

SUMMARY NOTE FROM RESIDENTIAL ADVISORY BOARD MEETING 5-6 February 2009

Suggestions emerging from the meeting for future RIN activities are highlighted in bold red.

Participants:

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1. The future of research libraries

The fundamental question is what will be the core roles of the library profession in 10-20 years time? Will these roles (as opposed to the types of media and the technology) not stay essentially the same?

Collaboration between librarians and researchers is fundamental in this respect. In the context of this collaboration, librarians have a major asset: they have a public purpose, and a role in custodianship and quality assurance, which is fundamental for ensuring the public good. Commercial offerings, such as Google, do not have this purpose, because they are driven by money-making imperatives. So there is a political choice to make with regard to how we ensure the effective stewardship of information resources, and the maintenance of quality standards for accessibility and content. Nevertheless, Google is attractive, popular and offers strong competition to some library services; this unavoidable fact needs to be factored into long-term library strategies.

Major points raised in discussion:

- The death of the library as a physical space for researchers is not a foregone conclusion. Many libraries, often with exciting new buildings, are being used extensively, albeit differently.
- Similarly, the demise of printed books has often been overstated, and they may be around for another generation at least. Hard-copy monographs often have advantages over digital offerings, e.g. ease of browsing. The question is whether such advantages will diminish for users more used to electronic information mining.
- The Google generation is spawning new research methodologies, but this does not necessarily result in a better understanding of the information environment; herein is another challenge for libraries to address.
- A more specific issue was raised about the role of specialist collections outside the HE sector, e.g. RC-funded research institutes and learned societies. These collections may have an increasingly important role if HE libraries start prioritising more of what they collect. **RIN could help to stimulate better collaboration between research libraries inside and outside HE.**

2. The future of scholarly journals

Is the big deal really under pressure? Small niche journals may be especially vulnerable, prone to *ad hoc* decisions; so the big deal, in a sense, presents a threat to the commercial viability of such publications. This in turn could threaten the corresponding small niche disciplines... so it's not just the journals that may be under threat. But some might argue that, in the context of scarce resources, these are sacrifices that might need to be made. Collaborative collection management could help to address this problem.

Much discussion focused on a slide summarising Microsoft's view of the future (5-10 years): a much more open, flexible, fast-moving environment articulated around user-led, collaborative activities (especially true for 'big science'). Is this the sort of world we want? If so, how do we get there and how do we influence it? Can we afford it and what are the respective roles of the different players in the scholarly communications system?

- It is important to recognise that the paths to such a changed environment will vary considerably across disciplines and the different cultures that they foster – and some disciplines may be much more reluctant to embrace this sort of change.
- Nevertheless, in spite of this, there is some sympathy with this view of the world, and there is a possible role for RIN to investigate how needs could be met in this rapidly-changing environment. Therefore, **RIN could attempt a horizon-scanning exercise in the same vein as Microsoft, pointing to what the research information landscape might look like in 5-10 years.** Most of what Microsoft has set out is happening, somewhere. What are the cultural blocks preventing these developments from becoming more universal and how could they be broken down? What are the barriers preventing better sharing of data and information across disciplines? These are very relevant questions for RIN to address, using a disciplinary lens.
- However, there is a danger that developing this sort of overarching view becomes little more than another instance of futurology. This could be averted by focusing on blockages within the overall landscape and enquiring about how they might be overcome – a good way, perhaps of attracting the attention of key stakeholders.
- Will new forms of peer review, as envisioned by Microsoft, be as robust as the traditional ones? Is traditional peer review in any case becoming over-institutionalised and ossified? **RIN might investigate how quality assurance works across the whole scholarly communications spectrum, before and after publication.** This also look at measures of esteem, in terms of number of publications in given journals, across disciplines.

Microsoft of course isn't the only commercial player, and others such as Google have their own world-view. How will these various and influential commercial players affect behaviour in the research world, in the medium to long term?

3. Measuring the value of research information services

The Board noted how value can be determined by quantity or volume of information/data accessed (note that access isn't necessarily the same as use), economic measures, and impact.

It is legitimate to ask what is meant by 'use', for instance of a journal article. There are very different ways in which such types of information can be 'used', in response to varying needs, and there is a case for trying to tease out the meaning of 'use' for different users/communities.

In order to try to determine value, the right questions need to be asked. Arguably, AHRC was not doing so when it took the decision to stop funding AHDS. RIN could therefore look **to identify the questions that need to be asked (and who to ask) in order to help determine, across disciplines, the value of information services.** In this context, the repurposing of information/data, so that users can more easily relate to it or identify it, is crucially important; so are the tools/methodologies for using the data (i.e. what has value is the instrument, not just the object). **RIN could investigate this repurposing, along with transferability of information/data and the obstacles to overcome to achieve transferability.**

Other questions covered in discussion:

- How long must information/data be kept, unused, before decisions are made about disposing of it?
- How can the uniqueness of data be established when taking decisions about long-term preservation? Arguably, retention isn't a problem, at least for established data centres; the challenge is to get the data preserved in the first place.
- What have been the advances in recent years that have really changed/improved the way that researchers can use/access information?

4. Options for future RIN activities

Research work

It is important to ensure alignment of RIN activity to the agenda of key stakeholders. However, experience has shown that it is up to RIN, proactively, to approach these organisations to persuade them of the relevance/usefulness of our work. We cannot afford to wait for them to identify issues for us to investigate.

At the same time, it is important for RIN not to lose focus in its future activities, and to retain a realistic view of what is achievable.

Major points raised in discussion:

- A key outcome for RIN is to help researchers optimise the way that they use and create information – so it follows that RIN's key strength is its ability objectively to draw conclusions and develop policy on the basis of analysis of researcher behaviour.
- There could be value in making international comparisons, to delve on how RIN's approach and activities in the UK might be of interest to players in other countries (where there are no equivalent organisations to RIN). Are there instances where other countries may wish to imitate what RIN is doing? Could we point to instances of non-progress because RIN-type organisations do not exist?
- How appropriate is it to undertake longitudinal work, as a means of building up an evidence base? It may be more helpful to think about **follow-up work, to use previous RIN outputs as benchmarks that can be revisited if appropriate** – although care would be required with regard to selecting sampling frames.
- The Board noted two previously-suggested ideas for project work:
 - **an analysis of usage of research data from UKDA and other data centres in the UK**; and
 - **an investigation into how publishers look after and provide access to research data.**

Communications and advocacy

RIN has real strengths as a generator of debates, as an organisation that professes to be disruptive.

However, it is vital for RIN to give clear and overarching messages in order to effect change – drawing on the rich variety of work undertaken (and to be undertaken) by RIN. There is a task of drawing together these various threads in order to formulate these messages and to provide a greater degree of clarity about the 'RIN story'. On that basis, RIN must ensure that such messages are clear, simple and punchy, emphasising what's been achieved so far and how things have changed for the better.

RIN has had some success in getting messages across the library community. But are there any lessons that can be drawn in terms of influencing other communities? For instance, can researchers themselves be influenced? The difficulty, and indeed the appropriateness, of outreach work within the research community have been noted by the Board in the past. Perhaps RIN should consider commissioning projects specifically focused on dissemination/advocacy, over and above what RIN staff do at present.

There is concern that we still do not know how successful RIN has been at influencing and in which areas – so it's difficult to establish how RIN needs to frame its future advocacy, what influencing approaches

actually work. Some quantitative analyses, such as RIN web usage statistics might help, but **there is a strong case for undertaking some evaluation of RIN's impact.**

5. Role of the Advisory Board

Making better use of the Board

There is little doubt that Board meetings can be stimulating – but it may be that not enough happens between meetings. However, is it realistic to expect busy Board members to commit themselves in this way? What could RIN help Board members to engage between meetings, e.g. through e-newsletters, online fora?

There was agreement that individual Board members could be used more in a targeted way for specific activities. RIN should feel free to identify and approach individual members on that basis, to use their services on the basis of their skills, interests and networking capacities (these could be identified by undertaking a brief 'audit' of members).

Individual or small subsets of Board members could be assigned to specific activities as part of an oversight role – for instance, as part of expert panels. At a practical level, such subsets could even meet in the wake of full Board meetings. It was noted that members could delegate activities to their own staff, or refer issues to colleagues and even hierarchical superiors. There is a door-opening role there.

The Board has an eyes and ears role too: RIN would welcome intelligence that members are bound to gather. One useful instance of this would be passing information about researchers that members have contact with.

RIN is making some effort to improve the sometimes unsatisfactory nature of engagement with its funders, and Board members may perhaps wish to participate in *ad hoc* meetings that take place with representatives from funders outside the context of the Funders' Group, for instance with a view to persuading them of the importance of specific RIN-led issues. Could such an idea be extended to organising seminars with selected representatives from funders?

Membership issues

Turnouts and levels of participation are problematic – this emphasises the need to attract the right sort of people to the Board. At the same time, there are a number of vacancies, which RIN is having problems filling. Have we been attracting the right sort of people so far? There is a recognition that members need to be fairly senior. This is very challenging: it is not easy to identify individuals who have the time to spare, and moreover who don't have obsessive agendas to push. How might these challenges be addressed?

- RIN should not feel restricted to recruiting members from RC-funded environments – most researchers do not receive RC funding. What about approaching the Wellcome Trust?
- Should RIN look to appoint younger and less senior members, perhaps drawing from the pool of the consultative groups – where there are some very motivated and interested individuals?
- What other categories of individuals might be approached? Board members' suggestions included: research managers (but there is little enthusiasm for that); representatives of learned societies, e.g. drawn from their own boards; researchers outside HE, for instance in the museums sector; the commercial sector.
- RIN should consider advertising for Board vacancies. If this happened, RIN should draw up a short statement setting out expectations, and highlighting the attractiveness of the Board's remit.