NEWSPLAN conference

Geraldine Beare


NEWSPLAN, for those unfamiliar with the name, is a programme organized in 1986 to locate and preserve local newspapers region by region in the UK. It is a cooperative venture involving public libraries, the National Libraries of Scotland, Wales and Ireland and the British Library. An implementation committee was set up for each region to coordinate the microfilming and a funding formula of one percent of their book funds was allocated to the project. Much of the microfilming has been undertaken by the British Newspaper Library, and since the late 1980s some 14,000 reels of microfilm, each corresponding to a bound volume of local newspapers, have been produced.

Over the years, several update conferences have taken place, the most recent in April 2002. These are particularly useful for catching up with progress and for seeing how influential the programme has been worldwide. Since the previous conference in Durham in March 1998, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has contributed several million pounds to what is known as the Newsplan 2000 Project. As Anthea Case, director of HLF, said in 1999:

The Heritage Lottery Fund recognises the importance of preserving these titles as an invaluable resource into the study of our past. They provide a detailed record of the changing social patterns of community and national life, important material for genealogical studies and an intrinsic record of the development of the UK press. Local newspapers provide extensive information about local events and the way in which each local community perceived them at the time.1

All ten designated regions have produced reports stating their holdings and the gaps, condition and location of their newspapers. Several of these reports are also available on the web including Yorkshire and Humberside, North West, South West and Ireland. In addition, regular surveys have been carried out as to who uses local/regional newspapers and their reasons for doing so, and seminars have been held locally to stimulate awareness of newspaper collections generally.

The regular surveys of local newspaper usage have elicited some interesting statistics. Most people travel no more than 20 miles to see the newspapers they want. A third of users want information from the last 20 years; the other two-thirds want information which is up to a century old. There is an exception to this: in Yorkshire and Humberside 55 percent want information from the last six months. As one speaker said: does this imply a short attention span, or just living on the edge? Interestingly, or perhaps inevitably, use of old newspapers in schools and other places of learning as part of required project work is low – no more than 15 percent. Only five percent find newspapers difficult or tedious to use, despite the lack of indexing. Where indexes exist they are not universally used (less than 40 percent used them), but where they do not exist, a majority (55 percent) would like them. Once again, this would seem to indicate that those indexes that are in existence are patchy in both subject matter and period of time covered. Overall, the results of the surveys confirm what many know. Newspapers contain a great diversity of subject matter, and this is reflected in the responses to questions about what information was being sought, and the use to which it would be put. Newspapers in copyright are the most popular and many current users are regular users. Finding aids could be improved, and current developments in the automated indexing of newspapers will greatly assist in this. One such aid is that produced by Olive Software, PipeX, which automatically creates a digital archive, building an index for every article, photo and page and which was demonstrated to great effect at the conference.

The conference held in London in 2002 had as its subtitle ‘Diversity and Opportunity’, and this was amply demonstrated not only in the content but in the regional, national and international representation. Switzerland, the Netherlands, Finland, USA, Canada, Spain and France were some of the countries represented, and libraries and universities as diverse as The London Library, the Imperial War Museum, the Institute of Latin American Studies and the Universities of Wales, Huddersfield and Ireland all had delegates.

The talks themselves contained a fascinating mix of achievement and future development and the overseas programmes were an eye-opener.

Metamorfoze

The first project to be discussed was the Netherlands’ Metamorfoze programme, named after a book by the 19th-century author Louis Couperus. This was begun in 1997 with government finance covering 70 percent of the costs, not just of newspapers and periodicals, but also of books and literary collections (to include letters and pamphlets) in general. A panel was set up to decide what should be preserved and copied. Microfilming was the preferred route and preservation and conservation via de-acidification and registration was put in place, as well as storage of original material.

The first phase was to preserve all newspapers. A regional approach was adopted: 15 regions, 12 provinces and three large cities. A pilot project was set up covering The Hague. Here there are some 48 daily newspapers, and so far 35 have been microfilmed. The success of this project has enabled

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the expansion of the plan to the rest of the country. Where necessary, copies of papers have been borrowed to fill in any gaps and copies of the microfilms have been given to lending institutions. Historical preservation and digitization covering earlier periods such as the First and Second World Wars and the 1920s have also been completed.

Since the Netherlands were involved in Indonesia during the heyday of colonial expansion, Indonesian newspapers have also been included in the project. These papers are unique and have generated worldwide interest. Alongside this, periodicals have been given priority in the second phase of the plan. Some 35 magazines covering the period 1840-1950 are being microfilmed and preserved, and for the future, regional newspapers will also be included. So far funding has been sufficient to cover the initial phases of the project, but there is a question mark as to how long this will continue. Since there are still some 5000 titles to be treated, it is to be hoped that finance will be forthcoming during 2004, when the present system comes to an end.

**Tiden**

Another highly successful project is the Nordic Tiden project. This involves the Royal Library of Stockholm, the National Library of Norway and the State University Library of Århus. The co-ordinator is Helsinki University Library. Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands are also working to digitize their newspapers under the project name Väsnord and some newspaper publishers have also shown an interest including a Norwegian local newspaper Nordlands Avis for the years 1893-1978. In Finland the largest newspaper publisher Sanoma Oy have made the indexes to their newspaper collections to the 1990s available at Helsinki University Library.

The main objective is to use microfilm as an intermediate step for future digitization. In Norway and Finland production lines have been built for digitization of newspapers from film. Once this has been completed the idea is to integrate the digitization of the newspapers into the libraries' ordinary functions. In Denmark and Norway the main aim is to get as much of the collections on the web as possible with minimal search possibilities, i.e. search on title, date and place. In Finland and Sweden, a full text search has been instigated which enables a search on each word in the textual content. In addition, an index of articles with hierarchical search terms from 1771-1890 is also available in Finland.

So far, information going back to the 1620s can be located in Sweden; the 18th and 19th centuries are covered in Finland and in Denmark and Norway has covered the 19th and 20th centuries. Copyright restrictions have meant that much of the work is concentrated on pre-1890 material—a great boon to researchers of course—but many problems have been encountered. As far as possible the whole production sequence has been automated, but human intervention has been needed, including indexing and Optical Character Recognition (OCR) treatment. Converting images to text has been a challenge, mainly because of the different languages and scripts used. Gothic script for instance can be found until the mid-1920s and it is not unusual to find in the same paper, and on the same page, three languages, two scripts and a variety of different spellings for the same name: Gothic and Roman; Finnish, German and Swedish—and in one instance 21 different spellings of 'Copenhagen'!

Tiden is the first historical digital newspaper library in the world which provides a full text search to newspapers in Gothic and Roman script. It can be accessed by logging on to http://tiden.kb.se and, if your language skills do not include the Nordic countries, there is an English version to guide you.

**United States**

Thomas Jefferson once said: ‘Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government I should not hesitate to choose the latter.’

The United States Newspaper Program is a massive, coordinated, national effort to locate, catalogue, preserve and make available to researchers newspapers published in the United States from the 18th century to the present day. Funding comes from the National Endowment for the Humanities (so far this has been in the region of £50m) and technical and management support from the Library of Congress. Readership of daily papers runs at 56 million and Sunday papers at 60 million people, whilst more than 4000 papers are available online. Microfilming is the preferred route, with project teams in each state and territory. Everything is being done to locate all the newspapers published since colonial times. The teams survey collections in research libraries, archives, historical societies, publishers' offices and private collections and note missing issues, title changes, variant editions and of course the physical condition of the newspapers—for example a petrified paper was found in a Wisconsin public library, much to the consternation of all concerned, and the title Texas State Weekly Gazette can be found in 17 variations.

Although preservation and subsequent microfilming and digitization of papers is considered a recent phenomenon, the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library began microfilming in the late 1930s, although at that time microfilm had a life expectancy of less than a generation. (Interestingly, microfilm was invented in 1839 by an Englishman, Benjamin Dancer, though a Frenchman, Rene Dragon, claimed it as his in 1859). Microfilming was a known process in the United States therefore, and the problems encountered were not so much with the process as with the condition of the papers. Some were held together with nuts and bolts, others were ring-bound and still more were bound in wood. Taking them apart was a necessity for filming purposes and, despite the often brittle nature of the paper, heroic efforts have been made to preserve the newspapers in their original state. A further complication has been that those microfilms produced during the 1950s and 1960s and even into the 1970s are substandard, which means that the discarding of original material, in whatever state of decay, has had to be delayed—something that many people are more than happy with.

It is hoped that the entire project will be completed by 2007, though it will be continued through continual maintenance of the database and the microfilming of current titles.
Complete and current projects will produce bibliographic records for 151,500 titles (in more than 60 languages) and will microfilm 82 million pages of newsprint. A prodigious task.

Conclusion

Overall, the NEWSPLAN conference confirmed the continuing worldwide interest in the preservation of newspapers, not just in their original state, but also in the newer, more accessible forms of microfilm, digitization and OCR. Availability on the web via the individual internet sites means that this vast information database is now accessible to all. As Philip Graham, the first editor of the Washington Post, once said, ‘News is the first rough draft of history’, and as such every country has a duty to preserve and make available its own newspapers to as wide an audience as possible.

The main themes of the day were undoubtedly the partnership concept, the pooling of information, the cooperation both within and between countries and institutions and the overwhelming need to ensure that standards are maintained and access to the material enhanced. Long may this kind of enthusiasm and goodwill continue.

Note

1 Cited at http://www.bl.uk/collections/nplanhlf.html

Geraldine Beare is a freelance indexer and, apart from the usual back-of-book indexes, has compiled indexes to the Strand Magazine, Punch magazine and Pathe newsreels. She has been Programme Organizer, Newsletter Editor and Vice-Chairman of the Society of Indexers and wrote the Occasional Paper No.4 on Indexing newspapers, magazines and other periodicals (SI 1999). Email: gjwriter@beeb.net

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