

Report to BBTI Project Management Group – 4th March 2003.

EVALUATING THE 'BBTI ON THE WEB' PROJECT: PROGRESS AND PLANS

1. Introduction

1.1 The approved proposals for the three-year BBTI project funded by the AHRB include the carrying out of several small-scale research projects for the purpose of 'evaluation of BBTI on the Web as a research tool... testing BBTI as a research resource and publishing results via conferences and the Web-site'. Research is one of the two major activities of the post of Research Fellow, the other being editing (quality control) of the content of the Web-site.

1.2 The primary aim of BBTI research is to test the comprehensiveness, quality and usability of the Web-based BBTI database. One of the first priorities is to identify any major gaps – geographical, chronological or other – in the coverage of BBTI data. The 'Urban Book-Trade Activity' project is particularly intended to identify major gaps.

1.3 The resources available within the AHRB funding for research activity are quite limited. (This is entirely appropriate as the main thrust of the AHRB programme funding our project is 'resource enhancement'. The research element is intended to support and complement the resource enhancement process, in this case the development of BBTI as a Web-based resource.)

1.4 Given that the Research Fellow is a half-time post for three years and that research is only one of its two main activities, the amount of time available for research is not large. However, research time is being maximised by using some of the Web Development Officer's time on research support especially in the areas of data management and mathematical analysis.

2. 'Urban Book-Trade Activity: a survey of BBTI evidence'

2.1 This first research project is still in its early stages, priority for the first nine months of the three-year project having been given to designing and launching the Web-site rather than to research. A brief pilot study has been completed, resulting in several improvements to the methodology.

2.2 The aim is to identify the scale, according to the evidence of BBTI, of book-trade activity in the larger English provincial towns. The study will create a number of comparative 'snapshots' at various points in time of the scale of book-trade activity in selected towns and will indicate where follow-up research might identify reasons for major differences.

2.3 The first phase is to identify the largest towns at certain periods. The selection will include older-established corporate towns as well as expanding industrial towns. Identifying the largest towns at different periods is not as straightforward a task as it may sound, since pre-Census population estimates vary considerably between different sources.¹

2.4 Once the selection of towns has been settled, BBTI will be systematically searched for evidence of (a) total book-trade activity, (b) bookseller/stationer activity

¹ This applies to both primary and secondary sources. Recent publications on urban history and demography give widely varying population estimates in some cases.

and (c) printing activity. Care will be taken to exclude double counting which might arise from cross-referencing, duplicate records or multiple trades.²

2.5 The results of this study, which will be presented in both tabular and graphical forms to facilitate comparison, should enable some conclusions to be drawn about the relative scale of book-trade activity in comparable towns. It may prove possible to establish norms for different types and sizes of towns, perhaps as a crude formula of 'x book-trade businesses per 1000 population'. Identified differences will be further examined to try to establish whether they are historically 'real' or whether it reveals a gap in BBTI coverage.

2.6 Although the main aim of this study of selected major towns is to disclose geographical shortcomings in BBTI data, it may also reveal unevenness in chronological coverage and/or in the records of different trades. In addition to providing some useful data on the apparent (*i.e.* as recorded in BBTI) scale of book-trade activity – thus highlighting possible areas for further research – the results of this study should provide valuable management information on the current state of BBTI's completeness.

2.7 A further phase will focus on the printing trade and its spread into provincial England following the lapse of the Printing (Licensing) Act, by examining printing activity during the twenty years after 1695. (Again care needs to be taken in interpreting the results, as gaps in BBTI coverage may be revealed.)

3. 'Book-trade networks in the Midlands'

3.1 This project will aim to identify regional trade networks in the Midlands, and overlaps between East and West Midlands, to examine the activities of traders with several outlets in the region and to attempt an assessment of Birmingham's importance as a regional centre of book-trade activity.

3.2 This project continues the comparative theme, building on the experience gained in the first project, perhaps enabling more sophisticated comparisons to be attempted between both geographical areas and individual practitioners.

3.3 Depending on the outcome of this research, and on our investigation of GIS³, a further mapping exercise may be carried out. Initial investigations may indicate that it would be appropriate to divide this research into chronological periods or perhaps to concentrate on a single period.

² At the last meeting of the Project Management Team a decision was taken not to conflate apparently duplicate records unless there was absolute certainty that two (or more) records do refer to the same person. Cross-references in BBTI (e.g. for variant spellings of names) are shown as additional records and must therefore be discarded before any meaningful counting can take place. Booksellers and stationers are being treated as a single category for the purposes of this research as the pilot study indicated considerable overlap and inconsistency in the use of the terms.

³ Geographical Information Systems. See for example, Bertrum H MacDonald and Fiona A Black, 'Using GIS for Spatial and Temporal Analyses in Print Culture Studies', *Social Science History*, 24:3 (Fall 2000), pp. 505-536, and Fiona A Black, Bertrum H MacDonald and J Malcolm W Black, 'Geographical Information Systems: a new research method for book history', *Book History*, 1 (1998), pp. 11-31.

4. Conclusion

4.1 The research outlined above should lead to a number of conference papers and/or journal articles. The dissemination of research results in the form of conference papers and/or published articles forms a useful scholarly exercise in itself but also has the benefit of publicizing BBTI as a research resource.

4.2 It is not yet clear whether the three-year project will allow time for any additional research. As the programme of research progresses, results will be monitored to evaluate possibilities for additional research which might form the basis for applications for further external funding. The advice of the Project Management Group will be sought in due course.

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