Newspapers in the Digital Age: A Case Study in How Public Library Patrons Read the News

Alyssa Pacy
Archivist
Cambridge Public Library
Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

IFLA
August 14, 2014
Introduction

Presentation outline:
1. Cambridge, Massachusetts (USA)
2. Cambridge Public Library
3. The Purpose of the Study
4. Previous Newspaper Studies
5. Methodology
6. Findings
7. Conclusion
Background:
Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

- “University City”
- Biotech, software, and engineering industries
- Population 105,000
- Ethnic makeup
  - 67% white
  - 12% black
  - 15% Asian;
  - 8% Hispanic
  - 6% American Indian, Pacific Islander, or two or more races in combination

- Education
  - 94% high school graduates
  - 74.3% college graduates

- Economic
  - 45,000 households with a median income of $72,225
Background:
Cambridge Public Library

• Library System
  – Main library and six branches
  – Serves over 700,000 patrons each year
  – Circulates over 1.4 million books annually
  – Diverse patron base
Purpose of the Study

• Six-week Newspaper Use Study, April 1 to May 15, 2014
  – Sample newspaper use in a public library
  – Discover who is using newspapers in public libraries
  – Determine how newspapers are consumed in the digital age
  – Understand how different points of access foster different kinds of use

• Cambridge Chronicle (founded in 1846)
  – Print edition (main library and branches)
  – Paid subscription database (2005 – current)
  – Microfilm (1846 - 2013)
  – Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection (1846 – 1922)
Previous Newspaper Use Studies

• Few in the U.S.
• Even fewer conducted by public libraries
• Most conducted by academic libraries
• Public Libraries
  – Different challenges and opportunities
  – Different acquisition strategies
  – Serve diverse populations with different needs
Methodology

Study was designed to:

• Be short-term
• Require no additional funding or staff to implement
• Encourage public libraries to conduct similar studies
• Encourage library’s archives and special collections to participate
Methodology

Different methods for each format tracked:

• Microfilm
  – Sweep Method
  – 30 recorded uses

• Print Newspapers
  – Observation Method
  – 299 observations
Methodology

Different methods for each format tracked (continued):

• Databases
• Statistics provided by vendors
• 6 databases recorded
  – Historical New York Times (1851 – 2011)
  – Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection (1846 – 1922)
    » Includes Cambridge Chronicle (1846 – 1922)
  – Boston Globe (1980 – Current)
  – Boston Herald (1991 – Current)
  – Cambridge Chronicle (2005 - Current)

• Standardize terminology
  – Sessions
  – Page views/article retrievals
Methodology

Surveys

• Librarian Survey
  – 9 research librarians and 6 branch managers

• Online Patron Survey
  – Posted to the library’s social media sites
  – Available on the Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection website
  – 59 respondents
## Findings

Database Use at the Cambridge Public Library between April 1 and May 15, 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Sessions</th>
<th>Page Views/Article Retrievals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection (1846 – 1922)</td>
<td>11,209</td>
<td>40,359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Times (1985 - Current)</td>
<td>803</td>
<td>2,393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston Globe (1980 - Current)</td>
<td>1,161</td>
<td>1,197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical New York Times (1851 - 2011)</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambridge Chronicle (2005 - Current)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston Herald (1991 - Current)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

Number of Database Sessions Accessed at the Cambridge Public Library from January 2011 to June 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection (1846 - 1922)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>6,472</td>
<td>80,529</td>
<td>45,803</td>
<td>132,804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston Globe (1980 - Current)</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>1,026</td>
<td>7,085</td>
<td>4,799</td>
<td>13,205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical New York Times (1851 - 2011)</td>
<td>714</td>
<td>1,559</td>
<td>1,310</td>
<td>638</td>
<td>4,221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambridge Chronicle (2005 - Current)</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>1,341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston Herald (1991 - Current)</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1,031</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

The Cambridge Public Library makes the Cambridge Chronicle available in several ways. Which of these formats have you used? (Check all that apply.)

- Cambridge-wise: 30.81%
- Subscription database: 3.03%
- Historic Cambridge: 83.66%
- Microfilm: 18.96%
- Newspaper (current two years): 6.06%
- Other (please specify): 3.39%

Total Respondents: 50

Why do you read the Cambridge Chronicle? (Check all that apply.)

- Local news: 35.96%
- Personal research: 25.42%
- Work-related research: 18.64%
- Genealogy or family history research: 53.54%
- Other (please specify): 11.86%

Total Respondents: 59
Findings

Patrons search for:

• Genealogy and Obituary Research
• Police reports – fires, accidents, and crime
• Current political news (reports on the city council and school committee)
• Historical research (society blurbs, local political campaigns, major political events)
• Primary sources (i.e., American Civil War and sinking of the Titanic)
Findings

Microfilm Use of the Cambridge Chronicle per Decade and Patron use of Microfilm at the Cambridge Public Library between April 1 and May 15, 2014
Findings

“The crowd is hungry for news. People come to the library to sit, read, relax, and have the luxury of turning the physical page.”

“Of the group of 20 waiting each morning to get into the library, at least half of them go straight to the newspapers.”
Findings

Top Five Print Newspapers: Total Percentage of Newspapers Observed being Read by Patrons at the Cambridge Public Library between April 1 and May 15, 2014

- **New York Times**: 28%
- **Boston Globe**: 25%
- **Boston Herald**: 17%
- **Cambridge Chronicle**: 10%
- **Financial Times**: 5%
“Patrons always want print, but maybe there will be a huge shift in the future. People will always read the *Cambridge Chronicle*, but what version they use in another issue.”
Conclusions

• Free and universal access to newspapers encourages reading and research
• The lowest barriers to access encourage the highest use
• Public libraries must continue to fund these resources
Conclusions

• Newspaper use in digital and print editions may be increasing in public libraries
• Print serves an older demographic who read the dailies
• Digital editions are used for research
• Local, historical news has value well beyond its community and its original intention.
Conclusions

• High use of newspapers in public libraries contradicts the low usage in academic libraries.
• More public libraries in the USA need to participate in newspaper user studies.
Contact Information

Alyssa Pacy, Archivist
Cambridge Public Library
Cambridge, Massachusetts USA

apacy@cambridgema.gov
http://www.cambridgema.gov/cpl.aspx