

SWITCHING ON SERIALS: THE ELECTRONIC SERIALS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES PROJECT

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This paper reports the findings of the Electronic Serials in Public Libraries project which was based at Loughborough University and completed in June 1998. The results of a UK-wide questionnaire survey and the findings of four in-depth case studies are presented. Survey data reveal the trends in the provision of electronic serials, the measurement of their use and future plans for these resources within UK public libraries. Data collected during case studies offer insight into the problems encountered by public library managers when providing electronic serials. The paper summarises the keys to success suggested by an examination of the data collected.

Context of the research

This paper reports the findings of Electronic Serials in Public Libraries (ESPL), a research project based in the Department of Information & Library Studies at Loughborough University and completed in June 1998. The main aim of the research was to provide public library managers with information to support the exploitation of electronic serials and to ensure their successful integration with more traditional media.

The project coincided with moves towards greater networking of the UK's public library system and with calls for more effective exploitation of electronic resources. A handful of pioneering library authorities have already demonstrated the potential for information and communication technologies (ICT) in public libraries. Bodies such as EARL¹ and the LIC² have been actively promoting the development of a national network and the co-ordination of its content. A key report, *New Library: The People's Network*³, recommended "the creation of a UK 'backbone' infrastructure to link individual public library networks ... to procure and/or develop content and services to enable 'access to knowledge, imagination and learning'". This landmark report, along with the Audit Commission's *Due for Renewal*⁴ and the DNH's *Reading the Future*⁵ have forced electronic resources to the fore.

These various developments are placed against a growing awareness of, and interest in, ICT among the general public. The resulting expectations, and increasing demand for networked information, are putting the public library system under pressure. In the face of this demand, it is essential that public libraries develop high quality and widespread connections to networks. In order to ensure that libraries play a part in the Information Society, they must tap into and fuel their users' interest, providing targeted, relevant electronic resources, to complement and, where appropriate, replace other resources.

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In the report *Due for Renewal* it is noted that "public libraries cannot ignore these developments, if they are to remain relevant to the people that they serve"⁶. Indeed, there seems to be a growing conviction within the profession that public libraries must expand, and perhaps even reformulate, their traditional roles in order to survive.

Why electronic serials?

Serials are an important resource for public libraries; in the words of one senior manager, interviewed during the research, "serials are vital for any respectable information service - we can't do it without them!". Newspapers and popular magazines tend to be the types of serial which are important to public libraries. During the ESPL project, therefore, the term 'serial' was used to refer specifically to these resources.

The growing number of electronic serials available does represent an opportunity for public libraries. Though electronic versions are sometimes inferior to printed ones, particularly in terms of completeness, there are some excellent sources appearing. A good number of UK newspapers and a more limited number of magazines are available in CD-ROM format (public libraries have a solid history of providing newspapers on CD-ROM). In terms of the Internet, a rapidly growing number of both newspapers and magazines is available, due, perhaps, to an anxiety amongst publishers to establish a presence in the electronic environment. Many of the magazines available on the Internet fall into what might be broadly termed the 'entertainment and leisure' bracket, but there are also some useful, more weighty publications, particularly in the areas of popular science and business. However, a major issue for public libraries is that publishers are beginning to introduce access charges.

Arguably, the main opportunity offered by electronic serials is that they may enable public libraries to extend the number of resources they can offer to users. Patterns of charging seem to be following the academic electronic journal market, where, typically, limited content is free; but full text is accessible to subscribers only; a costly market in which public libraries have been unable to participate. The issues surrounding the

academic electronic journal have been included in research programmes such as the eLib in the UK⁷ and Telematics for Libraries in the European Union⁸.

The research

The research fell into two phases: first a postal questionnaire survey; and second, case studies of four public library authorities. The questionnaire survey aimed to map the existing provision, exploitation and management of electronic serials in the UK's public libraries and to identify examples of good practice. All of the UK's public library authorities were surveyed and 55% responded, giving a clear picture of national provision.

Summary of questionnaire findings

Provision and infrastructure

The survey found that a large proportion of the UK's public library authorities (64%) do hold electronic serials of some kind. However, delving further it was found that the reality was less impressive. The number of titles held was modest with an average of just six titles and with many authorities holding far fewer than this. In many cases electronic serials were accessible only at the main library within an authority. There was a great disparity between provision at the main library or libraries within an authority, and at branch libraries. In many public library authorities there was little or no IT infrastructure. Branch libraries tended not to be networked and their level of CD-ROM provision and Internet connectivity was usually modest at best. Only 21% of authorities reported that there was access to electronic serials in their branch libraries.

Contextual data showed that many authorities have no access to basic ICT. For example, 22% do not have an OPAC system at all and in others the OPAC is not accessible in all branch libraries. It is likely that such authorities will have more pressing priorities in the immediate future than the implementation of electronic serials.

Measuring use

Where authorities were providing electronic serials, their use tended not to be measured. Only 37% of those authorities providing electronic

serials were measuring their use and these measurements were infrequent and/or informal. Many authorities noted that they have problems surveying the use of serials. Although it was noted that one advantage of electronic formats may be the easier collection of use statistics from booking sheets and / or logging software.

Policies

Very few authorities (13%) had a serials provision policy, even though nearly half had general collection development policies. Some authorities reported that they were developing policy documents, while others reported that they prefer to work to informal priorities for serials provision. The lack of firm policy was set against anecdotal reports that serials are of increasing importance to public libraries, especially with the expansion of distance learning and the shift towards new patterns of lifelong learning. Senior managers reported that more work must be done in this area and this is reflected in ASLIB's Review of the Public Library Service in England and Wales, which noted that one of the four major functions of a public library service is: "To develop, maintain and operate public library facilities and services of direct benefit to people who live, work or study in the area"⁹.

Concerns

Respondents to the questionnaire also commented on the opportunities and threats presented by electronic serials. Many and diverse issues were raised showing concerns similar to those about academic electronic journals. The main issues raised were:

- *lack of funding* - predictably enough, the most frequently mentioned problem was lack of funding, which had reportedly had an impact on the purchase of both printed and electronic serials titles and on the ability of libraries to purchase the hardware required to access electronic serials;
- *licences* - the need to negotiate licences and subscriptions packages was of concern; there were particular concerns about access to back-files if a subscription is cancelled;
- *copyright* - respondents felt that the complications of managing copyright in the

electronic environment had barely been addressed in their authorities or nationally;

- *durability of electronic formats* - doubts were expressed both about the shelf-life of CD-ROM, about the transient nature of the Internet and the possibility of electronic formats being rendered obsolete by new technological developments;

- *archiving on the Internet* - respondents expressed concern that no body is responsible for archiving the content of the Internet; there was a belief that much Internet content will prove to be ephemeral;

- *networking and hardware* - the recurrent costs of hardware and the increasing need for good in-house IT support were of concern to many respondents.

Summary of case study findings

The second research phase was case studies of four UK public library authorities. These case studies aimed to investigate in more depth the attitudes of librarians and users to electronic serials. The case studies were selected from the respondents to the questionnaire survey as examples of good practice. Electronic serials were already being provided in each authority but the four reflected different stages of advancement and a variety of experience. The four authorities comprised: a large county; a small metropolitan borough; a London borough; and, a Scottish authority. Each case study took place over two to three days so that the culture of each authority could be identified and assessed in relation to electronic serials provision. Both branch libraries and main libraries were visited in each authority. The case studies involved a mixture of observation and semi-structured interviews with library staff. Where possible the users of electronic serials were also briefly interviewed

Implementation of ICT resources

In each case study, the implementation of ICT resources and the use made of them was observed, including interaction between staff and users and users' approaches to using ICT resources. The implementation of electronic serials was characterised more by variety than by similarity of approach. However, one trend was that ICT resources in general tended to be better

co-ordinated and supported at main libraries. This was true of both the number of PCs provided and the quality of workspace layout and design. The branch libraries tended to present particular difficulties in terms of restrictive buildings, without spaces suitable to the provision of ICT resources. Another trend was that there was no explicit connection between electronic and printed serials. In most cases, ICT services were not located near the printed serials collection and there was no signage in the printed serials collection to alert users to the existence of an electronic equivalent.

The use of menus and lists of resources appeared to enhance the provision of ICT, easing access and creating fewer enquiries. However, while two of the case studies provided front-end menus offering access to CD-ROMs and the Internet, only one of these two was developing a webpage which listed Internet-based serials. The other two case studies were using search engines (typically, Yahoo!) and corporate homepages, even though one was providing a printed list of useful Internet resources, which included a handful of serials. All the case studies did provide instructional materials but the content varied enormously. Most offered general advice rather than guidance on the use of specific Internet resources but some did offer tips for using serials on CD-ROM.

Interviews with library staff and users

Semi-structured interviews with library staff were carried out during the case studies. In each authority one senior manager, a service manager and front-line staff at each site were interviewed. Senior staff provided an in-depth picture of the provision of electronic serials in their authority and gave their impressions of and attitudes to electronic formats. Front-line staff spoke about their expectations of, resistance to and/or enthusiasm for electronic resources, including electronic serials. All the staff interviewed were enthusiastic about the potential benefits of electronic formats but there were concerns about the "onslaught" of new resources and the need to continually update skills and awareness.

During periods of observation in each case study, every time a user accessed an electronic serial on CD-ROM, or if they used the Internet,

he/she was asked to briefly comment on his/her impressions. Use levels were not high in every library visited and just under 30 users were interviewed in total. Generally they were impressed by their library authority's initiatives in implementing ICT, but expectations were high and most were keen to see more and better services too.

Attitudes to CD-ROM

There was a general feeling amongst the staff interviewed that CD-ROMs have been something of a revolution for public libraries. They were almost universally acknowledged to be "A Good Thing" because of their effectiveness as information tools. All those interviewed were in agreement that there were various benefits to accessing serials (in particular newspaper material) using this format. On a practical level, CD-ROMs remove the need for users to search through unwieldy (and sometimes complex) printed indexes and to handle back-copies or microfilm (reader-printers were described as a "nightmare" by front-line staff). They can also ease the problems of hard-copy storage; space is often a key issue for public libraries, and branch libraries have particular difficulties storing long back-files. CD-ROMs were also considered to be useful because they offer access to many years of back-files (often searchable simultaneously), and tend to be well-structured resources with powerful search features.

However, while there was enthusiasm for CD-ROM, some disadvantages were acknowledged. All the staff interviewed noted that, while CD-ROM has made life easier in many ways, it has changed the nature of enquiry desk work, putting a greater emphasis on user education, technical troubleshooting and handling money for printing (most of the authorities were making a charge for printing). Some staff were also concerned by CD-ROMs' lack of up-to-dateness and the consequent need to retain printed copies of newspapers and magazines. Senior staff also noted that licensing, printing restrictions, the problems of stand-alone access and the expense of network access were also of concern.

A combination of observation of use, anecdotal evidence from those interviewed and data from logging software and booking sheets shows that,

where case study libraries were providing newspapers on CD-ROM, they were among the best-used titles. Users reported that they tend to use these resources in a very purposive way; they often visit the library specifically to undertake a search and they usually need to locate a specific piece of information. These purposive users were not particularly concerned about which tools they might use to locate information, but they were appreciative of the advantages of electronic formats, in particular the ability to perform keyword searches.

Attitudes to the Internet

Attitudes to the Internet were very mixed among the library staff interviewed. Even so, all believed that the medium presents opportunities for public libraries, potentially bringing in new types of user and, in some cases, generating income. There was great interest among staff in some of the academic serials appearing on the Internet and there was a conviction that public libraries will need to ensure that they exploit these serials, as they take on more responsibility for supporting distance and lifelong learners. However, none of the case studies had made extensive use of academic electronic serials, usually being restricted by the need to pay for a subscription. Of more immediate use were newspapers, which tended to be freely available and often provided a searchable archive of material.

Few users reported that they had access to serials on the Internet (only three had done so). Those users who had done so were impressed, especially by the currency of the information they found and, in one case, by the extra material available (including sound and video clips). Other users reported that they had come across magazine articles during a general keyword search (though just six users reported that they had done so) including one ex-academic keeping up with his area of study and one a businessman who reported regularly accessing a French newspaper for daily headlines.

There was disagreement among library staff about the value of less weighty Internet resources and one interviewee referred to the Internet's "amusement arcade image". The disadvantages of using the Internet to access serials were felt to outweigh the benefits, at least in the immediate

future. Most of those interviewed believed that the medium is still too undeveloped and unstable. Library staff reported that they had seldom, or never, recommended Internet-based serials to library users. There were various reasons for doubts about the Internet:

- *content* - library staff complained that newspapers and magazines on the Internet often contain only a subset of the printed content and noted that users are often unaware of this limitation. This can also be an issue for CD-ROM serials, where photographs, classified sections and international news are often missing. One interviewee felt that the limited coverage of Internet serials was part of the move towards a soundbite culture.
- *crude search features* - Internet searching was considered by library staff to be of dubious quality. Even where an Internet serial was felt to be useful they tended to have poor search features and sometimes no archive.
- *information versus leisure* - library staff felt that electronic serials could not replicate the browsing function of printed serials. Newspapers aside, many public libraries provide serials to support hobbies and leisure and it was felt that the lack of the "flick through while waiting for the bus" factor meant that the Internet was not the best medium for magazine resources. Portability has been a much-mentioned barrier in relation to user acceptance of academic electronic journals, and this was felt to be even more of an issue for less weighty publications.
- *workload* - the impact of booking mechanisms for the Internet was causing real problems in some case studies. Booking was usually managed by enquiry desk staff and there was concern that the time required to deal with booking, instructing users and solving disputes could have an adverse effect on the quality of the enquiry service.
- *referring users to the Internet* - there were also problems referring library users to the Internet for specific serials, for instance to take advantage of very up-to-date newspaper archives or to access magazine articles. In all the case studies a healthy booking rate meant

that instant access for drop-in enquirers could not be guaranteed. In one authority, free access meant that the Internet was booked so far in advance (anything from two days to a week) that directly referring enquirers to Internet serials was always impossible. Staff were also unhappy about the idea of referring users to information for which they must pay an access charge.

Impact of electronic serials on staff

The major impact on library staff relates to all electronic resources including serials. Front-line library staff have had to become ICT trainers and some of those interviewed were experiencing difficulties because they lacked time to continually update their skills as new resources became available. While they were familiar with CD-ROM serials, none of the staff interviewed had regularly accessed any newspaper or magazine on the Internet (indeed, some had never done so). All felt that they would need more information about the sources available before they would be confident recommending sites to users. Many staff felt themselves to be impeded by the lack of formal training programmes in their authority.

In all the case studies staff reported that CD-ROMs had arrived in their libraries before or alongside automated circulation systems and OPAC, and for many of those interviewed a PC running a stand-alone CD-ROM newspaper was their first ICT experience. Some front-line staff felt that this exposure to OPAC and CD-ROM had allowed them to become confident IT users, while others felt the need to develop their skills further. Many of those interviewed noted that the only way to learn is by practice and that time is seldom available for them to do so.

Conclusions

The Electronic Serials in Public Libraries project found that public libraries are struggling to take full advantage of the newspapers and magazines, which are appearing in electronic formats. There is much to gain from moving into this new service area but there are various concerns and barriers, which are preventing the co-ordinated implementation of these resources.

Taking front-line staff along

The attitudes of the library staff who support electronic serials was a central part of this research. It appears that there are serious problems relating to training and confidence building which are sometimes preventing staff passing information about electronic serials on to users. If there is a single lesson to be learnt, it was summarised by one senior librarian who noted that nothing can be achieved without "taking the front-line staff along" and ensuring they are given the skills to support new services as they develop.

CD-ROM versus the Internet

The benefits of providing CD-ROM serials were acknowledged by all those interviewed and these resources were popular with users. However, doubts were expressed by both library staff and by users about the value of the Internet as a delivery mechanism for serials. One member of staff noted that serials on the Internet may not survive in their current form and that the Internet is likely to engender new kinds of news or information sites.

Consistency of approach

At the moment, provision of electronic serials appears to be marred by a lack of co-ordination. Generally library authorities reported that Internet serials are an add-on service. There is little direct promotion and no explicit connections are made between them and their printed counterparts. As long as this is true, there is unlikely to be wide acceptance of them by users and they are unlikely to be heavily used. Policies for the acquisition and implementation of electronic serials are lacking and the infrastructure required for their implementation is incomplete in many authorities.

Future plans

For some public library authorities, electronic serials simply did not feature in future plans; four stressed that other plans (such as boosting book buying) must take precedence. However, the provision of electronic serials in public libraries does seem to be slowly increasing. Thirty authorities reported that they had firm

plans to expand their provision of CD-ROM titles and to extend access to both CD-ROM and the Internet. Some authorities reported that they were keen to explore provision of electronic serials but that they were keen to maintain and perhaps expand printed collections too.

Some of the staff interviewed felt that there may be a role in coming years for serials on the Internet to support leisure. Others noted that younger users are accustomed to finding information of all types electronically. Staff also felt that access to leisure-oriented electronic serials was more relevant for people with Internet access than those gaining access in the public library, especially as long as library users are charged for access to the Internet.

Further research

On a final note, the research for the Electronic Serials in Public Libraries project has indicated areas where further research may be required. All the senior librarians interviewed expressed concern about the implications of lifelong learning. They felt that public libraries need more information about the shift towards the use of public libraries for private academic study. This shift may mean that the provision of academic electronic serials will be of increasing importance.

During the project it was possible to explore the opinions of public library users in a limited way. More extensive user studies, akin to those which have accompanied academic electronic journals projects, may be required.

The lack of coherent policies for serials and for electronic resources in the public library sector is of cause for concern; the whole area of policy and coherence of provision, and the effect on the quality of the services being provided needs further investigation.

Notes

1. Further information about the work of Earl (Electronic Access to Resources in Libraries) from the website at <http://www.earl.org.uk/>
2. Further information about the LIC (Library and Information Commission) from its website at <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/lic/>
3. *New Library: The People's Network*, Library and Information Commission, 1997, pp107-8
4. *Due for Renewal: a report on the Library Service*, Audit Commission, 1997
5. *Reading the Future*, Department of National Heritage, 1997
6. *Due for Renewal: a report on the Library Service*, Audit Commission, 1997, p.18
7. Further information about eLib (Electronic Libraries Programme) can be found at <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/elib/>
8. Further information about the programme can be found at <http://www2.echo.lu/libraries/en/libraries.html>
9. *Review of the Public Library Service in England and Wales: summary and schedule of recommendations*, ASLIB, 1995, p.15