

Supporting researchers in UK libraries

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Introduction

Why do researchers use research libraries?

Put simply, for two reasons:

- to use original source material (archive repositories, museums and other institutions serve a similar purpose)
- to read the work of other researchers in their field (that is, 'secondary literature', the staple of the academic library)

Traditionally research libraries have built collections - and the staff, buildings and services to support them - with the aim of satisfying these twin desires.

In the last 20 years people have realised that not only is the source material scattered among many libraries and other repositories, but the secondary material too cannot be found in a single place. In the UK even the largest library, the British Library, cannot hope to satisfy all research needs, for example in the case of foreign language material.

At the same time, digital means of producing, storing and distributing knowledge has meant a tendency in the opposite direction. That is, to localise knowledge - not in a central store, but focussed on the desktop of the researcher. The task for research libraries then becomes making its material available directly to the researcher's computer.

Some people have forecast that the revolution in digital knowledge will lead to the death of the research library. Instead researchers will gain their information from a wide variety of other sources, most of them networked, some of them free, others commercial. There will be no need for the library as middle-man or intermediary.

What I wish to do in this talk is to give you an outline of how over the last 10 years researchers and research librarians in the UK have tried to respond to these two requirements:

- how can scholars have easy and convenient access to research materials that are widely scattered?
- how can libraries satisfy the desire of researchers to have as much material as possible delivered to them electronically?

I would like to look not only at the efforts of higher education but also those of the UK's national libraries.

Co-operation and national action

These questions have been tackled by means of two main modes of action: co-operation and national government action.

Of the two, co-operation is long established. One might say co-operation is the instinctive mode of librarians. For many years one of the main aims of the two chief academic library associations, SCONUL (the Society of College, University and National Libraries)¹ and CURL (the Consortium of Research Libraries)², has been to co-operate to create a more coherent and useful network of resources for researchers to use. To give one example, the SCONUL 'Research Extra' scheme³ allows any researcher in any UK university to read and borrow material in any other UK university library.

But I'd like to concentrate on the other engine of progress in this area, action at a national, governmental level.

There have been two main streams of development. They correspond very roughly to the two questions I suggested are most important to researchers: access to scattered non-digital resources, and easy access to electronic resources:

- a series of large-scale higher education programmes, culminating in the establishment of the *Research Information Network*
- the work of the *Joint Information Systems Committee* of the higher education funding councils (JISC)

'R' for Research: RSLP, RSLG and RIN

In 1999 the four bodies responsible for funding universities on behalf of the government, the funding councils, began an initiative called the *Research Support Libraries Programme* (RSLP)⁴. It grew out of the success of what was known as the 'Follett Report', a national effort to improve library buildings and other facilities, and the feeling that Follett had tended to ignore the needs of researchers.

¹ <http://www.sconul.ac.uk/>

² <http://www.curl.ac.uk/>

³ http://www.sconul.ac.uk/use_lib/srx/

⁴ <http://www.rslp.ac.uk/>

Over the next three years RSLP distributed £30m to libraries and other bodies, all of it intended to offer researchers in UK universities a richer and more coherent pattern of library resources.

RSLP had three strands:

- collaborative collection development: projects intended to co-ordinate or combine the operations of collections in similar disciplines held in different universities (for example, in Russian and Eastern European studies)
- support for humanities and social sciences collections: mainly retrospective cataloguing and collection description projects, but with some digitisation initiatives
- an 'access scheme' to compensate universities with important collections for the use made of them by researchers from other universities.

The central concept behind RSLP was that of the 'distributed national collection': the idea that although the nation's research resources were widely scattered between over 100 higher education institutions – and of course beyond them, in the national libraries and archives, and in specialist research institutions – it was possible to make these resources visible and usable to anyone who wanted to take advantage of them.

RSLP had mixed results. A great deal of good work was done to ensure online catalogue access to many collections, including collections of archives, that were little known and underused. Some libraries gained valuable experience in digitising some of their material. Work was begun on a major project called SUNCAT, a union catalogue of serials in university and national libraries in the UK⁵. The access money resulted in improvements to heavily used collections, although it was not an income stream that continued long after the end of the RSLP programme.

There were also some disappointments. An attempt to set up a series of national conservation laboratories serving university libraries and archives failed. In the collaborative collection development strand it proved very difficult to reach agreements between different universities, each with its own interests, on how to co-ordinate research collections in specific subjects in the national interest. Some of the reasons are analysed in a report commissioned by RSLP in 2001 entitled *Barriers to resource sharing among higher education libraries*⁶.

After the end of the RSLP programme the higher education funding bodies decided to set up a group to review the prospects for research knowledge under the chairmanship of Sir Brian Follett, the *Research Support Libraries Group*⁷. This Group included all three of the UK's national libraries as well as higher education. It was concerned about the cost of acquiring and storing research material, and about the rapidity with which technical change was affecting research knowledge. Three important reports were commissioned: one was a pioneering survey of the behaviour and views of researchers in their information seeking⁸; the second provided an international

⁵ <http://www.suncat.ac.uk/>

⁶ <http://www.rslp.ac.uk/circs/2002/report.htm>

⁷ <http://www.rslg.ac.uk/>

⁸ <http://www.rslg.ac.uk/research/libuse/>

comparison of research collaboration provision⁹; the third, by the JISC Scholarly Communications Group, reviewed how patterns of scholarly publishing were changing¹⁰. A sub-group examined what was called ‘e-science’: the vast quantities of primary electronic scientific information generated by programmes like the Human Genome Project. The Group concluded in its report in 2003 that there was a need for an established body to co-ordinate research information in the UK.

And so, in 2005, a small unit called the *Research Information Network* (RIN) was established. It is funded by the higher education funding councils and housed in the British Library. Its mission is ‘to lead and co-ordinate new developments in the collaborative provision of research information for the benefit of researchers in the UK’. It remains to be seen how RIN will work and how effective it will be. One of its interesting features is the important part researchers themselves – as opposed to librarians – are planned to have in its operation. Among its early concerns will be resource discovery and collaborative storage of little-used material.

JISC and the electronic agenda

One thing RSLP, RSLG and RIN have in common is that they have been anxious to avoid duplicating activity on research material *in electronic form*. The reason for this is that for many years digital research information has been the province of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)¹¹.

JISC was set up in 1993 as a body to provide common information and communication technology services to UK universities. Its best-known achievement was – and possibly still is – the broadband network that links all the higher education institutions, the Joint Academic Network (JANET). But early in its history it was persuaded, mainly by librarians, to take an interest in the national provision of information using the JANET network. By now, thanks to national deals and commissions by JISC, researchers in UK universities have access to thousands of electronic information resources and services.

JISC performs a number of services for researchers. It funds

- JISC Collections, a portfolio of electronic information resources, available to universities free or at preferential rates thanks to nationally negotiated deals with publishers¹²
- the Resource Discovery Network, a series of online directories of web resources according to discipline¹³
- three electronic data centres, at Essex, Manchester and Edinburgh, responsible for storing and giving access to electronic services and resources

‘JISC Collections’ offers thousands of individual resources: electronic books, journals and newspapers, indexes and abstracts, reference works, maps, still and moving

⁹ <http://www.rslg.ac.uk/research/incollab/>

¹⁰ http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/rslg.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/>

¹² <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=coll>

¹³ <http://www.rdn.ac.uk/>

images. A particularly important part of this array is the National E-Journals Initiative, 'NESLi2'¹⁴, which makes nearly 5,000 journals available for university libraries to network to their researchers.

As well as negotiating access to resources already in digital format JISC has also been active in recent years in funding the digitisation of historic collections¹⁵. £10m has been spent on schemes to digitise selected UK newspapers, historic sound recordings, official publications, newsreels and census data. More digitisation will be funded in future.

A recent survey of digitisation, *Digitisation in the UK*¹⁶ (2005), by JISC and CURL, makes a case for a more co-ordinated approach to digitisation in the UK, with better investigation of the needs of users. The survey estimated that over £130m of public money had been devoted to digitisation over 10 years.

National libraries and researchers

A consistent trend over the last 10 years has been the way in which the three national libraries, and especially the British Library, have been drawn into the efforts by the higher education community to help researchers.

The British Library's Document Supply Centre, of course, has been one of the most important services for almost all UK researchers for many decades. But more recently the British Library has been increasingly involved in the national programmes I've mentioned (RSLP, RSLG and RIN); it has played an important role in JISC, for example through its digitisation programme; and it has signed agreements with other research libraries about the scope of collecting policies.

What lies behind this tendency is the concept that the British Library is no longer a 'back-stop' or reserve supplier of research material, called upon only when other, more local suppliers fail; it is just one resource – albeit a particularly rich one – among many that all researchers have available to them direct. This is reflected in recent decisions of the Library to liberalise admissions policies in its reading rooms in London, and to offer convenient electronic document delivery services, 'zetoc'¹⁷ and 'British Library Direct'¹⁸, to individuals.

One of the main ways in which national libraries differ in nature from many other libraries that support researchers is that they have a duty to preserve their collections for future generations. This applies not only to special and unique collections but also to all the publications of their countries – the legal deposit material. Again, the British Library plays a leading role, not only in preserving its own material but also in offering help and advice and promoting policy, through the National Preservation

¹⁴ <http://www.nesli2.ac.uk/>

¹⁵ http://www.jisc.ac.uk/digitisation_home.html

¹⁶ http://www.curl.ac.uk/projects/Digitisation_in_the_UK.pdf

¹⁷ <http://www.bl.uk/services/current/zetoc.html>

¹⁸ <http://direct.bl.uk/bld/Home.do>

Office¹⁹ in the case of traditional materials, and the Digital Preservation Coalition²⁰ in the case of electronic material.

The National Library of Wales, digitisation and researchers

I'd like to say a little about one of the other UK national libraries, the National Library of Wales (NLW), and how it aims to support researchers' needs. NLW is of course much smaller than the British Library, but also more typical of national libraries in the world.

For us in NLW, as for most national libraries, the term 'researcher' encompasses all those who seriously seeking information in pursuit of their aims, not just academic researchers. Of course we do pay special attention to satisfying the needs of staff and research students in universities, particularly in areas of strength like Celtic studies. NLW is a member of a consortium of higher education libraries in Wales, the Wales Higher Education Libraries Forum (WHELFF)²¹, that has developed an action plan for improving services collaboratively: one of our current projects is to publicise and market NLW to researchers more effectively.

But we also have to keep in mind everyone with an interest in using the Library. Inevitably that means we focus on the strengths of the collections, and especially the special or unique collections.

At the most basic level that means making the collections visible: by making sure that as far as possible they are listed and indexed online, and by drawing attention to them through publicity, exhibitions, and exposure in the press and on television.

But since 2000 we've had available a more powerful and penetrating tool to help us – digitisation. For NLW, situated 70 miles from the nearest large town, this technology, with its capacity to deliver images instantaneously - not just indexes and catalogues and summaries, but replicas of the objects themselves – was a dream come true.

Since then we've built up a Digitisation Unit, consisting of two teams – about 12 people in all - working in parallel: one devoted to digital capture, the other to creating metadata and presenting the results. Other staff contribute from time to time. (We outsource some digital capture, especially of print.) We also house Culturenet Cymru, a national Welsh collection of digitised heritage material taken from over 100 archives, museums and libraries throughout Wales. By now we have over half a million pages available to everyone on the Digital Mirror section of NLW's website. Almost all of them are of direct potential use to researchers. They include important map and photographic collections, most of the framed paintings we have, and a wide selection of manuscripts and archives, including the most famous Welsh manuscript volumes from the middle ages.

What are not so well represented in the Digital Mirror are books and other printed material. And more generally we would have to admit that the Mirror contains only a

¹⁹ <http://www.bl.uk/services/npo/npo.html>

²⁰ <http://www.dpconline.org/graphics/index.html>

²¹ <http://whelf.ac.uk/>

tiny fraction of what the Library could or should offer. If we were honest, we would say that digitisation, for all its successes, is in essence a cottage industry, not a Henry Ford production line.

Then suddenly, in December 2004, we realised that digitisation could perhaps operate in Henry Ford mode. That is when Google made its amazing announcement that it intended to digitise millions of printed volumes from five of the world's greatest research libraries, and make their texts available and searchable on the Web²². Overnight, it seemed, what had seemed impossible had become within reach – if only one had a super-rich multinational company with enlightened thinking behind you. For us in Wales, a small country of only three million people, it became possible to talk about digitising the entire printed heritage of the country, without appearing to have lost one's reason. It is a tantalising vision: the whole intellectual history of a country, as it is recorded in print down the centuries, available instantly and easily to any researcher anywhere in the world; the whole of the output of Wales in its own language, Welsh, one of the oldest languages in Europe.

Libraries and future researchers

I'd like to end by imagining research libraries of 50 years from now. At the beginning I asked the question, 'Why do researchers use research libraries?'. I suggested two answers, to locate original sources and to track the work of their fellow-researchers. Will the researcher need libraries to do these things in the year 2056?

The Google revolution has show how powerful and profitable is that gigantic machine of the second industrial revolution, the search engine. Uncovering knowledge was something librarians thought they knew how to do best, with their catalogues and indexes and thesauri. It's now clear that the real – and certainly the most popular - experts at uncovering knowledge, now and in the future – searching trillions of items and delivering the results, selected for relevance, in an instant – are the massive companies like Google. So all-powerful is Google that librarians are wise to engineer their information so that it is easily visible to the search engine, rather than seeking to perfect their own search mechanisms.

We now know that this new kind of knowledge-gathering is closely linked with a new way of providing that knowledge: the aggregation of huge quantities of knowledge in digital form – both born-digital material and printed knowledge converted into digital form – for a large, often an international, public. This is being done by public bodies like JISC, by large corporations like Yahoo and Google, and by not-for-profit organisations like JSTOR²³.

What does this mean for research libraries? I think it means that the role of the research library as a store of secondary, non-unique literature will become less and less important, as more and more of it becomes accessible, either free or for a fee, from digital aggregators. The residual role of the library therefore becomes that of a

²² http://www.google.com/intl/en/press/pressrel/print_library.html

²³ <http://www.jstor.org/>

middleman or broker, paying a collective fee on behalf of individual researchers in an institution.

On the other hand, where libraries house and own primary, unique research collections, those collections will become even more important. And the library will in many cases – for example where research demand or potential is obvious – come under pressure to increase access, for example by releasing digital copies, again either for nothing, or for a fee.

The challenge, especially for a library like NLW, which records a ‘small’ culture and a minority language, is how to increase the scale of digitisation, from what is a cottage industry at the moment to a more Henry Ford mode of production, in response to the Googles and Yahoos.

So, in summary, I see three functions for a research library in the future:

- 1 as a broker or gateway for access to research information that is paid for collectively or through cooperation
- 2 as the guardian of existing unique or special print and archival collections, with a special duty to maximise its visibility and use, especially by the use of electronic surrogates
- 3 as the preserver of digital research material for the use of future researchers.

Enough to keep us librarians fully occupied for a few years to come, whatever the doom-mongers may forecast!