

re:SOURCE

The Council for **Museums, Archives and Libraries**

The People's Network: A turning point for public libraries

First Findings



Professor Peter Brophy

the peoplesnetwork

Professor Peter Brophy holds the Chair in Information Management at the Manchester Metropolitan University where he is also Director of the Centre for Research in Library & Information Management (CERLIM). He is also Chairman of LIMC Ltd, a specialist library and information management consultancy. He is the author of a number of books about libraries, notably *The Library in the Twenty-First Century* (Facet, 2001), as well as numerous journal articles.

The New Opportunities Fund distributes National Lottery money to health, education and environment projects across the UK. The Fund supports sustainable projects that will: improve the quality of life of people throughout the UK; address the needs of those who are most disadvantaged in society; encourage community participation; complement relevant local and national strategies and programmes. Funding for programmes is divided between England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales on the basis of population weighted to reflect levels of deprivation. For more information please visit: <http://www.nof.org.uk/>

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Introduction

The People's Network is a major government-led initiative to bring internet access and online services to the whole UK population. By installing PCs and broadband connections throughout the public library network, ordinary people – young or old and from every kind of background – are being given the opportunity to participate actively in the information society.

The People's Network is lottery funded by the New Opportunities Fund. It is new, additional investment to that provided by local authorities and represents the largest ever investment in the 150 years of the public library service.

It is estimated that by the end of December 2002, 68.5 million hours of internet access per annum will be available through the People's Network. In most cases this access is free, and all library staff have either embarked upon or completed a training programme to ensure that help and support is available to users.

This report is intended to provide an early assessment – before the roll-out of equipment is complete¹ – of the impacts that the People's Network is having and by extension is likely to have on its users. Statistical data has been analysed alongside individual case studies to provide a picture of a quiet revolution which is taking place in cities, towns and villages across the UK. The evidence so far available suggests that lives are being changed for the better in many different ways: as new learning opportunities are grasped; people find new ways to communicate with one another across countries and continents; communities are enriched; and social barriers are breached. The emerging impression is a highly positive one, emphasising the potential of the People's Network, as it moves beyond connectivity into community engagement, to make the transformation to a 'wired society' a positive experience for all.

1. Research informing the publication of this report was undertaken during October and November 2002.

1 Background

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This report is based on an examination of the October 2002 NETbase Survey² returns from public library authorities, supplemented with specific case studies from People's Network users obtained via the library authorities. It focuses on the impacts the People's Network is having on its users – the ways in which it is 'changing lives' – based on this early evidence.

The People's Network itself is an ambitious programme designed to deliver internet access and internet-based services to the widest possible cross-section of the UK population, with particular weight being given to the needs of groups of people who have to date been under-represented as internet users³. In 80 per cent of public libraries, this internet access is free. As one of the most widely-used, and most trusted, of government service points, public libraries have been an obvious focus for this development. This report attempts to shed light on whether this new provision is resulting in a significant increase in positive experiences for its users.

The development of the People's Network is not taking place in a vacuum. Government policy on the delivery of e-services has been a driving force through the work of the Office of the e-Envoy, providing government-wide co-ordination and impetus to the exploitation of new network-based technologies.

The People's Network was designed and advocated by the Library and Information Commission, predecessor body to Resource: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries. Resource has been responsible for the delivery of the project in England, working in partnership with the Scottish Library and Information Council, the Library and Information Services Council Wales and the Library and Information Services Council Northern Ireland. These organisations have worked in close partnership with lottery funding



body the New Opportunities Fund to successfully deliver the £120 million project within budget in just three years.

The successful roll-out of the People's Network project covers two separate programmes: one to install the network kit and the other to train library staff in how to use it, and support others in their use.

Library authorities have integrated the People's Network into their mandatory 'Annual Library Plans', firmly embedding this new dimension into their service portfolio. And to complement this work, the New Opportunities Fund is also supporting a strategic initiative to digitise a vast range of valuable content, from collections of early photographs to priceless historic records⁴.

But the People's Network itself is new. Although the infrastructure was established throughout the sector by the end of 2002, many branch libraries were still in the midst of installing PCs and network connections while this report was being written. Even so, evidence is starting to emerge from early implementers which sheds light on actual and, more importantly, potential impacts. This report is not based on comprehensive returns from all public library authorities and its conclusions are therefore indicative rather than definitive. Nevertheless, they point towards a significant public sector IT project which is, quietly yet steadily, generating real benefits for the public at large. That those users appear to be coming, in significant numbers, from among disadvantaged groups in our society is an added accomplishment.

2. The NETbase Survey is administered by the People's Network team at Resource on a quarterly basis. By November 2002, 94 returns were received (of which 86 contained usable data) from the 210 public library authorities in the UK. It is believed that the returns over-represent those authorities which are well-advanced in rolling out the People's Network. Statistical data in this report is drawn from the 86 usable returns (41% of the total number of authorities).

3. Key facts about the People's Network are available at:
<http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/progress/toolkit3a2.asp>
An online discussion list is maintained at:

<http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/peoplesnetwork.html>

4. <http://www.nof-digitise.org>

2 Why are people using the People's Network?

6 Analysis of the data returned by library authorities demonstrates that there is a wide range of different reasons for using the People's Network. A notable feature of these accounts is the way in which people who have previously had little, or very often no, previous contact with computers have been attracted into public libraries and are 'having a go' – sometimes with remarkable results. In Cornwall, for example, it is estimated that 80 per cent of People's Network users have never before used the internet (although it has to be noted that in other authorities the estimates are lower). The age range of users is extremely wide, from schoolchildren to 90-year-olds. People who had stopped going to the public library have been attracted back:

"I 'forgot' about library services over the years – now I use it more than ever."

Arthritis hasn't stopped one of the 90-year-olds becoming an enthusiastic user:

"Mrs V at the age of 90 is our oldest lady client ... her age has not stopped her interest in the internet or email. One of Mrs V's problems is her hand – suffering from arthritis made using the mouse very difficult. The library placed an order for a track ball and it has made a huge difference."

Detailed analysis of the libraries' returns suggests that reasons for using the People's Network can be categorised under the following headings:

- Learning
- Finding work
- Personal identity
- Community enrichment
- Social inclusion
- Culture and creativity



2.1 Learning

Learning may be formal or informal, and the public library is playing a variety of supportive roles which go well beyond the provision of books to read and tables at which to study. Many public libraries are now designated as UK Online Centres by the Department for Education and Skills. This means that they can offer an entry point to a wide variety of educational courses, including basic IT training such as the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), and also operate as an entry point to Learndirect⁵ courses.

Recent studies in formal educational settings suggest that exposure to advanced Information & Communication Technologies (ICTs) has positive impacts on learning and that the provision of ICTs within a learning environment has a positive correlation with learning achievement. It is this finding which suggests that ICTs in public libraries have considerable potential for promoting and supporting learning achievement in the population as a whole.

The data so far available provides evidence of a noteworthy contribution by public libraries: in a three month period 25,000 People's Network users undertaking IT 'Get Started' training; 30,000 doing an 'Internet Taster' course; 10,000 embarking on an office software course; and so on.

The advanced facilities offered by public libraries which have installed the People's Network equipment are plugging a gap in educational provision which is well-illustrated by the example of innovative uses of videophone facilities. One branch library in Northumbria helped a university lecturer to obtain an NVQ Assessor's qualification by providing a video link to London for the final assessment to be carried out remotely using British Sign Language. Others have used internet video-conferencing to bring dispersed learners together.

There is also evidence that the library offers an environment which is less threatening to would-be learners than formal educational establishments. In the West Midlands, one user reported that having been made redundant he was "very scared of using the PCs" – but the staff proved "very encouraging and helpful in all respects – until I started using this service I was not confident

5. <http://www.learndirect.co.uk/>

at all with learning". This reflects the stated aim of UK Online Centres to have approachable staff and a friendly, helpful atmosphere.

It is essential to note that much of the learning taking place in public libraries is informal – very often it does not lead to a paper qualification, but simply enhances the skills, knowledge and quality of life of the individual. There is some evidence that a particularly significant role of the public library is in helping individuals to develop their functional literacy skills, including reading skills, and a number of novel IT-based applications have been developed to support this work – such as the 'Stories from the Web' service developed by Birmingham public libraries⁶. A serious approach to lifelong learning greatly values such informal approaches, not least because many individuals' learning styles and preferences do not fit well with highly structured and formal approaches. As it develops, it will be important to encourage the People's Network to continue to give due weight to this type of learning experience.

2.2 Finding work

Access to the People's Network is helping individuals to find work. They may use the computer to type up a CV, or they may use the internet to look for possible vacancies, or they may even use the library's facilities in their work – one Scottish scriptwriter who is a frequent user commented simply: "It's a godsend". A user in the Midlands reported on using the People's Network both to find information in support of a course on starting a business and then for typing up course assignments. He comments:

"The staff are very friendly and are always ready to help you."

There is also evidence that the skills learned by using the People's Network can help individuals into employment:

"I obtained a place at College on their basic ECDL (European Computer Driving Licence) course and used the library to practise some of the things I learned at the college. If it hadn't been for the initial use of the library computer I don't think I would have considered the college course..."

6. <http://www.storiesfromtheweb.org/sfwhomepage.htm>

“I now have a new job in which I need computer skills. So from playing about with the library computer I now have a successful career, all because computers were installed in local libraries.”

In addition to the experiences of individuals seeking work, there are a number of reports of engagement between public libraries and business – particularly microbusinesses and SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises). Again there is a pointer here to a possible impact on local economies, since the People’s Network means that all such businesses will be within range of broadband internet access, even if they do not have it themselves.

2.3 Personal identity

A remarkably frequent usage of the People’s Network is to enable people to keep in touch with relatives and friends. A cross-section of ten library authorities reported that they had logged over 85,000 such usages in a three-month period. A typical story from the North West of England concerns a foster mother whose daughter went to America, initially for a short visit but then decided to stay. It is the local public library which is enabling them to keep in touch:

“The library PCs with the free email facility have become a lifeline between myself and my daughter who I do miss terribly.”

Keeping in touch while out of the country is also important. One 91-year-old man came into a public library in Sussex:

“He had no idea how to operate a computer and he was clutching a piece of paper with an email address on it. It transpired that he had been away for three days and wanted to send an email to his grand-daughter to let her know of his whereabouts. Needless to say he required a great deal of assistance in setting up a Hotmail account so that he could receive replies from her at the library. He had no idea how to operate the mouse and needed help with suggestions for passwords etc., but he was a willing learner and amazingly patient and accepting of this new technology which enabled him to communicate with his relatives.”

People who have come to the UK from all over the world are also finding that the public library helps them to maintain contact with their families and friends.

“Having returned from Canada, the internet has allowed me to keep in touch with the friends I left behind. It’s been a wonderful way to keep in touch and the service is great – I can’t believe how good it is.”

Some visitors are in the UK for holidays, others for work-related reasons, yet others are refugees – who can use the internet even if their English language skills are poor:

“Mohammed is a refugee and speaks very little English – he has been in England for just a few months. He uses the computer to access the internet so he can follow events in his own country ... it gives him encouragement to be able to read about things from home.”

Communication is also important within communities. One branch library in a large village enables users to avoid having to travel for DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) interviews in the nearest town by arranging the use of their video-conferencing link for interviews. The benefit of such applications to the village community can not be overstated.

2.4 Community enrichment

Public libraries have always played a role in making available documents and other records relating to the history of their locality. It would seem that the facilities provided by the People’s Network are enhancing this service to a considerable extent. At one People’s Network launch ceremony in Yorkshire a highly regarded local historian spoke of the use he had made of the internet in researching a Roll of Honour for the town, listing all those local people who gave their lives in the two World Wars.

An account by staff in one library gives a flavour of what appears to be a common experience:

“(One user) is 72 and until recently has never clicked a mouse, seen a floppy disk or knew what the internet was. Each week she brings her folder, floppy disk and walking stick to the library to enhance her growing knowledge and skill using the computer. The Computer Buddies Scheme has turned her quiet life around and after four months she is now adept at using the computer.”

The widespread interest in family history is also well-represented among the users of the People’s Network.

2.5 Social inclusion

The use of the People’s Network by disadvantaged groups has already been noted. Self-help groups are well-represented – one example is the East Lancashire Deaf Society which uses the Blackburn facilities ‘out of hours’. Derbyshire ensures that housebound clients are not excluded by offering a laptop loan service to enable them to access the library’s services. With more and more health-related information being made available online (NHS Direct and the National Electronic Library for Health being good examples) it is perhaps not surprising to find that the People’s Network is also being used by individuals to support their personal health and well being.

One noticeable aspect of the People’s Network roll-out is the attention paid to access for those users who may have difficulty with ‘standard’ IT equipment. For example, elderly people may find it difficult to use a mouse; visually-impaired and blind people may need voice-output software; and so on. The following table illustrates the percentage of authorities which have provided different kinds of facilities to enhance accessibility (in addition to those which come as standard in various software packages). Clearly there is scope for all libraries to follow this lead, but it appears that a good start has been made and examples of good practice are emerging.

| Accessibility facility | Availability |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Screen magnification | 72% |
| Text-to-speech output | 64% |
| Alternatives to standard mouse | 60% |
| Alternatives to standard keyboard | 59% |

2.6 Culture and creativity

Just as the public library supports leisure activities through its traditional book-lending and other services, the People's Network is proving popular with users pursuing their personal interests in their free time – and extending their horizons, as this example shows:

“X, aged 60, and a recovering alcoholic, had never touched a computer in his life. After six sessions he can now handle a mouse expertly, is developing his keyboard skills without demolishing the keyboard and is now happily playing chess on the internet with people from all over the world. He says life has never been so good.”

Creating personal magazines seems to be a popular pastime:

“With the use of floppy disks I can download many interesting news articles, biographies, stories, book extracts and reviews, BBC Radio listings and the ‘Archers’ Members board pages, even my horoscope ...”

while a diverse range of interests and hobbies is being supported:

“A woman who had little computer experience, and no knowledge of the internet or email ... She is very interested in machine embroidery and is now searching the internet for embroidery patterns, then downloading and unzipping files of designs which she likes.”



3 Patterns of usage

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A key question is whether or not new users are being attracted by the new facilities – there would be little merit in spending large sums of money simply to duplicate IT facilities readily available to users elsewhere.

There is a well-established correlation between ownership of a computer and social class. The National Grid for Learning (NGfL), in its recent report *Young People and ICT* (in the *Research and Evaluation* series) noted:

“The main reasons why households without a computer had not purchased one related to cost. The cost factor was most likely to be mentioned by those in social grades D and E (‘semi and unskilled manual workers’ and ‘state pensioners or widows [no other earners], casual or lowest grade workers’).”⁷

Although there is as yet no conclusive statistical evidence, there are indications that the People’s Network is attracting individuals from these segments of the population. Wolverhampton, for example, reports a ‘high proportion of unemployed people of all ages using the service for job related purposes’ while Leeds reports a ‘higher representation of black and Asian users than for other services’. Swindon reports that ‘more than 300 unemployed people have been supported in their search for jobs and that several micro-businesses have been started in recent months’. Many libraries report that they have noted a large increase in young users, particularly boys. At the other end of the scale, as some of the examples quoted above make clear, ‘silver surfers’ are well represented.

Internet access can be expensive for individuals and families on low incomes, and the free access offered by the public library provides welcome opportunities. One Midlands user comments:

“We now have our own computer but are unable to afford internet access so we still rely heavily on computer facilities offered by the library, which is our only outlet for email communications.”

While there is not yet enough data to extrapolate these reports to a national picture, they offer encouraging evidence of the ways in which the People’s Network is meeting the needs of less advantaged sectors of society.

7. <http://www.becta.org.uk/research/reports/youngpeopleict/>

4 Why libraries?

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Apart from the sheer 'reach' of the public library system – with 4,488 branches across the UK – the atmosphere in libraries tends to be less off-putting than that of formal educational and 'official' environments. As one People's Network user put it:

"The library staff have been helpful and helped me in an unintimidating environment."

Again, it is all too easy to underestimate the importance of a sympathetic environment in which to try out PCs for the first time, or to practise IT skills. For many people the fear of 'making a fool of myself' or of breaking the machine by doing the wrong thing is a major turn-off. Creating supportive and encouraging settings is a substantial issue.

A further reason for encouraging the use of libraries as internet access points is the knock-on effects on reading and on general library use. Library authorities estimate that of those non-members of the library who have used People's Network facilities, no less than 40 per cent have also joined the library.

Finally, it should be noted that libraries offer the opportunity to integrate services. A good example – though equally valid instances could be quoted from across the UK – is the way in which Rhondda public libraries are coupling their internet access with over 10,000 images of life in the Cynon Valley from 1880 to the present, thereby providing a rich resource for users.

5 Use and access policy

From the beginning concern has been expressed about the misuse of internet access. The dilemma for public libraries has been to make access as freely available as possible while taking all reasonable steps to ensure that misuse does not occur, or that if it does occur then it is caught and dealt with immediately. 15

Virtually all library authorities have put an Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) in place. Typically, this states what internet access may and may not be used for (banning the viewing of pornography for example), and access to the People's Network facilities is conditional upon agreement to abide by this policy. Approximately 75 per cent of authorities have also installed filtering software to prevent access to unsuitable material, and a number have taken a 'walled garden' approach as far as young people are concerned – this in effect gives access to selected sites rather than to the whole internet.

The AUP is backed up by action if any misuse is detected. A typical policy states 'Users are warned the first time anything unsuitable is accessed, banned for a month if caught a second time and banned for at least six months if it happens again'. In extreme cases the police would be informed.

The statistical data so far available suggests that problems in this area are relatively rare, with most authorities reporting AUP violations in single figures. However, it is an area which needs to remain under continuous monitoring.



6 Impact on other library services

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At present there is a mixed picture when it comes to the impact of IT provision on libraries' other core services of book lending and information services. Leeds has noted a 10 per cent increase in library membership since the People's Network was installed and 60 per cent of the local population are now library members, including people of all ages and ethnic backgrounds. Some libraries have expanded opening hours in response to increased demand – Somerset, for example, has done this in relation to two branches as reported in the local press⁸. There also appears to be a general increase in the number of reference enquiries being dealt with, although as yet there is insufficient evidence to enable conclusions to be drawn on the nature of this demand.

While overall the longstanding decline in book issues – for which there are many causes – has not been arrested, some authorities are reporting that the implementation of the People's Network has been accompanied by a modest increase in book lending: Kingston upon Thames, for example, noted a 14 per cent increase when the three-month period before People's Network implementation was compared with the three months after. A much longer period will be required, however, before any firm conclusions can be drawn. In any case what is almost certainly happening is a recasting of the service mix which public library users require and will come to expect.

⁸ Wells Journal, Thursday 28 November 2002, p. 14.



7 Raising the profile

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The public library service has come in for something of a battering in recent years. The Audit Commission issued a critical report in 2002, which suggested that core elements of the service have been neglected, but explicitly encouraged greater use of the internet.⁹ A specific user comment that the computers in public libraries were outdated was highlighted in this report.

The People's Network investment may come to be seen as something of a turning-point, illustrating that targeted additional funding can produce real results. For example, one authority has already reported:

“We have gained additional funding for the library service through the Best Value Review. The success of the People's Network was the outstanding example of what we could achieve with more resources.”

This is an encouraging sign of how public libraries can be reinvigorated through a combination of clear vision, innovation, appropriate investment and strategic management.

⁹ Audit Commission. *Building better library services: learning from audit, inspection and review*. London: Audit Commission, 2002.

8 The technical achievement

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Although left until last in this report, it is important to note the scale of what is being achieved through the People's Network. By mid-November 2002, UK public libraries were providing 18,578 public access internet terminals, a number continuing to increase daily as they move towards the target of 30,000 by the end of the year. Over 2,000 branch libraries have broadband connections (2 Mbps and above), of which over 200 are at 10 Mbps or above. Taking into account the varied opening hours of branch libraries, over 68 million internet access hours per annum will be made available – and the feedback indicates that overall utilisation of this capacity is already well above 50 per cent.¹⁰

Typical software applications (in addition to Web browsing and email) which libraries are making available include, in order of popularity:

- Office software
- Learning packages (especially IT skills)
- Online community information
- Online reader development (supporting schemes such as 'BookStart'¹¹ and 'Branching Out'¹²)
- Local or national e-government services
- Digitised materials, such as local history images
- Electronic reference enquiry services (such as the national 'Ask a Librarian'¹³ service)

This is a considerable range of applications to make available at this early stage of development. As such applications become more sophisticated and more integrated they will offer new opportunities for the development of novel services, as well as new challenges to those responsible for service development and delivery.

10. Take the London Borough of Sutton as an example: 85,672 hours are available: 47,195 are already being used.

11. <http://www.bookstart.co.uk/>

12. <http://www.branching-out.net/>

13. <http://www.ask-a-librarian.org.uk/>

9 The future

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The implementation of PC hardware and broadband connections provides the basic infrastructure for the delivery of a range of services in the future. Internet access itself, while an important service in the short to medium-term, is likely to become widespread if not universal in the future. The key questions for the future service provider will be the quality and range of digital content made available and the services which are built on that content.

While it is far too early to draw any conclusions about how public libraries will respond to these challenges, there are indications which suggest that they are capable of rising to the challenge. For example, in Northern Ireland the People's Network infrastructure is being used to deliver seamless access to the combined bookstock of all the province's public libraries. The New Opportunities Fund nof-digitise content creation programme¹⁴ has already been mentioned, but Resource is working with The Reading Agency, CILIP, and other partners on an exciting range of reader development projects to be delivered through the People's Network, and the public library sector is also becoming involved in other initiatives such as Culture Online¹⁵. These programmes and developments will mean that public libraries will be offering people a far wider range of services and giving access to valuable digital resources.

14. The New Opportunities Fund has commissioned the Tavistock Institute to undertake a two year evaluation of the People's Network and ICT training programme for public library staff. The evaluation focuses on assessing the impact of the programmes on library users, library services and on contributing to broader policy and organisational objectives, including promoting social inclusion. Preliminary findings from the evaluation will be published in spring 2003. Final evaluation reports are due in April 2004.

15. <http://www.cultureonline.gov.uk>



10 Conclusions

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This report, based on returns from 86 public library authorities, has found considerable evidence which suggests that the People's Network is having positive impacts on users. While some of this evidence is anecdotal, it can not be dismissed, for it implies that the People's Network is reaching into parts of society which have until now been by-passed or at the very least under-represented as far as internet access and the use of computers is concerned.

It is particularly striking that the People's Network appears to be removing the barriers to participation in the information society. Case study reports in particular suggest that many people who have never used computers in the past are finding this an attractive entry point – and once they become users they become hooked. Leisure interests turn into learning experiences which in turn point the way towards new learning and new leisure pursuits. Communication is improved or even simply made possible, thus countering isolation among older people, refugees and others.

'Impact' is notoriously hard to measure, for so many variables affect people's lives. In this case, however, the early evidence suggests that the People's Network will prove a positive influence and that its impacts will be both significant and valuable.



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Resource: The Council for Museums,
Archives and Libraries
16 Queen Anne's Gate
London SW1H 9AA
Tel: 020 7273 1444
Fax: 020 7273 1404
Email: info@resource.gov.uk
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