

USE OF PERIODICALS IN BRITISH COUNCIL LIBRARIES IN WEST AFRICA

Sue Buckwell

British Council libraries support development in their respective countries. Their users want to follow developments in their profession, find business and trade information, and read for recreation. The varied uses to which periodicals are put in these libraries in West Africa are described, along with some discussion of the problems faced by those libraries.



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At a recent meeting of British Council librarians in West Africa, I mentioned that a UK journal was interested in doing a piece on the use of periodicals in British Council libraries overseas. I asked my colleagues what motives for use they found among their users, expecting them to mention research, lack of foreign exchange for subscriptions etc. The actual response amazed me, and was a salutary reminder that unless you work directly with your users and the stock, do not imagine you have any idea what is going on!

British Council libraries in West Africa concentrate on providing materials to support the development process in each country, and on information to increase awareness about Britain, including British systems, goods and services, and the English language. We stock books, videos, audio cassettes, CD-ROMs, grey literature on development, newsletters, catalogues, course brochures and prospectuses, and, of course, newspapers and journals. Each of our ten libraries in this region currently spends between £10,000 and £18,000 on periodicals annually.

In most of our libraries, anyone can use the stock for reference free of charge but for membership and to borrow materials there is a modest fee.

Any periodical coming into a British Council library can look forward to a full, varied and long life. As a youngster it will be displayed for reference in the library and quite possibly have its contents page copied to priority users for current awareness. In middle age it is available for loan to library members. Articles will be copied in response to the current contents page service and it may well travel to distant parts of the country on our mobile distance information and outreach services. When it retires from active service in the British Council it is passed to the library of a local institution, one of the many which are always asking us to pass on our back issues to them. Old periodicals never die. They simply become the wrapping paper for groundnuts sold on the street. Not many things lead such a useful life, or in many cases, provide such good value.

So what are our users looking for when they pick up a British journal or newspaper? Certainly for many it is their only way of keeping up with developments in their academic or professional field. It is a long time since most libraries in Nigeria and Sierra

Leone had the money to subscribe to journals on a regular basis and, even if they do have funds, entrusting the journal to the local postal system is a great act of faith. Also, as in many countries in the developing world, even if there are funds available in an institution, library provision comes a long way down the priority list. However the recent World Bank project to support Federal University libraries in Nigeria did include journal provision. Unfortunately there were difficulties over the supply contract which meant that delivery was much delayed. Thankfully, the picture is now changing for the better in Ghana and an increasing number of libraries are re-starting their subscriptions.

Doctors, public administrators, accountants, development workers, lecturers, civil servants, scientists, educationalists, environmentalists, human rights workers, women's groups, English language teachers and artists are all trying not to be left behind in their skills and knowledge of what is happening outside their immediate environment. Demand for specialist journals is high but with limited resources we are unable to provide materials in which only a few people will be interested. Each year, before renewing our subscriptions, we carry out a survey to help us keep in tune with the needs of our target users as far as possible.

Increasingly, such users are able to do their research using CD-ROM databases in the British Council library. Many of them are satisfied with the level of information provided there. If, however, they then want the full text, the high cost of document delivery is prohibitive. The British Council can sometimes subsidise the use of BLDSC coupons out of our own funds for priority users, and some users do pay themselves, but the rate charged by the British Library is now frightening, especially given the exchange rates in some countries. The BMA service is slightly cheaper. We are keen to exploit our own journal stocks as much as possible before resorting to BLDSC etc., and have, therefore, started a union list of all periodicals and databases held in our libraries in West Africa. This also helps us to rationalise our periodical subscriptions.

Periodicals are often the only source of information about professional services, forthcoming events, conferences and training

courses. Many of our users try hard to get trips outside their countries as a way of updating themselves, keeping in touch with their professional international network and, it has to be said, to have a break from the strain of working in very difficult conditions at home. The extreme of this is seeking employment outside their own country and the situations vacant sections are always very well thumbed.

Another way of keeping abreast of new writing and research, without having access to the materials themselves, is through book reviews in periodicals and newspapers. Sometimes our users will then make suggestions for additions to our library stock. Book reviews, reading lists and references in journal articles are also used for selection purposes on those happy, but rare, occasions when an institution has money to spend on books. Even if local currency is available, hard currency is often impossible to obtain. For this reason, in some countries, the British Council operates schemes to accept payment for the supply of British books and periodicals in local currency against a pro-forma invoice from a UK supplier.

Since our emphasis is on development information, we find that a lot of the information that we want comes in free or low-cost periodicals and newsletters from international organisations, non-government organisations, research groups, and charities. These sources can be invaluable for local library and information services which have no budget for acquisition. By seeing them in the British Council library they can contact the publisher and hopefully get on the mailing list.

As part of our effort to promote British goods and services, and to support the development of the local economy, our library and information services provide business and commercial information. The most basic level will be through the *Financial Times* (FT) and some trade and business journals. In many parts of West Africa users want current foreign exchange rates, details on commodities' markets, trading information, general international business and financial information, and analysis. For instance, the in-depth focus and analysis given by the FT or the *Economist* on a particular country is unlikely to be found anywhere else. British information sources have a high reputation in this area, and combined

with the close business ties between Britain and anglophone West Africa, this makes the British Council the natural source of information.

Another area in which Britain is still held in high regard is in freedom of information. Within some sectors in Britain this may be debatable, but everything is relative, and for many of our users access to such materials as *Index on Censorship*, and Amnesty International publications, is much valued. However, we do get feedback at the other end of the scale as well. Some of our users now regret what they see as the trivialisation and sensationalism of the British press, and find its lack of respect and invasion of privacy offensive.

Periodicals which are supplements to the programmes of the BBC World Service, both radio and television, are very popular. BBC World Service radio is still one of the prime sources of current information which most West Africans regard as reliable. Focus on Africa, BBC Worldwide, BBC English, and BBC Wildlife are all heavily used.

Recreational reading is also a high area of use. I am told that a good number of our users do the English football pools and avidly consult match results and league positions. In fact, it is no secret that one of the most commonly shared interests

by people all over the world, whatever their profession, is sport, and use of our sports magazines and the sports pages of the quality newspapers is evidence of this.

Apart from this, recipes are copied out, and adverts for the most bizarre consumer goods photocopied. The private life of the Royal Family is a constant source of interest and amazement. Poetry is read and submitted, and the letters pages of many periodicals are frequently graced by our users. Pen pals are sought, as are educational opportunities outside West Africa. Young people keep in touch with what their counterparts are doing, particularly in popular music, in Britain. All human life is here!

British periodicals and newspapers are an essential element of British Council libraries in West Africa, and the support they give to often information-starved users is immense.

If any journal publisher reading this feels moved to offer us a free current subscription, we can promise a good home, high use and lots of good publicity for you. Please contact Sue Buckwell, British Council Lagos, Nigeria, c/o Despatch Unit, British Council, 10 Spring Gardens, London SW1A 2BN.