

CONNECTING UK PUBLIC LIBRARIES: ICT AND IMPACTS ON COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Electronic resources for public library services are now firmly on the UK political and professional agenda. *New library: the people's network* (Library and Information Commission, 1997) stated clearly that networking of libraries was essential if they were to gain status in supporting community development. This paper will assess the current and future activities in UK public libraries in developing electronic access, through the findings of recent projects that have assessed the impact of ICT on public library roles. The Electronic Serials in Public Libraries Project, the Social Impact of Public Libraries project, and others, are especially significant, as they followed through many of the issues raised by the *Review of public library services in England and Wales* (1995), which was undertaken for government. Measuring socio-economic impacts on communities has proved especially problematic and projects on social auditing and on self-assessment techniques for public libraries will also be discussed. The paper provides an overview of UK activities in the field, from the perspective of researchers who have been engaged in collaborative research with public library authorities.

INTRODUCTION: CHANGING COMMUNITIES AND LIBRARY SERVICES

'Change is the norm: embrace it!' has become the catch phrase of all public sector organizations in the UK. Rapid and indeed fundamental change has therefore been the context for the delivery of public library services, just as it has for education, health, leisure and social services. Economy, efficiency and effectiveness have become the watchwords underpinning public sector philosophy since 1979 up to the present. These concepts were introduced first by successive Conservative governments and are now being further developed under the 'Best Value' banner of the current Labour government. This focus on a more accountable public sector were due to the criticisms levelled at wasteful and inadequately focused services, that were felt not to be meeting the needs of their communities (Leach, 1993). During the 1970s and '80s a more consumer-conscious public demanded higher levels of effectiveness from the statutory services for which they were paying through taxation, and which in the UK have been free at the point of delivery.

The need to meet new challenges and the agenda for change has been addressed by: ensuring that publicly provided services are subjected to 'market testing' (i.e. comparing their efficiency with what could be provided by a private sector organisation)

restructuring local government in the UK through a comprehensive review initiated by the Local Government Act 1992. The aim was to ensure that services were delivered more directly to communities. The pace for change in Wales and Scotland was in advance of that in England, but reorganisation into the new unitary structures is now virtually complete for the whole of the UK. For public library services this has meant that they are often now being managed within smaller local authorities than previously.

focusing on the quality of service management, through more effective strategic and operational planning, customer focus, quality assurance (Brockman, 1997). Central government has a clear quality agenda, with the publication of the Citizen's Charter in 1991 reinforcing the doctrine of public accountability (Great Britain, 1991).

As well as changes in the use of technology both in wider society and in the delivery of information, library and information services in the public sector have, therefore, faced a shift to entrepreneurialism in the way they deliver their services, with the need to market services now recognised as essential (Kinnell and MacDougall, 1997). This has gone hand in hand with the expression of new expectations by the communities being served. Library services operate within organizations which have been undergoing tremendous upheaval through restructuring and realignment, and which have developed a much more customer-facing approach to service design and delivery. The changes to local government structures have meant that new public library authorities have been created, with more but smaller library service units - and often placed within leisure or community/arts departments rather than as stand-alone library services. This has served to reinforce their community orientation.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ICT AND IMPACTS ON PUBLIC LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES

The Role of ICT in Public Library Services

Changes in the delivery of information and the nature of collections, including the shift to electronic sources, and in the expectations of library users, have also meant the need for a fundamental reappraisal of the focus of library business. Synergy between the information and media sectors has become much more pronounced as a consequence of the information and communication technologies (ICT) revolution. Recent significant library projects in the UK in the fields of new media, new technologies, IT-based services and modern management must therefore be seen in this context of a rapidly changing public library sector.

There have been calls from various quarters for the networking of the UK public library system, to support libraries in meeting the changed expectations of their communities in this more focused and competitive environment. Libraries also need to prove their value if they are to remain at the heart of community information provision. Three main reasons have been advanced for public libraries developing their role in providing ICT:

- equity of access - public libraries are uniquely placed to ensure that all of the UK's citizens have equal access to ICT and electronic resources;
- to stake a claim for libraries - public libraries must continue developing ICT-based information and must have a hand in developing networks, in order to ensure that they have a future;
- to offer more than just access - librarians have special skills which will enable them to act as mediators between technology and users and to offer structured access to electronic resources and the content of networks.

There have been initiatives at both European and national levels. In 1995 the European Union launched a major project - PubliCA (the Concerted Action for Public Libraries) which aimed to explore the issues surrounding the role of public libraries in the Information Society [<http://www.croydon.gov.uk/publica>]. The main aims of PubliCA are:

To stimulate co-ordinated public library participation in the Libraries Programme thus creating new services relevant to the Information Society;

To assist the Commission in ensuring that public libraries benefit fully from the results of other relevant projects;

To reduce the disparity between public libraries within Member States.

At a national level, Project EARL works to promote the role of public libraries in providing library and information services across the network. A consortium of UK public libraries, Project EARL offers support to library authority policy makers and demonstrates prototype networked services. It also has an electronic discussion list and an excellent website that provides access to sources of interest to public libraries [<http://www.earl.org.uk>]. The work of Project EARL towards the development of a national networked infrastructure and co-ordination of content development has also linked with the recommendations of the Library and Information Commission's report *New library: the people's network* which stated that:

?New technology and networked libraries are essential if libraries are to gain status in the new world of networked information, knowledge and learning.? (Library and information Commission, 1997).

The Library and Information Commission (LIC) was set up in 1995, by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. It is a national source of expertise, advising Government on all issues relating to the LIS sector. It also provides advice across the whole range of topics that affect the LIS sector. It also provides financial support for and to disseminate high quality research. The LIC report, *New library: the people's network*, sets out both the vision and the practical problems involved in networking the whole of the public library system, that is 4,200 static library sites and other library outlets. The principal content and service strands will cover:

education and lifelong learning;

citizens' information and facilities for participation in society;

business and the economy, training and employment;

community history and community identity;

the National Digital Library.

Building the New Library Network, a report published in November 1998 by LIC provides firm proposals to translate vision into reality. It gives plans to develop the Network, the content and the training needed. The recent (May 1999) appointment of Chris Batt, formerly Borough Librarian of Croydon, one of the most advanced UK library services in the field of IT, to take on the role of co-ordinating the delivery of an internet infrastructure for public library services, takes implementation a step nearer.

A considerable amount of supporting evidence was used in framing the above themes, for example the Library and Information Services Council for England major report on children's services, *Investing in children*. This clearly stated that the public library's duty was

?to meet children's need and desire for information in a range of media as well as books. It should provide information in appropriate media and formats, and whatever technology is needed to deliver them....[libraries have] to recognise that children are becoming increasingly computer literate and have high expectations regarding the use of computers in libraries and instant personal access to information.? (Library and Information Services Council, England, 1995).

Importantly, too, the LIC referred to international studies and policy statements from the EU and beyond, each of which ?uniformly revealed a sense of urgency in the need to prepare for the development of the information society? (Library and Information Commission, 1997, 122). The Bangemann report (Bangemann, 1994) had paved the way for many of these individual country policy

formulations - exemplified in those of Germany (Council for Research, Technology and Innovation, 1995; Federal Ministry of Economics, 1996). The LIC found that visions of the information society were surprisingly similar across Europe, with lifelong learning at its base. The most important barrier to be overcome was agreed to be the lack of universal access to the information superhighway, hence the overriding importance of networking public library services, as part of the wider networking of all local authorities, and linking them in to other sectors, including:

other public-sector online services;

commercial online and Internet services;

services running on superJANET and other similar services in the higher education sector.

Community Needs

However, there are alternative visions in the UK of the development of universal access, particularly relating to the siting of access points. Shortly before the publication of *New library: the people's network* the National Working Party on Social Inclusion (INSINC), which comprised representatives from IBM and the Community Development Foundation (a charitable organisation), argued against public libraries as the natural locus of what they termed 'Community Resource Centres' (National Working Party on Social Inclusion, 1997). Their view, which ran counter to that of the LIC Report and to the expressed view of government that libraries should be at the forefront of the information society, was reached because it was felt that public libraries had failed to develop a sufficiently wide involvement by all in the community. They considered that while public libraries should be *involved*, the fact that the *Review of the public library service in England and Wales*, undertaken for government, (Aslib, 1995) demonstrated significant under-use by certain socio-economic groups, meant that Community Resource Centres ought to be the responsibility of other organisations who could show their greater community involvement.

This is an important point, one echoed in other recent work on the role of the public library within ethnic communities (Roach and Morrison, 1998). Another very significant research programme, examining the social impact of public libraries, has also dealt with this issue. It was undertaken by the Community Services Group of the Library Association, the Community Development Foundation, Sheffield University, Comedia and Loughborough University, and comprised a series of linked projects. From the evidence of this work it was found that there was need for libraries to demonstrate their social relevance for all community groups, if they were to be regarded as the natural home of the considerable investment required to mount a state-of-the-art information network and to continue to develop all of their service functions. These projects were funded by the British Library to explore how libraries make an impact on people's lives. They built on work of recent years, which has been less forgiving than in the past, investigating the public library's failings to engage with all of its clients, and the need to look beyond book issues, (Greenhalgh, Worpole and Landry, 1995; Matarosso, 1998). It is no longer enough to see public libraries as providing 'opportunities for learning, self improvement, for business, the local community and developing young people' (Department of National Heritage, 1997). They now have to *prove* their penetration of their market, i.e. the whole of the community which by law they are supposed to serve (Kerslake and Kinnell, 1997).

In the project undertaken by Sheffield University on the social impact of public libraries, and methods of understanding impact through social auditing, it was found that the library is essential for providing equity of access to under-resourced groups, for example the elderly, those with disabilities and people from ethnic minorities:

'Most modern statements of library purpose suggest that it is the role of the public library to provide equality of access to the wealth of information, ideas and works of imagination. We would argue that managing a public service is about managing social equity.'
(Linley and Usherwood, 1998, 85).

But public library services can no longer assume that this role is accepted without question.

This is where there is linkage between libraries? roles in the ICT revolution and the development of new managerial approaches that place the highest importance on accountability to the stakeholders of a service. Thus far, the findings of recent work undertaken across the public library field indicate that public libraries are making a significant contribution to people?s lives, across the whole range of areas covered by *New library: the people?s network*. The task is now to develop and demonstrate this effectively - to politicians as well as to communities of users.

QUALITY AND PERFORMANCE

A hugely significant area, then, which has been a consequence of the intensified entrepreneurial and businesslike environment for all library and information services, is that of quality management - or as many information professionals prefer, ?continuous improvement?. The ILS sector has traditionally been effective in quantifying its impact, through the use of quantitative indicators like the issuing of documents, numbers attending and so forth. It has been much less proficient at proving its worth and relating services to the needs of its markets- now a particularly important need for public libraries (Kinnell, 1997). Virtually all of the indicators of the ?health? of UK public libraries show a state of decline (Audit Commission, 1997). Professional librarians have declined from 1.34 per 10,000 population in 1990-91 to 1.17 in 1995-6; total staff have declined from 5 to 4.6; service points open for 45 hours or more from 865 to 738 (Library and Information Statistics Unit, 1998). Developing credible qualitative indicators and at the same time moving public library managers - and those in other sectors - on in their management of services has therefore become a major area of research and development activity. A major series of linked British Library projects has been undertaken over the past two years, (Brockman, 1997) and there has been more recent work - especially the joint Loughborough-Sheffield study of self-assessment tools for public libraries which has just been completed (Jones, Kinnell and Usherwood, 1999) and the Sheffield work on social impact (Linley and Usherwood, 1998) which developed a methodology for qualitative auditing.

MANAGING ICT: *Electronic Serials in Public Libraries project*

It was felt essential by researchers working in the fields of both ICT and quality management that work also needed to be undertaken to identify how specific services should be developed to meet community needs, as well as these more over-arching studies of quality management. A project which was carried out at Loughborough University between June 1997 and June 1998 was therefore designed to provide data and information which would inform public library managers and give them a context for strategic decision making on the management and exploitation of one form of electronic media - e-serials. By investigating a specific format in depth, it was possible to focus on the issues for public library services in providing materials and services to meet the emerging needs of communities for quality of electronic delivery (Brunskill, Kinnell, McKnight and Morris, 1998).

The research found that before e-serials, or indeed any electronic format, could be truly useful to the communities served by public libraries, it was important that an adequate ICT infrastructure was present in each library authority. As part of the project a postal survey investigated the extent to which public libraries had already invested in e-serials and what infrastructure was present to support them. The results showed that most public library services did not yet have large holdings of e-serials and that most had only limited access (and in some cases no access) to the Internet, with only a tiny minority of services being connected. (Hence the need for the major national networking project to be developed, following *New Library?s* recommendations). Most library services were providing just a handful of newspapers on CD-ROM and these were often available only in the main library. While networking and the Internet featured in the plans of many library authorities, the provision of access to e-serials via the Web had not been addressed by most of them.

The management issues raised by the project included:

Policies

No library authorities had developed policies relating to the provision of e-serials. While managers were

beginning to consider the need for wider policy-making on electronic media, and CD-ROMs were well established, it was clear that library managers needed to be making firm service plans if the provision of electronic resources was to be effective.

Personnel issues

Many personnel were still tied to traditional ways of thinking about information delivery. All of those interviewed as part of the case study work undertaken for the project expressed concerns about supporting e-serials and about the many technical and practical problems associated with them. Staff training and development was therefore a key requirement.

Use and users

While CD-ROM serials had proved to be very popular with users and the Internet was being used to some extent in libraries, the evidence for users' reactions was only anecdotal. Evidence of communities' reactions and needs was not being systematically gathered. However, it was felt that the role of public libraries in providing new and innovative resources should be related to the perceptions and attitudes of both users and staff. A member of the front-line staff in one library summarised the situation thus:

? You have to alter people's perceptions, but also to go with their perceptions and fit the technology to their expectations. ?

Performance Indicators

Library services, which should increasingly be committed to the provision of electronic resources, will need to be aware of their performance in this area. Communities and funding bodies will have high expectations of public libraries and their ability effectively to provide ICT-based information. While performance measures in this area are not yet usable as a justification for funding, it is likely that the ability to demonstrate performance over time will be necessary in the near future.

CONCLUSIONS

From the evidence of the research and development projects recently undertaken there are clearly issues that need to be resolved if UK public libraries are to meet communities' needs through the newly developing comprehensive, networked IT infrastructure. As it was noted in the Introduction, accountability is a key principle of the philosophy that now characterises all UK public sector services. Ensuring that communities have access to information in an information-rich but also information-expensive world is a key role for public libraries, but one that has not yet been fully articulated for electronic resources.

The issues can be summarised as:

- the need to develop strategies for service development and delivery that meet the needs of communities
- providing the infrastructure to support equity of access
- developing information content that is relevant to users
- ensuring that staff have the training and development to support new services
- developing performance indicators and measures to provide evidence of impact.

While these are issues that relate specifically to the UK context, from the evidence of European studies it is expected that similar problems are facing Canadian public library services as they develop ICT-based information delivery. Globalism is a reality when looking at Internet solutions to information access.

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