



Making an Exhibition of Ourselves? Academic Libraries and Exhibitions Today



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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen a noticeable increase in the size and scope of libraries' exhibitions. To investigate this observation, interviews were conducted at five academic libraries: the Bodleian Library, British Library, Royal College of Physicians Library, Royal Society Library and Wellcome Library. Each reported growth in their involvement in exhibitions, which feature in their strategies. Exhibitions are increasingly aimed at the wider public, not necessarily with the target of increasing user numbers.

Participants reported growing exhibition loan activity, yet there are no initiatives in the library sector to promote this. Investigation found that the sector has not developed practice to evaluate library exhibitions, and most participants did not have established means of doing so. Library professionals are also not formally prepared for involvement in exhibitions. Although practice from the museum sector can be used by libraries, they also face challenges specific to their exhibitions.

This paper argues for both the closer integration of library and museum professionals, and further research into library-sector-specific issues. Exhibitions can be a valid and valuable undertaking for libraries, but more research is needed if they are to benefit fully from them, especially if they are using exhibitions as an example of public outreach.

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INTRODUCTION

LIBRARIES AND EXHIBITIONS

Library displays are not a new phenomenon. In 1654 the diarist John Evelyn recounted being shown “manuscripts, medals and other curiosities” in Oxford University's Bodleian Library (Bray, 1901, p. 287). Moving forward two hundred years, catalogs exist from the mid nineteenth century onwards for exhibitions held in the King's Library at the British Museum (British Museum, 1869). In her how-to guide of 1958 Coplan advises that “all [types of libraries] have an opportunity through exhibits to make their readers, present and potential, more aware of their resources and facilities” (p. 21). Coplan's “exhibits” are relatively simple displays consisting of books or book jackets and other graphics concerning a theme, such as a national holiday, or the season. Many libraries today have similar kinds of displays, focusing on an author or specific area of their collection, for example. The distinction is not clear cut, but for the purposes of this study, an “exhibition” is considered to be on a greater scale and more intensively curated than this, with more of a narrative and interpretation for viewers, and with perhaps a wider scope.

A key motivation for libraries creating displays, as cited by Coplan and a significant amount of other literature (discussed below), is the idea of attracting new users, or making existing ones aware of the scope of collections. Yet recent years have seen a noticeable trend of libraries becoming involved in larger, more ambitious exhibitions, and recent developments at, for example, the British Library or Bodleian Library to renovate or introduce large public gallery spaces seem to indicate a new focus for them. This study seeks to investigate this observation with specific reference to academic libraries (or, in two cases, academic/special libraries). Interviews were conducted at five libraries of different sizes in order to understand their reasons for involvement with exhibitions. Their responses informed and directed further research into the challenges surrounding this involvement. The key points determined for examination were exhibition loans, evaluative practices, and the relationship between libraries and museums. Gaining a clearer understanding of such issues is vital if libraries' burgeoning activity in this area is to be as sustainable and beneficial for them and their audiences as possible.

It is difficult to discuss exhibitions without reference to museums. Despite their shared roots in the sixteenth century European curiosity cabinet (Kam, 2001, p. 11), most people today would arguably associate museums much more strongly with exhibitions than libraries. The museum sector has developed a substantial body of research and practice on numerous aspects of staging exhibitions, whereas libraries have not. Comparing library exhibitions to those in museums can provide a

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useful point of reference in terms of established practice, although this work also goes on to discuss the validity of applying methods developed in one sector directly to another without discretion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A brief initial look at existing literature on the topic helps to contextualize the current piece of work. There is a large amount of material published in library and information professionals' press about staging exhibitions, and the majority of it deals with practicalities, observations and case studies. Out of the first 50 relevant¹ English-language results returned for a basic search on "library/libraries" and "exhibit*" conducted on a major library science abstracting database,² 40 were in the form of case studies, or examinations of and reflections on specific instances of practice. 46 had highly descriptive elements to them, and 30 included tips or practical suggestions on how to "do" exhibitions. Only seven of the results included a strongly analytical aspect or theoretical basis, and only nine utilized surveys or comparisons between cases as part of their methodology. Six of the case studies specified community outreach as a goal of their exhibitions, and 14 listed promoting their libraries' collections or services to new or existing users. These figures represent, of course, just a brief initial review of existing literature, and other, more sophisticated searches were conducted. Yet they are illustrative of a clear inclination in the literature towards reflective, practical topics concerning exhibitions in libraries.

Exhibitions in academic libraries dominate this literature, with marketing the library, highlighting its resources and attracting readers frequently cited as key motivations. However very little, if anything, has been written examining the growing trend itself of libraries staging larger, more intensively researched exhibitions featuring a stronger narrative and more interpretation, and which do not necessarily have the aim of getting more users into the library. Reports from the museum sector highlight how connecting audiences with collections, through both exhibitions and programming, can both "support positive social change" (Museums Association, 2013, p. 3) and have major positive economic impact (Travers, 2006, p. 7), yet this kind of research is absent from the library sector, despite libraries' apparent new focus on engaging with wider audiences.

Case studies are a useful way to explore instances of a certain phenomenon with a view to understanding that instance as fully as possible (Silverman, 2005, p. 126). Indeed, this piece of work utilizes case studies to examine and illustrate instances of library participation in exhibitions. It is difficult, however, to be able to generalize from a single case study or know how representative it is of a wider phenomenon (Silverman, 2005, p. 127). It is interesting, therefore, that despite the number of articles on library exhibitions, there is relatively little wider research-related literature about them, although there is more in the general area of library outreach and programming, some of which touches on exhibits (Auten et al., 2013, p. 267–8). What research there is tends to focus on practicalities, for example conservation issues, such as Shenton's (2010) review of book display stands at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Although some case studies emphasize particular issues specific to library exhibitions, for example the need to work collaboratively where there are no dedicated exhibition staff, they rarely address others, for example utilizing space not necessarily designed for exhibits, or the challenges posed by displaying books as objects. A notable exception is the National Library of Scotland's document, *Exhibiting the Written Word* (2011), which reflects on how displaying textual objects differs from art or museum artifacts. In contrast, Matassa's recently published guide to organizing exhibitions (2014)

does not distinguish between library, archives and museum professionals' skills sets, objects with which they are likely to be working, or the resources available to them. And although it acknowledges the growing inclusion of display spaces in libraries and archives, this is still in the context of promoting collections to new and existing library users (p. xxiv).

More generally, there has been some interesting theoretical examination of the relationship between libraries and museums. Latham (2012) links Michael Buckland's information typology with the semiotics of museum objects and the experience of museum users, to demonstrate that both libraries and museums are "functioning cultural institutions charged with the storage, care and accessibility to information users seek out and experience" (p. 67). Mitchell (2013) however contrasts libraries' and museums' perspectives on users and information experiences, whereby library users have specific information needs and use library collections accordingly, and museum visitors may have any number of information experiences within a museum exhibit's defined boundary (p. 345). His suggestions for introducing the museum's "theatre" into library information experiences via technological hooks are not, however, wholly convincing. Looking at the implications of siting an exhibition in a library space, Reece (2005) examines concepts of representation and objectivity in a controversial university library exhibit. She suggests that the very setting of academic libraries, which can be viewed as "concrete symbols of the intellectual pursuit of truth", adds an extra dimension to the interpretation of exhibits, because they "carry the weight and implicit authority [...] of academia as a whole" (p. 366).

As libraries become increasingly involved in exhibitions, more of such theoretical investigation into them is needed. Although research into numerous aspects of exhibition practice is well established in the museums world, it is not always appropriate to simply apply it to library exhibits, as libraries' resources and roles differ greatly to those of museums. There has also been no coherent overview or attempt to understand the bigger picture of library exhibitions to date. This work seeks to explore libraries' relationships with exhibitions today, focusing on five libraries with varied collections and remits to illustrate different aspects of the phenomenon. It attempts to identify why libraries are engaging with exhibitions and the challenges they face in doing so, in order to give a more up-to-date and in-depth view than recent literature provides.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted as a qualitative study focused around semi-structured interviews. Speaking to a small number of participants who characterize the phenomena of interest, and who were purposively selected to represent rich knowledge about the topic (Beitin, 2012, p. 248), allowed an exploration of the themes identified by preliminary research. It was also appropriate in terms of the time and resources available. The personal contact interviews provide is better at eliciting fuller responses, and more complex or emotionally laden information than a questionnaire might (Powell & Connaway, 2004, p. 150). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to recognize statements which suggest new questions or lines of investigation (Powell & Connaway, 2004, p. 193).

The participants represent libraries of a range of different sizes and user types, all of which were observed to have an involvement to some degree in exhibitions. For practical reasons, all were located in London or, in one case, Oxford. Five initial interviews were conducted with Rupert Baker, Library Manager and Keith Moore, Librarian at the Royal Society; Katie Birkwood, Rare Books and Special Collections Librarian at the Royal College of Physicians; Simon Chaplin, Head of Wellcome Library³; Tanya Kirk, Lead Curator, Printed Literary

¹ Relevancy was defined, in this case, as journal articles or reports on any aspect of libraries' staging of, or involvement in, exhibitions, and excluded, for instance, book reviews or conference briefings.

² Search conducted on 13 August 2014 on ProQuest's Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA) database.

³ At time of interview. Chaplin is now Director of Culture and Society at the Wellcome Trust.

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