

initiatives to increase communication with areas outside of eLib such as the European Commission and the British Library. These events are an important way to share experiences and increase dialogue amongst eLib but also to widen eLib's scope to include initiatives from other sectors and countries.

Publicity

Further information about the Electronic Libraries Programme can be found at the eLib web site maintained by the UK Office of Library Networking (UKOLN) at the University of Bath:

<http://ukoln.bath.ac.uk/eLib>

The Programme publishes a complete Info Pack which contains information on each eLib project as well as further information about the programme in general. If you would like an Info Pack please contact the eLib Programme office located at the University of Warwick. (Coventry CV4 7AL, tel: 01203 524979), Web site address: <http://ukoln.bath.ac.uk/elib/>

Conclusions

Even in its early stages the eLib programme is having great impact on the HE academic libraries sector. Already the communication lines that have been opened and continue to open as a result of eLib are one of the Programme's greatest strengths. eLib projects cover a wide range of subject areas and technology applications. Therefore the projects bring together participants from different subject areas, computer specialists, librarians and educational developers with very diverse backgrounds and situate them under umbrellas of a hitherto unrecognised common interests. It is hoped that, through the projects' experimentation with various approaches and by dissemination of project results, eLib will provide some of the necessary building blocks for the new electronic library.

References

- 1 Joint Funding Council's Libraries Review Group: Report, (Chair: Prof. Sir Brian Follett), HEFCE, 1993 http://ukoln.bath.ac.uk/follett_report.html
- 2 Joint Funding Council's Libraries Review Report of the Group on a National/Regional Strategy for Library Provision for Researchers, HEFCE, 1995. http://ukoln.bath.ac.uk/elib/wk_papers/anderson.html

What do people do when their library closes down?

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Summary

This article describes British Library funded research into the Sheffield libraries strike last year. The aim of the research was to investigate the impact of the temporary closure of public library services on user behaviour and attitudes. It examines the robustness of public library use and how easily previous patterns of use were resumed after the strike. Assertions in previous research about the effect of the public library on the local infrastructure are also tested. The full Report is available from the British Library, (Research and Innovation Report 6224).

Background

In July 1995, the staff of Sheffield Libraries and Information Services went on strike over a perceived threat by the City Council to withdraw enhanced pay for Saturday working. The strike lasted eight weeks, and during this time 34 out of 36 service points, including the Central Library itself, were closed.

The strike provided an unprecedented opportunity to fill in some gaps in research on user attitudes and behaviour and test out some of the conclusions about the value of the public library service, and the British Library has to be congratulated on the speedy way in which it processed the proposal. The research tried to answer the following questions:

- What efforts were users prepared to make to replace lost services from, a) other libraries, and b) other sources?
- How did the service disruption affect people's choice of leisure activities?
- Which library services did users miss most?
- What efforts were library users prepared to make during the strike to secure alternative sources of books and information?
- To what extent did non library-related activities replace library use? ie what is the 'competition' for users' time and attention?
- What impact did the loss of service have on users' quality of life?
- Were any differences in behaviour and attitudes revealed which were dependent on the nature of specific communities?
- To what extent might the closure affect the way people use the service in future?
- How important are libraries to the local infrastructure?

Methodology

The lead-in time for the research was extremely short, (less than four weeks) because we were not able to anticipate the length of the strike. The timescale for data collection was, also, of necessity, limited. The research depended on a survey of users taking place immediately after libraries re-opened to ensure that it would include those people returning books borrowed before the strike, who may have decided not to use the library again. The methodology consisted of the following elements.

1. A literature review

There was no traceable published research on the impact of either permanent or temporary library closure on users. Previous research examining the effect of library strikes e.g. (Backhouse 1984) concentrated on the impact on staff. The focus of the research was informed by previous studies on library users, e.g. Groombridge (1964), Luckham (1971), Totterdell (1976), Comedia (1993) and Aslib (1995).

2. Semi-structured interviews with library users

Interviews were carried out with 518 library users returning library material to four community libraries and the Central Library in the four week period following the re-opening of Sheffield libraries on 2nd August. The libraries were chosen to reflect different communities. Libraries open for less than 30 hours per week were deliberately excluded from the sample because it was felt that limited opening hours would exclude certain categories of user.

3. Semi-structured interviews with information service telephone enquirers

Since so many reference enquiries are made by telephone we felt that a separate survey of this group of users was required. Library staff recorded details of enquirers willing to participate in a telephone survey over a two week period following the reopening of the libraries. A sample of these (38) was interviewed over the telephone.

4. Telephone interviews with staff at libraries in the region

Telephone interviews were carried out with librarians from academic libraries in Sheffield and other major public libraries in the region to gain an impression of their observations of the impact of the Sheffield library closure and of the measures Sheffield users had been prepared to take to replace lost services from other sources.

5. Interviews with staff in book shops

Staff from a sample of five bookshops in Sheffield were interviewed to examine the impact of the library closure on book buying.

6. Charting of books on loan data

The research tracked the return of books still on loan at the time of service closure until the decision was made by service point staff to write-off stock (4-5 months). The objective was to determine whether the percentage of books not returned was greater than the percentage of books normally written off stock through non-return. If the assumption was valid that the books had been retained by people not intending to use the library again, this would provide additional evidence of the strike's impact on future use of the library service.

7. Charting of issue data

Book issues from February 1992 to January 1996 were plotted monthly, for a sample of eleven community libraries. SARIMA modelling (Box and Jenkins, 1976) was used to compare forecast issues with actual issues from August 1995 to January 1996, in order to test the effect of the library closure on issue trends.

8. Media survey

Local newspapers were scanned regularly (Sheffield Star, Sheffield Telegraph, Yorkshire Post) for news items, editorials, readers' letters, etc. on issues related to the closure. The objective was to assess the extent to which the coverage either affected or reflected public attitudes towards the library closure.

9. Comments and complaints analysis

Sheffield Libraries and Information Services collects and analyses comments and complaints on a quarterly basis. The return for the three months following the re-opening of the service was checked to provide additional evidence of user attitudes to the stoppage and to the service in general. In addition the research was publicised in the local press and media. As a result, seventeen letters were received commenting on the strike.

Conclusions

This research was, of necessity, 'opportunistic'. It therefore has some deficiencies caused by lack of preparation time. There was no time to pilot the survey of users, for example. However, the sample of 518 users surveyed compares favourably with previous research samples and we feel the research throws light on a number of aspects of user behaviour and library use not covered by previous research. The following are felt to be of particular interest and value.

1. Patterns of library use

In two out of the four community libraries surveyed, we found that more than half of the respondents normally visited the library at least once a week. For a third library, the figure was only slightly less (44%). Differences between libraries seemed to be dependent on the nature of the community. In the community with the most highly educated respondents (44% having attended university), 20% of people normally visited the library weekly or more often. In contrast, in an inner city community with high unemployment, social and economic deprivation, and with only 1% of respondents having had a university education, over 70% of respondents visited the library at least once a week.

- The research suggests that previous published research may have disguised the true frequency of visits to the local library, and, by inference, the value of the library in people's lives.
- The research suggests that the library may be particularly significant as a community resource in communities where unemployment is high and access to other resources, including financial resources and educational opportunities, is limited.

2. What changes took place in the behaviour and habits of library users during and because of the strike?

Only 9% of respondents had deliberately chosen to replace the library with non-library related activity during the strike. The rest had either tried to replace library use with a related activity or could find no satisfactory replacement for the service.

- The research suggests that, although libraries compete with other forms of leisure pursuit for the attention of non-library users, for regular library users there is no significant competition strong enough to persuade them to stop using the service.

There were many comments about the unsatisfactory nature of alternatives, from the high cost of buying books to the inconvenience of using other and less appropriate libraries.

- The research indicates clearly that none of the alternatives to library use are satisfactory or acceptable on a long term basis.

3. How important are libraries to library users?

The survey asked for which *purposes* users missed the library most. It was significant that educational purposes were missed most in those communities where people might have been expected to have less access to other sources of educational materials.

- The evidence suggests that there may be a high potential for extended educational provision

through the library service in communities with limited access to higher and further education.

Over half of respondents in three out of four community libraries said that they had missed the library for a reason related to its social value or because it had become an indispensable part of their lives.

- The research provides clear evidence of the very high value placed on the use of the library as a social resource, particularly in communities with a higher than average incidence of social and economic deprivation.

The research indicated that if people are deprived of a library, a high proportion will find reading material/information elsewhere or simply stop reading until the library reopens - 99.62% of respondents said they would resume use of the service.

- The research provides evidence of the extent to which reading is an essential and critical factor in the lives of library users. The research demonstrated that, for the majority of the 518 respondents, it is not replaceable by any other activity.

4. The long-term impact of the strike on the service

A reassuring finding of the research is that of the 518 people surveyed only two said they would not be using the library again. The analysis of issue trends since the strike appears to confirm that the extended closure does not appear to have broken users' library "habit".

- The research suggests that normal borrowing and use patterns have been resumed because library services are not replaceable. Libraries are too important in people's lives for them, willingly, to transfer to another activity.

5. How important are libraries to the local infrastructure?

It appears that for many people library use is a key factor in determining the frequency of their visits to *all* local centres, urban and suburban. Nearly a quarter (23%) of all respondents visited their local centre less often because of the library closure.

- The research indicates that the library's presence in a local community may have a significant impact on local retailers and other businesses.

6. The impact of the strike on attitudes to the public library service

Users surveyed after the strike commented that the closure had brought home to them how much they depended on the service. Indeed more people commented that they would use the service *more* now the service was back, than indicated they would stop using it. This was a surprising finding, in view of the concern expressed by the Director of Libraries, Keith Crawshaw, during the strike, that the library habit might have been broken for many people.

- The research revealed that for the vast majority of library users the public library is a service of inestimable value, enhancing quality of life, and, for many people, fulfilling an essential need which no other pursuit or activity satisfies.

Areas for further research

The findings reveal the high value placed on the service by its users, and the lack of any acceptable alternative. It also raises questions about the sort of benefits that people get from the public library service and how this determines the frequency and pattern of their library use. It remains to be seen if these findings would be replicated elsewhere.

Particular questions in urgent need of further research are:

1. What has been the impact of library closures over the last 5-10 years on the lives of people and in particular on different groups in the community?
2. To what extent have opening hours reductions and changes in patterns in recent years affected the kinds of people who use public libraries?
3. What is the most effective range and pattern of opening hours which will secure accessibility for the widest range of socio-economic groups?
4. What determines the value placed on the public library service and the frequency of its use?
5. What factors make a local library service indispensable rather than highly desirable?
6. What is the potential for the enhancement of educational support for independent learners from local libraries?

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