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# The public library as public sphere: a longitudinal analysis

## 1. Introduction

In this paper an extended understanding of the public library in the early twenty-first century, and its epistemic functions, is presented. It is based on an analysis of longitudinal focus group data collected from public library users in two nations of the UK for a part-time doctorate awarded in 2020. The period of data collection fell towards the end of a long period of austerity in respect of public library funding in the UK that resulted from the global recession of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Appleton *et al.*, 2018, p. 275)

The importance of informational exchanges between public library staff and users, and in user-to-user interactions as transactional capital (Kostagiolas, 2013) is uncovered as a key component of value relevant to the epistemic functions of the public library. This main finding is discussed with reference to the concept of the public library as 'public sphere' (Habermas, 1962), as elaborated below. The novelty of the contribution is evident in the context of the prior work in Library and Information Science (LIS) on public library value that is dominated with accounts of societal and/or economic impact, frequently derived from quantitative studies (Appleton *et al.*, 2018). The report of this research also adds an important perspective to the domain of Information Society Studies where, to date, the place of the public library as public sphere has been treated as peripheral. Furthermore, unlike other work that brings the theme of public libraries together with important community interests such as democracy, the conclusions presented here draw on findings from a robust empirical study, rather than rely on rhetoric or unfounded assumptions (Jaeger *et al.*, 2013).

In the account below, the context for the empirical work is set through the presentation of a review of previously published research on the role of the public library, drawing attention to work that identifies the public library as a public sphere. There then follows an explanation of the research design for the empirical study, and the implementation of the approach to data collection that involved the organisation and hosting of a total of 24 focus group meetings with active public library users between 2015 and 2018. The main results from the analysis of the focus group data are then presented. These preface a discussion of the role of the public library in the early twenty-first century, and its functioning as a public sphere.

## 2. Literature Review

Library and Information Science (LIS) researchers readily acknowledge the commonly held view of public libraries as publicly accessible buildings that house collections of print material (e.g., Campbell, 2013, p. 8), where members of the community may develop literacy and learning (e.g., Brophy, 2001, p. 14; Foster and Ford, 2003; Rice, McCreddie and Change, 2001). These researchers have also long argued that public libraries represent so much more than these epistemic functions for which public libraries are traditionally known (e.g., Hoggart, 1957; Norcup, 1997; Williams, 1966), with multifunctional roles that span many different types of community provision over and above information services (e.g., Sørensen, 2021). Some commentators, such as Chowdhury *et al.* (2008, p. 4) have bemoaned the dangers of the traditional picture of public libraries as 'very limited and unhelpful' because it 'omits the various other activities which take place within a library, as well as the roles played by a library in human life and society in general'.

Other valuable activities performed by public libraries are often framed as supporting society to uphold desirable aspects of functioning cohesive communities, such as democracy, social inclusion, and emancipation (e.g., Black, 2000, pp. 3-4; Black and Pepper, 2012, p. 465; Brophy, 2006, p. 3;

Sørensen, 2021). The regeneration of communities, for example, is a modern-day function of the public library (Goulding, 2006). Key to these functions is social capital, i.e., the resources that individuals access through membership of a network, a theme frequently invoked by LIS researchers with reference to community-focused public library services and their outcomes (e.g., Goulding, 2004; Goulding, 2013; Hillenbrand, 2005; Johnson, 2010; Johnson, 2012; Kranich, 2001; Sørensen, 2021). Vårheim (2007), for example, has identified that social network building for community development and the promotion of citizenship can be prompted by the face-to-face meetings and activities organised by public library services. Similarly, Johnston and Audunson (2019) argue that public libraries provide valuable spaces in which immigrants' political and social integration into local communities can be facilitated and supported. Social capital is generated within public libraries because they are spaces in which neighbours, friends, and strangers engage with one another (e.g., Sørensen, 2021), often in an unplanned manner, leading to the creation of new social networks (Aabø *et al.*, 2010, p. 25). Communities that have good social capital, it has been argued, offer levels of social engagement, with characteristics that include citizenship and civic participation (Goulding, 2004, p. 3). Linking social capital with public libraries and public library usage is also often discussed with regard to the socialisation and integration of established and newcomer immigrant communities into local communities (e.g. Audunson *et al.*, 2011; Khoir *et al.*, 2017).

Other forms of capital are also discussed in the context of public libraries. Of particular value to this study is the articulation offered by Kostagiolas (2013). He argues that public libraries manage and distribute intellectual capital that comprises three forms:

- Human capital: the knowledge, experience, competencies and creativity of public library staff
- Organisational capital: the infrastructure of the public library including, for example, its classification scheme, the automated circulation system, etc.
- Relational capital: relationships between the public library and its stakeholders

He also identifies the role of human and relational capital in generating 'transactional capital', manifest as the outcomes of exchanges (of information, support, guidance, or advice) between two or more people.

Others who have applied concepts of capital generation to the context of public libraries have highlighted its value principally from a staffing perspective (e.g., White, 2007a; White, 2007b). Consideration of public libraries as sites for capital generation may be limited because library staff are unaware of the outcomes of the social relationships that they develop with users (Johnson, 2012).

The role of the public library has been theorised in studies that adopt the notion of the institution as a public sphere, often in the literature of Information Society Studies. Here reference is made to Habermas' initial definition of the public sphere as a 'society engaged in critical debate' (Habermas, 1962), as well as to that of Hauser (1999), which privileges the places in which such debate may ensue: 'a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgement about them' (p. 61). For example, Widdersheim (2017) explains the public sphere as a complex social phenomenon composed of three layers - infrastructure (the physical space), people (within the space), and communication (between the people) - noting their presence in public libraries.

Much published work on the public library as a public sphere privileges the first of these layers. It highlights the importance of libraries as meeting places (e.g., Aabø *et al.*, 2010; Aabø and Audunson,

2012; Audunson *et al.*, 2019a; Audunson *et al.*, 2019b; Larson, 2020; Leckie and Buschman, 2007; Most, 2009; Rothbauer; 2007), positioned as strong civic institutions with histories closely implicated with the notion of participation and democratic responsibility (Robinson, 2014, p. 22). Here democracy may be encouraged and enhanced as people are furnished with places to gather and debate (Audunson *et al.*, 2019b; Buschman, 2018; Buschman, 2019; Webster, 2007; Webster, 2014; Widdersheim, 2017). This space also provides ready access to learning resources to underpin democratic engagement (Audunson *et al.*, 2019b; Kranich, 2013; Webster, 2014), and thus supports the 'self-education of the citizenry in order that they may become fully participating members in a democratic society' (Alsted and Curry, 2003, p. 2) alongside the development of digital citizenship (Jaeger and Burnett, 2014). Less common are studies that provide detailed practical examples of the other two layers noted by Widdersheim (2017). However, prior work has pointed to public librarians as agents of the public sphere (e.g., Batt, 1997; Feather, 2013). A more recent practical illustration is the use of conversation interventions with newcomers in public libraries to bring immigrant voices into the public sphere and facilitate political integration (Johnston and Audunson, 2019).

Notwithstanding the value of the literature cited above, recent calls have been made to extend research on the role of the public library as public sphere. More theoretically based empirical studies are sought (e.g., Vårheim *et al.*, 2019; Widdersheim and Koizumi, 2016). In particular, researchers are urged to address the limitations of the more common normative research contributions that offer prescriptive advice that is not always rooted to evidence (Audunson *et al.*, 2019a), as is the case with some of the examples cited above. Similar criticisms might be made of coverage of public libraries in Information Society Studies monographs, where brief references to a role apparently conceived as peripheral are subsumed into broader discussions of the public sphere in general (e.g., Duff, 2000; 2013; Feather, 2013; Webster, 2014).

The broad aim of the doctoral research discussed in this paper was to develop further understanding of the role of the public library in the UK in the twenty-first century. In this paper, which draws on elements of the larger study, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What is the role of the UK public library as a public sphere?
2. How does this role relate to the epistemic, community, and political functions of public libraries?

### 3. Methodology

Studies that assess public library value adopt a variety of research approaches, as evidenced for example, in Sørensen's 2021 review paper. In the case of the full doctoral study from which the findings discussed in this paper are drawn, the goal of data collection was to gather insights from active public library users about the impact of their engagement with their public library services. This was to allow for exploration of the themes of personal advantage of using public libraries (particularly in terms of intellectual development), the impact of public library use on individual and community citizenship, and the facilitation of political participation and active democracy. Such insights were also deemed important to consider the position of the public library as a public sphere. The nature of the study thus lent itself to a qualitative research method that would allow for collective discussion of, and reflection on, these themes amongst active public library users.

The focus group method was selected for its main 'ingredients' of (1) people who (2) possess certain characteristics, and (3) can provide qualitative data (4) in a focused discussion (5) to help understand the topic of interest (Krueger and Casey, 2009, p. 6). In order to fully inform the research, it was felt that focus group participants would need the opportunity to engage in reflective discussion around

sophisticated. There was a risk that such discussion would not be enabled during a single focus group where participants, unfamiliar with one another, were brought together for the first and only time. Therefore, a longitudinal approach was explored in which focus group participants would be reconvened at regular intervals during the data collection period. That this research was undertaken as a part-time doctoral study actually allowed for the implementation of such a longitudinal method, in which focus groups could be convened and then reconvened across multiple locations. Therefore, each location’s focus group was convened on three occasions over a three-year period of data collection. This approach took advantage of the affordances of interval contingent design and recording (Bolger and Laurenceau, 2013) to observe and evidence social development over a defined time period (Lewis and McNaughton Nicholls, 2013). The rationale for this approach is discussed in greater detail in an earlier published paper (Appleton and Hall, 2021 in press). This earlier paper also includes details of piloting of the data collection technique, provides participant information additional to that outlined below, (e.g., means of recruitment, incentives for participation, obtaining informed consent), and considers the problem of participant attrition over the three phases of data collection, as well as discussion of the value of engaging a self-selecting group of atypical active public library users in studies such as this.

In practice, a total of twenty-four focus group meetings were convened. Three visits were made to the same sets of participants at eight local authority-run public library services in England and Scotland between 2015 and 2018, as summarised in Table 1.

Focus group public library location	Number of participants		
	Phase 1 (2015 -2016)	Phase 2 (2016- 2017)	Phase 3 (2017-2018)
Devon (Tiverton)	7	4	2
Edinburgh	10	7	4
Essex (Chelmsford)	2	2	2
Lincolnshire (Lincoln)	4	3	2
Liverpool	8	4	4
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	4	4	3
Redbridge (London Borough)	9	3	5
Sutton (London Borough)	9	5	6
<b>Totals</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>28</b>

Table 1: Numbers of participants by location and by phase

Those who volunteered to take part in the focus groups represented a mixed population of active public library users as can be seen in Table 2. Similarly, there was variety in the public library service profiles, for example, in terms of their location (inner-city urban to rural), local authority classification (county, city, metropolitan borough), and the socioeconomic profile of communities that they serve (deprived to wealthy).

Characteristic	Number of participants	
Age at first focus group	16-24	8
	25-34	1
	35-44	6
	45-54	8
	55-64	12
	65-74	16
	75-84	2
Gender	Female	36

	Male	17
<b>Occupational status</b>	Student	8
	Employed (paid/volunteer)	19
	Unemployed	3
	Retired	23
<b>Ethnicity</b>	White	37
	Asian	11
	Afro-Caribbean	5
<b>Nationality</b>	British	45
	Non-British	8
<b>Disability status</b>	Disabled	5
	Not disabled	48

*Table 2: Summary participant demographics*

In the Phase 1 focus groups, the participants shared anecdotes of their experiences of using public library services and considered the impact of this activity. These were important as conversational prompts for shared experiences as the participants met for the first time. During Phase 2, they were directed to reflect on their personal development and involvement in their communities during the previous 8-12 months, and to question whether any of this had been facilitated through their public library use. This instruction encouraged more focussed discussion of the themes of individual and community learning and development. By the time the participants reconvened for Phase 3, they had sufficient familiarity with the focus group process, and with one another, to engage in conversations that were more open and sophisticated than on the two previous occasions. Here they willingly considered abstract concepts introduced into the discussion, e.g., 'social capital' and 'information society'.

The transcribed focus group data were coded using NVivo 10, following good practice for longitudinal qualitative data analysis, including categorically and comparatively reviewing the data corpus across time Saldana (2009). This meant that the coding structures were adapted over the course of the study as new concepts were introduced or emerged in the focus group data from one phase to the next. This activity also prompted consideration of changes to developments in participant opinion during the study.

#### 4. Findings

The discussion in the focus groups developed over the course of the study, with responses to questions from the first and second feeding into the identification of themes for the second and third. The themes were:

- **Phase 1:** attitudes and feelings about public libraries; the demand for, and use of, knowledge and information; public library users; the concept of citizenship and the role that the public library plays in this.
- **Phase 2:** personal development and community involvement since the first focus group meetings, and the facilitation of these through their public library use.
- **Phase 3:** concepts of 'information society', 'social capital', 'human capital' and 'knowledge capital'

The longitudinal method meant that participants quickly became comfortable with one another when they convened on the second and third occasions and were happy to share their experiences freely. The level of comfort in the environment, and the established group dynamic, allowed for

increasingly deeper and more sophisticated discussion during each phase of focus groups, as can be seen in the thematic coverage of Phase 3 above.

Through the analysis of the rich data set generated from all the focus group discussions, four overarching themes relating to the role of the public library were identified: (1) reading and access to learning materials; (2) digital support and inclusion; (3) social interaction and relationship building; and (4) community engagement and citizenship. Examples to illustrate these main findings as related to these themes are presented below.

#### *Reading and access to learning materials*

The strongest responses (in terms of opinion) to questions posed in the focus groups concerned individual use of the public library and its impact on learning and development, i.e., its epistemic function. In Phase 1 reading and access to printed books were considered key to this. For example, the focus group participants noted the empowering nature of the knowledge in print materials:

...handling all those really old manuscripts and books... It's knowledge, just a body of knowledge. The library is a temple of knowledge... and knowledge is power, I believe. Knowledge is power! (Participant 2, Phase 1, Liverpool)

Access to print resources was also regarded as a route to enjoyment:

When I come in, I have a dead positive vibe.... When I walk through the door straight away, 'cos I know that I only need to spend fifteen minutes in here and I'll have lost myself in a book! (Participant 4, Phase 1, Liverpool)

Such views about books were shared by participants across all ages, including those under 18. They drew attention to easy access to reading materials in the public library, hinting at the inclusive nature of the service:

My favourite thing about the public library is that you can just grab any book that you like, and you can just sit as long as you like and read it. And, if you really like it, you can get another one! Books! (Participant 33, Phase 1, Redbridge)

Although the participants acknowledged the availability of digital resources, these were regarded as less reliable than in print materials. In general, print information, accessed in the library, is the preferred means by which to meet information needs:

I always start out on the Net and then come back to the printed books when I want to research something in more depth. If I want information, whatever it is, I know I'll find it in the library. I almost look at the library as a doorway to the Internet and I know I'm going into a bigger library.... I'm going to the world library. (Participant 50, Phase 2, Tiverton)

It is worth noting that this preference for print was not associated with focus group participant demographics. Indeed, most were proficient and enthusiastic computer users. Rather it was a question of trust:

An awful lot of the information that is digital might not be very trustworthy. Whereas if you come to the library, I feel that I can get a lot more trustworthy things. There is a lot of very damaging rubbish on the Internet. I trust printed evidence more and find it easier to consult more than one source. (Participant 47, Phase 1, Tiverton)

This finding also underlines the perception of public libraries primarily as places that offer access to a variety of print material held in books. The strength of this sentiment was evident in Phase 1 and 2 focus groups in city centre public libraries in Edinburgh, Liverpool and Newcastle, when some participants expressed the view that the primary epistemic function of the public library can be

diluted by the provision additional community services such as exercise classes and music groups. For example, one participant complained:

There's too much diversity [of services]... Dancing and music are really disturbing in the quiet spaces. There is a place for that, but not in the space that I'm using. They just don't join together. They just don't think about what to put in the spaces. I mean, there was Zumba going on in there the other day! (Participant 9, Phase 1, Newcastle)

Similarly, some younger participants from Redbridge held the opinion that the public library needed to provide space to study, quietly, and that this is a key role:

Primarily it should be, like, to study. People are there to study and respect other people. When you misuse that, start playing music outside... you annoy other people. There is space to do that outside. People shouldn't do that in the library (Participant 31, Phase 1, Redbridge)

In Sutton, participants observed that the increase in the range of services meant that library staff are no longer specialists in professional support offered, and there had been inadequate investment in their changed roles:

In general, over the years, they have been supportive, but as more and more technology is introduced, their workloads change, and they have got to learn more. For example, they've got a whole row of computers up there, but they need to train the staff so that they know how to show people how to use them... There's too much 'That's not my job' in here. (Participant 41, Phase 1, Sutton)

Learning to read and literacy also featured as themes for discussion. Indeed, several participants claimed that the public library helped them to develop their reading skills in childhood. This message was often conveyed sentimentally, and with a deep sense of gratitude. In other cases, strong attestations confirmed that education and intellectual development are progressed through access to a public library. For example, parents of young children pointed to the availability of diverse and varied reading materials as key to the acquisition of literacy:

For me it has helped me explore my child's interests in a more structured and creative way. She's not been limited to the books that I have bought for her. She's been able to choose all the books that I wouldn't have wanted her to read because they involve silly things, or illustrations that I don't like. But it has provided an opportunity to develop my child's interests and literacy beyond what I could have done myself. (Participant 25, Phase 2, Lincoln)

Other forms of learning were cited. For example, in the Phase 2 focus groups the wide range of topics mentioned included aromatherapy, cookery, drawing, gardening, learning to play musical instruments, and local history.

#### *Digital support and inclusion*

For many participants, especially during the Phase 1 focus groups, their essential understanding of a public library was of a building that contains books for reading. Participants who held on to this traditional view found it difficult to provide examples of the influence of public library usage on skills and intellectual development when the focus groups reconvened for Phase 2.

However, such perceptions were subject to shift as discussions moved on to other public library services. For example, the participants referred to the availability of staff support, both in general and with specific reference to IT skills, technology, and digital resources, as well as the inclusive nature of help provided. For example, one explained:

I did come into the library to ask for help with my iPad when I first got it and there was someone in the library... and it all sort of clicked with me. He was brilliant and he invited me to come back to learn more. It was much better to learn with a stranger [and] rather than my son getting frustrated saying 'No you press this and click that'. It was one-to-one in the library, and he was very patient. (Participant 52, Phase 2, Tiverton)

The focus group participants also offered specific examples of initiatives to promote digital inclusion. For instance, at the time that data were collected for this study, school-aged children in Sutton were invited into the library to help older public library users develop digital skills. Meanwhile, a Newcastle participant explained that the public library has been instrumental in providing digital skills and support for her child:

The librarians run after school clubs, such as grid clubs and computer clubs. These are supported and the staff often stay behind after they've finished. This access to learning is so important for me and my daughter. We really value it. (Participant 12, Phase1, Newcastle)

While support for reading and access to books was identified by the participants as an *educational* function of public libraries, these efforts towards digital inclusion were often framed as *societal* functions. For example, participants in Newcastle, Tiverton and Sutton spoke about taking advantage of 'job clubs' and computer skills training groups hosted by the public library services. These facilitate both the acquisition of skills, and the bringing of communities of people together in focused ways. For example, one participant said:

The library is enabling for citizens, especially unemployed citizens. The library enables people to cope and gives them some dignity. I've used the library for loads of things like that, like getting books for cooking on a budget, accessing job search and web sites to look for jobs. The job club at the East End Library is great, and the staff are always supportive when you're looking for jobs and filling out applications. (Participant 10, Phase 2, Newcastle)

#### *Social interaction and relationship building*

The initial focus group discussions of social interactions and relationship building within public libraries centred on user-staff interactions. Here library staff were seen as advisors, guiding users to make effective use of the services offered:

The staff are great. They will always show you how to do stuff. You don't need to book on a course to set an email account up for example. They'll just show you. The Job Centre doesn't have computers for online job searching now. You can now only access this in the library. So having the staff available to help is so important (Participant 11, Phase 1, Newcastle)

From Phase 2 onwards, the participants began to reflect on their building of interpersonal relationships with other public library users. For example, some of the anecdotes on the development of IT and digital skills provided evidence of learning alongside others and sharing and exchanging of knowledge. In other cases, there was acknowledgement of learning at the level of the community. For example, a Tiverton participant explained that Job Search club membership leads to the building of social relationships:

There are a lot of people who get to know each other through Job Search.... We exchange information with each other, sometimes written and sometimes verbally. When you get to know people, they get to know what you are looking for. They might say 'oh I've seen a job that will suit Joe'. It's that social side that I really value. (Participant 50, Phase 2, Tiverton)

When the concepts of social and transactional capital were introduced to participants at the Phase 3 focus groups, they considered the ways in which it is possible to make the acquaintance of others encountered in the public library – notably the staff – and build relationships with them. They also reflected on the outcomes of such actions. They noted, for example, that staff operating at a

particular level of professional expertise deal with the full range of public library users in different contexts, including the focus group participants themselves:

Sometimes, when I'm doing academic research and I've reached a point where [I'm] at a standstill, the interaction with [a member of library staff], who's had a broader experience... teaches you how to use people as a resource. As a knowledge resource! (Participant 44, Phase 3, Sutton)

The focus group participants also acknowledged their own role in knowledge exchange activities within the public library setting. For example, some indicated that they share advice, information, and guidance with other library users. This further confirms the role of the public library as a locus for social interaction and relationship building, with valuable outcomes. For example, a participant referred to the opportunity for library users to contribute to collection development:

I found out that we can have an impact on the books that are here. We can actually go to [the library staff] and advise or recommend what we want ordered for the library. I have collected different stories from Polish literature and Russian literature... We can get the books that make them available in English, so we are also sharing our culture. (Participant 28, Phase 2, Lincoln)

### *Community engagement and citizenship*

The focus group participants identified several elements that need to be in place for libraries to fulfil their societal and community roles: safe and welcoming spaces; inclusive values; adequate and appropriate information resources; adequate infrastructure; services that bring people together; and strategic outcomes related to enabling community cohesion and citizenship. Elements of these are elaborated with examples below.

The physicality of the library as a place is important to the sense of community: some focus group participants claimed that presence within the library equated to 'being in the community' and 'being a citizen'. They referred to the inclusive nature of this physical environment. Here all library users are treated as equals, with different ethnicities, races, religions, and nationalities represented in, and supported by, public libraries. They also indicated that they value encounters with different people to exchange ideas, opinions, and skills in the inclusive library space:

I can't think of another place where you might interact with different people from different faiths, I'm not going to church to meet Muslim people, Sikhs and Jehovah's witnesses, and vice versa, they're not going to come to meet me. So certainly, in the library, not only would you meet people, but they've got ideas. (Participant 42, Phase 1, Sutton)

Some participants felt that the inclusive nature of public library services, in combination with the resources that they make available, allows for the development of community identity. For example, the Lincoln participants spoke about community group use of library space for activities facilitated by the group members themselves. The aim of these groups is to equip women from newcomer populations with English language and other skills to enable them to participate fully as members of their local communities and British society. For example, one of members of this community group found success in the library as a digital mentor in a role that included supporting newcomers studying for the 'Life in the UK' test. Lincolnshire Libraries trained and registered her as a library volunteer so that she could help her peers in the digital aspects of the test:

Yes, she would introduce people to the digital resources and make sure that they are linked up to the relevant people. And because she could put this on her CV, that she had volunteered and all these skills, she has now gone on to get a job in IT in the health service. (Participant 28, Phase 2, Lincoln)

Similarly, a Lincoln participant reflected on her own position as a newcomer, having recently moved her family to the UK from Poland, when she explained:

The library is the first place I came when I moved here because I needed a lot of help. And also because my children didn't speak English. We just wanted to look for something that would help them. (Participant 27, Phase 2, Lincoln)

A further example, also related to community integration, this time with established immigrant communities, shows active contribution of a public library user to services provision:

I got to know the whole [Bangladeshi] community, not just as a tutor, but as friends and I ended up getting invited to their weddings... I was with them when 9/11 happened and they were terrified as a community, terrified as to what would happen to them and the implications, and I had to say, '...but you're from Chelmsford. The people of Chelmsford know you. You're our friends. We're your friends. Don't be scared. It will pass.' And it did, but I would not have had that experience with these people if it was not for our central community library. (Participant 24, Phase 1, Chelmsford)

In some instances, the participants expressed the sense that the public library 'makes' a community, and, by association, engaging with the library (and therefore the community) is an act of citizenship:

I feel that it is about being part of the community. I've always felt that about libraries, that when you use them, you are being active in the community. It's a public service, which is for absolutely everyone in the community. (Participant 26, Phase 1, Lincoln)

The public library is also viewed as a platform for individuals to 'discover' themselves and their roles within their respective communities in more significant roles, particularly in respect of democracy. For example, in Sutton, a participant related experiences of engagement in local politics at grassroots level thanks to ready access to resources made available by the public library:

I find out about lots of community groups and the thing that I have looked up most recently is the 'Sutton Plan' which is the 30-year plan of what is going to take place in the borough. I've downloaded the plan now, but I come to the library because I'm on some community groups, and I can let them know how I think the plan is going to affect certain things, and we can respond by writing to the various planning committees." (Participant 41, Phase 3, Sutton)

Other examples of political activity mentioned by the focus group participants included consulting information sources held in the public library and use of these to make informed decisions, or to lobby democratic representatives:

The library is a source of information to me to formulate my arguments and opinions to make to my politicians. (Participant 18, Phase 1, Edinburgh)

The focus group participants in Redbridge gave a specific example of the public library as a pro-active in politics through its support of a youth parliament, and the broad value that this brings to the community. For example, one of the younger focus group participants said:

I met this person called Nancy and she actually was in the library. She came to one of the hustings and I'm still in contact with her and I find that she's very knowledgeable [and] helpful in terms of advising me because she is a lot older than me. She's very knowledgeable of general life and different subjects that she's doing, so she's able to help me. At times I will text her and just ask her for some advice on...what to do, and so she is quite helpful. (Participant 29, Phase 3, Redbridge)

## 5. Discussion

The fundamental epistemic functions of the public library, as established in the literature review above (e.g., Campbell, 2013), are confirmed in the findings of this study. The study participants' preference for tangible print information sources over those in online formats underlines the physicality of such functions. Furthermore, the strong, and sometimes dismissive, opinion of 'non-traditional' public library services (e.g., such as exercise classes, music groups, etc.) could be seen as questioning the investment decisions of public library leaders. However, it may be the case that this finding is an artefact of sample selection for this study, and that wider services offered in public library space are actually important to a range of users broader than that represented in the eight focus groups. Further research undertaken with a sample of community members whose relationship with the public library is more 'casual' would help establish the ways in which traditional and non-traditional services come together to meet the needs of local populations as a whole.

A further strong message from the analysis is that public library services contribute to cohesive communities, again reflecting extant knowledge as summarised in the literature review above. In this respect, the promotion of inclusion is the most important feature. Public libraries exhibit this as physical spaces that are open to all, offering free access to core services (such as book loans), and facilitating the growth of an inclusive society through targeted initiatives. Some examples cited by the focus group participants directly recall others presented in the extant literature, for example on integration activities for newcomer populations (Johnston and Audunson, 2019).

The most significant aspect of this study, however, has been to bring to the fore transactional and intellectual capital (Kostagiolas, 2013) generated through exchanges between public library staff and users, as well as in user-to-user interactions, often in informal teaching and learning exchanges. This adds a further dimension to the public library's epistemic functions, seen to be performed both in the 'traditional' manner of information services provision to users, and through the creation of new knowledge by the user base itself within the physical setting of the library. This finding on the importance of access to human resources as information sources extends the limited prior consideration of public libraries as sites for the creation of capital other than social capital, as noted by Johnson (2012). It may have emerged strongly in this study (and not elsewhere) because the views of public library users (as opposed to staff) were canvassed for the analysis.

A further insight gleaned from this finding on interpersonal transactions is that the community and epistemic functions of the public library are tightly coupled, for example when activities offered as community events underpin new learning amongst citizens. This indicates that it is somewhat artificial to consider the individual functions of public library services (e.g. 'community', 'democratic', 'epistemic') as distinct from one another. Rather their development is interdependent.

This account confirms the presence in the eight public library services of the three layers of the public sphere: infrastructure (physical space), people (within the space), and communication (between the people) (Widdersheim, 2017). This is borne out in the additional detail of the public library's epistemic functions, i.e., the incorporation of standard information provision (e.g., in books) combined with new knowledge created by users with (or without) staff, where the latter act as agents of the public sphere, as previously identified by Batt (1997) and Feather (2013). For example, occasions when public library users are supported to act 'politically' in their local community - as demonstrated by the focus group participant who spoke about the Sutton Plan or the person in Edinburgh who corresponds with democratic representatives - are instances of the public library as public sphere. Such examples also support the contention that citizenship may be developed in the public library setting (Webster, 2007), providing much-sought empirical knowledge of the role of the public library in supporting essential values of the society in general, and in enhancing democracy in

particular. Such examples support the argument that ‘the promotion of democracy comes with the creation social capital and trust, mainly through the facilitation and the organization setting of public library space and activities’ (Sørensen, 2021, p. 7).

## 6. Conclusion

In 2007 it was suggested that public libraries are the nearest thing that the UK has to a public sphere (Webster, 2007). The findings of this study, undertaken a decade later, indicate that the role of public sphere is evident in a total sample of eight English and Scottish public library services. It may be concluded that this is likely to be representative of the position of public libraries across the UK. Here public library services offer inclusive, discursive spaces, in which users and staff can generate transactional and intellectual capital, thanks to an underpinning of shared social capital. The nature of this public library role as public sphere aligns closely with its epistemic functions, adding a further dimension to information services provision beyond access to ‘traditional’ print and online sources. Here new information and knowledge emerges through the person-to-person interactions in public library space. Further, by facilitating such exchanges, the community function of public libraries is demonstrated, notably as a platform for citizens to participate actively in society, including its democratic processes.

Attention to these extended epistemic functions, achieved through the implementation of a robust empirical study, provides a useful resource to demonstrate the worth of public libraries within communities. This responds to recent calls such as that to conduct ‘concrete studies on the embodiment of different types of library value [to] provide useful resources for public libraries’ efforts in creating positive impact in society’ (Sørensen, 2021, p. 1). This work is also an important contribution in the context of an extant literature on public library worth that tends to focus more readily on indicators of social impact, performance measurement, and/or economic metrics, rather than the fundamental epistemic value of public library services.

A further contribution of this work is to demonstrate that longitudinal, multi-location focus groups can generate quality research data from which valuable conclusions, such as those presented above, may be derived. The implementation of longitudinal, multi-location focus groups is less common in public library research than other data collection methods. Indeed, according to a recent literature review (Sørensen, 2021, p. 4) - and disregarding an earlier publication by the authors of the current paper (Appleton and Hall, 2021 in press) - only one other researcher has published an account of data collection by focus group (in this case with library staff) for a study on public library value: Elbeshausen (2007). The longitudinal, multi-location approach implemented here also proved useful in encouraging open and sophisticated discussion in a ‘safe’ environment, even on controversial subjects such as immigration. In studies where there is a need to prompt deep and frank discussion amongst participants, with the opportunity to return to topics following a period of reflection, longitudinal, multi-location focus groups offer a useful strategy for data collection.

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