



Imperialism, Trade and the Beginnings of Business Information: the Commercial Intelligence Bureau of the Imperial Institute, London, 1887-1903

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It is now well documented that the final decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a quantum change in both the conceptualisation and utilisation of information. This paper, based on original archival research utilising records located in the UK National Archives, explores the interplay between two engines of late nineteenth century informatisation – imperialism and ‘trade’ – through an account of the activities of the Commercial Intelligence Bureau of the Imperial Institute, London, between 1887 and 1903.

It examines the origins of the Imperial Institute itself – planned in 1885-7 and opened in 1893 as a memorial to Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee – and gives an overview of its various functions as commercial museum, scientific centre and, most visibly, as a centre of propaganda and ‘imperial display’ in belle époque Britain. It examines how the idea of commercial information came to be a core objective of the new Institute and how a commercial intelligence department was in practice established. It details how Institute staff – mainly ex-civil servants, scientists and military men – established new techniques of information provision including a current awareness service, a public enquiry service and a network of ‘correspondents’ and information gathering. In effect, it is argued, the Bureau became the first professional business information service in Britain.

Like many pioneering organisations, however, the life-span of the Bureau was brief. Its services were under-publicised and its enquiry office in particular attracted (in hindsight largely unfair) criticism. The funding model of the Imperial Institute (by voluntary public subscription throughout the Empire) proved to be precarious, and in 1902, when the Institute was nationalised by the British state, the Bureau was closed. However, its legacy ironically resulted in a major expansion of state sponsored commercial information in Britain. Following an enquiry in 1897-8 the British Board of Trade established a much larger and (directly) state-funded Commercial Intelligence Office in the City of London, which operated until 1939. Many of its services were modelled on the ground breaking provision initiated at the Imperial Institute, suitably modified and expanded to encompass Britain’s world-wide trade.

On the face of things, therefore, the Institute’s Commercial Intelligence Bureau it had little contemporary impact: its scale of operations was small, take up of its services was limited and it endured for less than 10 years. Nevertheless, from the perspective of information history, its activities were extremely significant. It became a prototype commercial information service spawning the not only Board of Trade’s Commercial Intelligence Office but numerous other local services which developed in Britain in institutions like Chambers of Commerce and public libraries. In particular, its gathering and dissemination of current information legitimised the idea that commercial knowledge was not fixed and cumulative, but mobile and shifting in an accelerating global economy. This suggested that active ‘intelligence’ services, rather than passive custodial libraries, would be necessary to support trade and commerce in industrial modernity.



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Mundaneum, Mons (Belgium), 20-21 May 2010

The Imperial Institute was, of course, not unique in developing this kind of service. The founders of a number of other Commercial Museums of the time – most notably the Handels Museum in Vienna (1873); Brussels (1882) and Philadelphia (1895) – all quickly realised that static exhibits of products and materials led to numerous enquiries about production, markets, tariffs and transport. Like the Imperial Institute, all of these museums had by the 1890s established information offices in order to satisfy this need for rapidly changing commercial information. Interestingly, moreover, all of these bureaux embodied a nationalist and imperialist rationale – even in the market driven United States, the Philadelphia Bureau of Information specialised as a national information centre on trade with the burgeoning US economic empire of Latin America.

Hence, in parallel with these contemporary examples, the brief history of the Imperial Institute's Commercial Intelligence Bureau underlines the significance of nationalism and imperialism in the new information age of the belle époque. The free market and 'trade' on their own provided a necessary but not sufficient impetus towards the establishment of new information services. In Britain, at least, it seems that to be successful these services required in addition both the sponsorship and expertise of an imperial state attempting to revive its fading empire and retain its commercial pre-eminence. 'Brain centres of empire', in the words of the London *Times*, these new institutions were never, realistically, able to become. They nevertheless stand in history as early harbingers of a future information age more connected, more global and, ironically, more 'imperial' than their founders ever imagined.

Biography

Dave Muddiman was, until 2008, Principal Lecturer in the School of Information Management, Leeds Metropolitan University. In his early academic career Dave's research and publications focused on the sociology and recent history of the public library service, but in the late 1990s he became fascinated by the history of the rise of information, in particular in the period 1870-1945. Since then he has authored a number of papers - on H.G.Wells, J.D. Bernal and the early history of ASLIB - and in 2007, with Alistair Black and Helen Plant, he published *The Early Information Society: Information Management in Britain before the Computer* (Ashgate). Dave's own information career continues on an ad hoc basis: in addition to part-time teaching and research he is currently Reviews Editor of *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* and a contributor to the latest edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Library and Information Sciences* (Taylor and Francis).