Oral history for library history

“This is a very introductory presentation on what was my master’s dissertation in Library Science from City, University of London, completed in September 2017, entitled ‘The Public Libraries of London collection: oral history in the digital age’.

Time for this presentation is short, so virtually all references will be omitted. However the dissertation itself is freely available online from the Humanities Commons' website, so anyone can download and check it at any time: https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:19093/

My motivation for doing this research came from a gap I had identified not only in the curriculum of my Library Science master’s course, but in all equivalent courses around the UK, which is library history.

I am not British. I have always loved history and historical research, and when I first met the British local public lending library I fell in love with it and wanted to find out more about its history. It was frustrating to discover that: first, I wouldn’t be taught that history in my master’s course; second, that probably no one was going to study it in their Library Science courses; and third, that I could barely find the history of British public libraries apart from just a handful of sources and authors. [6]

However, broadening the scope of research from British public library history to library history in general, we can find a more optimistic scenario. Scholars have been discussing what appears to be a renewal of the field, which has become, in the later decades, a deeper and wider subject, thanks to the ‘cultural turn’ in the study of history. [10] Deeper, as the history of libraries are not being told as if they were institutions with a simple,
independent narrative about creators and their ideas, but an apparatus and infrastructure that cannot be analysed outside of their social milieu. Wider, as the history of libraries now seem to allow a much greater variety of sources and contributions from different fields into its lines of enquiry, specially from microhistory, helping us to project library history into related subjects such as gender history, book history, information science and many more. [11]

With that exciting perspective in mind, I dedicated my research to trying to contribute to British public library history by creating a collection of narratives from public library staff about themselves and the public libraries where they work or have worked in. The aim was to build a collection that could be used as a resource to the study of the British public library. [8]

And why collect narratives from public library staff? Isn’t the library user the one who would provide a proper ‘bottom-up’ perspective of the public library? [29]

First, given our political moment, it can be said that the fully trained, full or part-time professional public library worker is an endangered species, in a very delicate position, and who shouldn’t be expected, at least right now, to go about recording memories and experiences by themselves — as quite a few public library users have been doing in attempt to ‘save their libraries’.

Second, over the years public library users’ thoughts and experiences have been documented, surveyed and looked into on a number of occasions: the Arts Council England conducted a few studies on public library service, including for example the ‘Envisioning the library of the future research in 2012’, which involved workshops and surveys on ‘understanding what people value about libraries’ and on how people use and think of public library services’; the Carnegie UK Trust ran surveys carried out by Ipsos MORI regarding use of and attitudes towards public libraries in 2011 and again in 2016; British library historian Alistair Black, having identified a gap in the documentation of the users’ perspective in the academic field, has collected hundreds of diary-like accounts from public library users (and non-users) via the Mass Observation Project [19]. The project called ‘Library Stories’ collects testimonies from Sheffield public library users and post them online. [22]

So there has been a positive turn of attention to the user of the British public library and the value of their perceptions and experiences, from both projects aiming at service assessment and improvements, and at provision of historical record for future research.
The voice of the common public library user is being amplified, but there is no evidence of the same happening to the common public library staff, whose personal experiences seem to have been left undocumented.

The greatest limitation of the interview with a current member of a public library staff is that they might hold back talking about certain issues in their responses, for obvious fear of upsetting their employer, which in this case is the public local authority. However, this collection is aimed at forming a documentation on the public library, and not a documentary; by being interviewed, it is the intention that library staff feel cherished and rewarded, and not threatened by being questioned. This can be achieved by asking open questions that the interviewee can answer in a very free manner, deciding for themselves how detailed or personal their response is going to be; the limitation is that more sensitive or political issues, which are also important documents, might not be mentioned, or stay off record.

A sample of an interview schedule is reproduced below: [31]

First, could you tell us a bit about your background? When did you start working at this library?
Did you used to work in public libraries before?

What does an average day at work in this library involve?
What do you most enjoy doing in your routine?

What are your impressions of the library collection? Do you take advantage of the library as an user as well?

Have you witnessed changes or renovations of the library building during your time here?
What are your impressions of the physical aspects of this library?

How have new digital information technologies affected this library and also your work?

Regarding the library users, do you see many of the same faces each day? Is there any specific library user that you are usually in contact with?

What do you think is unique about public libraries, and maybe about this library in particular?
What do you think makes people value them?

From your experience, what role do you think this library plays in the life of the local area?

What does this library mean to you personally; what part does it play in your life?

I’ve successfully made eight interviews with public library staff from different libraries of London, but as we’ve been discussing in the conference today, having a collection of oral history is just a first step; the next essential thing to do is store it somewhere where this collection will be accessible, discoverable, usable and useful.
I’ve chosen the **Layers of London** website as house for the collection. It is a new project, still being developed by the School of Advanced Studies, Institute of Historical Research of the University of London, and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. It is a website, basically a map of today's London that can be overlayed with historical maps from various times, and that serves as a platform for absolutely *anyone* to contribute to it by adding pins and collections of any sort of information on the history of London. [32]

On the website, I’ve created the collection ‘The Public Libraries of London’ and added the audio recordings, along with portraits of those interviewed, to pins that indicate the libraries where they work or have worked in. Adding all this data is as simple as it can be, for the website is aimed at the general public; useful metadata and related links can be easily added to each pin.
Absolutely essential to be able to upload these digital recordings and photographs to Layers of London, making them freely available and also collectable by libraries and archives was applying a Creative Commons license to them, via a consent term signed by the interviewee on the occasion of our meeting. This move keeps the recording as the interviewee’s property, while allowing free dissemination and use of the material, as long as it is done according to certain rules determined legally by the license. Is is also crucial that the terms of the license are fully understood by the interviewee, and that they are aware that the interview can be freely available online. [58]

In this presentation I won’t go into the contents of the interviews [41] — they are available at Layers of London if you’d like to have a listen. What I’ll do here is just highlight a few conclusions taken from the research:

Most importantly: the interviews did turn out to be very telling of the present public library as much as they are telling of their whole social, political, cultural and economic milieu, fulfilling the purpose of library history.

Two of the interviews were not recorded and the interviewees answered the questions in written form, at their preference. It was interesting to see how the longest written interview still had less than half of the characters of the shortest recorded interview. Such a great difference highlights some of the qualities of the oral record and the in person interaction. [55]
It was also good to notice the common themes emerging from the interviewees answers; lots can be extracted about saturday jobs, employment and careers; local history / studies; public diversity, ethnicity, income; history of information and more. [51]

Finally, I’d like to give an example the kind of enquiry for library history that I was able to identify; others, with other eyes or ears should be able to draw their own.

From these recordings, I would be interested, for example, in investigating more deeply what interviewees seemed to describe as a process of diversification of library work and of what the public library ‘is about’. [46]

They gave a sense that it is not the case that what public libraries were about before was ‘just books’, but that books, or rather printed material, were the main amongst few other different things that staff dealt with in their everyday, and that attracted people to the library; it seems that dealing with the organisation and the materiality of books was a very big part of library work. The emergency of other types of documents and new ways of producing and consuming them did diversify what the public library ‘is about’; while we should acknowledge that the place of the library, their social aspect, and information needs had always driven people to the public library, and still do, digital information technologies is now also what the library ‘is about’, ‘not just books’. And therefore, it seems that the role of mediation of public library staff between the library users and their local authority is increasingly important.”

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