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# An elephant in the room? Information literacy in the narrative of UK public libraries

Diana Hackett, Assistant Librarian, Nuffield College, University of Oxford. Email: [dhm.hackett@gmail.com](mailto:dhm.hackett@gmail.com) Twitter: @BeetleBook

## Abstract

Despite its recognised role in education, lifelong learning and active citizenship, the term information literacy (IL) is rarely used in the context of public libraries. At a time when public libraries are operating in an environment of financial austerity and are under increasing pressure to demonstrate the value of their role in UK society, this paper presents the findings of a small-scale research project examining the narratives surrounding public libraries and IL.

Through a qualitative text analysis, a picture is built up of the roles of public libraries as presented by government, professional organisations and charitable organisations. This analysis shows that IL is not a concept explicitly associated with public libraries; that the government's focus is on public libraries' role in delivering digital inclusion while at the same time depicting a largely passive role for libraries and diminished role for professional library staff; and that while current library advocacy supports this digital role, it does not effectively address the deeper need for transferrable information skills.

Based on this analysis, this paper recommends greater collaboration between academic research, higher education, and the public library sector, with a view to fostering a better understanding of IL and its potential to create a wider, more educationally-focused role for public libraries and their staff.

## Keywords

advocacy; information literacy; library research; public libraries; qualitative text analysis; UK

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## 1. Introduction

In the United Kingdom's current political climate of budget cuts, public library services are at risk. The view of public libraries as primarily book-focused services continues to be dominant in the minds of a majority of both the public and policymakers, while many other important services that public libraries provide are overlooked (O'Beirne, 2010). With branches being closed and services being fully or partially turned over to non-professional volunteers, advocacy has a key role to play in ensuring that decision makers are aware of the range of valuable services libraries can provide (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), 2015a).

The role of public libraries in developing and supporting information literacy (IL) is an important aspect of the services they provide, but is often not recognised (Crawford, 2013a) or effectively communicated (Widdowson & Smart, 2013). IL is 'inextricably entwined' (Lloyd, 2010, p.127) with lifelong learning, as its component skills enable people to achieve personal, professional, and educational success in the modern world. Defined in the Alexandria Proclamation as a 'basic human right in a digital world' that 'promotes social inclusion' (Garner, 2006, p.3), CILIP declares it to be 'a key public good' and 'a core activity of those working in [...] public libraries'

(CILIP, 2015b). To effectively construct an advocacy narrative to protect and develop public libraries and their essential provision of information literacy skills, it is vital that IL and its value is clearly represented (Bowden, 2001).

## 2. Information literacy – a review

### 2.1 Background

Paul Zurkowski first used the term 'information literacy' to describe a set of 'techniques and skills' possessed by workplace 'information literates' that enabled better use of information to achieve more effective problem solving (Zurkowski, 1974, p.6). This definition suggests the term was intended to be used in arenas beyond the library: the workplace, education, and civic life. There is a tendency for the term to be employed as a synonym for other concepts or skill sets (Bawden, 2001; Pinto, Cordón & Diaz, 2010). These synonyms are often linked to a specific technology or set of competencies. The Society of College, National, and University Libraries (SCONUL) '7 Pillars' model (SCONUL, 1999) and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) IL standards (ACRL, 2000) have both been criticised for falling into a reductivist trap for their original focus on 'skills'. Both models have since been revised, SCONUL adding user 'lenses' over the 'generic core model' (SCONUL, 2011, p.2) and identifying five user lenses (Goldstein, 2015, p.2), ACRL producing a flexible framework (ACRL, 2015) designed to encourage an understanding of 'core concepts' (ACRL, 2015, p.2). The recent A New Curriculum for Information Literacy (ANCIL) model (Secker & Coonan, 2011) also reflects this shift, suggesting a move towards a contextualised idea of IL as a behavioural practice.

There is a lack of similar frameworks or models designed for non-education environments (Crawford & Irving, 2011), reflecting a lack of research outside the education context (Crawford & Irving, 2012; Harding, 2008; Lloyd, 2010). This has consequences for those who do not participate in higher education (HE), as it may limit their opportunity for IL development (Bradley, 2013). Recent literature, however, displays a growing interest in IL within the workplace and communities, and in the need for a more holistic vision of IL (Webber & Johnston, 2017). This reinforces the move away from the skills focus of the earlier education models towards a broader, more flexible understanding of IL and the resources and practices that make up an information literate individual or community (Bawden, 2001; Crawford & Irving, 2011). This highlights the social aspects of IL and the recognition of the practices, people, and interactions that make up 'information landscapes' (Lloyd, 2010; 2017): interactive, social and contextual spaces through which members navigate. IL achievement cannot therefore be measured against an educational achievement model: more generic definitions of IL may be of greater use in disseminating greater conceptual understanding.

Although it could be argued that attempting to define IL is counter-productive and that it is a flexible concept necessitating differing skills in different contexts, there is still a need to reach a more common understanding to enable effective advocacy. The use of so many synonymic terms contributes to a silo effect within discussion and practice (Lloyd, 2017), which in turn makes outward advocacy problematic. A lack of conceptual understanding leads to a lack of value appreciation (Crawford, 2013b, p.25), and is a contributing factor in the lack of research outside the HE environment (Lloyd, 2010).

### 2.2 Issues of communication

The lack of conceptual understanding is most evident in the tendency to narrowly construe IL as digital literacy. As the evolution of technology creates 'cases of relative information poverty' (Thompson, Jaeger, Taylor, Subramaniam, & Bertot, 2014, pp.24–25), the notion of the digital divide is an increasingly important issue for policymakers. Digital inclusion is a key policy focus of the UK government, reflected in its 'UK Digital Strategy 2017' (Department of Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS), 2017), and features prominently in the 'Independent Library Report' (DCMS, 2014) and the Library Taskforce ambition document (DCMS, December 2016) as a key role for

public libraries. CILIP (2014b) and the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) (2015) have advocated for public libraries' ability to tackle this issue, but improved functional digital skills are frequently assumed to equate to digital and IL. From this view, it is simply necessary to increase the physical provision of digital technologies to improve IL (Bradley, 2013; Bundy, 2002; Crawford & Irving, 2011; Thompson et. al, 2014). This limited view of both problem and solution could be indicative of a failure in communication.

Bundy urges professional library organisations to reach agreement on 'the terminology, definition, standards for, assessment of, and importance of information literacy' (Bundy, 2002, p.133), while Webber and Johnston advocate for the recognition of IL as a discipline (Webber & Johnston, 2017). This would promote a common understanding, enabling a clearer and stronger message about IL's importance (Bradley, 2013; Bundy, 2002; Webber & Johnston, 2017). Since the Alexandria Proclamation (Garner, 2006), the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has focused on 'media and information literacy' (UNESCO, 2016) with a focus on the role of education, rather than libraries, in delivering this. The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) have also adopted 'media and information literacy' as their preferred term (IFLA, 2011; 2012), linking their advocacy with UNESCO's and attempting to highlight libraries' contribution to literacy development. However, national library associations still differ in their preferred term.

This point is echoed by those arguing for the development of local, national and international government policy on IL. The concept is currently poorly understood by those in power (Crawford & Irving, 2011) and thus rarely included in the development of policy (Crawford, 2013b; Horton, 2007; Webber & Johnston, 2017). However, IL 'must be cast in quite explicit and concrete terms' (Horton, 2002, p.16) to ensure that citizens are able to successfully navigate information and participate in modern life (Horton, 2002). Linking IL provision to state policy can foster a more positive perception of IL (Crawford, 2013a) and help clearly explain its benefits to society, and its potential in the achievement of government aims.

### **2.3 Public libraries, lifelong learning, information literacy and policy**

The 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act (PLMA) requires the provision of 'a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons' (PLMA, 1964, p.6), alongside 'advice as to its use' (PLMA, 1964, p.7). Historically, this has involved public libraries in the provision of lifelong learning and skills development, largely by helping readers develop information seeking and use behaviours: in short, by developing their information literacy. However, this role often goes unrecognised (Crawford & Irving, 2009), making it easier for public library service provision to be pushed down the list of priorities for government support, particularly in a climate of national austerity. There is a need for libraries and their professional organisations to lead on their own advocacy to effectively match the public library's public image with its true identity (Hariff & Rowley, 2011), rather than relying on reactionary campaigns (Stenström & Haycock, 2015).

It is suggested that it may be necessary for public libraries to refocus on their educational role (O'Beirne, 2010) to communicate their worth 'in terms of benefits to users' (Hariff & Rowley, 2011, p.357). While the use of the term IL in the public library environment is scarce (Harding, 2008; Widdowson & Smart, 2013), it remains a 'core activity' of public library provision (Widdowson & Smart, 2013, p.160), and is essential 'to engage the disenfranchised or disenfranchised in citizenship, to bridge the digital divide' (O'Beirne, 2010, p.128). The literature acknowledges the strengths of public libraries and their ideal positioning to provide IL training to all segments of the population (Crawford & Irving, 2009, 2012; Hall, 2010; Harding, 2008; O'Beirne, 2010). The role of libraries in facilitating lifelong learning is particularly well placed to incorporate IL education (Crawford and Irving, 2009, 2012; Harding, 2008), potentially through partnerships with other learning providers (Skov, 2004; Hariff and Rowley, 2011). Such partnerships work at their best when there is a common language, and proper strategic support, to guide them (Skov, 2004).

To garner greater institutional support for public libraries' role in IL provision, there is a need for the kind of research and investment that has been evident in HE. The definition struggles described above are a contributory factor to the lack of specific focus on IL within the public library service, in terms of both its poor understanding beyond the HE context and its poor understanding among practitioners (Harding, 2008). Research could enable active promotion, facilitate its delivery (Hall, 2010) and avoid a self-perpetuating cycle of silence, where lack of research results in lack of recognition and support for structured IL development. The gap between research and practitioners needs to be closed to enable greater communication and better development of IL resources (Crawford & Irving, 2012). The literature calls for greater collaboration between the worlds of HE and public libraries (Bradley, 2013; Crawford & Irving, 2012; Harding, 2008), to improve current provision and facilitate the creation of models and frameworks that can be used to spread best practice (Horton, 2007).

Both Scotland (Irving & Crawford, 2008) and Wales (Welsh Information Literacy Project, 2011) have developed national IL frameworks following successful collaborative research projects that increased both research on, and advocacy for, IL support from public libraries. There is no such UK-wide project yet, resulting in areas of the country where provision relies on pockets of best practice at a grass roots service level. The development of a national policy or framework could enable public libraries to reposition themselves in the eyes of stakeholders as valuable centres of education provision for their communities: if 'mapped against' (Crawford, 2013c, p.256) existing social and education policies, this could be a powerful advocacy tool (Crawford, 2013a; 2013c).

Is IL the elephant in the room of current public library advocacy? Developing a greater understanding of IL for those not in the library and information world could enable it to have a more central role in government policy for education, social inclusion, and beyond. As a result, public libraries could move away from their current narrowly defined role and take ownership of their ability to deliver IL support and development. Supported by appropriate research, public libraries could demonstrate their ability to contribute immense value both to UK society, and to the completion of government policy goals. Whilst this may seem clear to those within the library sector, for it to become a reality the opportunities of IL need to be more fully analysed and more clearly communicated to policy makers and those in government.

This consideration of current discourse presents intersections between the communication failures facing the concept of IL and the perceived role of public libraries. It may follow that by exploring intersections between the benefits of IL and public libraries, a more effective advocacy message could be achieved. This project examines current advocacy discourse for IL and for public libraries to consider whether a relationship is explicitly represented. By highlighting similarities and discrepancies between advocacy and policy for public libraries and IL, it aims to form recommendations that will lead to more effective advocacy that aligns with government policy goals and emphasises the importance of information and public libraries in UK society.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research strategy**

The aims of this study are to:

- Examine the terms used in advocacy narratives to refer to IL to determine what these terms suggest about the value it holds within these narratives;
- Analyse public sector stakeholder narratives to determine possible intersections between policy and public library IL capabilities;
- Formulate recommendations for ways in which IL could be better placed in advocacy narratives to align public libraries with wider national policy.

To meet these aims, the study examines selected advocacy and policy documents and the terms used therein to refer to IL and its associated skills and practices. It considers the context of these terms and the possible motives behind their selection. It also looks for instances when public library services are linked to the provision of IL education.

The research takes the form of a qualitative text analysis: derived from the more classical content analysis (Kuckartz, 2014), it has its basis in the study of communication and is therefore appropriate for studying materials of the kind selected. In text analysis 'an understanding and interpretation of the text play a far larger role than in classical content analysis' (Kuckartz, 2014, p.33). This is important for this study where the context in which these materials sit (financial austerity and the struggle for public library survival) affects their aims and the motives behind their creation. Qualitative research methods can be criticised for being too interpretive, and the analysis of results being too subjective (Biggam, 2015; Bryman, 2012; Flick, 2014; Kuckartz, 2014; Mason, 2002). However, it is important to consider that 'quantitative approaches are not as precise as interpretive approaches when it comes to understanding communication' (Kuckartz, 2014, p.32). The interpretive role is necessary to enable understanding of both the text and the context of the materials being studied.

Quantitative analysis can be used to 'clarify arguments and support theories and generalizations' (Kuckartz, 2014, p.13). This study uses the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package NVivo 11 to assist in the analysis. NVivo 11 enables the computer to take over the 'manual labour' (Bryman, 2012, p.591) of conglomerating coded data when searching for patterns or relationships. It provides quantitative data by counting the frequency of terms used: this is not used as the 'dominant logic of analyzing' (Flick, 2014, p.32) but rather to support the qualitative analysis, ensuring that the study remains qualitative in nature.

### **3.2 Data selection**

Materials were selected from professional bodies that advocate for public libraries and for IL, as well as materials produced by UK government departments and initiatives. This allows an exploration of similarities and differences between the two narratives. All selected materials were created in the last ten years to ensure that they form part of the current discourse on public libraries and IL. They are all publicly available materials, and can be viewed as representative of the public national discourse on the topic.

**Table 1:** Materials analysed

Issuing body	Title	Document
<b>Professional bodies and campaign organisations</b>		
CILIP	What makes a good library service? (2009)	D
	Information literacy - statement (2014)	E
	Driving digital inclusion (2014)	F
	My Library By Right (2015)	G
SCL	Inspiring people, connecting communities (2014)	L
	The universal offers for public libraries (2015)	M
Tinder Foundation (since renamed the Good Things Foundation)	Doing digital inclusion (2015)	N
Carnegie UK Trust	A new chapter (2012)	B
	Speaking volumes (2014)	C
IFLA	Media and information literacy recommendations (2011)	I
	Moscow declaration on media and information literacy (2012)	J
	Statement on libraries and development (2013)	K
<b>UK government</b>		
Arts Council England (ACE)	The Library of the Future (2013)	A
DCMS	Independent Library Report for England (2014)	O
	Libraries Deliver, ambition for public libraries in England 2016 – 2021 (December 2016)	H

### 3.3 Data analysis

Each document was read through several times to gain a full understanding of its content and then underwent a close text reading where statements were highlighted and sorted into categories and nodes (NVivo 11 term for coding categories). These nodes included identified synonyms for IL, as well as wider topics that related to IL skills and behaviours. Case summaries were written of each document to aid comparison (Kuckartz, 2014) and ensure that the context of each document's creation was clearly noted and understood (Flick, 2014).

The use of NVivo 11 facilitated the process of creating categories, making it easy to identify patterns and relationships, and to address the following questions:

- Is IL referenced in the material?
- What roles are posited for public libraries?
- Is a relationship between IL provision and public libraries explicitly or implicitly presented?

NVivo 11 also enabled the production of quantitative data on recurring phrases and synonyms to help support any patterns or relationships identified.

### 3.4 Limitations and problems

This study is not comprehensive: the restricted time scale of the project and the limited resources available means that it was not possible to examine all materials currently advocating for IL or public libraries. The materials selected offer only a snapshot of a wider field. In an environment where policy and advocacy documents are produced at a high rate, it was also necessary to make a 'cut-off' point for selection. As the discourse develops, further research should be undertaken to track its content and progress. It is also possible that there has been researcher bias in the selection of the documents, as they were the ones most obvious and readily discoverable. By the same token, however, this may indicate that the sample includes more prominent materials and so is still representative of the broader discourse.

Similarly, the interpretative process may be open to criticism for being subjective. However, when dealing with the study of textual communication, texts can only be understood through interpretation (Kuckartz, 2014). The analysis will necessarily have an interpretivist constructivist approach: by reading and analysing these texts, the researcher is constructing meaning through their interpretation, just as each author has constructed meaning as they produced the texts (Flick, 2014). Textual materials are 'written with distinctive purposes in mind and not as simply reflecting reality' (Bryman, 2012, p.555). These meanings may differ, but this is a tension inherent in textual communication. It is therefore not relevant to seek to create a purely objective, factual analysis in this type of research. However, triangulating the qualitative analysis through use of quantitative data (in this case, using NVivo 11 to count word/term frequencies, giving an indication of their prominence in the discourse (Roberts, 1997; Kuckartz, 2014)) supports the themes identified through the interpretive analysis (Kuckartz, 2014).

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Information literacy

The documents were searched for any references to 'information literacy' and any synonymic literacies. This focus on 'literacy' was to identify where the notion of a unified concept was being used, rather than skill sets, behaviours or competencies. Documents frequently referred to 'literacy', but 'information literacy' and its synonyms were infrequently used. This supports the assertion in the literature that the terms are not widely used in public library discourse (Harding, 2008; Widdowson and Smart, 2013). Table 2 lists the terms identified in the materials, the documents they were found in and the total number of times the terms appeared.

**Table 2:** Term frequency

Term	Sources term occurs in	Total no. of references
Information literacy	D; E; F; H	17
Digital literacy	B; C; F; G; H; L; O	11
Media and information literacy	I; J; K	26
Computer and internet literacy	O	1
Modern literacy	A	1

It was decided to code 'media and information literacy' as a separate term as it only appeared in documents produced by IFLA. 'Digital literacy' is the most widely used term, while CILIP is the organisation that uses the 'information literacy' the most, accounting for 88.24% of its usage across all documents.



## 4.2 The role of public libraries

References to the role or focus of the public library service (both current and as desired in the future) were highlighted and coded at 'role of libraries'. The references counted here are broader statements and inferences than the term frequencies identified in Table 3, and reflect more subtle assumptions being made in the narratives. Roles for public libraries were mentioned in all but two of the documents analysed: CILIP's 'Information Literacy statement' (E) and IFLA's 'Media and Information Literacy recommendations' (I). Both documents propose that library staff be trained to provide IL but this is not specified as a role for *public* libraries.

Public libraries are depicted as supporting local communities in many areas of life. Table 3 lists the most prominent of these areas, along with the documents that posit these roles and representative quotes of the way in which public libraries inhabit these roles.

**Table 3:** Areas supported by public libraries

Area supported	Documents	Representative quotes
Health / wellbeing	A; B; C; D; G; H; K; L; M; O.	<p>[Public libraries] 'improve our health and well-being by helping us to make sense of what is happening to us and how we can shape our lives' (A, p.4)</p> <p>'Libraries deliver:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• better-informed people, able to manage their own health more effectively, and fully participate in shared decision-making with healthcare professionals</li> <li>• reduced social isolation</li> <li>• support to the NHS, by helping to close equality, health and financial gaps facing it</li> <li>• extended reach for public health programmes' (H, p.p.67).</li> </ul>
Employment / job-seeking	B; C; H; K; L; M; O.	<p>'Libraries help jobseekers find opportunities and prepare themselves for interview. They offer courses and digital skills training which enable people to seek work.' (C, p.4)</p> <p>'Libraries also provide information and signpost government support for education and employment. [...] Libraries help develop the skills people need in the world of work' (H, p.70)</p>
Education / learning	A; B; C; D; F; G; H; K; L; M; O.	<p>'Libraries support lifelong learning, self-improvement and social mobility. [...] Libraries offer free resources for study and learning – online resources and courses, textbooks and reference books, and other media.' (H, p.66)</p> <p>'Libraries offer creative learning and reading opportunities for every age group' (L, p.3)</p>
Business enterprise	A; C; D; G; H; K; L; O.	<p>'Public libraries [...] support business and economic growth by information and skills development' (A, p.4)</p> <p>'They can offer advice and support for the development of small businesses.' (C, p.4)</p>
Culture	A; B; C; H; L.	<p>'Libraries deliver:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• spaces and opportunities for people to do, dream and create</li> <li>• enrichment to the lives of individuals and communities</li> <li>• art and culture as part of local 'placemaking'</li> <li>• contributions to the social and economic role of arts and culture</li> <li>• vibrant local creative economies' (H, p.59)</li> </ul>
Social inclusion	A; B; C; D; H; K; L; M; P.	<p>'They stand for intellectual freedom, democratic engagement, community cohesion, social justice and equality of opportunity.' (D, p.2)</p> <p>'Libraries support vulnerable and marginalised populations and help ensure that no person is denied basic economic opportunities and human rights.' (K, p.1)</p>

The notions of *access* and *support* are frequently referred to in the documents. Public libraries are described as having a role in providing *access* to information resources, digital technology, and digital resources, and providing *support* for skills acquisition and development. However, the nature of the *access* and *support* provided is often vague. Much emphasis is placed on public libraries providing *physical access* (see Table 4).

**Table 4:** Types of access provided

Type of access	Sources
Free Wi Fi / digital hardware	A; B; C; F; H; K; L; M; O
Physical information resources (e.g. books)	A; B; G; H; K; L; M; O
Physical space	A; B; C; G; H; K; L; M; N; O
Government online services	A; B; C; F; H; L; M; O

The precise level of support that public libraries should provide in fulfilment of their role is also not clearly defined. The term ‘signpost/signposting’ is used in four documents (C, p.5; H, pp.14, 28, 29, 60, 68, 70; M, p.4) to refer to libraries’ provision of information, suggesting that support takes the form of showing users what services are available, rather than providing those services directly. There is an emphasis on helping patrons learn to use digital technology: digital skills are a clear focus of DCMS (H) and SCL (M), with Carnegie (C), CILIP (F) and Tinder (N) also all producing documents focussed on public libraries’ delivery of digital skills. The use of libraries to ensure universal access to online government information and services is particularly emphasised by DCMS and SCL.

This perception of the role of public libraries is further reflected in an analysis of the most frequently used words. Figure 1 is a word cloud created from the top 100 most frequently used words of five or more letters found in the ‘role of libraries’ node. Certain common words are designated as ‘stop words’ and have been excluded. The following words were also excluded: public, library, libraries, deliver, delivering, provide, service, services. These words were removed to prevent them from dominating the word cloud: they are all frequently used when describing services that public libraries should provide or deliver.





**Figure 2:** The role of library staff – top 100 term frequencies in all texts

It is interesting to note that the words ‘volunteers’ and ‘librarians’ seem to occur with roughly equal frequency. There is frequent mention of the use of volunteers to staff libraries, particularly in the documents produced by DCMS (H; O), though there is little definition of any separation between volunteers and professionals when it comes to providing patrons with access and support.

#### 4.3 Public libraries and information literacy provision

While there is no explicit relationship depicted in the documents between public libraries and IL provision, there are many references to public libraries providing and enabling the development of *skills*. The skills depicted are often those that an information literate person possesses, or are processes in which an information literate person engages to meet information needs. The documents were explored for references to the following skills and processes, based on those listed in the CILIP definition of IL (CILIP, 2012):

- identifying an information need;
- understanding available resources and having access to resources;
- being able to search and find relevant information to meet a need;
- being able to critically evaluate information as reliable and fit for purpose to answer an information need;
- using information;
- organising and storing information;
- communicating information in an ethical and safe manner.

These skills are referred to frequently throughout the materials, but are not linked together as a literacy. The term ‘lifelong learning’ is infrequently used, most often as being something that public libraries provide access to, or as a service that is linked to the public library.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Digital dominance

The findings show that the IL terms used in the HE narrative are not commonplace within the public library narrative. While IL is used and recognised as a key competency by professional organisations (CILIP and IFLA), a relationship to its delivery through public libraries is not explicit. 'Information literacy' is rarely used by the wider stakeholders involved in public library provision (neither ACE nor SCL use the term in their public library materials).

'Digital literacy' is more prominently used, and often tied to the role of public libraries in facilitating digital inclusion. In particular, government linked narratives tend to use digital literacy as a goal with a physical solution: access to digital technology, often with the aim of enabling access to government services. The DCMS Taskforce document identifies 'improved digital access and literacy' (DCMS, 2016b, p.7) as one of its seven 'critical' (DCMS, 2016b, p.7) outcomes for public libraries by 2021, but with little recognition in the document of what digital literacy is. The detailed exposition of the outcome states:

'Digital access and literacy is increasingly critical to central and local government strategies around economic development, channel-shift, reducing social isolation and creating community cohesion' (DCMS, 2016b, p.64).

The sentence structure here links access and literacy as one concept. There is little detailing of what digital literacy is beyond 'things like online privacy and security' (DCMS, 2016b, p.64): the document focusses on the ways in which public libraries provide access and support for 'digital skills training' (DCMS, 2016b, p.64). Similarly, while stating that public libraries must provide 'trusted guidance through the evolving information landscape and build the skills needed to thrive in a changing world' (DCMS, 2016b, p.6) there is no clear outline of what these skills are, nor of a unifying concept of digital or IL to provide further detail. In the draft version of this document (published nine months earlier), the goal was for 'digital literacy to be recognised as a core skill' (DCMS, 2016a, section 7). While the revised aim suggests that the difference between access and literacy has been recognised, the vagaries of its description and the continued focus on technologies suggests a continued lack of understanding of digital literacy.

There is a significant difference between being able to navigate and access information on the internet, and being able to effectively evaluate, analyse and use this information. While the Taskforce document refers to the role of public libraries 'in developing users' critical thinking in dealing with online information' (DCMS, 2016b, p.65), a diagram in the document listing 'existing library activity' declares: 'Improved digital access and literacy: 26 million hours of internet access provided in 2014–15' (DCMS, 2016b, p.22). This further highlights the inability to disconnect digital literacy from physical access to technology. This supports the concern raised in the academic literature that conflating ICT or digital manipulation skills with the notion of being digitally or information literate means that patrons are not prepared 'to critically engage with information to meet lifelong needs' (Bradley, 2013, p.5). Governments focussing on investing in provision of physical technology seem to 'assume that making technology available is sufficient' (Thompson et. al, 2014, p.135) and therefore overlook the deeper issue of the 'information literacy divide' (Bundy, 2002, p.127). This viewpoint also suggests poor comprehension of the close links between digital and IL, and that government is focused on their need to provide nominal access to the increasing amount of government services only available online.

This is in opposition to the behavioural practice of information and digital literacy generally advocated by non-government organisations. CILIP 's definition of digital literacy emphasises that it goes beyond pure access:

'It gives us the confidence to find, critically appraise and manage information in our personal and working lives. Digital literacy also means we can create and contribute information and not just be passive consumers' (CILIP, 2014b, p.2).

This echoes their statement that 'information literacy empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals' (CILIP, 2014a). The Carnegie UK Trust also imply a close link between the two literacies through their use of the phrase 'information and digital literacy' (Carnegie, 2012, pp.6, 7). This contrasts with the DCMS version of digital literacy explored above and with the focus of SCL's 'Digital Offer', whose four key points all focus on access provision: free internet access, free e-resource access, staff support to access digital information, and access to services via a virtual network (SCL, 2015, p.4).

While it has been argued that the names used to reference literacy concepts are irrelevant (Bawden, 2001), the focus on digital skills under the cover of digital literacy offers a narrow skill set that patrons may struggle to transfer to non-digital environments. The issue of the transferability and flexibility of information skills is, as discussed in the literature review, a pertinent one (Bawden, 2001; Crawford and Irving, 2011; Lloyd, 2010; Secker and Coonan, 2011). As previously identified, the areas of life to which public libraries contribute include health, job-seeking, learning, business enterprise, culture and social inclusion: all directly comparable to the areas of life that IL supports (CILIP, 2014a; Garner, 2006; IFLA 2011, 2012). If public libraries are to deliver comprehensive digital and IL to their patrons, developing transferrable information skills that can be used in all areas of life will be necessary.

## 5.2 Passive directory or active delivery?

The documents present a clear role for public libraries in hosting information (both analogue and digital) that patrons can freely access to increase their knowledge and help them make decisions or develop skills. However, as noted in the findings, while there is emphasis on the *access* and *support* that public libraries provide, there is often little detail as to what this actually entails or requires.

Providing free, universal access to information is often presented as a key role of public libraries: for example, CILIP state that 'Libraries provide a popular and heavily-used service for everyone, allowing unbiased and unparalleled access to the world's knowledge' (CILIP, 2009, p.2). They make learning and development possible at every stage of life by being a 'supplier of an infrastructure for life and learning, from babies to old age' (DCMS, 2014, p.5). The focus of this access in the majority of the documents is physical: free Wi-Fi; free use of computers/tablets; free resources; free information. As suggested above, it is not enough to be able to physically access information and resources: if information is to be used appropriately, extensively, and ethically, patrons must have the information skills to do so.

IFLA state clearly in their 'Media and information literacy recommendations' that: 'The concept extends beyond communication and information technologies to encompass learning, critical thinking, and interpretative skills across and beyond professional and educational boundaries' (IFLA, 2011, p.1). This sentiment is echoed by CILIP in their statement on IL (CILIP, 2014a), confirming their support for the assertion of IL as a 'basic human right' (Garner, 2006, p.3). Despite this, CILIP does not explicitly detail a role for public libraries in their IL documents: separate documents advocate for public libraries, but with no explicit link made between public libraries and IL. IFLA's 'Libraries and Development' statement highlights the key role staff play in delivering IL; 'Librarians provide training and support for the media and information literacies people need to better understand and participate in the information society' (IFLA, 2013, p.2), but this is a rare occurrence in the documents analysed.

The use of the term 'signpost' and 'signposting' (Carnegie, 2014, p.4; DCMS, 2016b, pp.14, 28, 29, 60, 68, 70; SCL, 2015, p.3) to describe the way in which public libraries facilitate access suggests that public libraries inhabit a passive role in society: libraries host resources, host technology, and point patrons in the direction of other services, rather than being actively involved in helping patrons use information. This passivity can be seen as negative (O'Beirne, 2010), as it suggests a diminished role for public libraries. It is particularly interesting when these terms are used in the Libraries Taskforce document and the SCL Offers leaflet. The former advocates for libraries to be responsive and community focused, and the latter highlights the services public libraries offer communities: however, the choice of language casts public libraries in the passive role of information directory, rather than delivery service. This may be due to a wariness on the part of professional bodies of making promises of service delivery levels at a time when the future is uncertain, and resources are limited: the risk of over-promising and under-delivering is high and could lead to further service cuts. At the same time, a lack of explicit advocacy on this point contributes to a diminished view of their abilities, making them easier targets for austerity. The need to be bold and to make explicit the need for service investment when creating national level policy may help avoid this, but it is clearly a risk.

The many uses of the word 'support' may initially appear to offer a more active description of the public library service: however, the levels of support expected lack definition in these documents. The documents often refer to *libraries* providing support, while references to *staff* providing support are fewer. While this may be because use of the word libraries is meant to encompass the service and includes library staff, it means that there is less focus on staff involvement or an understanding of the value that they provide. It is interesting to note that neither of the SCL documents makes specific reference to support coming from library staff: all mentions of support are linked to 'libraries'. The 'Independent Library Report' calls for greater recognition of the contributions of 'librarians and the wider public library workforce' (DCMS, 2014, p.21), and the Library Taskforce document (created in response to the Report's recommendations) includes CILIP's 'Ethical principles of librarianship' as demonstration and recognition of the standards that professional library staff work to (DCMS, 2016b, p.19). It also makes mention of staff and volunteers helping users, but rarely offers distinct recognition of the skills that set professional staff apart. The following statement is typical of the impression given of the library workforce: 'Library staff help point users towards the best sources of information, and help them understand how to assess and handle it.' (DCMS, 2016b, p.66). There is no detail here of how staff offer 'help', nor is there any recognition of the extensive knowledge that professional staff must employ to provide appropriate information sources, help users identify their information needs, and teach them how to locate, evaluate and use information. Perhaps tellingly, it is only in 'Outcome 6: Greater prosperity' that the word 'professionals' is explicitly used:

'Library information and knowledge management professionals help people understand and become part of the knowledge economy, to boost business competitiveness locally and nationally' (DCMS, 2016b, p.29).

Professionalism is recognised only in relation to business: yet even in this context, vagaries surround the descriptions of how libraries and library professionals contribute to economic success. While the document is not intended to be an explicit record of the ways in which libraries and librarians function, the use of such passive descriptions dilutes their value, rather than clearly stating skills and contributions.

The Taskforce document deems the development of more mainstream managerial skillsets as necessary for public library staff, including 'marketing, data analysis, commercial, choosing and using alternative finance models, digital, and how to harness the commitment and expertise of volunteers' (DCMS, 2016b, p.50). These skills are not unique to library and information professionals, and could be developed in non-professional staff or volunteers. Similarly, while



the Tinder Foundation document declares that many public libraries are 'already doing excellent digital inclusion work' (The Tinder Foundation, 2015, p.2) it focuses on the use of volunteers to deliver this service. Combined with the focus on physical access and the lack of focus on the strengths of professional staff, these documents articulate a largely passive role for the library service and a narrow role for professional library and information staff.

Other documents are clearer in their explanation of the value that librarians provide: ACE, CILIP, Carnegie, and IFLA all refer to support that professional staff offer to patrons through teaching and guidance to improve digital skills, to find and use information, and more. In CILIP's statement on IL, it commits 'to promote fair and equitable access to quality information necessary to support people in making life choices' (CILIP, 2014a). This statement suggests that the support offered by libraries comes from the information that they enable patrons to find, access, and use. Information itself is therefore at the heart of the support that public libraries provide, enabling lifelong learning, active democracy and social inclusion: as long as patrons can develop the ability to recognise when they need this information and how to use it ethically and effectively. Applied to the public library documents analysed, it seems that IL *is* the elephant in the room: very much present but never directly addressed.

### 5.3 Intellectual isolation

The documents focussing on public libraries do not explicitly depict a relationship between public libraries and IL: at the same time, IL documents do not highlight a key role for public libraries in its development and advocacy. These latter documents focus on the link between lifelong learning and IL but do not then link this to the lifelong learning provided and supported by public libraries. As both CILIP and IFLA advocate for public libraries and their roles in community development, this could be a further indication of the gap between library science research, which has a strong HE focus, and public library provision. This lack of recognition of public libraries' contribution to lifelong learning and IL development has been highlighted in the literature (Crawford, 2013a; Lloyd, 2010), as has the lack of academic research into IL in the civic and social environment. This may be due to the difficulties of definition, and of the 'difficulty in reconciling the aspirational statements of information literacy, which are generalised and abstract, with the realities of actual practice' (Lloyd, 2010, pp.111–112). The disparity between advocacy narratives could be a consequence of this research deficit.

The frequent referrals in the public library documents to skills that are information skills (as listed in the previous section), without any attempt to refer to them as such or to link them through a concept of IL is perhaps the clearest indication of this intellectual fracture. While digital skills and digital literacy are frequently referenced and grouped together, information skills are unlabelled and isolated, with documents tending to 'address elements of information literacy, rather than the process as a whole' (Harding, 2008, p.281). This allows digital skills to dominate the narrative. Indeed, while digital skills have a clear framework (Go ON UK, 2015), there is no such information skills framework or model designed specifically for public libraries. What is more, many of the digital skills listed in this framework are actually information skills that have been targeted to digital information tasks.

IL is not mentioned in the Library Taskforce main document: it is mentioned only in the annex detailing how the report writers responded to feedback on the draft report: 'Information literacy features primarily within the Learning Outcome (now renamed 'Helping people to achieve their full potential')' (DCMS, 2016b, p.76) This dismissive reference to the concept may be indicative of the authors' view of IL as a purely academic concept, irrelevant to public libraries and their patrons, but vaguely related to learning. This view is echoed by those with experience working in public libraries (Widdowson & Smart, 2013) and points once again to a gap between research and practitioners. Questions have clearly been asked by respondents about the place of IL in the Taskforce's plans, but explicit use of the term has been avoided, despite several statements within the report that clearly articulate the behaviours and benefits of IL (for example 'through library support, people have more positive perceptions of their ability to participate in, engage

with, and function in, today's information society' (DCMS, 2016b, p.66). This suggests that the gap in perception is having a 'snowball' effect: if stakeholders see that public library practitioners do not see a place for IL in the public library narrative, it is perhaps understandable that they too only see it as an academic concept, detached from their policy goals.

## 5.4 Advancing advocacy

The organisations that have produced the documents analysed in this project are approaching the debate about public libraries and their future development with different objectives and vested interests. In the current political and financial environment, DCMS is under pressure to reduce expenditure and ensure that public libraries can demonstrate their value to society. The government's objective to migrate more of its services online (such as benefit and health services) means that they need to ensure that all citizens are digitally included. By increasing digital technology provision, the government can demonstrate investment in the service, while at the same time using public libraries as a safety net to ensure citizens can access government services: providing demonstrable value, and measurable modernisation. The documents created by DCMS show a clear emphasis on digital inclusion, with the Taskforce document expressing a clear desire to change stereotypical perceptions of libraries from book-centred to technology-centred, and emphasis on libraries as an access point for online government services. The Tinder Foundation's objectives are to help further digital inclusion, aligning them with the government's goals, and so their work with libraries is understandably focussed on this particular area.

ACE and SCL, though not government departments, are both closely linked to DCMS, and their objectives are closely aligned, placing emphasis on digital skills and digital inclusion. SCL makes several references to public libraries supporting 'key national agendas' (SCL, 2014, p.3, 2015, p.2): this may provide a logic for both their focus on digital support, and for the lack of overt advocacy for library professionals above use of volunteers. Carnegie UK works to support all aspects of public libraries. While it clearly promotes digital skills and inclusion as part of this, there is a greater support in their output for other aspects of library service, and for the role that library staff play in enabling the deliverance of wider social wellbeing goals. Similarly, ACE, though a government body, has a wider remit and is keen to include libraries in its plans for promoting cultural activities and opportunities. CILIP and IFLA represent the library profession and are more focussed on highlighting the importance of library professionals and the broader goals to which libraries can contribute.

The analysis suggests that there is a gap between the advocacy of government bodies and associated organisations (ACE, Library Taskforce, SCL) and the advocacy for public libraries and professional librarians as a social idea (CILIP, Carnegie, IFLA): each is working with different priorities and goals. Focussing the public library narrative on the digital inclusion goals of the government does claim a role for libraries in the future, but it is a narrow one.

## 5.5 Recommendations

This article suggests at least three avenues for improving the impact of advocacy narratives.

- *Greater collaboration between the academic research community, academic libraries and public libraries*

Collaborative research on the way that public libraries currently develop IL within their communities, particularly through informal and lifelong learning, should be conducted, with an aim to generate models and frameworks akin to those found in education. This will offer public librarians the opportunity to better understand and define their current IL offerings, giving them the confidence and academic support to actively lead in the development and delivery of such services. In turn, this will give them greater prominence in the eyes of all stakeholders, as they will be able to demonstrate their impact through delivering services beyond the narrow but

dominant digital literacy narrative. Any resulting models should be flexible, so that public librarians can use them to help shape their services to the needs of their communities, delivering transferrable information skills that will help patrons in all areas of their lives. At the same time, research into the capacity of public libraries to deliver the skills so often referred to in the government documents would be valuable. With so much emphasis being placed on the role of staff (professionals, administrative staff, and volunteers) in providing access and support, an in-depth assessment of their ability to do so – particularly in a world of shrinking budgets and reductions in both staff numbers and numbers of library branches – is necessary in order to be able to progress effectively.

Greater cross-sector collaboration will enable the sharing of best practice, encouraging public librarians to develop their teaching skills, and making best use of collective knowledge and resources, demonstrating value to government stakeholders. Professional organisations such as IFLA and CILIP have a facilitating role to play here, forging links between different sections of their membership. These links could lay the foundations for the development of a national IL framework, creating strategic support for the intersection of government policy, public library services, and academic research.

- *Linking of digital and IL in advocacy narratives*

Public libraries and their supporting organisations should take steps to highlight the links between digital and IL: specifically, the transferrable skills and behaviours of IL that enable the development of fuller digital literacy in patrons. This will enable libraries to widen the frame of reference for their established digital inclusion role, showing the flexibility and transferability of IL behaviours. The collaborative research recommended previously should be used to support this advocacy, ensuring that the portrayal of information and digital literacy in public library narratives is clear and accurate.

- *Greater recognition of the contribution of library professionals in advocacy narratives*

Communicating the role of library and information professionals in delivering IL will allow the development of more effective public library staffing through a clearer understanding of the differences between what professionals and volunteers can contribute. Library organisations should be proactive in their advocacy and cast public librarians as an active force, contributing to community inclusion and development to meet national policy goals through use of their professional knowledge and capabilities.

Each of these avenues would serve to promote a closer relationship between research and practitioners, a greater understanding of IL in both public library practitioners and stakeholders, and would help create more accurate and impactful advocacy narratives that demonstrate how public libraries can deliver wider policy goals in education, health, employment and social inclusion.

## **6. Conclusion**

The findings of this project show that the term IL is not commonly used in public library advocacy narratives. The favoured term is digital literacy, often used in support of the role public libraries play in furthering digital inclusion but frequently used in place of ICT proficiency. This indicates a lack of comprehension of the concepts of both digital and IL. The lack of supporting academic research literature means that there are few resources (such as models or frameworks) to aid public libraries in increasing comprehension of IL as a concept. This suggests that the lack of research, and IL's continued identity struggle, is having a detrimental effect on the development of IL in the public library environment.

The findings also show that current advocacy tends to closely align public libraries with the government's digital inclusion policy. Though this claims an important role for public libraries, it is a narrow one that often casts public libraries as passive directories and technology providers. The advocacy narrative of professional organisations doesn't directly challenge this passivity and, perhaps as a result, there is little recognition in policy of the skills and value provided by professional library staff. Similarly, IL advocacy does not highlight a role for public libraries in the development and delivery of IL to patrons. As information skills are frequently mentioned in the library narrative, and the IL narrative mentions the positive impact it can have on lifelong learning and social inclusion, it seems that there are natural intersections between government policy, public library capabilities and IL's benefits. These intersections are not currently being fully exploited to the advantage of public libraries at a time when they need advocacy and support to avoid further cuts and closures, nor are they being fully exploited to promote the benefits of IL to support policy goals.

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