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Great lives and information behaviour

Summary
Studying the information behaviour of prominent people from history is an intriguing topic, but must be approached with care, as part as a methodology for information history.

Keywords: information history; biography

It is always intriguing to look at individuals from the past, and assess their information behaviour, so far as we can ascertain it, to see if it has lessons for us, and this has been reflected in recent issues of *Journal of Documentation*. A recent editorial (Bawden 2006A) looked at the work of Albert Einstein in this way, Muddiman (2003) considered R.D. Bernal in a full-length article, while on a more ambitious scale, Spink and Curran (2006) examined nine individuals over a time span of several centuries, with the aim of beginning to assess and model how human information behaviour may have changed and developed over the centuries. A book reviewed in this issue examines the changes in the information infrastructure and 'memory practices' of the sciences, with reference to leading exponents (Bowker 2006): Lyell for nineteenth century geology, Ashby for twentieth century cybernetics, and so on.

There are, of course, a number of difficulties with any such project. Famous individuals may, almost by definition, be untypical of most people of their time, and therefore an unsuitable subject. Against this, we must set the practical consideration that such people are likely to be the subject of biography and autobiography, to have written about in their lifetimes, and to have left archives; all making the study of their personal information behaviour feasible. It would also be unrealistic to ignore the attractions of studying this aspect of the life and work of inherently interesting characters.

Most difficult of all to determine is the extent to which we may reasonably attribute 'modern' ideas of information behaviour to situations and personalities of past centuries. Usage and meaning of terms, and the very concepts of information and knowledge themselves, may change over time. There is even debate on the fundamental questions as to whether the development of language, and later of means of recording information externally, thus 'bypassing' human memory, affected cognitive abilities, or whether it was the other way round. Bowker (2006) focuses on some these issues in detail. Care is needed to apply historical methods appropriately and sensitively. A study in progress at City University (Weller and Bawden 2006), for example, is examining several leading figures in nineteenth century Britain, to try to understand the context in which they used, and spoke or wrote about, information and knowledge.

It is likely that studies of this kind - examining the 'great lives' of the past from an informational viewpoint - will continue, and some will, no doubt, appear in the pages of *Journal of Documentation*. It is important that they are analysed carefully, within the kind of models introduced by Spink and Curran, and with appropriate care for historical methodology. Used in this way, they can make an important contribution to the development of information history (Bawden 2006B, Black 2006).

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