

Demonstrating the value of libraries

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The word 'value' is a value-laden term.

Its ultimate derivation is the Latin verb 'valere', which means to have worth. That great Scottish book *Chambers Dictionary* gives the following associated terms for 'value': worth, intrinsic goodness, recognition of worth, relative worth, esteem, excellence. What these synonyms reveal is that the worth of an institution is ascribed to it by people, and people differ in their estimation of worth.

We could say that librarians (and others) have been concerned with questions about the value or worth of what they do, and how their users see them, since at least the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when great librarians like David Hume, Gottfried Leibniz and Giacomo Casanova roamed the earth. The golden age of 'user studies' was probably the 1970s, when any self-respecting library aimed to show that its patrons held it in high esteem. I must confess that at the time I contributed to the inflated professional literature on the subject. The interest has hardly slackened since, and there are at least two professional journals devoted to evaluation. One of the best studies I've come across recently was a study by OCLC called *Perceptions of libraries and information resources*¹, which I'd recommend to you all as readable and illuminating.

In the last few years there's been a fashion for moving beyond explorations of value, to talk about impact. 'Impact' is a word that has a much more definite, masculine tinge to it. It derives from another Latin verb, 'impingere', which means something like 'drive in' or 'fix in'. It suggests the clash of forwards' heads in a rugby scrum, or the firm locking-together of flat-pack furniture from IKEA. Somehow, it's implied, showing the impact of a service is so much more objective, definite and satisfactory than demonstrating value.

In practice, value and impact do get mixed up. SCONUL has recently set up a project called the Value Added and Impact Measurement Programme, known colloquially by the bloodthirsty acronym VAMP. The email message to SCONUL members announcing it revealed the motivation behind the initiative: 'a growing need for Directors/University Librarians to have data and/or methods available as evidence for senior institutional stakeholders of the value and worth of their library services'.² An earlier project, the 'Impact Implementation Initiative', a joint initiative by SCONUL and LIRG, sought 'to develop methodologies to enable higher education libraries to assess their impact', though it quickly found the task to be impossible.³

¹ *Perceptions of libraries and information services*, Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Online Computer Library Center, 2005: www.OCLC.org/reports/2005perceptions.htm.

² Maxine Melling, email to lis-sconul, 22 February 2006.

³ Philip Payne and Angela Conyers, 'Measuring the impact of higher education libraries: the LIRG/SCONUL Impact Implementation Initiative', *Library & Information Research*, vol.29, no.91, Spring 2005.

I suspect it was this pressure from above – from governors and funders - that led to the new school of library impact studies. The *locus classicus* must be the large-scale study conducted by the British Library in 2003.⁴ This abandoned the usual measuring of inputs and outputs, and was based on a relatively new economic technique called contingent valuation. Contingent valuation tries to compare the cost of providing a service with the notional monetary value attributed to that service by its users and others.

The British Library's consultants interviewed over 2,000 people. The kinds of question they asked were, 'How much would you be willing to pay to keep the Library in existence', 'How much would you be willing to sell your reader's pass for, assuming you could not replace it?', 'How much time and money would you be willing to invest to use the Library?', and 'How much money would you pay to use an alternative to the Library?'.

Then they calculated the difference between the sum of the financial values their interviewees came up with and the costs of providing the services: the so-called consumer surplus, or return on investment.

By no means all of the people interviewed used or even knew much about the Library. This is a departure from the traditional habit of treating users and non-users separately and asking them different questions. It also avoids the crass mistake of equating non-use with indifference or hostility. Because I hate opera and never willingly go to see it doesn't mean I'm against public funding of it. So, non-users of the British Library were still prepared to value it highly as a public good, even if they gained no personal benefit from it.

The British Library's study was probably the first comprehensive study of its kind. I can remember the looks of admiration and envy on the faces of the assembled national librarians of the world soon afterwards when the Chief Executive described the project, and announced that for every pound sterling invested in her institution, precisely £4.40 was generated for the UK economy. Another finding was that if the British Library lost all its public funding the UK would lose £280m each year.

Contingent valuation has been used since by other libraries around the world. Or at least by libraries that can afford to invest in what is an expensive technique. Roxanne Missingham of the National Library of Australia wrote a summary of the British Library and other studies in 2005.⁵ (They include, by the way, the Florida study we're going to hear about later this morning.)

On the face of it contingent valuation seems a big advance on other methods, like input-output, or balanced scorecards. It looks at value in an inclusive, whole-community rather than a restrictive sense, and yet it reduces value to pounds and pence. It takes a holistic view of a service and yet yields precise results. It also comes up with impressive-looking scores. But the more you think about the technique the more doubts arise.

⁴ British Library, *Measuring our value: results of an independent economic impact study commissioned by the British Library to measure the Library's direct and indirect value to the UK economy*, London: British Library, [2004].

⁵ <http://www.nla.gov.au/nla/staffpaper/2005/missingham8.html>

The doubts start with figures like £4.40. How can you be so precise about the economic value of the British Library? Only by operating in a hypothetical world. In reality respondents aren't choosing between real alternatives, between Amazon and Borders, or IKEA and Habitat. Not only is the British Library a publicly funded body, it exists in splendid isolation in its uniqueness and lack of comparability. In fact, come to think of it, a national library is a rather curious place to try out a technique like contingent valuation.

Another problem, referred to by Roxanne Missingham, is one that contingent valuation shares with many methods for deriving the value of libraries: that it can only take a snapshot of current values. It can't allow us to reach a conclusion about the latent or potential value of a library, for example to future generations.

Missingham points to a third weakness of contingent valuation: how to interpret the results. It's not clear whether £4.40 is a good or a bad result for the British Library. And what would the Library need to do in future to improve its score?

My feeling is that contingent evaluation is something of a Snark: a creature sought by library butchers and bakers, but ultimately a myth. Much as we'd all like to be able to wave figures like £4.40 in front of our funders and dare them to deny it, I'm not certain that contingent valuation is the knock-out blow it might seem. It certainly adds another technique to the range of methods we have to suggest the value of what we do. But we should not pretend that we can measure its impact. Our missions are too diffuse and our organisations too complex. I know my elder daughter makes good use of Edinburgh University Library. I have no idea, and nor, I'm sure, has she, what impact this experience will have on her degree grade, her aptitude as a learner, or her future value as a useful citizen of the world.

We'd all do well, I suggest, to give evaluation of our services the respect it deserves – but no more. We should divert some of our more frenzied efforts put into proving the impact of our libraries to reluctant funders into something even more important: finding better and more imaginative ways of serving our users, present and future.