

OXFORD RESEARCH IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

A FIELD-GUIDE TO BIBLIOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

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To many a student beginning a postgraduate course, the prospect of pursuing research without set reading lists from a supervisor may seem daunting. Where to look for sources, how to follow up interesting articles and how to be certain of keeping up to date with the latest findings are questions that threaten to undermine the student's confidence in the first months of a course. The problems facing the researcher resemble some of those faced by the anthropologist who has just entered the field. There are means by which to carry out efficient and exhaustive literature researches, just as there are guide-lines for carrying out successful fieldwork. Recently there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of information systems designed for this purpose; indeed, the advances have been so great over the last five years or so that an uninitiated browse through what help is available may overwhelm and confuse the student even more. This article intends to provide a jargon-free introduction to the types of service on offer to the researcher. It hopes to persuade the more conservative student that computers and terminals really are there to help and are not reserved for hard scientists. It is, in effect, a report on preliminary fieldwork conducted among Oxford's libraries and on-line terminals.

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OLIS

Most students starting postgraduate work will be familiar with the electronic cataloguing systems in libraries. Almost all universities are converting their traditional card indexes into computer records; in Oxford, for instance, all books and journals catalogued by the University's Bodleian Library after 1987 are entered on 'OLIS', the Oxford Library Information System. There is no physical ('hard') record for these entries, though some departmental libraries still operate the traditional card cataloguing system. It is, therefore, a matter more of necessity than convenience that users are acquainted with such systems as OLIS. Access to such systems is gained via the numerous terminals distributed throughout libraries, each offering the user a prompt by which he or she makes a choice. While these systems are easy to use, most libraries will also offer assistance and introductory courses. Throughout, I shall be referring to a working example in order to show how the systems available can be used in combination to provide an extensive literature search on a specific topic, namely 'Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa'.

Library systems such as OLIS provide a useful first round of inquiry. With it one can search the library holdings according to author, title, subject and publisher. The system will tell you the location of the book or journal and offer brief details about it. Searching by subject provides a useful way of browsing the book-shelves: tap in a keyword and it will display a list of all books stocked that concern that subject. A useful keyword to tap in for our example would be 'divination'. This provides several references, but the list becomes much smaller when we restrict ourselves to Africa. Two books appear to be of immediate interest. These are Philip M. Peek's edited collection *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) and William Bascom's *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination from Africa to the New World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993 [1980]). Both these books have extensive bibliographies, which can provide the reader with an initial grasp of the literature. One of the pitfalls of OLIS, however, is that searching by keyword will not guarantee an exhaustive list: for example, the classic work on this topic, Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937) is not listed under 'divination', though it is found under 'oracle'. Other works of importance can be found under such keywords as 'magic' and 'spirit possession'.

OLIS suffers from two major limitations. First, the material ('database') it covers is somewhat restricted. It offers information about the titles of books and journals, but it cannot grant access to their contents; nor does it cover articles in books and journals. Second, since there is often a year's delay between a book's being published and its being catalogued, the information that can be gained from the system is not completely up to date.

BIDS

There are systems available that can provide information to fill the gaps in such systems as OLIS. One of the most impressive in Britain is called BIDS, 'Bath Information and Data Services'. To take advantage of this service, one needs to be a user of a main-frame computer, for example, the VAX in Oxford. This is free for most students and provides access to many more information services and extra communication systems. Courses in using the main-frame are held frequently and are to be highly recommended.

The database to which BIDS provides access consists of journal articles and book reviews for all disciplines, along with conference papers, symposia, seminars and so forth for scientific and technical subjects. It is updated every week. The scope of the database is not constrained by the holdings of any one library: it covers a vast array of academic disciplines and all but the most obscure journals. It is designed to help the researcher find out who is publishing work in particular subject areas, to follow the work of specific authors, and to view the progression of ideas. BIDS allows the user to conduct searches by author, title and keyword, in a way similar to OLIS. Its main advantage, however, is that it can perform searches according to citation. That is, it can find any article that cites a particular reference, and display its publication details along with its bibliography. For instance, the student can find any article, published up to the previous week, that cites 'Evans-Pritchard 1937'. This line of inquiry has enormous potential for accessing the most recent literature, and also for providing a rough guide to the impact an article has had in a particular field; there is perhaps greater reason to read an article cited more than 100 times than a similar-sounding article cited only three times. 'Evans-Pritchard 1937' has been cited in 206 articles at the time of writing (in the social sciences database alone). Information overload is a common drawback of such extensive databases.

BIDS has many useful options. Searches can be limited by language, journal, subject and year; it can display bibliographies; it can also perform 'proximity searches', so that even without knowing, for example, the exact title of an article or the initials of the author, the student can still locate material. BIDS can even provide information regarding sponsors of conferences. This may give the student clues as to where to look for the next round of funding, though at the moment this is restricted to the hard sciences. BIDS holds extra advantages for the more intrepid explorers who have more advanced facilities, such as electronic mail (see below) and a bibliographic programme on their computer (e.g. EndNote Plus). For researchers so equipped, BIDS can save the chore of retyping references by downloading information directly to a personal computer, from where it can be transferred into a personalized bibliographic library.

BIDS is easy to use since it offers a menu of command choices and HELP options at all times. However, since it is so powerful and extensive, an introductory course is advised. In our example, we can not only follow up any article/book of importance by doing a citation search, but we can browse the most

recent issues of journals. A simple search provides a number of book reviews (including some of books not listed in OLIS) and a number of articles of possible interest.

As with all information systems, however, BIDS has its limitations. Still in its early development, it cannot be guaranteed to find all relevant articles, and its database is restricted to articles published after 1980. Most importantly, though, it offers little information regarding the content of the article. It provides the title, author (with departmental address), and the journal issue in which it is published, along with the language and subject words. Clues regarding its coverage may be gathered by a glance at its bibliography, but BIDS does not provide any text from the article itself.

CD-ROM

There are, however, information systems available that can provide the user with the abstracts of articles. These catalogues are contained on CD-ROMs, compact discs that are operated at special terminals distributed throughout libraries and that are available to all library users for free. There are over 100 CD-ROM products available in Oxford, each with its own coverage and special features. Usually one or two suffice for a particular discipline. One advantage of this facility over BIDS is that the coverage extends to articles within edited books. Where available, abstracts can be accessed, so the reader can be far clearer as to what is or is not appropriate to read before making the effort to obtain a hard copy of the actual article. This aspect of CD-ROMs is especially welcome in that it stems the information overload that can easily arise when performing literature searches. All the usual search options are available, and most terminal stations have printers to provide customized reading lists. These systems are so user-friendly that no special introduction is required, but users must be aware of the limitations regarding the boundaries of their database. Lists of CD-ROM holdings, along with advice as to which are the most appropriate, should be readily available at library information desks.

A search on the 'Sociofile' CD-ROM gives us 58 references for the key word 'divination', from the period January 1974 to December 1992. This list can be whittled down to about 13 once the abstracts are read. Searching the citations of these articles using BIDS will reveal more articles of possible relevance. A similar search on the 'Modern Languages Association' CD-ROM, which includes anthropology in its database, yields a few more articles from other journals as well as some chapters in edited books.

Electronic Networks

Finally, it should be mentioned that a wealth of information of a more informal nature is accessible through 'electronic networks'. Students wishing to have access to these need to be registered on the main-frame computer and to have an 'electronic mail' account. Electronic mail is a system by which subscribers can send messages to each other from their computers. With access to 'E-mail', the student is able to communicate with colleagues all over the world efficiently and for free. It also gives the student access to a plethora of 'bulletin boards' (or 'discussion lists'). Subscribers create an agenda for discussion and post their contributions on a list that is distributed to all other subscribers, who are free to add their own comments. In this way issues can be raised and debate pursued effectively without anyone actually having to meet. There are now thousands of these bulletin boards covering a full range of interests (academic and non-academic). Regulations regarding registration and contributions vary, but most offer interesting information regarding new books and forthcoming conferences, as well as academic debate. If, for instance, one is stuck on a specific issue and needs advice or help, suggestions may be more readily forthcoming from this source than from a busy supervisor. E-mail can open up a multitude of new possibilities and research threads, all at a reasonably informal level—a must for the more advanced postgraduate.

These, then, are the major ways in which library and information technology can be of help. Each path has its own advantages and limitations, but used in combination they provide a most powerful set of research tools. Just about everything is free to the individual user and very easy to operate: the biggest difficulty for many is appreciating just how much can be achieved. What is required of the student is the willingness to become accustomed to a different language, to ask questions that will seem basic to the informant, and to be prepared to spend some time becoming accustomed to 'other' types of relationship mediating our contact with books. Such injunctions should not be strange to anthropologists preparing for the field.

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Douglas H. Johnson, a historian, is a Research Fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford. He has worked in the Southern Sudan since 1972, the same year he began his research on the Nuer. He is the author of *Nuer Prophets* (Oxford, 1994).

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