Review Article

by Colette Coles and John Sumsion

Chris Batt INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES, Sixth edition, 1998. London, Library Association Publishing. 159 pages, A4 paperback. ISBN 1 85604 253 7. Price £ 26.95

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This is a remarkably successful enterprise and a splendid example of 'how to do it right' in so many ways. As a reference book it compiles a fantastic amount of information useful to IT practitioners and library managers. As a collection of statistics it provides solid evidence for the history of public library automation in the 1980s and 1990s. To keep policy makers' feet on the ground it provides essential information on which electronic materials and services have already been taken up by public library users. The combination of these three goals in a single volume works excellently: the whole is so much more valuable and exciting than would be a more 'logical' separation into parts. The fact that this is number six in a series of comparable data stretching back to 1984 makes it possible to see the historical context clearly. Chris Batt is personally responsible for this continuity: he deserves the gratitude and encouragement of the whole profession.

Scope In a field as dynamic as this help lines and contacts between individual members of the library IT community have always been important. In this context the basic appendices are particularly useful. The list of contacts is complete - although a mixture of chief officers and systems people.

Automated circulation systems are listed by supplier and system. The strengths of different suppliers (no fewer than sixteen) is clearly shown. A new appendix shows where newly devolved authorities have come to Shared System arrangements. Types of catalogues and acquisition systems are listed analytically.

The most lengthy appendices are those showing in detail for each authority the state of their CD-ROM holdings, their most popular CD-ROMs, charges made for CR-ROMs, Online databases available, Telecentres, and then various aspects of Internet use: availability for staff and for the public and charges made. Then there is detailed analysis of Community Information arrangements and charges for Open Learning. Finally, and new this time, there are abstracts of Management and Training arrangements and System Development plans and a list of authorities with IT strategies.

This amounts to a complete census of facilities and services in directory format. For directories it is so much easier to achieve 100 per cent response - few people want to be missed out of a directory: inclusion in sample surveys matters less to the 'ego'!

With such complete data in the appendices the commentary chapters and analysis can be comprehensive but eminently digestible - with smallish statistical tables concentrating on the main trends. At each point the author speculates knowledgeably about prospects for the immediate future - which, for general readers and policy makers, is the most important part of the book. New developments, of course, take up much space.

> "Public librarians are already making an impact in cyberspace and the data in this chapter show that more are 'joining in' all the time. These technologies now represent some of the most potent catalysts for change that the public library service has faced in its 150 year history." (p. 25)

1998 edition This was the first to achieve less than 100 per cent response - though the 99 per cent achieved is still remarkable and must reflect the professional keenness of IT people. Previous editions had mostly appeared at two year intervals. This time the 1997 data follows on the 1993 data - a four year gap due partly to the complications of local government reorganisation but no doubt also to the increasing magnitude of the survey task. For Internet matters data has sensibly been interspersed from Sarah Ormes' UKOLN study for the Library & Information Commission based on data in late 1995. The four year gap is regrettable - as is the rather long time between data collection and publication of the report.

Library management systems The trend to stand alone systems for all authorities -with all large service points connected for circulation, acquisition and catalogue purposes - is clearly documented. However, there are still only 62 per cent of authorities with over half their service points "connected to real time circulation". Straightforward 'computerisation' has still some

way to run; OPAC catalogue access, while a huge success story, is only available in less than half our service points.

CR-ROMs Access is provided in about a quarter of all service points; in London almost a third of authorities provide access in all their service points. While CD-ROMs took off in public libraries with the arrival of 'Bookbank', for public use the Top Ten cover (in order): Encarta, Guardian, Times, Bookbank, Independent, BNB, Financial Times, Dorling Kindersley titles, UKOP, and Britannica. In Batt's view "CD-ROM, as a standalone, high capacity cheap medium is likely to stay on the scene for a long time."

The Internet "When the last survey was completed in 1994, the Internet did not really fall within the consciousness of the public librarian on the Clapham omnibus, or anywhere else come to that!" There were two demonstrator/testbed projects. By comparing his results with Sarah Ormes' 1995 study dramatic rates of change are unfolded. Public librarians seem to have taken their own initiative to get connected up - mostly without waiting for the much publicised national government initiative. However, while there were three times as many service points with Internet access in 1997 than in 1995, the figure was still only 9 per cent. So there is still a very long way to go to get to the *New Library: People's network* target of 40,000 work stations.

Types of staff use of the Internet are analysed: ever more uses by more staff. It is especially important for Reference queries. Use by the public is beyond the scope of Batt's survey. Research such as that described in Coles' *IT in Public Libraries: seeking out the user's perspective*, (LIRN 70) explores user features and gives important leads on the likely need for both staff mediated and direct user access to the public libraries' electronic resources.

In Batt's view Internet benefits are less obvious and immediate than when CD-ROMs burst onto the scene: so public librarians have not been able to wait and see what value is offered - rather they have to leap into this Information Society. Clearly the Seventh edition - hopefully to come in

1999 or 2000 - and other research will have much more to say on this.

Online searching The figures indicate a decline, but this technology was still used by a third of authorities in 1997.

Community Information & Electronic Public Information Previous editions had shown Community information to be a 'natural' for electronic networking and widely taken up. It is increasingly automated with increased use of the Internet to make it accessible directly to the public. "The message . . . is that the PC and library management system have become the most frequently used solutions to the management of community information across the UK."

46 library authorities (listed) are involved with EPI systems. Where the non-library terminals are, and how great is the library involvement, are topics earmarked for future surveys.

The public library as IT learning resource The survey gives a count of Open Learning PCs and PCs for hire - in total and by service point. There is a large increase on 1993 but the figures per service point are low: 9 per cent for Open Learning PCs and 6 per cent for PCs for hire. Libraries are well placed to take the initiative in providing public access to IT resources.

Batt then speculates interestingly on ways in which libraries can become involved in Lifelong Learning initiatives and makes his contribution to this interminable debate. "Public libraries are better placed than any other institution to define and support the needs of episode learning" which we have done informally for years. But this is 'learning for life' rather than an extension of packaged units of education.

The price of information: charging policies It makes a good change to look at what libraries are actually doing to bring reality to the important debate on principles. As with so many features of public libraries the variety is staggering. 26 per cent of authorities provide Internet access free; 39 per cent (mainly in London) charge £ 5 per hour - with £ 3 per hour the next most common rate.

More than half the authorities make no charge for the use of PCs: these are mainly the Metropolitan Districts. Batt is in no doubt that Internet use should become part of the core service and therefore free to the user. More generally -

> "Until now we have not been very good at using macro-economic models of costs and benefits to show how charging does or does not influence the nature of use; in the future I think we may have to." (p. 35)

Management, training and future plans This section - with its very complete appendices - contains playback from those authorities planning to extend Internet and CD-ROM development, etc. However the main concerns are still with upgrading basic computer systems and completing computerisation of service points. The majority of services are seen as "relatively self contained for the management and development of their computer systems".

In his **Conclusions** Batt summarises the survey results in a simple Table - containing the following key indicators:

Application	*Percentage take-up*
Automated circulation (LMS)	95 %
OPAC	75 %
Service points with OPAC	48 %
Automated acquisitions	76 %
CD-ROM (public use)	85 %
Service points with Internet access	9 %
Service points with public Internet access	5 %
Automated community information	77 %
Service points with open learning PCs	9 %

The statistics tell a story of much progress, widespread skill and enthusiasm, a rapid rate of change at present, and a substantial distance still to travel. The value for public library users of networked community information and CD-ROM resources is clearly visible. In other respects it is almost impossible as yet to say what the average public library will have in the way of future IT provision. Trails are being blazed; national targets are set; and supplementary funding is becoming available.

There is at present much work in progress - Project EARL is the best known - but no national plan or co-ordinating agency. There is convergence of approach - the result of an organic process of trial and error. Things are set to change, and this survey summarises precisely "what the point of departure for the National Grid/People's Network will be". Technically the way ahead for networks and for IT is not too difficult to foresee. But "if the public library is to play a central role within the emerging information society, it will be as much about creating information and mentoring users as about the shape of the technological systems that make those activities possible". Hence EARL's emphasis on content provision.

As the evidence shows public libraries are providing an increasingly wide range of IT facilities. At last they are catching up with the Information Revolution but they are not necessarily meeting the needs of the information poor. Public libraries need actively to promote electronic sources: simply installing IT is not enough to ensure wide usage. Successful promotion of IT to public library users demands not only an understanding of users and their needs but also their attitudes to, and perceptions of, IT.

A barrier to use is often the lack of awareness about the electronic sources available - with a feeling that IT is not relevant to everyday life. Too often the service is aimed at highly IT-literate users (students are the prime example) while the IT-illiterate are ignored. These are altogether much more difficult customers to identify and attract. Staff have a role in creating awareness of what electronic sources have to offer users. It is hoped that this aspect will be reported in future surveys.

Review and Appreciation

As appeared in the Fifth Edition (1994) the mainstream electronic activity for users in UK public libraries seems to centre on Newspaper CD-ROMs and on Local Community Information. These are 'naturals' for IT networked treatment since the traditional procedures are time consuming, labour and space intensive, and obviously inefficient. The new applications benefit greatly from new search facilities and distributed networking. Other applications will develop: Chadwyck-Healey's *KnowUK*, a new Web general reference service, is an obvious recent possibility if affordable. So the evidence to date points clearly to mainstream electronic content for public libraries being different from that of academic libraries. While there can be clear advantages in cross sector access to the other's databases (particularly for staff), their mainstream electronic resources seem to be fundamentally different - just as their print resources are.

So much for the summary of Batt's work - which is obviously important and topical, even if we are already eighteen months beyond the time his data was collected. Having read this far few can be in doubt of the need to follow up with another stocktaking report of this kind using 1999 or 2000 data, while some of these points may in future be covered annually in CIPFA statistics. Quite possibly this report would serve as a valuable reporting model in countries overseas - where IT developments may be further advanced but less comprehensively reported.

It is however, from the LIRG 'methodology' perspective, worth analysing the features that make this exercise so successful.

First, there is the continuity element - allowing longitudinal comparisons over 15 years - to establish trends. 'Do not change the questions, add to them' is the simple recipe.

Second, the combination of Directory and Survey has been of direct value to all - and is probably significant in achieving the remarkable 100 per cent response rate.

Third, the survey considers CONTENT important as well as process. The Top Ten CD-ROMS tell us so much more about our users' interests than the bare CD-ROM statistics.

Fourth, there is a friendly informal approach - much to do with Chris Batt's personality, dedication and sense of humour - that contrasts

with more typical academic and bureaucratic research writing. But in no way is this at the cost of precision or correct handling of the data.

Fifth, there is evidence that the authors are only too pleased to stretch their terms of reference to cover whatever they uncover that is interesting and that could be important. Reprinting the detailed comments in the appendices can only serve as stimulus to countless readers.

Finally, the speculative policy comments and suggestions are clearly integrated with the survey findings and are grounded in reality.

The future How long Chris Batt can maintain this impetus and continue this one man show is our final question. Whatever the answer, it is vital for future progress and developments to be tracked, and this is the ideal way to do so.