

Gale Primary Sources

Start at the source.

Selection of Newspapers

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British Library

Various source media, *British Library Newspapers*



In April 2004, the British Library (BL) received 2 million pounds from the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)' to digitise up to 2 million pages of nineteenth century newspapers for access by UK Higher Education & Further Education communities. In delivering the project, the BL must comply with JISC criteria for funding and as the project progressed, the following criteria helped shape the project: select coherent and logical work packages; meet rigorous quality assurance, and procure an "open-source" solution. An early consideration asked the question: what does two million pages of historic newspapers look like? How much shelving and what number of titles does that represent? As our goal was to digitise approximately 1 percent of the BL's collections, and with very little detailed catalogue information available about the length of runs, total numbers of pages per title, or per type of newspaper, we knew that we did not want to select just the best quality items from the collection or material only of interest to particular curators or academics. Also, we did not have a discrete ready made collection to start with. The answer was to consult with a panel of academic users, define our criteria for selection, and then gain approval from our stakeholders.

The preliminary list of titles included at least 160 newspapers, split into: London national dailies and weeklies; English regional dailies and weeklies; Home Countries newspapers (Scottish national, Scottish regional, Welsh, Northern Irish); and 'specialist sub-clusters' (e.g., the Chartists). For copyright reasons, and to keep within the scope of the original project brief, only dates between 1800 to 1900 were selected. No newspaper less than 100 years old was digitised for access by UK Higher Education and Further Education

communities to avoid copyright issues, and BL policy is to proceed only with the agreement of rights holders and their representatives. Owners of titles still publishing may be digitising or have plans to digitise their back runs and it would not make economic sense to duplicate their efforts. The academic panel at the core of the project that steered the selection of newspapers decided to assess the value of all of the titles from the original list from the perspective of potential usage by the Higher Education and Further Education communities.

In order for the project to be successful, the relevance to the needs of actual or potential users had to be determined by an academic panel to inform the selection and to validate it through the exercise of an online consultation. Overall, it was clear that the replies endorsed the approach for a UK-wide coverage and the methodology adopted (i.e., a framework of national and regional titles and countrywide coverage with breadth and depth) was to form a virtual index to provincial newspapers in any medium. From the academic panel's prioritised list, a short list emerged which was sub-divided into four coherent work packages. There are two titles which are mainly illustrated: *Illustrated Police News* and *The Graphic*. Several national titles such as *Reynolds*, *Morning Chronicle*, and some specialist interest titles, such as *The Era* and *The Examiner* plus a sub-cluster of reform and chartist papers. There are also three Welsh language titles, two Irish, three Scottish, and two Welsh general papers.

The academic panel made their selection using the following eligibility criteria:

- To ensure that complete runs of newspapers are scanned
- To have the most complete date range, 1800-1900, covered by the titles selected
- To have the greatest UK-wide coverage as possible
- To include the specialist area of Chartism (many of which are short runs)
- To consider the coverage of the title: e.g., the London area; a large urban area (e.g., Birmingham); a larger regional/rural area
- To consider the numbers printed - a large circulation
- The paper was successful in its time via its sales
- To consider the different editions for dailies and weeklies and their importance for article inclusion or exclusion
- To consider special content, e.g., the newspaper espoused a certain political viewpoint (radical/conservative)
- The paper was influential via its editorials.²

The final 48 titles selected comprise 2.2 million pages in total. The selection follows a logical mix of UK-wide coverage with nationals and regionals, and includes 17 national and 29 regional newspapers from North, far South West and central England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, and one specialist sub-cluster.

Online Consultation and User Needs

The relevance to the needs of actual or potential users was determined by an academic panel to inform the selection, and was also validated through the exercise of an online questionnaire.

An online consultation with the wider academic community took place during February through March 2005, specifically on the titles to be included within the British Library Newspapers project and also to ascertain what titles should be included if future funding became available to either extend the project or pursue new ones.

A total of 195 people replied and of these, the majority consisted of librarians and lecturers working mainly in Universities and Further Education colleges, with a spread of researchers, students, managers, and teachers. Thirteen per cent of the replies came from the US.

The questionnaire asked users to rank from one to five in order of priority for digitising (one = strongly disagree, five = strongly agree), the titles from the long list in the business plan. In addition, we asked them to offer comments on any other titles they may be interested in but were not listed.

Overall, it was clear that the replies endorsed the approach for UK-wide coverage and the methodology adopted (i.e., a framework of national titles and countrywide coverage with the breadth and depth to form a virtual key to provincial newspapers in any medium).³

"This is a long-overdue project, which has the capacity to transform research on this period. It will make a big difference to Open University history teaching. Ideally, the papers chosen will offer a good geographical, political and chronological spread."

'Dr Chris Williams, Open University

NOTES

¹ JISC is funded through HEFCE, the Higher Education Funding Councils for England and Wales.

² With acknowledgments and thanks to Dr Peter Mandler, Reader in Modern British History and a fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge University.

³ With acknowledgments and thanks to Gareth Burfoot, a member of BL project team.

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