

Information seeking behaviour of public library users: use and non-use of electronic media

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INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights some of the significant findings from author's PhD: "Factors affecting the end-use of electronic databases in public libraries." Public libraries have a wide range of different types of users who, unlike academic or special library users, are not necessarily information-trained (see Coles, 1998). Whereas the academic, special library user may have specific information needs that can be met by electronic sources, public library users do not necessarily have such specific information needs that can easily be identified and met. Most user surveys have tended to concentrate on the searching and retrieval aspect of information seeking behaviour, whereas this study's user survey focused more on how people perceived and related to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). It was not how people searched a particular electronic source, in this case CD-ROM, that was of prime interest but rather whether or not people actually used them at all and the reasons why people did or did not use electronic media. There were several reasons the study looked at CD-ROM specifically. Firstly, CD-ROM is a well established technology, most people should be familiar with CD-ROM/multimedia. Secondly, CD-ROM was, at the start of the study, the only open access electronic media widely available in public libraries.

As well as examining why public library users chose to use electronic sources, the paper looks at the types of CD-ROM databases used both in the library and in general. Also examined are what sort of searches users carried out. Where appropriate some of the problems inherent in studying end-users in public libraries and the difficulty in getting reliable data, are discussed.

Several methods were used to collect the data. I wished to avoid limiting research to a small sample of library sites, the aim was to be as broad in scope as possible. There were two main groups of people I wished to look at: non-users as well as CD-ROM users

User Interviews. The interview's main aim was obtain information about the users's demographic profile, IT background and attitudes to IT as well as details about use and non-use of CD-ROMs. Just under 300 people were interviewed at 9 different public libraries. The sites were in the South East of England and ranged from rural town libraries to inner London branch libraries. Users were randomly selected as they entered the main entrance of library building. The interview sample did not knowingly include anyone under 16. There were several reasons for not including children: 1) most libraries had a separate children's CD-ROM service, 2) many libraries required police checks on anyone interviewing children and 3) parental consent is often required before a child can be interviewed. It was expected that the majority of respondents would be CD-ROM non-users.

Questionnaires. Self-completion questionnaires aimed at library CD-ROM users were used to supplement the user interviews. Though ideally interviews with CD-ROM users would have been the preferred option, it was not practical because of the low number of CD-ROM users in library and the lack of time to conduct interviews at enough sites. Data similar to the user interviews was obtained from the questionnaire as well as details about which CD-ROMs had been used and any searches carried out. The depth and range of information was inevitably more limited than from the interviews. In all 144 completed questionnaires were returned from 19 sites. Because there was less control over the sample group many more under 16s were represented in the questionnaire than in the interviews.

Log sheets. Log sheets were sent to all participating library sites. Log sheets were placed next to all the public access CD-ROM workstations for a one week period. Users were asked to complete the log sheet with details of date and CD-ROMs used that day. In all 41 sites returned log sheets.

USE AND NON-USE OF CD-ROMS IN LIBRARY

One of the aims of the study was to find out why people used or did not use library CD-ROMs. The library user interviews were used for this section. Three distinct categories of library users emerged from the interviews:

1. People who had used CD-ROMs but not public library ones, they accounted for 41% of respondents.
2. People who had used the public library CD-ROMs and accounted for 8% of respondents.
3. People who had never used CD-ROMs at all. This group was the largest accounting for 51% of respondents.

CD-ROM users

About 40% of respondents had used CD-ROMs but not at the public library where they were interviewed. The main reasons (Table 1) for non-use the library CD-ROMs were that respondents had used CD-ROMs elsewhere or that they did not know that the library had CD-ROMs.

Reasons	% of responses
Used CD-ROMs elsewhere	34
Did not know library had CD-ROMs	30
Had no need to use	19
Inadequate facilities	7
New member/first visit	6
Use library for books or other purposes	4

Table 1: Reasons for not using library CD-ROM

The main alternative places (Table 2) where people had used CD-ROMs were at home or at college/university. A fair number used them at work as well. One would normally have expected to have more respondents to have used CD-ROMs at school but the interviews were mainly with adults.

Other places used	% of responses
Home	32
College/university	32
Work	18
School	9
Other libraries	9

Table 2: CD-ROMs used elsewhere

Library CD-ROM users

Only 8% of respondents had used the library CD-ROMs. Despite carrying out interviews on various days and at various times, usage of library CD-ROMs remained very low. Some of the staff commented that normally the CD-ROMs were much busier. It was a common theme that the interview period was never representative of normal use.

The main reason (Table 3) respondents had used the library CD-ROMs was because the library was a convenient place for the respondent. Nearly a quarter had used the CD-ROMs because the selection of titles was relevant to respondent's needs. Interestingly some respondents had used the library CD-

ROMs because they didn't have to wait. Only 10% of library CD-ROM users had no other access to CD-ROMs.

Reasons	% of responses
Location/convenience of library	31
Relevant titles	24
Good for trying out CD-ROMs	10
Don't have to wait	10
Only place can use CD-ROMs	10
Use for a specific purpose	10
Staff helpful	3

Table 3: Reasons for using library CD-ROMs

CD-ROM non-users

Despite the availability of electronic sources, over half the respondents had not taken up the opportunity to use them. For most people the reason (Table 4) they had not used CD-ROMs was because they had no perceived need. CD-ROM had no particular relevance to them. Many people were not that particularly interested in ICTs. A significant number (22%) did not know what CD-ROMs were, perhaps people are not as familiar with everyday IT as one would expect.

Reasons	% of responses
Had no perceived need to use	37
Didn't know what CD-ROMs were	22
Didn't have a CD-ROM drive or computer	13
Prefer book/person to IT for information	9.5
Didn't know how to use CD-ROMs	7
Not had opportunity to use	7
Get someone else to do searches	2
Lack of time	2
Prefer Internet	0.5

Table 4: Reasons for not using CD-ROMs

As seen with CD-ROM users, a significant percentage (30%) did not know that the library had CD-ROMs available. The percentage of CD-ROM non-user was even higher, with 52% unaware that the library had CD-ROMs.

Future use. CD-ROM non-users were asked whether or not they had any intentions of using CD-ROMs in the future (Chart 1). Nearly 60% did intend to use CD-ROMs in future. There appeared to be a hard core of technophobic

respondents who had absolutely no intention of ever using Information Technology. It was perhaps surprising that only 22% of CD-ROM non-users did not know whether they would use CD-ROMs in the future, it was expected that far more people wouldn't know their intended use.

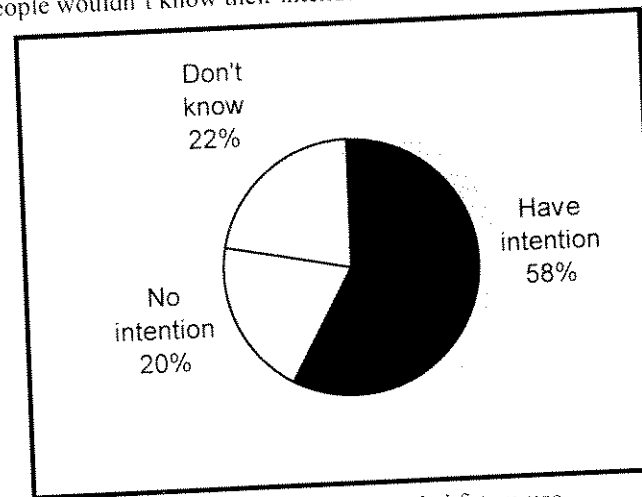


Diagram 1: Non-users' intended future use

Titles people used

This section looks at what CD-ROM titles people used. The data was collected from interviews with library users, CD-ROM questionnaires and from log sheets.

Titles were grouped into 13 subject categories (Table 5). Sometimes it was difficult to identify the actual title itself because the details were vague or incorrect or even to identify what the subject of the titles were. Many of the users didn't always know what they had used, or even that it was a CD-ROM.

The types of titles used were examined firstly by what titles people used in general. These were titles that respondents had used in places other than in the public library where they were interviewed. Secondly, the types of titles used were examined by what titles people used in the public library. These were titles users reported using in the public library where the interview occurred.

The most popular types of CD-ROM titles used in general were:

- Encyclopaedia/Dictionaries: 33%
- Non-Educational Games: 15%
- Newspapers: 15%

There was a similar pattern in types of titles used in public libraries:

- Encyclopaedia/Dictionaries: 19%
- Educational: Junior: 15%

- Newspapers: 14%

Category (ordered alphabetically)	% responses used in general	% of responses used in library
Arts & Humanities	6	7
Bibliographies/Indexes	7	5
Business/Law/Politics	3	11
Educational Games: Infant	3	10
Educational Junior	3	15
Encyclopaedia/Dictionaries	33	19
Games (Non-Educational)	15	n/a
History	1	3
Medical/Science/Technology	5	2
Newspapers	15	14
Software/Learning Packages	7	0
Travel/Tourism	1	3

Table 5: Titles used

The types of titles used both in general and in public libraries were compared to see whether or not usage followed the same patterns. There were certainly some significant differences between general use and public library use:

- Non-Educational Games were the second highest category (15%) in general use whereas none was used in public libraries because none was available at any of the sites.
- Software/Learning Packages were reasonably popular in general use but despite the availability in public libraries they were not used at all there.
- Medical/Science/Technology use was higher (5%) in general but lower in public libraries (2%).
- Business use was low in general (3%) but significantly higher (11%) in public libraries, a reflection perhaps on the higher cost of business databases.
- There was low use of Infant Educational Games (3%) in general whereas there was higher (10%) use in public libraries.
- History had a very low use (1%) in general with a slightly higher use (3%) in public libraries.
- Travel/Tourism had very low use (1%) with a slightly higher in use (3%) in public libraries.

There were, however, some similarities between general use and public library use:

- Encyclopaedia/Dictionaries were both the top categories but use was significantly higher (33%) in general use than in public library use (19%).
- Newspapers were both the third highest category.
- Bibliographies had similar usage between general and public library use.
- Art and Humanities had similar usage between general and public library use.

Most popular individual library titles. Not only was Encarta the most widely distributed title in the public libraries surveyed but it was also the most popular individual title used by users both in and out of the library. Dorling Kindersley titles formed a hugely popular collection of titles. Chadwyck Healey's quality titles featured highly in users top ten (Table 6).

Rank	Titles	Publisher
1	Encarta	Microsoft
2	Guardian	Chadwyck-Healey
3	P B Bear	Dorling Kindersley
4	Financial Times	Chadwyck-Healey
5	McCarthy	Chadwyck-Healey
6	BookBank	Whittakers
7	Extel	Extel
8	Dinosaurs	Microsoft
9	Ultimate Human Body	Dorling Kindersley
10	History of the World	Dorling Kindersley
10	Way things work	Dorling Kindersley

Table 6: popular library titles

SEARCHING LIBRARY CD-ROMS

The questionnaires offered an insight into public library users's searching experiences. The study did not include an in-depth analysis of either searching techniques or search results. The aim was get an idea, a picture of type of information people wanted, the usefulness of the searches and what problems users experienced. Because the data was self-reported one had to be cautious regarding both the reported success of searches and ease of use. It was very common for people, when asked what CD-ROM title they had used, not to know what they had just searched. It made it difficult to get any reliable detailed information from users' own accounts of searches.

Just over half the users (Table 7) were looking for background information on a topic whereas 31% of the searches were for specific pieces of information. A few users had just used the CD-ROMs for fun or just out of interest.

	% of responses
Specific piece/s of information	31
Background topic	52
Other	17

Table 7: Type of information sought

Only 30% of searches (Table 8) were successful with people finding exactly what they wanted. Just under half of respondents did find something useful. Again one has to be cautious about how people evaluated their own searches.

	% of responses
Exactly what they were looking for	30
Some useful items	46
Few useful items	14
Found nothing	3
Lots of irrelevant items	4
Other	3

Table 8: Information found

34% of respondents experienced some sort problem while using the CD-ROMs. People generally did not like to admit they had problems searching unless they were technical problems, printing being the usual one.

CONCLUSION

There appeared to be several reasons why some public library users did not use the electronic databases available in their public library. Some of the respondents, who were CD-ROM users, did not use the library CD-ROMs because they used them elsewhere such as at home or at college/university. Many respondents did not know that CD-ROM facilities were available in the public library. Only a small number of respondents had used the library CD-ROMs. The main reasons for using the library CD-ROMs were that the library was a convenient place and had relevant titles on offer. Just over half the respondents did not use CD-ROMs at all.

There was a great range of titles used both in the library and in general. The type of title people used varied on where they used them. Encyclopaedia & dictionaries and newspapers were both popular in general and in the library. Otherwise there were very different patterns of use. The most striking results was the supremacy of Encarta as the most widely distributed title in the libraries as well as the most popular amongst users.

Despite the difficulty of obtaining reliable data about end-user searching, users in the whole used the CD-ROMs for background topic information. Success rates were low with only 30% finding exactly what they wanted. Most users were content to come away with only a few useful times.

REFERENCE

- COLES, C. (1998) IT in public libraries: seeking out the user's perspective. *Library and Information Research News*, 22(70) 35-42.