
Collection Management in a Period of Change*

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FOR a major national library, the discipline of effective collection management represents a challenge that is both political and professional. Successfully meeting the challenge should bring benefits to the users in enabling a more comprehensive and sophisticated interpretation of the collections, to the library staff in enabling more rational and resource-effective decisions to be taken about the stock profile and priorities, and to the library and information community throughout the country in encouraging the formulation of new partnerships to enhance the quality of services to users within the

resource constraints. This paper describes briefly how the British Library has been responding to the challenge in the last five years, the successes it has achieved, and the agenda for the future.

The political dimension in the UK experience has to be given prominence since there has been a significant (if somewhat intangible) shift in the stance of central government towards the requirements of its major research libraries. Given that our new Department of the National Heritage only funds directly the British Library of the library institutions in the UK (the National Libraries of Scotland and of Wales being funded through the Scottish office and the Welsh office respectively, which endow their position and finances with political quirks and delights all their own),

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the British Library has felt most acutely the change in climate. The ancien regime of shared values between the national library and the political administrators, the rarely questioned acceptance that national libraries should continue to grow in order to fulfil their obligations to scholars as the national archive of documented memory, the clerisy of high culture which saw a strong national library, adequately — even generously — funded from the public purse as a symbol of a civilised nation, has collapsed. That regime sanctioned the fundamental commitments to the British Library's impressive new building at St Pancras; I doubt if such a monument would have been approved initially a decade later.

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I do not imply that today's political generation is hostile or philistine: its continued, if critical, support for the new building in its final phases is testament to acceptance of the British Library's performance and potential. Yet the approach is pragmatic, questioning, anti-historical (a profound intimidation for the older research library) and market-driven. Some of the sharpest questioning

relates to the incessant growth of the stock (The British Library is reckoned to require 2 miles of new shelving each year) and therefore the space needed to house it. Justifications are required, and in the case of the legal deposit privilege which in the British Isles is currently extended to 6 institutions under the 1911 Act, the questioning goes beyond the British Library. Professional collection management is no longer an optional subject on the core curriculum of national library management.

The British Library Board, aware of the changing environment, in 1987 commissioned Dr Brian Enright, the Librarian of the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and an eminence in the library land, to carry out a thorough review of the British Library's acquisitions and retention policies. Assisted by two senior library staff, the Report — known colloquially if awkwardly as the RARP report — was delivered to the Board in June 1989. Its recommendations were accepted as the basis for further study and implementation. A project team of two was appointed for the implementation phase, in addition for their existing responsibilities (both were already much involved in the maintenance and development of the English-language and especially the British collections of printed books). They have been assisted by a small steering committee chaired by the

Director-General Mr Smethurst, who throughout the life of project has shown an exemplary professional commitment to the goals of the Review.

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In appendix A, the specific recommendations of the Report are summarised. Briefly, all the collections of the British Library were covered by the Terms of Reference, but the Review Team focussed particularly on the areas of the unselected intake: the material received by legal deposit, international exchange arrangements and by BookNet were subject to detailed scrutiny. The impact of information in electronic form, and desk-top publishing, were also reviewed. The main recommendations advocate exercising more curatorial control and discrimination over these areas and revising the principles and guidelines for the acceptance of the legal deposit intake if necessary. Closer cooperation with the other legal deposit libraries was urged, as were active policies for retention, weeding and disposal. The relationship between the Library's holdings in London and Yorkshire needed further development and articula-

tion, in the light of the evolving common stock policies.

Four key themes are pervasive throughout the Report. First, that the acquisition of an item entails a continuing financial commitment once it is accepted into the collections: no storage is free. The techniques of life-cycle costing were applied on an experimental basis. The awareness of storage cost becomes particularly acute when the question of large-scale stock movement is addressed, as is the case of planning the Library's move to its splendid new home in London. There is an implicit conflict between maintaining existing holdings and securing new acquisitions when storage space and the resources for preservation are scarce.

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Secondly, that unselected publications are retained when there is no requirement that they should be deposited and are sometimes relegated to «dumps» in which they cannot be accessed for use. Meanwhile comprehensiveness should be positively sought by clearly defined guidelines and by continuing consultation and cooperation with the other legal deposit libraries.

Thirdly, that in some parts of the Library, e.g. those concerned with science and technology, different criteria will need to be applied for initial selection and later reassessment for permanent retention. Material may have been duplicated when in high demand, but does not justify long-term retention in multiple copies.

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Finally, that the Library should promote mutual awareness of the selection of retention policies of other institutions and seek to coordinate them in a national context for the better exploitation of its own collections and those of other libraries.

It will be seen that the Review encompasses a spectrum of collection management concerns, which range from the apparently very local and parochial — it is clearly good and economical practice to eliminate reprints received by legal deposit from the processing cycle as early as possible but it is not the stuff that library revolutions are made of — to those of national interest throughout the library and information community. Indeed, the RARP Report has something of a magnetic quality in

its capacity to pull together previously apparently diverse issues of library management, from the under-utilisation of the library's resources for the study of the history of science and technology to the conceptually complex issue of the place of «free newspapers» in the nation's printed archive.

The developing and eclectic nature of collection management as a library discipline is analagous to the emergence of preservation as a major policy concern in the 1970s: prior to that time, there had been of course policies and practices for the conservation of material, specialist workshops and binderies in the great research libraries and so on. Yet preservation rose very significantly up the library management agenda, became the chic cause for library directors to espouse, and attracted resources on a scale hitherto unknown (and that were not always wisely spent!). It was a sign of the times that in 1977 the Conference of Directors of National Libraries took as its major theme «preservation». By the 80s, many of the research libraries reflected this concern in the enhanced status given — rightly — to preservation in their organisational and managerial hierarchies. Yet, at root, many of the activities needed are of a good housekeeping nature: often routine, humdrum and not requiring high skills.

What was and is needed is sufficient managerial recognition of

the need for the proper allocation of resources to a frequently unglamorous activity. So too, would I argue, is the case of collection management. In my own Library, we have reached the point where collection management attracts sustained concern at the highest level without yet receiving all the resources necessary on a permanent footing to discharge the responsibility fully — despite the continuing eloquent advocacy of my Director General.

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Before surveying specific areas of progress in the implementation of the RARP recommendations, it is worth considering the impact the Report has had, outside and inside the Library.

Some of the external publicity was perhaps influenced by the choice of title for the Report, «Selection for survival», a nomenclature not favoured by Mr Smethurst or myself. It aroused dark suspicions in the minds of our readers: were we about to retreat from the comprehensive collecting aspirations for the national collections, abandoning for instance the collection of romantic fiction? — that was an unromantic fiction. Any

selectivity was greatly to be deprecated, they told us. Journalists reflected these anxieties in headlines: «300 years to tradition to be abandoned», proclaimed one national Sunday newspaper. The version of the Report read in the Treasury caused a quickening in the beat of what passes there for a heart: it was quickly perceived that the Report offered an opportunity to restrict the permanent retention of multiple copies in the five UK legal deposit libraries: this dogma at its most extreme said only one copy needed to be retained beyond the period of immediate use (so runs the simplicity), thus reducing the long-term storage costs to the Exchequer by up to 80%. Meanwhile another version of the Report — though in truth there was only one printing and what you see is what you get — was scrutinised by our professional colleagues. Some saw in it the recipe for a distributed national printed archive, with substantial portions of the British collections being relocated in existing or new specialist institutions, along with the receipt of incoming legal deposit material.

Inside the British Library, reactions varied. My colleagues in the north at the Document Supply Services felt that they had implemented all the relevant recommendations of the Report by the time it was published. Certainly, the procedures for BookNet (the service which takes in and redistributes

unwanted stock from other libraries) have been overhauled fundamentally. In London, many of the curators initially equated the Review with an instruction to dispose (particularly of government publications) — «to RARP» has become an infelicitous synonym. The recommendations, advocating improved control over the collections, seemed to be an assault upon the curatorial set of mind where backlogs (of years, not months) of cataloguing were tolerated, where selection decisions once made were never reviewed, where to manage actively and to discriminate ran the increased risk of «getting it wrong»: the ineffable posterity would judge us ill for that (if ever it got round to it).

The reality of implementation is more subtle, for the benefits of positive collection management rest in the long-term. There have been no draconian cuts or sale of stores no longer needed. Instead:

Legal Deposit Material

RARP singled out the legal deposit intake because of its scale — nearly 400,000 items a year.

The weeding out of reprints and duplicates at an early stage to eliminate unnecessary costs has been implemented; there may be a need to review the impact after two years' practice. Guidelines for excluding some other categories (see appen-

dix B) have been drawn up and approved by the BL Board.

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Internal procedures for handling British publications of a predominantly local nature (including those of local government) have been developed, but is recognised that there is some scope for collaboration with local authority libraries. It should be noted that the National Libraries of Scotland and Wales are far more comprehensive — in intent and execution — in collecting their national imprints than the British Library is in securing the English imprint. Preliminary discussion has taken place with LINC (Library and Information Cooperation Council) and FOLACL (Federation of Local Authority Chief Librarians) about the possibilities of decentralising the collecting responsibilities to ensure a more systematic coverage.

The British Library anticipates playing an active role in the Sectorial Library and Information Plans being developed in the UK under the auspices of LINC: the two most advanced are those for law and

the visual arts. The possibility of running a premium full cost-recovery service in legal information, as a feature of a new national legal information service based in part upon temporarily transferred British Library stock, is being explored.

Official publications received through Exchanges

The exchanges run by the London collections, many of them of long standing and concluded at an inter-governmental level before the growth and spread of government publishing into nearly every aspect of daily life, have been drastically curtailed for English and the Western European languages. The English language intake for 1990/91 was 59% of that for 1989/90.

Documentation

It is recognised that current acquisitions policies need to be documented for public consumption, as much for the legal deposit as for the purchased and otherwise acquired intake. They would be much more detailed than the limited outline given by Conspectus. This is already the practice of the Library of Congress and the National Library of Australia, for example. Specific requests have already been received

for librarianship and art and architecture statements.

Retention Strategies

The Review has been successful in instilling in many staff a heightened awareness of the costs of storage incurred in acquisition decisions but retention precepts are still insufficiently part of the management strategic thinking. For the London services this will be achieved most effectively if collection management responsibility is specified in every curatorial job description: this should harmonise with any modification of curatorial responsibility brought about by the more active pursuit of common stock policies, for the Library as a whole.

The developing and eclectic nature of collection management as a library discipline is analagous to the emergence of preservation as a major policy concern in the 1970s: what was and is needed is sufficient managerial recognition of the need for the proper allocation of resources to a frequently unglamorous activity. So too, would I argue, is the case of collection management.

As one of the benefits, determining the most appropriate location of

holdings (or parts of holdings if use patterns differ through the life-cycle) will enable the northern estate at Boston Spa to be utilised more effectively for the long-term storage of lesser used material, quite separate from DSC's stocks, systems and services.

*Progress in the reassessment
of non-duplicated stock*

In the Science Reference and Information Services, all current purchased serials were evaluated by curatorial staff in 1990/91 and allocated to 5 categories in terms of their usefulness as part of the reference collection. The results are being used to develop retention priorities.

DSC have now initiated a system whereby titles added to stock in a particular year can be identified. Their use will be monitored through barcoding, so there is now a mechanism which will allow comparatively sophisticated dual-site retention arrangements to operate.

The Implementation Team has identified and listed the «dumps» of legal deposit material mainly at Woolwich and some disposal is now in progress, (e.g. Hong Kong children's books and text-books, late 19th and early 20th century railway timetables; a substantial hybrid collection merely identified as «miscellaneous non-commercial publications»). Restructuring of the frame-

work of these collective press-marks has been proposed, the aim being to provide more «reader-friendly» access. A recent rough survey identified some 46 tranches of material requiring improved handling to assist access or else disposal, totalling some 3300 linear metres and some 9,5 cubic metres.

Important storage saving of some 2000 metres of shelving have been achieved from the continuing review of official publications in English and Western European languages held at Woolwich, although this is less than originally anticipated. It is, I fear, the end of the line for the British Library's 3 issues of the 1961 Louisiana School Lunch News.

*Links between BL
and other Institutions*

The principal work with other institutions has been under the auspices of the Copyright Libraries Working Group on legal deposit (CLWG) chaired by the BL's project leader. It is agreed by all the libraries that CLWG has played a significant part in fostering practical cooperation. Because all the libraries are autonomous bodies with different traditions and missions, progress has inevitably been cautious: but given the amount of time invested by the Team and the interest expressed by the OAL, it is important that the dialogue — innovatory in itself — con-

tinues. Its first report was delivered in June 1991, and its second report is in final draft.

In the June 1991 report, agreement was reached between the libraries of legal deposit to share retention responsibilities for newly received serial titles not regarded as part of the core collections of the individual libraries. A minimum of two copies would be preserved wherever possible. This selectivity has reduced the aggregate intake of new titles to 70% of the copies available to the libraries through the 1911 Copyright Act. The agreement has now been extended to new annual publications.

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In 1991/92 a further agreement has been drafted which would extend the joint retention policies to current and ceased periodicals, the categories which in volume terms account for the most significant occupancy of storage space. It proposes to rationalise little-used serial holdings between the British Library's London and Yorkshire collections, with only the legal

deposit copies being retained. This action would simultaneously trigger disposal possibilities in the other legal deposit libraries; the mechanisms envisaged could also work in reverse if one of the other libraries instigated a retention review. There would be safeguards provided to ensure the permanent retention of a national loanable copy.

There are also joint policies proposed for specific categories of monograph material, official publications, Celtica, local publications and newspapers.

A common management information framework has been drawn up to measure the benefits of the joint policies.

These are some of the indicative achievements. I should like to conclude with two quotations from the original Review:

«If the question of staff deployment (and redeployment) with a focus on acquisition and retention problems is not given a priority equivalent to that of planning the moves to St Pancras and implementing automation strategies, the full long-term value of these developments will not be realized».

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APPENDIX A

The summary recommendations of the Review are:

1. All decisions on acquisition should take account of the financial commitments incurred by retention.
2. The mechanism of life cycle costing should be applied to inform these decisions.
3. The British Library should formulate a public statement of its acquisitions policies and priorities.
4. Staff time should be designated to controlling unselected intake and improving co-ordination between divisions.
5. Reorganisation of the Copyright Receipt Office should be the occasion for a review of the principles for the acceptance of legal deposit material.
6. More staff time should be designated to controlling legal deposit intake by implementation of clear guidelines for acceptance of material.
7. More staff time should be designated to maintaining contact with publishers in the UK.
8. Current consultation arrangements with the Copyright Libraries should be extended in order to pursue a sharing of responsibility for archiving and lending in definable areas.
9. The Library should formulate an active retention policy for the materials it wishes to retain in perpetuity.
10. Each department should develop retention priorities, taking into consideration categories of stock where a copy devoted to reference or lending services should be retained, categories where common stock should suffice, categories for relation to reserve stores and categories for disposal.
11. Long-term retention of material in duplicate should be reduced by the extension of the «common stock» principle.
12. The recommendations of the Preservation Scrutiny should be further implemented by officially designating curatorial staff time for selection.

13. No material wrongly received via legal deposit in the past should be given preservation treatment.
14. The practice of dumping materials should be reviewed, particularly in the light of methods of processing such materials at the Public Record Office.
15. The Library should formulate an active disposal policy for a variety of materials, and staff time should be designated for weeding exercises implementing such policy.
16. The Library should promote contacts with other libraries with national responsibilities, both in UK and abroad, and with academic and professional bodies with subject expertise, in order to develop national strategies for acquisition, retention and disposal.

APPENDIX B

FURTHER CATEGORIES OF MATERIAL FOR EXCLUSION FROM AUTOMATIC LEGAL DEPOSIT

1. Programmes of forthcoming events without significant editorial material
2. Printed material not intended for the general public of interest exclusively or primarily to members of an institution, employees, customers.
3. Diaries without significant editorial text
4. Fill-in books of a recreational nature
5. Dress paper patterns, cut-out and press-out books without text.
6. Puzzle books
7. Blank stationery
8. Working timetables of railway services

Note: The BL retains the right under the 1932 Act to claim such material upon demand.