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Editorial: Public Libraries

John Crawford

1 Introduction

This guest edited special issue was founded upon the empirical observation that, while librarians in higher education regularly report their research and development activities in the professional and indeed educational literature, librarians working in public libraries are much less likely to report on their activities in the literature. The original aim of the special issue was to encourage practitioners in the public library sector to report on their work but the observation referred to above proved to be all too accurate and, of the six articles included, only one is from a practitioner.

Submissions were obtained by a call for papers on e-lists, support from the *Library and Information Research* Editorial Board, members of the Library and Information Research Group committee and personal contacts. The resulting issue has a strong international flavour and contains two articles from Australia, two from Scotland, one from Germany and one from England. Four articles are refereed papers and there are two reports.

In addition, this issue features four book reviews of relevant publications, on topics which include library services for children and young people, the changing nature of a community library, the role of reading groups for visually impaired people and the problem of burnout in library and information professions.

2 Refereed papers

'"You don't come to the library to look at porn and stuff like that": filtering software in public libraries' by Louise Cooke and colleagues at Loughborough University reports on an Arts & Humanities Research Council funded project on Internet filtering in public libraries in the UK. Internet filtering represents a dilemma for librarians who have traditionally opposed censorship but must put in place blocking mechanisms to prevent access to harmful materials. Filtering is a widely used strategy and the research set out to find out how internet filtering is managed in UK public libraries. Internet filtering is now the norm and is widely accepted despite concerns about the avoidable problems it causes. While blocking is now generally accepted it is also recognised that training on safe use of the Internet is also needed. The authors acknowledge that while filtering is at odds with the ethos of public libraries it enjoys widespread support and they offer recommendations as to how it can be more efficiently implemented and managed.

In 'Public libraries in the "age of austerity": income generation and public library ethos' Hartwig Pautz and Alan Poulter explore another ethical issue in librarianship, the generation of income in a public service. The study is based on a

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University of Strathclyde Masters dissertation and used both questionnaire and interview methodologies although the interviews were confined to Scotland. The results showed strong continuing support for the public library as a communitarian, socially inclusive service. Interestingly enough support for the local business community received less support, despite small businesses need for information and information literacy expertise. The range of income generation activities is not particularly surprising and suggests that librarians' attitudes to income generation have not changed a great deal in the past twenty five years. Printing and copying fees still top the list. Income generation necessarily involves staff time input and this has to be balanced against any profitable outcome and successful competition from other sectors. On the whole respondents believe that the free access to information ethos of the public library service should not be compromised by the profit motive.

In '"The love in the room": evaluating the National Year of Reading in an Australian public library' Sue Reynolds and Bernadette Welch report on their study of the impact of the Australian National Year of Reading on one urban public library service in Australia. The study was influenced by a similar study carried out in Yorkshire, England in 2008 and a formal evaluation of the Australian National Year of Reading. Measurement of impact is notoriously difficult and the authors discuss appropriate methodologies and the ones adopted. The findings from the formal National Year of Reading were broadly optimistic and the authors set out to establish whether the library service's specific aims for the National Year of Reading were achieved. Focus groups were used to capture data which could be compared with the findings of the national study. While it was found that libraries had been key to the success of the National Year of Reading measurement of impact had been weak. It is acknowledged that impact measures have yet to be seriously addressed in Australian public libraries although effective impact measurement is a time consuming activity.

In 'Using social media to create a participatory library service: an Australian study' Kathleen Smeaton and Kate Davis discuss how public libraries can use social media to engage with users and create a more participatory service. The authors link social media to the concept of learning through conversation, something which has been taking place in public libraries for many years. The use of social media demonstrates the relevance of public libraries in a Web 2.0 world. A participatory library is one which engages in conversation with users by putting the public at the heart of the service. Social media allows users to be involved in the library in a new way. It gives users the power of decision making in content creation, something that some public librarians may not be very happy about. The study, originally based on just two public library services, was expanded to improve data collection. The study reviews all types of social media used and finds that social media activity based on strategic objectives works best rather than a haphazard approach. Generation of engagement is the key issue and media which encourage engagement are to be preferred. The article is well referenced and will be a good starting point for anyone interested in taking this issue forward.

3 Reports

Both the reports are invited contributions.

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In 'Spreading the word – how public libraries are helping to extend digital inclusion' Lindsay McKrell describes her work as the Digital Champion for Stirling Council Libraries and Archives. Following an initiative by the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) all Scottish public library services have appointed a digital champion to support the Scottish Government's digital participation agenda. The Scottish Libraries Digital Participation Group which was formed in October 2013 has to respond to a number of challenges: the Scottish public libraries' ageing IT network, the introduction of the UK Government's Universal Credit scheme which will require clams to be made online and the Scottish Government's plan to adopt a "digital first" strategy, whereby as many public services as possible will be delivered online. She describes how Stirling Libraries is rising to this challenge and the services provided in which collaborative working with other agencies is a notable feature.

In 'The Ever-Changing World of Libraries: Six Years of "Treffpunkt Bibliothek" ("Meeting Point Library")' Maiken Hagemeister and Guido Jansen describe a programme which the German Library Association has been carrying out for the past six years to raise awareness of the value of public libraries against a background of budget cuts which will be familiar in other countries too. The central feature of the campaign is an action week in October which, over the years has attracted substantial media attention. Individual library services have also organised their own activities and academic libraries have also participated by publicising their services and their special collections. Celebrities have supported the programme which has been supported by a comprehensive report on the state of German library services. The success in attracting sponsorship and celebrity support is an example which other countries can emulate.

4 Conclusion

The six articles offered here provide a rich vein of data which can be mined by practitioners in planning their services. The refereed articles have a comprehensive range of sources which can be followed up. Perhaps an overarching theme which emerges is collaboration and working with partners from celebrities in Germany to community groups in Stirlingshire.

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