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OPENING OUT THE ARCHIVE:
FUNDING HISTORY FOR THE WIDER PUBLIC

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'Accessibility' is the button increasingly pressured academics, curators and archivists must press if they wish to get their hands on public funds. Is this a 'good thing'? Or is it just one more step in the dumbing down of our national culture?

When this call to disseminate academic research is delivered to museums, archives and universities along with redundancy notices, and dirigiste calls to rationalize working practices, it can engender bitterness and resistance. Curators whose workloads have been increased by the loss of specialist colleagues will not be inclined to search out new audiences to inspire. Librarians exhausted by servicing expanding computer facilities in a building where there are few new books and where the lifts don't work simply won't have the energy to guide a diffident young pupil attempting a school project on history.

Some government officers (at both local and central levels) tend to see curators and librarians; archivists and historians as privileged expensive creatures who have had it cushy for far too long. Well, for the most part they *are* privileged in terms of their 'cultural capital'. It *is* true that their undoubted education and expertise should be more widely shared, especially as new technology opens up undreamed of opportunities for them to do so. But for the most part, those expected to 'deliver' the new inclusivity are professionals who love their subject and want the time and resources to 'do' it *properly*. Leaving aside the fact that many of these professionals, particularly in the lower grades, are dreadfully poorly paid—especially in the libraries—they are also increasingly *time-poor*. Even in the universities, increasing numbers of PhD's are on temporary contracts and could make more by working as managers at Macdonald's.

Now asking such conscientious people to be less inward-looking in more and more exacting circumstances can be destructively counter-productive. I recently heard one historian complain truculently that the only way to get one's local history research financed these days was to 'do something on ethnic minorities'. In truth, the history of ethnic minorities in Britain is for the most part notoriously under-researched so his remark was a stupidly misguided attempt to scapegoat. Yet his rant contained a half-truth. Certain groups can become 'fashionable' to fund, for limited periods, before being returned to financial obscurity, as they always are once their novelty value has ceased to excite official interest. Inclusivity is a many splendoured thing.

First rate research needs time and repose. The best history is that which neither plays safe or tows a line. The best history is nuanced and embraces the contradictions and countercurrents of human relations. It is this sort of history which must inform the more popular materials currently so desired by funding bodies. Central and Local authorities need to ensure libraries, archivists and local historians are properly supported so they can research thoroughly without having to make a spurious case that they can do twice the job with half the staff,. It is for the most part a nonsense to

think that corporate sponsors are going to jump in to fund a project once Government has 'primed the pump' with a capital grant.

History fests, such as the event in Bristol this Spring which attracted some 15,000 people, attests to the popularity of local history. Certainly there is much expertise and commitment on the part of amateur local researchers and family historians which professionals ignore at their peril. Yet uninformed by academic rigour, popular history can descend into nostalgia or insularity. Good scholarship is not the enemy of accessibility, it is essential to it.

Of course, many people still feel diffident about using a library or visiting a museum. For their part, curators, librarians and their colleagues in the universities and archives need to be more welcoming and user-friendly. Many provincial museums, including Bristol, are pioneering imaginative new schemes to broaden their appeal in an increasingly visual age. It is not easy negotiating the path between stuffy elitism, and fatuous oversimplification. Sadly, many funding bodies are better at funding hardware and buildings than guides and actors who can make exhibitions come alive for new audiences. How many museums have taken the trouble, as Bristol did, to interview their own front-of-house and cleaning staff for their views on a then forthcoming exhibition on Bristol and the slave trade. There, in response to some of the concerns expressed by front-of-house staff, the Museum hired in two experienced local people, (including an Afro-Caribbean community activist) for two training sessions to help address the staff's concerns. The result was not only a happier and more welcoming front of house staff presence, but some useful suggestions from them to management about the staging of the exhibition.

There are some other exciting innovative things happening here and there. The British Academy has just funded a scheme to excavate slave plantations in the British Caribbean (including the Pinney plantation in Nevis) which includes provision for a small team of black British school kids of Caribbean origin to visit the digs and for Caribbean archivists to have some of their documents conserved. Yet, generally speaking, it's much easier for historians to get a year to write a book, than a year to devise a web site or write popular materials or make a television programme. The financing of Glen Jordan's innovative history resource centre for the mixed-race community of Cardiff's Tiger Bay has been up until recently, a real struggle. The new technology is providing really exciting possibilities for disseminating historical material. But that material has to be of the highest quality. Accessibility and inclusivity must be built on solid foundations.