

Every Silver Lining Has A Cloud: a Review of “The British Library – Providing Services Beyond the Reading Rooms” National Audit Office, The Stationery Office, 2004.38pp £9.25
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This is a report from the National Audit Office (NAO) based on a study of how effective the British Library has been in promoting its services to remote users. The study looked at three main areas –

- whether the Library’s website is effective in facilitating remote use
- whether the Library has an effective programme for converting material into digital form
- whether the document supply service is meeting the needs of users effectively

This review will naturally focus on the report’s answer to the third question but I’ll also take a brief look at what it said about the other two.

First of all a word on the NAO - “The role of the National Audit Office is to audit the accounts of all government departments and agencies as well as a wide range of other public bodies, and report to Parliament on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which government bodies have used public money” (National Audit Office, n.d.). It is not to be confused with the Audit Commission, which is “responsible for ensuring that public money is used economically, efficiently and effectively” (Audit Commission, n.d.).

It’s good to know that there are bodies ensuring that our money is spent wisely. We’d probably be experiencing high council tax rises and the imposition of stealth taxes if there were not. The zeitgeist out of which this report comes is very much one of ‘Best Value’, target setting and performance monitoring. We’ve seen the drive to demonstrate ‘economy, efficiency and effectiveness’ in other sectors, such as the NHS, otherwise known as death by a thousand and one Government-defined targets.

In such a climate, together with the never-changing scrabble for funding, public bodies are compelled, or certainly feel compelled, to demonstrate value for money. Indeed it was only a short time ago that the BL commissioned two teams of consultants to estimate the impact it was having on the UK economy. I’d have thought such a task was akin to nailing jelly against a wall but the BL came very well out of the study showing “that for every £1 of public funds the Library receives it generates over £4 of value to the UK economy. In addition, the findings show that the Library adds £363 million of value each year – £304 million indirectly and £59 million directly – and that, without the Library, the UK would lose £280 million of economic value a year” (British Library, 2003). The press release went on show how this compared very favourably with examples from overseas where similar exercises have been carried out. To my mind however, the finding from the St. Louis Public Library that it produced value between 2 and 10 times its public funding suggests that not all the jelly stayed in place.

And so, with the BL already feeling rightly proud of itself, we turn to this report. First of all let me say that the BL comes out of this one very well too. The report begins by outlining the BL’s role and the environment in which it operates, noting the benefits that the recent major

changes in the organisational structure have brought about. And it will certainly come as no surprise to anyone that the Library's Document Supply services are highly regarded by customers. This reinforces what librarians have felt for years and what a jointly commissioned report by CURL and the British Library also noted (The Higher Education Consultancy Group & CHEMS, 2003). That report's recommended best model for the future infrastructure for UK monograph interlending places BLDSC at the heart of a new partnership. This new report echoes that sentiment as well as recognising strengths of the collection, how easy to use and flexible are systems for ordering, the ability to move forward and develop new services such as SED etc. All this is as expected. Nevertheless such familiarity shouldn't prevent us from recognising the BL's achievement in maintaining such a level of excellence.

Whether we'd want to go as far as saying we are 'completely satisfied' with the document supply service, as 83% of BLDSC's remote users have done, according to the BL's Annual Report for 2003-2004, is another matter (BL, 2004). There has been a small but steady improvement in this figure over the last three years (compared to a target of 80%). Over the same period the 'document supply and monograph fulfilment rate' has dropped from 83% to 82% (against a target of 85%). It's tempting to say that the worse the service gets the more satisfied we become, thus echoing the many user surveys of document supply services that find users with relatively low expectations who are easily satisfied. However, being able to supply material from the BL's own stock is only part of the service it offers. As it seems to be increasingly left to pick up the more difficult requests that are not readily available in ejournal big deals, then the fulfilment figure is likely to drop further. I'm more inclined to view the figure as testament to improvements that BLDSC has made in recent years such as faster turnarounds with electronic supply and a greater proportion of material immediately available in e format.

But if we're not 'completely satisfied', then why not? The NAO report devotes considerable space (5 pages out of 8 in the section on Document Supply) to identifying where matters can be improved, although much of this is background information and comments on what is being done. The key area for improvement is pricing. Criticism of the BL in the report goes back to the year zero of 2000 when vouchers were dropped and different prices for loans, copies and searches introduced. This hit public libraries particularly hard. More recent criticism arises from "the significant rises in the cost of the Urgent Action (two-hour) Service and world-wide searches, introduced in August 2003". The report might also have mentioned the steep price hike to Irish libraries in August 2002 (with very little warning) by the BL's decision to take them out of the 'public good' sector. However it is not the prices charged that attracts criticism, at least not from the NAO – they just report dissatisfaction from customers - but the complexity of the pricing model, and, more particularly, explaining this to customers. If I want to check up on what the BL charges for supplying different types of material I naturally turn to its web site. However the prices quoted there are for the commercial sector, not the 'public good' that covers education, government, health, and public libraries. Further, there is nothing on the pricing web page to suggest that cheaper prices for a whole other sector exist. Additionally, my annual letter from the BL on its forthcoming prices lists only the cost of supplying a loan and a copy. To find out other prices I'll probably wait until the itemised invoices arrive. This isn't good enough. The British Library will have to do more to explain its prices for different sectors and how these are set. It must also assess "the financial impact of its pricing policy and price changes on key customer groups".

There have been improvements in customer liaison, and the Report identifies the appointment of specific customer accounts managers for the corporate and academic sectors as a key factor, but the recent SED advertising initiative shows that there is still work to be done. In May 2004 the BL provided advance notice of its plan to include a flyer advertising its SED service in every article supplied by them over a 6-week period. This bypassing of the intermediary to go straight to the end user was not universally appreciated. For many libraries the availability and setting up of the Adobe software is not in their hands. While certain users can set things up for themselves others will have to rely on an IT department, or it may be that PCs within an institution all require central setup and maintenance. Alerting users to a service that cannot be provided by the libraries through which they have to get their ILLs, is not to be recommended, even if the Report calls for the BL to raise awareness of its services to users.

However the major bone of contention regarding consultation with users I would hope and expect to be dealt with in the setting up of 'BLDSC Plus'. This will be the name of the new scheme for the interlending of monographs, involving the establishment of a Board of partner supply libraries. Once this Board becomes established we should see improvements in relations with the academic sector which will hopefully have a knock-on effect to other sectors. That's not to say that BL has to wait around until then – it could be making more of its contacts with bodies such as CONARLS, CURL and FIL to discuss changes.

To move on briefly to other areas of the Report – the key point on digitisation, I think, is the necessity to provide long-term access to whatever is digitised. As we've seen with the People's Network in public libraries, it is the initial investment and establishing of hardware and software that attracts headlines. But if early success is to be built on, rather than left to crumble, it is essential that enough resources are allocated to maintaining access. Viewing the 'Turning the Pages' section of the BL's web site shows what can be done with digitised material. This is a truly excellent feature that permits online viewing of some of the Library's treasured books and manuscripts.

But if part of the web site is superb, I can't go along with the Report's very positive spin on accessibility. Yes, much has been done and the site has improved, while future improvements are identified and are being worked on. The Report mentions two audits that the RNIB has carried out on the site and the improvements that have been made following those audits. This is all to the good. In the same place it also mentions the W3C guidelines on good web site design. Following these guidelines will take your web site a long way towards accessibility. As the W3C Markup Validation Service's FAQ says – "a *valid* Web page is not necessarily a good web page, but an *invalid* Web page has little chance of being a good web page" (W3C, 2004). So it is a surprise to find after the Report's hearty endorsement of the BL's web site that the BL home page fails to meet W3C standards – there are 20 errors on the page. The home page of the Document Supply Centre fared even worse in that the W3C Validator couldn't even attempt to validate the page. For a major international organisation charged with upholding standards this is a dismal showing. Things didn't get any better when I tried the web site's search engine. As many will know the BL did fantastically well in the 'Professionals' version of the 'University Challenge' TV show. Having missed the final I wanted to check up on how they did (they won), and so turned to the search engine. Using 'university challenge' as my search term I was rewarded with 'over 1000 documents found'. Thanks, I thought. Making no changes to my search term whatsoever but simply clicking on 'go' under 'edit search' reduced this to a more manageable, but still considerable, 'over 109 documents found'. Why didn't it produce just these the first time? Now, while the first

document in both lists did produce a short piece on the programme, that was a Research and Innovation Newsletter item on the semi-final win. The other documents of course had nothing to do with the programme. For those who need to know, the key documents on the BL's involvement (taking part and finally winning) are to be found in the 'News' section under 'Press releases'. Just don't try the search engine.

So that's what struck me reading this Report and thinking about the BL generally – for all the great successes there are enough flaws to diminish the shine.

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