

**The British Library Board**

2 Sheraton Street  
London W1V 4BH  
Telephone 01-636 1544

1st July, 1982.

The Rt. Hon. Paul Channon, MP.,  
Department of Education and Science,  
Elizabeth House,  
York Road,  
London, SE1 7PH.

Dear Paul,

Scientific Documentation Centre

A2 You will recall that Dr. P.S. Davison, Director of SDC, has conducted a campaign through the Press and Parliament maintaining that the policies of the British Library Research and Development Department and its antecedent the Office of Scientific and Technical Information were gravely mistaken in their policies for scientific information, storage and retrieval and had thereby wasted public funds. Almost two years ago he wrote to the Prime Minister at some length and I believe you have a copy of that letter. P41 Following her reply he wrote requesting a meeting with me (copy letter enclosed). After discovering the substance of his correspondence with the Prime Minister I responded to his letter by asking him to state the subjects he wished to discuss. Some 14 months later he wrote a long letter and I enclose a copy.

Now after a further long delay on his part he and his Chairman have been to The British Library and I enclose a note recording what took place together with copies of his Chairman's letter to me and his own letter to Mr. Perry who is the Director of our Research and Development Department and was present at the meeting. As you will see the meeting was reasonably satisfactory in tone and content and we now await proposals from Dr. Davison. I cannot say whether any of these proposals will succeed in securing grant support from the Library because they will have to be judged on exactly the same criteria as other grant applications i.e. on the scientific merit of the proposal, the capacity of the investigator to carry out the study and the importance in relation to the purposes for which the British Library was set up.



I felt that you and, because her office has been involved, the Prime Minister should know the stage that has been reached with Dr. Davison. For the moment all is calm in our relations with Dr. Davison and I am sure that Dr. McIntosh will do his best to restrain Dr. Davison in any further outbursts. I think it would be unduly optimistic to expect that Dr. Davison would abandon entirely the views about the British Library Research and Development Department and OSTI which he has held for so many years and that he will not write to the Press or to you or to the Prime Minister or activate his Member of Parliament to speak on his behalf but I am absolutely certain that he has no grounds whatsoever for complaint that he has been unfairly treated or discriminated against. I have taken a personal interest in this matter and will continue to do so in order to satisfy myself and you that he is dealt with even handedly and that you or the Prime Minister could affirm this without fear of contradiction and fully supported by the evidence. I had hoped to tell to this personally at our meeting on Tuesday 29th but this had to be cancelled because of the rail strike.

Yours sincerely,

Fred Dainton.



SCIENTIFIC DOCUMENTATION CENTRE LTD.

Director of Research, P. S. Davison, Ph.D., B.Sc., A.R.I.C., M.I.Inf.Sc.

HALBEATH HOUSE,  
DUNFERMLINE, FIFE, KY12 0TZ,  
UNITED KINGDOM.



Telephone: Dunfermline 23535

Reference:

Sir Frederick Dainton,  
Chairman,  
British Library Board,  
Store St.,  
LONDON, WC1E 7DG

12 - 10 - 80

Dear Professor Dainton,

Following correspondence with the Prime Minister, she has suggested that I ask for a meeting with you.

My Chairman is in Canada, and I wondered therefore, if it might be possible for us to meet you some time after his return at the end of October?

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'P.S. Davison'.

P.S. Davison.



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**The British Library Board**

Store Street

London WC1E 7DG

Telephone 01-636 1544

16th October 1980

P.S. Davison Ph.D., B.Sc., ARIC., MI., Inf., Sc.,  
Director of Research  
Scientific Documentation Centre Ltd  
Halbeath House  
Dunfermline, Fife KY12 0TZ  
United Kingdom

Thank you for your letter of 12 October. I would be grateful if you would let me know what you and your Chairman wished to see me about.

Yours sincerely

Fred Dainton.

This office will move to

2 Sheraton Street  
London W1V 4BH

ON 1 NOVEMBER 1980

The telephone number remains  
the same: 01-636 1544





Handwritten note: *Check/ attach similar covers and show to H.M. for comment*

SCIENTIFIC DOCUMENTATION CENTRE LTD.

Director of Research, P.S. Davison, Ph.D., B.Sc., A.R.I.C., M.I.Inf.Sc.

HALBEATH HOUSE,  
DUNFERMLINE, FIFE, KY12 OTZ  
UNITED KINGDOM.

Telephone: Dunfermline 23535

Your Ref:

Our Ref: PSD/EMM

Sir Frederick Dainton, F.R.S.,  
Chairman,  
British Library Board,  
2 Sheraton Street,  
London. W1V 4BH

Handwritten date: 14/10/81

Dear Sir Frederick,

The reply to your letter of 16th October is given below and indicates in detail the reasons why my Chairman and I wish to follow the Prime Minister's advice and seek a meeting with you to request the support of the British Library for our research programme. To give the reasons for this approach I have also had to lay out the relevant background to the development of information retrieval in the period in which I have been involved.

Background - The Traditional Publication Systems

The last three decades have seen major changes in retrieval, storage and dissemination of scientific and technical information. Traditional means developed and used by the Learned Societies, were based on publication of abstracting journals and indexes in periodical/book form. Viewed as information systems these had theory-based maximum intrinsic effectiveness potential; practical application characteristics, operational parameters, limitations and constraints (such as interface losses reducing this potential in practice) in this rôle, and cost structures imposed by the attributes of their production and storage methods. These production methods are text preparation/composition/printing/binding/publication - distribution. Among the most important of these attributes was the requirement to achieve viability, that a substantial number of identical publications giving the same (rather large) selection of information had to be sold, and this attribute requires that publications are given attractiveness to a large number of users. This meant dissemination of very large amounts of unwanted information to each user at high composition and printing costs and at a low information-required to information-supplied correlation characteristic.

Emerging Systems: The Concept of Selective Dissemination of Information

In the 1950's, emphasised by two international conferences, it was realised that Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) could avoid dissemination of most of the unwanted information, might avoid much of its high cost, and would provide systems with entirely different characteristics imposed by the different attributes of their different production methods. Great reduction in the volume of disseminated information till it correlated much more closely with the actual needs of the individual user, might offset higher unit costs and might give much lower total system costs for the same needed dissemination for the nation.

Two production systems came forward which could build round the SDI concept the retrieval, storage and dissemination mechanisms which (perhaps with central filing of less needed reports) could provide major alternative systems, and fulfil a major part of the role of the traditional system - perhaps effectively and perhaps at lower cost.

IBM/

Members of Council: - Dr. D.M. McIntosh, C.B.E., Chairman; J.R. McNally, M.B.E., J.P., Vice-Chairman; C.J.V. Roberts (Kodak) Vice-Chairman; R.M. Anthony (DCL); Dr. A.J. Barnes (Salford Univ.); S. Barrows (formerly DCL); Prof. D. Bryce-Smith (Reading Univ.); J. Davison; Dr. W.D. Fordham (Bush, Books Allen Ltd.); F.H. Truscott (ITT); P.S. Davison, Secretary.





IBM had seen the financial opportunities in information retrieval that they could exploit, and research by Luhn in the late 1950's proposed the application of computers,<sup>1,2</sup> and had large financial benefits to computer firms through over twenty years of publicly-funded research on this, which has still failed to produce systems which are more effective at disseminating the information the user needs, than traditional facilities. In the mid 1960's the British 'Establishment' adopted computerisation as the method it proposed to develop for SDI. It did so following the introduction of operational, interdisciplinary SDI services by this Research Association using a system worked out in the late 1950's and early 1960's, which achieved selectivity by storing and handling each reference on a separate piece of paper, and by providing systems and equipment able to produce and select this information economically and on the substantial scale needed.<sup>3</sup> This system has been operational ever since and has been able, for example, to accumulate about two million references on a quite small number of subjects, for a tiny investment by computer standards. This could be extended hugely, and for a small part of comparable computer costs.

### Computer Macro Systems

Viewed as systems, the computer macrosystems required, also have constraints and limitations imposed on them by their production and storage methods. These methods, which differ in current awareness and retrospective search rôles, are broadly (text preparation)/selection and coding in some cases/digitisation/transfer to store/computer search and selection/print out and despatch of print out (after on-line or off-line display by video or teleprinter). The attributes; parameters (including limitations and constraints<sup>2</sup>) and characteristics of these processes enable one to assess the potential performance of the systems in different situations. Quantitative assessment such as the Oxford Evaluation<sup>4,5</sup>, showed the computer system costing more, even discounting subsidy, and able to give only half the relevant recall of the SDC system. More recent versions of the computer system (on-line) have been described as both absolutely and in cost terms less effective than any other existing means of information retrieval. The danger to research and industry of wide acceptance of incompetent systems obstructing its R & D and management growth points is obvious and most serious.

### The SDC System

Viewed as a system the method developed and used by SDC<sup>6</sup>, also had constraints imposed on it by production and storage methods. These methods are broadly (text preparation)/selection and coding/reproduction/sorting/despatch, or, (text preparation)/coding/reproduction/(storage)/selection for user/despatch, depending on rôle. The quantitative assessment of the current awareness rôle by the Oxford Evaluation mentioned above showed this system able to obtain double the relevant recall of two much larger computer systems, one of which was currently very heavily subsidised, and that it would do this at lower cost - substantially lower than the real costs of the other systems. We have seen a number of smaller assessments comparing the computerised and SDC systems and all, including one carried out without our knowledge by Birmingham University, showed a large advantage of recall of relevant information for the SDC system.<sup>7</sup> We are disappointed that the British Library failed to follow up the Oxford Evaluation on chemical information services with proper comparative evaluations of the SDC system and computerised retrieval systems in other subjects as requested.

### SDC's Research Status/





## SDC's Research Status

Since SDC was incorporated in 1962 we have applied a vigorous research activity to information retrieval. Our publications were probably the first to prove quantitatively the startling ineffectiveness in recall etc. of the traditional information retrieval systems;<sup>6, 8-10</sup>, these studies covered first a single subject, next a single sub-discipline and lastly a complete major discipline. The great increase in expenditure on R & D for information retrieval in recent years, shows acceptance of the weaknesses in the traditional existing system which we established. We have published comparative unit costs for dissemination of information using a whole range of print-based systems including production by both the above-specified systems and this, yet again, confirmed the high unit cost of computer systems.<sup>9,11,13</sup> We have, and are, carrying out cost studies on major computer centres like Swansea, systems like Prestel, on machine translation and other important matters affecting major libraries.<sup>2</sup> Two papers<sup>2</sup> I recently presented at a Luxembourg Symposium established expenditures of, at least, £800,000,000 on computer macro-systems, established the very long research periods of all (up to thirty years) and it seems widely accepted that these systems are still not generally more effective than what they could replace in information retrieval terms. Later support by OSTI/BLR&DD of ideas like those embodied in earlier SDC descriptions appears at least to give the compliment of emulation to our research ideas. Publications from here also laid out a substantial part of the reasoning and basis of what has become the Parents' Charter policies in education of this Government.<sup>14-22</sup>

## Unbalanced Research and Development Programmes

The fates of the two SDI systems since the 1960's differ remarkably. The computer system has been developed in a variety of different ways, one following the other in a continuing expensive succession, all with the help of public funding of a generosity never before seen in research for information retrieval in Britain. Research funding of experimental computer services of the mid 1960's, of the computer data processing centre and of specialised information centres (some computerised), was followed by generous funding for SDI and liaison experiments, statistical analyses, re-packaging, integration, evaluation, correlated structure text searching, reviews, free indexing, development of thesauri, machine profile construction, alternative strategies - all for computer systems - and even user reactions and user education for (computer systems) attracted widespread funding. Now computerised on-line and networks are big money receivers.<sup>23</sup> A journal very recently led the very pertinent question that expenditure on promotion of on-line services should be evaluated against the actual income of those services: The extremely high proportion of sales/promotion costs to turnover and profit, and sources of funds and comparison with normal commercial practice would be fascinating results of this study.<sup>24</sup>

During the same period the systems, whose operational introduction preceded this generous expenditure, found a remarkable and entirely consistent impossibility of obtaining any funds from the same main sources for its R & D. Two systems exist. They offer different potentialities for effectiveness, have different attributes, characteristics and different cost structures for operational application and both can meet an essential and important function with very important benefits for science and industry. It seems to us that there is a most unsatisfactory state of imbalance when one receives almost unlimited funding and the other none, and the latter because of withholding of funds remains largely undeveloped. This is especially unsatisfactory when there is substantial factual evidence that/





the unsupported system is more effective and more cost effective than the supported one.<sup>4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11.</sup>

Research and Development Areas Proposed by SDC

It is our belief that funds should be available for support of research and development on the following in the order of priority given:-

1) Overall Systems - Pilot Study

Based on 20 years experience and existing well-known practical operating systems, it is our belief that an overall system of information retrieval for the next few decades could be established using a combination of techniques, including SDC's input method, COM index, micro film or fiche or printing, which would provide effective recall at lower cost than in comparable alternatives. The systems would provide the effective recall proved by SDC practice and frequently obtained in the traditional systems, but at which computer services have repeatedly failed. Its output could set standards. Its development costs are believed to be around 1/10th of computerised development costs. We believe that a feasibility study on this is needed urgently. We believe it would point the way to very large savings in public funds.

2) Theoretical Research

Knowledge of large systems for information dissemination in practical operation depends on the level of theoretical knowledge established in this field. It is, and has for some years, been our belief that it would be possible to establish at a fundamental level the theoretical relationships between the different parameters, characteristics, attributes and cost structures of systems so that the potentialities of different systems applied to a particular rôle or situation could be calculated on a theoretical basis in advance of spending large sums on their establishment. This research should, in our view, be supported in an on-going manner, as only when it succeeds, can we avoid the long string of expensive experiments in the past. The proposal therefore could avoid large and wasteful future public expenditures.

3) Library Information Officers' Camera

It has long been our view that it would be feasible and not excessively expensive to develop a small personal hand-held strobe-operated camera, which a librarian or information officer could use to copy individual abstracts or small entries, or possibly whole pages, direct on to film or paper - producing a continuous search record directly. The last two decades of development of computer systems have succeeded in showing the way to remove a little of the drudgery of copying out references - at the cost of losing effective recall - and at the cost of £6,000,000 (£7,500,000 including the Infoline losses) in the UK alone. This proposal would give a great reduction in drudgery without losing the effective recall which the human search allows, and that the computer system loses. The proposal could increase the/





the efficiency of research.

4) Unnecessary Publications

Pilot studies <sup>22</sup> carried out by SDC some years ago showed that in one social science subject, a large proportion of papers published were purely opinionative and contained no substantial new proven fact. Storage and retrieval of scientific and technical information is an expensive necessity for the nation, whose efficiency is also reduced if a large part of that information is of low or no intrinsic value. This has important bearings on the size of all information stores and on the attitudes to what is acceptable for publication as science or technology. We believe, that fuller studies should be commissioned to assess the proportion of material published in areas of social science and education that is of proper scientific standards, or that contains other material that is of real value and worth recording for posterity. This could reduce expenditure on storage and retrieval of material of no permanent value.

5) Stability of Ultra Micro Storage

Many years ago SDC carried out a literature study on the stability of magnetic storage media. <sup>25</sup> This showed that the media used 15 years ago were largely stable. They could be affected by electric motors and perhaps occasional radiation occurrences. There is now much talk about extreme high density in magnetic and optical storage media which might be used to store vital national permanent information resources. We believe that the stability of these media to modern hazards should be fully checked, by a research study. This project would check that essential records are not liable to be put at risk in new media.

We estimate that the cost of the above project would at S.D.C. approximate to £70,000 over six years.

We believe that the fact that SDC information services continue and are now nearly twenty years old, and have accumulated a retrospective data bank input of two million references, with very tiny resources, proves that they are highly cost-effective in their operation, because none of our European competitors has done this or operates without assistance for its R & D.

The British Parliament makes funds available for R & D in information retrieval for British organisations. As the British Library at present controls in effect all these public funds for R & D for information retrieval in Britain, we seek a meeting to obtain a decision in principle from you to now support SDC's research in a way SDC can use.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "P. S. Davison", is written over a horizontal line.

P. S. Davison.



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SDC  
5-10-81



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SDC AND RESEARCH - NOTE OF A MEETING HELD AT THE BRITISH LIBRARY ON THURSDAY,  
10 JUNE 1982

Present: Dr D M McIntosh, CBE - Chairman of Council, SDC Ltd  
Dr P S Davison - Director of Research, SDC Ltd  
Sir Fred Dainton, FRS - Chairman, British Library Board  
Mr B J Perry, Director, Research and Development Department

## 1. BACKGROUND

Dr McIntosh opened discussions by outlining the history of SDC Ltd and its achievements to date, including winning two contracts with the EEC. He said that basically SDC was looking for two forms of support:

- (i) funds to meet the increased requirements for accommodation to house SDC collections;
- (ii) support for research that would improve their products and activities.

Dr Davison said SDC was a non-profit-making limited company with capital limited by guarantee. He confirmed that it was not officially approved as a research association. Sir Fred stated that the British Library could not help with funds for accommodation and suggested that the small firms scheme, or the British Technology Group might be able to help. However, the Library could use its research funds to support acceptable proposals provided that the results were of general applicability and were made available for public use. BL research funds could not be used to subsidise the activities of an individual organisation. Research proposals would be refereed in the normal way.

## 2. RESEARCH PROPOSALS

In introducing the research proposals set out in his letter of 14 October 1981, Dr Davison said he would like to withdraw proposals numbers 1 and 3 because British Library conditions on exploitation of results could prove detrimental to SDC's financial interests. Mr Perry suggested that Dr Davison might like to contact Mr Ken Cunningham of British Technology Group on his interesting suggestion for a library information officer's camera. The remaining three proposals were then discussed in detail, the main points being:



- (i) Theoretical research - Dr Davison said he was interested in this because of his belief that it should be possible to develop mathematical models as an aid to selecting particular systems for retrieval of particular information. If successful, this could mean that there would be a potent guide to evaluating the cost of efficiency of systems. He estimated that this work would take the equivalent of 1½ man years at the cost of approximately £15,000. Sir Fred outlined the purposes of the seminar on economics of information being held by the BL on June 24 and 25. He thought that the discussions could be helpful to Dr Davison and invited him to attend. Dr Davison accepted and said that he would work up his proposal in more detail after this seminar.
- (ii) Unnecessary publications - SDC's interest in this work had developed from previous research they had carried out into four specific areas of educational practice by following up references in the British Education Index, when they had been able to show that only in the case of "continuous assessment" had properly-conducted research been evaluated to produce new practice. He thought that this situation could exist for many areas, particularly in the social sciences. Indicators of non-research papers were the length of the paper, ie 3 to 4 pages are not enough to cover discussion of research findings, the number of references and tables and graphs, etc. SDC had a large amount of basic material in this field and Dr Davison wished to extend the previous research into other areas. He would use panels of experts to look at the assessment made on the basis of indicators and confirm, or otherwise, the judgement as to the value of the papers. This research project would again take about 1½ man years and would produce results that could be used by secondary services to judge whether or not they should include articles in their coverage. He thought, for instance, that it could produce data for decision on inclusion of material in BEI.



Sir Fred, whilst admitting to no specialist knowledge in the social sciences, expressed a fear that some conceptual papers with original ideas could possibly be excluded from secondary services. It was <sup>first</sup> thought worthwhile for Dr Davison to discuss his ideas with the Social Science Research Council, who were more expert in the methodology of research in the social sciences than any members of the BL. They might after discussion refer a project in this area back to the British Library. Mr Perry suggested that Mr David Allen of SSRC could be a useful first contact.

- (iii) Stability of ultra micro storage - Dr Davison explained his interest in this area as being, particularly, the possible effects of both background radiation and increased radiation on the permanency of micro storage media. Sir Fred said that the Library was interested in problems of permanence of all storage media and, after some discussion, it was agreed that Dr Davison would contact the National Computer Centre, Dr Lewis Roberts, Director of Harwell and Sir Fred, in his capacity as Chairman of the Radiological Production Board, to find out what relevant research had been done on this subject. Mr Perry mentioned that the British National Bibliography Research Fund had commissioned NRC<sup>1</sup> to carry out a literature search on the archival properties of new media and agreed to send a copy of the report to Dr Davison as soon as it was available. It was generally agreed that when all this background material had been brought together it would be valuable to issue a contract for the production of a pamphlet on the relevance of this work to librarians and information workers.

Following these discussions, Dr Davison raised the problem of paying research staff at a rate different from that of the staff already working at the Centre. Sir Fred agreed that it would be possible to issue a grant that worked on the basis of



man-time equivalents and that it might be possible to use university scales for research assistants' salaries or their equivalent. If overheads were requested, then money would be awarded in the form of a contract rather than a grant. The British Library representatives outlined the current difficult financial position and the fact that many requests were at present competing for very limited funds. Dr Davison indicated that he would not wish to start on research projects immediately since there is a heavy work-load at SDC at the moment. Mr Perry explained the various forms of publication that were used by the R&D Department.

It was generally agreed that this had been an extremely useful meeting, which had served to remove much of the communication difficulties that had occurred in the past and Sir Fred stressed that the facility for such discussions with the BL was always available.

750 17/6/82

B. J. Perry

Research & Development Department

15 June 1982



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**SCIENTIFIC DOCUMENTATION CENTRE LTD.**

Director of Research, P.S. Davison, Ph.D., B.Sc., A.R.I.C., M.I.Inf.Sc.

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Your Ref:

Our Ref:

*Mr Perry to me  
then file  
YSD  
18/6*

14 June, 1982

Sir Frederick Dainton, FRS.,  
Chairman,  
British Library Board,  
2 Sheraton Street,  
London W1V 4BH

I should like to offer my sincere thanks for the very friendly and helpful reception you gave us on our visit to the British Library. Not only did you provide us with straight answers to our questions, but you went out of your way to make suggestions as to how we could further our efforts. This was one of the most constructive meetings I have been present at as a beggar for many a long day!

Yours sincerely,

*Douglas M. McIntosh.*

Douglas M. McIntosh.



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SCIENTIFIC DOCUMENTATION CENTRE LTD.

Director of Research, P. S. Davison, Ph.D., B.Sc., A.R.L.C., M.I.Inf.Sc.

HALBFATH HOUSE,  
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Telephone: Dunfermline 23535

Reference: PSD/EMH

14th June, 1982.

B. J. Perry, Esq., BSC., FLS.,  
Director,  
British Library Board,  
2 Sheraton Street,  
London W1V 4BH.

Dear Mr. Perry,

*PSD*  
21 JUN 1982

I was very glad to renew our acquaintance at the meeting with Sir Frederick a few days ago, and I should like to offer my sincere thanks for the friendly and very helpful way you both received us. I believe it augers well for the future, and I look forward to meeting you at Banbury.

Yours sincerely,

P. S. Davison.

P.S. Dr. McIntosh has sent a letter of thanks to Sir Frederick.