The implications of Brexit for libraries: an Academic Librarian's perspective

Plague, famine and Brexit

The morning after the EU referendum, Richard Ovenden, the Bodley Librarian, reassured his patrons that the University of Oxford's libraries had "survived through European conflicts, plagues and famines, and economic crises of many kinds over the past 400 years." The Chief Executive of the British Library later emailed his staff, urging them to respect the varied views held on Brexit. If the leaders of major institutions – relatively well-placed to weather storms – felt the need to offer reassurance, clearly Brexit was of interest to library professionals.

Reaction to these comments was mixed, but it is striking that they were made at all. Since then, with the exception of the usual suspects, librarians have largely retreated back behind its monitors and book stacks, limiting their discussion of Brexit to compartmentalized consideration of professional issues. This is a shame, as in a time of contested facts and 'fake news', librarians could make a worthwhile contribution to discussion of Brexit, not necessarily by defining truth, but at least by assisting with the negotiation of meaning.

As an Academic Librarian of Leeds Beckett University, working in student instruction, research support and stock acquisition, I am therefore grateful for the chance to offer some personal reflections on the implications of Brexit for the library profession.

Budgets and research

The post-referendum fall in the value of the pound posed a challenge for many libraries, particularly academic ones. Many key resources – e.g. journals and databases – are paid for in euros and dollars, while UK library budgets are provided in pounds, meaning that libraries' purchasing power has decreased. If Britain leaves the single market, any increase in tariffs – whether on computing equipment or information sources – would exacerbate this challenge.

While the government's offer to supply any lost EU funding is welcome, any decrease in international academic collaboration – instances of which have already been reported – will also have an impact on university libraries. Fewer European partners will mean fewer European co-authored articles being deposited in British open access repositories, while any reduction in funding of The European Library will also have an impact on international information sharing, even before considering any potential loosening of ties between the constituent parts of the UK which might result from Brexit.

Creative chaos

Reaching for positives, Richard Ovenden's Oxford colleague, Sir John Bell, Regius Professor of Medicine, has commented on how British research might benefit from freedom from the EU's unwieldy regulatory framework. A less helpful form of disruption has come from the long-term trend of database, journal and ebook publishers providing key content through expensive subscription and 'bundle' models, rather than as the traditional one-off purchases preferred by libraries. This pre-existing trend is likely to be exacerbated by economic uncertainty, as companies seek security through long-term relationships with public sector institutions such as libraries.

Reflecting society

Such issues reflect the information world's place within wider society. Equally, even allowing for spirals of silence and vocal minorities, many library staff seem to share wider concerns about how workplace rights may evolve after Brexit, as well as having concerns about Brexit's potential impact upon international copyright and intellectual property arrangements. It was welcome to many information professionals when it recently emerged that Brexit will not prevent the UK ratifying the single European patent agreement.

Less positively, public libraries may suffer if local authority funding falls as the government covers lost EU funding for other areas. Their future collection development will necessarily reflect their local population. If that population becomes less diverse as a result of post-Brexit restrictions on European free movement, then there may be less desire for public libraries to provide access to stock in as many languages.

More necessary than ever

After the referendum, the head of CILIP wrote of how promoting "literacy, creativity, understanding and a respect for evidence" was now more important than ever before. Perhaps. The erosion of public library services in Britain is a well-known story, but academic libraries seem to be holding their own, even if how their patrons use them has changed. Much public discourse also reflects the need for libraries, even if not explicitly.

The need for reliable facts was one relevant theme of the referendum, alongside Michael Gove's well-quoted comment that "people in this country have had enough of experts", and its implication that they would be deciding for themselves. Since the US presidential election, there has been much discussion of 'fake news'. Libraries can help with such challenges. In providing access to reliable information, and staff who can advise on how to apply that information, libraries are already political spaces.

Plus ça change…

That too few people realise the support available represents an ironic failure of the information profession to communicate. How can this change? In the short-term, libraries can help to contextualise available information, while in the longer-term they can more effectively tie their services to their customers' evolving needs. Whatever Brexit transpires to mean, it may prove useful to have a population able to make informed judgements, rather than relying on the first search result they happen upon and vulnerable to the distortive effect of filter bubbles and echo chambers.

In his poem Aubade, while ruminating on mortality, Philip Larkin – a great librarian as well as a great poet – memorably observed that "Work has to be done." Evidently. But what work, and how? Brexit has made that more uncertain for libraries. However, some encouragement can be found in a task begun by major UK libraries in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, recording the debate. Both Richard Ovenden and Philip Larkin were right, whether Brexit means a New Jerusalem or plagues and famines, and whether 'library' means open access repository, social resource or a space for information literacy teaching, work has to be done – and libraries can help with it.

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