

Beijing Symposium: History of Science Online: new possibilities and new challenges

Introductory remarks

Peter Harper

National Cataloguing Unit for the Archives of Contemporary Scientists,
University of Bath
United Kingdom BA2 7AY

Let me first introduce myself as President of the DHS Bibliography and Documentation Commission, a position I have held since the Mexico Congress in 2001.

I should say that my professional background is in archives as director of a university-based organisation with a national mission in Britain in the preservation of contemporary scientific archives. We have been doing this for over thirty years now. I have a general interest in matters bibliographical and particularly online developments which are very important for my own work but as regards many of the technical questions in the presentation of bibliographies I cannot claim any special expertise. That is why I am looking forward as much as anyone to today's proceedings. Indeed we are very fortunate to have been able to gather together such a distinguished group of experts from around the world.

I should like to take this opportunity to say a little about the Bibliography and Documentation Commission itself. It seems to me to be extremely important that IUHPS DHS has a commission with this title as a focus for interest in bibliographical and archival sources. But what is very special about the Commission is that its interests are fundamental and indispensable to the whole history of science community whether organised in national committees, commissions and scientific sections, and these committees, commissions and sections have themselves responsibilities in seeing these activities prosper within their respective fields of operation. In other words while the Bibliography and Documentation may serve as a focus bibliographical and archival matters concern everyone.

In its present form the Commission has existed since 1993 and was presided over for eight years with enormous success by my predecessor Professor Rod Home of the University of Melbourne. It has focused on history of science bibliographies and issues surrounding the understanding and preservation of scientific archives and manuscripts. Although in recent years the focus of the Commission's documentation interests has been contemporary scientific archives, all periods come within its remit, and, for example, when Rod Home was President it was able to take an interest in manuscripts of interest to historians of mediaeval science.

One of the long term projects of the Commission (initiated by Rod Home) along with the History of Science Society and the Society for the History of Technology is the international electronic database of current work in the history of science and technology established by the Research Libraries Group (RLG) in the USA. Selecting one or two initiatives in contemporary scientific archives I might mention a meeting held by the Commission in December 2000 which resulted in the elaboration of a number of resolutions on contemporary scientific archives subsequently adopted by

the DHS. Subsequently the Commission sponsored with CASE (Cooperation on the Archives of Science in Europe) two international 'Future Proof' meetings on contemporary scientific archives at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland in April 2003 and at the Deutsches Museum in Munich, Germany in April of this year.

In one important area the Commission has been a little slow to act: the establishment of its own website. However with the financial support from DHS this has now been accomplished in Brazil by the Commission's Secretary (and one of our speakers today), Dr Alfredo Tolmasquim of the History of Astronomy Museum in Rio de Janeiro. The website was designed in Brazil and is hosted on one of the Museum's servers. The web address: <http://www.mast.br/iuhps.cbd/>

Colleagues who wish to learn more of the Commission's activities and / or become involved in its activities are invited to visit the website and contact myself or Dr Tolmasquim.

A rather special feature of the Commission on Bibliography and Documentation is that it has enjoyed the particular support in its work of DHS Secretaries General. I might mention in passing (and with gratitude) Professor Saldana's efforts to take the Commission's resolutions on contemporary scientific archives to ICSU and the ICSU family of scientific unions. But it is another association which brings us to today's symposium. When Professor Saldana assumed the DHS Secretary Generalship he did, as is appropriate in such circumstances, look at what the DHS was about and how it might develop in the future. A draft strategic document was circulated and the Bibliography and Documentation Commission responded with an expression of real satisfaction that matters bibliographical and archival were mentioned but hoped that they could be given greater prominence in the DHS scheme of things. As we all know Professor Saldana's response was a proposal for a major online project with a bibliographical focus – a project that would for the first time make possible a DHS-wide activity: World History of Science Online (WHSO). Now a great deal has happened since that initial proposal: definitions and scope, for example sources rather than current work; experts meeting, revelatory for me in respect of the concerns of colleagues outside Western Europe; technical questions of databases and protocols; bibliographical guidelines; survey of current activity within DHS; website design; archives (I seem to recall an early document in which after every reference to bibliographies I added 'and archives'); and funding – Professor Saldana's success in this area has made many things possible including this symposium. All steps on the way to the creation of a free sustainable online resource for the worldwide community interested in the history of science.

And so to business. We are here to explore the whole range of possibilities opened up by the WHSO project in a genuinely international symposium: technical questions, of course; current activity; future ramifications. Let us take on the world in our project and begin with Africa.