

People and Place: the role of public information services in making the global, local

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ABSTRACT

How can libraries, archives and documentation centres help create a shared sense of community in a world where the individual is confronted with an increasingly uniform global culture?

How do they enable local communities to benefit from the opportunities to grow and succeed which are offered by the information society?

This presentation draws on experience from the UK and from the presenter's own local authority, Derbyshire, to suggest some lessons for the future.

TEXT

Good morning. It is a very great pleasure to be with you. Not just to see for myself this beautiful part of the world, but to be able to contribute to this very important conference. I thank you very sincerely for the invitation to speak to you and to hear what other speakers have to say.

Let me begin with a quotation. It comes from Yoshio Utsumi, Secretary-General of the World Summit on the Information Society, which took place in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2006. At that second meeting he said:

“In the Information Society, we become richer by sharing what we have, not by hoarding it...What is required is a new pact between ‘haves and ‘have-nots’.”

What I hope to do today is to explore the role of public information organisations – libraries, archives, museums and documentation centres – in sharing their amazing wealth of resources with the local communities they serve and with the wider world. And I will look in particular at strategies to improve access and combat inequality.

My perspective will be from the place I know and love best – my own county of Derbyshire. Let me tell you something about Derbyshire. It is one of the largest

counties in England, one hundred miles from north to south, and one of the most rural. In the west there are wide open spaces, rolling countryside and spectacular hills, with very few settlements. This is the home of the Peak District National Park, the first of the UK's national parks and still one of the most visited.

In the east of the county, by way of contrast, there is a cluster of small and medium sized communities where the majority of the county's 750,000 people live. Many of these communities have seen their traditional industries, such as coalmining and textiles, wither away – and they have not been replaced by other, more modern, technological industries.

So we have a mixture of affluent areas and other areas where the economy is characterised by low income and low skills. Around 50% of the population does not have access to computers and broadband access in the home, so their ability to share in the benefits of the information society is limited, unless we look to other more social models of provision.

Even in affluent rural areas there are pockets of deprivation, and individuals can be victims of rural isolation. When you consider that the elderly population is set to grow by 90,000 over the next twenty years, you can see that there are big challenges ahead for the local authority. But what does this mean for libraries and information services in particular?

Well, we are all here this week because we believe that libraries and information services have an important role to play in improving opportunities for individuals and communities. In the UK this means working as part of a strategic local authority providing a wide range of services. As you are no doubt aware, there is no national library service, and this allows us many opportunities to create local partnerships. So let me finish this bit of scene-setting by describing the provision in Derbyshire.

Our network consists of forty-five branch libraries, many of them small, part-time libraries serving catchment populations of 5,000 – 10,000 people. The

main library is in Chesterfield, a market town with a population of 100,000. Despite this small population, Chesterfield is the fifth busiest library in the UK, outperforming many large city centre libraries – so we must be doing something right.

As well as the network of library buildings, there is a local studies library at the county council's headquarters and a fleet of twelve mobile libraries which visit almost two thousand locations. The three largest vehicles are equipped with satellite broadband, offering free access to the Internet. This fleet means that our service reaches into the smallest villages and hamlets where a library building would not be cost-effective – and we can even get to individual farms in isolated areas.

My department also manages the county Record Office, which is the repository for all modern and historic official records, and a museum.

This network ensures that the library and information service has a presence at the heart of every local community. And they perform multiple roles within the communities they serve.

Perhaps a good place to begin is with literacy. The ability to read is the foundation on which all learning is built. Without literacy a person's ability to work, to participate in society, to exercise choice, is compromised. That is why libraries in Derbyshire work hard to support those with literacy needs. We work actively with partners to identify those who need help; we provide a range of specialised resources, and we use external accreditation to demonstrate that this aspect of our service is fit for purpose. With Read On, Write Away!, Derbyshire's own literacy agency, we have pioneered the Quality in Libraries Award, which measures how well libraries are doing in providing for people with basic skills needs. All forty-five branch libraries have achieved the Quality in Libraries Award and have been re-accredited, and we have sold the idea to other library authorities, too.

Functional literacy, as I have said, is the fundamental building block without which any meaningful participation in the wider society is very difficult. But true engagement requires something more than functional literacy. So libraries are in the business of building a reading nation, encouraging our users to develop their reading skills, their confidence and their enjoyment.

There are many examples I might quote to you, some of them involving major national partnerships with organisations such as the BBC. One good example of the sort of project which libraries manage for the benefit of new and emerging readers is the Six Book Challenge. Participants can select from a variety of specially selected titles which are designed to build confidence and encourage gentle progression. They receive incentives to complete the challenge of reading six books in a specified timescale, including having their names in a draw for a cash prize. This is not an activity that takes place just in the library. Our staff are taking the challenge out to local companies and factories to encourage workers to take part. Companies are understandably keen to raise the reading ability of their workforce, and a number of them are organising

presentation events on company premises to recognise this modest but nevertheless significant achievement.

The most important role for the modern public library remains to foster a love of reading. We achieve this by offering the widest possible range of books, well presented and promoted. This core offer is complemented by activities of all kinds, for adults and children. For example, Derbyshire libraries run more than one hundred and sixty reading groups where members can explore different types of books and share their experiences in a friendly environment. There are listening groups for visually-impaired people, and reading groups for people with mental health problems, as well, so the local library is a truly inclusive place.

To describe the full range of activities around books and reading would need a separate presentation, but I would just like to mention two highlights of the programme, Derbyshire's Literature Festival, which takes place every two years, the county's own Poet Laureate scheme.

Festivals come in all shapes and sizes, but they are usually focused on a particular location or venue. Derbyshire does it differently. We wanted our festival to be accessible and inclusive, so we take events to communities large and small, right across the county. Venues range from local libraries to Chatsworth House home of the Duke of Devonshire, and one of Britain's most magnificent stately homes.

This approach generates a sense of community identity and ownership. People love the idea that top name authors are visiting their local area, and around 11,000 of them turn out to support the festival.

For the past five years Derbyshire has had its own Poet Laureate – the present occupant of the post is the third. The Laureate's role is to stimulate interest in reading and writing poetry, engaging with children and young people, older people, community groups and the general public. The response has been overwhelming, with commissions for new work, collections of participants' writing, and a new interest in reading poetry.

Once again, the library service is taking a lead in stimulating creativity, introducing people to new interests, growing skills and confidence. And we're encouraging people to learn about and to explore Derbyshire's history and heritage in a new way, through poetry.

That's just one way in which libraries stimulate learning. Of course, many people who have learning needs are unable or unwilling to use formal learning centres. They may have had a bad experience of education the first time round, not receiving the support they needed, failing at school, lacking qualifications. Let's suppose that later in life they realise that they have lost out and need to do something about it. Acknowledging that is a big step for many people. The last place they want to go to pick up the pieces is a school or college where the memory of failure is all too recent. For older learners it may have been so long since they undertook any learning that they don't know where to turn, or they fear being put in a classroom with younger more able learners who will leave them behind.

For people like this the library can offer a reassuring first

step back into learning and achievement. We organise a host of short taster courses in everything from ICT to crochet, from family history to floristry. In the nine months to December more than 4,200 people took part in learning events such as these. Library staff have run family history and local history events and given one-to-one help with computers to over eleven hundred people. There was nothing daunting about these courses. They took place in the local library on the high street, often on a Saturday morning. They didn't require people to sign up to a long-term commitment, and they were delivered by enthusiasts, not academics.

When people take part in informal learning in the library it often leads on to a desire to get involved in more formal learning. Librarians are not trained teachers – that's not their role – but they are educators in the true sense of the word, and they do work very closely with other learning providers. The county council runs a network of learning centres across the county, delivering vocational and non-vocational training. Many of our libraries are twinned with their local learning centres and this enables them to run advice surgeries in libraries and to put on courses which we would not be able to support from our own staffing resources.

In recent years we have formalised this relationship. Over the past few years we have been converting our traditional library meeting rooms into learning and training centres. They have become multi-purpose spaces. Of course they still act as accessible and economical venues for events and meetings for local community organisations, but now they have suites of computers, interactive white boards and all the facilities needed to put on courses of all kinds, including courses which help local people get to grips with ICT.

So here is an example of the local library fulfilling its role as a resource for the whole community to use – but in this case it has the specific aim of enabling people to gain new skills and explore new interests. It is also making a contribution to the wellbeing of the community – a focus for community activity of all kinds.

We have used these facilities as the venue for a programme of learning activities that lead people in gently and encourage them to further progression into more structured learning. We have just completed a three-year programme, and the target was to attract a thousand new learners in the final year. We hoped that around six hundred of them would achieve a qualification at level one or two – in other words, they would master the basic skills needed to help them in the job market, or get a qualification.

In the event, that target was exceeded. There were 2,700 enrolments in that last year, which represented 1070 individual learners – and 1004 of them succeeded in obtaining a qualification. Courses covered a wide range of topics, including ICT, basic skills, food hygiene and floristry, and they were all provided at no charge to the participants.

I think this demonstrates two things:

- that libraries really can provide the sort of friendly, informal access to learning that will help overcome reluctance and nervousness;

- and secondly, that informal learning opportunities such as the ones I have been describing can be a way in to more structured learning that can lead on to employment, as many of our participants can testify.

We think it is important that the benefits we have seen for local communities are sustained, and so the county council has made a sum of money available to continue the project into future years. On a slightly more modest scale, but preserving two important principles: effective partnership between county council services, and free access to learning opportunities for local people.

I have said that ICT features strongly in the work libraries have done around learning. Now I want to talk a bit more about how important ICT is to delivering modern library and information services – and how the library can play a role in overcoming barriers to access.

It is easily forgotten in this digital age that many people still lack the basic means of access. I talked earlier about a low wage economy. People in many parts of Derbyshire earn less than the regional and national average; the number of people who own a computer is lower as well, and there are even fewer households with a broadband connection. For many people the public library is their only access point, which is why the Internet is freely available in all our forty-six libraries, three large mobile libraries, the Record Office and Buxton Museum. Altogether there are over 400 PCs for the public to use, and twelve libraries have free wi-fi as well. These services are heavily used, with more than 600,000 half-hour sessions booked every year.

The service has invested in electronic resources, in many cases replacing or supplementing traditional printed sources. Our twenty-four hour library gives library users access to a wide range of newspapers and periodicals, encyclopaedias and directories, family history resources, business and legal information, either in the library or from their PC at home or at work. In the past year we have seen a 37% increase in take-up as the service becomes more widely known.

At the same time we have been creating our own content.

The Peakland Heritage project was a partnership project which brought together resources held in Derbyshire libraries, museums and archives, the Peak District National Park Authority and the British Library. The result is a Website, www.peaklandheritage.org.uk, which makes available 750 specially-written stories, a gallery of 2,000 digitised images and a database of 5,000 print and other items which have never been listed in this way before.

Picture the Past is a partnership between the four local authority library services in Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, to digitise many thousands of historic images, initially with the aid of funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The project is now mainstreamed and is the largest of its kind. Currently there are over 75,000 images on line; users can view and download images, or order photographic quality copies through the Internet. The images you see on the screen behind me are taken from the Picture the Past Website.

I mention these projects because they seem to me to exemplify what libraries and information services are best at doing. That is, they bring to a local audience resources and content which would otherwise be inaccessible: in this case, the treasures which are held in the British Library and in around one hundred and forty libraries across the four local authorities. And they take the distinctive and particular local heritage and make it accessible to a global audience through the World Wide Web. We know this is the case, because we receive a constant stream of emails from people all over the world, telling us how much they value being able to explore our unique local resources.

Of course it is not enough merely to provide the physical means of access to resources. Many people need help making sense of the information jungle, and this is where the librarian's skills as an expert mediator come into their own. We have a team of information specialists based at Chesterfield Library who offer a service face to face, by telephone or by e-mail, so that library users can enjoy a consistently high level of service, wherever they happen to live. And all library staff have been trained in the use of ICT so that they can help users get started.

In a number of libraries we are using volunteers to help with this. If you are an older person who has never used computers or electronic resources before, it's very reassuring if the person helping you really understands your needs and your concerns. That's why we have been recruiting 'computer buddies', older people who are confident about using ICT and who are prepared to give some time to helping those who are less able. They are a great addition to our professional service – but they don't replace the trained information professional.

Some people may risk losing out because of disability. So in all our libraries we have provided a range of adaptive hardware and software – image enhancement, voice output, roller balls, large type keyboards, and we have a small specialist team whose role is to develop services to people with disabilities, including deaf and visually-impaired users. It's all part of creating inclusive communities which give a fair chance to all.

I have already hinted that this inclusivity makes libraries very attractive to other service providers. Increasingly, they want to take advantage of the library service's reach into local communities, its broad user base and its neutral, non-threatening atmosphere. And so we find health services providing funding to set up health and wellbeing facilities in libraries, promoting healthy living and addressing people's health concerns before they reach a stage where medical intervention is needed.

We find the Employment Service and the Pensions Service using libraries to hold advice surgeries – they see the benefits of taking their services out to where their customers are. And the national advisory service for small businesses, Businesslink, is achieving great results through holding advice sessions in libraries for new business start-ups.

I could go on – careers advice, consumer advice, help with tax, advice on housing matters, benefits and policing. These are all examples of the services that are now being offered in libraries, in partnership with other

agencies.

Organisations in the voluntary and community sector – charities and not for profit groups – recognise the value of the local library. It provides resources they can use, spaces where they can meet, training to improve the skills of their workers, a recruiting ground for volunteers, and a shop window to tell the local community what they are doing. It's about capacity-building, improving the ability of local communities to help themselves. Not the heavy hand of state intervention, but a helping hand from the library in your own community.

It's high time I said something about children and families. Children are the future on whom our communities, our economy and our society depend. Libraries have a crucial role in helping children to achieve, to enjoy life, to stay safe and to make a positive contribution.

Success begins before school, and libraries are working with a wide range of agencies to promote family literacy and children's reading. The Bookstart programme, for example, delivers free books, games and promotional material to every child at nine months, two years and three years. There is a lot of evidence to show that children who have been active library users have a distinct advantage when they start school. Bookstart aims to get that message across to new parents and give them opportunities to share books and reading with their children.

Libraries are also playing a key role with more vulnerable families. In Derbyshire we have professional librarians based in family centres in areas of greatest need, and they are active in promoting family literacy, learning and reading and linking with the local library.

The School Library Service provides essential support for the curriculum and for wider learning objectives, and there are close links between School Library Service and the public library service, to ensure that they complement each other.

This work extends through the summer with the Summer Reading Challenge. This high profile, national programme aims to keep children reading, and there are incentives and prizes for all. 7,000 children took part in Derbyshire last year, and there is convincing evidence that the scheme does help to maintain children's reading levels through the long summer holiday.

We also encourage young people to make a contribution through participating in and running their own groups – we have teenage reading groups, Headspace, a drop-in centre for young people at Buxton Library, and Book Pushers, who are groups of young people who act as champions and advocates, developing confidence and articulation and sharing their enthusiasm for books with other young people. We even have two Book Pushers groups for disabled young people.

Vulnerable young people and adults, including those with learning disabilities, know that the library is a safe place where they can get help if they feel threatened. And library staff have been trained to recognise special needs and to give a hand where needed. It's all part of that wider contribution to creating inclusive local

communities.

But there is a wider issue here. As librarians, we have changed our behaviour. We have got out from behind the desk and into the local community. We have identified groups with particular needs and we have tailored our services to meet those needs. But is it enough merely to reflect community aspirations? Should we instead be challenging and leading expectations?

Here is an example of what I mean by that. Derbyshire is a pretty homogenous place. The proportion of the population from ethnic minority communities is less than 2%. And yes, we do make strenuous efforts to establish their needs and design services for them, whether they are travellers, migrant workers from eastern Europe, or immigrants from the Asian sub continent. But in many local communities residents share the same social background, the same education and employment history, the same colour, and probably the same values. They may have little awareness of the diverse, multi-ethnic Britain of which they are a part. If you ask them (as the government does through the annual Place Survey) whether people in their locality get on well together, they are likely to say "Yes, because they're just like me."

There is a role here for libraries. Not to engage in social engineering, but to remind local people that there is a wider world out there; to challenge their preconceptions; to offer them new experiences; to give them a glimpse into the world as others see it.

If I sound patronising, that's not my intention. But how can we understand our place in the world if we know nothing beyond our own horizon? How can we make informed democratic choices if we don't understand what's at stake? Where do we go to get that wider, inclusive view of the world? Not to the tabloid press or popular television programmes, that's for sure.

And so I end with my beginning, as it were.

The library is a place where resources are shared, not stored. It is a place where information, works of creative imagination, technology and professional expertise come together for the benefit of the people and communities it serves. It is a place where no one is excluded, where everyone has an opportunity to learn and grow, and where a second chance is always possible. Through the breadth of its resources and its networks the library service delivers world-class resources right down to the most local level – even to the individual home, making access to opportunity a reality for everyone. The growth of mobile technology and e-books is creating more opportunities.

But there is a threat. Across the UK local authorities are having to meet challenging efficiency targets. Many of us are looking to self service technology to reduce staff costs while maintaining opening hours and spending on resources. But machines can only do so much. It is the library staff who transform it from a storehouse to a living, breathing presence at the heart of the community. Of course we need to work smarter to make the most effective use of staff resources, but we must not lose the human contact between librarian and user which is the basis of our trust and our influence.

The library is an institution which collects, preserves and interprets the collective memory, but it is also an agent of change, a place where communities can define themselves, where a sense of identity and belonging are forged, and where we can start to work out our place in the wider scheme of things.

We may be faced with a global society in which local differences are more and more difficult to discern, but it is also true that interest in local history and family history has never been stronger.

We all need to know where we came from and where we belong. Libraries, archives and museums answer that need. They offer the best hope we have of retaining strong local communities within a global society.

Thank you.