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The British Library and the impact of research

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The history of the British Library is a short one and it is a mere twenty-five years since it began its operations.[1] It may however still be necessary briefly to rehearse some of the key points in that history as a backcloth to what follows. The British Library Act was enacted in 1972, following a government enquiry and brought together what tend to be known as the London operations and Boston Spa – the former British Museum Library and the National Lending Library.

The new organization formally began operations in 1974, at which point OSTI was integrated into the new organization as the British Library Research and Development Department. Almost from the beginning the new library was to be pre-occupied with issues of space and a new building – a key determining factor in how it has related to the world ever since [3]. In 1988 it published an automation strategy, which attempted to pull together its corporate approach to the emerging digital library movement. Throughout this period it appeared from outside at least that two cultures operated within the library and that the scientific information/commercial tradition of Boston Spa and SRIS and the scholarly humanities non-commercial tradition of London failed to integrate except in the most superficial ways. At the same time the profession chose to see BLRDD as a sort of mini Research Council which happened to be accommodated within the British Library. This apparent lack appeared to be addressed by the so-called Peterborough Initiative in 1994 which produced new approaches and corporate rather than site-based responsibilities for senior managers. Perhaps the most notable was the single collection strategy which caused much angst amongst users – notably those in London.

In 1996, following the retirement of the much admired Brian Perry, Director of BLRDD, the Department was renamed the British Library Research and Innovation Centre reflecting a new approach to research. Within the last year BLRIC has merged with the Library and Information Commission. Merging the budgets as well as the activities of these two groups heralded a genuine attempt to create a national research strategy for LIS.

1. The Wasted Years of the BL[2]

In the early years of the British Library it and its staff were major players in almost every professional field. It was (and is) one of the – perhaps the – major research library in the world' with its most senior

members sitting on SCONUL Council and serving as elected officers of such bodies as the Library Association. But throughout the period there has been a progressive disengagement from the profession. Direct involvement in professional bodies progressively retreated to regular meetings with professional groups with agendas of items of common institutional concern. Of course, members of the profession continued to serve on the various BL advisory committees – but there the agenda was that of the British Library itself. This seems in turn to have led to a growing gulf of understanding marked by a series of more or less acrimonious disagreements on the nature of the BL's relationship with its institutional colleagues. Such disengagement is perfectly explicable as the BL found more and more of its increasingly straitened resources devoted not just to the design and creation of the new building, but to the apparently incessant range of attacks on the new building from sources as varied as the Prince of Wales, the House of Commons, the *Evening Standard* and the users of the Round Reading Room. These have been a huge distraction but one to which the new building is a triumphant answer and vindication [4].

Throughout the period BLRDD remained a firm point of contact with the profession although its own relationship with the BL seemed to become semi-detached. With characteristically understated but mischievous humour, Meadows comments on this in his excellent history of BLRDD.[3] He places his comments on the links between the two bodies in his chapter on BLRDD's external relations, devoting two pages out of the book's one hundred and seventy-five to the topic, in a chapter on European Community and international activities. The BL has had no fundamental involvement in the outcomes of major initiatives as varied as the Follett Programme [5] or the People's Network [6] although its staff have served on the relevant advisory committees.

The Library's 1997/8 Annual Report seeks leadership and partnership – but shows the barest real evidence of either. This is not to doubt the library's ambition to be involved as both leader and partner, nor to denigrate the regular attempts by individual members of staff to break out of the spiral of disengagement but to reflect that the consuming passion of the new building has made this an unrealizable goal. The other dispiriting reflection is that this increased introversion has arguably led to a failure to understand the aims and ambitions – and successes – of the rest of the profession. For example, the BL has conducted a variety of research projects which have been much touted and which have been aimed as much at public esteem as professional integration. This has led to a number of showcase but non-scalable projects and a degree of self satisfaction which may stem from using other national libraries – where the BL is clearly a leader – as comparators, rather than other research libraries. Thus a member of staff can say of one BL programme that "The *Initiatives for Access* programme as a whole was a resounding success. If there is any regret it is... [that] there were no failures" [7]. A programme with no failures is a rare paragon indeed.

2. Achievements of BLRDD

During the same period of time BLRDD was fully engaged with the profession and indeed in research terms may be seen to have created it. It has had a whole string of successes – and failures – which are well described by Meadows and need not be repeated here. But it is in three major areas that its strategic leadership has been most felt.

When BLRDD was set up, Library and Information Studies did not really exist as a separate academic discipline. All sorts of research was of course conducted, by a mix of practitioners and academics, who apart from the heartlands of cataloguing and classification, worked mainly on the fringe of disciplines as

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[3]Meadows, *supra.*

varied as computing and psychology. BLRDD worked hard to create a much more clearly defined LIS research community, using its grant awarding powers to develop both a coherent research plan and a clearly defined LIS research community. The success of individual projects may be seen as almost secondary to this achievement. It also used its funds judiciously to create a cadre of researchers which skillfully wove together practitioners and academics into a self-confident group which, as research agendas consolidated, has been able to open up new funding streams varying from the research councils to charitable trusts. Although the figures are opaque, in recent years the money spent on information research and development has grown to the tens of millions, culminating in Library and Information Studies being acknowledged formally as a major strand of the new Arts and Humanities Research Board.

Secondly, and almost as importantly, it invested in people as well as projects. Much of this growth in research funding has come from the vision nurtured in and by a cadre of young researchers and librarians who have moved into a professional leadership role which, through research for support in policy development, has developed a substantial vision of the future of libraries and their role in the developing information economy. Although one should always be careful of linking cause and effect, it may be thought no coincidence that the leaders of the Follett Programme, which has revolutionized academic librarianship and the major thinkers in public libraries have all been beneficiaries of BLRDD funding.

Thirdly and from the start it positively encouraged the internationalization of research. From a period well before the development of networks or European Community Framework programmes, BLRDD made small travel grants available to encourage both a wide view of best practice and the concept of learning from others. External factors have inevitably cemented this international perspective, but links with Directorate General XIII in Luxembourg, with the National Science Foundation in Washington, with Japan and Australia were all initiated with BLRDD support. It is now virtually given that LIS research programmes have an international dimension, while librarians and researchers quite naturally seek international partnerships and have built personal international networks. It is difficult to recall that even ten years ago this was far from the norm. It is even more satisfying to recognize that this broad view and this coherence of the research agenda is widely envied abroad.

3. Consortia

The greatest area of professional change since the foundation of the British Library is that of automation. Here the support of BLRDD has been critical in facilitating developments in the UK. Again pure research was funded in areas as varied as data warehouses and electronic journals, but it is in strategic influence that the impact of BLRDD was most felt. From an early stage funding went into supporting regional consortia such as BLCMP, LASER and SWALCAP. That support has led to the UK having a strong developmental position as well as a successful commercial library automation industry. The encouragement of consortia created communities which were able to press ahead with the development of widely accepted systems and services, a development not paralleled in the BL as a whole which (at least in part for financial reasons) lagged behind the community at large.

Another great if much slower success was the support for regional groups which kept the torches of co-operation and research alive in the public library sector in a period when it was much battered by what seemed to be never ending reorganizations of local authorities coupled with the severe financial pressures of the Thatcher years. The persistent support for and encouragement of Local Information Plans (LIPs) stimulated resource sharing while the management of the PLDIS grants scheme ensured

that at least some public librarians were able to develop a sense of the future. Many recent government reports and some commentators [8] have criticized the public library service and its aspirations. However, the publication of the series of reports by the Library and Information Commission through the work of committees which included many public librarians and proposed the People's Network as the future for public libraries, may be seen as a triumphant vindication of BLRDD support throughout the lean years.

BLRDD was also very innovative in the tools it used to support the research agenda. Its consistent funding of a series of research centres over periods of years ensured that the profession had trusted and neutral foci for areas such as catalogue research, statistics, user studies and networks. If acronyms such as CCR, LISU CRUS and UKOLN fail to be memorable, the work of the centres has both ensured a steady and trusted flow of research results and policy into the profession while giving the UK an international standing. And it was a tool used with apparently ruthless efficiency. Centres were set up and funded, but just as swiftly closed down as the research agenda moved on.

BLRDD also had a strong attachment to the much undervalued area of standards. While others concentrated on the formalities of ISO and BSI, BLRDD put its effort into developing or testing standards of practical value to the community, most notably in the fast moving electronic arena. The role of the BNB Research Fund should also be acknowledged in this. The development of strong links into publishing and bookselling where community relations have often been strained provided a necessary lubricant to squabbling communities who were forced to recognize that their common interests were more important than their differences.

4. The British Library, bibliography and document supply

In the 1970s the British National Bibliography had a dominant role in the supply of bibliographic records. That monopoly has been progressively eroded to the point where record supply is now a marketplace rather than a near monopoly. Whether the BL could or should have attempted to maintain its market position may be a moot point, but by the time of the publication of the Follett Report in 1993 a perhaps final attempt was being made to restore this position with the widely discussed prospect of charging for the BL's proposed OPAC. Financial pressure was moving the BL to a position where it felt that only through charging could it fund the much needed move into the electronic age. At the same time the substantial position it held in document supply was seen by some, at least in higher education, as acting against the sort of co-operative developments emerging most notably in the USA. Document supply was seen both as overpriced and technically backward. These perceptions may or may not have been more apparent than real, but at least in part due to the disengagement from the profession mentioned above, The Follett Implementation Group for IT (FIGIT) developed the view that it should use some of its funds to create alternatives to BL structures. Whether these would offer useful free alternatives to BL products was seen as less important than the need to undermine the BL's apparent move towards charging for what academic librarians saw as basic services. The title of the Festschrift for Peter Lewis, a former Director General of the British Library, "Eating the Menus" [9], helped shape the view that while charging was clearly appropriate for some areas of activity, it was inappropriate for others and that the ability to identify some services as chargeable did not of itself justify such charges. Although the development of the CURL OPAC (COPAC) was seen as valuable in its own right in supporting academic infrastructure, a clear secondary reason for the very substantial investment in that service was to undermine the BL's ability to charge for its OPAC. Similarly, the funding of several document supply services and experiments, notably LAMDA which was based initially on university libraries in London

and Manchester was seen by FIGIT not just as a sensible development in resource sharing, but as a development which would replace the Document Supply Service – or at least hold its prices down. The concept of the Document Supply Centre as the library of last resort rather than the library of first resort began to be bandied about. Whether or not the fact that OPAC97 has remained a free service and the fact that LAMDA is flourishing is a result of these efforts is in some senses unimportant. The key point to be made is that a research agenda had been developed which saw the BL's policies as a threat or a hindrance and it can be contended that this sprang from the introversion of the BL at a time of radical change in other parts of the library world. It is then ironic that much of this research agenda sprang from BLRDDs support for policy development.

5. British Library automation and OPAC97

To describe the history of automation in the BL and the impact of research – or lack of it – on developments would require a book. But a brief examination of OPAC97, the workhorse of scholarship for the library is instructive, for both structurally and operationally it falls well short of what is provided in any typical university research library. It is of course an enormously powerful research tool and the conversion of data to machine readable form has been an extraordinary feat. Some of the data is idiosyncratic (as is true in all libraries) and plans are known to exist for such obvious developments as the seamless searching of all the catalogues rather than the present position where they have to be searched sequentially. But for the user, particularly the remote user, it can be frustratingly unhelpful. It is the norm elsewhere for OPACs to be available seven days a week and twenty four hours a day. This is not true in the BL. Quite apart from the sabbatarian zeal which makes it available only six days a week, it is available for only twenty hours a day and with glorious idiosyncracy not on three of the four public holidays at the Christmas period. Access to the Internet is not generally available from the St Pancras building and certainly not from the OPAC. Thus users cannot continue their searches in the OPACs of other London libraries or other copyright libraries, far less use electronic resources relevant to their studies. Users outside the building cannot identify and then order items for use when they visit London. All of these requirements have been known and articulated for several years.

The OPAC design is clumsy in the extreme for extended periods of searching. Since by comment consent the BLRDD funded OKAPI research on OPAC design was quite excellent – research adopted by SWALCAP/SLS – it is curious that this appeared to have no impact on OPAC97 design. It is also an endearing quirk that the BL's home page is perhaps the only web page which has no links to other resources. While this is understandable in the sense that users in the building have no network access, the many users of the OPAC outside the building could sensibly use such a feature. Or does it reflect an assumption that if the BL is so comprehensive that links are un-necessary?

6. Participation

The BL has espoused the role of professional leadership and partnership for many years. While its collective efforts have been focused on the new building at St Pancras this has seemed an unsupported aspiration. John Ashworth the current Chairman of the British Library Board has recently and very publicly reiterated a commitment to co-operation and some funding has been set aside to support this. It would be a genuinely welcome development were this to happen now that the burden of the new building has disappeared. However the fine words on co-operation must not be allowed to melt away on

the unbuttered parsnips of no resource. The Research Support Libraries Programme newly funded by the Higher Education Funding Councils shows very little evidence of BL financial partnership in projects to develop the research infrastructure. Very real financial exigency appears to cause the library to waver alarmingly in its view of whether it is a partner for research libraries in the UK or whether it is in a purchaser/provider relationship of commercial products. It is perhaps instructive, if not pressed too far, to compare its relationship with UK libraries with that of OCLC in the United States. OCLC appears to walk the tight-rope of co-operation, leadership, research funding and commercial services with a degree of self-assurance that is instructive.

The Research Support Libraries Programme Phase II and the impending call for content for the People's Network will prove an interesting test of the library's commitment to partnership – and certainly on the latter the signs are encouraging. However it would also be very welcome to see such critical developments as Dublin Core and ROADS which sit outside research programmes having much more input from the BL. There is however a persistent worry that the BL remains a remorselessly collection based organization and that the community concerns for resource sharing and access are not seen as a central focus. This is perhaps borne out by the development of the highly praised Arts & Humanities Data Service (AHDS). Although this has been funded as the result of a recommendation in the Follett Report, the original proposal for such a service came from a joint British Academy/British Library report. The function of the AHDS is to organize access to distributed electronic resources rather than to build a central national collection. Did this influence the BL's willingness to allow higher education to adopt the recommendation?

7. The BL by 2000

This paper has given a personal and critical view of the development of the BL and BLRDD over the last quarter century. Inevitably it is coloured by the author's prejudices and perceptions from some involvement in policy development over that period. But the criticism has to be tempered by an understanding of the intolerable financial pressures suffered by the library over that period and by the huge investment of staff time and effort as much as money in creating and defending possible the major publicly funded building of the twentieth century. It is the fate of most national libraries to act as a professional Aunt Sally, but beneath the criticism there is a huge fund of professional goodwill to be tapped. The BL has sensible ambitions.

Several years ago it proposed that by the year 2000 it would seek:[4]

– A digital collection by purchase, license or deposit,
– A web page describing services,
– Access to remote sources by BL readers,
– Access to the BL by remote users,
– Reading Room access to multiple media,
– Networking of all basic operations,
– Co-operation with other bodies.

That ambition is to be applauded and supported, even if there may be inevitable slippage in parts of the programme. If this personal view of the recent past has been overly critical it will please no one more

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[4]Cited by Day, *supra.*

than this critic to have David Russon describe in another paper how the BL will achieve these and its other goals in its second quarter century.

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