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Social capital, government policy and public value: implications for archive service delivery

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review how the role of the local authority archive service in the UK has developed, and the implications of the requirement for public sector bodies to demonstrate value in relation to concepts such as social capital, for the way in which services are promoted, evaluated and delivered.

Design/methodology/approach – A range of literature (1919-2006) is synthesized to provide a perspective on archive service development, theories of social capital and public value, and government policy, as a means of identifying the implications of current government agendas for archive service delivery. The findings are presented in sections addressing: the context of archive service provision; social capital and government policy; the role of the archive service in meeting government agendas; and the need for services to demonstrate public value.

Findings – Provides information about the context of archive service provision, and how services have responded to government agendas within an operational environment which has seen a renewed emphasis on the archive domain within government policy and in terms of structural development since 1997. Considers the applicability of thinking on social capital and public value to service provision. Recognises the implications of the low profile of the archive domain to the capacity of services to demonstrate public value in these terms.

Research limitations/implications – Commentary focuses on the local authority context of archive service provision, within England and Wales.

Originality/value – Brings together information from different sources in making explicit the need for archive services, as with libraries and museums, to respond to government priorities.

Keywords Archives management, Local authorities, Government policy, Social capital, England, Wales

Paper type General review

Introduction

The provision of public sector services is inevitably influenced by the context in which they operate. Government policy, legislation, and financial regulation act as key determinants for the way in which public sector bodies set priorities and deliver services. The relevance of this context to the provision of local authority archive services, in common with public libraries and museums, has become increasingly apparent since the mid-1990s.

In the local authority sector, financial constraints have real implications for services such as archives, which, perhaps inevitably, do not tend to be viewed as a priority in comparison with the needs of core functions like education and social services. Indeed,

The work reported here is based on the author's research undertaken as part of doctoral studies and a report commissioned by MLA Yorkshire (Horton and Spence, 2006).



local authority archive services face particular difficulties given their relatively weak statutory position. Their very existence is predicated on permissive legislation, notably the Local Government (Records) Act 1962, the outcome of a Private Member's Bill which gave local authorities the power "to accept records of local interest...[and] to make records available for study" (Ridley, 1963, p. 288), but which placed no requirement on them to actually do so. The legislative status of services was enhanced by the passage of the Local Government Act 1972; section 224 places a statutory duty on all principal councils to make "proper arrangements with respect to any documents that belong to or are in the custody of the council or any of their officers", but neither this, nor subsequent guidance on its implementation (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1999), made the provision of an archive service a mandatory function of local government. Within Wales, local government reorganisation, under the Local Government (Wales) Act 1994, did include, under section 60 of the Act, a requirement for principal councils to "make and maintain a scheme setting out their arrangements for the proper care, preservation and management of their records". This is seen by some as giving services in Wales de facto statutory status, although its influence on the ground is less clear, and it is apparent that it has not resulted in significant levels of investment in service provision.

In such circumstances, it becomes vitally important for archive services to demonstrate their value and relevance to the key central government agendas that inform local government policy. This has drawn local authority archives to focus, in particular, on delivering services that address social and educational agendas, such as social exclusion and lifelong learning. Increasingly however, there is the need to look beyond the outputs of service delivery to the outcomes and eventual impact of what services do; as government seeks to monitor the extent to which the public sector is delivering public value. This is often seen in terms of the contribution of services to socio-economic goals such as the building of social capital.

Social capital and government policy

The origins of the concept of social capital can be traced back to 1916 in its first usage; since then it has attracted a number of proponents, and as Aldridge et al.(2002, p. 9) note there has been an exponential growth in references to social capital in the academic literature from the mid-1980s onwards. The most prominent figure currently in the field is the political scientist Robert Putnam (2000, p. 19), who considers that social capital "refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them". He contends that such social networks have value synonymous to notions of physical and human capital:

Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so too social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups (Putnam, 2000, p. 19).

Putnam emphasises the distinction between two forms of social capital:

- (1) *Bonding* (or exclusive) – what binds groups together; reinforcing "exclusive" identities and homogeneous groups.
- (2) *Bridging* (or inclusive) – what links individuals/groups to other groups; generating broader identities and reciprocity.

He characterises how these work in practice as follows:

Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40 (Putnam, 2000, p. 23).

Aldridge *et al.* (2002) note the recent emergence in the literature of a further dimension, linking social capital: *Linking* – links between individuals/groups and other groups with different status/access to resources.

The concept of social capital comes, however, with a complex sociological pedigree; Johnston and Percy-Smith (2003, p. 329) consider that it “carries with it a heavy burden of claims that it may not be strong enough to support”, drawing attention in particular to “the lack of clarity regarding its genesis, maintenance and sustainability”. Often viewed in a positive light, the writing on social capital also notes that it can have negative outcomes. For example, Putnam (2000, p. 23) considers that bonding social capital, “by creating strong in-group loyalty, may also create strong out-group antagonism”.

It remains, however, a concept with a strong appeal to policy makers; Johnston and Percy-Smith (2003, p. 329) sum up the more modest claims that can be made for its benefits as follows:

Social capital, in the form of strong formal and informal networks, contributes to shared norms and trusting social relationships. Such relationships improve the overall quality of life for communities and the life-chances of individuals.

The relevance of the concept of “social capital” to government policy was already being considered under the last Conservative administration in the mid-1990s. In 2002 the Performance and Innovation Unit (now the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit) attached to the Cabinet Office, produced a discussion paper analysing the literature and evidence on social capital, and its relevance to the development of future government policy (Aldridge *et al.*, 2002, p. 73). The authors concluded that there was “a strong general case for applying social capital thinking to a wide range of policy areas” as a means of providing “useful insights into the importance of community, the social fabric and social relations at the individual, community and societal level”. Johnston and Percy-Smith (2003, p. 322) further consider that there is a clear link between New Labour social policy and social capital ideas, quoting Tony Blair’s first speech as Prime Minister in 1997, when he spoke about recreating “the bonds of civic society and community”.

For government, “social capital” thinking clarifies the associations that can be made between so-called “high-trust communities” and low levels of crime and anti-social behaviour; it is also seen as influential in promoting healthier lifestyles, and higher levels of educational attainment, which in turn helps promote economic development. It is important therefore for the archive domain, and indeed the wider cultural sector to engage with this concept, as the means of highlighting their potential contribution to government’s social goals. Indeed, “history and culture” have been identified as major determinants in the development of social capital (Aldridge *et al.*, 2002, pp. 39-40) emphasising that cultural services, and archives in particular, do have an important role to lay claim to.

The role of the archive service in meeting government agendas

Archive services, like libraries and museums, can be categorised as repositories of public knowledge (Usherwood *et al.*, 2005a). Although the local authority archive service, or County Record Office, as it is often known, is largely an early mid-twentieth century phenomenon, its roots can be traced to a similar sense of “intellectual idealism” as that attributed to the foundation of the British Museum and the public library system (Usherwood *et al.*, 2005b, p. 50).

Following on from developments such as the establishment of the Public Record Office (1838 Public Record Office Act), which brought the public records of central government into safe custody, and the institution of a Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts in 1869 (addressing records in private hands), concern began to grow for the preservation of local records. A Royal Commission instituted in 1910 to enquire into the state of the public records as a whole, and in its *Third Report* (1919), into local records of a public nature, formally recommended the establishment of a network of local offices. It considered that this would help stimulate local “patriotism and interest in local history” (Royal Commission on Public Records, 1919, p. 35). The first local record offices, starting with the establishment of the Bedfordshire Record Office in 1915, although not a direct outcome of this Royal Commission, reflected the view that they should serve “as a repository for the historical records of the county and a centre for historical study” (Godber, 1949, p. 12).

The role of the archive service was thus, from its inception, closely associated with the provision of an historical information resource, serving the needs of education and research. A further dimension to this role lay in the recognition that such sources could also support a sense of local cultural identity; indeed, the Royal Commission on Public Records (1919, p. 36) contended that “it should be regarded as a point of honour for a well-managed and progressive county or municipality to possess a record office, just as much as a public library and a museum”.

An additional aspect of the role of the archive service does, however, set it apart from these essentially cultural concerns; this is its potential to act in an administrative capacity, in managing the current records of its parent organisation. This “evidential” role has tended to be overshadowed by the cultural dimension of service provision, but in some service contexts has been recognised from the first, as the primary role of the record office. Such a role has been reinforced in modern times, with the need for public sector bodies to meet the requirements of Freedom of Information legislation in particular. However, the fulfilment of this role is often now being taken forward by dedicated records or information management units, rather than as part of an integrated archives service.

In recent years archive services, libraries and museums have increasingly been viewed by government in terms of their own social and economic policy objectives. In reviewing the political drivers for data collection in the cultural sector, Selwood (2002) traces such concerns back to the Conservative administrations of the early 1980s, first under the Office of Arts and Libraries (OAL) and latterly under its successor, the Department of National Heritage (DNH). The establishment of the DNH in particular saw a move away from government’s previous “arm’s length” approach to the cultural sector; the establishment of a dedicated department of state being “synonymous with the increasingly interventionist role” of government (Selwood, 2002, p. 21), in ensuring that the sector delivered on government agendas. Concerns tended to focus initially on

the need for greater accountability in the strategic management of public expenditure. This was accompanied, however, by a growing emphasis on the economic impact of the sector, in relation to employment, tourism, contribution to local businesses, even environmental renewal. Selwood (2002, p. 27) also notes the emergence of access, “as a mainstream political issue at central government level” from the beginning of the 1990s onwards, with an emerging focus on cultural diversity, and an emphasis on activities aimed at community development and encouraging volunteering. In these contexts in particular, concepts of “social capital” begin to emerge as important, the idea that “the overall social health of a society reflects the strength of voluntary and community associations within it” (Selwood, 2002, p. 30).

These concerns were taken forward by the New Labour administration, under Tony Blair, from 1997; DNH became the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), which sought to tie the cultural sector even more closely to government agendas. Crucially for the archive domain, this involved the establishment of a new Council for Museums, Libraries and Archives (originally known as Resource and now MLA): an amalgamation of the existing Library and Information Commission, and Museums and Galleries Commission, but with additional responsibility for archives. The policy documents issuing from this body (Resource, 2001), from DCMS (2000, 2001), and the appearance of a specific *Government Policy on Archives* (Lord Chancellor’s Department, 1999, p. 6), all reflect the centrality of government agendas to the aspirations for service provision. *Government Policy on Archives* is particularly concerned to show how archives can “make vital contributions to seven of this Government’s most important policy objectives”, notably:

- (1) public access;
- (2) modernisation of public services;
- (3) open and accountable government;
- (4) education;
- (5) social inclusion;
- (6) economic regeneration; and
- (7) regionalism.

The archive profession itself has embraced this new political environment, and many of its own policy and strategy documents emphasise the same themes. This is clearly evident in the suite of nine Regional Archive Strategies, produced by the English Regional Archive Councils 2000-2001. The very existence of these councils is a further reflection of how DCMS sought to maximise domain potential, by working with the professional body, the National Council of Archives, to establish regional structures for archives on a par with those already in existence for libraries and museums. The Regional Archive Strategies provided “a co-ordinated response to government policy and regional needs” (National Council on Archives, 2001a, p. 4), identifying a number of key themes, including:

- improving access;
- the need for advocacy;
- meeting social inclusion objectives;

- strengthening records management services;
- managing electronic records;
- building partnerships; and
- workforce development.

The National Council on Archives (2001b) also produced a report looking specifically at the archive domain's contribution to meeting social inclusion objectives. More recently, the report of the Archives Task Force investigation 2002-2003 into the state of the UK's archives, *Listening to the Past, Speaking to the Future* (MLA, 2004, p. 40) addresses similar key themes:

- access for all;
- creativity;
- regeneration and renewal;
- tourism;
- information management;
- learning and social inclusion; and
- connecting with communities.

Its recommendations again seek to “position UK archives as key contributors to national, social and economic objectives”. Structural developments under MLA, have also seen the creation of nine cross-domain Regional Agencies in England (superseding the Regional Archive Councils) responsible for representing museums, libraries and archives “on the ground”; agencies which now form an integral part of the MLA Partnership, through which MLA and the Regions are developing a shared agenda for planning and delivery of national and regional programmes.

Although MLA seeks to work with equivalent bodies in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, its primary focus is on provision within England; nevertheless, its policy and strategy development, by appealing to central government agendas, has relevancy across the UK. From 2004, the equivalent body in Wales, CyMAL (Museums Archives and Libraries Wales) has focused its work around similar themes.

Demonstrating value: social capital and the archive service

Increasingly, government is also talking in terms of the public value of services; the idea that “public services must create a value to the public, in the same way that the private sector creates shareholder value” (Ray, 2006, p. 15).

How this works in the cultural arena is already being looked at by organisations such as Demos (“a think tank for everyday democracy”) where Holden (2005, pp. 8-10) considers that cultural value consists of three elements:

- (1) *Instrumental value*. The social and economic impact of culture on society.
- (2) *Institutional value*. Derived from the engagement of cultural organisations with their public.
- (3) *Intrinsic value*. The personal value derived by the individual from their subjective experience of engagement with cultural activities.

As Holden (2005) notes, capturing or evaluating how these three types of value work in practice is likely to require different approaches, and points to different constituencies:

- the public who use services;
- the professionals who manage them; and
- the politicians who set the parameters.

Holden, and his colleague Robert Hewison (Ray, 2006, p. 15), speaking at a two-day conference in London in January 2006 on capturing the public value of heritage also suggest that “debate has been focused too narrowly on the instrumental value of culture and that it is time to engage in more debate with the public over the intrinsic value of heritage”. Matty (2006), paraphrasing Holden, presents the argument that the balance of power between the constituencies involved is changing:

Citizens will no longer be content to receive passively services cooked up between the politician (with his/her view of what the public wants) and the professional (with his/her view of what the public needs).

To date politicians have been concerned with the instrumental value of services, and how they contribute to key government and social agendas; a concern to which the archive domain has sought to respond. However, the public tend to interact at the more personal level of the intrinsic, and to a lesser extent the institutional. Although they may recognise that there is a value to a service at the instrumental level, the value the public place on a service will be much greater if they can see its personal relevance to them.

The implications of this for how archive services can demonstrate their value may be far reaching, and highlight long-standing concerns over the profile of the domain in the public’s consciousness.

If building social capital can be considered as an outcome of service delivery, then it is nevertheless the eventual impact of such outcomes – the “difference” services can make – for which government is seeking evidence. Archive services across England and Wales, in common with the wider cultural and public sector, are becoming accustomed to the need to evaluate what they do; collection of statistical time-series data is now almost routine, notably through the annual compilation of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy *Archive Services Statistics Estimates*. The domain also regularly collects data on usage and customer satisfaction through the Public Service Quality Group *Surveys of Visitors to British Archives*. A number of cross-domain studies (looking at archives, libraries and museums) have also sought to elucidate the evidence base for the social and economic impact of services. Wavell *et al.* (2002) and the Burns Owens Partnership (2005) provide an overview of research in this area.

However, as Selwood (2002, p. 51) notes, while widespread claims are made for the social and economic benefits of cultural service provision, there is a need “to distinguish between advocacy and evidence, between identifying potential and what has actually been realised”. There has been a tendency in the past to approach service evaluation in terms of “what can be measured”; this leads to a focus on outputs, “measuring commitment and effort, rather than effectiveness” (Burns Owens Partnership, 2005, p. 63). Selwood (2002, p. 72) explicitly reviews the limitations of the existing evidence base, noting that even approaches such as the development of

Generic Learning Outcomes by MLA (as part of Inspiring Learning for All (www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/)), present problems of interpretation. She is forced to conclude that:

Until the data being collected are widely regarded as robust, until their analysis is considered meaningful, and until the evidence gathered is seen to be being used constructively, it could be argued that much data gathering in the cultural sector has been spurious.

The question of how to develop robust impact measures that can be used to demonstrate service value remains to be definitively addressed. The complexities of “disentangling” the various factors at work make this task particularly problematic; the Cultural Heritage Consortium (2002, p. 20-21) discuss the very real practical difficulties to be overcome:

- how to distinguish cause and effect over the long term in a meaningful way;
- the distortion of time between an individual’s experience and collection of data;
- how to separate the influence of the archive from other experiences; and
- how to define what constitutes a positive impact.

For the archive domain in particular, the question of how to undertake the kind of measurements required to demonstrate value must also be considered in light of other issues. If the question of demonstrating “value” becomes removed from the instrumental field and enters the intrinsic, where the focus is on levels of personal engagement with archives, the issue of domain profile will become critical.

This is not a new problem, the professional literature and archive mailing lists abound with evidence, albeit much of it anecdotal, of the lack of awareness of archive services, and what they do. This issue is not confined to the UK; in the 1980s the Society of American Archivists set up a Task Force to address such concerns, noting how misconceptions of archives “by our publics and by those with the power to allocate resources to our repositories strikes at the heart of our existence and ability to function.” (Gracy, 1984, p. 8). By the late 1990s, a study of the archival image in fiction (Schmuland, 1999, p. 40) could however still conclude that the “single most pervasive image associated with archivists is that of librarianship”, aside that is from the ubiquitous association with “dust”.

The UK archive profession is attempting to address this issue through initiatives such as the ongoing Archives Awareness Campaign, but despite such continuing self-promotion and advocacy activities, the low profile of archives remains a matter for concern. Never more so than when faced with the need to assess value to a public where the majority continue to lack awareness of what archives are. Indeed, this issue has been identified as influential by two recent studies. In evaluating Bolton’s museum, library and archive services, Jura Consultants (2005) concluded – having utilised contingent valuation techniques across the three domains – that archives were probably disadvantaged by the fact that there was “a lack of understanding amongst all ages and walks of life about what archives actually are and what they contain”. A previous study into the value of the recorded heritage (EFTEC, 2001) also found that “people are aware of the benefits provided by the recorded heritage [but only] when recorded heritage is clearly explained to them” (Özdemiroglu and Mourato, 2001, p. 8).

Conclusion

There is clear evidence that the archive domain is engaging with government's social and economic agendas at the level of policy and strategy. It is also apparent that in terms of delivering actual services, educational activities and attempts to widen participation are at the forefront of service development. What government is particularly interested in, however, is the outcomes and eventual impact of engagement with services. Many of these outcomes are seen in relation to the way in which services contribute to building social capital within communities, something which in turn impacts on wider society.

For archive services themselves, such activities cast new emphasis on the need to educate the public and politicians about the nature of archives and the role of the service in the twenty-first century.

The need for services such as local authority archives, public libraries and museums to demonstrate their value in terms relevant to government is clear; the utility of the evaluation activities they are currently engaged in is, however, questionable. Concepts such as social capital provide a potential route into delineating service contributions, but the methodologies necessary to provide the kind of robust evidence that government is seeking are not yet in place.

Where the evidential role of the local authority archive service is recognised and supported, the value of the service in administrative terms is clear. It is in demonstrating the value of the cultural dimension of service provision that archive services, as with libraries and museums, are facing new challenges.

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