Editorial

Welcome to this summer edition of *LIRN* - the second in our new two column layout and the first in our new 'outer clothing'. The cover design closely matches the LIRG brochure - which has recently been updated and was sent in June as an insert to all readers of the British Library Research & Innovation Centre *Research Bulletin*.

Believe it or not it has taken the LIRG Committee even longer to produce this new *LIRN* cover than it took the Library and Information Commission to bring forth the final all singing, all dancing version of their strategy -*PROSPECTS: a strategy for action*. This was previewed in our last number by the 'Comments' which the Group fed into the consultation process. Whatever else, the Commission's Research Committee certainly took the consultation requirement seriously - recasting large chunks and rewriting much detail in response to points made formally and informally. So this must reflect the broad consensus of opinion of those within the profession who most care about research. On this evidence we have "a listening commission". Will it also enthuse people outside our professional ranks?

This is not the occasion for detailed and considered review. Ros Cotton wrote her "News and Views" some weeks earlier, and your editor has had only three days to look at it. But some major points are clear.

- the *Connectivity - Content - Competences* categories work well as the main theme

- the all inclusive broad scope and role of LIS is given full rein alongside a proper contemporary focus on networked information and digital developments

- the relationship between BLRIC and the Commission is worked out carefully and as well as it could be within present political parameters

There is a good deal on the 'research infrastructure' - assessment, reviewing, mapping, quality assurance, dissemination and all that. This can be taken as the politically correct contemporary way of saying 'we want good research not bad, and we want research that makes us all better off - sooner or later'. If the older ones among us have to adapt to terminology that seems longwinded and bureaucratic, so be it. But beware lest the overheads in managing research backstage distract from the research activity itself and the real excitement of discovery and invention. Whether research results are expected to be predictable or full of surprise is an important question too infrequently addressed.

PROSPECTS in a nicely printed version is available free from the Commission or can be accessed on the Commission's newly launched web site <http://www.lic.gov.uk/>.

The launch party on June 15th. was a quintuple headed affair - also encompassing BLRIC's Research Plan 1998 - 2001, the Commission's double *Annual Report 1995 -97*, and two LIC reports: *The Role of Libraries in a Learning Society*, and *Virtually new - creating the **digital** collection: a review of digitisation projects in local authority libraries and archives*.

It was a rich menu and 'going out with a bang' too for the Novello Room - the scene of countless similar events including LIRG's last two AGMs. The lease is up for the British Library. The room's echoing acoustic, its frustrating impracticality and its splendidly solid panelling and great ceiling will soon be forgotten - just as the room's musical origins passed into history decades ago. *Sic transit* . . . The Research and Innovation Centre plans to relocate to the rear of the St. Pancras site in the autumn.

We are fortunate, in this number of *LIRN* to have variety in many dimensions:

- articles from professors and experienced professionals alongside those from beginners contributing as a result of LIRG prize opportunities

- topics covering public libraries, university libraries and special libraries

- 'hard' research in information retrieval techniques, research analysing situations in practice, and a review of the research process itself

Deborah Goodall's analysis of practitioner research in public libraries ties in well with the strategic research policy published in our last number and with the lively interest of our government departments and agencies in the state and future of public libraries in the UK. There is always more interest to be discovered in the public library scene than one expects - and this is no exception.

Perhaps the most unusual contribution is that from David Allen. His hard hitting account of internal politics may seem like 'tabloid' research to some. But it shows how rough the sharp end can be - with a very unusual perspective on funder and user behaviour, and on the decision makers who are the main audience for our research results. [Some more caustic language was edited out in the interests of reader sensibility!] The power that lies beneath academic politeness and reticence has been explored occasionally by novelists - most notably by C. P. Snow in the 1950s and 1960s. David was receptive to the suggestion that his points might be more telling in the form of Fiction!

David's piece would have been more convincing with actual examples to illustrate and colour the findings. There are clearly problems in methodology when the research has to lean over backwards to preserve anonymity. Which leads to another thought: how much more telling would be studies of 'bad practice' instead of studies of 'good practice'! The profession may find it difficult to define or describe a 'good library': there is seldom much disagreement in recognising the features of a 'bad' or 'inadequate' library. But how to do this without identifying the place itself?

How do you count or plot the availability and use of electronic and networked resources? This is occupying many minds at present - including that of your editor in the context of the international standard. Peter Brophy is strong on the distinction between 'Resource Discovery' and 'Resource Delivery' - alongside the conventional categories of 'Resource Utilisation', 'Infrastructure Provision', and 'Resource Management". These categories seem to work out well when applied to new and future types of service provision. Help with resource discovery is the distinguishing feature *par excellence* of library and information services.

It may be more important than we have realised in the past to distinguish first between Abstract & Indexing / Bibliographic databases on the one hand and Full Text databases on the other - and then to classify the types of Full Text database by their monograph, periodical and encyclopedia features. Such differentiation by content matters more to the user than differentiation by format or communication media.

In this vein I am glad to welcome the contributions of Felix de Moya's Spanish team's outline of genuinely international vital but difficult 'core' research. First there were OPACs and then the web as quite revolutionary break throughs - coming as a result of much unsung basic research. If now the searching problems and net overload problems can be solved, can we arrive at the golden age of quick customer access to relevant full text - in seconds? We are still some way off - but research in this direction has to be of greatest importance in the medium to long term.

Not far removed from this Laurent Lachal (from the French firm *Ovum* speaking at the Birmingham L + I Show) seemed to be mapping out a path that could led to AUTOMATED 'CURRENT AWARENESS' outputs. Would n't that be great? And we may not be that far off. Look at <http://www.umdl.umich.edu/moa/> (the MAKING OF AMERICA) for a real example of slick searching protocols that take you direct to downloadable full text!

This latter leads on to Hazel Rothera's exploration of basic indexing protocols in the under publicised Humanities field. Just what the connection is here with virtuality and networking may be for another occasion - but this much is fascinating and seems important - for the content as well as for the insights into the problems and delights of research as part of the Master's programme.

That's enough star gazing for now - but is n't it preferable to navel gazing for a change? Enjoy your reading!

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