

# Specialist Users of Serials

## – the BBC

### Introduction

The phone rings. "We've got President Havel of Czechoslovakia for our programme" a voice says; "Well done" we say, immediately assuming that they are going to want to know about his politics or his literary writings and plays. Wrong! "He's going to do a *Building Sights* programme" (the voice continues) – "You know, a well known person talks about a building of particular interest. Well, he's chosen the Manes Art Association Building in Prague and we don't know anything about it or the architect – can you help, and can find some pictures of it? And I'd also better have something about his politics and writing."

The phone rings again: "We're thinking of doing a programme on suicide." "No, I don't know what angle, but we think that there are probably some interesting aspects we can discuss, so just some general background articles on current thinking and issues would be fine to start with. We're not even sure yet if it'll be one thirty minute programme or a series of six." Someone comes into the library. "Hello I'm working on this drama series called *The House of Elliot* set in the 1920s. In the next episode I've got to arrange a smart dinner party. Can you tell me what they might have been eating then and how the table would have been laid out in 1926?"

Early last year the phone went and a voice said: "Assignment here" (the Foreign Affairs weekly programme), "Somebody mentioned something called 'political correctness' to me the other day, it seems to be a new 'in' approach in America. Can you find out what's been written about it in the States?" As I said, this was early last year and the resulting programme claimed to be

### Frances Tait

the first to publicise the concept of political correctness in Britain.

These are typical of the 10,000 enquiries the libraries receive each month from television programmes. The types of programmes the libraries are dealing with can be very roughly divided as follows:

#### FACTUAL

<i>Timewatch</i>	<i>Holiday</i>
<i>40 Minutes</i>	<i>Everyman</i>
<i>Open Space</i>	<i>That's Life</i>
<i>Watchdog</i>	<i>Omnibus</i>
<i>Building Sights</i>	<i>Horizon</i>
<i>Tomorrow's World</i>	<i>Medicine at the</i>
<i>Blue Peter</i>	<i>Crossroads</i>
<i>Advice Shop</i>	<i>Science and Society</i>
	<i>Schools</i>

#### NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS

<i>6 O'clock News</i>	<i>Panorama</i>
<i>Assignment</i>	<i>Newsnight</i>
<i>Question Time</i>	<i>Reportage (Youth</i>
<i>Westminster</i>	<i>Programme)</i>
<i>Newsround</i>	<i>World Service</i>
<i>(Children)</i>	<i>Television News</i>

#### DRAMA

<i>Clarissa</i>	<i>House of Elliot</i>
<i>Ashenden</i>	<i>Casualty</i>

#### LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

<i>Wogan</i>	<i>People Today</i>
<i>Russ Abbott</i>	<i>Every Second Counts</i>

#### BOUGHT IN PROGRAMMES

Documentaries take roughly a week to three months to make; News & Current Affairs are immediate or can take up to two months; Dramas take months or even a year or so and Light Entertainment shows vary

from a couple a week like chat shows to several months.

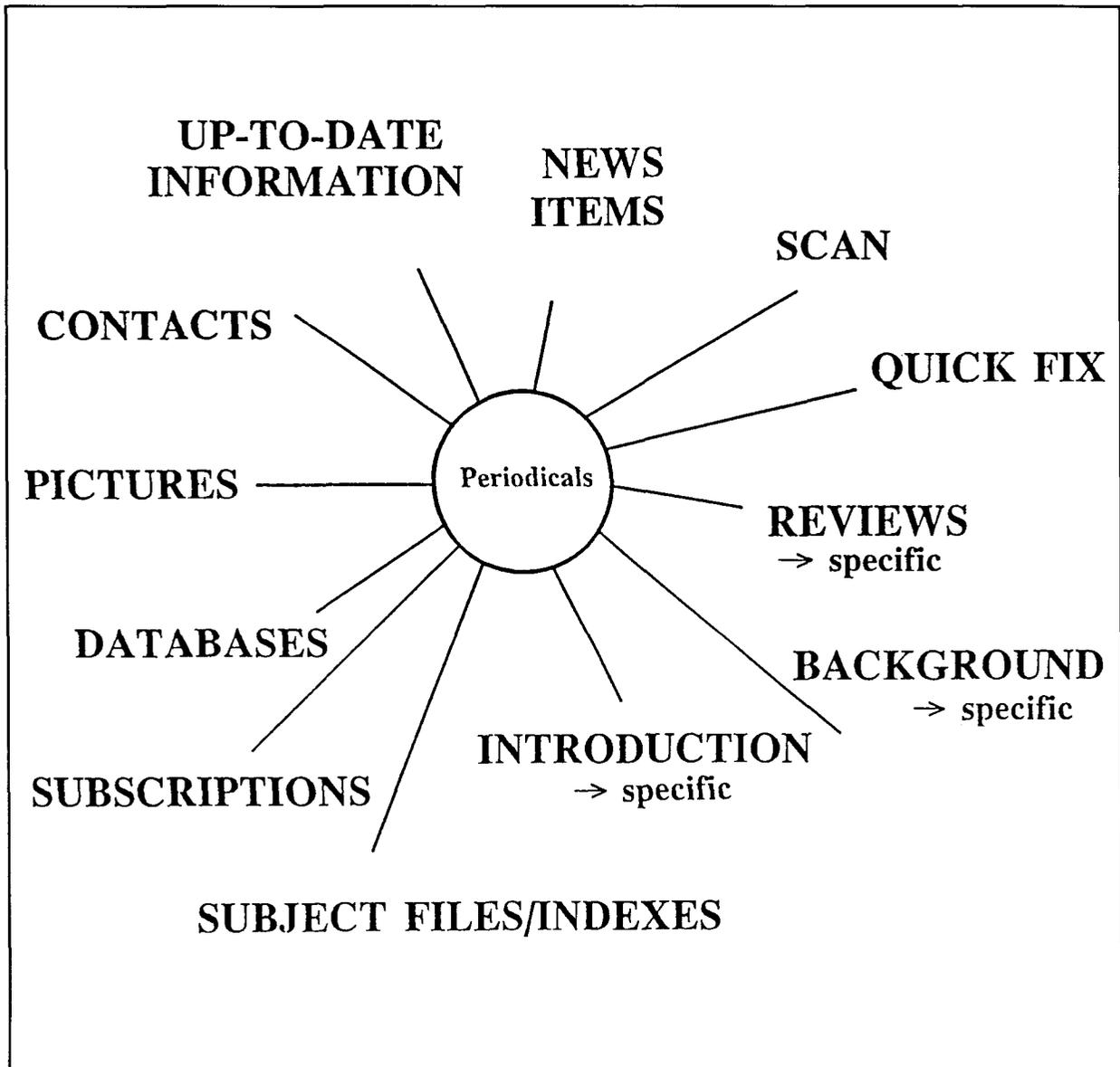
However long a programme takes to make, people cannot usually get started until they have information from the libraries. So, as everyone wants information immediately, the library systems are geared to more or less instant response.

There is no particular way in which programmes use periodicals but the following sun diagram roughly illustrates use, with many illuminating information rays emanating from the periodicals literature, in no particular sequence, and at different times in different ways. See Figure 1.

**Current Information**

Up-to-date information is absolutely essential. Most programmes are about what is going on now, and new developments in subjects. So about the only place to find the information is periodicals – books are usually too old as, often, are databases.

News items in periodicals contain the germs of programme ideas. The only way to track these is through scanning because, unfortunately, they are often not detailed in contents pages, and do not necessarily appear in databases. Recently a whole thirty minute programme on the way a particular church group was helping the homeless came from a single small news item.



However there can be the opposite effect – a whole series of programmes was once ruined by a news item: a producer was following the development of a uranium mine throughout a year and about six months into the project, in the new issue of *Metal Bulletin*, a three line news item appeared saying the mine had closed – the producer had not heard from any other source.

Scanning incoming periodicals is also important to check for new articles relating to programmes, not just news items. Recently *Assignment* were in Korea filming, just for a week, when an excellent article appeared while they were there that threw a new light on the story they were covering. The article was faxed to them in Korea and as a result the whole direction of the programme was changed half way through the week.

A ‘quick fix’ enquiry is one when someone says “Quick – the Energy Minister has just confirmed he’s prepared to give us an interview this afternoon. Can you give me something quickly that is up to date, and fairly substantial, on gas prices?” or, “Quick – there’s a story breaking about the mis-use of pension funds and were covering it on the Six O’clock News today. Have you got anything about the control of pension funds?”

### **Background Information**

Periodicals are also used in a rather more structured way. Like many other places we get the sort of requests that say “Can you get me everything ever written on electromagnetic fields and their effects on health?” But, unlike many other libraries, most users of the BBC’s libraries may well have no knowledge of the subject. As they will usually be doing a programme about current research they are offered review articles updated with more recent articles on specific developments, or good background or introductory articles. It is suggested to them that they read these and then come

back when they have fixed on particular aspects of the subject and then further, more specific, articles can be provided. The level at which information is needed is not always highly technical or academic – programmes are mostly layman’s guides to a subject so that is where the producer starts, and will end, although en route s/he may need something more academic.

### **Subject Files and Indexes**

Most of the periodicals’ use is through the libraries’ subject specialists. They have subject files and in-house indexes into which go anything that is picked up when scanning that might be of interest in the future. The selection depends on the expertise and experience of the subject specialists who, as all the library staff do, develop an instinct for what programmes are likely to be interested in in the future and can therefore anticipate their requests.

The idea is to be able to give an immediate response, at least something to be going on with, so the files are geared to the way enquiries are received. There is a file on suicide and a file on the effects of electromagnetic fields on health because they are recurring current issues. There is a file on Japan, and on other countries, because we know programmes like *Rough Guide* or *Tomorrow’s World* ring up and say “We’re going to Japan, we’ve got some ideas of what we can do when we get there, but can you suggest anything else?” So into these periodical subject files and indexes go news items and good background articles. The most topical newsy weekly magazines such as *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, *The Economist*, and *Community Care* go into our news cuttings files along with the daily press, as these are available 24 hours a day, so that they can be used by news programmes or, as in the case of *The Stage* or *New Musical Express*, for *The Late Show* (the late night arts programme) or chat shows like *Wogan*.

## Subscriptions

Because the libraries never know what they are going to be asked next it is not cost effective to subscribe to a large number of highly subject specific journals, like a university library can. About 300+ general interest level titles are taken, primarily the main topical journals in a broadly based area such as the *BMJ*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Social Work Today*, *Management Today*, *New Civil Engineer*, *Police Review* and *Race and Immigration*. Other libraries such as the BLDSC, Royal Society of Medicine and London Research Centre are relied upon for more specialised titles. Most titles are not kept longer than ten years.

## Databases

Databases are obviously important for a more comprehensive picture of a subject than can be found in the libraries' own files and journals.

Full-text databases are particularly useful because of the urgency of providing information – the political correctness query was answered within minutes by a very good series of articles on Nexis from *Atlantic Monthly*. Bibliographic databases and published indexes are useful too, but there is always the worry that they are not up-to-date. However, *Art Index* produced the only reference that could be found to the 1930s building in Prague that President Havel was interested in.

Because of need to provide a fast service a list of the current journal subscriptions is sometimes run against a search to highlight those in stock. Also, it has been decided that there is no point in spending hours trying to locate an essential but obscure title – it is quicker to give the journalist or producer the telephone number of the publisher.

## Pictures

Although, the libraries do not have back

runs there are some exceptions. Illustrated periodicals are essential for period detail in drama so, for example, the *Illustrated London News* 1842-1988 and *Picture Post* 1938-1957 and other titles are kept. When drama, or even a comedy show, decide to do something about Queen Victoria, or set in the 1940's, pictures are available of actual events, all kinds of transport from cars and trains to ocean-going liners, and pictures of dress style and make-up etc. The query about the dinner party in 1926 was answered from recipes and pictures in *Good Housekeeping*.

To the libraries, historical drama is actually anything set before the current year! So subscriptions to current periodicals like *The Face* (a pop, style magazine) or *Black Hair and Beauty* as well as *Vogue* and *Ideal Home* are extremely useful for anything set last year or the year before, and in years to come these will form the prime sources for the 1980s and 1990s.

It is not just photo-journalism that is of interest in periodicals. Recently advertisements for a particular drug were tracked down through several years of medical journals because a programme had heard that the advertising copy kept changing as more problems were discovered with the drug. *Medicine at the Crossroads*, a new historical documentary programme, wanted pictures of medical instruments in use at various times throughout the years and advertisements were one of the best places to find these.

## Contacts

One of the most crucial uses for periodicals is the contacts. "We urgently need an expert academic in the studio tonight for a discussion on computer viruses. Who's writing on the subject?" or "Who can we talk to for some background information on water problems in Asia and Africa?" To which the reply is sometimes "Did you know there's a journal on the subject. How about trying the editor?"

## Non-Programme Periodical Users

Although so far programme information needs have been discussed there are many other people who work in the BBC who also need periodicals. Many of them are found in most large companies.

TECHNICAL – Research  
Transmission  
Studio  
Sound and Camera Crews  
Film & VT Editors

PERSONNEL – Equal Opportunities  
Industrial Relations

LAWYERS – Contracts  
Libel  
Copyright

MANAGERS

POLICY MAKERS

PROGRAMME SALES – Marketing: UK  
& International

PUBLISHING – Books  
Magazines

ACCOUNTANTS

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

SAFETY

AUDIENCE RESEARCH

LIBRARIANS

The research engineers have the only library where highly technical journals are taken; the doctors need information such as

references to deafness in musicians caused by their instruments; the lawyers need Lexis searches.

## Conclusion

A very large thank-you is due:

- to publishers, their editors and contributors for being so helpful, for occasionally providing free copies, and even for being prepared to be interviewed sometimes – often at very short notice.
- to distributors for putting up with the vagaries of programme makers who only need to subscribe to a title for a few months whilst a programme is being made on that subject.
- to librarians for helping the BBC libraries out of tight spots when they need periodicals urgently.
- and to everyone for doing their best to meet BBC deadlines which sometimes seem almost impossible and, even to the BBC libraries, unbelievable.

## Further Reading

EAGLE, S.ed. *Information sources for the press and broadcast media*. London: Bowker Saur, 1991. p23-33