

Bawden, D. (2006). Great lives and information behaviour. *Journal of Documentation*, 62(5), pp. 553-554.



**CITY UNIVERSITY
LONDON**

[City Research Online](http://www.city.ac.uk/researchonline)

Original citation: Bawden, D. (2006). Great lives and information behaviour. *Journal of Documentation*, 62(5), pp. 553-554.

Permanent City Research Online URL: <http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/3145/>

Copyright & reuse

City University London has developed City Research Online so that its users may access the research outputs of City University London's staff. Copyright © and Moral Rights for this paper are retained by the individual author(s) and/ or other copyright holders. All material in City Research Online is checked for eligibility for copyright before being made available in the live archive. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to from other web pages.

Versions of research

The version in City Research Online may differ from the final published version. Users are advised to check the Permanent City Research Online URL above for the status of the paper.

Enquiries

If you have any enquiries about any aspect of City Research Online, or if you wish to make contact with the author(s) of this paper, please email the team at publications@city.ac.uk.

Great lives and information behaviour

Summary

Studying the information behaviour of prominent people from history is an intriguing topic, but must be approached with care, as part as a methodology for information history.

Keywords: *information history; biography*

It is always intriguing to look at individuals from the past, and assess their information behaviour, so far as we can ascertain it, to see if it has lessons for us, and this has been reflected in recent issues of *Journal of Documentation*. A recent editorial (Bawden 2006A) looked at the work of Albert Einstein in this way, Muddiman (2003) considered R.D. Bernal in a full-length article, while on a more ambitious scale, Spink and Curran (2006) examined nine individuals over a time span of several centuries, with the aim of beginning to assess and model how human information behaviour may have changed and developed over the centuries. A book reviewed in this issue examines the changes in the information infrastructure and 'memory practices' of the sciences, with reference to leading exponents (Bowker 2006): Lyell for nineteenth century geology, Ashby for twentieth century cybernetics, and so on.

There are, of course, a number of difficulties with any such project. Famous individuals may, almost by definition, be untypical of most people of their time, and therefore an unsuitable subject. Against this, we must set the practical consideration that such people are likely to be the subject of biography and autobiography, to have written about in their lifetimes, and to have left archives; all making the study of their personal information behaviour feasible. It would also be unrealistic to ignore the attractions of studying this aspect of the life and work of inherently interesting characters.

Most difficult of all to determine is the extent to which we may reasonably attribute 'modern' ideas of information behaviour to situations and personalities of past centuries. Usage and meaning of terms, and the very concepts of information and knowledge themselves, may change over time. There is even debate on the fundamental questions as to whether the development of language, and later of means of recording information externally, thus 'bypassing' human memory, affected cognitive abilities, or whether it was the other way round. Bowker (2006) focuses on some these issues in detail. Care is needed to apply historical methods appropriately and sensitively. A study in progress at City University (Weller and Bawden 2006), for example, is examining several leading figures in nineteenth century Britain, to try to understand the context in which they used, and spoke or wrote about, information and knowledge.

It is likely that studies of this kind - examining the 'great lives' of the past from an informational viewpoint - will continue, and some will, no doubt, appear in the pages of *Journal of Documentation*. It is important that they are analysed carefully, within the kind of models introduced by Spink and Curran, and with appropriate care for historical methodology. Used in this way, they can make an important contribution to the development of information history (Bawden 2006B, Black 2006).

David Bawden

References

Bawden, D. (2006A), Einstein in the office: is information really necessary, *Journal of Documentation*, 62(3), 305-306

Bawden, D. (2006B), The history of information and documentation, *Journal of Documentation*, 62(2), 1169-170

Black, A.C. (2006), Information history, *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, 40, 441-473

Bowker, G.C. (2006), *Memory practices in the sciences*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press

Muddiman, D. (2003), Red information scientist: the information career of J.D. Bernal, *Journal of Documentation*, 59(4), 387-409

Spink, A. and Curran, J. (2006), Towards an evolutionary perspective for human information behaviour: an exploratory study, *Journal of Documentation*, 62(2), 171-193

Weller, T. and Bawden, D. (2006), *paper in preparation*