

Publishing and mediation of information

This research group is concerned with the processes and practice in publishing and mediation of information. This group represents interests in the School for a number of years, eg the impact of mass media on information flow, as well as newer interest areas emerging from staff connected with the School's Publishing Studies courses. The group has a number of small projects including, for example, a survey on the acquisition by public and academic libraries of the output of Scottish publishers, an investigation of the relative shelf life of hard and paperback books and a project with the Northern College of Education into how children's reading skills may be affected by aspects of typography. The group is also currently seeking support for an investigation of the portrayal of Scottish cultural identities in the media. An interesting PhD study, nearing completion, has been looking at the handling of environmental information by news media, primarily at the local level. The research should provide a useful model of how information undergoes change in the process of its mediation by news reporters.

Although the School has not yet received large scale funding in the area, a major new interest for staff is that of electronic publishing, the focus for current development work in the Publishing Studies courses. This is an area of common interest to a new multidisciplinary cluster group which has formed within the University, bringing together the research interests of staff from information, design, and computing backgrounds.

Perhaps particularly germane to this article is a PhD, currently in its final stages, which is examining the causes, frequency and impact of alleged excessive publication of research results in scholarly journals. Although it might be a topical subject over the next few months until the results of the next Research Assessment Exercise are published and digested, the results of this research will probably not be available until 1997.

This has necessarily been a very superficial taste of what is going on in Aberdeen. Further information about any of the projects described above are available from the School of Information and Media, the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.

UNNDERPIN at St. George's Hospital, Morpeth : a case study of library service provision and user needs in a climate of change

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UNNDERPIN (University of Northumbria at Newcastle Development of and Research into the Provision of Information to Nurses, and nurse educators) has been an 8 month study jointly funded and undertaken by the Information Services Department and Department of Information and Library Management from the University of Northumbria, and the Bede, Newcastle and Northumbria College of Health Studies, which is also now part of the University of Northumbria.

The general aim of UNNDERPIN has been to undertake an examination of library and information services in a climate of change where user information needs are changing and demanding changed services to meet those needs, in order to support patient care and clinical developments. A picture has been built up of individual users' information use, needs, problem areas and possible solutions.

Against the background of change in health information provision (its move into higher education; the implementation of Care in the Community; the withdrawal of conventional library services and the increasing use of electronic information) the project has examined :

- library services currently available;

- the use made of current library services;
- the identification of information needs;
- options for the redesign of present library services.

Within the overall case study framework the investigation has used several survey-based methods comprising a questionnaire, interviews and focus groups.

The outcomes of UNNDERPIN have been to :

- inform the development of policy for library and information service provision in both the merged UNN / BNN and at St. George's Hospital. Insights have been provided which will help to shape services for users who will be increasingly dispersed over a wide geographical area;
- explore issues involved in the electronic delivery of information including to remote rural sites;
- identify problem areas as seen from the individual user's point of view and identify possible solutions and areas for further research.

On the basis of data and information gathered during the study conclusions have been drawn in the following areas.

- **On library services currently available**
Services are very limited in terms of both stock available and services offered. It has to be decided whether or not the present service should be preserved, developed or closed down in the light of changing needs and resource availability.
- **On use made of the library service**
Use is minimal across all user groups. There is a very marked inequality of access to information between individual information users in the Trust due to a number of factors which include uneven funding between user groups; the difficulties of workers sited remotely from St. George's. The profile of the library is not one of usefulness.
- **On information needs and information gaps**
Most health professionals employed by St. George's Hospital are not having their text-based information needs met by the present library service. Changes in education and hospital organization have compounded existing problems by creating new user groups (community-based workers, nurses needing support for up-dating courses and research projects) with new information needs. These new user groups are not adequately supported by the existing library service.
- **On possible service developments**
All the information users are essentially specialists in their field who need better access to current information in their own specialism, backed up by a full range of library services accessible locally (either in person or by electronic contact). Access is also needed to information beyond the user's specialism, given that most work in a multidisciplinary context. Briefly stated, access to text-based information needs to be fast, local and to good quality information. This could most effectively be provided electronically, thereby meeting the needs of users both local and remote by providing flexible access to resources centred either at St. George's Hospital, or elsewhere.
- **On strategies for information service provision**
A reevaluation by the Trust of its provision of text-based information services is needed now. Such information must be seen as being supportive of clinical practice and ultimately as improving the quality of patient care : it is not enough just to see text-based information as supporting staff whilst on courses or doing research projects. These information-seeking activities could be regarded as quality indices being reflected in enhanced care. Training and up-dating requirements are now on-going for specialist staff and nurses.

Text-based information provision can now claim a more central place in resource allocation. In this context the Trust has several options available to it.

- **The Trust could do nothing**, whereby the already poor situation from the user's point of view would become even worse, with the eventual removal of BNN / UNN books and funding.
- **The Trust could establish its own library service**, including electronic support of its remote sites. The present nurse education books could possibly be bought from BNN / UNN and additional professional library staff employed to provide library housekeeping functions and information services. However effectively this were to be carried out, the service would still be limited by the lack of breadth of its stock and lack of access to sufficient databases to meet its users' needs.
- **The Trust could choose electronic options for information and service delivery**. Electronic mail facilitates library housekeeping communications; remote database access opens up the wider world of information; file transfer facilities allow easy access to downloaded information. Access to such a system can be desk-based, ward-based or even home-based, to suit user preferences. The computer networking to support such a service is developing under the umbrella of the NHSwide network. The central library collection(s) to which such services are linked could be bought on a contractual basis by the Trust - thereby removing the requirement to maintain its own service. Although technologically feasible this option would require considerable development work.
- **The Trust could develop a combined approach**, which would probably be the most desirable from the users' point of view:

- very small core collections of material could be set up at service points where staff meet (remote sites, Departments) and consist of several key journal subscriptions in the specialism to permit browsing, and a very limited number of key reference texts relevant to that team of workers;

- all other library services would be available electronically and bought on a contractual basis. This option adopts a more piecemeal approach to electronic library provision - a halfway house on the road to a predominantly electronic service.

Further work was recommended as follows :

- the options put forward as future information provision strategies should be considered by the Trust and developed into costed options;
- a before-and-after trial of an electronically-based library and information service should be carried out in one of the remote sites. The service would be developed to meet user needs, building on the present study, trialled and evaluated by its users. It would form a microcosm on which a large-scale service could later be developed.

Project team (University of Northumbria at Newcastle)

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