



NEXT GEN. LIBRARIANS

Statistics, the media, and the trouble with the library legacy

< Ned Potter

Everyone knows statistics can be misleading. Entire reputations can be made or destroyed by the media, depending on whether the 'average' they report (be that average rates of success, failure, profit, loss, or whatever) is the mean, the median or the mode. Public libraries in the UK are going through something of a crisis, and the statistics on usage are damning enough without misleadingly negative interpretation pouring oil on the fires which are threatening to engulf the sector.

I would argue that the library has changed more in the last two or three decades than it changed in its entire previous history. I would also wager that if I'm off the mark in that assumption, the readership of this journal will be better placed than most to put me straight! But one thing I'm confident we can all agree on is that both public perception and media portrayal of libraries are in a state of arrested development: these perceptions often owe more to the legacy of libraries past than they do to what we get up to in the industry today. Judged by the standards of yesterday's libraries then the figures are indeed bleak: footfall is down. But of course the resources that libraries offer, and the way in which these are accessed, have changed significantly. We can no longer meaningfully judge anything by the standards of yesterday's libraries.

Let's take an obvious example. Until recently the only way you could reserve or renew a book was in person (or over the phone). Today, a large percentage of renewals happen online, meaning that those patrons no longer need to visit the library nearly as frequently. I asked around - at Sutton Libraries, for example, 38% of renewals are made online, and 20% of holds; these figures were typical of those I received. *Of course* footfall is going to be down. The headline is, LIBRARY USE DECLINING RAPIDLY; the reality is, library use is merely changing. Patrons are simply engaging in different ways.

My own local library service in the York area started collecting online usage statistics in 2005/06 - in that year, a total of 862 searches of online library resources were made, and the footfall across all the libraries amounted to 881,030 visits. In the most recent year

for which figures are available (08/09) the footfall is actually up to 934,645 but more significantly there were no less than 80,899 online searches! So physical visits to the library increased by 6% in four years, but online activity was up by a scarcely absorbable 9,385% across the same period.

All of that, however, is far too complicated to explain to someone who's read an article in the paper about how the use of libraries is declining... Judged by the old criteria, libraries are failing; no one has told the headline writers that those criteria are no longer valid. We, as librarians, must accept responsibility for that failure of communication.

Libraries in the News

It's been a rough few months for libraries, with regard to the media and statistics. The seeds of misery were sown in April when *Newsnight* turned its attention to libraries - that was never likely to end well, and indeed after a relatively promising start the BBC's correspondent decided to describe libraries as 'an ethos in search of a purpose'. That was as nothing compared to the debacle that followed, however - a big graphic appeared on the screen lamenting the fact that the total circulation of books in UK public libraries had fallen to just 314 thousand. Watching at home I thought to myself: hang on a second... My own library of employment lends more than five times that figure annually - admittedly it is an academic rather than public library, but surely it can't enjoy far greater circulation than all c.4,500 public libraries in the UK? Sure enough, *Newsnight* had made an error - in fact, figures had fallen to 314 *million*. Wrong to the power of one thousand. But of course, there was no one in the studio discussion that followed who corrected the figure, and although many people (including representatives of CILIP) wrote in afterwards and quoted the proper figure, that update did not find its way to the 2 million or so viewers who watched the original erroneous report. We were and are stuck in our own little Echo Chamber (Potter, 2010) - millions hear misleading information about libraries, but our riposte reaches only ourselves.



The Department for Media, Culture and Sport released a report in August of this year (DCMS, 2010) which received wide-spread news coverage for its damning assessment of the state of libraries today. It shows that the number of adults visiting libraries in this country has declined steadily over the last five years – that fact was reported time and time again, with little reference to anything else in the report. I understand that is how headlines, and news media, works – it is not surprising that no one delved deeper into the findings. If they had, though, they would have discovered various rather more encouraging statistics. For example, in the last year use of the library by black and ethnic minority groups has increased; use of the library by non-Christian religious people has increased; and the number of 5 to 10 year olds who claim to have visited their library ‘in the last week’ has increased (by more than 20%!). In other words, even during a down-turn in overall visitation, kids and some minority groups are finding more reasons to visit than before – I think that’s good news... Incidentally, the report says more than once, ‘The decrease in library visits is consistent across all socio-demographic groups.’ Maybe I’m missing something, but that seems quite a sweeping statement in light of the statistics above. If the report itself glosses over any positives, what hope is there of the headlines picking up on anything other than the negatives?

In May, three months before the DCMS released their report, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy released their own survey (CIPFA, 2010) on exactly the same subject, amid far less fanfare. Their findings cover the same five year period, but make much better reading. Both surveys find physical attendance to be down by around 4%; the difference is, CIPFA took the time to investigate online activity as well. This, they discovered, was up by a massive 49% across the country in the last year alone. As discussed above, this would more than account for the drop in foot-fall – in fact, one could interpret the statistics as representing an overall *increase* in the use of libraries. The compound figure of physical visits and library website visits is up from 404,677,184 in 2007/08 to 438,480,489 in 2008/09 – an increase of more than 34 million. But how many people know that? How many outlets have reported that? Who outside of the library sphere will EVER hear about that?

(As an aside, I accessed the DCMS report online, like the vast majority of readers will have done. By their criteria, does that mean I haven’t accessed it at all? After all, they don’t collect online statistics for libraries – so unless we all go down to Westminster in person and request a copy of the report, presumably they’ll infer that it isn’t being used at all...)

The library media narrative

Ian Clark, an influential blogger and member of the *Voices for the Library* movement, has written a lot about statistics (indeed I’m indebted to him for pointing me towards those CIPFA statistics and must credit him with much of the

inspiration for this article) and what he calls ‘the library media narrative’. (Clark, 2010) This narrative, he says, is not something we in the world of libraries are currently able to control, and as a consequence the whole reputation of libraries is at the mercy of those who *can* control it – third parties who may wish to undermine libraries for their own ends (to soften them up before massive cuts, for example). We need to wrest back control of this narrative.

How do we do this? My own view is that it is an on-going process that needs to happen via multiple methods, and that all of us are involved. We are all library advocates, like it or not, as soon as anyone engages us in conversation about our current (or former) profession – whether or not we can demonstrate the value of libraries to the person we are talking to is what makes us good or bad at advocacy... More than this, though, we need leadership from the front. We need CILIP to be on *Newsnight* to correct erroneous figures, and we need CILIP to have a media representative ready to rebuff any media story which misleads the public as to the health of public libraries. I’m confident that the new CEO, Annie Mauger, is aware of this need and plans to address it – I believe the new President will be too.

The most important thing is that we collectively break out of the Echo Chamber, stop preaching to the converted, and give the wider public enough information to make an informed choice on whether or not to visit their local library. The only thing stopping most people, who are currently indifferent, is the fact that they don’t know what we can really do for them. Let’s make our own headlines in future.

Ned Potter works for a University Library and currently serves as a New Professionals Support Officer for CILIP. As well as organising and speaking at events for those new to the library profession, he established LISNPN, the LIS New Professionals Network, and blogs at www.thewikiman.org/blog.

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