

THE SUBJECT LIBRARIAN'S EXPERIENCE (SHEFFIELD, 20 JUNE 1997)

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When I was asked to give this talk my first thought was to avoid being self-indulgent. I didn't want to sound partial and provincial. But I soon realised that whatever I may say is bound to be partial and provincial. So I might as well be self-indulgent too. What follows is what being Arts Librarian at Liverpool University for seven years has taught me, personally. It doesn't necessarily reflect Library policy. If it has a theme, that theme is **resources**.

I'm not really a 'subject librarian'. I look after the subject areas researched and taught in the Faculty of Arts at Liverpool: archaeology, classics, oriental studies, English, French, German and Dutch, Hispanic Studies, history, music, philosophy, some Italian, and Russian studies. (We have no department of fine art or religion, and architecture is in another faculty.)

When I meet a true specialist subject librarian, I tend to feel deferential, as a carpenter might feel towards a fine joiner; and I pick up what I can from them. For example, at a meeting of IAML (the International Association of Music Librarians) some years ago, I was trying to get across to them my difficulties over resources in the Music Library. 'Do you mean to say you can only put in seven and a half hours a week in Music', one asked. 'No', I said, 'a library assistant puts in that amount. I'm not there at all, except for meetings or emergencies. What am I to do?' 'Have plenty of leaflets.' And he was right. The first 'How to find out' leaflet I wrote was for Music. Incidentally our Music Department picked up a starred five in the latest RAE.

So I have to spread myself. I am a scarce resource, and how to divide up my time is a constant concern. When Dr B., former staff member, asks who wrote the notes for the 1535 Chesneau edition of Alexander ab Alexandro's 'Dies genies', I know I will cop for it, because it sounds horribly arty and I am nearer than the Special Collections librarian. But whose servant should I be, and to what degree? Some say that the academic staff in our departments are our real 'clients'. I have a deep respect for scholarship and see twenty years devoted to getting a textual commentary right as time well spent. But I must also attend to the needs of the average student, there for three or four years who probably has that one shot at getting her entitlement from the University. When a 'returner' of my age, say, comes up to the Enquiry Desk and says in a tangier accent than mine, 'I'm doing some research into the Cavalier poets, but I'm not sure where to start', I know where to point her. I feel that I am making a

difference. But ideally I should be pointing the other six (or thirty six) who need to know at the same time.

Unfortunately the interests of the various kinds of library user sometimes clash, where access to resources is concerned. And although, by the nature of things, academic staff tend to mediate between the Library and their students, there are instances in which their mediation doesn't meet the students' needs. In those cases the Library should make good the deficit. Let me spell it out with a particular example.

At Liverpool, Arts departments have always done the book and journal selection from their Library allocation. I could do it at least as well, but I could also live with the way it is. Provided, that is, that when money is being divided among books, journals, IT, other materials, interlibrary loans, document delivery, it is done as part of a collection development policy, agreed between Library and department. A policy under constant review. When appropriate library staff, with a **strategic** outlook on information needs, are satisfied that the collection policy will give all users in that subject area as fair a share of resources as possible, the day-to-day spending can be left in departmental hands.

For several years now I have been teasing collection development policies out of my departments and I now have them for Music, Philosophy, French, German and Hispanic Studies. The documents are relatively meaningless as they stand, because, like treaties on the environment the initial commitments tend to be sketchy or undemanding. But as money becomes harder to find (and I've not met anyone who thinks it will become easier) I will be pressing departments to make more exacting commitments. This, I hope, will be one, though not the only, way of stemming the flow on to the shelves of specialist monographs, many selected on individual whim, touched by librarians' hands and hardly anyone else's. How should whatever money there is be spent? More on that later.

Leaving material resources, for the moment, I am constantly nagged at by the question of access to research skills, and information skills in particular. At Liverpool we pull out all the stops within our scandalously low staffing limits for Library induction. For Arts subjects we also lay on drop-in sessions for CD-ROM, BIDS and EDINA training. Like most other subject-based librarians I also spend an increasing amount of my time on more focused work with research students on printed and electronic information sources. This began with pre-dissertation MA groups in Victorian, Renaissance and Romantic English literature and moved on to include more general sessions for Popular Music, Women's History and Archives research students.

The big breakthrough came when I was asked to provide lengthy and intensive courses for Research MA students (doing 'one plus three' courses) in English, History and then Hispanic Studies. For several years now I have put on eight two-hour sessions in each of those subject areas during the first semester, including printed sources, CD-ROM, external databases, the Internet and bibliographic software.

I found early on that the best way of getting a response from the people I was teaching was to home in on their individual research topics. The least I expected was for them to fit the broad subject rubric. But when my English Research MAs included the

fifteenth-century French writer Christine de Pisan, it was a case of me to supervisor: 'Look, Christine is NOT English'; supervisor to me: 'This person's paying for her course, I've found someone in the department who knows about Christine. As far as we're concerned, she's English'; And then there was Down Syndrome language and teacher/student interaction: I tackled them all.

These sessions have also involved me in meaty exchanges with various departmental supervisors over resource provision. Despite our pleas, departments have never been keen on letting librarians in on the course planning process at Liverpool. This means that some individual research projects are authorised with little regard for book, journal or IT provision. ('The excellence of the teaching staff here is the most worthwhile resource' was the rejoinder in one case.) In one department I have been co-opted on to the course planning committee, but to my surprise it's somehow failed to meet this session.

Getting a grip on all those individual research topics and exploring them across the information media is a demanding job. And though the results have been satisfying all round, I've been left exhausted at the end of the semester without covering more than a fraction of the 250 postgraduates of various sorts who are floating round in the Faculty of Arts at any one time. I'd been campaigning for a long time for the Faculty to respond to Ph.D.s and M.Phils who had asked me to set something up for them. Without logistical help from the Faculty there wasn't much I could do.

Then, as often happens, the door to bringing in greater numbers and to taking part in course planning opened without my needing to push. Somewhat late in the day in comparison with some universities, the Faculty has acquired a Humanities Graduate School, with an energetic director. He has brought together the departmental research directors, the Library (in my person), various interdepartmental bodies and outside consultants, to set up a core course of research skills, compulsory for all taught M.A.s, and for Ph.D.s and M.Phils who have not had similar training beforehand. The change in approach means that the number of postgraduates taught within a session will go up to over a hundred. I will be taking part in an initial day school and then during the first semester providing two ninety minute evening sessions each week for five weeks on the information skills I mentioned earlier. I will also take part in some optional sessions in the second semester. Because I will be setting assignments for my sessions I will also have to get some training in assessment and become a University examiner. I see myself ending up as a hybrid teacher-librarian.

The danger in all this is that with large mixed-subject groups I may have to some extent to sacrifice quality for quantity, losing the individual topic focus I have used till now. To compensate I plan to offer follow-up sessions on individual research topics for 'one plus three' students and 'surgeries' for the rest. I will only have the time to do so if the Faculty or University are willing to buy a replacement for my daytime and evening Enquiry Desk duties in the Library. I don't know what will happen on this. If there's no money I have an alternative plan to train postgraduate teaching assistants to give the follow-up and 'surgery' sessions.

After a brief and sad experiment over one session there is now no post of IT training officer in the Faculty and there are no plans to hire another. The difficulties of providing enough human bodies to teach IT and other information skills at a meaningful level of detail is not helped at Liverpool by a tendency to see these skills as something that is acquired outside the immediate subject area. It is my belief that all such skills, from time-management to footnoting to IT are best taught by academic staff as they teach the subject itself. That way noone can opt out without opting out of the course and everyone should see that the skills are of immediate relevance to the topic in hand. Academic staff are in general willing to spend time on matters such as bibliographical citation, but usually not on information technology. In many cases it is because they lack IT skills themselves, are unaware of their relevance and reluctant to acquire them. Am I doing myself out of a job by arguing that we should assign subject-specific IT training to academic staff? I don't think so: there would still be a need for a core course, and for someone to train the teachers and continuously bring their skills up to date.

There is a brighter side to all this. We now have a Faculty of Arts IT Committee. I have acquired horns and a tail there by suggesting that the University should 'take steps to ensure' that Arts academics are not permitted to ignore the existence of information technology if they choose. Meetings of the committee are never exactly packed out, but it has one real achievement under its belt. It has recently persuaded the Faculty to ask for the appointment of a Lecturer in IT in the Humanities.

Then we come to the larger question of refining the IT skills of **undergraduates** after the initial induction session. Up till now it has been impossible to persuade departments to timetable library skills after the first two weeks. But even this has begun to change. I have arranged to see Popular Music students at the start of the second semester to help them with any difficulties they might have using the Library catalogue, and to get them looking beyond it.

Looking things up in local catalogues or on the Web is often the start of a frustrating journey. Perhaps the Library doesn't own the book or journal, or CD-ROM, because it is short of money. Or if it's a book or journal we do own, it's on loan or can't be traced on the shelves because of misshelving or theft by a library user. And interlibrary loan or some other sort of document delivery is too slow or costs too much. Or perhaps there is a full text version on the Web, but the Library can't afford to subscribe to the database which includes it. And if we have a print copy we can't photocopy it or put it on to the Web ourselves, because of copyright restrictions.

These are the everyday but important problems we have to tackle on behalf of our increasingly hard-pressed users. Behind them lurks the greatest material resource problem facing us. The Web could offer a comparatively low-cost solution to the problem of distributing both academic research and teaching materials. The two major obstacles to this are copyright (largely held by academic publishers) and the monumental task of digitising what, for the arts, amounts to centuries of printed matter, copyright and non-copyright, but still worthy of some form of electronic archiving.

Follett in its wisdom considered that ‘ ... authors and publishers of work in electronic form will continue to want their copyright protected’ and went on to recommend various initiatives involving academic institutions and publishers. And Follett begat e-Lib out of JISC, and e-Lib begat On Demand Publishing Projects and Short Loan Collections projects. Many of the projects were scheduled to ‘ ... work directly with publishers to establish a workable, scaleable model for delivery of information on-demand to students via a network, the two most common pricing models being a fee per printed page model or a model based on an annual payment by the institution.’

Several years on we are still in the dismal state of affairs we all know, and which Follett for all its virtues, has made no real effort to grapple with. Arts academic staff, normally using their institution’s resources (human and material), write journal articles and monographs. They retain the intellectual rights in their product but assign the copyright to a commercial publisher without payment. The publisher then processes the product for distribution and sells it back to the academic institution. It often charges a rate which means that the institution can’t afford to buy enough of the product to satisfy the needs of its members. This is not a market, but a travesty of the market, in which only the distributor truly thrives. Most academic producers collude with the system on the grounds that to do otherwise would interfere with career progression and in the case of journal articles make peer review (and therefore quality control) more difficult. The student consumer merely suffers, though the academic producer is also to an extent a victim. Contrary to Follett’s assertion most academic authors don’t want their **copyright** protecting, provided that there is no profit involved. They just don’t want their **ideas** stolen.

Let me define my target carefully here. I am making no comment on publishing in general. I’m talking for the moment about publishing in the arts and humanities, because that’s what I know best. From what I have read, it is the same or worse in other areas. I would exempt some publishing **projects** (rather than publishers) which are so vast and demanding that they could probably only be done commercially. In fact I have done some work for Chadwyck Healey, and liaised with Brepols on behalf of academic staff at Liverpool.

Let me take a broader and more idealistic slant on this: journal articles, conference papers and research monographs are important threads in the enigmatic conversation that arts and humanities people have been conducting among themselves for centuries. This conversation embraces the living and the dead, and extends right down to the undergraduate essay or seminar contribution. The only qualification for joining in is the ability to take part. Unlike the sciences, engineering, medicine and some social sciences, it produces few measurable outcomes in the real world and serves no particular end, except to maintain the health of our particular cultural tradition. I would call it ‘good in itself’ and, despite all the talk of ‘dumbing down’, something worth fighting to retain and improve. (I believe that most academics would in their hearts subscribe to this view, although many are too cynical nowadays to let it pass their lips.)

Until now the technology for making this conversation known, the printed word, has mostly been commercially based. And this has meant that academic publishers have inevitably acted from a distance as gentleman-bouncers, granting or barring entry to

would-be participants at particular institutions at particular times: not enough copies of this book, illegal to copy it, and so on.

Dissemination via the Web could change all this, but unsurprisingly academic publishers are fighting hard through copyright control to keep products off the Web or have them there on their own terms. But consider, every penny of their profit and the larger part of their costs are these days parasitic on the product they are distributing. Their claim to be adding a unique value through their 'quality control' imprint, and the final commercial polish of the product is spurious. All the the user needs in the way of text, illustration and quality control could be provided by the producer on the Web, which offers additional media, and hypertext linking where appropriate. The rush into electronic journals which are just clones of their print originals doesn't seem to me to signal an attempt to cut costs and a whole-hearted acceptance of a new medium. In many cases it brings in **extra** income for the publishers, and seems at root a tactical ploy to protect their print base.

There is no time here to even begin to sketch the complexity of argument in this area. But my preferred outcome in, say, ten years time would go like this:

- most academic publication in the arts and humanities would take place on the Web;
- it would be a distributed resource, but accessible through a single, properly catalogued gateway;
- published through non-profit consortia run by the higher education institutions;
- the consortia might be regionally based for administrative convenience, or more likely in an electronic environment, grouped according to common or complementary research interests;
- be financed from institutional funds, with an annual budget based on the estimated research publishing quota (journals and monographs) for each institution within the session;
- the money would mostly come from the 'library budget';
- academic staff within each consortium would be expected to publish individual research through their consortium (with possible exemption for work submitted to learned bodies);
- collaborative research would be published on a round-robin basis;
- there would be a certain amount of cross-subsidisation among consortia to protect minority subjects;
- peer review and general quality control would be provided within each consortium;
- mutual access would be free among the consortia and for similar institutions, except when a project had a commercial component (à la Chadwyck);
- in that case, and for access by commercial interests, a license would have to be negotiated;
- the comparatively low cost of running this service, as compared with current book and particularly journal costs, would free substantial sums for other purposes.

Let me qualify this utopian? prospect to some degree. If most arts publishing were to be on the Web, the categories 'journal article' and 'monograph' would undoubtedly be transformed into something more closely consonant with the medium. I see no great problem with this.

Some material used in teaching and research (primary texts in contemporary literature, for instance) is written by non-academics who wish to profit from their labours. This material would still have to be paid for.

I am concerned over the precise legal status of the existing university presses and the extent to which their resources could be co-opted into a consortium model.

Finally, it is difficult to know how other academic publishers would react to losing their future market. Ideally they would transfer their activities to other spheres (gardening, heritage, cookery?) or go out of business. It might then be possible for consortia to acquire the copyright to existing material at little or no cost. Alternatively many publishers could diversify, stay in business, and demand exorbitant prices for their existing copyright material when it came to new editions and reprints.

Imagining for the moment a favourable outcome, what could be done with the savings? First they could be used to upgrade and maintain the hardware base and bandwidth necessary to ensure Web access to all. Then they might go to subsidise the transfer to the Web of journals issued by learned societies, which are not interested in profit but could not cover the costs of Web distribution themselves. In time they could help to hire the hands and equipment necessary to digitise that enormous backlog of printed material in the arts (and convert the rest of the Curl library catalogues if the lottery money doesn't arrive).

So all I need to do is persuade Professor X to publish her monograph with the Northwest Universities Web Consortium, rather than Cambridge University Press; to persuade Dr Y that his article should go to 'Med on the Web', rather than to 'Antiquity'. How do I set about this?

There are several conflicting models of the academic author in the air at the moment. One selflessly considers herself to be the reporter of research findings, the writing being an integral part of the research contract. She expects no financial reward and wishes her research to be available to everyone in the academic community, as long as no financial profit accrues. This author (in some disciplines at least) enriches her institution through the impact factor of her articles within the Research Assessment Exercise. Such people do exist.

Author two doesn't want any financial reward either, but for career reasons wants to publish his articles in prestige journals and his monographs with prestige imprints. He will not welcome changes to the system. Most academics I have met fall into this category

The third wants a slice of everything that's going. She will retain copyright, and license publication and copying of her work at differing rates in different circumstances. Say, free to academic institutions, but with a charge to others. These are the fortunate few in this country at this time. They will hate losing their pickings.

The latter two categories would be brought into line by the automatic assignment of copyright to the academic institution (and thence the consortia) on completion of the

work. (If any author, in her own time, with her own resources and without impinging on her institutional contract, turns out academic work that she can sell, let her cut the best deal she can wherever she can.)

What else will be needed?:

- an increasing sense of despair over the present set-up, to stimulate a radical solution;
- possibly intervention by the government to impose professional management on academic staff.

(You may think this could never happen. But according to a colleague who knows the place well, something like it has already happened in the Netherlands, just the other day.)

In the wider world, of course, whatever solution we adopt will be one among many, and an unrestricted and therefore loaded market in North America would still have a significant impact here. But if our system worked, and our information flowed freely and cheaply, it would not be long before others started to operate along similar lines.

Looking it over, my entire talk seems to have presented a series of professional cruxes, all difficult to resolve, and in the last case requiring what many will consider a far-fetched resolution. I have, however, tried to be as resourceful as I can about my dilemmas:

- I was unsure of what demands to make on my own role, so I tried to redefine it;
- faced with resistance from departments over rationalising their spending, I have used increasing difficulties with money at least to set them thinking about how to proceed;
- given a polite welcome at departmental meetings, but not really getting the IT message through to them, I have achieved a lot more by seeking out neutral venues, such as the IT Committee and the Postgraduate Committee;
- faced with the impossible problem of access to copyright material, I've at least tackled it theoretically by thinking the unthinkable.

You may think the questions I have raised are more interesting than the provisional responses I've come up with. Or you may even say I've not asked the right questions. I hope you don't find my approach too partial, provincial and self indulgent. Let me, at least, thank you, who are yourselves scarce resources, for indulging me with twenty minutes of your precious time.