BRINGING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE TO LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE:

COMEDY RESEARCH

[PRZENOSZENIE PERSPEKTYWY INTERDYSCPLINARNEJ NA GRUNT BIBLIOTEKOZNAWSTWA I INFORMACJI NAUKOWEJ: BADANIA NAD KOMIZMEM]

Abstract: As a fundamentally practical discipline with only a small body of theory specifically devoted to it, Library and Information Science (LIS) is in particular need of perspectives drawn from other disciplines. LIS can be discussed in relation to disciplines as varied as Neurosciences and Pedagogy, or even Agricultural Science. Comedy research, in particular, suggests ways of looking at the origination and evolution of information and ideas, the variety of formats that content can take, the ownership of ideas, the ethical values reflected by different types of content and many other issues that are of importance to LIS professionals. Research on comedy as an area of academic study is, in itself, completely interdisciplinary, drawing on theory and insights from literary, dramatic, psychological, physiological, social, political, and other academic domains. It can thus further enrich LIS by proxy. A small study of the attitudes of stand-up comedians towards their exercise of freedom of expression is used as example of the potential of ideas on comedy in LIS.

AGRICULTURAL SCIENCE – COMEDY – INTERDISCIPLINARITY – NEUROSCIENCE – PEDAGOGY

Abstrakt: Bibliotekoznawstwo i informacja naukowa (BIN) jest dyscypliną u podstaw praktyczną, mającą niewielkie zaplecze własnej teorii, z czego wynika dla mniej szczególna potrzeba poszukiwania się perspektywami badawczymi zaczepnietymi z innych nauk. Można rozważać związki BIN z tak różnymi dyscyplinami, jak neuronauki i pedagogiki, a nawet nauki rolnicze. W tym kontekście badania nad komizmem mogą podsuwać określone


The great strength of LIS as a discipline for teachers and researchers is precisely its practicality. Whilst historians, philologists, anthropologists and sociologists can comment on the phenomena they observe and investigate to an academic audience, essentially they are powerless to influence change, except perhaps in the long term through their students when they, in turn, reach positions of influence. In contrast, the audience and readership for LIS is much more a body of practitioners than of fellow academics and the researcher can speak directly on matters of policy and practice, and hope to exercise an influence in the short and medium term. This makes for a healthier (less self-obsessed) academic community. It offers a much wider range of conferences, seminars and workshops, and a large and varied journal, report and book literature. However, some commentators would suggest that these advantages are balanced by the disadvantage of a lack of theory that is specific to LIS.

The lack of theory (pace those colleagues in Scandinavia, France, USA, etc who think otherwise) can actually be seen as a strength. Because it has little theory of its own, LIS is effectively forced into a healthy interdisciplinarity. Along with theory derived from other disciplines comes access to great bodies of observation, experimentation and commentary on areas that are not LIS but share characteristics and experiences with LIS. The interdisciplinarity is first of all a means of filling gaps, since many important topics in LIS have been insufficiently studied and there may be little or no literature to help the researcher beginning with a specific topic. It goes much further than this, however, because it expands the horizons of what LIS might include and discourages too exclusive a concern with the minutiae of practice. What follows will begin with a brief discussion of two areas that have been previously explored in a fairly superficial way as background to work on topics for which the LIS literature offered little guidance or help. These are first the rich mixture of neuroscience and pedagogy that underlies almost all of LIS; and second the assistance offered by the agricultural science literature to the researcher interested in the information phenomena of the rural areas of the developing world. These will be followed by a slightly fuller account of research in progress that uses insights from the theory and practice of comedy to illuminate a number of areas of relevance to LIS, most notably freedom of expression.
TWO EXAMPLES OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY

LIS, Neuroscience and Pedagogy

The prime example of gaps in the whole LIS enterprise is the more or less total neglect of the phenomena of human learning. Learning underlies the whole information universe with which LIS deals and there is a clear link from the way that human beings learn (and should be taught) with the ways libraries should function [Sturgess 2009b]. To explore it the researcher is forced to turn to the literature of pedagogy, which is old-established, abundant and full of fruitful accounts of experimentation and practice, as well as a highly developed body of theory. What makes this even more exciting is that now the discipline of neuroscience offers a further layer of significant insight based on scientific experiment and monitoring. This intersection between pedagogy and neuroscience arises from the notion that the flow of sensations into the brain of the newborn child, that range from tastes and smells through to the visual and auditory reception of incredibly complex messages coded in language, number and other sets of symbols, does not merely inform, but develops and supports the ability to think. For a newborn baby there is initially no set of data against which to check its perceptions; no patterns into which something newly perceived can be fitted. However, the baby immediately begins to identify sensations, recognise them when they occur, and even predict their recurrence. Babies can be observed responding to the messages from their senses as early as the moments when they first seek to attach their lips to their mother’s nipple. Very soon they will know their immediate surroundings and recognise those who care for them. A process of change in the brain is central to this development of understanding, but now we know that the change itself is reliant on the reception of a flow of stimuli.

The processes that are taking place in human learning are now much better understood through the use of technology such as electroencephalography, positron emission tomography (PET scanning), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and magnetoencephalography (MEG) [Winston 2003]. It is now possible to examine brain function down to the level of the single neuron. The functions and interrelation of different areas of the brain have become increasingly apparent through this type of research. It is possible to show that certain areas of the brain perform certain functions: the frontal lobe area handling planning and decision-making, for instance, or the brainstem dealing with involuntary functions such as breathing and heart rate. Our picture of the questioning mind that emerges from neurology-related studies links our awareness of intelligence, personality, and learning to actual brain function. The increase of brain activity in the areas associated with the various senses can be measured during the early months of human life. The development of the baby’s physical coordination and its perception of distance and space develop markedly during the first few months and before the end of the first year the frontal lobes become active. At this stage, the baby can choose to concentrate on particular visual or auditory stimuli to the exclusion of others and to make other choices based on this observation. All of this activity is dependent first on a flow of sensory information and then, after the child has developed the ability to understand and use language, of the encoded messages passed on by other humans [Kuhl 2000].

It is this dependence on what is effectively a flow of unfiltered information that justifies an assertion that the human being is a learning creature, programmed to ask questions and needing to find out, almost as a condition of existence. The important thing is that this process of finding out, building understanding on what is identified, and then basing actions on that understanding, is not merely a learned response. The neural equipment of the
infant human has the basic capacity to cope with the information that reaches it through sensation, and what is more, the brain requires it. We could regard this as the state of being wired to discover. As Koren (1998) puts it:

In essence, the child is an information seeker. Information affects the physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development of the child and this fact has far-reaching implications for the child’s providers of information.

Exposing the child to a wide range of sensation and information from its earliest days, so that it can continue to develop, thus becomes a necessity rather than a luxury. To understand what happens in the process of learning how to find out, and the actual business of finding out, we still need to turn to the area of educational theory.

Still the most widely known and accepted approach of this kind is Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development [Piaget 1953]. He came to understand the development of the mind as a process of the same kind as biological growth. His intensive observation showed him the child constantly defining and redefining its understanding of what it perceived as it experienced more and more exposure to external stimuli. He saw this as the child actually thinking and reasoning in different ways at different stages in its life, an insight on which he elaborated his theory of cognitive development. Piaget’s theory overwhelmingly suggests that learning is not passive: learners must actively construct and reconstruct their own knowledge. He argued that for a child to learn it must be ready: that is, it must have reached the appropriate developmental stage. This placed a requirement on formal education to respond to the needs of the child, not to feed the child with highly structured information, ready or not, according to the pre-set structure of a curriculum. This conclusion that the child needs to experiment and question, to be an active searcher for answers has been the basis of a multitude of experiments with child-centred learning in schools and provides the rationale for the provision of responsive information services of all kinds and levels. It is the basis for the argument that adults, as successors to the actively learning child, also have a fundamental need to discover and that libraries are an ideal arena for free learning driven by individual need.

**LIS and Agricultural Science**

The LIS researcher interested in the flow of information to the poorest rural inhabitants of developing countries will struggle to find relevant literature in the LIS journals, conference proceedings or books. If he or she is determined to pursue the topic, they will be forced into interdisciplinary reading: more precisely they will need to turn to the area of Agricultural Science literature that deals with topics like farming systems and farmers’ research. This literature also throws light on the interaction between those employed to provide information to the farmer, and farmers themselves. We discover that farmers tend to manifest a seemingly irrational response to the provision of an information service, especially a service of a more sophisticated type. For instance, an electronic network set up in Ethiopia in the 1990s to provide outreach information for farmers, was surprised to receive numerous requests for astrological information from farmers wanting help in making decisions on crop planting, stock rearing and family matters [Sturges, Gooch 2006]. The network staff wondered if it was legitimate to use its hard won funding to give such ‘irrational’ information: but in the end they did. The irrational information was ‘good’ because it increased the farmers’ confidence in the service. If people have found that over the years their astrologers give what they find to be helpful advice on matters including planting and harvesting, it is perfectly reasonable for them to persist in consulting them. In other parts of the developing world similar means are used. In northern Ghana, for instance, farmers consult soothsayers and earth priests (*tendana*) to obtain messages from their gods and ancestors to assist with agricultural decision-making. The messages give guidance on matters of
wind, rain, crops and livestock, and the agriculture of the region has a good record of innovation and success [Millar 1993].

The record of formal agricultural advice services in giving appropriate advice is not so perfect as to justify the wholesale shifting of trust from the traditional to the modern. Failures of introduced innovations, from the East African groundnut scheme of the late 1940s onwards, have occurred regularly and often devastatingly. It is generally the agricultural extension field agent who is supposed to supply farmers with information about a new strain of crop, or a method of cultivation. This information will have originated from an agricultural research centre or a commercial organisation with a research capacity and been processed by the ministry of agriculture and its experts. The farmers will therefore be expected to incorporate the innovation into their practices with direct beneficial consequences. But extension services, as another instance, have also hit low spots such as that described by Wiggins (1986):

In sub-Saharan Africa extension agents are all too often sad figures, abandoned in the bush with little or no support, infrequently supervised, with no messages worth passing on to the farmers, and with few incentives to get on with the work. Farmers do not appreciate the agents’ work, and only make use of them when they can gain access to some inputs – especially if subsidised – such as seed, fertiliser, chemicals, tractor hire, or farm credit. Consequently agents are demoralised, with little enthusiasm for their jobs.

The tone of this bears a fascinating similarity to some of what is said about the work of librarians in the community, but by looking at the work of extension agents we can perhaps pick up some helpful hints for librarians. Malawian farmers, asked for their opinion on the extension services that were supposed to keep them in touch with technical and market developments expressed support for the principle but considerable disillusion with the realisty [Sturges, Chimseu 1996]. People hinted that the extension agents favoured certain better off farmers and used the knowledge and resources available to them by virtue of their position to farm successfully themselves. Research more specifically directed at the functioning of extension services in Nepal supports this suggestion in more detail [Roberts 1997]. Farmers in the flatter, more fertile land of the valley bottoms were regularly visited by agents, whilst the farmers on the poorer land higher up the valleys seldom if ever saw them. The disparity between the experiences of farmers was not only based on the accessibility and potential of their land. The poorer highland farmers were generally of lower caste and did not always speak the same language as their more prosperous neighbours. Ever since Mchombu (1982) wrote his seminal article on libraries in Africa there has been confusion and distress over the role of libraries, but experience from agricultural science has something useful to tell us about how and why libraries fail to provide services that reach their target population.

COMEDY RESEARCH

Finally, and perhaps less obviously, we turn to comedy. In case anyone is unaware of this, the literature of comedy is vast and growing. Research on comedy as an area of academic study is, in itself, completely interdisciplinary, drawing on theory and insights from literary, dramatic, psychological, physiological, social, political, and other academic domains. Works by Legman (1968), Moreall (1983), Palmer (1994) and Billig (2005) are worth mentioning as providing particularly strong context and Medhurst (2007) is a recent work that builds on a good selection from this wealth of choice. Central to the business of comedy is the joke; the discrete item of content through which comedy is communicated. The joke is therefore a valid subject of study for LIS: a discipline that very much concerns itself with content. A working comedian’s thoughts on the subject can be found in
Carr and Greeves (2006). This is very definitely not a scholarly work, but it makes its points with hundreds of good jokes. Holt (2008)’s elegant essay on jokes also illustrates the form very effectively. Freud (2002) is still probably the most quoted authority on the joke. He called the joke a combination of [comic] technique and [humorous] thought. Though this sounds banal, it works. The thought is a perception of something arguably humorous (the sort of verbal coincidence that makes a pun; observing someone who walks in a strange way; a relationship that functions badly; or even a gross political or social injustice). The technique is the presentation of this perception in a way that points up its comic quality. The technique may be physical (a pose or a rolled eye), is most commonly verbal, but can be graphic or musical; there is no real restriction.

Jokes are usually regarded as existing in a realm not wholly governed by the everyday requirements of tact and consideration for others but Freud himself, as Willis (2005) points out, distinguished between innocent and contentious jokes. Phrases such as ‘Just joking’ or ‘Only a joke’ are often introduced in conversation when there is a perception that offence may have been caused and there is a need for distance from a particularly contentious joke. But Jacobson [1997, p. 137] draws our attention to the dangerous side of comedy and suggests a role for it:

In hostility and aggression is our beginning. Comedy cannot hope to change that. But by making a play of our incorrigible combativeness, it propitiates it, harmonizes us with it. And more than that, reminds us of our inexhaustible capacity to evade the burden of sympathy and the compulsion to suffer.

Bakhtin (1968)’s analysis of carnival identifies a space granted by civil and religious authority in the medieval and early modern period in which this aggression was temporarily given license. At carnival time people feasted and drank and participated in comic celebration in which ‘the body copulates, defecates, overeats, and men’s speech is flooded with genitals, bellies, defecations, urine, disease, noses, mouths and dismembered parts’ (p. 319). This is still the central core of uninhibited comedy and it is, in itself, offensive to those who hold authority and to members of polite society who deny their own earthy origins and needs as much as they are able.

As Henkle [1980, p. 13] puts it: ‘Comic works characteristically expose pomposity and smug self-deception, and undermine dull and inhuman mores. By toppling those authorities comedy encourages us to understand what is masked by rigorous, sombre approaches to human behaviour.’ The problem is the virtual certainty that unrestrained comedy will give specific offence and produce outraged reaction from individuals and groups sooner or later. As Lockyer and Pickering [2005, p. 5] put the question, ‘So how do we negotiate the perilous terrain that lies between humour and offensiveness, or free speech and cultural respect, in a pluralist society?’ These questions place comedy research firmly in the same ambit as LIS. We will go on to try to show that comedy research suggests ways of looking at the ethical values reflected by different content. But we could just as well point to what comedy research tells us about the origination and evolution of information and ideas, the variety of formats that content can take, and the ownership of ideas. These various questions relate to the old mystery ‘Where do jokes come from?’ The answer is that we sometimes seem to be able to trace a joke to a particular writer or performer, but more commonly they seem to exist in the culture, appearing and reappearing, transformed a little or a lot, and in the process casting doubt on the validity of the whole concept of intellectual property. This is not to say that comedians are not interested in protecting what they believe is their intellectual property, but merely that the process throws fascinating shafts of light on legal concept that underlies the theory and practice of LIS, but cannot genuinely be regarded a theoretical ‘given’.
COMEDY RESEARCH: CASE STUDY

The area is fruitful for research. The need to say something helpful on the Danish cartoons affair of 2005, pointed not only to ideas on human rights and related jurisprudence, but at the theory and practice of Comedy [Sturges, 2006]. The need for restraint in addressing the vulnerable is one that has been examined in the literature of comedy. Modern comedy, ‘stand-up’ in particular, can be savage and is explicitly intended to be disturbing. In theory no issue should be exempt from the attention of the comedian. However, even the most outrageously comedians do work within some generally unspoken limitations. This has been identified as the exercise of ‘decorum’.

Decorum can be defined as a decision about the form of expression which is publicly judged appropriate for a given setting and theme [Palmer 2005, p. 80].

This could be seen as including a calculation of the offence that might be given by a particular humorous theme or style. The exercise of decorum applies particularly in everyday life, but a kind of licence that permits satirical humour to exceed the boundaries of normal decorum is accepted in the modern world. In venues and media such as theatres, nightclubs, magazines articles and cartoons, it is accepted that different standards apply.

Palmer (2005)’s argument is that in licensing satirical humour society recognises the existence of many different ‘discourses’ and stands back from the imposition of a single unified ‘language’. In this way the contradictions and tensions of communal life are given recognition and, implicitly, the possibility of change accepted. In the first place this requires the ‘permission’ of the state, but it can be further argued that the permission of those who might be objects of satire is also needed. By this it is not meant that all comedy should be checked and approved by those it might offend. Rather it means that whilst comedians can assume a broad social permission for their art, they should retain sensitivity to the feelings of those, particularly vulnerable groups, that they might be seen as addressing. Working this out the implications of this sensitivity in practice is problematic and the outcomes not consistent. For instance, the exercise of decorum by male comedians might now be taken to include the avoidance of gratuitous insult to women. At the same time, it might be accepted that after centuries of female subordination to the male, a female comedian might well exceed similar limits in her commentary on men. In doing so, she would at some level or other be working with the permission of men and, arguably, for the good of men. What this means is that for comedy to perform its licensed role in society, the exercise of decorum is required and the calculation of what that means in practice depends on some sense of permission. However, for that to be effective it does, in turn, depend on the assumption that any specific group will show its commitment to pluralistic values in society by extending at least elements of such permission.

Interviews with a small group of stand up comedians during the first half of 2008 were used to test something of how and if this works in practice [Sturges 2010]. The interviews were informal, allowing the interviewees to express their own thoughts on two questions: what restrictions they perceived to their comedy, and what they identified as the sources of these restrictions. The interviewees included both male and female comedians, experienced performers and beginners, comedians with national profiles and others with mainly regional exposure. The interviews offered an insight, and no more, into what some comedians thought about their material and performances, which does no more than offer scope for a sketch of their motivation and the outcomes of their personal interface with controversy. The comedians interviewed for this study often tended initially to find it a little difficult to see their work in terms of restrictions. There is a body of law in the UK that could be used to
investigate and prosecute on charges such as obscenity, blasphemy and defamation. In practice this body of law has hardly been used in relation to performance and literature for decades. Performances on premises licensed for entertainment are today unlikely to attract any official or police attention. Performers use this zone of freedom to press at the boundaries; swearwords are used for punctuation and emphasis; and sex, previously one of the greatest taboos, is celebrated and profaned by them all.

In fact, the interviews confirmed that there is still a moral dialogue between audience and comedian in progress. The comedians are also influenced also by the promoter of the show, who wants to feel that the audience will be divided between those happy with what they hear and those likely to be offended on no more than a 90/10 ratio, but might be prepared to accept 80/20, or even 70/30. How the comedian receives and handles messages or the anticipation of messages from the audience is another matter. The comedians interviewed might use a test of both the effectiveness of comic material and its acceptability to audiences, such as observing whether a joke is successful three times out of five and keeping it in the act if it passes the test. Other performers may not actually use a formula to test their material, but they are constantly alert to audience reaction. They were all clear that they believed it was possible to go too far, alienate an audience, and no longer be comic. The audience has to be assessed, understood and addressed in ways which it will accept, even if that acceptance sometimes involves a thrill of horror. This can be seen as an amoral approach, based on giving the audience what it wants. But what the audience wants is definitely not bland. Audience response in comedy clubs at which the interviews took place clearly suggested that they got what they were looking for. They roared with laughter and applauded when a telling blow was struck against taboos and those who support or seek to enforce them. Their audible intake of breath at something almost too daring indicated recognition of thoughts they might have had, but scarcely liked to admit.

To return the discussion to the more accustomed areas of information science, we can look finally at the problems experienced by information service institutions over access to information and ideas. For instance, the question of controversial material is one that has troubled the American library profession throughout the twentieth century and continues to do so. America’s religious minorities (which cumulate to form America’s religious majority), are a continual source of challenges to stock selected, or potentially selected by librarians. At the end of the twentieth century the question of using software filtering systems to limit users’ access to websites with ‘unacceptable’ content joined this as a source of controversy. The American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom has asserted the values of freedom of expression and freedom of access to information, as has IFLA’s Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) Committee since it was set up in 1997 [Byrne 2008; Sturges 2009a]. Some tentative but helpful conclusions about this area of conflict can be drawn from the research study just described.

Those who exercise their right to free expression have to do so in awareness of possible limitations and ultimately they must accept responsibility for what they say, and understand the possible consequences to society as a whole (including its minorities) and international relations. By extension, those who act as intermediaries for communication, be they publishers, broadcasters, Internet services providers, or information professionals, must understand this clearly too. The consequences of giving offence by mass media are difficult and require clear thinking and conviction on the part of managers and owners. Information service institutions such as libraries are not mass media, but because they seek to offer the whole spectrum of print and online access they can be used like mass media. They also acknowledge a mission to serve the whole of society, with minorities frequently re-
ceiving specific reference as part of this mission. This is an inclusive policy (material that will serve everyone including minorities) not an exclusive one (material that will serve everyone except those who object to some of it). Offence is likely to be caused by some of the material made available in libraries and this will require policy decisions and responses.

Just as comedians take trouble to calculate the effect of their material by exercising decorum, information professionals also have to devote careful thought to how they deal with such problems. They must balance the compelling need for free expression when directed at the powerful, religious and secular alike, whilst exercising patience, tact and consideration when dealing with expression that might offend the weak and powerless. Information professions, as a secondary level of freedom of expression ‘actors’, have a responsibility to respect the decisions made by writers and other creative artists as to what should be set before the public. The point is that they should not ignore protest and the voicing of outrage, but that they should assess it both in terms of volume (number of protesters) and intensity. A response may be appropriate when protest reaches some sort of level, but identifying what level and what response requires careful judgement, not a panic withdrawal from providing access to the challenged material.

CONCLUSIONS

The examples worked through above, particularly that of comedy, are intended mainly as a kind of taster of the pleasures of interdisciplinarity for the LIS researcher and practitioner. Pleasure is important in both research and practice, but it is not, of course, the main issue. What really matters is whether we learn anything of substance via interdisciplinary thinking. The contention here is not merely that we do, but that we cannot learn enough in LIS without it. A self-contained LIS discipline scarcely exists and, insofar as it does exist, it is a weak and inadequate area of knowledge. The scope for interdisciplinary studies is almost infinite and we should never be afraid to stray across the boundaries of LIS into the fertile territory that exists all around it. One might suggest that a good test of the validity of a potential publication in the LIS literature is whether it uses and cites material from other disciplines. One might even add that the measurement of whether a writer in LIS is of the highest standard is whether they have published in a literature other than that of LIS and spoken at conferences and seminars outside the discipline strictly defined. We need to be interdisciplinary not merely within LIS, but to take our interdisciplinary credentials out and test them in a wider intellectual sphere.

REFERENCES