

## **SOME THOUGHTS ON EPHEMERA**

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In November 2011 I attended the annual conference of the British Records Association which was about the records of pressure groups. It was a very interesting opportunity to learn about the best ways of collecting this kind of material and the problems of making it accessible once collected. Many of the collections described included material which local studies libraries collect under the heading of ephemera and it led me to think about the value of this kind of document.

The CILIP guidelines for local studies libraries states –

Acquisitions policy should embrace ephemeral materials such as trade catalogues, programmes for local events, annual reports of local organisations, posters, timetables, sale catalogues, election publicity and other political material, catalogues of local exhibitions, and publicity material issued by local firms. Care should be taken to distinguish between ephemera and archival material (e.g. large collections of bills and receipts providing evidence for business history) that might be more appropriately located in a record office. Local studies librarians should be aware that collections of ephemera are often held by local museums. In such cases, there should be careful coordination of policy. (1)

While there may be elements of confusion between record offices, museums and local studies libraries over older material, only libraries seem to collect current ephemera to preserve for the future. In fact the idea of creating a collection is often not felt to be in an archivist's remit while it is very common to local studies librarians. Librarians are used to looking at their stock and trying to identify gaps, then going looking for something to fill the gap even if it means creating the document themselves or encouraging community groups to do so. They have taken photographs, made films, done oral history interviews and created digital sources to widen the scope of collections and make them more relevant to their users. Archivists are also very active in searching out people and organisations with records that would make their collections more representative and relevant, and then trying to persuade them to deposit these records. But they are less likely to approach one of these organisations and ask to be put on the mailing list so they can receive regular newsletters and other material and thus create a collection themselves. But it is a grey area: as archivists were quick to debate the need to preserve the leaflets, banners and placards created for the march for public services in London in 2011. Local studies librarians need to make sure they are collecting local material of this type.

Local studies libraries have an advantage in collecting this kind of material as local groups and organisations often want to display their publicity materials

in public buildings. While it might sometimes be thought to be unsuitable to go on display it still presents an opportunity for the local studies library to take it for posterity. Future historians will want to know about the activities of many low key fringe organisations and political groups both on the extreme right and left, so even material which cannot be displayed should be preserved. A poster can sometimes be the only documentary record of the existence of a political or community group. It is important for the group and for the wider community that such a record is preserved. This depends on lending library staff knowing they can send out of date local posters and display material (and any similar documents which have not been displayed) to the local studies library. Once a start is made value can be added to the collections as more material will be brought in and histories may be written using the collections.

Some of these small fringe groups are suspicious of authority or have not given any thought to preserving a record of their activities, but collecting this material and going on mailing lists helps build up trust and introduce them to the idea of preservation so when they run out of space or are down to their last two members they might approach the library about finding a home for their records (which would generally be a record office). This material supplies local studies libraries with an opportunity to think about changes in the study of history in their area, ephemeral material shows us the new subjects which are bubbling away under the surface ready to emerge as the research of the future. The study of minority communities is commonplace now, but ephemera collections often give us the first documents marking their existence. LGBT people are recorded in many different sources, but the information often has to be created, for example by oral history interviews, or retrieved, for example by searching newspapers for relevant material. But since the growth of campaigning groups there will be leaflets and posters for local events which may survive in ephemera collections. Preserving and making this material accessible means we must always be thinking about the "future of history".

Cataloguing or indexing this material presents plenty of practical problems because of its format, but it also creates a terminology minefield. Traditional subject headings are often not suitable, it may be better to use the terms developed by the groups who produce the material regardless of whether those terms have yet become acceptable. Many people believe that the contribution of black people, women etc have been hidden because finding aids do not highlight them, but in trying to uncover this contribution we have to be sensitive to the descriptions these groups prefer. When the Linen Hall Library in Belfast re-catalogued its large collection of political ephemera it found it difficult to find neutral indexing terms – even the name Northern Ireland was problematic for Republicans (2). This problem will first become apparent when dealing with ephemera but will eventually also apply to grey

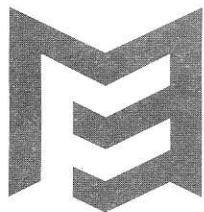
literature and then to books.

While more and more fringe groups use the internet to publish their newsletters and details of their events (creating more preservation problems for local studies libraries) electronic publishing seems to have created even more paper ephemera in the short term. Perhaps the new social media give us the chance to appeal for this kind of material to be donated to us.

The development of technology and the changes to public services mean that there is likely to be a growth in the publication of ephemera, but dealing with it can often be an opportunity to think about the future character of our collections and to make them representative of all elements in our communities.

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1. Martin, Don (ed) Local Studies Libraries. Library Association Guidelines for Local Studies Provision in Public Libraries (2002) p 28
2. Gray, J 'Documenting a community in conflict: The Northern Ireland political collection at the Linen Hall Library, Belfast Law Librarian 27 (4), p 216 -22, 1996



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