

# *Relevant repositories of public knowledge?*

**Perceptions of archives libraries and museums  
in modern Britain**

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**Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board**



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## **Executive summary**

### *Relevant repositories of public knowledge? Perceptions of archives libraries and museums in modern Britain*

Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, the project sought to examine the perceived relevance of traditional repositories of public knowledge in the information age, that is, the extent to which the British public still value access to museums libraries and archives in modern Britain. The research, undertaken by the Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society (CPLIS), University of Sheffield and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB), was conducted over a period of two years commencing October 2002.

*In summary*, the research suggests that museums, libraries and archives are still relevant repositories of public knowledge, but will not be relevant to all people, all of the time. However, there high levels of 'existence value' placed in our traditional repositories of public knowledge, and respondents indicated a real moral and ethical obligation to preserve and maintain such services irrespective of their levels of use and patronage.

#### MLA role and value

The data show that relatively high percentages of value are placed in museums libraries and archives in helping respondents to understand social and political concerns. However, these figures fell quite sharply when survey respondents where asked if they had *used* a museum library or archive for such a purpose in the last six months. Nevertheless focus group data demonstrate many other highly valued roles and uses for traditional repositories of public knowledge

MLAs are seen to perform an essential role by providing a context to modern life. They help people understand contemporary issues and situations, and contribute to an individual's understanding of self and place in society at large

The provision of historical and evolutionary context forms part of a wider educational role for museums libraries and archives, particularly with reference to informal, lifelong and family learning

The role of museums libraries and archives in preserving cultural heritage is seen as highly valuable by all demographic groups.

Museums libraries and archives are seen as social, recreational places where the opportunity to mix with fellow users and receive professional advice. The guidance from MLA staff is highly valued

The 'day out' effect is key in encouraging a concerted effort on behalf of potential users to visit MLAs when demanding lifestyles place such

restrictions on free time and recreation. Cultural organisations need to build upon the experience and motivation of 'holiday maker' users to make local resources more attractive and viable

The fact that museums libraries and archives can cater to a variety of learning styles and needs is highly valued

The ability of cultural organisations to encourage a sense of empathy and understanding for alternative cultures is regarded as highly significant in what is a diverse contemporary society

Museums libraries and archives are vital sources of informal family learning. Parents should form a key target audience for these established repositories of public knowledge as changes in educational culture are encouraging a more proactive role for parents in their child's education.

There seemed little recognition amongst the general public of the 'commonality of purpose' between museums libraries and archives. It was observed amongst respondents from all regions and demographic groups that each sector was often discussed or referred to individually or in isolation

The archive service had the most negative response in terms of a definitive description of its role and value in modern Britain. There is a lack of understanding about the full range of services it offers

### *Data analysis and research findings*

Data analysis revealed several key implicit themes which help to explain the research findings and the related conclusions listed above. Recurring themes include notions of, and the difficulty in defining, contemporary interpretations of 'community'; the role of nostalgia and retrospection in shaping perceptions of museums libraries and archives; the demands of changing lifestyles on information needs and consumption; the pervasive perceived educational role of museums libraries and archives, particularly as sources of informal learning; the power of cultural assumptions and social identity in shaping perceptions of museums libraries and archives; the growing pressures of consumerism and the 'infotainment' industry.

Research findings are presented under the following headings, derived from patterns emerging from quantitative and qualitative data analysis:

1. Accessibility, immediacy and information needs
2. Empowerment and apathy
3. Trust versus use
4. The construction of image and public ownership

1. Accessibility, immediacy and information needs

Information needs in terms of contemporary social and political concerns are instinctively associated with speed, immediacy and accessibility. As such, consequent information seeking behaviours involve the consultation of convenient information sources that compliment daily routines and responsibilities.

Immediately accessible sources of information such as newspapers, television and the internet are perceived as preferable despite the relatively low levels of trust and value placed in them

Busy lifestyles, and the consequent pressures on available time, limit the opportunity to seek a deeper understanding of social and political concerns, and limit respondents to more immediately accessible information sources than museums libraries and archives

Inappropriate and inconvenient opening hours are perceived as a *major* barrier to the use and value of museums libraries and archives in an information seeking context

Inadequate marketing and publicity should be a key concern for museums libraries and archives, as a lack of awareness of the services they provide is perceived as a major barrier by respondents from across the sample

The growing use of electronic resources and digitisation across the three domains is seen as a very positive and effective step in increasing access to, and awareness of museum library and archive services

## 2. Empowerment and apathy

Respondents associated their lack of developing a 'deeper understanding' of social and political concerns with the pressures of busy lifestyles rather than with any apathetic tendencies

There is evidence across all the demographic groups and regions consulted that levels of engagement and the relevant sources of information chosen are determined by social and cultural factors such as professional and educational circumstances, social and political beliefs and social systems and peer groups

The extent to which museums libraries and archives are used and valued is in turn affected by existing sets of factors such as parental responsibility, professional identity, personal environment, educational attitudes and previous experiences; none of which fit in to neat demographic variables such as age, social class or region

The data suggests that people have a benchmark of personal relevance and importance for measuring the scale of their political and social concerns and the depth of inquiry required

The personalisation of contemporary concerns can lead to a 'fear factor' in the extent of information sought. This is particularly true with health issues. The 'human face' of traditional repositories of public knowledge can act as a reassuring element when increased anxiety levels are the result of 'too much' information

### 3. Trust versus use

The national telephone survey revealed a worrying trend amongst the British public of a greater use of least trusted information sources when seeking information on social and political concerns

Focus group respondents explained this discrepancy as 'dismissive consumption', indicating that least trusted sources of information such as tabloid newspapers are regarded as sources of entertainment and speculative gossip rather than real information. The ability to interpret and accept or reject the information offered is offered as a 'damage limitation' in the habitual reliance upon least trusted information sources

The least trusted sources are perceived as the most immediately accessible within a day-to-day context

Information provided by traditional repositories of public knowledge are trusted more because of their higher levels of authenticity and neutrality; lack of editorial bias or manipulation; the professional assistance and standards offered by MLA staff; the availability of a variety of authoritative published sources

### 4. The construction of image and public ownership

Notions and definition of community are integral to perceived levels of public ownership of traditional repositories of public knowledge

The extent to which an individual feels ownership of museums libraries and archives is directly related to their individual sense of community belonging and identity, and the cultural representation of this

People in urban centres and regions with a strong sense of civic and cultural identity are most likely to feel a sense of ownership and pride in cultural organisations. They regard them as symbols of civic identity on a local and national scale

A greater sense of community ownership is encouraged where a number of public services work together in a shared space. This is most easily achieved by the public library service, but can be emulated by museums libraries and archives working together on a more visible basis in order to encourage a common sense of cultural ownership and value in the services they provide

More visible partnerships with centres of formal learning and education will also encourage a greater sense of public ownership

## *Methodology*

In combination with a continuing review of the literature, the first stages of the research involved a quantitative national telephone survey designed by the CPLIS team and conducted by the independent market research company ICM. Using a statistically significant sample of 1000+ respondents, the survey investigated how the British public gain information on, and a greater understanding of, contemporary social and political concerns, and the role and value of museums libraries and archives within such a context. Rich qualitative data were added to this statistical framework via focus groups conducted on a national basis. These were assembled so as to reflect key demographic groups and appropriate regional representation. In addition a research workshop was undertaken with eminent professionals and academics from the three domains and other related public policy sectors. This was an integral part of the research process and the data obtained were used to inform the final report.

## **Introduction**

The research described in this report sought to examine the perceived relevance of traditional repositories of public knowledge in the information age, that is, the extent to which the British public still value access to museums, libraries and archives in modern Britain. To put the research in to a contemporary information seeking context, respondents were asked to discuss how they obtain information on major social and political concerns of the day, and what role museums, libraries and archives may play in helping them to gain a greater understanding of such issues as compared to other identified information sources. Five major socio-political concerns as identified by MORI's regular survey of issues affecting Britons were used as examples to prompt discussion, including the NHS and healthcare, foreign policy and defence, law and order, the economy and education (MORI, 2003).

It was considered appropriate to combine the three individual cultural organisations as one research topic because of the increasing commonality of purpose ascribed to museums libraries and archives, particularly in response to key social policy objectives such as social inclusion and lifelong learning. This *commonality of purpose* is manifested by both intellectual discussions across the domains and the formation of administrative structures, such as the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) to re-align the shared role of museums libraries and archives as public services in contemporary society (DCMS, 2001). This increased emphasis on the societal role of cultural institutions along with the perceived conceptual transition from an industrial to an information society creates the need for an exploration and re-assessment of how well these institutions now serve their communities, particularly as sources of information and learning.

The project combined quantitative and qualitative methods to answer or explore the following key **research aims and objectives**:

**Assess if in “the information age” people still *need* and *value* access to traditional repositories of public knowledge**

It was considered important to assess the public's value of access to traditional repositories of public knowledge in an information society that has a plethora of mass-media and other information sources, irrespective of the extent to which they actually use museums libraries and archives. This can help to place an 'existence valuation' on cultural services which cannot be gained from visitor statistics or numbers of book issues. In this sense, quantitative and qualitative data on the extent of respect and value invested in

traditional repositories of public knowledge by the British public can complement and contribute to existing value and impact studies.

**Assess the extent to which people *use* archives, public libraries and museums when attempting to understand contemporary social concerns**

In keeping with the contemporary information seeking context of the study, respondents were asked the extent to which they actually use traditional repositories of public knowledge when attempting to understand major social and political concerns (with particular reference to the five issues outlined by the MORI poll). This has helped to establish the contemporary public role of museums archives and libraries as information sources within a particular context, and the British public's perceptions of how these institutions can inform and shape their understanding of important societal issues.

**Compare people's use of archives, public libraries and museums with their use of *other possible sources* of information and understanding**

To gain a fuller understanding of the role of museums libraries and archives as contemporary information sources, it is important to compare their role in terms of use, accessibility and value with other identified sources of information on major social and political concerns. For the benefit of this study, 'other' information sources referred to during research fieldwork included television, radio, the internet, broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, colleges and universities, experts and specialists and places of worship. Information sources were carefully chosen following a consideration of those sources most frequently referred to within the relevant literature and studies of information seeking behaviour. Respondents were asked about their use of, and value placed in, such sources when seeking an understanding of the five identified social and political concerns.

**Evaluate the perceived *trustworthiness* and *authenticity* of different sources of information and understanding**

In establishing the motivation behind the use of various information sources in understanding social and political concerns it was considered valuable to investigate the relationship between trustworthiness (the extent of trust placed in an information source) and use, and the perceived levels of authenticity of chosen information sources. This can lead to a fuller understanding of patterns of user behaviour when seeking information from a consumer perspective, particularly when considered against other factors such as immediacy and accessibility. It can also help to reinforce and evaluate the value placed in museums libraries and archives as authentic, reliable information sources.

**Identify any *demographic differences* in the use and perception of archives libraries and museums**

By categorising the sample by distinct demographic groups (for example by region, age, ethnicity or parental status) it is possible to assess any demographic differences in how museums libraries and archives are both being used and perceived by the public in Modern Britain. Inferences can be made about patterns of usage according to 'life stages' and lifestyle and any subsequent influences upon perception and value.

**Explore the *differences* and similarities between *professionals* and the *public* in their assessment of archive, library and museum services**

To compliment the examination of the British public's perceptions of museums libraries and archives, it was considered important and relevant to include professionals from the three sectors in the study and examine their perceptions of their professional role as information providers and mediators in the information age. Treated in isolation, the research is able to provide

impressions from a professional perspective of the reality of the ‘commonality of purpose’ between the three sectors. By comparing the perspectives of the general public and the professional sample, the research findings can help assess any differences in opinion regarding the role of museums libraries and archives, and determine any filters or barriers to a common understanding, of the role of the RPKs.

**Assess how “*public*” these institutions are in the mind of the public**

In helping to understand what shapes the British public’s perceptions of traditional repositories of public knowledge, the research sought to establish exactly how ‘public’ these institutions are considered to be in terms of personal and community ownership and advocacy. In relation to this perceived sense of public ownership, it is also important to establish any barriers that exist in terms of public usage and ownership. That is what factors prevent people from using museums libraries and archives and taking ownership of their services, and what is their effect on the public image of such cultural organisations.

It is anticipated that the study will be of value to policy makers, social and cultural commentators, educators and professionals in the media as well as museum library and archive sectors. It is a contribution to the body of work concerned with information seeking and the general public, and via its analysis of the three sectors to value and impact studies in the cultural sector.

## **2. The research context**

### **The public role of museums, libraries and archives: historical perspective**

For nearly two hundred and fifty years the British people have had access to collections of information held for the common good. When the British Museum opened its doors to the general public in 1759, "its collections belonged to the nation, and admission was free and open to all. Entry was directed to be given to 'all studious and curious persons' and thus throughout the Museum's history public enjoyment has been linked with scholarship and education."<sup>1</sup> Within a century the Public Libraries Act established the grounds for a national system of libraries and museums for "instruction and recreation" (1850 Public Library Act).

The pervasive philosophy combining each of the traditional repositories of public knowledge is one of equality and excellence; that being an equality of access to all who choose to use the services and a mediated, objective, non-judgemental and inclusive collection of information sources, artefacts, collections and exhibits. Neil MacGregor recently asserted that one of the principal purposes for which the British Museum was established, and for which it still exists today, is to 'allow visitors to address through objects, both ancient and more recent, questions of contemporary politics and international relations' (MacGregor, 2004). He describes the decision to set up the British Museum, the first national museum in the world, as an act of intellectual idealism and political radicalism which laid the foundations of a quite new concept of the citizen's right to information and understanding which can be compared to the founding of the BBC and the Open University. Greenhalgh et al offer the following description of the historical role of the public library service:

"With its reference books, its networked access to published material of all kinds, it represents the inherited culture of rational thought, self-education and individual enlightenment. It has sustained an enviable tradition – unlike many other institutions – of non-sectarianism and secularism, and librarians are widely perceived to be non-judgemental and tolerant to all opinion. Because it is a voluntary institution it has never attempted to impose set ideas or asserted its values above those of its users" (Greenhalgh et al, 1995, pp. 24)

The public archives service in the UK has a dual purpose from a public and a personal perspective. In a recreational sense, the holding of archives facilitates learning, pleasure, contemplation and enthusiasm for history and culture. The manuscripts, books, volumes, files, letters, diaries and other primary sources held by a wide range of archival institutions, can create a unique picture of past events. From a more official perspective, records management services make a key contribution to the efficient and effective management of public and private business. Archival organisations also help to uphold civil rights to access of information (Resource, 2001).

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<sup>1</sup> [www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/visit/history.html](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/visit/history.html)

During the nineteenth century public libraries were seen as part of a process whereby knowledge and information could be redistributed in favour of the educationally underprivileged (Luckham, 1971). Black and Muddiman (1997) in their study of community librarianship discuss phases of 'civic' librarianship between 1850-1940 and 'welfare state' librarianship between 1940-75. More recent research in to the social impact of libraries suggests that libraries are still held in some esteem in the public mind as repositories of knowledge and information (Linley and Usherwood, 1998). The present project seeks to assess the extent to which the British public has maintained this esteem, and the extent to which the public role of the traditional repositories of public knowledge is being upheld, in the information age.

### **Cultural industries and contemporary public policy**

The British government believes that museums, archives and libraries all have a part to play in shaping among other things cultural attitudes about social inclusion and lifelong learning, and maintains that libraries and museums play a key role in underpinning education in it's broadest sense (DCMS, 2001). Their role as sources of informal learning and cultural recreation make them key players in economic policy objectives including neighbourhood renewal and increased community cohesion. In supporting the formation of the Museums Libraries and Archives Council, the Department for Culture Media and Sport made the following statement:

"All three areas (museums, libraries and archives) have the potential to make an enormous contribution to the Government's social, economic and cultural objectives - particularly to formal education and lifelong learning, to the pursuit of excellence, and to social inclusion and the active life of communities."

(DCMS Design Group establishing MLAC)

Middleton (1998) identified six structural trends and changes affecting the role of museums and cultural organisations in the twenty-first century. These included, the emergence and implications of a post-industrial society (occupational decline and growth and the requisite structural changes in economy and population); changing government attitudes (national agencies for museums, libraries and archives, regional development agencies, modernisation of local government); trends in information and communication technologies affecting patterns of user behaviour and human interaction; changing educational philosophies and 'learning for life'; the increasing significance of marketing and promotion and the 'day out' target group; the growing importance and necessity of performance measurement and monitoring. Thus the contemporary political and societal role presents many challenges for museums libraries and archives and the professionals responsible for their performance and survival.

The Museums Libraries and Archives Council<sup>2</sup> was launched in April 2000 as the strategic and development agency working with and for museums libraries and archives, facilitating collaborative work across the three domains, and advising government of policy and priorities for the cultural sector. Although 'cross domain' ideas are now reflected in such official structures there has been little research that has explored the common contemporary role of archives, libraries and museums as mediators of public knowledge. To date such value and impact research has tended to look at these institutions in isolation. This project seeks to examine whether or not the British public recognise and value such a 'commonality of purpose' between museums and archives.

### **Socio-political concerns and modern British society**

The social and political concerns used as examples in this study are taken from the UN sponsored European wide survey on social concerns 'What's worrying Britain?' (MORI, 2001). The survey has shown that the 'top ten' domestic concerns in Britain for 1996 and 2001 both include issues surrounding law and order, health, education, the economy and social welfare issues. Using such concerns as a starting point, this research sought to examine how the British public seeks to resolve or understand their concerns over these issues, and what information sources they refer to in doing so. It has been argued by Vestheim (1994) "when people are striving to reach a deeper understanding of themselves and their society, they need information that can highlight their total life situation". This suggests a role for repositories of public knowledge such as archives, libraries and museums.

There are conceptual issues involved in asking people about how they develop an 'understanding' of socio-political concerns. Understanding (and how individuals perceive their understanding) can be achieved on many levels. On a personal level, it is possible to watch a film, hear a song, or read a poem and be inspired to reach a decision on how we *feel* about a certain issue. This is however a very emotive response to an artistic, often fictionalised interpretation of a particular topic, and may be driven by an individual's own cultural, social or ethnic background. The stimulus offered by artistic information sources does not arm us with the facts – the true political, social or economic reasons behind policy decisions will not usually be gleaned from a transitory artistic experience. However, this should not undermine the impact of artistic references or sources of information, as it is often these that are most remembered and that will fuel an ongoing interest in the issue concerned.

This calls to question whether or not emotive and more factual, considered responses towards, and opinions on, socio-political concerns are in fact dependant upon one another or can function as separate, mutually exclusive phenomena in becoming a 'fully informed citizen'. Is it possible to feel satisfied

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<sup>2</sup> MLA: <http://www.mla.gov.uk/index.asp>

with the extent of one's knowledge on a subject without truly understanding what this means on a personal, ethical level? By the same token is it possible to fully appreciate the personal and ethical implications of a socio-political event or policy without having at first established a considered, factual understanding via the consultation of various information sources? This is an important consideration when examining the role, value and trustworthiness of different information sources and the impact that can be gained from the consultation of a variety of different media, publications and institutions.

Consider the following example: The information available following the Soham murder case in the summer of 2002 will elicit varied responses. It is no doubt fair to say that the majority of people will have felt an instinctive, mournful, angry, possibly vengeful response upon seeing the image of the two young girls concerned wearing their Manchester United shirts on the day that they disappeared. This touching image was emblazoned across tabloid newspapers and on our television screens daily for many weeks. Imagine that one person (having experienced the same anger and dismay) takes the time to visit their university library and consult various criminology text books. That person may learn that in 'x' number of cases whereby a child has been murdered, the perpetrator will have suffered systematic abuse from an early age. This information may encourage the reader to take a more considered, objective viewpoint about what can be learned from the Soham case to reduce further risk. Meanwhile (hypothetically) a group of angry residents on a housing estate some 200 miles away, having been saturated by dogmatic tabloid media coverage, have opted to terrorise a neighbouring paediatrician. This is an extreme and perhaps controversial example, but illustrates how potentially emotion and reasoned, informed contemplation can shape our understanding of contemporary socio-political concerns and events.

The need for discourse, interpretation and evaluation in information seeking and understanding is widely discussed in the literature. In a study of the social aspects of information, Chu (2003) observes that the social network surrounding a piece of information is integral to its meaning and understanding, and describes a system of 'information ecology', whereby people, practices, values and technologies interact within a local environment. Traditional repositories of public knowledge offer a gateway to interpretation and understanding which combine all of these elements. Artistic intervention models employed by museums in telling and interpreting their stories and exhibits allow a process of 'transmission' of understanding between the professional and the user (Graham, 2003). Kniffel (1997) has observed that the library and museum capture 'a collective cultural knowledge, hold it for use, and expand it by allowing it to connect to our inward thoughts... They are all... about the possibility to construct unrestricted knowledge and to craft personal truths of individual design'.

### **The Information Age: revolution, evolution or political spin**

The phrases 'information society' and 'knowledge economy' are political 'buzz words' or inventions presented as a social phenomenon to describe the

economic and intellectual processes by which contemporary society operates. The knowledge economy is a system whereby knowledge is the basic form of capital, and economic growth is driven by the accumulation of knowledge. Organisations and individuals working within the knowledge economy are dependant on intellectual capital and systems of lifelong learning (MED, 2004). Black (2001) argues that the information society can be traced historically, and describes a Victorian information society where the public library played an important role evidenced by their surveillance and ordering of knowledge; their adoption of businesslike, bureaucratic procedures; and a 'panoptic' tracking of users and their activities.

From a societal perspective, the theorising of an information age and the relevant 'knowledge economy' signifies a shift in occupational and production models from an industrial age and manufacturing economy. As previously mentioned, Middleton (1998) presents the emergence of a post-industrial society as a challenge to the role of the cultural sector. A decline in traditional industries such as iron/steel/coal mining, textiles, manufacturing and transport has given way to a sharp rise in finance, retail, media, telecommunications and tourism sectors, causing shifts in economic centres and population growth.

In a study on the value of information, Fenner (2002) states that information, more so than ever before, has become a prime element of commercial success or failure, and that successful people and businesses are those who 'control information: its development, access, analysis and presentation'. However, it is only when information has been *comprehended* that it becomes of any real value; value is derived from the understanding of information and its subsequent application. Thus in his study of 'knowledgeability and democracy' in an information age, Webster (1999) stresses the importance of *quality* in information provision above and beyond technological techniques in presentation of information, concluding that 'an "information explosion" and no end of information and communication technologies do not make for an informed public'.

Kerslake and Kinnell (1998) argue that the development of the information society presents a critical difference between the rationale for the establishment of public libraries and that for the contemporary service. They believe that a definition of the contemporary public library must accommodate the information rights of the citizen when an information society is available mainly to those who are able to pay for it by purchasing IT equipment, internet connections and books for individual use. The research reported here seeks to re-examine the role of traditional repositories of public knowledge in the 'information age', and the extent to which it contributes to the necessary levels of information consumption and skills development to survive and prosper in a knowledge-driven society.

## **Information seeking behaviour and the general public**

Research on information seeking behaviour tends to look at individual phenomena affecting patterns in information seeking and retrieval. For example Heinstrom (2003) conducted a study into the relationship between personality traits and information habits within a student sample, concluding that in less motivating situations such as routines or daily activities, personal characteristics are likely to be more influential. It has been shown that psychological, demographical, interpersonal and environmental characteristics influence the information seeking process, and that the decision to seek information is rooted in cognitive or emotional origins (Wilson, 1981; Wilson and Walsh, 1996). In the development of a model of information behaviour in everyday life, Hektor (2003) identifies eight forms of information activity based on user intention and information seeking skill, including the 'habitual monitoring' of information in accordance with daily routines such as reading the newspaper at breakfast. Miwa (2003) is critical of human information behaviour research that has been conducted within a single information environment using a homogenous population such as students of faculty members. Such research emphasises users' internal factors such as cognitive and affective states and tends to ignore external factors such as social and environmental situations.

With reference to social and political concerns and information seeking behaviour in response to such topics, Shenton and Dixon (2003) illustrate that information seeking is essentially a convergent process involving the making of choices and taking of decisions. Information seeking is initiated when a situation arises which stimulates an information need, under which several types of information may be needed, including spontaneous 'life situation' information (such as a specific health concern), an empathic understanding of others and interest-driven information. The present study seeks to understand how museums libraries and archives 'fit in' to the information seeking behaviours of the British public in pursuing such contemporary information needs and seeking a *fuller understanding* of contemporary concerns.

It is this 'fuller understanding' that is key to the project and its contribution to the existing body of work on information seeking behaviour and the role of museums libraries and archives. Academics and other commentators from outside the profession have perceived libraries as vital to securing the citizen's 'right to know'. They are seen to provide a non-commodified provision of culture and information with a physical presence in the places of everyday life (McGuigan, 1996). Recent work in the United States (Rosenweig & Thelen, 1998) suggests that museums also help people to make sense of the present and influence the future. It is suggested that the information they supply promotes a wider understanding of the past, offers individuals the opportunity to acquire new skills and knowledge and gives everyone the opportunity to enjoy a rich and varied cultural life. Karp et al (1992) argues that the importance of museums is in how they help their audiences to exploit the information resources in the quest for knowledge.

It is important to consider the relationship between the established repositories of public knowledge to the many other sources of information and ideas available to us in the information age. Do public libraries still have a

physical and meaningful presence in the places of everyday life? Are the historical and interpretive role of museums and archives being taken full advantage of in the quest for knowledge and a fuller understanding of contemporary issues and concerns? It has been suggested that newer and alternative sources of information are often insufficient as reliable sources of public knowledge. For example Nicholson (quoted in Herbert, 1988) has observed that 'the problem with television is not that it brainwashes you. The problem is that if it is the only source of information you have, then you may not truly know what is going on in the world'.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **The literature review**

Throughout the duration of the project, an on-going review of the literature was undertaken. The review included books and scholarly journals, the professional press, cultural media and electronic sources such as organisational and departmental web sites and on-line publications. The literature review as a research method serves many functions, including helping to distinguish existing research from new contributions to the field; establishing the theoretical context of the topic or problem; placing the research in a historical context; identifying relationships between ideas and practice; rationalizing the significance of the problem (Hart, 1998).

The literature review in this report serves a conceptualising function, both as an introduction to the research and as a justification for its value, and also to complement fieldwork data. Evidence from the literature is presented alongside data analysis to provide a rich interpretation and synthesis of research findings.

#### **Quantitative research – the national telephone survey**

The first stages of research fieldwork involved an extensive national questionnaire-based survey that provided the starting point for the exploration of the British public's use, value and perception of museums, libraries and archives in contemporary society. The main objectives of the survey were to provide 'snap-shot' statistics on the public *value of access* to museums, libraries and archives (repositories of public knowledge) in seeking a greater understanding of contemporary social concerns as compared to other identified sources of information; the public *usage* of repositories of public knowledge as compared to other sources of information in relation to contemporary social concerns; the scale of trust placed in various information sources including museums, libraries and archives; the level of community ownership associated with repositories of public knowledge. For the questionnaire used in the survey please see appendix one.

The survey method is considered to be most appropriate at the explorative stages of the social research process because of its relatively straightforward approach to the study of attitudes, beliefs and values; its capacity to collect generalizable information from a human population; ease of data standardization; efficiency in generating large amounts of data in relatively short periods of time; the allowance of user anonymity (Robson, 2002).

Following the design of the survey questionnaire by the CPLIS team, the independent market research company ICM<sup>3</sup> were commissioned to

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<sup>3</sup> ICM: <http://www.icmresearch.co.uk/default.asp>

administer the research via the telephone survey method. This approach was considered to be the most appropriate in order to achieve the desired, credible sample size for a national study within a manageable time frame. The appointment of a centralized telephone interviewing facility improves the conduct of a telephone survey by ensuring quality and integrity and a systematic and efficient approach (De Vaus, 1993).

ICM interviewed a total of 1063 respondents. The sample was determined using the 'random digit dialling' technique following the regional specification as determined by CPLIS, which was based on the regional Museum Library and Archive Council (MLA)<sup>4</sup> areas of the UK and included the following:

- Scotland
- Wales
- Northern Ireland
- North West
- Yorkshire
- Midlands
- East of England
- South East
- South West
- London

The random digit dialling method facilitates a more representative sample by allowing access to unlisted numbers and avoiding the time-consuming consultation of telephone directories (De Vaus, 1993). ICM survey data are weighted according to adult population to be representative of key variables including age, gender, and social class (ICM, 2004). Further to CPLIS specification, other key variables were identified by the survey including ethnicity and parents of school-aged children.

### **Qualitative research – focus groups**

In the second stage of the study, focus groups were conducted on a national basis to provide qualitative data to enrich, support, justify and challenge survey findings. Preliminary survey data analysis was used to inform the qualitative stages of the research both in terms of research instrument design and strategic sampling and organisation. Using the same regional classification, focus groups were held in the ten regions of the UK with six key demographic groups (one demographic per group). These included:

- Museum, library and archive professionals
- Known museum, library and archive users
- Parents of school age children
- Ethnic minorities
- Age 18-25

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<sup>4</sup> MLA regional structure: <http://www.mla.gov.uk/action/regional/00regional.asp>

- Age 55+

Groups were organised by contacting relevant groups and organisations within each region, for example, the relevant Museum Library and Archive Councils, Public Library Authorities, individual museums, libraries or archives, community organisations such as Age Concern, parent groups and schools. The qualitative fieldwork was undertaken during spring – summer 2004 and a total of 50 focus groups have been conducted, transcribed and analysed. Due to the complexities of conducting qualitative fieldwork on a national basis in terms of respondent recruitment and availability, the research team were unable to fulfil the desired quota of focus groups for each demographic in each region within the allowed timeframe. However, it is considered that the views of each group are reflected appropriately across the sample.

A qualitative element to the study was deemed essential when considering the public's perceptions and values of repositories of public knowledge and the cultural sector. Usage alone may be adequately studied and reported via quantitative research methods and the relevant statistics, but a qualitative approach is vital to gaining an understanding of the meanings and values behind public behaviour in social research. Detailed 'real world' descriptions and verbatim quotations from respondents can help the research reader to gain a vicarious understanding of the subject matter and to apply the findings to the world which they know (Seale, 1999). Bloor (2001) describes the advantages of the focus group method as providing the forum for debate and discussion amongst participants in a non-threatening environment that can be presented as sociable events where no technical skill is required. Krueger (2000) describes the conversational aspects of focus groups as one of the main advantages, as responses provide mental cues for other participants and facilitate the further exploration of a range of perceptions. As the primary focus of this study is the exploration of public perception, the focus group method was considered to be the most appropriate for the qualitative stages of the research.

The aims and objectives of focus group research were to investigate further themes and issues arriving from preliminary survey data analysis. The focus group question guide (please see appendix two) was designed and structured to reflect and question those themes established and identified by the quantitative data, including:

- Accessibility, immediacy and information needs
- Empowerment and apathy
- Trust versus use
- The construction of image and public ownership
- Museum, library and archive role and value

Each focus group discussed a total of seven questions, two of which involved a card-sorting exercise to help prompt discussion within the 'role and value' and 'trust versus use' themes. Focus group sessions lasted between 45 and 90 minutes (duration varied depending on total number of individual group participants and the loquacity of those present). Each focus group session

was tape-recorded and fully transcribed to allow effective data analysis and the inclusion of verbatim quotations in the final report. Quotations are presented as transcribed and have not been altered or corrected grammatically.

### **Developmental qualitative research – the research workshop**

As the qualitative fieldwork reached its closing stages, the research team held a workshop at the British Library in London. Senior professionals and academics in the museum, library and archive sectors and beyond were invited to discuss research findings 'so far'. The aims and objectives of the workshop were to gain the insight and opinion of those eminent in the field at both policy and research level, to complement the data retrieved during focus group research from the general public and those professionals responsible for the delivery of museum, library and archive services. A total of 15 delegates were in attendance.

Following a brief presentation of the research, delegates were split into three separate groups and were each asked to discuss two themes that had emerged from focus group data. The workshop was an integral part of the research process, and as such, each session was recorded, transcribed and analysed. Delegates had received a workshop pack prior to the day which included a preliminary paper and workbooks for the focus group sessions on the day, including a series of questions per theme and quotes from the literature and focus group transcriptions to provide context for the discussion (for workshop materials please see appendix three). The six emerging themes considered on the day included:

- Contemporary interpretations of community
- Nostalgia and retrospection
- Lifestyle and information needs
- Education and information
- Cultural assumptions and social identity
- Consumerism and infotainment

The workshop has given a three-tier structure to data collation and analysis building upon ideas explored and discovered during the survey and focus group phases of research. This shows a progression and pattern of analysis throughout the two-year project period, which has allowed effective data analysis, interpretation and presentation.

### **Methodological triangulation**

The process of combining a number of research methods is known as methodological triangulation, an approach that enhances the rigour of the research (Robson, 2002) and enhances the completeness of a study. The triangulation of research methods can help to overcome problems of bias and any question over the validity of research findings. The use of multiple

methods can help to corroborate findings, particularly from a developmental perspective when conducting a large-scale or long-term project. The use of methodological triangulation in this project has helped to enhance, structure and develop the findings at each stage of the research.

In a chapter discussing approaches to social research, Robson (2002) describes the marriage of quantitative and qualitative methods as a pragmatic approach based on value-rich enquiry, theory-rich facts and the belief that any particular set of data is explicable by more than one single theory. The pragmatic approach used in this study is intended to provide evidence to encourage debate and discussion on the contemporary role and value of repositories of public knowledge rather than present absolute conclusions.

### **Ethical issues**

Studies involving interaction with a human sample will usually have some ethical implications. It is important to establish trust with the research participants, and this was achieved by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality to all respondents; carefully explaining the research process and how the data were presented; providing as much information on the project and its aims and objectives without influencing responses. In some cases an extra degree of sensitivity was required when conducting focus group sessions, especially with reference to the card sort exercise, for example, where participants had a visual impairment, the card exercise would not have been appropriate and would have been left out of the session.

### **Methodological limitations**

The survey method in general and from a theoretical perspective, has some limitations and is widely debated in terms of its usefulness, rigour and appropriateness in the research methods literature. The survey method alone cannot adequately establish causal relationships between certain variables and outcomes or circumstance, and quantitative surveys do not describe the meaningful aspects of social action or the contexts of human beliefs and actions (De Vaus, 1993). Disadvantages of the telephone survey method in particular relate to problems with contextual clarity and respondent understanding of the question being asked. Long questions for example may be difficult for the respondent to follow and remember, and complex questions that require multiple choice selections or scaled responses are difficult to interpret over the telephone (Wiggins and Deeb-Sossa, 2000). Postal surveys designed for self-completion have psychological and cognitive benefits for the respondent in this respect. In comparison to face-to-face survey interviews, the inability to use multiple channels of communication (body language; visual aids) can be another disadvantage of the telephone survey method (Thomas and Purdon, 1994). The commissioning of ICM (in light of their experience and reputation in the market research field) was considered an effective way to ensure quality in the quantitative stages of the research and help to overcome any potential limitations of the telephone survey method.

The survey was intended to provide a snap-shot of public opinion which would be used to inform and structure the qualitative stages of the research. It was not regarded as the only source of conclusive evidence.

The focus group method from a strategic point of view had its limitations within this project to a certain extent in terms of the difficulties experienced when recruiting focus group participants on a national level, and the subsequent anomalies in sample size and quality.

It is important to note that the limitations of the individual research methods are particular to those methods when used in isolation. The process of methodological triangulation compensates for the individual weaknesses in many research cases, and was felt particularly appropriate within this project, particularly in placing an emphasis on the importance of qualitative research in establishing public perceptions and values.

### **Approaches to data analysis**

Data analysis has been informed and inspired by approaches to research fieldwork and the ways in which themes and patterns have emerged throughout the research process. Using a 'pattern matching' technique the report is structured using recurring analytical themes, which are in turn used to present key findings and summaries. The process of establishing themes within the data via the pattern matching technique has been guided by the main research objectives as outlined in the introductory chapter. Maintaining the key concepts of the research within each stage of research instrument design has facilitated this approach. Themed analysis in qualitative research helps to discover and identify relationships and connections within and across domains (Rice-Lively, 1997). Such an approach to data analysis has helped to establish similarities and differences between the demographic and regional variables used in this study.

#### 4. Data analysis and research findings

Data analysis includes evidence and findings from all methodological approaches, including evidence from the literature, survey results and focus group and workshop quotations and analysis. Research findings are presented under the following key headings:

- Accessibility, immediacy and information needs
- Empowerment and apathy
- Trust versus use
- The construction of image and public ownership
- MLA role and value

##### 4.1 Accessibility, immediacy and information needs

Speed, complexity, volume and accuracy can often compete with each other, and create tensions with regard to information seeking. (McLuhan 1964; Toffler 1984; Harvey 1990; Case 2002; Webster 2002). The electronic and print media can offer a level of immediate access to information on a day-to-day basis but, as recent events show, at the expense of accuracy. For example the notorious “sexing up” broadcast by Andrew Gilligan fell well below the degree of accuracy one might expect from the BBC and public service information professionals. Those responsible failed to make elementary checks, and jumped to too many conclusions in their search for an immediate headline. On the other hand, some forms of data are time critical. The faster such data can be turned into an actionable, consumable form, the more competitive they are (Firestone, 1999; Gleick, 2000; Webster, 2002). A recent survey of trust in the political process (Burrell, 2004) indicated that 55% of respondents get most of their news from television; 26% from newspapers; 4% the internet and 1% quoted ‘other’ sources.

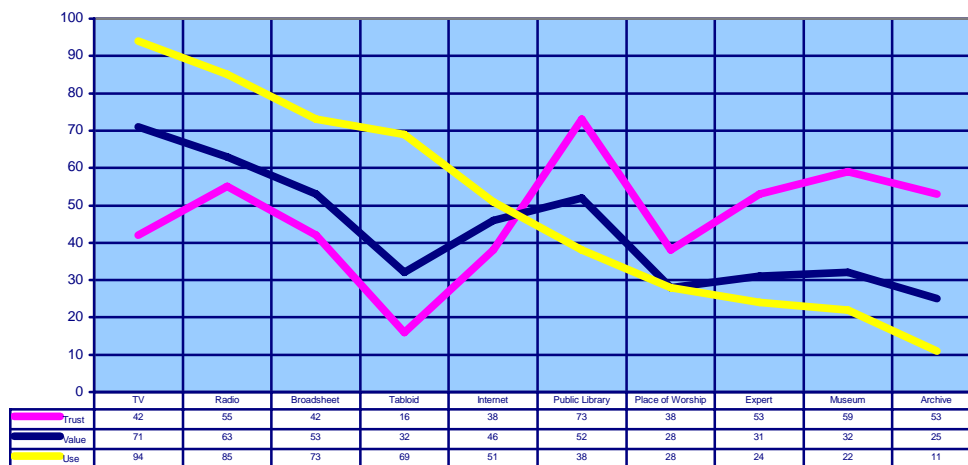


Table 1

Table 1 (above) represents the levels of 'value', 'trust' and 'use' afforded to each of the quoted information sources by telephone survey respondents. This clearly demonstrates an inverse relationship between the information sources that are trusted and valued the most, and those that are used the most. There is clearly a dichotomy between immediacy and accessibility of information sources and the perceived levels of accuracy, authenticity and reliability that each source represents. The qualitative stages of research allowed an exploration of how these factors compete with one another in terms of how respondents seek information on current social and political concerns, and of whether or not speed and immediacy were of the highest priority as the survey results suggest.

Focus group respondents instinctively associated information needs with respect to major social and political concerns with immediacy and convenience in terms of the types of information sources used. When speaking of keeping 'up to date' in terms of headline news and general awareness, the information sources which most complimented busy lifestyles and daily routines were the most heavily used. These included, listening to the radio in the car, checking the internet from work desks, watching TV whilst eating dinner and so on. Respondents commented on a 'habitual' nature to their information consumption, and considered this more of a contemporary inevitability than a conscious desire. This corresponds to Hektor's 'habitual monitoring' stage in his model of information behaviour in everyday life mentioned in the previous chapter (Hektor, 2003). Other respondents noted that the accessibility of information from the 'comfort zone' at home negated the need to make a concerted effort to consult more rigorous information sources:

"Life has just moved on so quickly, and people are just constantly on the move nowadays... if you can watch the TV whilst doing the ironing and kill two birds with one stone then why go to the library" (Parents, South East)

"It's about convenience really... I mean you can check the internet on the bus on your mobile phone... we're becoming more and more spoon-fed as a society!" (Midlands, MLA users)

"Surely most of the big issues of the day are of the immediacy of the news. The newspapers and the magazines and the radio...you wouldn't go in to a museum to find out something you badly needed to know connected with the health service would you?" (MLA users, East of England)

"You pick up the surface detail of things quite easily as you go about your daily business, particularly if you are a newspaper reader or radio listener... and if you have a desk job whereby you can check the news on the internet very easily... and I suppose if you're asking why we use those sources the that's exactly why, because it's so easy to access them without having to go out of your way" (Parents, Midlands)

"It's just laziness. A book will tell you more information and you'll probably have a better idea after reading a book, but it's quicker on TV." (18-25, Northern Ireland)

"The thing is it's so easy to buy a newspaper, everyone likes reading them when they're on their lunch break and things like that. People don't go to libraries." (East of England, 18-25)

"Its laziness isn't it?! Although is it when you've got so much going on already? You acquire information as you do 101 other things, so you almost have to go for the easy option"  
(Northwest, Parents)

Respondents also commented on the convenience of the internet for providing immediate access to more thorough and rigorous information sources, such as research findings and official reports, which may take a considerably longer length of time to access in 'hard copy' format. It was observed that it can take a long time for publications to become available in library stock and collections:

"For modern research, like healthcare, you will want research that is the most recent, and for that, the internet is best. As it takes a while for research to be published in book form, it could be out of date. Like if you wanted new discoveries in medicine which haven't been published yet, you can look for cases such as in America, which wouldn't be in a book yet." (South West, MLA users)

"If you did consider using a library, then the immediacy of the issue might prevent you finding anything out... like 'x' said earlier, they might not have the relevant report yet, or any information actually available yet" (Midlands, MLA users)

Respondents suggested that a certain sense of conformity is inherent in the way that people select, judge and believe or reject their chosen sources of accessible news information. Again, this fits in to a habitual theory behind news and information consumption. Once an individual is satisfied with the information they receive from a certain publication, for example a certain newspaper, they tend to purchase the same newspaper on a habitual basis and trust to a certain extent, or at least be willing to accept, the information they receive:

"When you're talking about current issues, you've got to be reliant on current media; newspapers, television, radio and so forth. Part of the problem there is judging how independent they are in their opinions. How trustworthy they are in their opinions. Some of the time you're listening and thinking "hmm... not too sure about whether that's a fact or opinion". Some of it is initial research, looking at newspapers and saying "This is the one I think truly represents issues properly" and that's the one I'll take to get my opinions from. But having made that decision personally, I don't really venture out and see what the other one's say to get a cross-range of opinions. I tend to rely on people reporting on what's said in our newspaper." (East of England, parents)

Younger respondents indicated more casual methods of information retrieval which combined social behaviour and leisure activities, such as reading magazines and talking to friends. Their social and study environment also facilitated other information sources, such as leaflets available from college reception areas and student union buildings, college newsletters and lectures. Generally the consultation of more specific news information sources was motivated by study or professional concerns:

"Sometimes, for information for uni, I'd use the Guardian for social issues... because that's my line of work, social problems" (North West, 18-25)

The inclination of younger people to opt for more visible, contemporary information sources which conform to social and learning needs was also commented on from a leisure and entertainment perspective, with reference to a decline in the use of traditional cultural resources amongst the younger population. This in turn has an effect on how younger groups perceive and use information sources from a consumer perspective, in terms of their aesthetic and visual attraction and technological effects:

“It’s inevitable... with such rapid changes in technology and how this affects the leisure and entertainment industry... it doesn’t just affect libraries and museums but other cultural sectors too... how many young people visit the theatre for example? And you can make assumptions about the type of young person that does based on class and affluence but historically the working class were big theatre goers... now they might go to the cinema instead”.  
(RPK FG, Parents, Midlands)

“Because you don’t get books that move, do you? Whereas on the internet you’ve got animations and they’ll actually show you footage of... like if you look up World War 1 in a book, you don’t see planes flying around and stuff, whereas on the internet they’ll have video clips and stuff like that.” (East of England, 18-25)

A central element of the present project is to determine the sources used, not just to acquire superficial information, but in order to obtain a "*fuller understanding*" of socio-political issues. At one level the majority of people's perceived information requirements can be satisfied through nominal, easily available and readily comprehensible sources. To this end the news bulletins of the broadcast, print and web media appear to serve the majority of the populations' requirements. However, in order to more fully engage with the issues a degree of complexity, context and nuance may be necessary. Instant newscasts can rarely offer the degree of detail needed to see the issues from multiple perspectives, or allow the meditation required to form considered opinions. The quantity of information surrounding many of the chosen issues is immense, and the ability to sift and absorb such material requires time, a quality that news broadcasts by their very nature do not possess. It is perhaps at this stage that people turn to other sources. The results from the telephone survey indicate that more than one third (38%) of respondents used public libraries, and more than one fifth (22%) and one tenth (11%) respectively chose to use a museum or an archive in order to gain a *fuller understanding* of complex issues.

Respondents generally associated the formation of a deeper understanding of social and political concerns with a need to understand the context surrounding such issues, particularly from a historical perspective. It is this motivation that would encourage the use of wider information sources and a more considered approach, particularly in terms of published sources and the 'written word'. Often, the pursuit of a 'deeper understanding' will involve the consultation of particular documents and reports, whereby libraries and archives are the only relevant source, but such specific information pursuits are more infrequent than the general consumption of newsworthy information. Respondents expressed some confusion over the role of an archive service in

understanding contemporary concerns, and noted that this may become a secondary use further to visiting such services for other, more recreational purposes:

“It’s not historic, that’s the problem with some of the web stuff, it’s fairly current, if you wanted to dig into it you’d need to find somewhere where it’s written down in some form, that takes you away from the web once you get into it.” (East of England, parents)

“If I knew there was a white paper on something that’s been published by the government and I’m desperate to see it, I’d go to the library to have a look at it, but that’s not something I’d do very often.” (Scotland, MLA users)

“I think if you’re looking for something specific like, say, education, looking at which is the best University for your needs, you might be likely to go to libraries and look at the tables, the information there. Speaking personally, it has to be that specific, I wouldn’t normally go to the library to find out general information. I would use it for specific information.” (Wales, MLA users)

“I wouldn’t have thought of coming into the records office for any of those headings. To start using a records office, again, there would have to be a specific reason. It would probably start with trying to trace a family, ancestor or something. Then, I would possibly realise what was on offer. But to get through the door in the first place I would have to have a very specific query. I wouldn’t think of using it for those.” (Wales, MLA users)

Generally speaking, focus groups respondents did not consciously seek more information and a deeper understanding of the five identified socio-political concerns unless they were able to personalise the issue and give it meaning and relevance to their selves, families, personal interests, political persuasion or professional responsibilities. Knowledge and general awareness of major issues was assumed to take place on an inevitable, gradual basis but was not actively sought. The gradual acquisition of information was believed to take place on a daily basis by routine habitual procedures such as reading the daily newspaper and watching news programmes. Conversation, discussion and debate play an important role in aiding people’s understanding of and emotional responses to social and political events, particularly for those respondents in the older age category:

“Some of these bigger issues, like foreign policy and defence... you don’t really seek more information on a day to day basis... you would naturally learn more as you read more newspapers or read more news reports. That doesn’t mean you’re not interested... I think most people, certainly people here with jobs, kids, study to do, just wouldn’t have the time” (North West, parents)

“If it affects me then I go further. But I don’t go for general knowledge.” (Wales, 55+)

“Discussing other political issues can help you to understand them, or rationalise them... It can help you to understand what side of the fence you’re on, or is that argument rather than discussion!” (North West, 55+)

“I have the radio on in the car. There’s more discussion on the radio isn’t there? They will talk about the issues once the news has been reported”. (North West, 55+)

Recent research has shown that the main reason cited by respondents for not visiting a museum or art gallery in the past twelve months was not having the time or the opportunity or being 'too busy' (MLA, 'Visitors to Museums and Galleries 2004'). Focus group respondents suggested that where there may be an interest in developing a deeper understanding of social and political issues, time and the demands of a busy lifestyle were often inhibiting factors. In their contemporary context, lifestyle of users and perhaps more importantly non-users are an important variable in measuring the impact and value of the services that museums libraries and archives provide, and the conditions under which their services are operated:

"You don't get as much from the media, but it is quicker. When I retire I may spend more time with the deeper understanding, but for the mainstream, media is quicker. You never stop learning. I think TV and radio are informative but not in depth". (MLA users, Northern Ireland)

"Time really... if you live here. I mean people here on holiday will put time aside to visit the museum. You only really have that luxury when you are on holiday" (South East, parents)

"I think because of these issues, there will also be a limit to how much of our lives we can actually give up to keep yourself informed about these, I think I'm reasonably well informed. These are very important issues, but there is a limit to how much you can know. I've got other parts of my life to deal with." (Scotland, MLA users)

"Time will affect the library use as well... if you're busy and the book you're after is available on Amazon with 20% off then Bob's your uncle, just order it from work and have it arrive on your doorstep three days later... it's a matter of convenience" (South East, parents)

Linked to the time that needs to be set apart to visit a library, museum and archive, distance can also be a barrier, particularly for potential users living in rural or isolated locations where there are no local cultural amenities. In some rural communities, the mobile library is still highly valued and regarded as a service that must be maintained. In the words of one respondent:

"The most heartening thing to me is travelling libraries; I think that's a wonderful thing for the community. I hope it never stops; there'd be a riot if it did. People rely on it. When you ask them what's the value of this, 60% might be novels people read, the other 40% might be educational books and expanding their knowledge. To me that's a very necessary thing. People can come to museums, but people who can't come to museums at least have the library at their doorstep. It's very very useful." (Northern Ireland, MLA users).

Other respondents discussed the "distance barrier" to the use of museum services:

"Distance, often. Because if they're really worthwhile they're quite specialised, I'm thinking on the east end of London they've got some lovely museums there but you've got to get to London to actually see it. It's unfortunate. You can have a thought of the museum moving around the country, they could have an exhibition or a show or a particular show which came up from one of the east end museums, it could then travel the country, but that's not easily organised." (East of England, parents)

“Another issue is location of your organisation. For some of the public it is not really convenient to reach us”. (Northern Ireland, MLA professionals)

It has been stated that ‘one test of a democracy is whether it grants equal access to the tools that make knowledge possible’ (New York Times editorial 16.11.98). The need to ensure equity in the distribution of services is one of the factors that distinguish public sector organizations such as archives libraries and museums from those in the commercial world. However, some debate remains in the professional literature about the accessibility of traditional repositories of public knowledge for all citizens. In their observation of the public library service Black and Crann (2002) noted that many of their sample acknowledged exclusion from the public library service based on social circumstance and class position, including the assertion that ‘the people most likely to use public libraries are white, articulate and middle class’. A recent study of visits to museums and galleries concluded that ‘the higher an individual’s social class, household income and education, the more likely they are to visit museums, art galleries and other types of cultural attractions’ (MLA ‘Visitors to Museums and Galleries 2004’).

The survey results indicate that that the highest percentage of users of the public library service from each social class are from the DE category, but this group represented the lowest percentage of visitors to museums and archives (see table 2). The highest percentage of visitors to museums was from social class AB, as suggested by previous museum visitor studies.

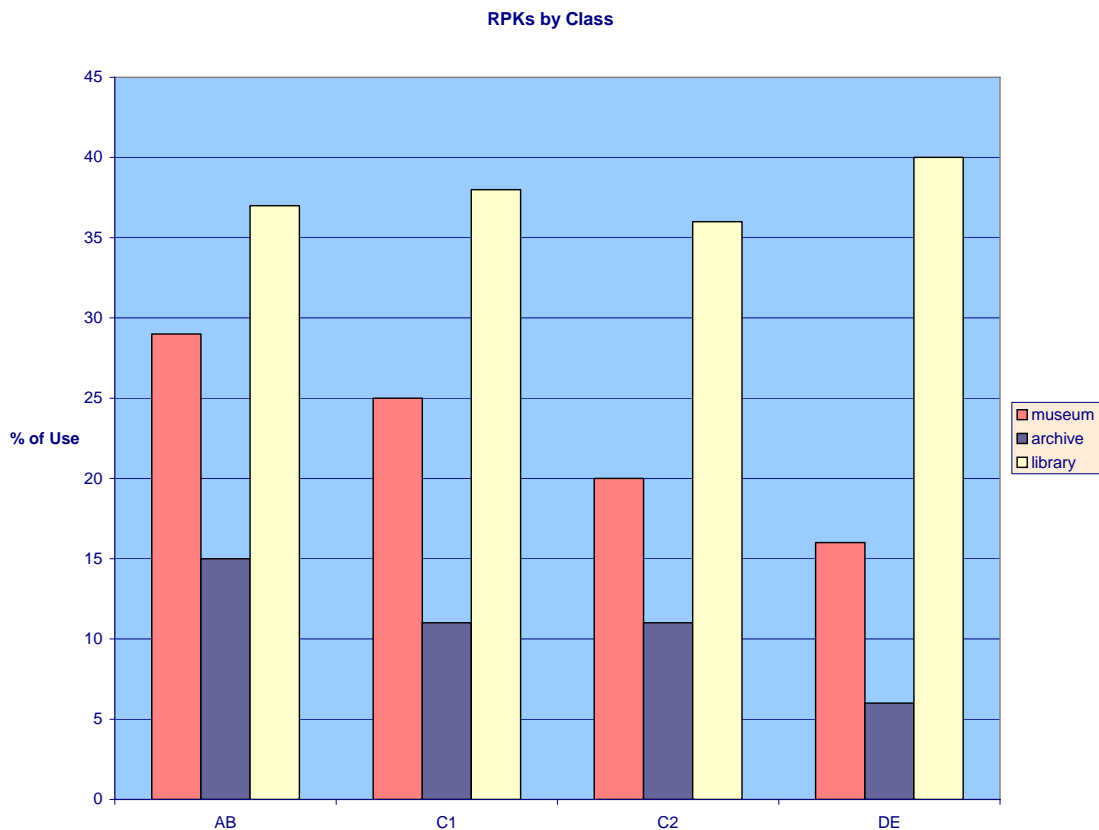


Table 2

In a study of parents and their information needs, Nicholas and Marden (1998) observed that only a very small percentage of their sample mentioned libraries as a source of information for parenting, despite the need for alternative information on health and childcare problems or the latest research findings. The most popular sources of information in the Nicholas and Marden study were organizations such as clinics and hospitals and professionals including health visitors, social workers and general practitioners. Although a large proportion of the sample used public libraries for other purposes, they were seen as inappropriate information sources because, amongst other reasons, of their inadequate opening hours. In a controversial report examining responsibility for the public library service, Coates (2004) advises that the service is failing its communities by having inadequate opening hours for a consumer society, and recommends longer opening hours and weekend services akin to those offered by commercial high street booksellers. Many focus group respondents raised the issue of inappropriate opening hours across the three domains with reference to when users are most likely to have the time to visit them, namely evenings and weekends. This was seen as a major barrier to museum library and archive use and value.

“Museums shouldn’t expect to continue to be successful, running the same way they were 50 years ago. They can’t. If you go to the continent, their museums, they will stay open ‘til 8-9 o’clock, they’re better, you can’t expect to keep on going with the same museum that you had.” (East of England, MLA users)

“It can be inaccessible, my local library is only open during working hours and a few hours in the morning on a Saturday, if you can’t get there in those few hours then you don’t go there. The internet, you can sit there all night, or at the end of a day.” (South West, MLA users)

“I noticed libraries always shut on a Saturday at about lunch time, some of them don’t actually open. That’s when people could use them. The central library opens at 10.30, they’ve also cut the evening. You used to be able to go in there until about 9 o’clock, that’s been cut. Maybe because of staff shortages and money, that kind of thing, but it does worry me that if we do own them, why aren’t they supplying us with convenient times.” (Scotland, MLA users)

When discussing existing and potential barriers to the use of museums libraries and archives for the general public, respondents often cited a lack of awareness on the public’s behalf of what these services have to offer. In a study of obstacles to the utilization of information held by archival institutions, Kemoni et al (2003) reported similar findings in the lack of recognition, both on behalf of the wider potential research community, officials and the archives themselves on the importance and relevance of archive services. Williamson (2000) states that publicity, or rather a lack of, is one of the major tenets of the public sphere as a whole, as many authorities that adopt an integrative approach to service delivery fail to publicise their services appropriately. Users are expected to simply know about the services on offer, which are not promoted explicitly. This is an obvious cause for concern for non-users of traditional repositories of public knowledge, and residents who are new to their areas and are unaware of the services provided by museums libraries and archives in the vicinity:

Data from the focus groups revealed a wide ignorance of the work of RPKs:

“Also people don’t know what archives do. If you say to someone you’re a brain surgeon or a nuclear physicist, they’d have some vague idea what you do. But if you said you’re an archivist they wouldn’t know. That’s something which the profession as a whole need to get over.” (Scotland, MLA professionals)

“Lack of understanding of what those organisations, institutions, whatever, have to offer, because it’s not always clear.” (East of England, MLA professionals)

“I know there is an archive in Sheffield but I wouldn’t really have a clue a, where it is, b, how you can go about using it, when its open, this is a general point of view that you don’t see a lot of information about it”. (Yorkshire, MLA users)

“People don’t know about what they’re for. There’s the intimidation factor. It’s very difficult to get into a lot of archives just because there are stairs everywhere, it’s difficult physical access to the building. There’s also the perception. There’s a whole different perception to reality. We looked at our visitors and our home visitors, because very often what you think something is about can be a barrier. That’s very important to be aware of that. I think we have to look at how people live their lives today. Attitudes have changed completely. It can be a contentious issue.” (Scotland, MLA professionals)

“I suppose the profile of a place; most people know what a public library is, and the same with a museum. But maybe not for a records office... Once you’ve used any of these facilities, then you realise the other things that you haven’t explored. But you realise what facilities the reference library has, then you can keep it in reserve for the future.” (Wales, MLA users)

“Resources like libraries or museums, although they are moving on in becoming more modern resources, that’s not publicised enough, and we don’t have as much input in to that as we should” (Yorkshire, 18-25)

“It’s an important place to new people of the town as well... we’re becoming a bit of a commuter belt... especially for young families...there are marvellous kids activities at the libraries. I think they need to publicise them a bit more though. You don’t really know about them unless you come here in the first place” (North West, MLA users)

A lack of general knowledge on the range of services available at museums libraries and archives was perceived as a major barrier to the general use of cultural services. With reference to their role as information sources, particularly with regard to contemporary social and political concerns, it was felt that more could be done in terms of publicity and promotion to raise awareness of the range of *information* sources available courtesy of traditional repositories of public knowledge:

“I think the library could do more to promote books on current political topics... I don’t think I would come here and actually look for those kind of books, but I might be interested in reading them if I knew they were available” (Midlands, MLA users)

In a study of motivators and demotivators influencing academic staff use of university libraries, Mills and Bannister (2001) discuss two categories of barrier, including those coming from the source itself (such as a library database or catalogue) and the images (mental constructions) associated with

the source, both positive and negative. They found that past experience was very much a determinant of future action, in that bad experiences with unsuccessful outcomes help to create negative images of the library service and self-constructed barriers to future use. Furthermore, positive early years experiences encourage continued use throughout life. Linked to themes of bad experiences are issues surrounding confidence in one's ability to use the services and to successfully obtain the information we are seeking. Many focus group respondents reflected this view:

"I think as far as archives go, they tend to be rather intimidating buildings. Certainly the national archives, I mean I'm used to it now, I've been going there 14 years, but the first time I went I was very glad that somebody I knew, that knew the place took me. Showed me where to apply for my ticket. I was nervous. I know people might find the library intimidating too"  
(Scotland, MLA users)

"Those people you talk to who go to a library, its often because they were taken as a child, that's why I've got in to it... its become a habit". (Yorkshire, MLA users)

"I think they're accessible its just in the past we've chosen not to... there are easier ways of getting information now. If I go in to a library, it's very difficult for me to find a book that I want anyway or that I need... I find it very very difficult... I think its because years ago, you weren't really seen to be able to go in to a library, its too complicated, everything's too complicated for me, I like simple things" (North West, 18-25)

"When I took my boys to join our main library, there were other kids in there, and the lady on the desk was quite abrupt and dismissive with them. They might have been a bit cheeky I suppose, but kids are. I suppose that's an answer to what stops people using them isn't it? If you have a bad experience you won't go back. I don't suppose those kids would be very bothered if the library closed down!" (North West, parents)

Focus group respondents provided evidence of how new media are being used to increase access and awareness of museum library and archive services. The growth of the People's Network in attracting new library users, the use of online catalogues and the digitisation of archive and museum collections were cited as particularly successful and exciting opportunities to 'open doors' to new audiences and increase awareness and publicity. Perhaps more importantly, and of extra significance to this study, digitisation and the growth in electronic cultural resources is providing a gateway for the 'commonality of purpose' between museums libraries and archives, and opening up working relationships between the three sectors for both professionals, users and potential users alike.

"I have noticed that... I pointed out to people the national archives and the Scottish archives network, online catalogue as well. People said "Oh, great". Said that they would go and have a look at it. These are just ordinary folk, who may be tracing their family, doing some local history, tracing something. I think it's exciting because it's on the internet, then they believe it."  
(Scotland, MLA users)

"I re-joined the public library in Belfast last summer, I was interested to know by joining you had access to broadband, which I didn't realise, and then I used the library over a period of a couple of months" (Northern Ireland, 55+)

“On the internet you can get information on any archive in Britain, get the catalogue reference, then they can phone through and go there, or they can get a copy sent abroad, even. Without the website, those people wouldn’t know in the first place.” (South West, MLA users)

“Museums are putting their stuff on the web sites, telling you everything about them. It’s not actually the same, though, as standing in front of a real painting. But at least you can find out what’s there beforehand.” (Wales, 55+)

“But if you wanted to search for a historical context, you would hit the national history museum. Or in London, at the British Museum. But depends on what you want information on. Here that’s not going to be dreadfully accessible. Through the net perhaps”. (Northern Ireland, 55+)

“If you then wanted to compare that in history, to go back a bit, where libraries are limited in a sense, we will have print material, we have books which may have life in the fifties, or life in the sixties, but what it won’t give you is artefacts or real examples of those sorts of things and that’s where museums and archives I think are crucial resources... So for instance you could go on the Birmingham libraries website and look at local photographs on Birmingham through the last 100 years, and you can equally go on to the museums website and you could probably get history on them as well, so it’s looking at ways at trying to bring those together I think and trying to link them so that if people are looking for that topic it’s almost like a gateway” (Midlands, MLA professionals)

## Accessibility, immediacy and information needs

### Summary

- Information needs with respect to contemporary social and political concerns are instinctively associated with speed, immediacy and accessibility. As such, consequent information seeking behaviours involve the consultation of convenient information sources that compliment daily routines and responsibilities. This is typical of all demographic groups and does not differ according to region
- Immediately accessible sources of information such as newspapers, television and the internet are perceived as preferable despite the relatively low levels of trust and value placed in them
- Museums libraries and archives are not therefore *immediately* associated with the provision of information on current social and political concerns
- Younger respondents (18-25 age group) are more likely to refer to information sources that 'fit in' to social and educational activity, and are more attracted to interactive multi-media sources of information
- Older respondents (55+ age group) look for an element of discussion in seeking to understand social and political concerns, and as such are drawn to radio programmes and opportunities for debate
- Respondents of all age and demographic did not consciously seek a 'deeper understanding' of social and political concerns unless the issue was of some personal relevance to them
- Busy lifestyles and the consequent pressures on available time limit the opportunity to seek a deeper understanding of social and political concerns, and limit respondents to more immediately accessible information sources than museums libraries and archives
- Respondents living in rural locations experience isolation from traditional repositories of public knowledge and still rely heavily upon mobile public library services
- Museums and archives are still predominantly used by higher social classes, although the public library service has a higher percentage of social class DE users
- Inappropriate and inconvenient opening hours are perceived as a *major* barrier to the use and value of museums libraries and archives in an information seeking context
- Inadequate marketing and publicity are a key concern for museums libraries and archives, as a lack of awareness on the services provided by these organisations is perceived as a major barrier by respondents from across the sample
- The growing use of electronic resources and digitisation across the three domains is seen as a very positive and effective step in increasing access to, and awareness of Museum library and archive services

## 4.2 Empowerment and apathy

*"The British way has always been much more than self-interested individualism... They knew that prosperity and improvement must be founded on something more and something greater than harsh organised selfishness: instead a sense of social obligation - often infused with religious values - and a broad moral commitment to civic improvement."  
(Gordon Brown National Council for Voluntary Organisations Annual Conference 2004)*

*"Because there are so many people in the world, one vote isn't going to make a difference anyway, is it?"  
(East of England focus group, 18-25)*

*"Frankly, I really don't think a lot of these topics, apart from law and order and education, people wouldn't go very deep, they just say 'out of my control' and leave it as so. Total apathy". (Yorkshire, 55+)*

The choice of information sources used may say more about the population's sense of engagement with particular issues than it does about the mediums through which they choose to receive their information. Is there perhaps a general malaise about fully engaging with social political matters? Focus group respondents were reluctant to concede apathetic tendencies when pressed to define the extent to which they become 'fully informed citizens' and at which point this is achieved. Many respondents asserted that time, or rather lack of, was a huge barrier to becoming fully politically engaged and taking full advantage of the range of 'less immediate' information sources available to them. Respondents expressed concerns over how to define and interpret the phrase 'fully informed' as the extent to which individuals achieve a satisfactory level of informed status will be subject to personal information needs, and their 'real world' capacity for knowledge in relation to family, work and lifestyle responsibilities:

*"Life's short, and an awful lot of things that come under those headings, I have to admit I have a brief knowledge of and I'm happy with that, whereas the things I'm more interested in, I get more involved in and will feel more authoritative about. I think unless you've got a lot of spare time, its difficult to get knowledgeable background" (Yorkshire, MLA users)*

*"I don't think you can ever reach a conscious conclusion on how informed you are... it's the whole 'knowledge is power' thing... can you ever know enough? In a real sense you have to draw the line... not consciously I agree, but that's why it all becomes so habitual... it has to fit in with everything else" (Parents, Midlands)*

*"I don't know if I ever recognise the point that I know enough... once I am able to make a decision I suppose... Once you come to a personal conclusion ... when you know how you feel about it, or when you've established an opinion" (Midlands, MLA users)*

*"I think the public information is excellent. It is available; the problem is people making use of it, because they're so busy. I love listening to the news and thinking 'I wish I could do something about that', but you get frustrated. The information is there but people don't have the time to dig deeper" (MLA users, Northern Ireland)*

*"It's about having a political consciousness or an aptitude for it... most of it really is about an interest in human rights, the popular journalism stuff I mean... that may be determined by*

your side of the fence but the extent to which you read up on such topics wouldn't be... you can still be interested and have an opinion but not necessarily spend huge amounts of time reading about it" (Midlands, MLA users)

Part of this might reflect a willingness to relinquish control of such issues to specialists or experts. Kingrey (2002) describes that a certain amount of risk and vulnerability is applied to people's information seeking and development of a fuller understanding in terms of having to admit what is not known, or only partially known, opening oneself up to new knowledge and a negotiation between the self and the larger world in which the seekers identity and social status are both vulnerable. Brookes et al (2004) argue that media and politicians in partnership generate public disengagement and apathy by only offering the public a limited and passive role in political discussion and media presentation, which in turn makes media and political elites the key players. Indeed there are a variety of reasons for not seeking a fuller understanding about the issues of the day. Case (2002), for example, in a recent review of the literature discusses the idea of information overload as a reason for not seeking further information. He argues:

"We often think of information reducing anxiety, but such is not always the case... If one cannot address anxiety by taking action, a typical result of anxiety is lowered performance and less enjoyment, whether on the job or in one's personal life. We often feel that way about information because we do not control its production and dissemination, and the environment bombards us with plenty of it"

Focus group respondents supported this view, which affects not only the information sources consulted, but the attention paid to specific reports and concerns:

"Sometimes you have to be particularly interested to even read the full news story... I certainly don't read the paper word for word... I'd skim through a story on Palestine/Israel because sometimes I just feel like I've heard it or rather read it all before" (MLA users, North West)

"You have a kind of in-built filtering system don't you... I listen to the radio and I know I switch off... weapons of mass destruction, that will just switch me off and I'm not listening anymore because I'm just sick of hearing about it... you can tell as well things that will get people going, people who might not be interested in day-to-day news... things about children or health scares... people who don't see themselves as active citizens... that's the sort of news that people galvanize and want more information". (Yorkshire, MLA professionals)

Some respondents acquired information via special interest groups, or groups and organisations that conform to particular social, political and ethical beliefs and concerns. This illustrates a very particular sense of empowerment in information seeking and consumption, and one that is inspired by a pre-determined set of personal rules, knowledge and obligations. Professional and educational circumstances also encourage increased awareness of specialised sources, and more importantly, access to them. In this respect the internet has increased access to professional journals and publications from the workspace, reducing the need to visit libraries for some, not all, official sources of information. The same can be said of knowledge and awareness of

specialist publications, and the subsequent pre-informed action taken when consulting such sources. An individual's lifestyle in terms of their occupation and career can also affect their general levels of interest in social and political concerns in terms of the opportunity to discuss such topics with colleagues and peers. Such societal pre-determined influences upon engagement and information seeking are evident across the regions and demographic groups:

"Also if you are a member of an individual organisation like Amnesty, as I am, you get quite a lot of information. You get actual information, not views of campaigns but actual information from Amnesty that you don't pick up anywhere else." (East of England, parents)

"I myself was a lecturer in physics. Also some other topics that were of interest of the time. During those days, anything I needed professionally, I always used to go to the university library. That was the most immediate and accessible source of information. If I couldn't find what I needed to there, usually the librarian there or other indicators would direct me to an appropriate place." (Scotland, MLA users)

"I find also in a work context, if you want to find out information for clients, for example a heart transplant, where you can actually go on to the journal, on the BMA website, British Medical Association, and actually find out what the process is... That's extremely useful for an advisor to be able to do that. Finding out that information in the past would have been a nightmare". (Northern Ireland, 55+)

"The education part is the main part for me. I read TES, you have to know all about the government initiatives on education, who's bringing up what... I have to know it all to be a good teacher." (South West, 18-25)

"I would be prepared to use the library for more serious research because I went to uni and wouldn't feel intimidated by it... but I'm not sure that would happen in reality... unless it was somehow connected to further study or work The same for archives... but it would involve real effort to do that and you have to have real time and inclination, and a specific reason for doing it. Otherwise there are so many easier options... namely the internet. The quality of info on there is improving all the time; especially if you have access to academic sources... e-journals are an absolute god-send!" (North West, MLA users)

"If you look at things broadly, at things of particular interest to you, then you would start looking at professional journals and so on... Like the things we were discussing this morning... learning and global impact... so that's when you will go to a seminar, or speak to a colleague about it". (Yorkshire, MLA professionals)

"If I wanted information that was fairly specific, supposing I had been confused by some of the radio and the broadsheet bits then I might go for specialist publications. I might go for, for instance, the Spectator or the Economist or something like that. Trying to get an analytical article in one of those to help me. I don't trust tabloids at all." (East of England, parents)

"Things like foreign policies, these things, we don't really touch upon... I think it's a different matter when you're actively employed, where you're meeting a community of the day, if you're going into an office and you've got colleagues there, then these subjects come up. They come up far less often at home, with the family." (Wales, 55+)

Yet another perspective relates to Giddens' (1994) surveillance activities that contribute in the production of an individual consumer's lifestyle. This involves what Lash and Urry call 'semiological' collecting (1994) whereby signs and meanings are accumulated as social and cultural capital. This may be an

unconscious, culturally embedded behaviour which motivates people to be “in the know”. Work by Fyfe and Ross (1996) with regard to the use of museums appears to support this view. Qualitative evidence suggests that a pre-determined cultural identity, political persuasion, and more evidently ‘lifestyle’, are all key attributes in shaping the extent of one’s political and societal engagement, and subsequent information seeking behaviour. The extent of MLA usage can be affected by factors including parental responsibility, professional identity and societal influences such as educational achievement and upbringing:

“Some people think reading a broadsheet or going to a museum makes you a better person... more intelligent and informed or whatever... but as long as you are aware of different issues, can interpret information accordingly and make decisions in your own right, does it really matter?” (Parents, North West)

“The way I identify with this place [library] in terms of how I own it is as using it as a resource to fulfil my role as a parent and as a young professional working in the city” (Parent, Midlands)

“They’re more institutional I think [central libraries]... they seem less friendly. If a new gallery opened you might visit it out of curiosity or obligation, I don’t think you’d ever really cherish it, unless you’re really in to art or whatever the museum was about... only a lecturer or some sort of professional would visit central library or an archive often enough to have that sense of ownership” (55+, North West)

Personal spaces and environments often encourage more civic engagement, particularly with reference to use and value of cultural resources and traditional repositories of public knowledge. This is especially true when comparing urban and rural environments, and city centres with smaller urban conurbations.

“I think in rural communities like this, when I was a kid, anyway, we didn’t have, in my area, a lending library. There was no way of getting a book, except from the school library. There was no mobile library. There was very little knowledge about museums. Or libraries, come to that.” (Wales, 55+)

“The museums are marvellous in London, we have so many to choose from, especially now that we have the time to use them” (London, 55+)

“We’re very spoilt here in the City of London, we have the Barbican and a gaggle of libraries all within walking distance” (London, MLA users)

Focus group respondents in some instances were keen to make cultural assumptions about the typical MLA user and cultural barriers, which may or may not exist for some groups in society. Parents in particular felt a moral obligation to encourage their children to become library users for example, and limit any future potential barriers, seeing schools and education as the most obvious channel for doing this:

“I suspect it’s not the people like us [MLA non-users]... So many museums, you think of the British Museum and the Liverpool Museum, they’ve got these very imposing and daunting facades... great staircases and columns... [they probably think that] they are for people like us and they’re not for people like the people you’re probably thinking of”. (MLA users, East of England)

"It all stems back to your childhood and early adulthood really... if its normal for you to visit the library then you always will, it gets in your blood. That's why all of us are so keen to bring the children here. It's up to the schools to teach children how to use a library properly and to the libraries to make them see how fun and rewarding it can be". (Parents, South East)

Owens and Palmer (2003) have shown how the internet has provided the opportunity for greater political engagement and activism by altering the power relationship between mainstream and alternative media. The world wide web, they argue, has altered the media landscape of protest by giving activists access to a mass medium that they control themselves, which in turn has widened public discourse and laid foundations for a more 'democratic public sphere'. This democratic 'right to information and understanding' lies at the core of the public service responsibilities of museums libraries and archives and is still highly valued by respondents, but it is not necessarily taken advantage of due to contemporary circumstances such as political cynicism and the attraction of multi-media sources:

"I think the internet has changed that for me, there was a time before when I wouldn't have bothered to write off for a government report whereas now I would be far more ready to go to websites, download something" (Yorkshire, MLA users)

"It's not just to be informed, to be clever, it's to enhance your capacity to interact with other citizens and within the democracy that we're supposed to be living in. Since Tony Blair came into power there is a sense of disengagement which has probably never been stronger. I think the whole disengagement from politics. Institutions like libraries, books, papers etc should be helping people to engage in issues much better"  
(Northern Ireland, 55+)

"The cliché: knowledge is power. I think you need a well-informed population. We have become lazy, as a generation. Information is in front of you with the TV and the media, so we tend not to look outside those resources. It comes more from discussion nowadays – someone may know a different opinion. It comes more from communication rather than going to printed books..."  
(Yorkshire, 18-25)

The literature on information seeking behaviours highlights the infinite number of variables that lead people to seek *fuller understanding*. Gladwell (2002) has identified "tipping points" that cause people to seek out richer information. There is a continuum of information needs ranging from avoidance to active engagement. One of the tipping points may simply be the proximity and ubiquity of resources that provide complex information, as evidenced in the 'habitual' reasoning behind the choice of information sources in focus group discussion. Qualitative evidence suggests a far more personalised 'tipping point' for the extent to which information is sought and acquired. Scale and importance of issue and the extent of personal relevance are regularly cited as the only real motivation behind seeking a 'deeper understanding' of social and political concerns. Emotional and intellectual responses to political events influence information seeking behaviour with reference to the volume and complexity of the information that is sought. This is particular to all demographic groups and includes angry responses to political decisions and situations, and more anxious responses to health scares and concern over

emotional and physical well being of oneself and relatives. This has a two-fold effect in that people may be fearful of too much information and subsequent increased anxiety levels:

“You want to find out more if you think it will affect you, particularly health. I’ll do that by consulting the surgery, or books on the subject. I’ve bought a few books on health issues for women my age! I don’t do it too much though. You can get paranoid and turn in to a real hypochondriac if you believe everything you hear!” (55+, North West)

“I say that, entirely selfishly, I’d probably only look in to something a bit more if I thought it might affect me. So for instance, education... when I did my MA last year, I do remember trying to find out exactly how tuition fees would affect me, basically”. (MLA users, East of England)

“I did when I was pregnant... you know sometimes you read ‘pregnant women shouldn’t do this’ and sometimes I would go and find out the reasons behind it... like the MMR jab and stuff concerning the baby. I needed to know the pros and cons”. (North West, 18-25)

“I have followed that Iraq situation quite closely... mainly hoping for the downfall of Blair and Bush. I’ve mainly done this on the internet and by buying more than one paper, usually broadsheets” (North West, 55+)

Workshop participants raised some issues over conceptual clarity when discussing levels of political engagement and civic interaction, stating that it is often a personal motivation that drives membership of special interest groups and political activism. Thus the personalisation aspect of political engagement and information seeking behaviour is perhaps the most powerful element:

“it is the Friends of the Earth, the Greenpeace, and if you have an illness within the family, people will crowd around issues such as Alzheimer’s, which is where the engagement occurs, and it’s personal engagement whereas civic engagement suggests that you make an attempt to approach the totality, the generic... I think that people are now making the choice that they can’t actually grasp or totally do that and that they can only operate at this single issue level...” (workshop participant)

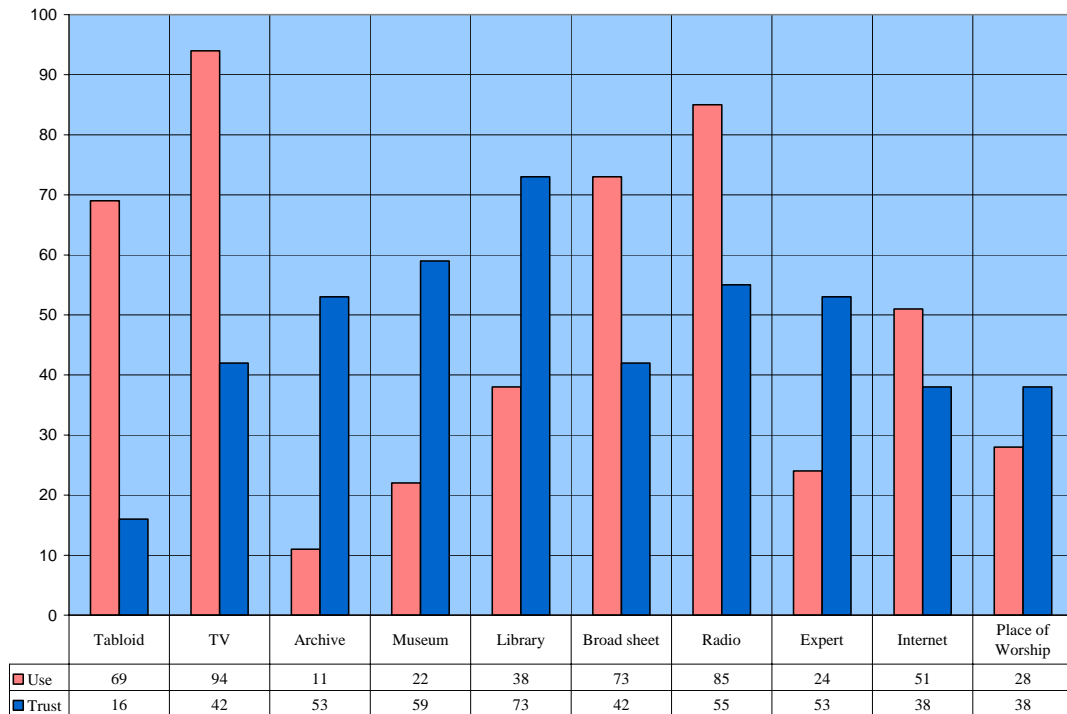
## **Empowerment and apathy**

### ***Summary***

- Respondents associated their lack of developing a 'deeper understanding' of social and political concerns with the pressures of busy lifestyles rather than with any apathetic tendencies
- There is evidence across all the demographic groups and regions consulted that levels of engagement and the relevant sources of information chosen are determined by social and cultural factors such as professional and educational circumstances, social and political beliefs and social systems and peer groups
- The extent to which museums libraries and archives are used and valued is in turn affected by existing sets of principles such as parental responsibility, professional identity, personal environment, educational attitudes and previous experiences; none of which fit in to neat demographic variables such as age, social class or region
- Those respondents belonging to metropolitan areas expressed a greater opportunity for civic and cultural engagement than those living in rural or smaller urban areas; the increased promotion of digital resources may help to redress this imbalance
- In the same way that the internet has provided a mass medium for political discussion, there is great opportunity for museums libraries and archives to reassert their role as democratic public services and facilitate greater political and social debate and engagement
- All respondents have a benchmark of personal relevance and importance for measuring the scale of importance of political and social concerns and the depth of inquiry required
- The personalisation of contemporary concerns can lead to a 'fear factor' in the extent of information sought; this is particularly true with health concerns and increased anxiety levels when faced with 'too much' information. The 'human face' of traditional repositories of public knowledge can act as a reassuring element

### 4.3 Trust versus use

A phenomenon observed from the national telephone survey concerned the discrepancy between the information sources that tended to be the most used and those that were the most highly trusted (see table 3). Public libraries were the most trusted source and tabloid papers the least. Respondent's faith in RPK's recalls Virginia Woolf's observation. "If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where I asked myself, picking up a notebook and pencil, is truth?" (Woolf 1929).



**Table 3**

By and large, with the exception of radio, the sources that were used the most were trusted the least. How might this be explained? Perhaps the public appreciate and use several "pushed" mass media sources (broadcast, print, electronic) to collect together various perspectives in order to form opinions. Although they are wary about their inherent reliability they take advantage of the ubiquitous and near instantaneous information across a wide spectrum of issues. The "pulled" nature of the RPK sources require a greater degree of purposeful seeking on the part of the information consumer. These institutions actually supply a variety of information media from a host of perspectives (including the aforementioned mass media), as opposed to often singular editorial/authorial biases from newspapers, television channels, or web sites; a factor readily acknowledged by focus group participants, but not necessarily taken advantage of:

"The library can be one-stop-shop, lots of books and free access to the internet... Staff who are trained in the resources". (MLA professionals, Northern Ireland)

"The thing about a library is, if it works you can order books, you can get a while range of books that you may just look at for one chapter, which you couldn't do if you were buying them. You can borrow from other libraries all over the country. It's a wonderful resource which I think may have been neglected". (Yorkshire, MLA users)

The issue of trust was an underlying theme to the 2002 Reith Lectures. The lecturer observed:

"Where we can check the information we receive, and when we can go back to those who put it into circulation, we may gain confidence about placing or refusing trust... But where we can do nothing to check or investigate sources of information and their credentials we often and reasonably, withhold trust and suspend both belief and disbelief in favour of cynicism and half belief. We may end up claiming not to trust, and yet for practical purposes place trust in the very sources we claim not to trust" (O'Neill, 2002)

The element of trust placed in mass media resources is widely discussed in the literature, particularly with reference to political issues and public opinion. In a study of British television coverage of the 2001 general election, Brookes et al (2004) observed that journalists invoked public opinion on the election race in various, less ethical ways, including the subtle invocation of public opinion through causal and often unsubstantiated assertions and 'vox pop' views of individual members of the public. The political showcasing in the way that particular opinions and issues are selected for broadcasting, and the resultant restricted opportunities for political participation and discussion, encourages (it is argued) apathy, disengagement and cynicism. Alternatively, a recent article in *The Independent* (Burrell, 2004) reported the results of a survey which indicated that 55% of respondents blamed the politicians themselves for the decline in trust of the political process, whereas 20% of respondents blamed the media. Focus group respondents, in some cases, expressed a cynicism towards journalistic reporting, and the requisite political jingoism, of all kinds:

"the journalist instead of just reporting, they put their own spin on it. They think you're too thick to interpret it yourself. Instead of saying the facts they say their opinions. I don't trust either newspaper. You can look at it and interpret it. There's good and bad stuff, a lot is to do with personal experience." (Scotland, MLA professionals)

"Bush uses the phrase War on terror... these are individuals who are murderers... a War on terror is not with a country that has a policy we disagree with... its blurred for political reasons to provide an excuse to go after Saddam or whatever". (Yorkshire, MLA professionals)

The value and trustworthiness placed in information is affected by the reputation or point of view of those responsible for providing the information (Fenner, 2002). American respondents surveyed by Rosenweig and Thelen (1998) put greater trust in those sources offering various points of view and the facilitation of greater discussion and cited museums, personal accounts and university professors as being more trustworthy than television programmes. The mediated role of MLA information provision increases the value of the information that is provided by such organisations by reducing

barriers in terms of advising users on the appropriate information to consult, providing appropriate interpretation and analysis, advising where to find further information and how to use it (Fenner, 2002). The availability of primary information sources gives museums libraries and archives a higher degree of authenticity. Some respondents placed a higher degree of trust in written, published sources. The removal of certain barriers to information analysis and interpretation in terms of bias or manipulation, also encourages trust and value, and places an emphasis on self-evaluation and analysis:

"It hadn't occurred to me before, that they felt they could go to a library or go to a museum and feel that they got closer to the truth because there wasn't an editor, a film reporter, T.V. camera between them." (East of England, MLA professionals)

"...as a boy from a working class family, I remember at 12 years old being given some information by a teacher which has stood me in good stead all my life, and has been very sensible. He said "So what happens with working class people? If they have got some problem they want to know the answer to, they ask around amongst themselves and they get all sorts of clouded information. If you want to know anything, go to a reference library. Ask them. They can more or less tell you any information you want".  
(Wales focus group, 55+)

"I'm probably talking from a librarians perspective, but I'd still rather go to a text book or a published 'something'... because its published its got provenance or authority or something, and you're tempted to say 'well I believe that more' because its printed". (Yorkshire, MLA professionals)

"And it [television] has to be glamorised to work... it's a visual snappy thing... they warn you that you may find some images disturbing but that's why they've chosen them! There's no real substance... you only really absorb something by reading about it" (South East, parents)

"I have to look for authenticity a lot of the time. If you get stuff off the internet, you have to check the source, because anyone can put it on there. If it's in a book, it's got to be reasonable. TV, radio and the internet is up to date, but you've still got to check authenticity. With the newspaper scandal with those photos that were published... everyone believed them, but it shows you can't really tell what to believe." (South West, 18-25)

"I see the archive as being... it's gathered, it's there, there is less bias. I'm less conscious of anyone pushing a line. An opinion. It's a fact, it's historic." (East of England, parents)

"A key function of libraries is this idea of being neutral, being unbiased, being fair and all-inclusive, so we have information that reflects different opinion, so if you were talking about political information, we will have resources that reflect all different sorts of political information, and obviously if somebody is just watching TV you are only getting in most cases one specific opinion from one particular source, so it's this balance, this neutrality, this feeling of being able to present information which people can balance themselves and look at different opinions, make their own judgements based on a range rather than just being given one point of view" (Midlands, MLA professionals)

"In terms of information I think people see libraries as having a mandate to provide information about government and about the community we live in... and access is seen to be unprejudiced. A religious organisation would have some element of spin" (London, MLA users)

The volume and diversity of information sources held by museums libraries and archives also encourages a sense of trust and value, in providing the opportunity to gain a balanced, considered view point. The level of direction and support offered by staff in the traditional repositories of public knowledge also contributes to the high levels of trust placed in them. The volume of information held by traditional repositories of public knowledge is not only relevant in term of the different sources available to users, but also in the choice and variety of individual sources of information:

“I would trust an archive because they have to keep a broad record. They don’t have an option to pick and choose in quite that way, particularly municipal archives, you keep the lot, that’s what it’s about.” (East of England, MLA professionals)

“I think the library is the best place because it holds all kinds of complex information. I can ask the librarian to direct me towards information on a certain topic.” (Scotland, ethnic minority)

“We take a wide range of national newspapers here, so if people are buying one newspaper they’re getting one particular political point, but having a range of newspapers enables you to look at how different sources are presenting information on a particular point, if you’re looking at how a particular news event or a particular policy or programme is being presented, if you’ve got a range of newspapers you can see the different perspectives to make your own judgement” (Midlands, MLA professionals)

However, the research has shown that people are often willing to sacrifice trust and value in information sources for easily-accessible ‘quick fixes’. Focus group respondents were keen to dismiss the large-scale use of least trusted sources as mere ‘dismissive consumption’, arguing that they had the ability to filter information and decipher fact from fiction, and that the reading of tabloid newspapers is viewed as a passive and simple leisure pursuit. This was noted by respondents from all demographic groups, along with the idea that tabloid newspapers often provide the information you are looking for if you are seeking a viewpoint or opinion rather than absolute fact. Respondents suggested that it is always the most accessible resources that are more widely used and least trusted, as it is the elusive, ‘esteemed’ quality of less available resources which implies and encourages such trust to begin with. Multi-media sources are seen as spectacles; something which might draw attention to an issue using popular and recognisable formats:

“Televisions are sometimes good at drawing attention to a subject... a reputable journalist would help”. (Northern Ireland, MLA users)

“People will use the services that they trust the least because that’s what they have at their disposal... I might trust a university or expert more than I would trust the television but it’s the TV I see in my lounge every morning so I’ll switch it on. I mean I would probably trust a Mercedes more than I would my little Punto, but it’s the Punto I use to drive the children round because that’s what I can afford!” (Ethnic minority, South East)

“They [tabloid newspapers] do draw you in and you can’t help but kind of spot something else and maybe read it... it’s just fun and superficial... it’s a source of information that you can easily come across everyday, and you will read it even if you don’t trust it... it’s a sound bite kind of thing... you don’t take it in”. (18-25, North West)

“They [tabloids] are read more for entertainment purposes now anyway... that may have always been the case... they’re all about Posh and Becks and reality TV rather than real political issues! I think it would be hard to misinterpret information when there isn’t really any there!” (MLA users, Midlands)

“Even a tabloid newspaper, because with that, you know what the bias is. With other sources it may be much more difficult to detect the bias. I would go to a tabloid newspaper if I was looking for a viewpoint, I wouldn’t necessarily trust it but I would be getting a viewpoint. It would depend on what I was looking for. I can’t just say I would rule out anything.” (Scotland, MLA professionals)

“If people are using the sources they trust the least, then they’re probably taking them with a huge pinch of salt... there is a difference between using and believing”. (18-25, South east)

There is evidence to suggest that trust plays a part in the use of the most accessible information sources such as the internet; a source which is quoted as being less trustworthy because of its unmediated services and discrepancies in content quality. This can be overcome by relying on established, corporate brands for news-related information such as the BBC website, or related broadsheet newspaper sites. For older respondents in particular, this was held in the same esteem as using such sources in their original format, but is considered to be much more appropriate and accessible for daily routines and busy lifestyles:

“The internet as well... I read the BBC and Guardian Unlimited – is that the same as watching the BBC news and reading the Guardian? I suppose it is, I just don’t have to leave my desk and go to the newsagent” (North West, 55+)

“I suppose most things would be on the BBC website, it’s so good in itself and there’s so many things where you can find out what you want.” (Scotland, MLA users)

## Trust versus use

### Summary

- The national telephone survey has revealed a worrying trend amongst the British public of a greater use of least trusted information sources when seeking information on social and political concerns
- Focus group respondents explained the discrepancy with theories of 'dismissive consumption', in that least trusted sources of information such as tabloid newspapers are regarded as sources of entertainment and speculative gossip rather than real information. The ability to interpret and accept or reject the information offered is offered as a 'damage limitation' in the habitual reliance upon least trusted information sources
- The least trusted sources are perceived as the most immediately accessible within a day-to-day context
- Information provided by traditional repositories of public knowledge are trusted more because of their higher levels of authenticity and neutrality; lack of editorial bias or manipulation; the professional assistance and standards offered by MLA staff; the availability of a variety of authoritative published sources
- Building from the point raised in the '*Accessibility, immediacy and information needs*' chapter concerning the positive role of on-line resources in increasing access to museums libraries and archives, cultural resources can learn from organisations such as the BBC and Guardian Unlimited, in transferring the trust placed in them to increased usage of such digital resources. From a news and current concerns perspective, MLAs should consider the contemporary appropriateness of their web-based resources and how they can be used to raise awareness of the role of their services in encouraging a greater understanding of social and political concerns

#### 4.4 The construction of image and public ownership

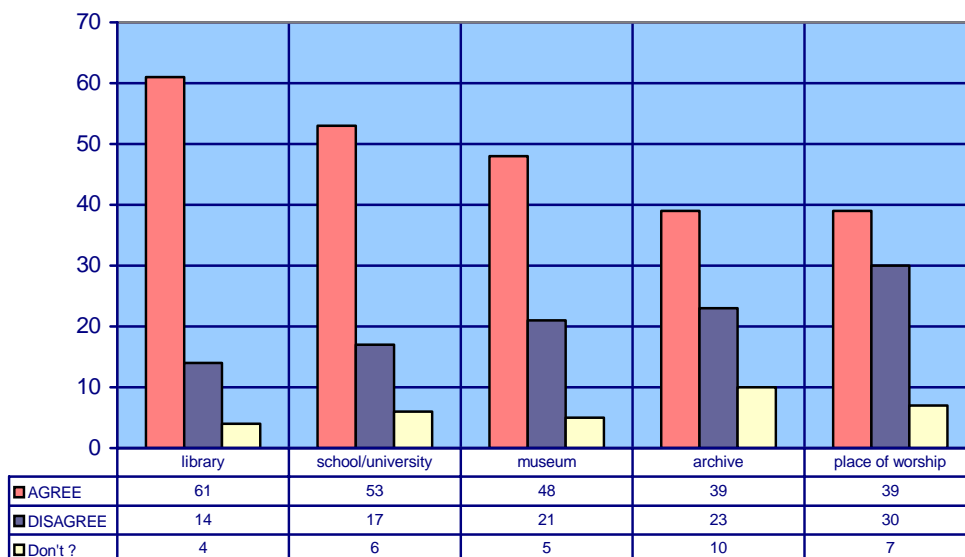
“It is certainly the case that there are many difficult areas in Britain where the public library is the last affirmative, dignifying and respected public institution, among many others whose function it is – more negatively – to redress social problems, to repair social damage or to counterbalance social disintegration. Deprivation is fairly easy to quantify, but how do you measure community spirit?” (Greenhalgh, 1995)

“They are an important part of community, and a large source of employment in the city. Not quite on the scale of the docks, or closures in major industry maybe, but still part of city life. Part of modern city life, chronicling past city life... It would be a sad irony if they disappeared too.” (North West, 55+)

The established repositories of public knowledge represent fixed institutions, often built with iconic architecture within the city or townscape. This physical and cultural pre-eminence may both limit and assist in providing for information needs. Not only do they secure and provide public access to a variety and quantity of original or primary information but they can also provide a site for public, even civic interaction (Greenhalgh et al 1995; Bryson et al 2003; Burdett et al 2004). In so doing they provide the *ideal speech situation* (Habermas, 1962) which many see as necessary for a healthy and functioning democracy. The human construction of knowledge and ideas is in large measure a social behaviour, and can be created and shared in public spaces. Libraries, museums and archives built throughout the 19th and 20th centuries recognised these qualities, and sought to encourage civic engagement (Bennett 1995; Greenhalgh et al 1995; CABE 2002a, 2003).

The national survey suggested, that relatively little sense of ownership is encouraged by the traditional repositories of public knowledge (please see table 4).

*Seldom Give Sense of Community Ownership, Accountability or Managemem*



**Table 4**

When asked if they agreed with the statement that various sources of information *seldom* encouraged a sense of community ownership or accountability, 61% of respondents agreed with the statement with reference to a public library; 48% agreed that a museum seldom gave a sense of public ownership; 39% agreed with the statement with reference to an archive service.

There is some debate within the professional literature over the public role of museums libraries and archives, and the fact that the definition of what 'public' actually means in contemporary society is varied and often contested. The definition of 'public' in cultural debates is somewhat vague and unclear, although this has previously benefited the professions in cultural institutions as it is generally accepted that the term 'public' exudes a certain goodness and worthiness (Greenhalgh et al, 1995). The public, community and civic role of museums, libraries and archives is evidenced quite strongly in the qualitative data by themes including the extent of community ownership, and the extent to which respondents identified with, and took pride in cultural institutions. Factors appearing to affect community and civic identity (and in turn the effect of this upon MLA use and value) included professional migration and subsequent community displacement, tourist culture and other 'lifestyle' choices, which may in some part explain the discrepancies between survey and focus group data.

"I think most museum users wouldn't know who owns what museum they walk into. At all. Unless they happened to have lived there for a number of years". (MLA professionals, East of England)

"The community aspect affects how the library is used because it's an obvious port of call for community information... it's the local tourist information if you like" (Parents, South East)

"I think museums are owned by the town as a cultural resource, or rather a commodity, but are much more widely used as visitor attractions" (Parents, South East)

Other aspects of community identity encouraged a sense of ownership in traditional repositories of public knowledge. Some respondents were able to see the positive side of tourist economics, which encouraged an alternative sense of ownership, pride in and gratefulness for cultural resources. Archives were perceived as having a very specific community information function, which still encouraged a sense of community ownership despite the comparatively lower use of archives to libraries and museums:

"The thing is, with the Castle museum, people come to Norwich to actually see them, from outside Norwich. That's paying for... they're spending money here and that's paying for other things for us as well". (18-25, East of England)

"In terms of community it's important, especially if you think of archives and local history... storing community information as it were" (North West, 55+)

“Well they provide your community archives don’t they... land registers, birth registers... all your local history. They have a real role to play for local historians, the council, academics... Slightly less everyday than the library but still important... Less obvious than museums and galleries too because they’re so specific, I imagine only a small number of people use them in comparison” (South East, parents)

Some regions more than others, forged a link between cultural institutions and the preservation of community identity, history and belonging, and stressed the importance of cultural preservation in terms of personal, individual identity and value. Liverpool, with particular reference to its successful ‘European Capital of Culture 2008’ bid, was cited as an example of this phenomenon. In a study of the role of museums and the arts in the urban regeneration of the city of Liverpool, Lorente (1996) stresses the significance of the development of the Albert Dock, now home to the Tate Liverpool and the Merseyside Maritime Museum and a symbol in itself of the city’s maritime, industrial and social history, as the key force in embedding the cultural capital of the city in the people’s consciousness and encouraging public ownership of cultural organisations. In turn, as well as shaping civic identity this also helps to reinforce notions of national identity, and of a city’s cultural role in the national and international arena.

“And museums... look at the Albert Dock... the museum of Liverpool life, the maritime museum, even the Beatles museum... they’re all to do with Liverpool’s history and people and mean a lot to the city and people who live here and grew up here. They help visitors and tourists to learn about the city, and have done a lot to revive the image of the city” (North West, 55+)

“Places like museums, archives and libraries... with people’s association with their past and interpretation of that, [if they were to close]... you take away any sort of connection with that... These are vital resources, they’re telling you where you are in history and what your community is and how it got to be like that and what your place is in this community and what you can make of it”. (MLA users, East of England)

“Museums and galleries are seen more as national treasures aren’t they? They move sort of above and beyond community spirit... they have a bit more prestige about them... certainly something like the Tate... its part of Liverpool culture but it’s a national brand... and something like the Beatles museum doesn’t just belong to Liverpool, its part of popular culture...” (North West, 55+)

“The community would lose an awful lot of heritage. That would be absolutely disastrous. This is one of the few buildings we have representing a very important period of history in Ipswich. There’s very few other buildings to compare with this house left in Ipswich. It would be an even added disaster if this was to be taken away from us.” (East of England, parents)

“This part of Birmingham is very much the civic centre if you like, the more congenial place to visit than the shiny new bull ring, and there’s almost a right to ownership there. People are very protective of it and some people are quite opposed to the new library, or new library site for that reason” (Midlands, MLA users)

In some smaller town and villages, places where traditional notions of community are still appropriate and relevant, a sense of ownership is also encouraged in terms of ‘belonging’ to a place. This is identified by the friendly

relationship between staff and users, and the sense in which users take ownership of the building and facilities as social community resources:

“It is part of the community, isn't it, the library... It's a community thing as well as finding out information. I'd feel isolated, not being able to meet other people finding out information. Also this building and other buildings have been given to the community so people do feel that they own it.” (South West, parents)

“It's not just cities, smaller towns and communities rely on their public library. Like what you said before about people who don't have the internet at home, and people need them for their own hobbies and interests. My dad's mate is writing a book on the history of the village, and he lives in the library! He's on first name terms with the librarian!” (Parents, North West)

A greater sense of community ownership is encouraged and developed in situations where there is a shared space for public services and increased visibility for community partnerships. It is important to note that this is perhaps more achievable for the public library service, in terms of its capacity to provide 'information clinics' with other organisations such as community police and health services, and facilities involving partnerships to provide childcare services and family support. Such community partnerships also help to establish the role of the public library service in providing information specifically on social concerns such as health and education:

“There is an increase in social enquiry. We have covered it in different ways, as much as we have for, say, the pension helpline. The jobcentre plus people are trying to have workshops, every Monday. They are specifically funded to target the long-term unemployed. We have an enquiry into the contact of the Scottish enterprise because they wanted to find a new business. Again, it's making a lot available to the people now so they can come in out of the ordinary office, because they may not like it there. They can use a library space for all sorts of things. Cure Scotland people are sitting in the library, widening their advice, doing workshops. Again, it's actually making the library relevant to the community they're in” (Scotland, MLA professionals)

“There's a lot of practical community information here and it's a friendlier environment than dealing with a load of bureaucrats on the phone... so that's important. To me that's what a library is about, not about being serious research institutions. If a young Mum comes here to find out times of swimming lessons at the leisure centre for the kids, then it's served a purpose, and a valuable one at that. It doesn't matter if she hasn't learnt anything about the European Union and civil war in some place she's never heard of!” (MLA users, North West)

“They're targeted to looking at government now, I think that at one time libraries will be offering much more information in those areas. And work in partnerships as well with links already established with the health service and stuff.” (South West, parents)

“a lot of people use libraries for not what we would call library purposes at all, but a lot of groups meet in libraries, it does have a role in the community that's not just as an information provider or as a provider of reading materials, it has other roles as well and I think libraries can often be relied upon as well to deliver services and do what we say we're going to do. I think we're very reliable particularly when we're working with other agencies as well as delivering services” (Midlands, MLA professionals)

Some respondents felt that public and community ownership was hindered by a lack of awareness as to what MLAs can offer, and the preservation of perceived class barriers. It was suggested that MLAs need to address these issues to encourage a more universal use, value and ownership of cultural institutions. It was also suggested that schools and centres of formal learning should play a greater role in providing access to cultural resources and encouraging a sense of public ownership, particularly with reference to the 'breaking down' of class barriers, although interestingly, another group from the same region observed that a greater sense of ownership amongst school children was being achieved *because* of the working relationship between schools and cultural organisations. Again, this comes down to an inconsistent sense of awareness and clarity with respect to the role of museums libraries and archives:

“Your question about the local community... we've got great big divides across the local community. We must have people who's minds have never crossed using a museum or... “It doesn't belong to me”. (East of England, parents)

“I think there's a huge amount of work, PR, education needed to make people feel that these are in the public domain, they are owned by the people for the people. This would make them more welcoming, make the access easier... that they are exciting, interesting places to be, museums are the same... I think there's a lot of education needed to make [them] more accessible to the lower social-economic [groups] and to make them feel welcome... There's ownership there, that they have a right to access these places”. (55+, Northern Ireland)

“I'm convinced that it would be a good thing in schools generally, not only in rural areas but also in some of the cities, if not all the cities, if there was included in the school somewhere, a session on what is available, because I would have certainly welcomed that. I didn't know what was available.” (Wales,55+)

“I feel very strongly that if the schools take them to these places, as part of their schooling, and they get used to using all these facilities, to be ok with them, that it belongs to them. Not something that belongs to the middle class, they belong to them.” (East of England, parents)

“I was going to say actually school children have quite a strong sense of ownership because the partnerships between museums and schools is very strong now and it's built into the curriculum and that's part of their experience. Children are used to having a lesson in a museum setting now. When you see groups of school children in a museum, I don't want to say they treat it like it's their own, but it's better because of that. Quite often they wouldn't be taken by their parents. It's their only opportunity for going.” (East of England, MLA users)

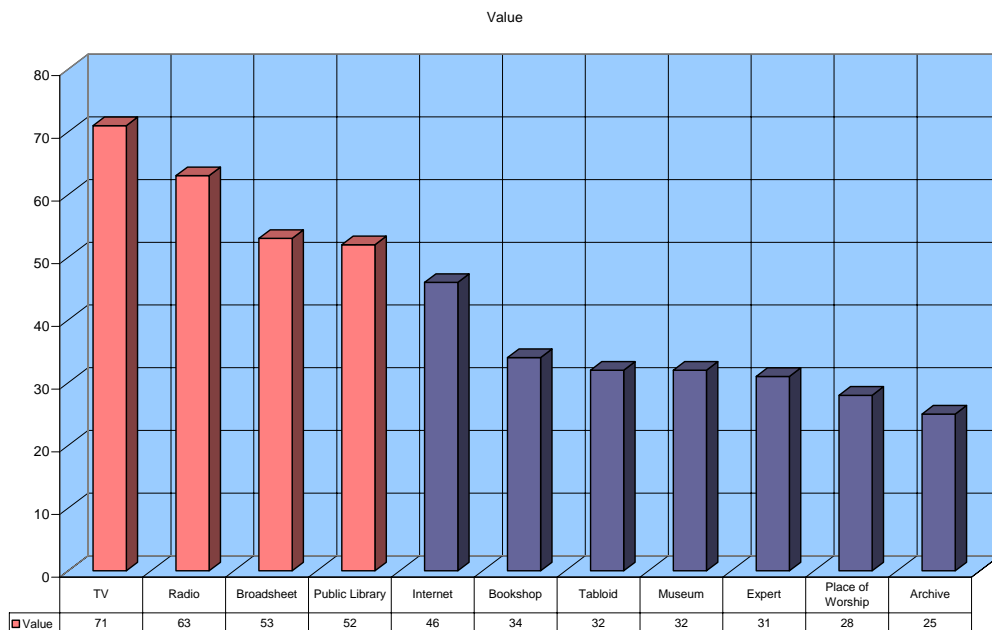
## The construction of image and public ownership

### Summary

- Notions and definition of community are integral to perceived levels of public ownership of traditional repositories of public knowledge
- The extent to which an individual feels ownership of museums libraries and archives is directly related to their sense of community belonging and identity, and the cultural representation of this
- Demographic groups with the lowest sense of public ownership are the 18-25 age groups and parents who have moved away for professional or personal purposes
- Urban centres and regions with a strong sense of civic and cultural identity are most likely to feel a sense of ownership and pride in cultural organisations and regard them as symbols of civic identity on a local and national scale
- Smaller, rural and urban communities feel a sense of belonging, particularly with the public library service which is seen as a friendly, social resource
- A greater sense of community ownership is encouraged where a number of public services work together in a shared space. This is most easily achieved by the public library service, but can be emulated by museums libraries and archives working together on a more visible basis to encourage a common sense of cultural ownership and value in the services they provide
- More visible partnerships with centres of formal learning and education will also encourage a greater sense of public ownership
- Issues surrounding poor marketing and publicity are also affecting levels of public ownership for the cultural sector; respondents again felt that more awareness of the public service role and value of museums libraries and archives needs to be raised
- There seems to be some deviation between the survey (in which a relatively high percentage of respondents agreed that the public library in particular *seldom* gives a sense of community ownership) and focus group responses in the consideration of the sense of public ownership of museums, libraries and archives. It is important to acknowledge that the focus group method and qualitative research in general allows for greater conceptual clarity and discussion, and may have encouraged more considered responses

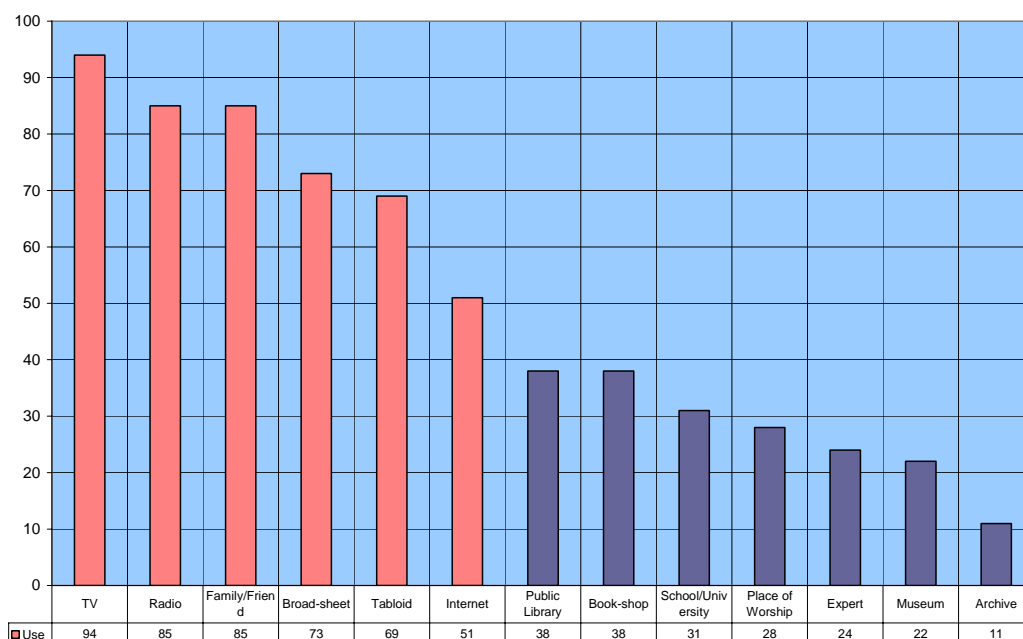
## 4.5 MLA role and value

The national telephone survey asked about the importance of various information resources for understanding socio-political issues (see table 5). Over half of the respondents questioned stated that they thought television, radio, broadsheet newspapers and the public library service were important. Slightly over a third said that museums were important and a quarter thought that archives were. However, when asked if they had used any of these within the last six months for understanding such issues, public library use fell to a little over a third, museums to just below a quarter and archives registered just over a tenth (see table 6).



**Table 5**

Television however remained the most highly valued *and* the most highly used information source for understanding social and political concerns. However, 61% of respondents used a tabloid for such purposes but only 32% actually *value* access to them! This corresponds to theories of habitual use which have been previously discussed, but has serious implications for the role and value of museums libraries and archives within a contemporary information seeking context, as the data already discussed imply that there is little opportunity for a habitual ‘everyday’ role for traditional repositories of public knowledge.



**Table 6**

The literature suggests that the public's perception of museums, libraries and archives *raison d'être* can have consequences for use and value. Their position as sources of complex information might be perceived as secondary to other roles. In the public mind they might be more associated with works of the imagination and creativity, leisure and recreation, or seen as storehouses of cultural heritage and identity—a cultural safety net securing the nation's treasures for posterity (Greenhalgh, et al. 1995; Coalter, 2002). The professional and government literature acknowledges the educational and preservation function of these institutions (*museums*: Pearce, Hooper-Greenhill, MLA, Belcher, Coalter, etc.; *libraries*: Coalter, Greenhalgh et al). At the same time, R.P.Ks also provide raw materials and support for many information goods, ranging from radio and television documentaries to government reports.

### *Educational role and value*

Museums are perceived as having a broader educational value beyond that of immediate sources of contemporary information. They are seen as providing historical and evolutionary context for which to understand and interpret contemporary events, issues and circumstances. Chu (2003) explains that a piece of information only acquires meaning when it is socially understood, which is linked to 'understanding the background', observing something being done, and experiencing the process. The contextual learning undertaken in museums libraries and archives is often subconscious, and in some cases it was only the prompt of focus group discussion that helped respondents to

appreciate the contextual educational value of traditional repositories of public knowledge:

"I would say that some art reflects things like point of view, and I would have thought that they are challenging, politically, but whether I'd go there to find information I'm not sure, and although that might educate me, because I like to visit museums... I can't think that I would to find information, or see it as an [information] institution" (MLA users, Yorkshire)

"...museums can help you to understand scientific development. To be honest if you wanted to suggest a way for somebody to get a grip on... genetics or space research or some area... a visit to the science museum in London would be a pretty good thing to help them out with it. I say, certainly for scientific subjects, museums have a big role to play in helping people understand". (MLA professionals, East of England)

"The big issue for museums would be the education. A high percentage of museum visitors would be for education... and the culture" (Northern Ireland, MLA users)

"you could go to a museum and see how the hospitals were run and how the NHS and that were run, so you can compare that with how they're run today... whether they're better, how it started... Law and order is a good example for the children, when you take them to a museum and they see somebody hanging... so from that point of view it's brilliant for the children". (Parents, East of England)

"I consult archives for history of archives. Because I have to for my course, but it was fun and interesting. You can build up a picture of what things used to be like, and then there's a comparison to what's happening now. I don't think it's a conscious thing, it's a side effect." (Wales, MLA users)

"Or you can understand things more clearly from a historical perspective from museums and archives, but it's accidental... you go to a museum because it's a nice place to visit, a nice place to take the children, and if you come away feeling that you've learnt something then that's all well and good, but I won't have gone there with that intention" (South East, parents)

Focus group respondents demonstrated an understanding of the need to understand the past before we can fully comprehend the present and indeed the future. From a research perspective it was interesting to see how the focus group discussion encouraged a conscious realisation of the contextual role of museums, libraries and archives in helping people to understand *contemporary* issues and concerns. This is an interesting phenomenon for R.P.K professionals considering how they can encourage a more conscious awareness amongst users and potential users of the informative and educational value of the services that they provide.

"Well, the messages of the past have some bearing on the present, and you can appreciate... yes, although I do archive research, it certainly has present day interest and relevance. There's so many stories they're not new stories. They've all happened before. I think that's fascinating, but I don't think it gives you the answers. It's just funny how we've never learnt." (Scotland, MLA users)

"When you think of archives in a practical way, the first and second world wars and the misery and suffering those caused... through this we've got the common market, then translate that back, thinking 'Should we go with the UK Independence party, get out of Europe', then you think of the past, the EC, bringing all the warring factions in the past together, the Austrians, France, German, Britain... now being in one common community will to some extent prevent this happening. You've got this historical record of what happened, and this can change our

attitude to current issues. It might not be so dry and dusty and academic as one might think. We can learn from it.” (Wales, MLA users)

### *Encouraging empathy and understanding*

Museums libraries and archives also help to develop not only intellectual, but emotive understanding of political situations. Hoskins (2003) describes how the process of integrating primary evidence and ‘real life’ testimony along with digital, visual and audio media in an interactive experience helps to stimulate profound and empathic responses to a museum exhibition dedicated to the Holocaust. Respondents noted that the artistic element of cultural organisations help the visitor to understand themselves as well as the issue being presented. Cultural experiences that have moved visitors and helped them to gain an empathic understanding are often the most memorable. It is this role in developing an emotional and empathic understanding of oneself and others that is considered equally (if not more so) important to the educational and information role of museums archives and libraries:

“It, to some extent... away from all those things that are very pragmatic, and gets me in to another bit of the world, another bit of life which is very important from the total balance of trying to form yourself in to the human being you have become. It’s the artistic stuff and the heritage stuff” (Yorkshire, MLA users)

“[museums] tell the story of how events have affected other people, and that helps you to understand because it helps you to put yourself in their shoes... I mean this is especially true of war-related exhibitions and so on, which are quite emotive subjects anyway, but it gives you a better understanding rather than reading very scholarly history books... sometimes the factual stuff can be very abstract and detached from reality, so museums can give you a better understanding on a personal level” (Midlands, MLA users)

“The other place where I had that was the Liverpool museum, there was an exhibition about slavery, and that’s very intense. I remember going on a half term with a friend and for the first time seeing a lot of afro-Caribbean people in the museum, whole families. It was particularly their history. It was very very moving”. (Yorkshire, MLA users)

“they help to provide context... I went to an exhibition about D-Day yesterday and that stays in your mind when you hear things about the war and about the problems... if I think about the war [Iraq] then the images I’ve got of the trenches from that exhibition will help me to understand the implications of war... its that broader social context for today’s news in a way” (Yorkshire, MLA professionals)

“They convey information in so many different ways... it’s more about education than information and that’s not about learning facts and being informed... it’s about how you feel about yourself and others... improving confidence even” (Midlands, MLA users)

It is important to consider the use of museums libraries and archives outside the context of information seeking on social and political concerns to truly understand the public perception and value of these services in modern Britain. Recent research has shown that library visits have increased by almost 5 million since the early 1990s; equivalent to over 93,000 extra visits a week made to libraries across the country (MLA ‘Something to Celebrate’, 2004). Such increase is credited to major initiatives such as the People’s Network and extensive reader development projects, which are not reflected

by declining book-borrowing statistics. In a recent study of leisure activities and visits to museums and galleries, 37% of respondents had visited a museum or art gallery (MLA 'Visitors to Museums and Galleries 2004'). In the same survey, 51% of respondents had visited a library as a leisure activity, with the most popular activity being a trip to the cinema (59%).

### *The personal touch*

When asked their perceptions on what libraries, archives and museums offered to society (particularly if not being used as immediately accessible forms of 'up-to-date' information), focus group respondents described valid community, heritage management and educational roles for the three sectors, which included appraisal of the mediated, interpersonal 'real world' experience that such organisations encourage. MLA professionals saw this mediatory role as key to preserving their traditional archival and conservational responsibilities amidst contemporary changes to their services and ideology. The opportunity to mingle with other users alongside the customer service focus of libraries museums and archives provides a welcome alternative to the isolation of a networked society where interpersonal communication is becoming less and less frequent.

"The difference is you wouldn't go to a bookshop and expect people to find you a range of information, if you go to a library you expect an extended service. You expect help whereas in a bookshop you expect direction" (MLA professionals, Yorkshire)

"From a human resource aspects of the library are particularly good in terms of the help and support you get... we have a very good team here" (London, MLA users)

"They respond to requests more than... the information they provide, like if you were looking up a family tree in the national library, once you go there, they give you the helpful information. Lots of support and encouragement", (55+ Wales)

"There's been quite a lot in the media recently about the role of libraries, particularly where we have the internet now, people can access so much information, but equally there's so much information they can't access and it's all to do with the help we provide and the access we give people to information, as specialists and information providers, and also ensuring that information continues, is stored and is accessible, the archival role the conservers of information." (Midlands, MLA professionals)

"Some companies are now doing no e-mail days... We have the entire organisation saying 'stop emailing! Go visit somebody'. People were sending emails from one office to the next. This business of withdrawing from interaction with humans, particularly older persons. People are becoming isolationists. That's very scary". (Northern Ireland, 55+)

"I think of the effect on community as well... if you're always getting your information within your own home and you're not communicating with other people in the community, then what sort of contribution are you making? What contact are you having with people in the community?"  
(RPK FG, 55+, Northern Ireland)

### *Cultural preservation*

The traditional repositories of public knowledge are highly valued for their role in preserving cultural heritage and facilitating awareness and understanding of alternative cultures. The historical perspective they provide is regarded as an essential commodity for understanding one's sense of self and place in society at large.

"I would suggest that without archives, you have no history, with no museums you'd have no interpretative background. The same with library books." (Scotland, MLA professionals)

"You can go to the museum to see all the things of the past, see how the ideas of the time were physically formed. You can see the cultural differences. Expression of ideas can be very different from different countries and different religions. That is how you truly find out about cultural differences, through their expression and views. The same applies of books, even architecture." (Scotland, ethnic minority)

"Archives and sources bring a third dimension to everyday living... its something you can refer back to. It adds a lot of colour to life". (Northern Ireland, MLA users)

"I can't perceive a society without museums and libraries as being anything other than detrimental. I think that background and history would be greatly missed. You can use it to understand how your life exists." (Scotland, MLA users)

### *Family learning environments*

Parents were particularly vocal about the educational role of libraries, museums and archives, particularly museums, in helping them to stimulate their children's learning and creativity by offering fun, non-formal learning environments. It is not only the recreational, non-formal aspects of learning in museums that appeal, but the variety of ways in which collections are presented, which may be appropriate for a variety of user learning styles and needs. There is evidence to suggest that a decline in deferential attitudes towards formal learning organisations and professions is encouraging increased levels of parental involvement in children's education, and a growing role for informal learning environments such as museums and libraries. In an article describing the modernization of 'family-friendly' museums, Birkett (2004) describes how children often provide an excuse for parents themselves to engage in informal learning as children are often the cultural mediator between adults and museums and their collections or exhibits: 'adults shove their kids forward to engage with the characters, and then end up getting engaged themselves. They just need the kids as intermediaries'.

"Museums are more cultural in the way you use them as well, but do have an educational function... I mean we may take the children to *Think Tank* at the weekends because it's fun, but they're also learning"  
(Parents focus group, Midlands)

"The thing about politics is that its based on the past. You can read about the past, that's a very individual thing to do. But to see the past in three dimensions, and enjoy it with the family... if all we had was books... to have a museum, we can come and see, it has the visual

aspect. It's much easier to imagine. Maybe it's because I don't read that much". (Northern Ireland, MLA users)

"No, it is more of a hobby thing isn't it? You can learn about things you're interested in, but I see it as more of a historical thing. Like the maritime museum. They're valuable in terms of education, but for different reasons. You would take the kids there to help them see that learning is fun" (North West, parents)

"I think it's because more people are going to university now and feel able to be more proactive and ask questions, express their opinions... I think when we were children our parents felt obliged to leave it to the school, or the teacher, or maybe didn't have the confidence or there wasn't the opportunity to become involved... There was more respect for the teaching profession... now that I know people who have gone in to teaching you realise that the entry levels are not that demanding! Many parents are equally qualified to do the job, if not more so... that's why if I think my children need the extra help we can come here together and I'm perfectly comfortable with that" (Midlands, parents)

"To some extent it's what the kids are interested in as well. I've got dragged around museums about museums... they're quite interesting. John Lennon's house, Paul McCartney's house..." (Wales, parents)

### *Recreation and the 'day out' effect*

Museums libraries and archives are all perceived as having a highly valued recreational role, not just in stimulating a child's learning in a non-threatening, informal environment, but in providing an entertaining experience for individuals and families as a whole. For some respondents the family day out role was far more prominent and meaningful than any information seeking function. The educational experience is often a subconscious after-thought to the leisurely experience. This is especially true when combined with travel and holiday making. Many respondents noted that visits to museums and cultural centres formed an integral part of the travel experience in seeking to learn more about alternative cultures and places that are visited. It is an interesting proposition for MLA professionals to consider whether or not they can encourage the same interest in community heritage and culture:

"I think that's the fun side of it. Recreation and fun is very much helped by the interaction of knowledgeable guides." (East of England, parents)

"You are [learning], but its not the learning that gets you in... you're like 'I'm going to have a nice leisurely afternoon looking at paintings'". (Yorkshire, MLA users)

"I think that museums are coming from a very different point of view now, they're becoming very much a leisure thing. That's how I view the Millennium Gallery, when you compare it to our old Weston (Park) museum, they very much go by that, they say they are more for leisure than for learning" (Yorkshire, MLA users)

"I sometimes have a sense of cultural obligation, or rather responsibility to visit a museum... the best example I can give is the Jewish museum in Berlin... I didn't feel as though I could stay there without visiting it and it was a very enlightening, moving experience... it puts everything in to perspective along with checkpoint Charlie and the Brandenburg Gate... it helps you to understand the history of the place you're visiting and to have a whole experience" (Midlands, parents)

“But as you said its to take the kids to something. I mean you’ve got the central library in Belfast now and you’ve got the branch libraries and that’s what we’ve got. Its like a day out with the kids and OK you learn... but in terms of sorting information around those issues, I don’t think that many of the services here provide that”. (Northern Ireland, 55+).

“For me it is the day trip. I would always search out a museum. If I were going on holiday I would find out where the museums are and I’m going to them. I want to get a feeling of the area, I want to understand the people and the history, the background of the place, and that’s very important to me. I would do that, always. I would never go to [Pleasure Wood Hills]”  
(East of England, MLA users)

“It’s a leisure interest rather than a research interest. I went to London once for a day specifically to go to the British museum, to the Egyptology department, because I wanted to find something out before I went to Egypt. I went on my own. I loved it.” (Wales, parents)

### *Conceptual issues*

When discussing the public perceptions of museums, libraries and archives and their relevant role and value, many focus group respondents struggled with the concept of treating the three organisations as a whole and challenged the concept of a ‘commonality of purpose’ between the three domains with the ways in which they perceive and use the different sectors. The archive service prompted the most conceptual difficulty, and on a number of occasions, researchers were asked to define what they meant exactly by such a term! With respect to their contemporary ‘commonality of purpose’ in a bidding culture, Coulson et al (2001) question whether archives have the appropriate image and context (in terms of their cognitive and physical location in the minds’ of the public) to succeed in light of the differing perceptions held by government and the general public regarding the role of museums libraries and archives.

“It’s obvious to you because you use it. I would go straight to the library or the internet. I wouldn’t even dream of going to the archives...But what’s in a library that isn’t in an archive. What is an archive?” (East of England, parents)

“Birth certificates and death certificates and that’s about it.” (Scotland, 18-25)

“I interpret an archive as being a little more official, and not quite as readily available as a normal library or a museum... It has a vagueness attached it to it... I’m not even sure if anybody is fully aware of what they are or what kind of information you can get from them”  
(Midlands, MLA users)

“I didn’t even know there were separate archive services so it wouldn’t occur to me to use them” (North West, parents)

“It’s difficult with your project lumping all three [museums libraries and archives] together with every question... is an archive a public records office or a university collection which we don’t have access to... museums and archives individually can mean many different things... archives are necessarily more specialised and necessarily more protected... the three services are not the same... the implied access works on different levels” (London, MLA users)

## *Existence value*

Significantly the data suggest the need to take into account what has been termed “existence value”. Arrow et al (1993) argue that “for at least twenty five years, economists have recognized that individuals who make no active use of a particular beach, river, bay or other such natural resource might, nevertheless, derive satisfaction from its mere existence, even if they never intend to make active use of it”. They refer to Contingent Valuation, a tool used in the environmental sector. There remains a debate as to whether this is appropriate for the evaluation of RPKs but many would argue that there are important similarities between environmental and cultural goods, and the method was used by the British Library (2004) in its recent ‘*Measuring our Value*’. Recent research suggests that 76% of those questioned who had not visited a museum or gallery during the past twelve months think it is important for their local town or city to have its own museum or art gallery (MLA ‘*Visitors to Museums and Galleries 2004*’). To assess the extent to which ‘existence value’ applies to the cultural sector, focus group respondents were asked how they would feel should museums, libraries and archives suddenly cease to exist. Responses illustrate a moral obligation to preserve and obtain such institutions irrespective of individual use and patronage. Identity with, and subsequent pride in, museums libraries and archives is achieved on a local, civic and national scale.

“I think the public would be very concerned, because they’re institutions that they feel belong to the community and enhance the community. I think that’s irrespective of whether they use them or not. I think they are perceived as cultural assets” (MLA professional, East of England)

“I’m very proud of the national library. And the museum. I’d be very upset if they disappeared. I think there is a national pride that we’re talking about now. I would feel a terrible loss” (55+, Wales)

“I would think it was wrong and a great shame. That might be hypocritical seeing as though I don’t use them that much, but I think every city needs them. It’s part of the city’s identity. Here in Liverpool they play an important role in the city’s tourism. We wouldn’t be the European City of Culture without the museums at the Dock, without the Walker [art gallery]”. (Parents, North West)

“It’s hard to tell, how much taking for granted the sense of ownership, because with your own family you tend to take for granted a lot more that you can have a strop, but they’ll not stop being your friends, it’ll be ok, you can behave with your family in a way that you wouldn’t behave with your friends. There is a sense of “I’ve got to keep those friends” whereas I always have my family. It’s the same with those institutions. You feel at home with them. You realise you do value them when they become “poorly”. I wonder if in some way that might be valid, the idea of their existence rather than valuing the information they hold for you.” (Wales, MLA users)

## MLA Role and Value

### *Summary*

- Despite relatively high percentages of value placed in museums libraries and archives in helping respondents to understand social and political concerns, percentages fell quite sharply when survey respondents were asked if they had *used* a museum library or archive for such a purpose in the last six months. Focus group research however has revealed many other highly valued roles and uses for traditional repositories of public knowledge
- The historical context that MLAs give to modern life is seen as an essential role in helping to understand contemporary issues and situations, and for understanding one's sense of self and place in society at large. The role of museums libraries and archives in preserving cultural heritage is seen as highly valuable by all demographic groups.
- The provision of historical and evolutionary context forms part of a wider educational role for museums libraries and archives, particularly with reference to informal, lifelong and family learning
- The fact that museums libraries and archives can cater to a variety of learning styles and needs is highly valued by research respondents
- The ability of cultural organisations to encourage a sense of empathy and understanding for alternative cultures is regarded as highly significant for a diverse contemporary society
- Museums libraries and archives are seen as social, recreational places where the opportunity to mix with fellow users and receive professional advice and guidance from MLA staff is highly valued
- The 'day out' effect is key in encouraging a concerted effort on behalf of potential users to visit MLAs when demanding lifestyles place such restrictions on free time and recreation. Cultural organisations need to build upon the experience and motivation of 'holiday maker' users to make local resources more attractive and viable
- Older respondents (55+ age group) see cultural organisations as a healthy respite from the highly technical routines and procedures of an information society

- Parents are a key target audience for museums libraries and archives as changes in educational culture are encouraging a more proactive role for parents in their child's education. As such museums libraries and archives are vital sources of informal family learning
- From an observational perspective, there seemed little recognition of the 'commonality of purpose' between museums libraries and archives amongst respondents across all regions and demographic groups. Each sector was often discussed or referred to individually or in isolation
- The archive service had the most negative response in terms of a lack of understanding about the services on offer and a definitive description of their role and value in modern Britain
- Respondents across the sample showed that there are high levels of 'existence value' placed in our traditional repositories of public knowledge, and a real moral and ethical obligation to preserve and maintain such services irrespective of their levels of use and patronage
- A greater drive in marketing and promotion is essential to encourage a greater conscious realisation of the contextual 'learning and understanding' role of MLAs in modern Britain. A remarkable feature of the qualitative element of the research was how focus group respondents gradually became very responsive and animated when discussing the role of museums libraries and archives with reference to social and political concerns, when originally, in some cases, respondents did not understand the relationship between the two. There are therefore obvious benefits to the cultural sector, MLA users and non-users of greater levels of communication and discussion between the three parties in their relevant communities.

## 5. Key findings

Data analysis has revealed six emerging themes which help to explain and support research findings and the way in which public perceptions of museums libraries and archives are shaped and articulated. The themes discussed in this chapter formed the basis of discussion during the workshop undertaken during the final stages of the project. The six themes are:

- Contemporary interpretations of community
- Nostalgia and retrospection
- Lifestyle and information needs
- Educational values
- Cultural assumptions and social identity
- Consumerism and infotainment

### 5.1 Contemporary interpretations of community

Issues of community, changing community dynamics and the subsequent problems with community definition and interpretation were implicit to focus group discussion and analysis. Changing community dynamics include the increasing levels of professional migration and the subsequent community displacement; urban or 'city living' definitions of community as compared to rural or more parochial connotations; 'commuter belt' lifestyles and the changing make up of communities in terms of holiday homes and short-term occupation. This has real implications for traditional repositories of public knowledge in terms of the perceived levels of public and community ownership of such places and how this affects their use and value:

"I think for our generation there is no community anymore, just men, women and families. City, or urban living is very different to the image you've just conjured with your Gran... and the role of the library is very different too".

(RPK FG, Parents, Midlands)

"I think there's a problem in terms of community when you live somewhere like this, and not just from a tourism perspective.... It's been a real boom area in terms of aspirant commuter residence lately, and community, or rather what I perceive community to mean, is quite transient when you live somewhere like this. We don't really have that sense of community that others do, people generally keep themselves to themselves and are moving in and out".

(RPK FG, parents, South East)

"You would be more likely to use libraries if you felt welcome and felt like part of how they are run. If you had that sense of familiarity and ownership. But people move away a lot now don't they? If I had stayed in my home town I'd still go to my childhood library and want my kids to go there. It's like wanting to get married in the same church as your Mum and Dad... community to a lot of people means their hometown rather than wherever they might be living now".

(RPK FG, Parents, North West)

The traditional sense of identity and belonging amongst the British public is being challenged at many levels; it has been said that traditional norms of cohesive power are being lost to strengthening European political and legal

powers and traditional loyalties to place and flag are being eroded by global consumer identities. Some commentators have observed a shift to a plurality of separate, though overlapping, communities and cultural identities (Greenhalgh et al, 1995). Metaphorically, the word 'community' is a warmly persuasive word which describes an existing, or alternative, set of relationships and unlike other terms of social organization, it seems never to be used unfavourably or given any positive opposing term (Williams, 1983).

Marwick (2003) observes that the multi-cultural modern British society operates on the basis of a 'series of parallel lives', implying little sense of community cohesion or cultural understanding of the way in which families live. In a study of social division, Crow and Maclean (2000) state that communities are treated as phenomena of social cohesion rather than social division as they are constructed around members having something in common; however, by the nature of their very being, communities still have associations with rivalry and conflict in their capacity to be *exclusive* as well as inclusive. This can have real implications for civic engagement and social responsibility, as Putnam (2000) observes:

"At the conclusion of the twentieth century, ordinary Americans shared this sense of civic malaise. We were reasonably content about our economic prospects... but we were not equally convinced that we were on the right track morally or culturally. Of baby boomers interviewed in 1987, 53% thought their parents' generation was better in terms of 'being a concerned citizen, involved with helping others in the community' as compared with only 21% who thought their own generation was better".

As indicated earlier, the British government perceives a valid role for the cultural sector in addressing social inclusion and facilitating greater community cohesion. The research has shown that where communities can be realised and identified, either in terms of social, cultural, civic or personal identity, a sense of community ownership is a powerful force in establishing the role of museums libraries and archives within individual communities. The ability of traditional repositories of public knowledge to evoke an empathic, emotional and intellectual response to and understanding of alternative cultures and their heritage (as evidenced by the qualitative research findings) is also a central element to the development of community cohesion, both in theory and practice.

Workshop participants commented that it is essential for museums libraries and archives to preserve notions of community and identity for those wishing to understand how the past has informed the future from personal, communal, national and international perspectives. Traditional repositories of public knowledge encourage an evocation of community and act as valuable sources of community knowledge, a role also observed by focus group respondents. Workshop participants agreed there is a strong role for MLAs in a community context, but one which needs to be re-addressed by the relevant professionals. It was stated that professionals need to be much more proactive rather than reactive in meeting public demand and choice in terms of their collections and how well they serve and represent their communities. There is also a real challenge for museums libraries and archives in

representing the contemporary phenomenon of communities *of interest*, or communities of choice, as opposed to the traditional, easily identifiable physical or 'local' communities. Libraries in particular are seen as community venues which are used to pursue individual interests. The role of museums libraries and archives as virtual organisations is seen as a vital contemporary community and user link which can only serve to encourage greater communication and non-user exploration of cultural public services.

"It's a mesh of geographical and communities of interest... community will mean different things at different stages of one's life... if you are a parent of young children you will feel a very particular part of community life... that will be different when you are part of a church community perhaps in later life... what are people interested in at the moment as a community, whether its local or not" (workshop participant)

"Communities are now based on communities of choice... people are choosing to relate to communities based on their individual interests and needs... this is what is so important about electronic access, local relevance and access isn't necessarily important" (workshop participant)

"Community can be overdone really... the one thing I think of where a public library is concerned is that they are community places where you go to be an individual... there's that sort of tension" (workshop participant)

"Something like the Beamish museum presents an evocation of community which users can relate to, both our present and past... but the basis for that isn't there anymore... people will use a library to seek a particular information interest, I think we need to get rid of the empathic 'sense of belonging' side to community" (workshop participant)

"You can make a person feel something and bring a [museum] object to life... you can do that by looking at it and have someone interpret it for you, you can do it on broadband, by broadcasting, in a book... there's so many ways of doing it... it doesn't matter... its about getting it out to the community" (workshop participant)

## 5.2 Nostalgia and retrospection

*“The golden age is always three generations ago isn’t it?” (Workshop participant)*

When discussing their perceptions of museum, library and archive services, and with particular reference to how they *use* these services, respondents would often reply retrospectively, and refer to childhood experiences. Such nostalgia and retrospection are key ingredients of the respect and sense of value that respondents displayed towards the traditional repositories of public knowledge. This is especially true when it came to the perception of public ownership of such resources. This illustrated how changing communities and contemporary lifestyles are not necessarily encouraging the same sense of ownership, which was often linked to a sense of community belonging and personal history:

“To me, that’s a bit of a yesteryear question [MLAs and community ownership]... I was inclined to say yes because I suddenly got an image of my Gran using her local library... but that really was a local library, I don’t really have that... I don’t feel any sense of ownership in relation to this library [central], and this is the one I use”  
(Parents, Midlands)

In their mass observation of the public library service, Black and Crann (2002) experienced a similar phenomenon: “For others this was an opportunity to explore memory and nostalgia in *Cider with Rosie* mode: ‘a beautiful gloomy place with dark wooden shelves... We loved it because it was dark and mysterious and quite unlike home... I remember librarians from my childhood as elderly, kindly women, usually with braided hair wound round in buns... and wearing shirts and twin sets’. Thus, it is possible that some correspondents may be playing out their aspirations as writers, thereby embellishing and dramatizing their observations”.

The relevant professionals however shouldn’t necessarily view nostalgic interpretations of past MLA experiences as negative, insignificant evidence. Grainge (1999) observes that nostalgia is often used as a powerful political tool: ‘Nostalgia is often thought to have an intrinsically conservative bias. It represents a plea for continuity in times of uncertainty and change; the rhetoric of nostalgia posits a decline and then appeals to a more authentic and politically serviceable golden age’. In a study of British cinema in the Thatcher years, it is noted that heritage films turned their backs on the industrialized, chaotic present and nostalgically reconstructed an imperialist and upper-class Britain, with more settled and visually splendid ‘manifestations of an essentially pastoral national identity and authentic culture’ (Higson, 1993). Whilst not wishing to condone such politicised propaganda, traditional repositories of public knowledge could take fuller advantage of their historical significance and value when marketing and promoting their services, by building on the nostalgic fondness and respect that the public holds for them.

Workshop participants agreed that there is scope for the cultural information industries use their nostalgic value in terms of the public and community *relevance* of the services they provide. By providing communities with a sense of their own history, and encouraging family use and activities, younger audiences can be encouraged to inherit this sense of nostalgic value and respect and develop a personal history and relationship with museums libraries and archives, although it was felt that this may no longer be articulated in a deferential way. This in turn may encourage a new sense of public ownership of these resources. This need to encourage a sense of belonging and ownership in the younger generations was also voiced by focus group respondents:

“It’s a generational thing as well... younger people have so many other choices now. Round here there was nothing to do when I was a kid... it must have been worse for our parents... two TV channels, that’s if you had a telly! So they read more... and couldn’t afford to buy books so they borrowed them... it’s a different world now!”  
(MLA users, North West)

“I grew up in a household with very few books, there was a set of Dickens and the Bible. That was it. For me, libraries were the most wonderful places on earth because I could sit there and read... there must still be children, for all we think ‘oh they’ve all got computers, they’ve all got televisions’... there must still be children for whom these are really important places that they can’t get from anywhere else”.  
(MLA users, East of England)

“Its this issue of respect, can you [museums libraries and archives] just live on respect... it ought to be easier to make museums relevant to youngsters and families... in which case they will go knowing that they are accessible fun places... and maybe then be encouraged to continue using them for different reasons... but that isn’t about respect at all is it? It’s about giving people an image that is welcoming and friendly and ‘for me’” (workshop participant)

“It’s a cultural thing isn’t it? I never ever went to the library, and certainly not museums until very recently... in fact I still don’t go to museums! I grew up in a small town and it just wasn’t part of life. I remember my aunties using the small public library for Catherine Cookson and gardening books... but that’s the kind of lasting image it has for me. I’ve had to use the library since starting college and now I would encourage the kids to.” (North West, parents)

Museums libraries and archives can also reclaim their public service image by emphasising their impartiality and objectivity in presenting such personal and community histories. It is important to enable people to interpret their own pasts, and it is felt that such retrospection is essential for understanding both the present and the future, which brings us full circle to the role of museums libraries and archives in the contemporary information age:

“I think it places museum, archives and libraries that you close with people’s association with their past and interpretation of that, so you take away any sort of connection with that. It’s almost like people being taken away from their families at birth and not knowing who their birth families were, they just get a sense of dissociation with everything. These are vital resources, they’re telling you where you are in history and what your community is and how it got to be like that and what your place is in this community and what you can make of it. I think it broadens your outlook as well.” (East of England, MLA users)

The sense of history and tradition implicit within perceptions of museums libraries and archives provides strong evidence of their cultural value, and although largely anecdotal in terms of evidence, shouldn't be overlooked by policy makers and professionals. As one workshop participant observed:

"If you can show that something has had a value in the past you need to be very careful about the decisions you take to reform it and to create new policies in the present. I think the past is very important".

### 5.3 Lifestyle and information needs

Perhaps the most prevalent and widely discussed issue in shaping the public's use and value of museums libraries and archives is the contemporary role of lifestyle and how this affects information seeking and patterns of consumer behaviour. Focus group respondents continually referred back to lifestyle and its demands, including professional and family responsibilities, and how this limits the time that individuals can make available to more considered information seeking and cultural activities. In turn, lifestyle also plays an inhibiting role in levels of political engagement and awareness:

"You can also be so caught up in how to pay the bills, the day to day things, that actually none of these things [political issues] ever enter your consciousness. We're lucky in that we all have the luxury of being able to think about these things".  
(East of England focus group, Parents)

"It depends on how interested you are on a particular subject. Life's short and an awful lot of things that come under those headings, I have to admit I have a brief knowledge of, and in a sense I'm reasonably happy with that, whereas the things I'm more interested in, I get more involved in and will feel more authoritative about. I think unless you've got a lot of spare time, it's difficult to get knowledgeable background."  
(Yorkshire focus group, Users)

"Lifestyle is an important word I think... attitudes towards these things stem from so many influences... your family attitudes... your friends... where you lived... what school you went to, the job you do... major incidents in your life... people will only ever know or need to find out what they feel they need to know to keep up... That's a bit deep! But true... I couldn't tell you anything about foreign policy, at least I don't feel as though I could... because I don't need to or particularly want to!"  
(Northwest focus group, Users)

Respondents indicated an awareness of the resources that are available from museums libraries and archives, but suggested that not having the time to visit them presented real problems.

"People have busy lives especially young families. Both my daughters have moved away, they both work and have children. Their weekends are spent on the kids' hobbies, footy practice, swimming... and visiting their families. They're always on the go. I think they visit museums when they're on holiday, but have probably never been to one at home. I have no excuse personally mind!" (North West, 55+)

"I think the public information is excellent. It is available, the problem is people making use of it, because they're so busy. I love listening to the news and thinking "I wish I could do something about that", but you get frustrated. The information is there but people don't have the time to dig deeper."  
(Users focus group, Northern Ireland)

It is important to note that life *stages*, along with individual and collective lifestyles also affect the ways in which museums libraries and archives are perceived and used. For example:

“I think that, I know from myself, when I was younger, in primary school. I was definitely the sort of child that did have knowledge. My parents would take me to museums, we’d go down to London regularly. Then, I think when children get to high school, into adolescence, they kind of lose that thirst for knowledge because there’s other commitments. I know for myself, I definitely lost it a bit. But I would... I know I’ll regain it once I have more spare time.” (East of England, MLA users)

“I think as well to follow on from that, libraries are not necessarily used continuously by the same people for long periods of time, you might use them when you are a young child, you might also use them perhaps when you are at school... you may then not use them again in your working life, but you may use them for recreation and leisure in your fifties and sixties.

So people like to know it’s there for if and when they want to use it, even if they may not necessarily use it every week or every month, or every year” (Midlands, MLA professionals)

Workshop participants discussed issues surrounding lifestyle and the subsequent impact upon information seeking and political engagement. They debated the implications of ‘choice theory’; the role of information digestion and the work/life balance; conceptual distinctions between ‘well’ and ‘fully’ informed citizenship; the relevance and appropriateness of accusations of general public apathy. It was considered that the convenient mass-media sources of information are preferable in terms of ‘choice theory’; that being the theoretical assumption that the more choice an individual gets the less choice they actually have. In this respect the information digest is becoming more common in professional environments as individuals do not have the time available to sift through information sources and draw their own conclusions.

“One of the things that I’ve been reading about recently, is choice theory which I’m sure you’re all well aware of, which means the more choice you get in fact the less choice you have... This seems to be germane to the whole empowerment issue... What I tend to think about this question is that if you think of libraries museums and archives, the mass of choice that is within them, is actually disempowering, and therefore as indicated earlier, to have somebody mediate it, be it a broadcaster be it a tabloid journalist, and they’re not always bad, thinking of Paul Foot, one of the key investigative journalists of the century and wrote for a tabloid for most of his life, so it’s not tabloids bad, broadsheets good, radio 4 great... it’s more difficult than that... so I actually think that people get fed up with making choices, and that in some areas of life they do want others to make the choice for them” (workshop participant)

“We love an information digest, look how popular they are in our professional life, the digested mailing list, that sort of thing, we need someone, well I need someone to tell me what to think in some ways in my personal life outside of work, because we’re so busy at work the work/life balance is difficult to achieve” (workshop participant)

“looking at the work of Schutz I was interested in your concept of the fully informed citizen, he used the concept of the well informed citizen which I think is a better concept, a more useful one... and what he suggested was the blindingly obvious that most people dealing with every day situations, everyday realities are functioning at one of three levels most of the time, either consciously or unconsciously, and at the level of the expert, the well informed citizen or a superficial level. I guess in answer to this question, the build up of pressures will make us opt for one or another of those levels” (workshop participant)

“There’s just something that we sort of touched on earlier and its this word apathy... I think in defining or discussing apathy, really what we were talking about at the beginning was a lack of capacity, it’s not an apathy... we’re not saying that we’re apathetic we’re saying we don’t have the capacity to inform ourselves... I don’t think people are saying that they’re not interested in the information, it’s certainly not what the research shows, it shows that we just don’t feel we have the time” (workshop participant)

It appears that the build up of external pressures forces people to accept their status as a 'well enough' informed citizen rather than pursue the level of expert. As such, it seems inappropriate and derogatory to refer to an individual living under such circumstances as apathetic; an opinion upheld by focus group respondents in Section 4:2.

## 5.4 Educational values

*Where is the wisdom we have lost to knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost to Information? (T.S. Eliot)*

The research has raised some interesting issues about the informative, educational and recreational role of museums libraries and archives, with particular reference to how each role can complement and sustain one another, and shouldn't necessarily be seen as mutually exclusive. In a discussion of the future role of the public library service, Williamson (2000) fears that the redefinition of the educational and informational role of the service in light of social inclusion objectives will lead to a 'diminution of service provision in the recreational and cultural roles'. Recreation, Williamson states, is an essential part of a person's life, along with a reference to some sort of cultural heritage. He argues that the public library service provides a worthy impartial outlet for these two needs. Respondents recognised the need for museums libraries and archives to marry the educational and recreational roles, both from a philosophical and a strategic perspective:

"I think that's interesting isn't it, in that there's education and fun and leisure [that] are mutually separate. For me, if I'm not really learning, it's not fun and it's not leisurely".  
(Professionals focus group, East of England)

"I think the problem that libraries have is that you could use it for leisure as well as work. You can use it for information, for the role of education, you could use it for universities, as we have done. You have lots of different bases and lots of different roles, and that's always been the big problem... where are we going?" (Scotland, MLA professionals)

"The museums here [have] just been moved from the education budget to the tourism budget. Traditionally they were always under the education budget, but because they're a big attractor of visitors now, that's why tourism would be the thing to ask for funds..."  
(Users focus group, Northern Ireland)

"Museums are where you can find things of interest about the world in general, about industry, arts, life almost anything... Its good for a general learning curve, and I've enjoyed taking the grandchildren there in the past ... I think a museum is an educational place".  
(Yorkshire, 55+)

As noted in the chapter four, the role of museums libraries and archives as sources of *informal* learning is highly valued by all respondents. Implicit to this role are concepts of image and understanding. It is important for traditional repositories of public knowledge to be seen as non-threatening and welcoming environments in order to fulfil this role effectively. In creating this image it is important to continually and explicitly acknowledge and provide for a variety of learning styles and educational needs in order to break down barriers associated with cultural and social assumptions:

"...most people who've left school will say 'that's the end of school, I'm not going to learn anything for the rest of my life'. Learning is perceived as something that is out of the way, but you do learn, obviously, but you don't sign up to learn, unless you're like us, professionals, students and academics".  
(Professionals focus group, East of England)

“Actively supporting developing literacy and the role we have to play in learning, the way every library in the country supports people very locally in learning experiences and nurtures people at different steps in their lives... it’s a very personal service we give to people, not all people have access to the internet, have the confidence, knowledge or ability to be able to access information, that’s where libraries have a big role to play” (Midlands, MLA professionals)

For the public library service, the research has revealed the need to extend reader development activities to include social and political non-fiction genres. This will make explicit the valuable role of reading in helping people to understand contemporary social and political concerns. Some focus group respondents expressed an enjoyment of reading popular social and political titles and authors, and commented on how accessible such titles are by mainstream commercial booksellers. Public libraries can learn from this and think in terms of displays and promotions targeted towards such audiences which may encourage new readers of the genre.

“In terms of a general understanding of the political situation in terms of the Middle East and foreign policy, I’ve read around that... I mean that’s quite easy to do... reading the likes of Pilger, which is quite popular journalism really can help you do that... I wouldn’t say I’ve gone in to any great depth” (Midlands, MLA users)

“I was thinking specifically about the ‘Stupid White Men’ book when I made the bookshop example... that’s a politically orientated title, I mean not particularly high-brow and academic, but it’s widely available in paperback and was included in the Waterstones 3 for 2 offer! That’s demonstrating a political or social consciousness by reading quite a popular best-seller” (Midlands, parents)

“I see them as places to expend your learning but more informally... I mean I do borrow books from the library but I borrow fiction... travel guides... I still feel like I’ve learnt something and am becoming more culturally aware in doing that... I don’t really feel the need to read books devoted to these topics” (South East, parents)

The relationship between museums libraries and archives and formal places of learning has already been discussed briefly under the heading of community ownership. A partnership with formal learning organisations give museums libraries and archives the opportunity to reinforce their educational role and encourage new users, which in turn drives a sense of public ownership and continued patterns of use and value. This powerful relationship was also discussed by workshop participants:

“I think we do more now in terms of education and I think we’re catching up with museums and libraries on that. There are projects, we’re in a major one now that has a booklet and a CD, an interactive programme, using documents as part of learning. That’s at primary school. From primary through secondary the words archives and documents and the idea of their existence is hopefully going to be fundamental, rather than something somebody discovers in their 40’s when they do genealogy.” (Scotland, MLA professionals)

"Regardless of whether you are a child or an adult it will, if you see a painting that captivates you, it may well then lead you to go and search more about the subject of that painting, to talk about it. One thing could trigger a lifelong interest..." (Yorkshire focus group, Users)

“the mutual benefits to be gained from having the next generation of teachers clued up about museums libraries and archives and thinking of them as more than just repositories in the most passive sense, you know, it’s fairly obvious. There’s lots of work to be done there and I would have thought there are opportunities across the board” (workshop participants)

Respondents look to museums libraries and archives to provide thorough, rigorous information sources and representations in response to, and rejection of, the ‘snap-shot’ culture of news reporting and media representation. This is perceived as maintenance of a traditional standard of excellence which is associated with the public service role of traditional repositories of public knowledge:

“I think it’s important that the knowledge should still be in-depth and quite specific. I think we get enough, as you said, of all this skimming over and giving a brief résumé of stuff. Assuming that about 5 minutes is about as long as anyone will listen. I think it’s important that there should be a standard of excellence that things don’t go below.” (East of England, MLA users)

“The only thing I’d like to reiterate is this idea that information, or printed information, is a bygone era now, people won’t use books, people won’t be interested, that’s rubbish. There will always be a desire and a need to use printed material, whether it’s fiction or non-fiction, and that will always remain a core element of people’s learning, education and how they perceive and understand life.” (Midlands, MLA professionals)

“ we do want it to be accessible and fun, but again, you shouldn’t forget that there is a place for just pure knowledge for the pleasure of knowledge, really.” (East of England, MLA users)

The role of museums libraries and archives as embodying the pleasure of learning was echoed by workshop participants. The challenge for them is in appealing to all members of the public and making this role as explicit as possible:

“Isn’t there a role just for... let me think this one out... acquiring knowledge and information not for any specific purpose but just for the sheer joy of acquiring it... there doesn’t need to be a specific outcome, there is a role in there for libraries, archives and museums just to provide somewhere for people to acquire knowledge and I think the problem certainly in archives has been how to get across to people that archives are not necessarily for professors and academics and students, it is for anybody who has got any interest in finding out what they want to find out” (workshop participant)

As the information age encourages an obsession with information literacy and accessibility, it would seem that the simultaneous educational and recreational role of museums libraries and archives must not be lost. In an article entitled ‘The end of imagination’, Taylor (2004) notes that the government mantra of ‘education education education’ is proving to be a contradiction in terms. Whilst exam statistics seemingly demonstrate that the British youth are growing brighter by the year, the proliferation of reality television and celebrity obsession illustrates how little we, as a society, value education and intelligence. Again, this brings the argument full circle to the original enriching and enlightening role and objectives of cultural services in the public sector. This is perhaps more relevant now than ever before.

## 5.5 Cultural assumptions and social identity

The research has revealed a certain degree of cultural assumptions and perceptions about the museum, library and archive sectors, the people who use them and the services they provide. The same is true of other sources of information identified by the study, including the broadsheet and tabloid press, which in some way challenge the established assumptions and preconceptions made about such media and their audiences. Such cultural assumptions provide a very tricky conundrum for the traditional repositories of public knowledge in terms of how and why to market their services to non-users whilst preserving high cultural and educational standards expected from existing users and patrons.

It is important to consider whether the all-inclusive philosophy of the traditional repositories of public knowledge is perceived as valid in the twenty-first century information society. It has been said that museums use their unique collections to involve an ever wider cross-section of the population, assisting users to determine their place in the world and understand their identities, reflecting the concerns and celebrating the diversity of contemporary life (Scaife and Blackwell, 2000). Godowski (2004) states that libraries, historically, have been the most inclusive public service with the broadest audience. Focus group respondents however felt that some cultural barriers could still be in place, and that this was relevant on behalf of the non-user and the professionals themselves:

“There used to be a certain amount of cultural snobbery... I'm not sure if that still exists... you know what I mean... people would think they didn't belong” (North West, 55+)

“I think people would assume they were of a higher quality because they are mediated by professional, learned people and because they are in fact institutions to many people... they have an academic quality” (Midlands, MLA users)

“I think one of the main barriers, I mean we're breaking down barriers all the time, slowly, but I think one of the main ones is that some people see us as these cultural buildings and if they haven't got particularly developed literacy skills, or if they had bad experiences in those places when they were younger, that can impact upon them... also if they feel they're not particularly learned or cultured, then obviously museums aren't for them or libraries aren't for them...” (Midlands, MLA professionals)

“It's definitely all to do with lack of cultural awareness and I think it comes from both sides as well I don't think it's just one-sided, and it's important that the two work together and break those issues down rather than one blaming the other” (Midlands, MLA professionals)

In a consideration of the increased importance given to social inclusion objectives in the public library service, Coates (2004) observes that whilst such policy initiatives are worthy and valuable, there are fears that other needs are being neglected in terms of the quality of the services being provided and book availability. From this perspective, it is argued that, ‘it is because the majority are being neglected in the pursuit of the minority that so many people find nothing useful in libraries, and have ceased to use them’. The role of museums libraries and archives in underpinning educational

excellence and academic fulfilment was acknowledged by focus group respondents as something that must be sustained alongside social inclusion objectives:

“libraries should be centres for knowledge and learning... for serious research and academic consideration... there’s no point going to Birmingham Central Library now unless you want a book in Urdu or you have basic literacy needs... that’s all you see when you walk in”  
(Midlands, 18-25)

“...for the very clever people, they don’t need to be told this, we won’t put interpretation on it, it’s there for the connoisseurs. I think it’s very difficult for modern museums to try and embrace the much wider audiences that they are embracing without reconciling the fact that you are not going to do that by appealing to a broad range of people in the same way as you would appeal to connoisseurs, shall we say. Or enthusiasts or specialists. You don’t want to lose them either. It’s marketing, essentially.” (East of England, MLA professionals)

“What annoys me in particular, now, is when you’re in the library, whichever library you go to, particularly the central library, there were probably tens of thousands of pounds worth of computers sitting around, people surfing the net, etc. Yet they can’t afford some descent microfilm readers for people with serious interests.” (Scotland, MLA users)

“I think it’s important that [public] libraries make academic stuff available... the sort of thing that can’t be found on the internet. University libraries, anyone can use them, but only a student can get a book out”. (Yorkshire, 18-25)

“when the library becomes used for other purposes, to enhance the work force, to be a more popular place for children... once you get more children and young people in, you drive out the traditional library users unless you’ve got a separate space for them. I think there’s a certain criteria which are fundamental and we need to protect, regardless what comes in from what’s fashionable or government policies. It probably has a role in it, but the fundamental role should be below that.” (Wales, MLA professionals)

Social and cultural identity is a strong determining factor in the choices to be made in terms of information sources and recreational pursuits. As stated in previous chapters, respondents were keen to dismiss the power of least trusted information sources in shaping or influencing their beliefs and understanding of social and political concerns. The reasoning behind this argument suggests a pre-determined selection of information sources on behalf of an individual, which has been influenced by existing social, cultural, and political beliefs rather than the other way round. One workshop participant offered the following explanation of such a phenomenon:

“There used to be in the mass media field these two paradigms... one was that the mass media influenced people and the contrary paradigm was that people made what use and took what gratification they could from the media so they looked at the programmes they liked or read the articles that gave them pleasure and conformed with their world view... it does seem to me that as you get this explosion of information, people increasingly do that, they look around and they say this is the way I see the world and that sees the world in the same way therefore that’s good information, good knowledge it confirms my world view... a sceptical analyst is few and far between” (workshop participant)

The literature suggests that readers of different newspapers will have differing attitudes towards social issues and crime (Cozens, 2003; Wiles, 2003). A causal relationship between the two is difficult to establish, as an

individual will often make a newspaper selection based on whether or not that publication already conforms to their own worldviews and opinions; it is important to look to the historical and social context in order to understand an individual's beliefs and perceptions (Hampton, 2001). Some focus group respondents upheld this view:

"I think the tabloids represent extreme left or right politics, and that some people choose to read them for that reason... they are already on that side of the fence they haven't been swayed that way by reading the Sun".  
(MLA users, Midlands)

"I think we have to accept that the individuals writing in there [newspapers] are individuals. If we were all to write something about the same thing, even if we all agreed on it, it would come out quite differently. Because we have our own life baggage which makes us see things in a slightly different way".  
(East of England, parents)

"It's the specifics that we've experienced which is influencing our views and the way we direct our lives".  
(MLA users, East of England)

"A lot of us, these things are virtually genetic, you take the opinion of your household."  
(Wales, MLA professionals)

At the same time, some vaguely controversial and sweeping statements were made about the cultural and psychological make up of tabloid readership:

"Newspapers tend to force it down your throat; they're aggressive about what they think. That's why you get crazy people believing the tabloids". (Yorkshire, 18-25)

Strelitz (2002) notes that where once the identity of individuals was rooted in production (as workers or owners), today it is patterns of consumption which confers identity, as this is the one domain over which people feel that they still have some sense of power, with media consumption at the heart of this process. The problem of appealing to users on an individual, cultural *and* societal basis is a complex issue for museums libraries and archives, which invariably necessitates the making of decisions on behalf of potential audiences. The role of paternalism in the cultural industries, and making assumptions about how people do and should behave, was perceived as a danger to the sector, and one that may potentially threaten the use and value of the relevant services:

"One thing that does concern me a lot is there is an immense amount of paternalism in how we think, that the people out there should be about or what they would appreciate or how they might use it. That paternalism really pisses me off. So often in my job we talk about this, that was one of the things that concerned me about today as well." (East of England, MLA professionals)

"It seems to me you've got a group here that is used to running into museums and libraries, although we aren't that acquainted with archives. If you had dragged a number of people off the street who had rarely been in a museum, never been in a library and don't know what an archive is, you'd have got some very different views on what the values are. Would I want to go in any of those places? And they probably wouldn't...Yes, I think everybody's worrying,

terribly, that we must get more people in, but these people probably don't want to come in anyhow." (Scotland, MLA users)

Further to what motivates choices in information seeking, workshop participants observed that it is important to take in to account the type of information seeking that is being undertaken. Museums libraries and archives, it is argued, often conform to a passive sense of information seeking, whereby information is acquired on an unintentional basis. The motivation behind such acquisition is a sense of curiosity, which along with other previously discussed motivating factors such as professional responsibilities and peer influence, doesn't necessarily fit in to neat demographic categories such as age, ethnicity and social class. Another element affecting the consideration of the relationship between social and cultural identity and information seeking and behaviour, is the extent to which this is individualised and motivated by personal factors and experiences. Workshop participants considered many motivating factors behind information seeking and lifestyle decisions that are not so easily explained or categorised:

"I think we need to draw a distinction between active and passive... the sort of thing you're talking about is active seeking... you know deliberately wanting to know something and going out and seeking it, whereas I guess is... a huge proportion of people who go to museums and libraries, not archives because you're distinctly thinking when you go to an archive... are actually, it's more absorption and a more passive learning and a more gathering of stuff that you didn't know you wanted to know but you're fascinated when you find out... I think in that case the driving force is curiosity... if you're a person who has curiosity you will do these things and you will learn even if you didn't know you were interested" (workshop participant)

"perhaps because I'm a cultural historian I really find that we each create our own narratives, I mean we create them to satisfy our own particular needs and all our sensory perceptions all our information that we've gathered is mediated by the way we think, by our life experience and all the rest of it, and we create a narrative, so that's my particular perspective of it"  
(workshop participant)

"One of the things that actually struck me by looking at Bourdieu's work, is that he makes no reference to difference between let us say optimists and pessimists, or between romantics and realists... or people who are concerned with equity as opposed to freedom or whatever, which I think cut across if you like at a perceptual level and therefore at the ways people look for information across the whole socio-economic structure" (workshop participant)

It would appear that, on a community level, the only way to address issues surrounding cultural assumptions and social identity, and the impact they have on MLA role and value, is by achieving greater communication and understanding between these services and the communities which they serve. It is only by listening to ideas about what the community wants and how they want it that traditional repositories of public knowledge can bridge the gap between cultural standards, inclusive services and busy, consumer lifestyles, as respondents note:

"I think libraries and museums etc mean so many different things to different people... some people couldn't give a toss about them, some people swear by them... other people use them but for different reasons... whether its for bus timetables or serious study... they're never going to please all people all of the time. If they do become more community and people

oriented then they may lose that credibility we were talking about for people who rely on them for study... they can't win really" (North West, MLA users)

"They are trying to cater for too many people and not catering enough for individual groups as a result... you can't cater for an overall audience... every single person who visits a library has an individual need. I wouldn't like to see Thelma, who's been using the library for 80 years being stopped because they've opened an internet café on the bottom floor. They need to either change the buildings so they are for different groups (students, young people, OAPs)... you can say I want to chill out... but if everybody else wants to sit around and talk about a book, and talk quite loudly about a book, then they should be able to." (North West, 18-25)

## 5.6 Consumerism and infotainment

“They [the *Juke Box Boys*] are ground between the millstones of technocracy and democracy; society gives them an almost limitless freedom of the sensations, but makes few demands on them – the use of their hands and of a fraction of their brains for forty hours a week... and the commercial people ensure, by the inevitable processes of development in commercial entertainment, that their peculiar grip is retained and strengthened”. (Hoggart, 1992)

“... this isn’t an intelligent movie with an intelligent analysis. Its fast food politics, filled with the sugar and carb of cheap sensation and low on nutrition... It’s a shame. American liberals needed this film to energise them in the most important election year for decades, and most of the facts are on their side. They needed a movie that offered its huge audience more vitamins and less lard”.

(Johann Hari, ‘Truth and Lies and sticky innuendo’ – review of Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *The Independent* on Sunday, 11/7/04)

The research has revealed that, unavoidably, traditional repositories of public knowledge face stark and real competition from the commercial alternatives including mass media information sources and the growth in commercial bookselling, both from a high street and e-commerce perspective. Traditional, authentic forms of art and culture are threatened by an age of mass consumerism and reproduction. Perhaps surprisingly, this is supported by comments from the professionals themselves:

“I would not think of going to the public library, the municipal library to look for information. I would absolutely use the web. Then I would go to Waterstones or other bookshops”.

(RPK FG, MLA professionals, East of England)

“You can’t take drinks in to the library, it’s more restricted. Borders want that market... that kind of ‘third place’ after the pub and the cinema. It’s not work and it’s not home, and you can have fun”.

(RPK FG, 18-25, North West)

“Very rarely I might use the public library, but I use it less and less. I tend to buy books more than getting them from a public library. 10, 20 years ago I would have used the library... books are so much cheaper now. There’s so much more opportunity to buy books.” (Wales, parents)

“it’s like art in a sense... instead of seeing the original you can buy a print from Ikea. Why do you need to come and see it when you have it in your living room!”

(RPK FG, 18-25, North West)

“A lot of children in my form say they’ve ordered a book from amazon.com, they’re more into using the internet to get books rather than go to a bookshop or library.” (Wales, parents)

Museums libraries and archives do however have a role to play as a consumer-driven source of information in their leisure and entertainment sphere, a role which complements their perceived and highly valued role as sources of informal learning and education. It is widely accepted within the professions that the cultural industries need to be more commercially aware and accountable, but not at the expense of their educational role:

"Of course, national museums and galleries should be run as efficiently as possible, but they are far more than mere commercial organizations. Museums and galleries are repositories of knowledge and centres of learning, not shopping malls." (Foster, 2004)

There is however much controversy surrounding the commercialization of the cultural sectors, and a reluctance to concede to a consumer-driven society. Williams (1983) considers the appropriateness in terms of the history of the word 'consumer' that the description *consumer society* was often used to express a wasteful and 'throw away' society. The anti-commercialization debate is very strong within the liberal lobby of the cultural sphere in terms of cultural patrimony and the state of the 'classic' text and principles of aesthetic distinction and cultural inheritance (Grainge, 1999). The advent of 'popular history' aided by the development in satellite and cable television also creates tension within the history and cultural disciplines. Parts of history are being exposed as never before to popular and mass forms of representation and interpretation, which are often conflicting and are open to scrutiny in terms of quality and authenticity (Hoskins, 2003). Higson (1993) states that the transformation of the past into a series of commodities for the leisure and entertainment market offers 'an image, a spectacle, something to be gazed at' and little else. As one focus group respondent warned:

"In 50 years time when the young people are taught about the Second World War, what's gone on in Hollywood films will be taken as fact".  
(RPK FG, MLA users, East of England)

However, such accessible, alternative interpretations of history including popular history television programmes were enjoyed and appreciated by some focus group respondents, although they acknowledge potential historical inaccuracies in such presentations:

"The T.V. programmes on history I enjoy, because I don't have the great in-depth knowledge. Although there may be certain things I think I don't think is quite right, I still enjoy it. Even if the history is not entirely accurate doesn't mean it may not have a point. History in itself is not entirely accurate as many books contradict each other. I enjoy these programmes on T.V. and I do think they do a fairly good job. It depends how biased the current government are. But it's specific things, something which may raise your interests. You may think you want to check up on something. Life's too short for going into detail in everything, though. I think the BBC does a good job of it's reporting." (Scotland, MLA users)

I think there are some excellent programmes put out by the BBC and even by, surprisingly, Channel 4. Particularly with visual records where they gather up material which has been in private hands for, perhaps 75 years or so. People taking early photographs of the trenches and various notables of those times. It's quite fascinating to see some of these people, albeit, other than just an illustration in a book or perhaps a few descriptive passages, it's another story to see someone for real. I wouldn't be quite so heavy on the media. I never take the media too serious if I want really informed information, but it does have a place to excite you and stimulate you and get you involved, and perhaps see a new dimension of historical events. You don't see that any other way. (Scotland, MLA users)

Respondents in Black and Crann's study of the public library service (2002) rejected the commercialization of the service and regarded it as a neutral, democratic territory where people act as citizens rather than consumers. It has been argued that anti-elitist policies can be detrimental to the core of the public library service and their educational activity (White, 1976). Coates (2004) presents an alternative view, whereby he recommends that libraries should learn from their retail equivalents, the high street book stores, and provide welcoming consumer driven environments with comfortable furniture, café culture, events and round the clock opening hours. Coates also recommends the same supply management principles used by commercial booksellers, which implies a 'watering down' of professional skills and responsibilities and has serious implications for the professional identity of the public librarian. In response to Coates, Dyckhoff (2004) celebrates the reinvention of the public library with Poplar's Idea Store and its 'all inclusive' design, stating that 'residents want us to use the language of retail rather than the language that local authorities used in the past. Moreover, they wanted libraries on the high street, so they could pop in while shopping'. Indicating that libraries can successfully provide that '3<sup>rd</sup> place' alluded to in the above focus group quote. This does not necessarily imply a 'selling out' to the consumer super-power, as Cabe (2004) observes, the Scandinavians have long since been given to describing the modern library as the 'living room in the city', or the 'town salon'; a civil and educational alternative to the frenetic commercial world of the modern shopping mall or themed bar.

Bookselling, e-publishing and commerce and the advent of the so-called café culture high street library presents new challenges to the public library in terms of the extent of discounting and offers that are made to the book-buying public, such as 'three for two' offers and heavily reduced best sellers. Some focus groups observed that those in a suitable financial position to take up such offers are less likely to borrow fiction and readily available paper backs from the public library. The counter argument to this is that the public library is still an invaluable book-borrowing resource to those who are not in such a favourable financial position, and to those readers wishing to borrow more weightier and expensive publications such as text books and more exclusive hard backs.

"I think for novels and things libraries can't possibly compete with bookshops because there are so many wonderful offers now. I think for reference stuff they are unbeatable". (Yorkshire, MLA users)

Focus group respondents suggested that a compromise with or to the consumer society will be necessary for museums libraries and archives to survive, and could provide the opportunity to 'open doors' for new users:

"Because we are increasingly more consumers, I think if you don't include a consumer experience in any experience, you automatically cut off a main driving force of getting interactive with it. You go on the internet to buy stuff, you spend money on daytime shopping. A tiny amount, by doing that, individuals buy into an experience, which is the cup of coffee, but it's in this place. I think in a sense you are becoming a patron of that place by having that cup of coffee. It somehow provides an interface" (East of England, MLA professionals)

“The seating in the library needs to be dragged, kicking and screaming, into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Let’s have a couple of easy chairs, sofas, a coffee table” (South west, MLA users)

“In Year 9 we have a leisure group, and we talk to the top group about what they would like to have, and they always say they’d like a drop in centre for people aged between 13 – 16. They want a safe environment where they can socialise with their friends, without intimidation and a variety of activities” (Wales, parents)

“The libraries were never attractive, because they’re dusty and out of date. Now, it’s no different. I can find my information on the internet. If the libraries had more, like a play area for children, lounges, café’s, then I would go.” (South West, ethnic minority)

Workshop participants recognised the need for commercial activity across the three sectors in support of their core activities and aims and objectives, not instead of them:

“I am actually saying people, in trying to promote ICT across our constituency, you do have a commercial opportunity and in fact while funding is shrinking, you need to support your core activity, as you perceive your core activity, what is wrong in it, whether it is conditioning download so that somebody can have a wall-size constable in their dining room, or whether you have a shop” (workshop participant)

“Half of them [independent museums] are run to earn enough money to pay their staff and open their doors, they have to be commercial... libraries and archives are being drawn in to the same element, there’s very few libraries without shops these days” (workshop participant)

In a time of huge political cynicism and social mistrust, there is an ideal opportunity for museums, libraries and archives to draw on appropriate commercial expertise to reiterate this role and reposition themselves in communities as public information service providers. That is to rediscover their role as repositories of public knowledge and facilitators of independent informal learning. In a political climate that drives people to cinemas to watch the latest Michael Moore offering, museums libraries and archives can open up the world of social and political concerns based on issues surrounding personal, communal, social and national histories and identities. The research has shown that there is still a need for authentic sources of mediated information in the digital age, particularly in terms of social and political agendas. . As Billy Bragg suggests it might be necessary:

“Take down the Union Jack, it clashes with the sunset  
And pile all those history books, but don’t throw them away  
They just might have some clues about what it really means  
To be an Anglo hyphen Saxon in England.co.uk”  
*Billy Bragg (2002), ‘Take Down the Union Jack’*

## 6. Summary

In examining the multiplicity of information sources that shape our emotional and intellectual responses to contemporary concerns, and enable people to become fully informed citizens, the data suggest that museums, libraries and archives have a valid function as repositories of public knowledge. Whilst the immediacy of newspapers, radio and the internet can keep people abreast of news stories and relatively 'up to date', museums, libraries and archives serve a community role by providing historical context, offering alternative viewpoints, artistic interpretation and a mediated service which caters to a variety of learning styles and information needs. Even if the R.P.K.s are thought to serve primarily as a source for recreation they can still contribute to the public understanding of socio-political concerns. If a library user borrows a work of fiction telling the story of a Kurdish refugee's experiences in the city of Liverpool, or a museum visitor views a collection or display on the Cold War, then their understanding of contemporary concerns will invariably be shaped and inspired in some way.

The project has revealed the need to redefine the conceptual issues used within the research with particular reference to the previously discussed educational role of MLAs in shaping knowledge and understanding of current social and political concerns. It is perhaps more relevant to think of such issues as *enduring* social and political concerns in a contemporary context rather than as current concerns. As one workshop participant observed:

"I think one of the tensions of the whole research... [was] the difficulty of distinguishing socio-political issues that are current and socio-political issues that are enduring... you cannot actually say that the current issues are detached because actually if you detach them you are not the well or fully informed citizen you are somebody who has taken an extremely partial and probably very dangerous view point... in other words I think past, present and future are all very closely inter-linked".

This reinforces the educational informative role of MLAs in providing historical and interpretative context to help shape our understanding of social and political issues, a role which was frequently cited and valued by respondents.

The research has shown that both lifestyle and life stages are highly significant factors when examining patterns of MLA use and value. Busy lifestyles which combine family and occupational responsibilities were often cited as reasons for choosing easily accessible and digestible information sources such as television and the internet, which readily 'fit in' to daily routines. Life stages are an important consideration, as the research has shown that patterns of usage are rarely constant, but tend to occur at specific stages in respondent's lives. For example there are many examples of nostalgic, anecdotal evidence which show how childhood experiences of MLAs have helped to shape perception and value of these services; entry in to further and higher education encourages increased MLA usage; having children often signifies increased use of such services as parental responsibility encourages an enthusiasm for a child's learning and education; retirement also encourages increased individual use of MLAs as people have

more leisure time to pursue personal interests and informal learning opportunities.

It is the conscious recognition of this role that can help shape the future identity of RPKs through service marketing, publicity and attempts to create increased awareness and accessibility. MLAs must respond to these conditions upon patterns of usage if they are to reinforce their role as repositories of public knowledge and meet the demands of contemporary communities and lifestyles. Many respondents referred to a preference, or a necessity, for longer opening hours and weekend/Sunday opening in particular. Services should be marketed towards the key demographic groups and awareness raised amongst non-users within these categories. It would seem that parents are a particularly good target group as respondents commented that their parental role in taking their children along to a museum or library had often 'opened doors' for them in terms of the adult services provided and the satisfaction gained from the overall experience.

In many ways the position of the RPKs reflects the current debate about the future of the B.B.C. Peter Aspden (2004) has written how the BBC is, in "a tricky position hovering between several expectations: as a guardian of the cultural cannon [and] as a mass broadcaster that has to win the approval of several different elite groups..." Similar dilemmas face archives, libraries and museums.

Although RPKs are conventionally viewed as one of many information organizations it is possible to pose an alternative view that, along with public service broadcasters, they are, part of a small number of true information organizations. The press, the internet and much of the electronic mass media are more concerned with gaining attention for advertisers, political, religious, social or other causes. They are, in reality and virtual reality "attention seeking" rather than information organizations. This is seen for example in their sensational treatment of events which, as in the notorious Gilligan broadcast, can even cause public service organizations such as the BBC to lower their standards. It is also seen in marketing activities whereby newspapers increasingly promote themselves not by the quality of their journalism but through free CDs or airline tickets.

On the other hand the RPKs like public service broadcasters have to find ways to attract attention to the services they provide. In the words of one of our respondents:

"There's a huge amount of work, PR, education needed to make people feel that these are in the public domain, they are owned by the people for the people. This would make them more welcoming, make the access easier...(and show) that they are exciting, interesting places to be (55+, Northern Ireland)

The evidence suggests that it is considered important for society to have access to the established repositories of public knowledge even if people do

not use them all of the time. It is this difference between social value and “use” value that justifies public funding. Indeed as one of our respondents argued, “The difference between the social value and the use value of RPKs are a measure of their *need* for public funding”. On the basis of the qualitative and quantitative data presented here, museums, libraries and archives are still regarded as relevant and valued repositories of public knowledge in what some may term “the information age”.

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## **Appendix 1**

### ***Survey questionnaire***

#### ICM Omnibus Introduction

Good morning/afternoon/evening, my name is .....,I'm calling from ICM Research the independent market research company. We are conducting a research project which requires us to talk to a representative sample of people aged 18 or over throughout the country on issues that affect all people. We have selected your telephone number purely at random and would greatly appreciate your help for a few minutes to answer some simple questions.

**IF RESPONDENT SOUNDS LIKE THEY WANT TO REFUSE SAY:**

For the purpose of our research project it is most important that we talk to a representative cross section of all people. Therefore, your views are extremely important to us and the interview will only take a few minutes of your time.

**IF RESPONDENT STILL SOUNDS LIKE THEY WANT TO REFUSE, SAY:**

If you cannot spare the time at the moment I would really appreciate it if we could call you back at your own convenience over the next ... days. As I say, your own views are very important to us.

OK - CONTINUE

REPOSITORIES OF PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE  
DRAFT SCHEDULE FOR TELEPHONE SURVEY  
(ICM redraft)

Introduction: READ OUT

As part of an academic study we are investigating how people use different sources of information when seeking information on, and attempting to understand, contemporary issues. A recent survey showed the following to be the five most important issues for the British people to be:

1. National Health Service
2. Foreign Affairs/Defence
3. Education/Schools
4. Law & Order
5. Economy

Q1 In order for you to achieve a fuller understanding of these issues how important is it that you have easy access to the following? Please use a scale of 1-5 where 1 equals very important and 5 equals not at all important. READ OUT, ROTATE – CODE 1-5, DK FOR EACH

An archive collection  
A local expert  
A museum  
A broadsheet newspaper  
A tabloid newspaper  
The internet  
A public library  
Radio  
Television  
Bookshop  
A place of worship

Q2 Again thinking about these issues (National Health Service, Foreign Affairs/Defence, Education/Schools, Law & Order and the Economy), in the last six months have you done any of the following in order to obtain a fuller understanding of any of these issues? READ OUT, ROTATE, CODE YES, NO, DK FOR EACH

Visited an archive collection  
Consulted an expert  
Talked to family, friend, or colleague  
Visited a museum  
Read a broadsheet newspaper  
Read a tabloid newspaper  
Used the internet  
Used a public library  
Listened to the radio  
Watched television  
Purchased from a bookshop  
Visited a place of worship  
Visited a school, college or university  
Other – SPECIFY

Q3a In the last six months have you done any of the following in order to obtain a fuller understanding of any other issue(s) of contemporary concern? READ OUT, ROTATE, CODE YES, NO, DK FOR EACH

Visited an archive collection  
Consulted an expert  
Talked to family, friend, or colleague  
Visited a museum  
Read a broadsheet newspaper  
Read a tabloid newspaper  
Used the internet

Used a public library  
Listened to the radio  
Watched television  
Visited a place of worship  
Visited a school, college or university  
Other – SPECIFY

FOR EACH CODED AS YES AT Q3A

Q3b What was the issue you ...[ANSWER TO Q3A] to gain a fuller understanding of? DO NOT PROMPT

War on terrorism/ war against Iraq  
Israel situation  
House prices  
Standards of living  
General news information  
History of your area  
Drugs in sport  
Politics and sport  
Other - STATE

ASK ALL

Q4 On a scale of one to five, where 1 equals highly trustworthy and five equals very untrustworthy, how trustworthy do you think the following would be as sources of information on issues of contemporary concern?

READ OUT, ROTATE, CODE 1-5, DK FOR EACH

An archive collection  
A local expert  
A Museum  
A broadsheet newspaper  
A tabloid newspaper  
The internet  
A public library  
The radio  
The television  
A place of worship  
A school, college or university

Q5 It has been said that repositories of public knowledge seldom give any sense of community ownership, community management, or accountability. For each of the following please say how strongly you agree or disagree that this statement applies to each of the following repositories of public knowledge. Please use a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree

READ OUT, ROTATE, CODE 1-5, DK FOR EACH

An archive collection  
A museum  
A public library

A place of worship  
A school, college or university

#### FOLLOW UP QUESTION

The client for the questions I have just asked was the University of Sheffield. They are interested in doing some follow up research. Are you willing to play a further part in this research? If so, please can you give me a contact name? You will not be identified in the final report

Yes – RECORD NAME  
No

#### ICM Omnibus Standard Demographic Questions

Do you have access to the internet at home, at work or somewhere else?

At home  
At work  
Both at home and at work  
Somewhere else  
Not at all

Have you taken a foreign holiday in the last three years?

Yes  
No

And how many cars do you have in the household?

NULL = NONE

1 car  
2 cars  
3+ cars

In order that we interview people from all walks of life please can you tell me what the occupation of the chief wage earner is?

A  
B  
C1  
C2  
D  
E

Which of the following age groups do you fall into....

18 - 24  
25 - 34  
35 - 44  
45 - 54  
55 - 64

65+

At what age did you finish your full time education?

IF RESPONDENT STILL IN FULL TIME EDUCATION ENTER "99"  
IF RESPONDENT HAD NO FULL TIME EDUCATION ENTER "0"

And are you...  
READ OUT.

Single  
Married or co-habiting  
Widowed/Separated/Divorced

And do/are you...?  
Working full time (30+ hrs a week)  
Working part time (8-29 hrs a week)  
Not working but seeking work or temporarily unemployed/sick  
Not working/Not seeking work/Retired

Is the house or flat in which you live owned by you or by another member of your household or is it rented or rent free. Which of these applies to the house or flat...

The house or flat is...  
READ OUT  
Owned outright (without mortgage)  
Owned with a mortgage or loan  
Rented from the council  
Rented from someone else  
Rent free

Do you have any children aged 18 or under? If so, how old are they?

No  
Yes: Aged under 5  
Yes: Aged 5-10  
Yes: Aged 11-15  
Yes: Aged 16-18

ASK IN CLASSIFICATION

Which of the following best describes your ethnic origin or descent?

White  
Bangladeshi  
Chinese  
Indian  
Pakistani  
Asian other  
Black African

Black Caribbean  
Black other  
Other  
Sex of Respondent

Male  
Female

## Appendix 2 Focus group guide

Region: \_\_\_\_\_ Group: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_ Place: \_\_\_\_\_

### RPK FOCUS GROUPS

Seven separate focus groups will be arranged in each regional location. These will comprise:

1. Archive, library and museum professionals
2. Known users of archives, libraries and museums
3. Young people (18 – 25 year olds)
4. Age 55+
5. Parents with school aged children
6. Minority ethnic communities
7. Mixed social classes

### ***Rationale***

It is considered important to take account of the general public's perceptions and use of RPKs and to compare these with those of the professionals involved in the management of RPKs. The objective of the focus groups is to identify and explore groups' attitudes towards and use of RPKs. The focus groups will be organised to reflect different sectors of the community.

Group size:

Between 5 and 10

Supplies

Tape recorder(2)/power-cord/batteries/Tapes  
Notepad/pencil/pen  
MORI Issues list/ Trust cards/ Use cards

Room:

Refreshments  
Semi-circle seating

### FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

#### **Introduction**

##### **Moderator and reporter introduced**

Aim of project outlined, and objective of focus group explained. Only mention that the research is attempting to understand how a variety of information sources are used by the public to understand current social and political issues. The MORI-5 are an example of these issues. Confidentiality of individual comments confirmed. Ask permission to record. Group told that they are not expected to reach a consensus. There are no right or wrong answers, only opinions. Explain they are encouraged to give **personal examples**. If you don't understand the question, please ask that it be rephrased so that you do. Timing of session confirmed, especially when it would end.

<b>Link to Original Research Questions</b>  Proposal Question No. (X) *questions 5 & 6 are captured through demographic choices of focus groups	<u><b>Guide Questions</b></u>	<u><b>Research Questions Suggested from Literature &amp; Survey, Etc.</b></u>
	<u><b>Question 1</b></u>  <u>How do you obtain information on the major issues or concerns of the day?</u> <u>For example:</u> <u>The NHS, Foreign Policy, Law &amp; Order, Education, or the Economy</u>	
<b>(3)</b> Need & Value  Relationship to other media	<u><b>Question 2</b></u>  <u>Have you ever felt the need to seek extra information or a more in-depth understanding of concerns like these?</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>NO:</b> <i>Why do you say that?</i></li> <li>• <b>Yes:</b> <i>Could you give me an example?</i></li> <li>• <b>Why</b> <i>did you choose these sources?</i></li> <li>• <b>Prompt:</b> <i>When do you feel that you have become an "informed citizen"? What is required to satisfy your need to know?</i></li> </ul>	Continuum of Knowledge <i>passive to active</i> <b>actively sought vs. unintentionally acquired</b> (able to be asked of the data à posteriori)  Apathy vs. Empowerment Awareness vs. Engagement (what is the "Tipping Point")  Someone else's problem (specialists/experts) Not interested To big to make a difference



	sources of information and understanding such as TV, radio, newspapers, or the Internet?	
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(1 & 2) Role & Value	<b>Question 4 (A-C)</b>	
	<p>A. I am now going to give you cards* each of which contains a brief description of a place or service you might have access to. Thinking in terms of an <b>archives service</b> please choose the three sources most appropriately describing your perception of what an archives is and the three sources that least appropriately describe your perception at the bottom. Ask group to discuss choices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Prompt: What made you choose your first choice? <b>Why?</b> If <b>others</b>: who?</i></li> <li>• <i>Prompt: What made you choose your last choice? <b>Why?</b></i></li> </ul> <p>B. I am now going to give you cards* each of which contains a brief description of a place or service you might have access to. Thinking in terms of a <b>public library</b> please choose the three sources most appropriately describing your perception of what a library is and the three sources that least appropriately describe your perception at the bottom. Ask group to discuss choices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Prompt: What made you choose your first choice? <b>Why?</b> If <b>others</b>: who?</i></li> <li>• <i>Prompt: What made you choose your last choice? <b>Why?</b></i></li> </ul> <p>C. I am now going to give you cards* each of which contains a brief description of a place or service you might have access to. Thinking in terms of a <b>museum</b> please choose the three sources</p>	

	<p>most appropriately describing your perception of what a museum is and the three sources that least appropriately describe your perception at the bottom.</p> <p>Ask group to discuss choices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Prompt: What made you choose your first choice? <b>Why?</b></i> <i>If <b>others:</b> who?</i></li> <li>• <i>Prompt: What made you choose your last choice? <b>Why?</b></i></li> </ul>	
<b>(7)</b> Ownership	<p><b><u>Question 5 (A/B)</u></b></p> <p>A. To what extent do you feel that the local community owns museums, archives, &amp; libraries?</p> <p>B. How does that effect you use of them?</p>	
<b>(4)</b> Trust	<p><b><u>Question 6</u></b></p> <p>I am now going to give you cards** each of which contains a potential information source for understanding today's big issues. Please choose the three sources that you would trust most and the three sources that you would trust least at the bottom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Prompt: What made you trust your top three choices the most? Why?</i></li> <li>• <i>Prompt: What made you trust your last three choices the least? Why?</i></li> <li>• <i>Prompt: Anything else about trusting</i></li> </ul>	<p><b><u>trust vs. use</u></b></p> <p>using the sources that are least trusted</p>
	<b><u>Question 7</u></b>	

	Is there anything else you would like to say?	
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**CONCLUSION**

Moderator provides brief summary of discussion  
Moderator reconfirms confidentiality of proceedings  
Thanks to participants

## **Appendix 3 – Workshop materials**

### **Group 1**

*Contemporary interpretations of community & Nostalgia and retrospection*

#### ***Contemporary interpretations of community***

##### **Questions for discussion:**

1. What role do museums, libraries and archives play in shaping civic and urban identity?
2. How does increasing migration (for example, professional migration) affect the community role of museums, libraries and archives, if at all?
3. In the twenty-first century, are museums, libraries and archives public services or urban commodities?
4. Do museums, libraries and archives need to reassert their public function?
5. Will the contingency value of museums, libraries and archives be enough to justify their future existence?

#### ***Nostalgia and retrospection***

##### **Questions to for discussion:**

1. Does positive, nostalgic anecdotal evidence about the value of museums, libraries and archives provide justification for their continued funding and existence?
2. How can museums, libraries and archives take advantage of this perceived public respect for their organisations?
3. Will future generations ever inherit this vision and respect for cultural heritage? How can this be encouraged by museums, libraries and archives?
4. Is nostalgia and retrospection a mere form of escapism that detracts from contemporary issues?
5. Can we really understand the present and the future without understanding the past?

## **Group 2**

*Apathy, empowerment and information & Education and information*

### **Apathy, Empowerment and Information**

#### **Questions for discussion**

1. Work-Life Balance?—What effect do expectations of leisure time, pressure to increase productivity at work, and demands of family have on information seeking?
2. How are museums, libraries and archives adjusting to these lifestyle demands?
3. How dangerous is information apathy for society?
4. Is civic engagement the preserve of the middle-class?
5. What is the relationship, if any, between apathy in information seeking and voting behaviour?

### **Educational Values**

#### **Questions for discussion**

1. What does the notion of self-improvement mean today?
2. What priority should museums, libraries and archives give to the concept of self-improvement?
3. In today's society what obligates a citizens to be well informed?
4. How realistic is it for museums, libraries and archives to expect the public to actively engage with them over current social and political issues?
5. What relationship should museums, libraries and archives have with formal educational institutions?

### **Group 3**

*Cultural assumptions and social identity & Consumerism and 'infotainment'*

#### **Cultural Assumptions and Social Identity**

##### **Questions for discussion:**

1. How far is information seeking structured by gender and age power relations?
2. How far is the choice of information sources formed along class, cultural and educational lines?
3. Should we deride "Sun readers"?
4. What criteria are used for evaluating information sources?
5. What is the tabloid-culture and who are the tabloid readers

#### **Consumerism and 'Infotainment'**

##### **Questions for discussion**

1. Is the proper business of archives libraries and museums with the serious user?
2. Should archives libraries and museums seek to counter commercialism?
3. How can archives, libraries, and museums help people develop a critical capacity and a sense of discrimination?
4. How can archives, libraries, and museums provide services which prioritize high intellectual standards and, at the same time, promote equity and social inclusion?
5. How can archive, library and museum professionals meet the demands of policy makers to open up their services without destroying them?