ESSAY REVIEW

HUMANITIES INFORMATION RESEARCH: PROCEEDINGS OF A SEMINAR: SHEFFIELD 1980

Until recently only a few pitifully inadequate pieces of research had been done on humanities information. The BLR&DD seminar at Gregynog in 1975 (Smith, 1976) marked the beginning of the Department's intervention in this field, and since then programmes of humanities information research have started to take shape. Virtually everything that had gone before was only fit to cause frustration to anyone like, for instance, a library school lecturer wanting to give lectures on humanities information problems which were anything more than anecdotal. The Report on the BLR&DD Sheffield seminar of 1980 is a progress report on how far things have moved in this new sub-discipline since the Department first apprehensively dipped a toe in the water. The first thing that emerges is that the state of knowledge has already improved immeasurably since those bad old days before 1975. However, all is not yet perfect.

The report shows that at present the field is still incoherent and fraught with problems. The first of these problems is definition. What are the humanities? The seminar revealed considerable vagueness about this. Ancient history, including prehistory and archaeology, biblical studies, English language and literature, French, Greek, history, linguistics, music and philosophy are all included in one of the Centre for Research on User Studies (CRUS)'s projects. Other subjects such as art and Hispanic studies were mentioned at other points during the seminar. Clearly there is considerable diversity amongst these subjects and only a form of words like 'the bits left over after science, technology and the social sciences are taken away' really describes them as a group. Professor Meadows has a helpful point when he says that 'an historical approach does characterize a vast range of research in the humanities' (p. 2). The tendency for discussion in the seminar to concern itself with history perhaps confirms this. On the other hand the reader's frequent feeling that this was a seminar about history may not be an entirely positive one. However, if the participants were often unsure of this basic grounding for their discussion, there is the consolation that other equally learned assemblies have tied themselves in even worse knots with this. (See, for example, Broadus, 1979).

What does emerge from the Report is a fairly consistent picture of the humanities scholar's working methods. At various points during the seminar his preference for working as an individual rather than in a team is mentioned. Three styles of humanities research are identified by the CRUS team: (1) the chronicle type, based on the study of a large number of texts and documents; (2) the critical or comparative type, in which the material is likely to be more easily available; (3) the contemplative type, which requires only a small number of readily available documents (p.20). CRUS has gone further and identifies the

expected number of books bought, number of periodicals subscribed to, frequency of use of libraries outside his own institution, use of interloan services, conference attendance, and preference in bibliographic tools. Perhaps the test of common working methods is a better indicator of what unites the humanities than attempted syntheses of a common intellectual core for a rather diverse range of disciplines.

Accepting that definitions present problems, the next question to ask is what is the sphere of the humanities information researcher? This was an area left in a very unsatisfactory state by the seminar. There was a tendency for some of the participants to regard the problem as one of 'how humanities scholars pick up references and at what point' (p. 26). Such an approach, concentrating as it does on one trivial aspect of the problem hardly calls for research at all and is almost as well served by casual observation. In the absence of any list of the necessary pre-occupations of the humanities information researcher, the reader must provide his own. The reviewer's version of what humanities information research should be concerned with is as follows:

1   the epistemology of the humanities disciplines,
2   the methodology of humanities scholars and students,
3   information systems and how they relate to the methods used within the humanities,
4   technical developments relating to methodology and information systems.

Once one has a list of this kind to hand, one can examine the content of the seminar report by subject, rather than paper by paper.

What immediately emerges is that the first of the categories is almost completely absent from the deliberations at the seminar. This is not surprising, as most British scholars and librarians would not recognize epistemology if it came up and hit them over the head. The lack of a theory of knowledge and how it is to be acquired in the humanities disciplines generally is manifest. Historians still believe that commonsense will tell anyone what history is all about and literary scholars are still to be found taking a text and enthusing over its beauty or the eternal values it represents with little concern for the specific cultural values it expresses. It is still possible to take a university degree in history without ever being exposed to historiography, except insofar as it occasionally emerges from debate over some specific historical issue. The kind of soul-searching which has gone a long way towards making geography a coherent and self-confident discipline is rarely to be found in the humanities. Because of the crucial importance of this to the other elements of humanities information research, it is worth pursuing the point in more detail.

Professor Meadows's example, in his opening address to the seminar, of the way he went about writing the biography of a nineteenth century scientist, can be used to illustrate the point. In rough order of relative importance he (1) searched for and read primary sources relating to the man's life (2) searched for and read secondary sources, many of them contemporary with his subject (3) discussed the topic informally with colleagues, particularly on the interpretation of nineteenth century background (p.1). Though it may be maligning Professor Meadows to equate this account of methodology with a parallel organization of the intellectual problems presented by this particular life, the message seems clear. The approach is empirical: the facts are assembled and then interpretations are attached to them. The eternal problem with this is that implicit assumptions govern what one considers to be facts and

the relative importance one attaches to facts. In the case of scientific biography the importance one gives for instance to the personal life of the subject, his upbringing, social position, religious faith and so on, needs to be clear at the inception of the research. If this is not the case, problems of interpretation can perhaps be resolved by a casual dip into the subject's personal history. Questions relating to the contemporary background can likewise be used in this *post hoc* fashion. An explicit theoretical framework is needed as a first priority.

To continue with the example of history of science, the work of Kuhn (1970), Lakatos (1978) and others has gone a long way towards bringing theoretical considerations into their rightful place. The hidden mechanisms behind the working of the scientific community have become at least a subject for debate, if not unanimity. In other humanities' disciplines similar progress is not always apparent. This lack of progress is illustrated by the resistance to structuralist approaches to the humanities. A wider British public has only recently become aware of structuralism via the public disputes in Cambridge over the refusal to grant tenure to a structuralist member of the English Department. The fact that structuralism is French in origin, comes to us originally in works which include a lot of difficult new terminology and which often translate into unappetizing English may contribute to the indifference of much of the British intellectual community. Structuralism has thrived in France for more than twenty years and pervades disciplines from anthropology to the history of medicine. Its consistent feature is the search for structures, whether they be in language or in the intellectual milieu of a scientific discovery. This provides a rigorous, purposeful method of exploration. One does not have to be a doctrinaire follower of Levi-Strauss, Althusser of Foucault to see the value in this. (See, for example, Levi-Strauss, 1966; Althusser, 1971 and Foucault, 1972).

The methodological choices made by humanities scholars rest on their epistemology, or lack of it, and discussion of methodology is rendered difficult by the lack of clear ideas on what underlies it. This problem is most clearly acknowledged by Carole Smith in her paper, when she says that on her appointment as a British Library Information Officer with the York History Department she did not know what history was, and 'no-one else in information science knew what it was either' (p.27). She might have added that the same is true of many historians. Despite this difficulty, the Report does contain a good deal of useful information on aspects of methodology. The CRUS research is good on this.

Sue Stone's paper summarizes work already published and some yet to be published. The work is built on questionnaire responses and interviews with academics and PhD students, on the subject of their library and information needs. As mentioned earlier, a profile of the research methods and literature use of humanities academics and research students emerged. Particular points such as PhD students' lack of interest in abstracts, heavy use of interlibrary loan, reliance on travel to other libraries and institutions, all go to build up a convincing picture. Differences between disciplines emerge, with history and philosophy usually at opposite poles in questions of literature use and research methods. The Research Officers in the York and Birmingham History Departments extend the picture to include the way teaching methods affect students' methods and literature use. The implication is that students pick up bibliographical techniques in the same haphazard way they pick up essential arguments about what history is and how it is done. Something on the

Polytechnic of North London's bibliometrics project would have made this aspect of the seminar even more useful, but apart from a brief mention in Richard Snelling's review of BLR&DD's intervention in the field it is not discussed.

After methodology, we come to the role and effectiveness of information systems. The seminar included three substantial papers on this. The first is Michael Doran's account of the *Repertoire International de la Litterature de l'Art* (RILA) British office. The office contributes to this international art abstracting and indexing service, and Mr Doran's information on this is interesting enough. What gives the RILA office even more significance, is that BLR&DD finances it to monitor its own activities and investigate the reactions of its users, concurrently with its day-to-day operations. Thus RILA becomes a testing ground for ideas about bibliographic services through a process of self-examination.

The office has asked questions about collection methods—should journal editors be used to obtain abstracts from the authors of articles, and publishers from the authors of books? how can collection for an international service be standardized? and so on. The user study aspect of the RILA project was based on questionnaires and interviews. It has produced interesting conclusions on the use of bibliographic services and their ability to modify the researcher's methods. It has also fed back the information that RILA's coverage of certain periods is unsatisfactory, but that its coverage of exhibition catalogues and newspaper articles is highly valued. Though the dangers in self-monitoring and indeed in a user survey conducted from within a service (albeit with BLR&DD guidance) are obvious, it is also clear that the RILA project advances the understanding of bibliographic services in the humanities and points valuable lessons on how other such investigations might be organized.

Similarly the information about Newcastle Travelling Workshops' History Package in Sue Lacey-Bryant's paper is very revealing. There is a justifiable suspicion of user education abroad in the land, arising as a reaction to the uncritical vogue it has enjoyed for so long. This makes it hard to look at a particular manifestation of user education with an unprejudiced eye. However, the Newcastle History Package seems calculated to disarm such suspicion. It was created in co-operation with a practising university history teacher, Professor Norman McCord of Newcastle University, who supplied his perceptions of a history department's needs. A student handbook, posters, a teacher's manual and the ubiquitous tape-slide programme were devised, first to help students to learn the techniques of systematic searching, and second to encourage them in the criticism of sources. The aims and methods, the tentative conclusions drawn from the compilation exercise, and the identification of problems for further investigation, all seem very sensible.

The third paper on a specific form of information system was given by Gregory Walker on guides to resources. Since humanities scholars so often have to work at a distance from a large portion of their sources; since so much unique or rare material can be required; and since funds for travel and investigation of the whereabouts of sources are not plentiful, guides to sources are a very logical provision. The need for them seems to be confirmed by most research on the needs of humanities scholars. Unfortunately the existing guides are often patently inadequate, so Mr Walker's sound and practical comments are extremely valuable. His remark on the entries in a guide is a good sample—'Not only must all relevant holdings be mentioned, but all the

"mentions" must use a carefully controlled vocabulary and variation of length, to ensure that—for example—a 200 title special collection in a small library is not described with a much greater verbal fanfare than a 2000 title holding on the same topic in the Bodleian' (p.64). This kind of good sense is the seminar at its best.

On questions of technical developments the seminar was not always so levelheaded. The comments on new technology for the scholar himself tend to take as their starting point technical facilities which exist, and which the scholar might be encouraged to use. Professor Meadows envisages the loan of a computer for the storage of research notes and possible availability of the notes to others. He also advocates the use of the word processor in writing up. Pleasing ideas, but realistic either in terms of the finance available or a real need for the humanist to change from the methods he has used since ancient history first produced scholars?

Pamela Graddon had been explicitly asked to talk about new technology which *'could be* of benefit to people doing research in the humanities field' (p. 45) (reviewer's italics). She mentions the electronic journal. This is a seductive idea: a new version of the invisible college made possible by the technology of the late twentieth century. Although Mrs Graddon does not dwell on this particular innovation, it is one which sums up the difficulties of relating new technology to the humanities. The pattern of journals, newsletters, conferences and meetings through which humanists communicate with each other, has grown up over decades in response to needs expressed by the scholars themselves. Though waiting lists for articles to appear in the best journals are long and new journals are continually being founded to cope with the flow of worthwhile articles, there is no sign that this problem is sufficiently urgent to require an entirely new form of publication. The pressure on journals in the sciences does indeed indicate a need for exploring new forms, for in science disciplines there is a constant need to establish priority of discovery and to pass on ideas that can be utilized immediately.

The humanities differ from the sciences on the question of urgency of publication, for although there is personal frustration experienced by authors at the tardy appearance of their writings, speed of publication is not an essential feature of the communication process. More immediate communication of research in progress is quite adequately dealt with by conferences, seminars and the network of excellent informal newsletters. The humanist is firmly wedded to the idea of conventional publication. His scale of values is described by form of publication, from the hardback monograph originating from the most prestigious university presses, down to departmental discussion papers and self-published pamphlets. It might be argued that electronic journal publication could fit into that hierarchy of prestige—somewhere near the bottom end of course—and this is perhaps true, but unlikely. The electronic journals as envisaged at present, have a fairly short currency for their content and a restricted user group. The humanist is used to regarding even his smallest published efforts as permanent and available to the world at large. He is unlikely to accept any form which does not offer him these features. All the refinements Mrs Graddon discusses—videodiscs, voice input, and so on—all fail to alter the essential reasons why most forms of new technology remain marginal to the humanist.

To take the one form of new technology which has been enthusiastically received by humanities scholars—the computer as a manipulator of large

bodies of text or statistics—the story is still not an entirely happy one. Scholars clearly relish the freedom the computer gives for the performance of tasks too daunting to be performed manually. There does, however, seem to have been an element of fashion in this. The precision that printout or display on the VDU seems to give to results has often been spurious. Census data and other historical statistics are just not sufficient, or indeed sufficiently accurate, to give history more precision than it had with its old methods. History is the sum of such an infinite range of variables, data on many of which are irretrievably lost, that even with the best of mechanical assistance it remains indeterminate and the subject of tentative generalizations.

This may seem like what Richard Snelling calls a 'Luddite reaction to new technology'. (p.12) The phrase is striking, but does not really stand deeper examination. The humanities are essentially cottage industries and there is no essential force (such as the economic logic behind the industrial revolution) for them to change into a steam-powered, factory-organized business. A scholar with a pencil and something to write on can still do work in the humanities as well and at much less expense than a colleague with all the machinery that the technologists can invent. Not every simple technique or inexpensive apparatus is automatically outmoded by new inventions. All the body scanners that medical science has available to it have not rendered the stethoscope, invented two hundred years ago, less useful as a portable means of observing the inner workings of the body. While medicine is still done in places other than clinics or hospitals, its portability and reliability are likely to ensure its continued use, contemptibly simple though it is. The point is that most humanists, like the medical general practitioner, have no desperate need for more sophisticated equipment.

Even admitting that some new technology will be incorporated into the humanist's tool box, there is no reason why this should happen immediately. Microform has been around for over one hundred years, hardly used at all for most of that time and only used much in the humanities in the last few years. It was potentially useful for the whole period, but a sufficiently strong need for it to be used has only just been felt. The process is more likely to be similar for recent technical improvements than is a hectic rush to take them up immediately.

In conclusion, it would be churlish to express too much disappointment at the content of this report. Unsatisfying though much of it is, at least we now have something marking out the trends in large areas of humanities information research. In Maurice Line's 'Concluding observations' there are also a number of positive suggestions for directions future research could take. Citation studies in the humanities are one category he mentions and ISI's *Arts and Humanities Citation Index* will provide an increasing volume of data that could be used for this purpose. His scheme for the machine input of book indexes and their integration into large machine files has attractions, daunting though something of this size would be. Studies of reading habits, particularly browsing, both within individual books and within collections, could be fruitful.

There is no lack of worthwhile work to be done, and if epistemological aspects of humanities information are not nelgected, then humanities information research looks set to develop into a useful sub-discipline. The sponsorship of such research by the BLR&D Department is quite clearly the means by which it has grown. This sponsorship must continue if growth is to

advance at the same rate, but now the subject is properly founded, work by PhD students, academics and librarians without BLR&D Department funding should become increasingly common. The time when humanities information research has a momentum of its own should not be too far off.

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