
Perceptions of archives, libraries, and museums in modern Britain

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Abstract

In a research project undertaken by staff at the University of Sheffield, respondents were asked how they obtain information on major social and political concerns, and to consider the role museums, libraries and archives might play in helping them gain a greater understanding of such issues when compared to their use of other identified information sources. The study revealed a worrying trend amongst the British public to turn to some of the least trusted information sources when seeking information on current concerns, but also indicate that a relatively high value is placed on museums, libraries, and archives in helping respondents to understand social and political issues. They are also perceived as vital sources of informal family learning, and seen to perform an essential role by providing a context to modern life.

Background to project

For nearly two hundred and fifty years the British people have had access to collections of information held for the common good. When the British Museum opened its doors to the general public in 1759, "its collections belonged to the nation, and admission was free and open to all. Entry was directed to be given to 'all studious and curious persons', and thus throughout the Museum's history public enjoyment has been linked with scholarship and education."¹ Within a century the Public Libraries Act established the grounds for a national system of libraries and museums for "instruction and recreation" (1850 Public Library Act).

The pervasive philosophy combining each of these repositories of public knowledge (RPKs) is one of equality and excellence; providing an equality of access to all who choose to use mediated, objective, non-judgemental and inclusive collections of information sources, artefacts, and exhibits. Neil MacGregor recently asserted that one of the principal purposes for which the British Museum was established, and for which it still exists today, is to 'allow visitors to address through objects, both ancient and more recent, questions of contemporary politics and international relations' (MacGregor, 2004). He describes the decision to set up the British Museum, the first national museum in the world, as an act of intellectual idealism and political radicalism which laid the foundations of a quite new concept of the citizen's right to information and understanding, which can be compared to the founding of the BBC and the Open University. Similarly the public library service, "with its reference books, its networked access to published material of all kinds, ... Represents the inherited culture of rational thought, self-education and individual enlightenment." (Greenhalgh et al, 1995). At the same time the public archive services in the UK facilitate learning, pleasure, contemplation and enthusiasm for history and culture and make a key contribution to the efficient and effective

¹ www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/visit/history.html

management of public and private business. Archival organisations also help to uphold civil rights to access of information (Resource, 2001).

During the nineteenth century public libraries were seen as part of a process whereby knowledge and information could be redistributed in favour of the educationally underprivileged (Luckham, 1971). Black and Muddiman (1997) identified phases of 'civic' librarianship between 1850 and 1940 and 'welfare state' librarianship between 1940 and 1975, and recent research into the social impact of libraries suggests that they are still held in some esteem in the public mind as repositories of knowledge and information (Linley and Usherwood, 1998).

The British government believes that museums, archives and libraries should all contribute to social inclusion and lifelong learning, and maintains that libraries and museums play a key role in underpinning education in its broadest sense. The Department for Culture Media and Sport argues that:

"All three areas (museums, libraries and archives) have the potential to make an enormous contribution to the Government's social, economic and cultural objectives - particularly to formal education and lifelong learning, to the pursuit of excellence, and to social inclusion and the active life of communities." (DCMS, 1999)

It has been argued that "when people are striving to reach a deeper understanding of themselves and their society, they need information that can highlight their total life situation" (Vestheim, 1994). The need for discourse, interpretation and evaluation in information seeking and understanding is widely discussed in the literature. In a study of the social aspects of information, Chu (2003) observes that the social network surrounding a piece of information is integral to its meaning and understanding, and describes a system of 'information ecology', whereby people, practices, values and technologies interact within a local environment. The established repositories of public knowledge, archives, libraries, and museums offer a gateway to

interpretation and understanding which combine all of these elements. For example, artistic intervention models employed by museums in telling and interpreting their stories and exhibits allow a process of 'transmission' of understanding between the professional and the user (Graham, 2003). Other writers have observed that the library and museum capture 'a collective cultural knowledge, hold it for use, and expand it by allowing it to connect to our inward thoughts... They are all... about the possibility to construct unrestricted knowledge and to craft personal truths of individual design' (Kniffel, 1997).

Testing ideas

The research summarised in this paper sought to test the currency of some of these ideas by examining the extent to which the British public still value access to museums, libraries and archives. It was considered appropriate to combine museums, libraries and archives in one research topic because of the increasing commonality of purpose ascribed to them. This commonality of purpose is manifested by intellectual discussions across the domains and through the formation of administrative structures, such as the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) – "a body which aims to re-align the shared role of museums libraries and archives as public services in contemporary society" (DCMS, 1999). The work was funded by the then AHRB and undertaken by the Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society (CPLIS) at the University of Sheffield. Respondents were asked to discuss how they obtain information on major social and political concerns of the day, and to consider the role museums, libraries and archives may play in helping them to gain a greater understanding of such issues when compared to their use of other information sources. The social and political concerns used as examples in the study were taken from the UN sponsored European wide survey on social concerns, 'What's worrying Britain?' (MORI, 2001). This has shown that the 'top ten' domestic concerns in Britain for 1996 and 2001 include issues surrounding law and order, health, education, the economy and social welfare.

The question of how respondents obtained a 'fuller understanding' of an issue was regarded as a key part of the project. Academics and other commentators from outside the profession have perceived libraries as vital to securing the citizen's 'right to know', seeing them as non-commodified providers of culture and information with a physical presence in the places of everyday life (McGuigan, 1996). At the same time, work in the United States (Rosenweig and Thelen, 1998) suggests that museums also help people to make sense of the present and influence the future. It is suggested that the information they supply promotes a wider understanding of the past, offers individuals the opportunity to acquire new skills and knowledge and gives everyone the opportunity to enjoy a rich and varied cultural life. Karp et al (1992) argue that the importance of museums is in how they help their audiences to exploit the information resources in the quest for knowledge.

The project was designed to explore a number of issues. First it sought to assess the value people place on having access to the established repositories of public knowledge, irrespective of the use they personally made of such services. This helped to establish an 'existence valuation' for the services and went beyond the kind of simple evaluation gained from visitor statistics or the number of book issues. That having been said, the project also sought to calculate the extent to which respondents actually used archives, public libraries and museums when attempting to understand contemporary social concerns, making particular reference to the five issues outlined by the MORI poll. As a result, data were obtained on the contemporary public role of RPKs as information sources, and the British public's perceptions of how these institutions can inform and shape their understanding of important societal issues.

To gain a fuller understanding of these roles, in an information society that has a plethora of mass-media and other information sources, respondents were asked to compare RPKs with other identified sources of information terms of use, accessibility and value. For the purposes of the study, the 'other' information sources

referred to during the research included, television, radio, the internet, broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, colleges and universities, experts and specialists and places of worship. These were chosen following a consideration of those sources most frequently referred to within the relevant literature and other studies of information seeking behaviour. The study also investigated the perceived trustworthiness and authenticity of the different sources of information and understanding.

By categorising the population sample by distinct demographic groups (for example by region, age, ethnicity or parental status) it was possible to assess any demographic differences in how RPKs are being used and perceived by the public in modern Britain. This enabled inferences to be made about patterns of usage according to 'life stages' and lifestyle and any subsequent influences upon perception and value. To complement the examination of the public's perceptions of RPKs, professionals from the three sectors in the study were asked about their perceptions of their role as information providers and mediators. Finally the project attempted to find out how 'public' these institutions are considered to be in terms of personal and community ownership and advocacy.

Research methods

These issues were addressed by using a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. In conjunction with a continuing review of the literature, the first stages of the research involved a quantitative national telephone survey. This was designed by the CPLIS team and conducted by the independent market research company ICM. Using a statistically significant sample of 1000+ respondents, the survey investigated the issues set out above. In the second phase of the project, rich qualitative data were added to this statistical framework via focus groups conducted on a national basis. These were assembled so as to reflect key demographic groups and appropriate regional representation. In addition a research workshop was undertaken with eminent professionals and academics from

the three domains and other related public policy sectors. This was an integral part of the research process and the data obtained were used to inform the final report.

Key themes

An analysis of the data revealed several key themes which help to illuminate the findings and the related conclusions indicated below. Recurring responses included notions of, and the difficulty in defining, contemporary interpretations of 'community'; the role of nostalgia and retrospection in shaping perceptions of museums libraries and archives; the demands of changing lifestyles on information needs and consumption; a pervasive perceived educational role of museums libraries and archives, particularly as sources of informal learning; the power of cultural assumptions and social identity in shaping perceptions RPKs; and the growing pressures of consumerism and the 'infotainment' industry.

Four major themes emerged from the analysis of the data:

- Accessibility, immediacy and information needs
- Empowerment and apathy
- Trust versus use
- The construction of image and public ownership.

Accessibility, immediacy and information needs

Satisfying information needs in terms of contemporary social and political concerns was instinctively associated with speed, immediacy and accessibility. As such, consequent information seeking behaviours involved the consultation of convenient information sources that compliment daily routines and responsibilities. Immediately accessible sources of information such as newspapers, television and the Internet were perceived as preferable, despite the relatively low levels of trust and value placed in them.

Busy lifestyles, and the consequent pressures on available time, were seen to limit the opportunity to seek a deeper understanding of social and political concerns, and restricted respondents to more immediately accessible information sources than museums libraries and archives. Respondents noted that the accessibility of information from the 'comfort zone' at home negated the need to make a concerted effort to consult more rigorous information sources:

"Life has just moved on so quickly, and people are just constantly on the move nowadays... if you can watch the TV whilst doing the ironing and kill two birds with one stone then why go to the library"

(Parents, South East)*

"It's about convenience really... I mean you can check the internet on the bus on your mobile phone... we're becoming more and more spoon-fed as a society!"

(MLA users, Midlands)

"Surely most of the big issues of the day are of the immediacy of the news. The newspapers and the magazines and the radio...you wouldn't go in to a museum to find out something you badly needed to know connected with the health service would you?"

(MLA users, East of England)

Moreover, inappropriate and inconvenient opening hours were perceived as a major barrier to the use and value of museums, libraries, and archives in an information seeking context. However, the growing use of electronic resources and digitisation across the three domains was seen as a very positive and effective step in increasing access to, and awareness of, museum library and archive services. More generally, there is a lack of knowledge about the services they provide, and this was perceived to be a major barrier by respondents from across the sample. The data suggest that inadequate marketing and publicity should be a key concern for those who manage RPKs.

Empowerment and apathy

Respondents associated their lack of developing a 'deeper understanding' of social and political concerns with the pressures of busy lifestyles rather than with any apathetic tendencies. There is evidence from respondents across all the demographic groups and regions consulted that the level of engagement with issues, and the relevant sources of information chosen are determined by social and cultural factors such as professional and educational circumstances, social and political beliefs and social systems and peer groups.

The extent to which museums libraries and archives are used and valued is in turn affected by existing sets of factors such as parental responsibility, professional identity, personal environment, educational attitudes and previous experiences; none of which fit in to neat demographic variables such as age, social class or region. The data suggest that people have a benchmark of personal relevance and importance for measuring the scale of their political and social concerns and the depth of inquiry required. Thus:

"You want to find out more if you think it will affect you, particularly health. I'll do that by consulting the surgery, or books on the subject. I've bought a few books on health issues for women my age! I don't do it too much though. You can get paranoid and turn in to a real hypochondriac if you believe everything you hear!"
(55+, North West)

"I say that, entirely selfishly, I'd probably only look in to something a bit more if I thought it might affect me. So for instance, education... when I did my MA last year, I do remember trying to find out exactly how tuition fees would affect me, basically".
(MLA users, East of England)

The personalisation of contemporary concerns can also lead to a 'fear factor' in the extent of information sought. This is particularly true with health issues, as indicated by the response from the North West respondent quoted above. The 'human face' of traditional repositories of public knowledge can act as a reassuring element when increased anxiety levels are the result of 'too much' information.

Trust versus use

The national telephone survey revealed a worrying trend amongst the British public to turn to some of the least trusted information sources when seeking information on social and political concerns. The least trusted sources are perceived as the most immediately accessible within a day-to-day context. Focus group respondents explained this discrepancy as 'dismissive consumption', indicating that the least trusted sources of information such as tabloid newspapers were regarded as sources of entertainment and speculative gossip rather than real information. Respondents argued that:

"People will use the services that they trust the least because that's what they have at their disposal... I might trust a university or expert more than I would trust the television but it's the TV I see in my lounge every morning so I'll switch it on. I mean I would probably trust a Mercedes more than I would my little Punto, but it's the Punto I use to drive the children round because that's what I can afford!"

(Ethnic minority, South East)

"They [tabloid newspapers] do draw you in and you can't help but kind of spot something else and maybe read it... it's just fun and superficial... it's a source of information that you can easily come across everyday, and you will read it even if you don't trust it... it's a sound bite kind of thing... you don't take it in".

(18-25, North West)

"They [tabloids] are read more for entertainment purposes now anyway... that may have always been the case... they're all about Posh and Becks and reality TV rather than real political issues! I think it would be hard to misinterpret information when there isn't really any there!"

(MLA users, Midlands)

Information provided by the traditional repositories of public knowledge is trusted more because of perceived higher levels of authenticity and neutrality; lack of editorial bias or manipulation; the professional assistance and standards offered by MLA staff; and the provision of a variety of authoritative sources. In the words of one respondent:

"In terms of information I think people see libraries as having a mandate to provide information about government and about the community we live in... and access is seen to be unprejudiced."

(MLA users, London)

Another recalled how

"...as a boy from a working class family, I remember at 12 years old being given some information by a teacher which has stood me in good stead all my life, and has been very sensible. He said "So what happens with working class people? If they have got some problem they want to know the answer to, they ask around amongst themselves and they get all sorts of clouded information. If you want to know anything, go to a reference library. Ask them. They can more or less tell you any information you want".

(55+ focus group, Wales)

The construction of image and public ownership

Notions and definition of community are integral to perceived levels of public ownership of the traditional repositories of public knowledge. The extent to which an individual feels ownership of museums libraries and archives is directly related to their individual sense of community belonging and identity, and the cultural representation of this. People in urban centres and regions with a strong sense of civic and cultural identity were most likely to feel a sense of ownership and pride in cultural organisations. They regard them as symbols of civic identity on a local and national scale.

"They are an important part of community, and a large source of employment in the city. Not quite on the scale of the docks, or closures in major industry maybe, but still part of city life. Part of modern city life, chronicling past city life... It would be a sad irony if they disappeared too."

(55+ focus group, North West)

A greater sense of community ownership is encouraged where a number of public services work together in a shared space. This is most easily achieved by the public library service, but can be emulated by museums, libraries, and archives working together on a more visible

basis in order to encourage a common sense of cultural ownership and value in the services they provide. More visible partnerships with centres of formal learning and education can also encourage a greater sense of public ownership.

Providing a context to modern life

Archives, libraries and museums are seen to perform an essential role by providing a context to modern life. They can help people understand contemporary issues and situations, and contribute to individuals' understanding of self and place in society at large. For example,

"you could go to a museum and see how the hospitals were run and how the NHS and that were run, so you can compare that with how they're run today... whether they're better, how it started... Law and order is a good example for the children, when you take them to a museum and they see somebody hanging... so from that point of view it's brilliant for the children".

(Parents, East of England)

By using such organizations people

"can build up a picture of what things used to be like, and then there's a comparison to what's happening now. I don't think it's a conscious thing, it's a side effect."

(MLA users, Wales)

Museums, libraries, and archives are perceived as vital sources of informal family learning. The provision of historical and evolutionary context forms part of a wider educational role for the established RPKs, particularly with reference to informal, lifelong and family learning. The fact that museums libraries and archives can cater to a variety of learning styles and needs is also highly valued. The ability of these organisations to encourage a sense of empathy and understanding for alternative cultures is regarded as highly significant in what is a diverse contemporary society. One respondent stated that he/she

"would always search out a museum. If I were going on holiday I would find out where the museums are and I'm going to them. I want to get a feeling of the area, I want to understand the people and the history, the background of

the place, and that's very important to me. I would do that, always. I would never go to [Pleasure Wood Hills]"

(MLA users, East of England)

The role of museums, libraries, and archives in preserving cultural heritage was seen as highly valuable by all demographic groups. In addition they are seen as social, recreational places providing the opportunity to mix with fellow users and receive professional advice. Thus, *"Recreation and fun is very much helped by the interaction of knowledgeable guides."* (parents, East of England) There is what might be termed the 'day out' effect.

"You are [learning], but it's not the learning that gets you in... you're like 'I'm going to have a nice leisurely afternoon looking at paintings'"

(MLA users, Yorkshire)

Museums, libraries, and archives are perceived as having a valued recreational role, not just through stimulating a child's learning in a non-threatening, informal environment, but by providing an entertaining experience for individuals and families as a whole. For some respondents the family day out role was more prominent than any information seeking function. The educational experience is often a subconscious after-thought to the leisure experience. This is especially true when combined with travel and holiday making. Many respondents noted that visits to museums and cultural centres formed an integral part of the travel experience in seeking to learn more about alternative cultures and places that are visited. It is an interesting proposition for MLA professionals to consider whether or not they should build upon the experience and motivation of 'holiday maker' users to make local resources more attractive and viable. Whatever the answer to that admittedly contentious question, the data suggest that parents could be a key audience for the established repositories of public knowledge as changes in educational culture are encouraging a more proactive role for parents in their child's education.

Conclusions

In summary, the research indicates that museums, libraries and archives are still perceived as relevant repositories of public knowledge, but that they will not be relevant to all people, all of the time. The data show that relatively high percentages of value are placed on museums, libraries, and archives in helping respondents to understand social and political concerns. In addition, data obtained via focus group demonstrate a number of other highly valued roles and uses for these established repositories of public knowledge. However, these figures fell quite sharply when survey respondents were asked if they had used a museum library or archive service for such a purpose in the last six months. The archive service had the most negative response in terms of a definitive description of its role and value in modern Britain. There is a lack of understanding about the full range of services it offers.

In contrast to the views of policy makers there was little recognition amongst the general public of a 'commonality of purpose' between museums, libraries, and archives. It was observed amongst respondents from all regions and demographic groups that each sector was often discussed or referred to individually or in isolation. Nevertheless, high levels of 'existence value' are placed on all of these traditional repositories of public knowledge, and respondents thought that there was a moral and ethical obligation to preserve and maintain such services irrespective of their personal levels of use and patronage. In this brief article it has only been possible to provide a glimpse of the rich data obtained. A full copy of the final report to the now AHRC (Usherwood et al, 2005) can be downloaded from the CPLIS web site at <http://cplis.shef.ac.uk/publications.htm>. The research team believes that the work raises some topical and important issues and would be pleased to receive the comments and observations of readers.

Note

* The comments in parentheses after direct quotations from respondents describe the composition of the focus group and the region in which it was held

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