# We can do more for you! Librarians can work as part of your research team: Working with the National Centre for Research Methods.

“The traditional role of the Library and Librarian is changing” is a phrase that has been heard for a long time but may never be truer than now. The benefits of the digital age are many and search engines such as Google have opened the door to the delights of knowledge, previously hidden in musty tomes such as Abstracting and Indexing publications. Data and information now pours from many different sources, leading to opportunities in research that were not possible previously. With these benefits come new challenges: how do you find the best information; how do you manage what you find or create; how do you save the documents so that you can retrieve them later; where can I find help and support for my research project with these tasks? And the answer is ‘get the librarian integrated into your team’!



Earlier this year the “[IT as a Utility Network](http://www.itutility.ac.uk/)” offered an opportunity for a Librarian to be embedded in an academic research team for two months to support and contribute to their work. At the same time [Prof David Martin](http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/about/people/hub/David-Martin.php) at the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) was looking for help with a review of the Social Science Research Methods Typology[[1]](#footnote-1) (Beissel-Durrant, 2004) and its use on the NCRM website and in their databases, as part of the launch of the new Centre in October 2014. This was an ideal opportunity and, following a successful application, I started to work with NCRM 2.5 days a week in May this year. Although I have been an Academic Liaison Librarian for some years now, this was different. No longer was I based in the comfort of a Library building waiting for enquiries to come to my desk or inbox. Instead I was hot-desking in NCRM staff offices, bumping into academic and research colleagues, and focussing on a specific problem that would benefit from the skills and knowledge of both academic and librarian.



Having received a warm welcome from the team, I got down to the task at hand. I needed to get to know the individual team members and familiarise myself with goals that had to be achieved. These are two key elements of the role of an embedded librarian (Shumaker, 2012). I had to find out what the different individuals were working on, how these related to the typology and how I could contribute to the required outcome. Were they users of the typology? Were they working on the infrastructure that incorporated use of the typology in the new website? How did they make use of the typology terms – was it for retrieval or as description of publications or events?

Another key element of being embedded was that of being “fully ‘read into’ the nature of the work” (Shumaker, 2012 p.5) so another of my early tasks was to become familiar with the concept and purpose of a typology and why it had been chosen originally. This was followed by a search of the literature to see if there was anything that pointed to whether newer technologies, such as tagging or elastic searching, or the use of a more formal structure, along the lines of HASSET (UK Data Archive, 2011) would be a better way forward.

[Rebekah Luff](http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/about/people/hub/Rebekah-Luff.php), Senior Research Fellow was responsible for the Typology review in NCRM. The review was in response to a demand for more specific terms to be included to improve description of material and also from comments about some of the terminology being used in a strange form, for example, the use of ‘Questioning’ rather than ‘Questionnaires’. As an experienced researcher Rebekah was able to understand the rationale behind the original structure and to weigh new terms identified through the review process. Working alongside Rebekah was [Arshad Khan](http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/about/people/hub/Arshad-Khan.php), Research Assistant and [Jon Earley](http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/about/people/hub/Jonathan-Earley.php), IT Coordinator and Web Developer.

Arshad had been tasked with incorporating the Restore website content (<http://www.restore.ac.uk/>) into the new NCRM website and enabling material to be retrieved, making use of elastic searching and incorporating use of typology terms.

Jon had responsibility for the website development and the two key databases – NCRM ePrints Repository and the Training and Events Database. These both make significant use of the typology to describe the materials entered so it was important to consider the impact of any recommended changes. As the new Centre had a launch date of October the work had to be completed in sufficient time to allow these to be incorporated when the website went live.

I was to look at the information management issues around the use and application of the typology, and consider options for the future. This work broke down into two main aspects: the first was around the application of the typology in the different situations and the second was around the debate over whether there was still a need for a fixed structure like the typology.

The two main databases showed varying levels of use of the typology, partly related to who was adding the material and partly to do with the different interfaces. Authors of material were much more knowledgeable about the content and therefore more able to select the appropriate typology terms. The typology order, representing the successive main stages of a research project (Beissel-Durrant, 2004, p.5), was not well understood by some, and numbering added was not helpful as it changed the relational hierarchy and displayed it differently. Guidance on how to use the typology was really only available from the original report (Beissel-Durrant, 2004) and this may have contributed to a lack of consistency so one recommendation was that guidance should be available on the website. There was also a lack in the specificity of terms offered. People are much more familiar with the idea of keywords or indeed the use of natural language to describe things so not being able to select these was unhelpful. Fortunately the uncontrolled keywords field in ePrints seemed to be reasonably well used and, as well as a good source of possible descriptor terms, suggested that improving keyword description or tagging might be a way forward.

The typology has been used for a variety of purposes. The main reasons were to help draw together courses and materials covering similar topics, to enable those new to the area of social science research methods to discover different approaches and to aid analysis of courses to plan for future events. Could this be done without the use of the typology? Alternatively, should it become more structured to enhance these purposes? This debate was about controlled thesaurus versus uncontrolled keywords or tagging options, see Gerolimos (2013); Jeong (2009); Derntl et al. (2011); Crawford (2006). Here I was able to look through the various options and offer a view that; there was still a need for structure; that moving to a more formalised one wasn’t necessary; that while tagging might have its place it was better suited to social media and a better options was to improve the range of descriptive terms in the typology.

And so started the next phase of the work, that of the revision of the typology. I worked with Rebekah to assist with the analysis of prospective terms, gleaned from keywords used in the databases, compare them to authoritative sources and suggest those terms that might be synonyms or related terms. Drafts were circulated, comments received and finally, following a marathon editorial review session, skilfully chaired by [Prof David Martin](http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/about/people/hub/David-Martin.php), the revised typology was finished and ready for Arshad and Jon to use.

As with many projects, the creative part is not the final stage. The typology has now been fully implemented on key databases and necessary guidance has been produced for users with, of course, the inevitable report is in production(Luff et al., 2014). Although my embedded time is now complete and I have returned to my library office full-time, my involvement in these is on-going. This is an example of a relationships lasting beyond the initial phase as a result of taking on shared responsibility for the outcome (Shumaker, 2012, p.5), but also of where the embedded role was built on an existing support structure.



During my time with the NCRM I was fortunate enough to be able to attend the [6th ESRC Research Methods Festival](http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/RMF2014/home.php). This excellent biannual event allowed me to get a more in-depth understanding of the range of research methods used and to hear about exciting research. Attending this type of event is something Shumaker (2012, p.61) includes in his list of best practices for embedded librarians in higher education and I would certainly support this recommendation. The other delegates were always more than happy to talk to me about their work and it was not long before I found that I could contribute to the discussions.

I am really glad that thanks to the “[IT as a Utility Network](http://www.itutility.ac.uk/)” I got the opportunity to take on this role. I was hesitant about what it would involve, but I now know that librarians really do have more to offer academics and researchers than just help with their literature reviews or citations. I would certainly recommend to others to take up a similar opportunity if it arises.

Being an embedded librarian is different. It is scary, challenging and exciting! It may not always be easy to know in advance exactly what is expected of you or all the things that you can offer. It takes becoming part of the team, taking time to familiarise and observe, to ask those ‘reference enquiry’ type questions so that you gain a deeper understanding of the work and to see what you can do. The researcher, with their focus on their research, may not know either so the role develops out of a strengthening relationship that is mutually beneficial.

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1. A typology is a type of conceptual framework in which the regulative function is to classify phenomena in terms of certain criteria. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)