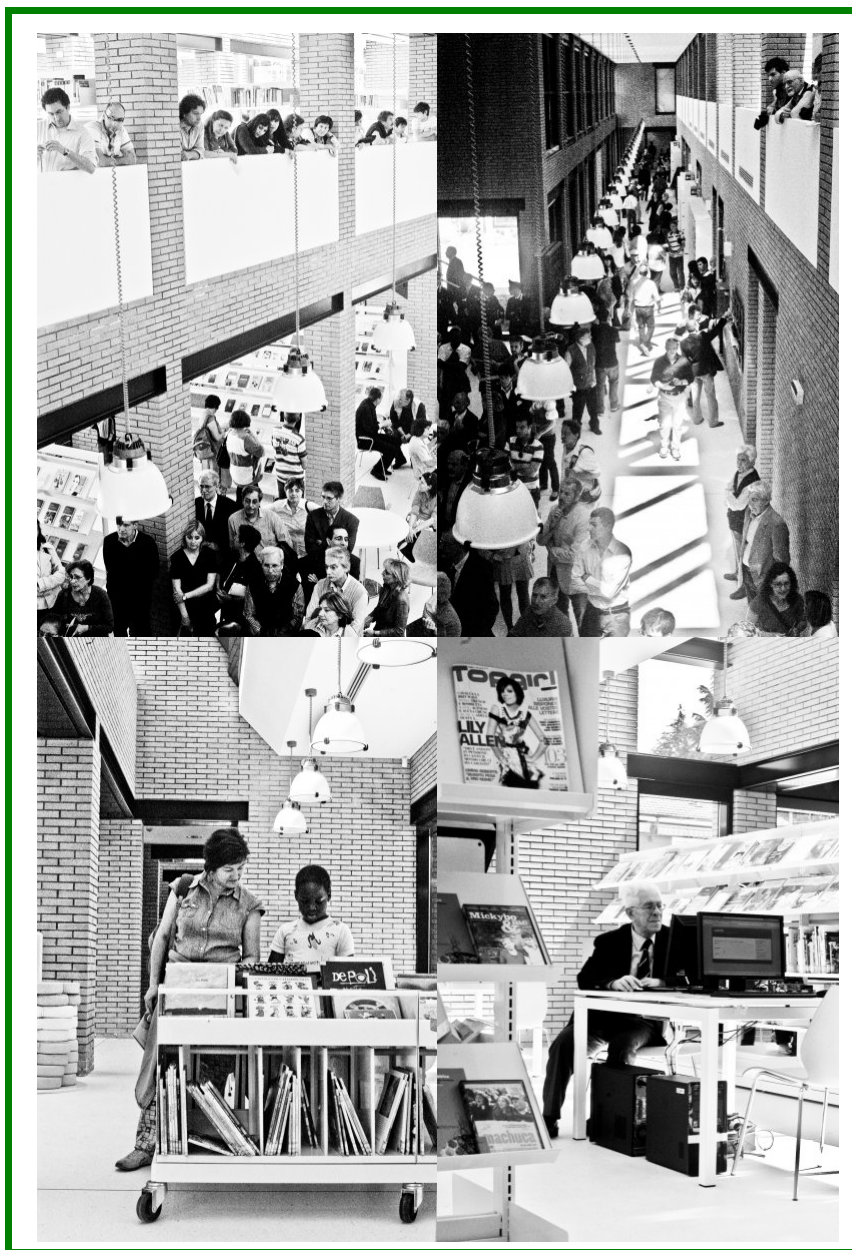


# What are libraries worth?

## A way to assess the impact of Italian Public Libraries on users' lives and society

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, libraries all over the world have faced major funding cuts, and the global economic crisis has challenged their functionality – and sometimes their very existence – because of the huge cuts in their budgets. This phenomenon is obviously affecting Italian public libraries as well: thus, in order to survive, they need to legitimize their role and continued existence by proving their value for individuals and for society.

Impact evaluation studies are trying to demonstrate this value, developing adequate methods for identifying tangible and intangible benefits of the library as described in the 1994 IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto.

In Italy, impact evaluation has raised interest only in the last two or three years, and apart from an experimental survey carried out in 2010 in a one-person-library this project is the first real attempt to apply impact evaluation models to Italian libraries. Being a pilot study, its main objective is to identify, test and describe a suitable method to measure the impact of public libraries on individual users' lives and on society.

Evaluation of library impact is still a relatively new topic in LIS literature, and being such a complex and multifaceted subject, it includes different areas of studies. The two main research subjects are: social impact (including impact on individual users) and economic impact. Economic impact is represented by a considerable number of studies using the methods of cost-benefit analysis (CBA), contingent valuation and return on investment (ROI) (e. g. Aabø, 2005; Griffiths et al., 2004; Elliott et al., 2007). The number of systematic studies about social impact of public libraries is not lower, if impact on individual users is included here (Morris et al., 2002; Imholz & Arns, 2007; *Making cities stronger*, 2007; Rosenfeldt & Tyquin, 2006), but financial return was the main topic on libraries' agenda for a few years. Since 2010, ISO TC46/SC8 has started a working group – “Methods and procedures for assessing the impact of libraries” – trying to establish a new ISO standard on library impact: the results of this project will be used in the work on the standard.

The attempt to evaluate the impact of public libraries on their users and on the community is a complex action that needs a number of different measuring tools. Given the lack of specific indicators adapted to directly proving impact, soft methods such as interviews and surveys seem to be most effective. However, some methods used for assessing the economic impact (such as willingness-to-pay) provide useful results too.

The method chosen for this project was a survey of actual library users administered through personal interviews. Interviews offer the unique chance to directly observe the respondents' reaction to questions and thus to understand which questions worked well and which should be modified or eliminated. The questionnaire was elaborated based on the questionnaire developed within the IFLA/ISO/UNESCO project “Global statistics for the 21st century” (IFLA, 2011). In addition to predefined options of answers, free comments were allowed.

Four sample libraries located within a 50 km radius took part in the project, and 81 persons were interviewed (approximately 20 per library). 81 respondents cannot be seen as statistically valid sample. However, as stated before, the main aim of the project was not to attain sound and valid results for the individual libraries, but rather to test and describe a method and a prototype of the questionnaire.

Each interview lasted approx. 10 minutes, and all the interviews were completed within a period of 8 days (2 days per library). The results were transferred on-line via a website using Microsoft Sharepoint and then copied onto 3 different formats: Excel, Access and SPSS. Because of the low number of questionnaires, it was decided to use Excel for the data processing.

It is apparent from the results that interviewees greatly value their libraries: they consider the library to be part of their community and like to spend time there, not simply to borrow books, but also to read, meet other people or attend special events. The main activity in the library continues to be borrowing books, and only a small part of people make use of the library online services (and use it mainly to explore the OPAC).

Among the benefits acknowledged by the interviewees, the great majority said that the library is an enjoyable, safe and quiet place for leisure and study, whilst also an important source of information. In the open answers, the library often seemed to have an emotional value that has little to do with its immediate benefits: many people value their library because they *love* the place, while they do not overlook the informational help by libraries. Many open answers suggested some kind of benefits for children, so that should be considered in a future survey.

The great majority of users say they would be seriously affected in the case of the library closing down, even if they have Internet access at home. Asked how they could replace the library if it was closed, almost all respondents say they would go to another library.

The reported cost for a potential replacement of the library's services is indeed astonishing: almost 50 % say they would have to pay more than 30€ per month, and many of them would have to dispense with something or other that they get now in their library. Furthermore, the unreal scenario of the library closedown made the interviewees eager to say something about their personal conception of the library's value, considering not only why the library is important for them, but also its general social value. That was remarkable, because the questionnaire focused mainly on individual activities and benefits.

After displaying the results of the survey for each question separately, it is illustrated how – using simple data processing – the combination of a few relevant answers can bring to light more specific information. What are the activities of children and teenagers in the library? What is the University students' perception of public libraries? What do non-registered users do when they visit the library? What are the benefits described by those who value the library and its services at 720€ or more per year? The results of some of these data combinations led to very interesting and sometimes unexpected outcomes. University students, for instance, are often considered *improper* public library users: yet, their answers demonstrate that they are well aware of the difference between a public library and a University library, and opt for the public library because of the different services offered. In the same way, people who said they would pay 60€ or more per month if the library closed down, gained indeed different (and more “economically” valuable) benefits – such as time saving and help in their professions – compared to the overall respondents.

Value is undoubtedly difficult to define, but the answers given by the interviewed users tell us something about the *perceived* and the *potential* value of the library. One of the key objectives of the research was to test a questionnaire in order to determine whether it was suitable for assessing impact, and whether it should be modified for future research. In the “Discussion” section some modifications are suggested, and Appendix 2 shows the revised questionnaire.

Being a pilot study, specific limitations were needed, but a future impact survey could consider non-users as well as library users, and could plan a specific online survey addressed to the users of library e-services. It is also recommended to carry out a project on regional or national level because of wider effects and possible follow-up.

## PRELIMINARY NOTE

The introductory pages of this paper attempt to set the scene by illustrating why the topic of library impact has come to the fore and how it has been approached by researchers all over the world (particularly in the English-speaking countries). Yet, as the main goal of this project was to develop, test and describe a suitable method for assessing the impact of Italian public libraries, the core of the report is the explanation of the method and its results: that is the reason why the Method and Result sections are so extensive compared to the rest of the paper.

The revised questionnaire presented in Appendix 2 is an important outcome too, as it results from the ideas gained during the interviews and data analysis. The decisions that led to this revised draft are shown in the “Discussion” section.

## BACKGROUND

Between the early nineties and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many Italian libraries actually changed their face: new libraries were built and old library buildings were restored. A lot of people saw their old, dusty and sometimes unfriendly libraries turned into bright and beautiful places, and began to get used to a new kind of library where they could borrow books and also CDs and DVDs, where they could use computers, drink a coffee with friends after taking an English class, or visit a photographic exhibition.

Yet, in the last few years the serious global economic crisis has challenged those libraries' functionality and sometimes their very existence because of the huge cuts in their budget – cuts that mean less books, reduced staff and opening hours, obsolete facilities etc. This is a development that concerns not only Italy. Civil services all over the world are facing major funding cuts (Aabø, 2005, p.17): 400 public libraries are under threat in the UK (Youngs, 2011) and even Florida public libraries – that were the subject of a well known ROI research (Griffiths et al., 2004) – had to fight a long battle in 2010 for saving their funding (Florida Library Association, 2010).

In Italy, the crisis is still a long way from ending – on the contrary, it is getting worse day by day – and the latest budgets have planned dramatic cuts in almost every sector of public life. At the local level the cuts affect in the first place the cultural and educational areas. On top of all this, the global economic crisis caused a reduction in private funding too.

In the present situation of decline in public funding, libraries need to legitimate their role and existence (Di Domenico, 2009, p. 101; Davlantes, 2010) towards both state and local authorities by proving their value – for individuals, for society, and for the economic growth of a community. The first step to this would be trying to find out what kind of value is ascribed to the specific library by its user.

This is not completely new: the necessity of proving the library's value was recognized in the nineties (Proctor, Usherwood & Sobczyk, 1996; Proctor, Lee & Reilly, 1998; Matarasso, 1998, as cited in Aabø, 2005). Owing to the spread of a more business-oriented outlook, the researchers gradually shifted their target from *social* to *economic* impact, looking for a method to assess the economic value of a *non-market good* like the library (Imholz & Arns, 2007). Contingent valuation, cost-benefit analysis and return on investment proved to be the most suitable and reliable approaches to the subject (Morris, Sumson & Hawkins, 2002; Griffiths, King, Tomer, Lynch & Harrington, 2004; Aabø, 2005; Imholz & Arns, 2007; Elliott, Holt, Hayden & Edmonds Holt, 2007).

Yet lately – also according to the theories of the Indian economist Amartya Sen, that in 1998 won the Nobel prize in economic sciences – there has been a sort of rethinking: libraries have a social and cultural value that goes far beyond their economic value, and all over the world they were created for totally different reasons than those of economic profit (Galluzzi, 2011; Olivo, 2010). Therefore it

would be a great mistake to focus on mere financial return (Throsby, 2001, as cited in Di Domenico, 2010).

Some library benefits are tangible, but some others are not (Elliott et al., 2007) and if we look at the 1994 IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto we can see that among the public library's fundamental goals there are "lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups" (IFLA/UNESCO, 1994, para. 2). How can that be measured from a financial point of view? Therefore researchers agreed about the need of a new type of impact measures, capable of measuring features like the "contributions public libraries make to strengthening places and community quality of life" (The Urban Libraries Council, 2007, preliminary section, para. 2) or, in other words, their *social* return on investment (Imholz & Arns, 2007).

In spite of the growing number of studies and their ever-increasing sophistication, the field of impact evaluation of libraries is young and still lacking a sound and established theoretic and practical basis. Hopefully further studies and projects will be undertaken in the next few years, in order to increase the critical mass and provide the desirable coordination, common standards and vocabulary that are still needed (Imholz & Arns, 2007).

In Italy, the subject of impact evaluation is slowly winning popularity and in the very recent years it has been explored by a few researchers and librarians (Ventura, 2005; 2007; 2007a; 2010; *Vitamina biblioteca*, 2009; Cassella, 2009; Di Domenico, 2009; 2010; Brognoli, 2011). When this project began nobody had yet undertaken a practical impact study, but at the beginning of 2011, a pilot study was started by the Marche division of the Associazione Italiana Biblioteche (Italian Library Association) under the patronage of the provincial administration of Pesaro and Urbino (AIB Marche, 2011). The study is still underway and its results will be published in 2012.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS, OBJECTIVE AND AIMS

Public library funding is getting dramatically low (Aabø, 2005; March 2010). Administrators and policy makers claim that the library service is not as basic as – for instance – playschool and public health services, and that it has no positive financial effect on the community. Furthermore, nowadays there is the general tendency to believe that information is free on the Internet. It seems necessary to develop sound arguments and convincing answers to the questions raised by the funding institutions, the media and the public:

- Are libraries of value for their users and for the citizens that – with their taxes – provide the libraries' financial support?
- What kind of value is it? Can we identify a direct value for the individual and a general social value? Is it consistent with the goals of the community it belongs to?
- Is it possible to identify also an economic value?
- Do users acknowledge any individual or social impact of libraries?

For answering these questions it is necessary to explore and assess all facets of library value.

Previous research has proven that where libraries are properly financed and promoted, people usually acknowledge their value (Proctor, Usherwood & Sobczyk, 1996; Proctor, Lee & Reilly, 1998; Griffiths, King, Tomer, Lynch & Harrington, 2004; Aabø, 2005; Elliott et al., 2007; Imholz & Arns, 2007).

The aims of this research were basically three:

- to show evidence that there is a clear value of public libraries for users and the community, which is experienced in different ways by each user;
- to find out how users rate the library's impact;

- to identify an effective method for assessing the different types of impact .

An impact study involves time, effort and money. As it often emerges from the pressing need to defend libraries' funding against progressive decrease (Elliott et al., 2007), the method aimed at by this study had to be relatively low-cost, simple and reproducible, so that it could be used by every library.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Since the first basic studies on impact of public libraries were published (e.g. Proctor et al., 1996; Proctor et al., 1998; Curry et al., 2001; Griffiths et al., 2004; Aabø, 2005; Elliott et al., 2007; Imholz & Arns, 2007) the research field has widened, particularly due to the rapid changes in information flow and information technology. Consequently there is a need to upgrade, remodel and adjust the impact assessment tools identified until now. Furthermore, no impact survey was ever carried out in Italy – nor in the majority of non-English-speaking nations (Aabø, 2009) – so contributions from every country will be greatly welcomed for enlarging the knowledge about library impact and for identifying a universally acceptable method for impact assessment in libraries.

Performance measurement – the assessment of effectiveness and cost-efficiency of library services – has been adopted by libraries for decades, and new performance indicators are developed continuously adapting the framework or measurement to new services (Poll & te Boekhorst, 2007; Heaney, 2009). Yet, performance measurement does not answer the question whether there is an impact of library services on the user and on society. In December 2010, ISO TC46/SC8 “Quality – statistics and performance evaluation”, chaired by Roswitha Poll has started a new working group “Methods and procedures for assessing the impact of libraries” trying to establish an international standard for assessing impact of libraries. This project had the chance to benefit from the working group's initial concepts and on the other side to provide a practical test of those concepts: its results will be used in the development of the ISO standard on library impact.

So this research will provide methodological material for Italian libraries and librarians in search of effective impact measurement and advocacy tools, but will also hopefully contribute to the existing international fund of knowledge about library impact.

## **OUTCOMES AND DELIVERABLES**

As already pointed out, this study was not planned as comprehensive project of impact evaluation for the participating libraries, but rather as pilot study for finding a suitable *method* to measure the impact of public libraries on users' lives and society.

At the very beginning, the project's intent was to find a method based on two key tools: a survey of library users and a set of relevant indicators. It was deemed possible to find “impact indicators” similar to the well-known “performance indicators”, describing each a method with fixed procedures. Yet no indicator really fit to prove impact was identified, so it was decided to ground the method exclusively on the survey and on the analysis of the information thus gained.

In the “Method” section, the project is described step by step from the selection of participants to the survey and data analysis, in order to make it easier for anyone to repeat (or adjust) it. The “Results” section shows – with the help of simple tables and figures – how the information achieved by the questionnaire can be used and interpreted in order to better understand the library and its impact on users and society. It will be easy to note that some of the results could be foreseen, while some others were quite unexpected – as for instance the students' perception of public libraries.

The questionnaire initially devised for the project (Appendix 1) was then revised and shortened on the basis of the research experience, and the revised questionnaire (Appendix 2) can certainly be considered as the main deliverable of the project.

The additional – but not completely unexpected – outcome was a better insight into users' vision of the Italian public library at this point of time: on this subject, users' free answers and additional comments were really valuable and offer an important instrument to explore the sense and meaning of the library.

A more comprehensive project making use of this method will gain a rich collection of valuable data that could be used as well for self-assessment as for advocacy. Thanks to the information attained, librarians and library managers could analyze whether the library fits with the detected values, and what could be done in order to improve and increase its actual value. Then, as communication is indeed of great importance in these types of studies, they would be able to publicize the project results to users, local representatives, staff and all other library stakeholders, so that everyone can be aware (and perhaps proud) of the library's value.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Impact evaluation of libraries* is still a new topic in LIS research. Even if some studies were carried out in the nineties, most of them have been performed in the last decade. Besides – just as the word “value” holds many different meanings – it is a complex and multifaceted subject that necessarily encompasses a certain number of “sub-disciplines”. For both these reasons, impact evaluation is still a somehow unsystematic discipline, including different areas of study.

The two main topics in impact evaluation are *social* impact (that may include the impact on the individual person as well) and *economic* impact. Contingent valuation, cost-benefit analysis (CBA) and return on investment (ROI) are quite well established – even if still somewhat controversial – methods to assess the economic impact of libraries, and they offer some interesting hints as to social impact assessment too.

Within the pioneer studies on the subject there are the U.K. studies of Proctor et al. (1996; 1998) and Usherwood (2001). Curry et al. (2001) give an exhaustive explanation on how to analyze and evaluate the collected library data, Rodger (2002) meditates about the meaning of library's value, while Poll (2003; Poll & Payne, 2006) give a general overview of the topic.

Using an evidence-based approach, Markless & Streatfield (2006) share techniques, checklists, and models on how to collect data and measure service impact, while Elliott et al. (2007) – who also provide a clear and meticulous description of the steps librarians shall attempt to measure their library's value – focus mainly on economic impact.

As to *economic* impact Aabø (2005) – besides being one of the most important studies applying the contingent valuation method – provides an accurate theoretic background for the broader subject and a detailed review of the existing literature up to 2004. Aabø (2009; 2010) reviews the economic impact studies accomplished worldwide, while Imholz & Arns (2007) offer an updated overview of ROI studies all over the U.S., giving noteworthy ideas for further developments and introducing the significant notion of social ROI (SROI).

In addition to those broader studies it's worth mentioning specific ROI research using a combination of different measuring techniques (economic impact, cost-benefit analysis, value of time, contingent valuation etc.) to determine the overall value of libraries: Griffiths et al. (2004) for Florida public libraries; Berk & Associates (2005) for the Seattle new central library; Barron et al. (2005) for the public libraries of South Carolina, and many others (British Library, n.d.; Kiviniemi, Laitinen & Saarti, 2009; Morris, Sumson & Hawkins, 2002).

Social impact is discussed in the previously mentioned report of Imholz & Arns (2007), by the Chicago's Urban Libraries Council (*Making cities stronger*, 2007) and by the research about Victoria's public libraries (Rosenfeldt & Tyquin, 2006).



From the perspective of the quantitative analysis, Poll & te Boekhorst (2007) and Heaney (2009) deal extensively with library statistics and performance indicators, even if they don't suggest indicators expressly designed for assessing impact<sup>1</sup>.

On the Internet there are several useful websites such as the Library research service page (<http://www.lrs.org/>) and the Wisconsin department of public instruction's page dedicated to the economic impact of public libraries (<http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/pld/econimpact.html>). A general bibliography of impact studies, including all types of libraries (Poll, 2011), is retrievable at [http://www.ifla.org/files/statistics-and-evaluation/publications/Bibl\\_Impact\\_Outcome-Jan2011.pdf](http://www.ifla.org/files/statistics-and-evaluation/publications/Bibl_Impact_Outcome-Jan2011.pdf).

In Italy, the literature about impact evaluation is still at a very early stage. Most of the existing works (Ventura, 2005; 2007; 2007a; *Vitamina biblioteca*, 2009; Cassella, 2009; Di Domenico, 2009; 2010) simply review the current literature on the subject, although there were a few attempts to experiment with the new impact evaluation models (Bandirali, 2010; Brognoli, 2011).

In the last two years, the interest towards economic and social impact has increased: Ventura (2010) wrote an exhaustive report about economic impact evaluation studies all over the world, while the Marche division of the Italian Library Association started a pilot project (AIB Marche, 2011) that will lead to a publication within the end of 2012.

## METHOD

### 1. General

Although public libraries are often small institutions, they are complex systems that provide a wide range of services directed towards very different areas of life (Aabø, 2005, p. 34): services for children, for adults and for elderly people, services for informational, educational, cultural and recreational needs. They are places providing print and other collections, but also meeting places, places for study and reading, places where you can take a break drinking a cup of coffee or tea, or where you can visit an exhibition and attend to cultural events.

Thus, the attempt to evaluate the impact of public libraries on their patrons and on the community involves the evaluation of elusive and intangible features such as access to information, well-being, social inclusion and cultural identity. This is a complex action that needs a certain number of different measuring tools.

The present theoretical framework, based on a number of projects worldwide, offers several theoretic models, but soft methods and “solicited evidence” like interviews, surveys, focus groups and self-assessment of users are at the moment the most-used and most effective techniques to assess impact (Usherwood, 2001; Markless & Streatfield, 2006).

However, it is important to note that some of the methods employed to measure the economic impact of libraries – such as contingent valuation and cost-benefit analysis – can also provide useful suggestions: the idea of confronting the interviewees with the simulated scenario of a sudden closure of the library (Aabø, 2005) was borrowed from the contingent valuation method, and the idea of asking patrons to monetize the value of the library services that they regularly use (Elliott et al., 2007) comes from the cost-benefit analysis.

### 2. Choosing the method

Surveys are the most used methods in Impact Evaluation research because they can combine several aspects of the evaluation (users' habits, benefits received from the library, the issue of the economic

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<sup>1</sup> ISO TC46/SC8/WG10 (“Methods and procedures for assessing the impact of libraries”) still didn't find any indicator really fit to prove impact of libraries, as the indicators designed until now relate basically to library performances. Yet some of them can validate results obtained by “softer” methods.

value) and can also include questions about user's activities in the library: what do they do, how often they use a specific service? Thus, the chosen method for the project was a survey.

Several kinds of surveys could be selected: interviews, focus groups, paper questionnaires or online questionnaires on the library website.

The online questionnaire was excluded because of the risk of having too many answers compared to the number that could be realistically managed, and of having a bias on persons used to online library services. The focus group method was ruled due to the lack of time (as well as of the required skills), and so it was therefore decided to use a questionnaire for actual library visitors, and to execute it through personal interviews. Non-users were left out – even if the non-users' perception would also be interesting for a comprehensive Impact Evaluation research – because direct experience was what was worth investigating, given the obvious limits (in time and budget) of the research.

The considered sample cannot obviously be statistically valid. However, the aim of the project is not to attain sound and valid results, but rather to test the method and a prototype of a questionnaire.

The interviews gave the unique chance to investigate the interviewees' reaction, and answered a few important questions:

- Is the questionnaire easy to understand?
- Can it be answered within 10-15 minutes at the most?
- Which questions weren't clear enough? Which were incorrect? Which were useless?
- Could some questions be left out and possibly answered by other methods (e.g. statistics, counting user activities in the library etc...)?
- Does the survey yield data that helps to identify not only various kinds of impact, but also problems for achieving that impact?

The model for the survey was the questionnaire for public libraries developed in the IFLA project "Global statistics for the 21st century" (IFLA, 2011), with a few changes in order to adapt it to the regional circumstances. The survey was tested in several libraries, in order to avoid having only one background and single type of clientele.

### **3. Recruiting the test libraries**

Four sample libraries took part in the research:

- Antonio Delfini library (Modena central public library – 18.757 active borrowers<sup>2</sup>);
- Crocetta library (Modena's branch library – 2.987 active borrowers);
- The library of Castelfranco Emilia (4.890 active borrowers);
- Natalia Ginzburg library (Bologna's suburban library – 5.418 active borrowers).

The choice of libraries was influenced by a territorial factor, as they had to be not too far from one another so as to make the research possible.

The four libraries have some analogies and some differences: the analogies were extensive enough to consider their individual outcomes together.

#### *Analogies:*

- they all belong to the same geographic, social and economical milieu, as they are all situated in a quite rich and advanced region of northern Italy – Emilia Romagna – with a strong tradition of public spirit;
- they are all lively libraries situated in modern and functional premises.

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<sup>2</sup> In the sense of ISO 2789 "active borrower": registered user who has borrowed at least one item during the reporting period.

#### *Differences:*

- Three of them are urban libraries, while one is a rural library<sup>3</sup>;
- One is a big central library; one is a recently restored and a new-concept branch library; one is a traditional branch library and another one is a countryside library.

All the selected libraries are used to recurrent statistical data gathering, and they all make use of the same library software (Sebina Open Library).

The library managers were contacted with an email explaining:

- the broad outline of the project;
- why their collaboration was requested;
- the extent of that collaboration;
- the potential benefits for their libraries.

They all showed willing to assist and appeared very interested in this new kind of evaluation, as they were all well aware of the necessity to identify and prove – in this time of crisis and reduced budgets – the value of the library for the community.

#### **4. Preliminary interviews**

The selected libraries' managers were required to give a preliminary interview in order to gain some basic information about each library (brief history, basic statistics, weaknesses and strengths, strategic plans, expectations from this study etc.). The interviews were useful to develop the final draft of the questionnaire

In two cases, the manager's perception of the library's mission was entirely confirmed by the users view of that library's special strengths: in particular the special care for students at Natalia Ginzburg Library and the goal of Delfini Library to attract every kind of person, becoming a true alternative downtown square.

#### **5. Pre-tests**

As mentioned earlier, the first draft of the questionnaire was modeled on the IFLA/ISO "Global statistics for the 21st century" questionnaire, with a few changes meant to adapt the questions to the Italian reality.

This first draft was emailed to a sample of selected persons (non-librarians, 20 to 65 years) in order to understand whether the questions were clear enough and how long it took to complete the survey.

The second draft was then tested among a first group of library users: this second pre-test was very useful for making a few simple but basic changes, such as:

- differentiating the questions about traditional and online library services (the first interviewees mixed up "library online services" and "using PC and Internet within the library", so there was the need to differentiate them sharply);
- specifying which are the library online services;
- adding an additional question about PC and Internet access at home.

After this preliminary work, the questionnaire (Appendix 1) was ready for use.

#### **6. Data Collection**

A few days before the start of the interviews, each library put up a notice for patrons, describing the project's subject and aims, and informing them that in the following days a researcher was going to ask their compliance in a brief interview about the library.

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<sup>3</sup> Modena is a medium-sized town with 184.000 inhabitants and a medium-sized University (the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia counts almost 16.000 students). Bologna is a big town (380.000 inhabitants) with a historic major University attracting Italian and international students from everywhere (60.000 enrolled students in the 2009/2010 academic year). Castelfranco Emilia is a small town with approx 31.000 inhabitants situated in the countryside not far from Modena and Bologna.

A simple chart was prepared and filled out as the interviews proceeded. The aim was to have a sample of users that would be as representative as possible of the library's population (with regards to age, gender, profession, place of origin etc.)

After the "on the spot" test, it was clear that the best way to get in touch with library users was to walk around looking for potential interviewees, and to conduct the interviews in informal places: standing in front of the bookshelves, sitting at the nearest table or chair, etc. Thus, users did not become shy, and felt much more at ease.

Each interview lasted approx. 10 minutes, so 2 visits to each library were enough. The option of conducting all the interviews in a single day was excluded because the intention was to catch different users on different days of the week (for instance it was essential to have a Saturday for each library, to get in touch with people who usually work during the weekdays).

On the whole, people were helpful and liked to be interviewed. When they were informed about the scope of the project, they relaxed and showed willingness to answer the questions – even the ones that at the very beginning seemed to be suspicious. Teenagers were amused and interested, and seemed to be glad to be considered as well as adults.

Not to be too obtrusive, people using the library's PCs were left in peace (the use of library computers have time restrictions, and there's also the issue of privacy). This reticence may have affected the results about the use of PCs within the library.

In one library (Crocetta – 2987 active borrowers in 2010) there were only few visitors, and it was impossible to reach the desired number of twenty interviews (seventeen interviews were collected), while on the other hand, in the Delfini library (18757 active borrowers in 2010) the sample of 20 interviewees was clearly inadequate with relation to the high number of patrons visiting the library.

## **7. Library statistics and performance measures**

The IFLA project "Global library statistics" (Poll & Boekhorst, 2007, Heaney, 2009) shows that at the moment there is no data in libraries – with regards to the statistics that libraries collect regularly – that could be used to prove an impact on users or on society. Statistics show the input into and output of libraries. Performance or quality indicators measure the quality of the library's services. Neither statistics nor performance indicators can really show impact, but both can be used additionally to support or confute the results obtained by methods of impact evaluation. Therefore it was decided to rely basically on the questionnaire results, and – where it was reasonable to do it – to procure additional data as back-up for the results.

## **8. Data analysis**

The paper questionnaires that were completed during the interviews were then transferred on-line via a website run by ANCI Lombardia (National Association of Italian Municipalities – Lombardia Bureau) using a specific web application platform: Microsoft Sharepoint.

The data were copied onto 3 different formats: Excel, Access and SPSS.

The question was whether to use SPSS or Excel. The best way to analyze statistical data is SPSS software, but it requires not only the availability of the software (a highly professional and expansive one) but the skills to use it as well.

Not having those prerequisites, it was decided to use Excel for the data analysis. That was feasible because this is a pilot study, and the overall number of questionnaires was quite low – 81. Nevertheless, if a number of over 100 questionnaires has to be handled it is recommended to use SPSS, perhaps with the collaboration of someone able to use social statistics software (and perhaps including the Statistics Department of the nearest University in the project).

## RESULTS

### Personal data

As to gender (Table 1), there was a slight majority of female interviewees: that reflects quite well the gender distribution among the library users.

Gender	n.	%
Female	49	60.49%
Male	32	39.51%

Table 1

The age of interviewees (Table 2; Figure 1) was well spread.

As could be foreseen, it was a little difficult to interview children (11.1% of the total respondents), both because there were few children within the libraries and because it is often difficult to approach children without embarrassing them. Children were sometimes interviewed in pairs, or with their (grand/)parents. Nevertheless, their answers were among the most interesting ones, partly because they are usually left out of the usual patron's surveys, and partly because children usually interact with librarians in a different way compared to adults: not as equals, but as children-to-adults. In the future it will be worth dedicating a specific research to children and teenagers, as they could give us an interesting perspective about the future for the library.

How old are you?	n.	%
under 18	9	11.1%
18 to 24	15	18.5%
25 to 39	18	22.2%
40 to 49	18	22.2%
50 to 59	8	9.9%
60 or over	13	16.1%

Table 2

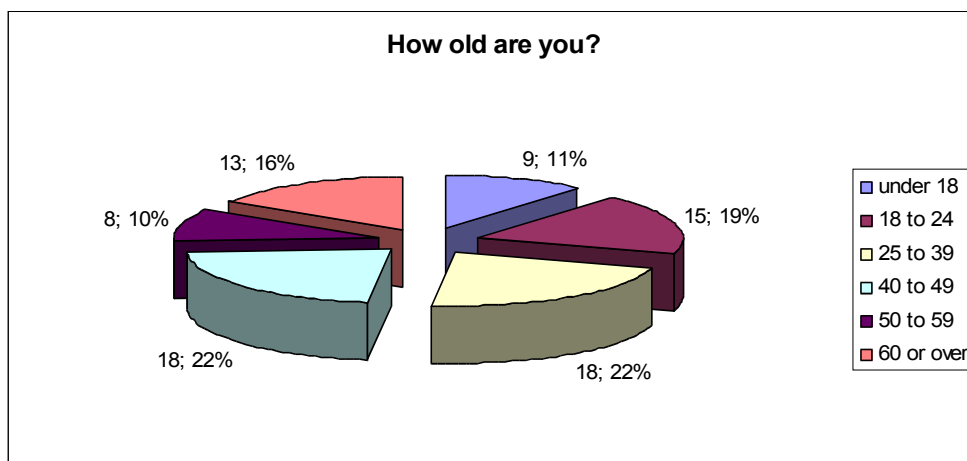


Figure 1

### Are you a registered patron of the library?

The interviews showed that 8.6% of the people who go to the library have not registered as users (Table 3): that may mean that the number of library users could be almost 10% more than the registered active users.

Are you a registered patron of the library?		
Yes	74	91.4%
No	7	8.6%

Table 3

### Library visiting

92.6% of the interviewees (Table 4; Figure 2) visit the library at least once per month, and 37.1% visit it at least once per week: these data show that library users are generally regular visitors. Thus, the library seems to be a constant presence in their life, a part of their monthly/weekly routine.

- ✓ I'm a retired person. Every evening I jog from home to the library, stop here for a while to read something, then jog back home: if I hadn't such a pleasant destination, I would give up jogging!
- ✓ I come here every day during my lunch break.

In average, how often do you visit the library?	n.	%
daily	8	9.9%
several times per week	22	27.2%
several times per month	33	40.7%
ca. once per month	12	14.8%
Less often	6	7.4%

Table 4

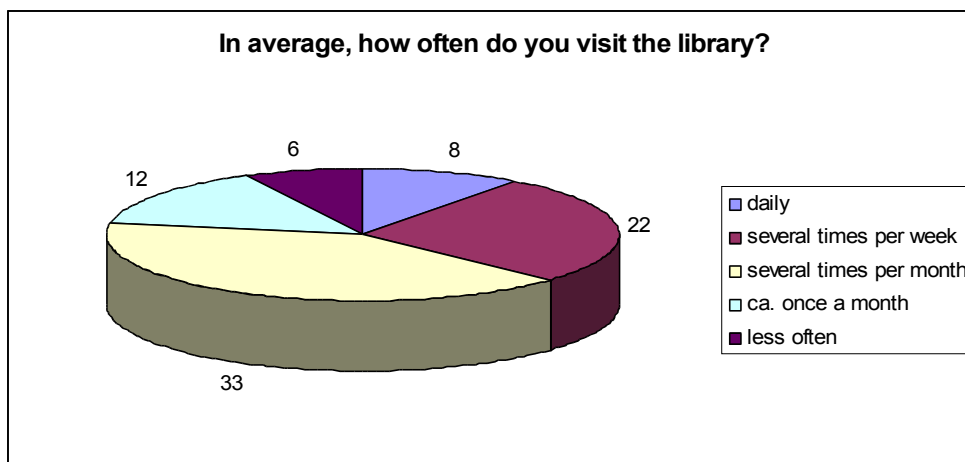


Figure 2

### Activities in the library

The question “What do you do when you visit the library?” was always asked from 2 different viewpoints: “What do you do at all (but perhaps not so often)?”, and “What do you do most frequently?” in order to find out both people's activities and people's *favorite* activities inside the library

That gave rise to articulated results such as that for reference: 86% (nearly all) make use of the help services every now and then, but for only 4% (nearly nobody) it is one of the most frequently used services.

The most frequent activities (Tables 5-6; Figures 3-4) are:

- Borrowing items (87.66% - among the three most frequent activities of 75.3% of interviewees);
- Asking staff for help and/or information (86.4% - among the most frequent activities of just 3.7% of all the interviewees)
- Meeting friends (77.8% - among the most frequent activities of 13.6% of interviewees)

Reading (books, magazines, newspapers etc.) and study/work *in* the library come immediately after: respectively 56.8% (among the most frequent activities of 28.4% of interviewees), and 48.1% (among the most frequent activities of 19.8%).

So borrowing – the most traditional library service – is still the most relevant one: despite the many innovations of the last two decades, the library still seems to be – for its patrons – mainly a place where you can browse and borrow books.

But for most people (whether they're children, university students or working adults) the library is also an important *place* (even without using the collections): a place where they go to meet people (77.8%), read books or newspapers (56.8%), study (48.1%) and take part in events or exhibitions (39.5%).

- ✓ It's essential for study, leisure, as a meeting place (it isn't a meeting place for me anymore, but it has been for a long time when I was younger).
- ✓ ...you should have asked my husband: if he could, he would camp inside the library!
- ✓ I like it here because it's a nice place: even studying it's more pleasant here.
- ✓ When I was young and I played hooky, I used to go at the library instead!
- ✓ I come here to watch films, to study, and to joke with my friends. It's useful to stay in company.
- ✓ Studying at home is not the same thing!

Furthermore, library users are accustomed to address the staff whenever they need help or information (86.4%) and they often show that they appreciate that:

- ✓ The staff here is really nice and helpful.
- ✓ Librarians here are really kind.
- ✓ Librarians here are really capable.
- ✓ I live in San Lazzaro<sup>4</sup>, but I don't like the staff over there: if this library closed down I wouldn't go to that library.
- ✓ The people who work here make the difference: not only libraries, but librarians too!!

Table 5

<b>What do you do when you visit the library?</b>	<b>n.</b>	<b>%</b>
Borrow or return books, DVDs etc.	71	87.66%
Turn to the staff for help information, suggestions	70	86.4%
Meet friends	63	77.8%
Read books, newspapers, magazines etc, in the library	46	56.8%
Study/work	39	48.1%
Drink/eat something at the bar or at the drink/snacks dispenser	39	48.1%
Use the children's area	36	44.4%
Use the online catalogue	35	43.2%
Take part in events/exhibitions	32	39.5%
Use copying/scanning facilities	26	32.1%

<sup>4</sup> A little town within easy reach from Bologna, with a brand-new beautiful library.

Use library's computers	25	30.86%
Interlibrary lending	16	19.8%
Watch videos, listen to music	16	19.8%
Use the Internet with my own laptop	16	19.8%
Other	15	18.50%

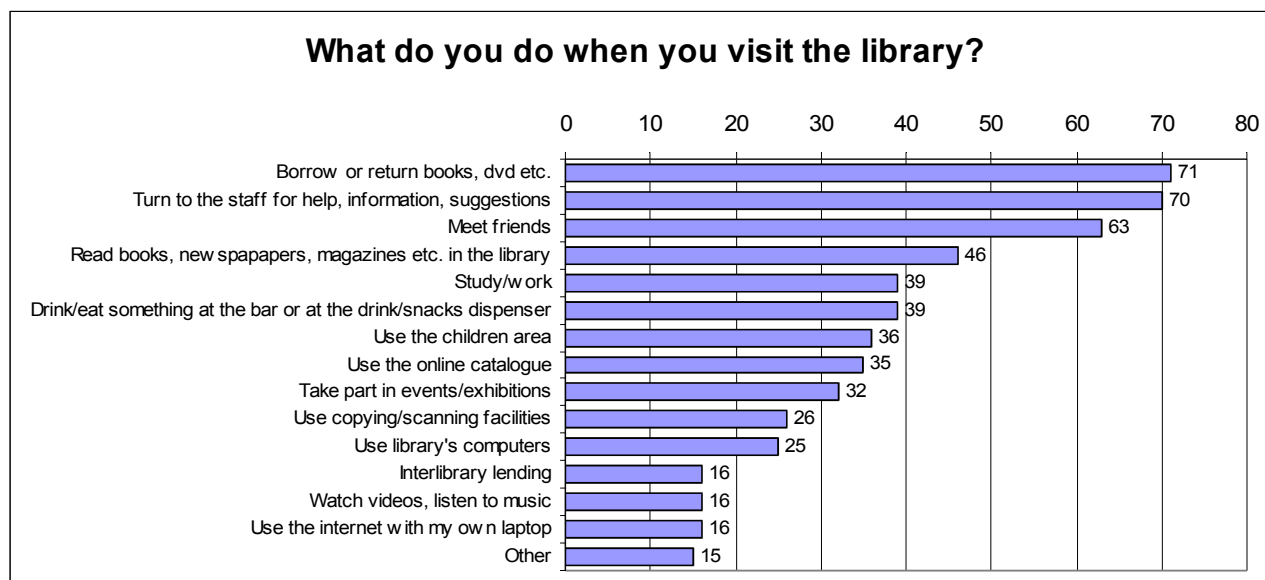


Figure 3

Table 6

<b>The 3 most frequent activities</b>	<b>n.</b>	<b>%</b>
Books/DVDs lending	61	75.3%
Read books, newspapers, magazines etc. <i>in</i> the library	23	28.4%
Study/work	16	19.8%
Meet friends	11	13.6%
Children's area	10	12.3%
Other	6	7.4%
Use Wi-Fi	5	6.2%
Eat/drink something	4	5%
Watch videos/listen to music	3	3.7%
Turn to the staff for help, information, suggestions	3	3.7%
Use the library's computers	3	3.7%
Interlibrary lending	2	2.5%
Opac	1	1.2%
Take part in events, exhibitions	1	1.2%
Use copying/scanning facilities	1	1.2%



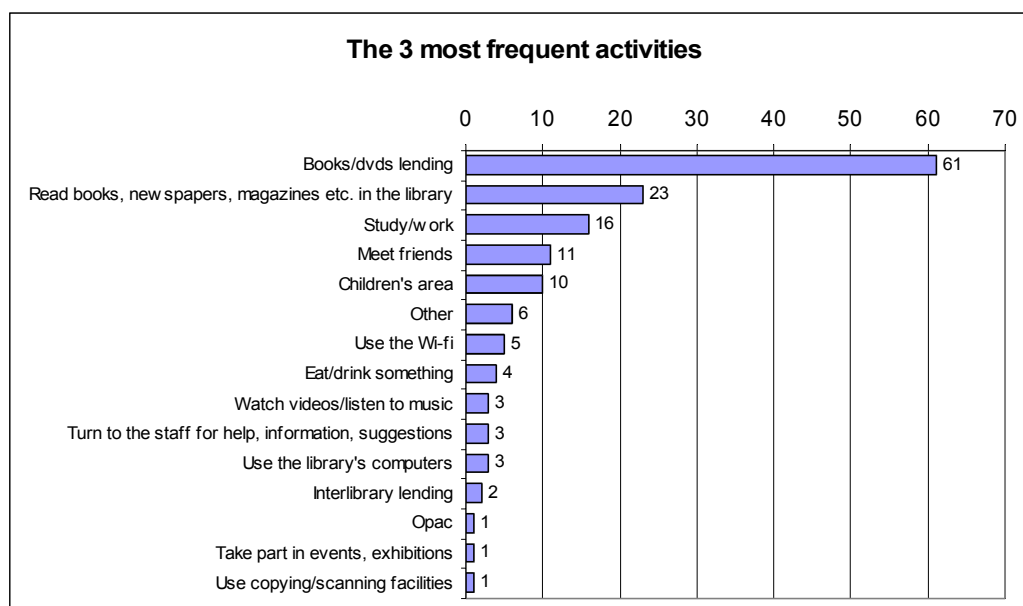


Figure 4

### Online services

Surprisingly, just 42% of the library users access the library online services (Table 7), and just 13.5% do it more than once per month (Table 8; Figure 5), versus the 77.8% who visit the library more than once per month.

88% of those who answer that they use the library online services consult the online catalogue (Table 9, Figure 6), and 12.34% of all interviewees check their account or make reservations online, while only 2.47% do things such as reading the library newsletter or the librarians' blog, downloading full-text resources etc.

The statistical data is very low, and this is probably due to the fact that electronic library services – with the exception of the Opac – are not yet well known.

Still, there's another factor that could have affected the results: the decision to interview people *within* the library, thus leaving out all the people who may use the library online services more frequently, but from outside the library. A further project will surely have to consider the option of an online survey too.

Do you ever visit the library OPAC/Website?		
Yes	34	42.00%
No	47	58.00%

Table 7

How often do you visit the library's Opac or the library's website?	n.	% of all the interviewees
Less than once per month	11	13.60%
Ca. once per month	7	8.60%
Several times per month	9	11.10%
Several times per week	1	1.20%
Everyday	1	1.20%

Table 8

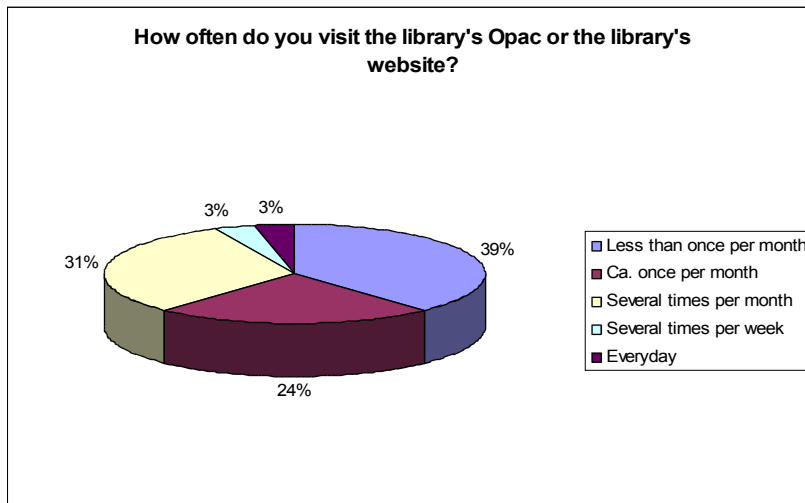


Figure 5

What do you do when you visit the library Opac/website?	n.	% <sup>5</sup>
Online catalogue	30	88.2%
Browse the library website	14	41.2%
Check my account, make a reservation etc.	10	29.4%
Get information about coming events/activities	8	23.6%
Check the library's opening hours	5	14.7%
Ask for information	5	14.7%
I'm registered to the public libraries' mailing list	2	5.9%
Read the librarians' blog	2	5.9%
Get information about the latest items purchased	2	5.9%
Download full-text resources	2	5.9%
Other	2	5.90%

Table 9

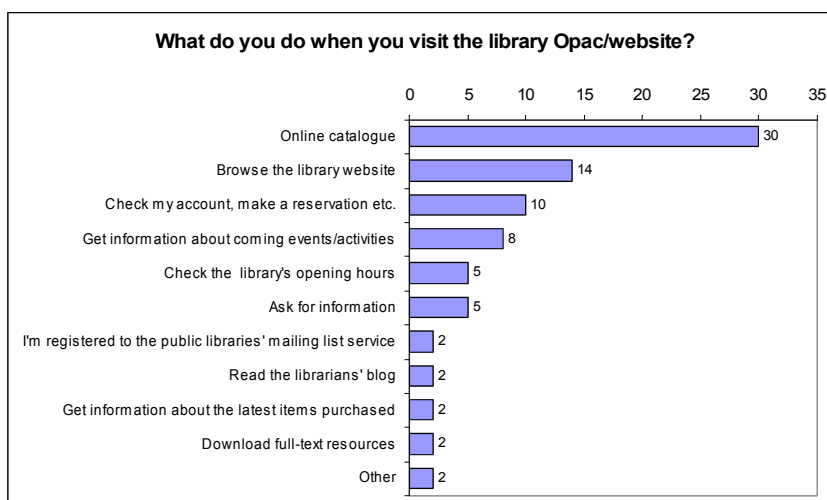


Figure 6

<sup>5</sup> Percentage of the actual users of the library online services (34 persons – 42% of all library's users).

The 3 most frequent activities	n.	% (of the actual users of the library online services)
Online catalogue	23	67.6%
Check my account, make a reservation etc.	4	11.8%
Browse the library website	4	11.8%
Download full-text resources	2	5.9%
Get information about coming events/activities	1	2.9%
Get information about the latest purchases	1	2.9%
Other	4	11.8%

Table 10

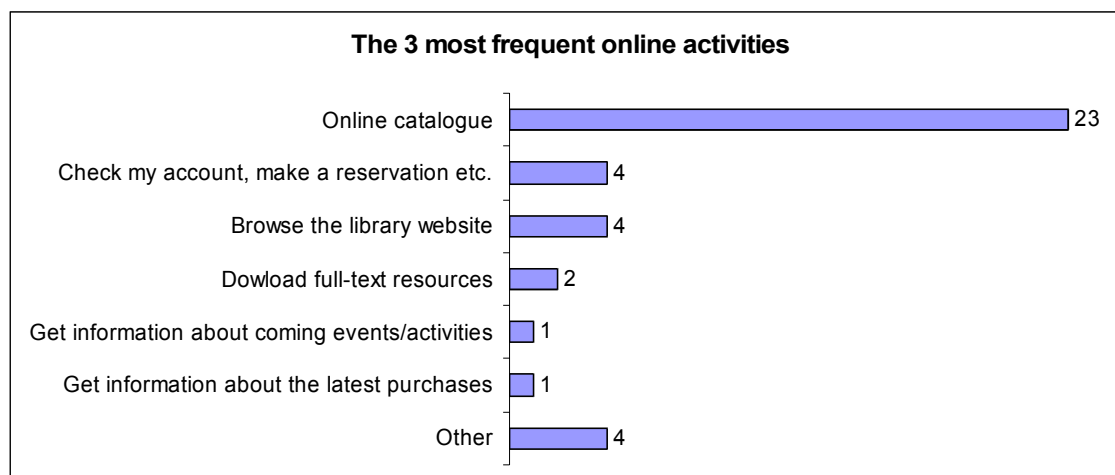


Figure 7

## Benefits

*"The time spent in the library is time that you gain, not time that you lose!"*

*"I come here and I lose some time – and I'm happy with it!"*

*"The library doesn't help me to save time: quite the reverse! But it's always well spent time"*

With the question regarding benefits we come to the very heart of the research, as *benefits* and *impact* can somehow be considered synonymous. In the previous questions, interviewees were driven to think about what they do in the library (when they visit it physically or "online") so now they were quite able to consider the benefits they gained.

This question joined the two aspects of the physical and the virtual library, as the pre-test had already showed that the use of the library's online services is not yet very high in the test libraries. Interviewees had the option to check more than one box.

Among the benefits acknowledged by the interviewees (Tables 11-12; Figures 8-9), the great majority said that the library is an enjoyable place (98.8%), safe and quiet (74.1%), for leisure (91.3%) and study (74.1%). The library is also important for information: it helped the interviewees keep up-to-date (70.7%), and 65.4% of them developed new skills/new interests.

The same benefits are indicated among the three most important benefits: "important for leisure/recreation" (38.3%), "a safe and quite place for study and reading" (29.6%), "an enjoyable place where I like to spend some time" (27.2), "helped me to keep up-to-date" (25.9%) and "I developed new skills/interests" (23.5%).

Have you benefited from visiting the library or using its online services?	n.	%
I experienced the library as an enjoyable place where I like to spend some of my time	80	98.8%
It was important for my leisure/recreation	74	91.3%
I experienced the library as a safe and quiet place for studying and reading	60	74.1%
The library helped me to keep up-to-date	57	70.4%
I developed new skills, new interests	53	65.4%
I received helpful information about the town	49	60.5%
It helped me to save time	46	56.8%
I received helpful information for school/university	41	51.6%
I made contact with many different kinds of people	33	40.7%
The library helped me in my profession	22	27.2%
I got helpful information for job seeking (writing a resume, seeking job ads on the Internet etc.)	6	7.4%
I found helpful information for business and commerce	1	1.2%
Other	17	21%

Table 11

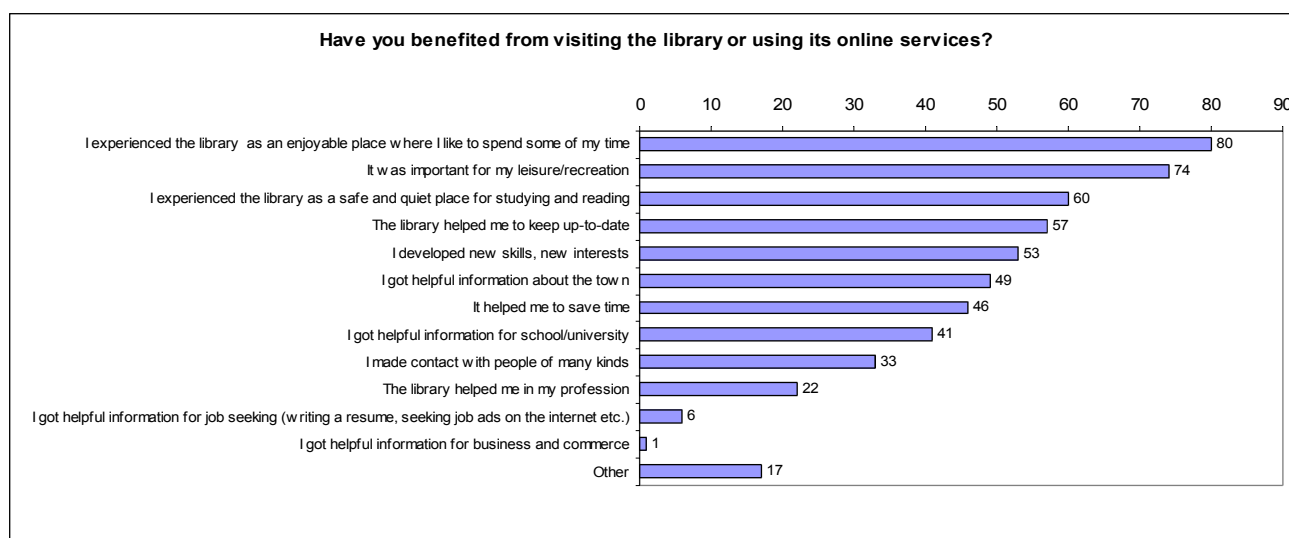


Figure 8

Among the “other benefits”, 5 interviewees (6.17%) expressly said that the library helped them to save money: even before coming to the specific question about money, a certain amount of people showed themselves to be conscious of an economic benefit.

In order to identify what interviewees see as highest value of the library, a second question asked them for the 3 most important benefits.

Please name the 3 benefits that were most important for you	n.	%
It's important for my leisure/recreation	31	38.3%
It's a safe and quite place for study and reading	24	29.6%
It's an enjoyable place where I like to spend some of my time	22	27.2%
It helped me to keep up-to-date	21	25.9%
I developed new skills, new interests	19	23.5%
I received helpful information for school/university	13	16%
Other	9	11.1%
I received helpful information about the town	8	9.9%
It helped me to save time	6	7.4%
I made contacts with people of many kinds	5	6.2%
It helped me in my profession	5	6.2%
I found helpful information for job seeking	2	2.50%

Table 12

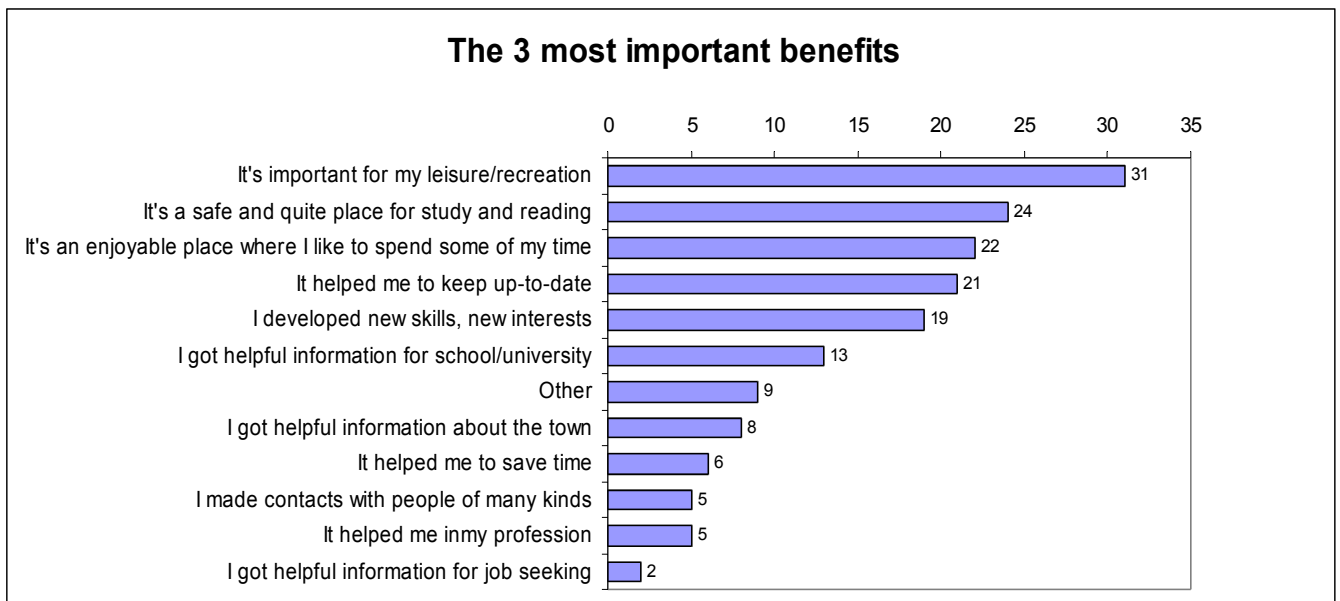


Figure 9

It seems that the majority of library users appreciate the library as a physical place that is part of their community, a place where they like to go, not just to borrow books, but also to meet other people, and a place where sometimes they feel more at ease than at home.

- ✓ Beautiful building: my compliments to the architect.
- ✓ I think it's aesthetically beautiful: it's nice to have the opportunity to enjoy such a beautiful place! It's pleasant in itself, not only for its usefulness.
- ✓ I can concentrate better here: it's a better place than home.
- ✓ I like the quiet and silent place.
- ✓ I like to come here, it's a comfortable place.
- ✓ I like the place and the atmosphere: I have a lot of books at home, but I read more here.
- ✓ Here I find a relaxing dimension, because of the quiet and the peacefulness, the chance to concentrate etc.

- ✓ It's a relaxing dimension. Here you can find a quiet atmosphere, and it's easy to concentrate.
- ✓ Here you can breath fresh air.
- ✓ 25 years ago I met my husband in a library!
- ✓ I like it to come here, because at home there's my brother – that pain in the neck!
- ✓ I'm accustomed to come here almost every day: if the library closed down, I wouldn't know what to do.
- ✓ I live in Modena, but I come here in Castelfranco almost every Saturday: it has become a pleasant habit, the ritual of the Saturday morning.
- ✓ I like spending time here – and sometimes meeting old friends – while I'm waiting to get a job.
- ✓ In a town, the library is a primary meeting place for the community. It's good to know that it exists.
- ✓ For children it's a nice experience to be allowed to come here by their own, even just to meet their friends.
- ✓ The library helped me to overcome my shyness, and the uneasiness due to the fact I couldn't speak a fluent Italian: here I feel equal to anybody else; I feel that everybody – doesn't matter whether he/she is Italian or foreigner – is equal.
- ✓ Here I had the chance to read books in my language (Arabic) and I experienced kindness and equality.

This is quite a surprising and important result, as there is a general conception (local politicians, funding institutions, the media) that people just drop in at the public library to borrow books (or other things) so that it doesn't make any sense to invest money and resources to create beautiful buildings with a comfortable atmosphere. For future surveys, it is recommended to include in the questionnaire an additional question to quantify the average time spent in the library.

Another interesting issue is that in these answers the library often seems to have an emotional value that has little to do with the immediate and practical benefits: many people value their library not just because of the benefits they get, but because they *love* the place. A recent Italian research about the perceived identity of libraries (Faggiolani, 2011) came to nearly the same conclusion.

Can we consider the emotional value among the significant values of libraries? This issue goes beyond the scope of the project, but it could be considered by future research: we can't overlook the fact that in the past few years the economic indicator of the Gross National Product has been challenged and set beside the Gross National Happiness (Stratton, 2010; Jacchia, 2011), a new indicator that should be able to measure quality of life and social progress (Gross National Happiness, 2011).

Aside from this, the interviewees' free answers do not overlook the informative side of the library. A high percentage of people number among the benefits “keeping up-to-date” (70.7%) and “developing new skills/new interests” (65.4%). Thus, the library turns out to be the right place to go when you're looking for help and information in addition to books. Sometimes this information may come from non-conventional sources, such as an exchange of ideas with someone you meet at the library.

- ✓ In the library I always found what I was looking for.
- ✓ Every time I come here I find what I am looking for.
- ✓ Here I find everything.
- ✓ It's the right place to go when you need something.
- ✓ For me it's important because here we find help.
- ✓ All by myself, just with my own skills, I couldn't find all the things I find here.
- ✓ The library is essential for my leisure and my entertainment: I especially like the fact of coming here and find a huge choice of everything.
- ✓ I borrowed a lot of technical books I needed for my profession.

- ✓ I didn't have a proper education, so now that I've got time I like to learn new things. For me it's real amusement. Reading allowed me to learn a lot.
- ✓ The library offers a great opportunity for lifelong learning, especially with its document holdings.
- ✓ Here I have a chance for a lifelong learning, in particular because of the great amount of items of every kind.
- ✓ I like to study in order to learn things that I didn't learn at school.
- ✓ The library is really "informative".
- ✓ The library helped me in having a positive approach towards books and culture.
- ✓ The library is a much better place than, for instance, a cafe: I don't learn as many things in a cafe.
- ✓ While exchanging views with other people I came across interesting information that I wouldn't have found otherwise.

It is interesting to note that 22 free answers (27.16% of the interviewees) suggest some kind of benefits for children.

- ✓ Children very much like to come here.
- ✓ It's an option for the children, a place where they can spend a nice afternoon.
- ✓ Huge benefits for my child.
- ✓ The children's area was essential for me and my daughters: I brought them to the library with the explicit purpose to make them fond of books and reading.
- ✓ I wouldn't have the same service for children if this library was closed down
- ✓ I couldn't find nearby a place like this for children: here is a quiet place, easy to use, and it's easy to find parking too.
- ✓ I deliberately decided not to have a personal library card because my daughters have theirs, and I like to use them as 'family library cards'.
- ✓ Here I find large amount of books and DVDs for children
- ✓ I think it's such a great resource, especially for children and for young ones that are making their way toward books and reading
- ✓ Sometimes I meet friends in Sala Borsa, it's a meeting place for the children.
- ✓ My elder son often comes here to do his homework.
- ✓ When I was a little girl I came here with my mum, and now I like reading.
- ✓ When the children start studying by their own, it's a nice experience for them to be allowed to come here on their own, even just to meet their friends.
- ✓ It was essential when my children were growing up
- ✓ I like to teach to my daughter that she has to take care of the books from the library and to return them in time so that other children can read them too
- ✓ It's a place where our children can grow up.
- ✓ The children section is a really first-rate one
- ✓ I borrow a lot of books for my little niece
- ✓ When my daughter was younger we attended wonderful and really involving activities for the little ones.
- ✓ I come to the library with my granddaughter.
- ✓ The library gives me a lot of nice ideas for my son, in order to spark his imagination. While reading books to him, I often find out how ignorant I am in a lot of subjects!
- ✓ I remember with great pleasure my visits to the library when I was younger, and I'd like to communicate this passion to my newborn son.

Hence – considering also that 44% of interviewees reported to use the children’s area, and 12.3% included it among their 3 most frequent activities in the library – it seems advisable to include in the question about “benefits” an additional option about benefits for children.

### Increase of use

This question – like the questions about activities of users in the library – is meant to give background information for the issue of benefits. Increasing use in specified areas can thus be compared with what users regard as benefiting them.

The increase of use indicated by 64% of the interviewees (Table 13) is not supported by the library statistics: between 2008 and 2010 (also considering that two of the sample libraries closed down for a few months when they moved to a new address) the number of active users and loans remained substantially unchanged.

<b>Did you increase the use of the library's services during the last 2 years?</b>	<b>n.</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	52	64.2%
No	25	30.9%
I don't know	4	4.9%

Table 13

Yet, the answer corroborates the positive opinion about libraries that is expressed everywhere. It is surprising that the increase still concerns mainly borrowing (65% - see Table 14 and Figure 10) and not – for example – Internet or computer use (15.4%). This result is consistent with the answers about the use of library online services: once again it seems that traditional library services are still the more significant for the majority of people.

<b>Which services did you use more often than before?</b>	<b>n.</b>	<b>%<sup>6</sup></b>
Books/DVD lending	34	65.4%
Spaces for individual or group study	12	23.1%
Children's area	6	11.5%
Internet	5	9.6%
Reading in the library (mostly newspapers and magazines)	5	9.6%
Events	3	5.8%
Library's computers	3	5.8%
Now I've got more time	3	5.8%
Online catalogue	1	1.9%
Being unemployed, I've got plenty of time	1	1.9%
Wandering among the bookshelves	1	1.9%
The old library was a little cramped	1	1.9%
Everything (and all the town libraries)	1	1.9%

Table 14

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6 % of the 52 positive answers to the previous question



### Which services you used more often than before?

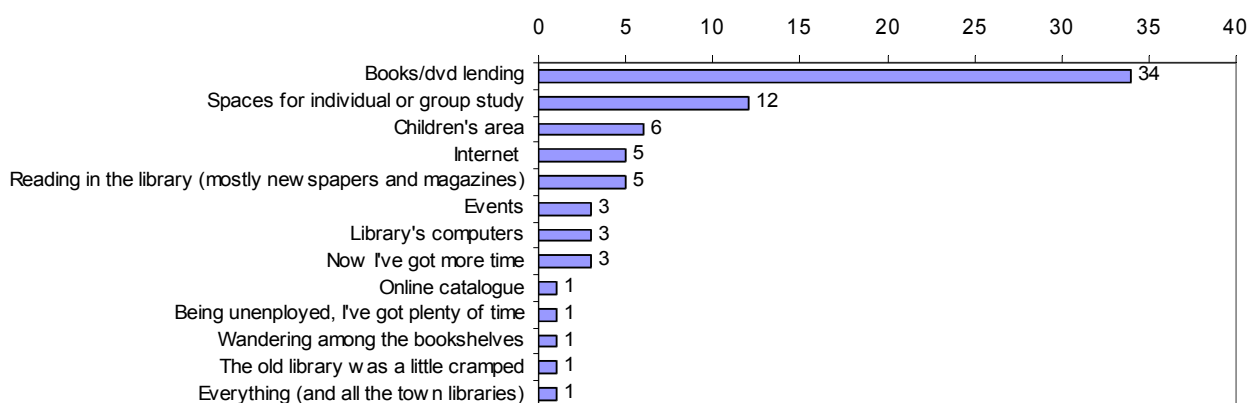


Figure 10

### “What would you do if the library closed?”

This question is the follow-up of the benefit questions. It is meant to show whether the library benefits are only “nice to have”, or whether without the library there would be a real gap in people’s lives that could not be replaced by other institutions.

88.9% of interviewees would be affected by the library closedown (Table 15), and 14.8% claim that they couldn't get the same information and services elsewhere.

Here's what they think they would miss if the library closed down:

- ✓ I wouldn't have the same choice of books, dvds etc..
- ✓ I wouldn't find Wi-fi
- ✓ I couldn't find the same atmosphere elsewhere. It would be a problem for my concentration and my study.
- ✓ I would go to another library, but I would miss this cozy place.
- ✓ I should go to the nearest town, but I would have to pay for the journey and I would have to go to an unfamiliar place.
- ✓ If this library closed down I should have to go to the university library, but I couldn't find not-for-study documents there.
- ✓ I should go to another town – but I know that, after all, I wouldn't do it.
- ✓ I'd miss the cozy place, and the staff's competence and kindness.
- ✓ I'd miss the atmosphere.
- ✓ I'd miss this place, the context, the human contact. I don't feel as much at ease in other libraries.
- ✓ I'd miss the place for study and a quiet place.
- ✓ Other libraries don't have such a good choice.
- ✓ I wouldn't have the same choice of music.
- ✓ I couldn't borrow books, I wouldn't have the same services for children.
- ✓ I couldn't find nearby another place for children like this one: here is a quiet place, easy to use, and it's easy to find parking too.
- ✓ I don't know. It would be too big a loss.
- ✓ I wouldn't find some books, and above all I'd miss the nearness to my home.
- ✓ I wouldn't find the same choice of items in English.

- ✓ I wouldn't find the same choice of documents in foreign languages.
- ✓ Here it's less dispersive than the town central public library, and the staff are more helpful.

7 answers mention the good collection, and 2 the helpful staff, but overall most of them place their emphasis on the library as a good place to be – because of the atmosphere, because of the coziness, because they feel at ease and because often the library's near home. Once again, the users' answers point out an emotional side.

<b>If the next year this library was closed down, could you get the same information/services elsewhere?</b>	<b>n.</b>	<b>%<sup>7</sup></b>
Yes	7	8.6%
Yes, but it would take more time and effort	40	49.4%
Yes, but not everything	24	29.6%
No	12	14.8%
I don't know	2	2.5%

Table 15

The most interesting issue is that – though 80% of interviewees have Internet access at home – only 41.8% of the respondents think they could get the same information or services via the Internet (Table 16; Figure 11), while 92.5% of them would go to another library. So the library – for it's users – seems to be an irreplaceable institution, both as place and as service for the community.

Table 16

<b>If you think you could get the same information elsewhere, where would you get it?</b>	<b>n.</b>	<b>%<sup>8</sup></b>
From another library	62	92.5%
Via the Internet	28	41.8%
Purchase/rent in a bookstore or specialist shops	21	31.3%
From friends, colleagues etc.	13	19.4 %
In the media (newspapers, radio, television)	7	10.4%

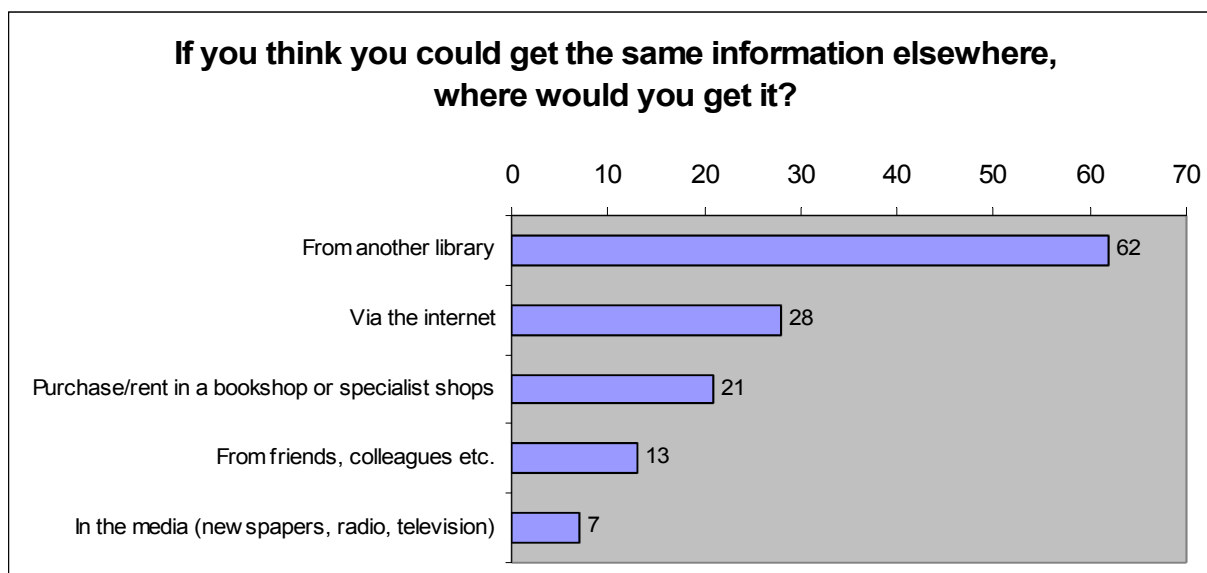


Figure 11

<sup>7</sup> Interviewed people could choose more than one answer, so the overall answers are 85 and the overall percentage is 104.9%.

<sup>8</sup> Out of 67 answers (that is the 81 interviewed people *minus* the 14 who answered “No” or “I don't know” to the previous question).

## Costs of surrogate services

Usually, when projects tried to assess library benefits in monetary terms, they have used the contingent valuation method and asked for the “willingness-to-pay”: What would you be willing to pay for up keeping of this library?

For this project, it was decided to put the question in another way: What do you think you would have to pay monthly for replacing the library’s services to you (if at all possible)?

In the interviews, it was notable that the respondents often misinterpreted the question into: What would I be able to pay? In a future survey this question should explain that issue.

So, 12.3 % of interviewees said that they would pay less than 10€ not because they don't value the library but because at the present time they couldn't afford to spend any money on books, CDs, DVDs etc.

✓ If the library was closed down I wouldn't pay anything: I should simply dispense with everything I do here.

✓ If the library closed down I should dispense with everything, because at present I can't afford to buy books.

✓ If the library closed down I would have to dispense with everything it offers. The price of books drove me to use the library: now I couldn't afford to purchase any book.

✓ If the library was closed down I would dispense with almost everything, unless it is really essential.

✓ It's irreplaceable: if it was closed down I could pay just a few Euros per month to replace the 10 books per week I usually borrow. Besides – as I could purchase only the commercially available books – I would have much less options.

The reported costs for potential surrogate services are indeed astonishing (Table 17): 47% would have to pay between 10 and 29€, 34.5% would have to pay more than 30 €, and of them 11.1% would even have to pay 60€ or more.

Furthermore, a number of respondents stressed the fact that – despite the price they would be able to pay – they would have to dispense of something else in any case.

✓ If the library was closed down, despite the 10-19 more euros I would have to pay monthly (just for me, not considering the rest of my family) I should surely dispense of something.

✓ If the library was closed down I would be ruined: I couldn't afford to read all the books I read now, and I certainly would read less.

✓ If the library closed down I would have to dispense of something in any case, not just because of the books' price, but because of the place too.

✓ If the library was closed down it wouldn't be just a matter of money: the thing is - I would have to dispense of something.

✓ If the library was closed down the kids should have to read less, for economic and “spatial” reasons.

✓ If the library was closed down it would be a big problem, and I would have to dispense with a lot of things (I buy only what I really like).

✓ I can't assign a monetary value to the library services: I probably couldn't afford to pay for them, and I would have to manage without them.

✓ As for the price I would have to pay if the library closed down, 20-29 Euros is what I could pay, but now I borrow items for a much greater value.

✓ If the library closed down, it would be too big a loss. In our family there are 7-8 people, and we all read.

✓ If the library was closed down I surely couldn't afford to pay for all the things I find here

If you couldn't benefit from library's services, how much do you think you would have to pay - monthly - to obtain the same information/services elsewhere?	n.	%
0 to 9 Euros	10	12.3%
10 to 19 Euros	19	23.5%
20 to 29 Euros	19	23.5%
30 to 39 Euros	6	7.4%
40 to 49 Euros	9	11.1%
50 to 59 Euros	4	4.9%
60 Euros and more	9	11.1%
Doesn't want to (or cannot) answer	5	6.2%

Table 17

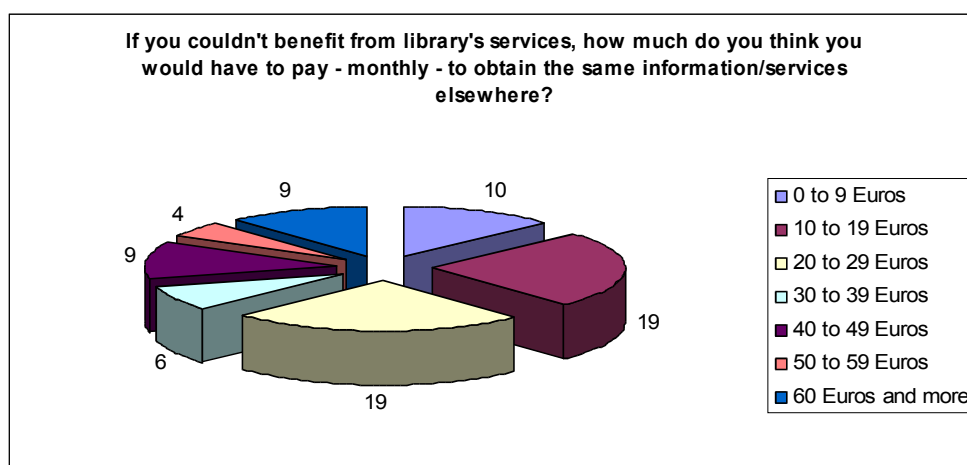


Figure 12

The unreal scenario of the library closedown made the interviewees eager to say something about their personal conception of the library's value – which is the ultimate subject of this research.

They considered not only why this library is important for them, but also its general social value. That is quite remarkable, as the questionnaire focused mainly on individual activities and benefits, and seems to show a widespread belief that the library has a social impact that goes beyond the individual benefits for each user. A main issue in the free answers was the social integration of immigrants or of persons with a small income.

- ✓ The library is important, I think that the idea that there's still something free and shared with other people is essential.
- ✓ I studied in Guinea: over there, there isn't any place like this, where you can read, borrow books, ask for information etc. I think that access to information is a vital element for the development of a nation: that's why I like it so much here!
- ✓ It's a place of open-mindedness: it should exist everywhere.
- ✓ I'm pleased to see how many young people come here. Maybe most of them come to play or to stay with friends, but I think it's a good thing that they come here
- ✓ I like to see all these immigrant families coming here. I like to see children and teens of foreign origins – that are (or will soon be) Italian citizens – coming to the library.
- ✓ If the library closed down I wouldn't think of how much I would have to pay, but of the great loss for the town: loss of an important point of reference, and loss of a place where people can socialize.

- ✓ I think that the library is one of the things that ties the community together: I would fight against its closure.
- ✓ The library helps people who don't have a great income. Even with education: without this library, I wouldn't be able to attend the university.
- ✓ It's important not only for me but for a lot of other people too. For that reason, if it was closed down it wouldn't be just a private loss.
- ✓ It's enough to see how many people come here to understand the library's importance.
- ✓ It certainly is a great resource, especially for the less well-off, because it offers the same opportunities even to those who can't afford purchasing books.
- ✓ It's a basic service – I would say indispensable – for communities.
- ✓ The library fights against ignorance: without libraries we would lose a lot of what we achieved in all these years.
- ✓ If the library closed down, it wouldn't be just a material loss.
- ✓ If it closed down, it would be one of the worst things that could happen. It would be a great mistake, especially for children who have to learn to read and write.

### Internet access

The question about PC and Internet access (Table 18-19) at home proved very useful: it shows that a majority of library users have a PC (88%) and Internet access at home (80%). This can partly explain why Internet and the library PCs don't seem to be essential services for the majority of interviewees. Nonetheless, there's a significant 20% who don't have Internet access at home, thus showing the importance of having Internet access within the library in order to lessen the digital divide.

Do you have the opportunity to use a computer at home?	n.	%
Yes	71	88.00%
No	10	12.00%

Table 18

Do you have Internet access at home?	n.	%
Yes	65	80.00%
No	16	20.00%

Table 19

### Data combination

So far, the results of the questionnaire were displayed for each question separately, but it's easy to imagine how – with simple data processing – they can produce more specific and interesting information. Here are some examples of what can be obtained by comparing some of the answers.

The first and easiest way to analyze the results is by age range.

#### *Under 18 years – 9 respondents*

What do children and teenagers do when they go to the library?

Their first activity is to meet friends (100%, versus the 77.8% of all respondents). 88.9 % of them borrow books and/or DVDs, but 66.6% of them use the library computers as well, and 55.5% use the copying/scanning facilities (versus the 30.86% and 32.1% of all respondents respectively).

So the young ones make a much more intensive use of computers. Perhaps they don't have a computer on their own, but they are also the true “digital natives”: books and computers are equally part of their everyday life, and they use them both for study and for leisure.

<b>What do you do when you visit the library? (under 18 years)</b>	<b>n.</b>	<b>%</b>
Meet friends	9	100.00%
Turn to staff for help, information, suggestions	8	88.90%
Borrow or return books, DVDs etc.	7	77.80%
Use the children's area	7	77.80%
Study/work	6	66.60%
Use library computers	6	66.60%
Use copying/scanning facilities	5	55.50%
Read books, newspapers, comics etc. in the library	5	55.50%
Use the online catalogue	4	44.40%
Watch films	4	44.40%
Connect to the Internet with my laptop	3	33.30%
Drink/eat something at the bar or at the drinks/snacks dispenser	3	33.30%
Take part in events, exhibitions	1	11.10%
Borrow items in foreign languages	1	11.10%
Listen to CDs	1	11.10%

Table 20

Despite their young age, children and teenagers seem to have a clear perception of the library, and found no difficulties in answering all the questions – even the “economic” ones.

- ✓ I like to come here. When I was a little girl I came here with my mum, and now I like reading
- ✓ I like the atmosphere, and there's a great selection of comic books
- ✓ I come here to watch films, to study, and to joke with my friends. It's a useful place to stay in company.
- ✓ I can better concentrate here: it's a better place than home - and besides, it's really near home.
- ✓ Wandering around, not only in the teens' area, we found books and authors we didn't know (e.g. some detective stories we had to read for school) and it was such an interesting and unexpected discovery.
- ✓ If the library closed down I would dispense with almost everything I usually borrow, unless it's really essential
- ✓ Here I find everything.

They seem to be quite conscious too of the consequences of a hypothetical library closedown:

- ✓ If the library closed down I would dispense with the comics I read now.
- ✓ If the library closed down it would be a big problem and I would have to dispense with a lot of things (I buy just what I really like)
- ✓ I wouldn't find the same choice elsewhere.
- ✓ I wouldn't find some books, and above all I would lose a library near home.
- ✓ I should go to the nearest town: but I would have to pay for the train and go to an unfamiliar place.

#### *19-24 years – 15 respondents*

Most of these respondents are probably university students. 86.6% of them study/work in the library versus the 48.1% of the overall interviewees (Table 21) and – same as children and teenagers – 100% of them meet friends in the library.

<b>What do you do when you visit the library? (19 to 24 years)</b>	<b>n.</b>	<b>%</b>
Meet friends	15	100.00%
Drink/eat something at the bar or at the drinks/snacks dispenser	14	93.30%
Study/work	13	86.60%
Turn to staff for help, information, suggestions	13	86.60%
Borrow or return books, DVDs etc.	10	66.60%
Read books, newspapers, magazines etc. in the library	8	53.30%
Take part in events, exhibitions	8	53%
Use library computers	6	40%
Use copying/scanning facilities	6	40%
Connect to the Internet with my laptop	6	40%
Use the online catalogue	4	26.66%
Watch films	3	20.00%
Use the children's area	3	20.00%
Interlibrary lending	2	13.33%
Use the library's spaces to study in group	2	13.33%
Listen to CDs	1	6.66%

Table 21

Students' perception of the public library is very interesting, because they are often considered by librarians (although not by all of them) *improper* library users: they usually occupy all the library's seats for many hours, thus taking away other users' space. According to some, they use the public library as a studying centre, and this could be seen as a waste of public money.

Nevertheless, the data collected show us another picture: 86.6% of them turn to the staff for help or information (slightly more than the overall respondents), 66.6% of them borrow books and other items; 53.3% read newspapers and magazines in the library, 53.3% take part in events or exhibitions (versus the 39.5% overall respondents) and 26.66% use the library catalogue.

So they don't seem to use the library mainly as a studying centre.

In consideration of this issue, some students were specifically asked in the interviews why they prefer to study in a public library instead of a university library. Here's what they answered:

- ✓ The mood here facilitates concentration, besides it's a meeting point for me and my friends.
- ✓ Libraries well provided with books are a real saving. I like the quiet and silent place, and I study here because it's closer to my home.
- ✓ In the library I always found what I was looking for.
- ✓ I'd miss this place, the context, the human contact. I don't feel as much at ease in other libraries.
- ✓ If this library closed down I would have to go to the university library, but I couldn't find not-for-study documents there.
- ✓ I virtually live here, for me the library is a sort of sanctuary: I couldn't survive without it. It's a vital point of reference for my life. There are a lot of libraries nearby - I live in the neighborhood - but I like it here: when I have a vacant hour I come here, and I know I'll find someone I know. I grew up here. It's about ages that I come here. While exchanging views with other people I came across interesting information that I wouldn't have found otherwise. Coming to the library I can better concentrate, so I'm faster in preparing for the exams. If the library closed down, I couldn't find the same atmosphere elsewhere, and it would be a problem for my concentration and my study. I like it better than an university library because it's more informal: when I come here I feel free to study - if I want to study - or to do anything else I want to do. Besides, people from every faculty come here, not just people from my same faculty, so I have the chance to hang around with different people, and to exchange different points of view.

So students seem to be well aware of the difference between a public library and a university library, and deliberately choose to study in a public library, not just because of the cozier atmosphere – even if many of them pointed it out – but because of the different services offered.

The collected data can also be compared in different ways, for instance considering those who gave an interesting answer to one specific question. Here are some examples.

*Not registered users – 7 respondents*

As we saw earlier, 8.6% of the interviewees reported they were not registered users of the library. That is interesting, especially because it's a percentage that was found in other projects too: there seem to be ca. 10% of library users that are not registered users.

Therefore, it could be interesting to understand what they do when they go to the library:

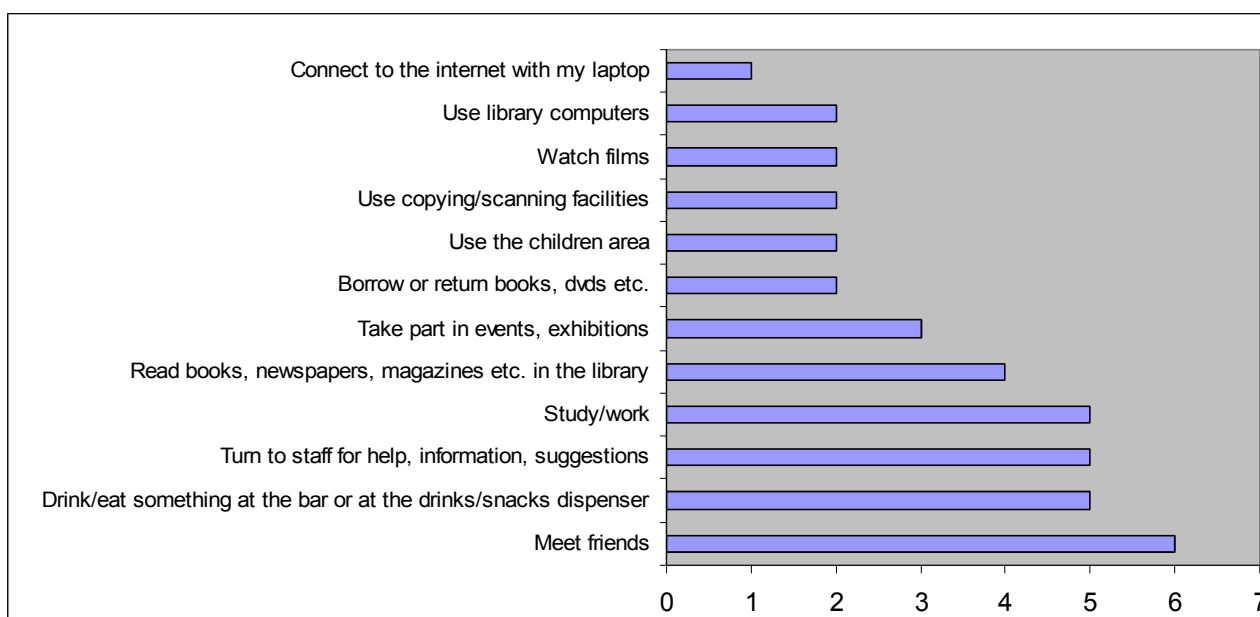


Figure 13

The majority of them go to the library to meet their friends (85.70%) and to study (71.40%), and while studying they like to drink or eat something (71.40%).

✓ I come here to watch films, to study, and to joke with my friends. It's a useful place to stay in company.

✓ It's a meeting point for me and my friends.

Yet, 71.40% turn to staff for help and 57.10% read books, newspapers or magazines in the library:

✓ I like the place and the atmosphere: I have a lot of books at home, but I read more here. I like to study to learn things that I didn't learn at school.

One of them - a woman who used to go to the library in her youth – was going to request a library card the very day of the interview.

✓ The library helped me in having a positive approach towards books and culture. I remember with great pleasure my visits to the library when I was younger, and I'd like to communicate this passion to my newborn son.



Finally, one middle-aged woman was not a registered user because:

- ✓ I deliberately decided not to have a personal library card because my daughters have theirs, and I like to use them as 'family library cards'.

*Frequent visitors – 19 respondents*

Do the answers of people who go to the library several times per week differ from those of overall respondents? What do they do in the library? (Table 22)

<b>What do you do in the library? (visit the library several times per week)</b>	<b>n.</b>	<b>%</b>
Turn to staff for help, information, suggestions	19	100.00%
Meet friends	18	94.73%
Drink/eat something at the bar or at the drinks/snacks dispenser	15	78.95%
Study/work	13	68.42%
Use copying/scanning facilities	11	57.89%
Connect to the Internet with my laptop	10	52.63%
Read books, newspapers, magazines etc. in the library	10	52.63%
Borrow or return books, dvds etc.	9	47.37%
Use library computers	9	47.37%
Take part in events, exhibitions	8	42.10%
Use the children's area	6	31.58%
Use the online catalogue	6	31.58%
Watch videos, listen to CDs	5	26.31%
Interlibrary lending	2	10.52%
Use the library's spaces to study in group	1	5.26%
Borrow items in foreign languages	1	5.26%

Table 22

Actually, it was determined that 100% of them turn to the staff for help versus the 86.4% of the overall respondents. 94.73% meet friends (versus 77.8% of the total respondents) and 78.95% drink/eat something (versus 48.1%) in the library. For them, the library seems to primarily be a familiar and essential place for their life and only secondarily a place for special information needs.

- ✓ I virtually live here: I couldn't survive without it. It's a vital point of reference for my life.
- ✓ Every evening I jog from home to the library, stop here for a while to read something, then jog back home: if I hadn't such a pleasant destination, I would give up jogging!

And if it's true that they are used to address librarians –

- ✓ All by myself, just with my own skills, I couldn't find all the things I find here

– it is also true that just 47.37% of them borrow books (40% less than the overall respondents).

A 25 years university student is already worrying for the future.

- ✓ Perhaps they could try to keep the library open in the evenings some day, so that working people can come to the library: with the current opening hours, when I'll be working I won't be able to come anymore.

*Occasional visitors – 6 respondents*

As to those who visit the library less than once per month, 100% of them borrow/return books, ask the librarians for information/suggestions and (quite surprisingly) use the children's area. With the exception of the children's area, they seem to pay quick visits to the library in order to get what they need: just 33.3% of them take part in events or stop at the library for a drink, and only 16.6% stay there to read books or watch a film.

<b>What do you do when you visit the library?</b>	<b>n.</b>
Borrow or return books, DVDs etc.	6
Turn to staff for help, information, suggestions	6
Use the children's area	6
Meet friends	5
Study/work	3
Take part in events, exhibitions	2
Drink/eat something at the bar or at the drinks/snacks dispenser	2
Use the online catalogue	2
Interlibrary lending	1
Read books, newspapers, magazines etc. in the library	1
Watch films	1

Table 23

Nevertheless, among the benefits, 100% of them value the library, not only as an important place for leisure and recreation, but also as a pleasant place where they can spend some time, and a quiet place for reading.

Finally, they use the library online services more frequently than the overall respondents: 66.6% versus 42%. So maybe the remote use of the online services replace a number of visits to the library.

*Those who consider the library irreplaceable – 12 respondents*

The almost 15% who answered “no” to the question “If this library closed down could you get the same information/services elsewhere?” seem to think that the library is irreplaceable: it will be interesting to know more about them (who are they? how often do they visit the library? what are their activities?) in order to understand why they think the library is so unique.

Their age range is quite varied, and 75% visit the library at least several times per month.

100% of them meet friends and turn to the staff for help/information (versus 77.8% and 86.4% of overall respondents), 91.7% read books, newspapers etc. in the library (versus 56.8% of overall respondents) and “only” 75% borrow books and DVDs. Once again, the library turns out to be a place to go in order to spend some pleasant time, instead of a mere books storage area. And once again, the librarians seem to have a basic role in this idea of “libraryness”.

<b>What do you do when you visit the library?</b>	<b>n.</b>	<b>%</b>
Meet friends	12	100%
Turn to staff for help, information, suggestions	12	100%
Read books, newspapers, magazines etc. in the library	11	91.70%
Borrow or return books, DVDs etc.	9	75%
Drink/eat something at the bar or at the drinks/snacks dispenser	8	66.60%
Take part in events, exhibitions	6	50%
Use copying/scanning facilities	6	50%
Use library computers	6	50%
Use the children's area	5	41.66%
Use the online catalogue	5	41.66%
Study/work	5	41.66%

Table 24

People who – to the same question – answered that if the library was closed down, they wouldn't find everything elsewhere, focus mainly on the atmosphere and the cozy place:

- ✓ I'd miss this place, the context, the human contact. I don't feel as much at ease in other libraries.
- ✓ If the library closed down, I couldn't find the same atmosphere elsewhere. It would be a problem for my concentration and my study.
- ✓ I couldn't find nearby a place like this for children: here is a quiet place, easy to use, and it's easy to find parking too.
- ✓ If this library closed down I would have to go to the university library, but I wouldn't find not-for-study documents there.
- ✓ I wouldn't have the same choice of books, DVDs etc.
- ✓ I wouldn't have the same choice of music.
- ✓ I'd miss the cozy place, and the staff's competence and kindness.
- ✓ I wouldn't find the same choice of books etc. in foreign languages.
- ✓ I wouldn't find some books, and above all I'd miss the closeness to my home.
- ✓ It's less dispersive than the town central public library, and the staff here is more helpful.

In contrast, those who consider the library an irreplaceable place coherently claim that they would miss something more essential than a comfortable place:

- ✓ If the library was closed down I should simply renounce everything I do here.
- ✓ If the library was closed down I would be ruined: I couldn't afford to read all the books I read now, and I certainly would read less. The people who work here make the difference: not only libraries, but librarians too!!
- ✓ It's irreplaceable: if it was closed down I could pay just a few Euros per month to replace the 10 books per week I usually borrow. Besides – as I could purchase only the commercially available books – I would have much less options. The library is important, I think that the idea that there's still something free and shared with other people is essential.
- ✓ It's the right place to go when you need something. It's a place where our children can grow up.

*Those who value the library and its services at 720€ or more per year – 9 respondents*

The 11% of the interviewees claimed that if the library closed down, they would have to (and would) pay 720€ or more per year in order to obtain the same services/information elsewhere. Even acknowledging that their willingness to pay is overestimated – and it seems definitely reasonable to cut it down – the sum is still astonishing.

88.8% of them visit the library at least several times per month. It is interesting to see how they benefited from the library, and how their benefits differ from those of the overall respondents.

The first and the second answers don't differ too much from the overall respondents, even if the percentage is a little lower: the library is an enjoyable place where they like to spend some time (88.9% versus 98.8%) and it is important for their leisure (88.9% versus 91.93%). Still, 77.8% think that the library helped them to save time (versus 56.8% of the total respondents), 55.5% got helpful information for school or university, and – above all – 55.5% said that the library helped them in their profession, versus 27.2% of the total respondents.

Time saving and help for the profession thus seem to be the benefits that really make the difference in calculating the library monetary value. This result is consistent with some of the cost-benefits methods (Elliott et al., 2007) that establish a correspondence between time and money. In any case, the interviewees prove to be well aware of the economic value of the library for themselves.

<b>Have you benefited from visiting the library or using its online services?</b>	<b>n.</b>	<b>%</b>
I experienced the library as an enjoyable place where I like to spend some of my time	8	88.90%
It is important for my leisure/recreation	8	88.90%
It helped me to save time	7	77.80%
I developed new skills, new interests	6	66.70%
It helped me to keep up-to-date	6	66.70%
I received helpful information for school/university	5	55.50%
I experienced the library as a safe and quiet place for studying and reading	5	55.50%
It helped me in my profession	5	55.50%
I received helpful information about the town	4	44.40%
I made contact with people of many kinds	3	33.30%
It helped me to save money	2	22.20%
I found helpful information for job seeking	1	11.10%

Table 25

Even the free answers do not focus so much on the atmosphere, but stress the essential (and valuable) services the library offers to each of them:

- ✓ Now that the town central library is closed on Mondays I come here more often.
- ✓ At home I don't have a broadband connection.
- ✓ I borrow a lot of books for my university exams
- ✓ For me the opportunity to consult 10 books without having to buy them is essential: that's the way I discovered a lot of authors I didn't know before.
- ✓ At home I don't have a broadband connection so I come here to have Internet access. I'd like also to have free interlibrary loans. If the library was closed down I surely couldn't afford to pay for all the things I find here, so I would surely renounce something.
- ✓ Here I find everything
- ✓ If the library closed down I would have to go to the nearest town: I would have to pay for the train and I would have to go to an unfamiliar place.

## DISCUSSION

Value is hard to define, but undoubtedly users' answers tell us something about the actual perceived value (individual and social value) of the library. They tell us something about its potential value too, e.g. how the existence in a town quarter can influence users and non-users of the library. Considering at what users do in the library and listening to their free answers, library staff, library managers and local representatives can identify the critical factors and the priorities that should be addressed in order to make their public library still more valuable.

This research project cannot claim to have established a comprehensive reliable picture of library impact and value in the participating libraries. 81 respondents do not constitute a statistically valid sample, but the answers provide an insight into which library services are influencing the population, and what benefits users think they are receiving. The aim of this project was to test a method and an instrument in order to verify whether it can be considered suitable, effective and repeatable too.

The method – using a questionnaire that was presented to users and completed in an interview – proved to be effective. The interviews are of course more time-consuming than simply handing out the questionnaires, but when first trying to assess impact, it will be easier when questions can be explained. For example, Question 7 (“If the next year the library was closed down could you get the same information/services elsewhere?”) can lead to doubts about the library’s further existence, if there is no interviewer to explain it. Disadvantages of this method are that it only comprises actual library visitors, and that the answers might be biased by the interviewer.

The questionnaire itself worked on the whole very well, yielding very interesting, partly even surprising data about the library use and the perception of the library by its users.

Nonetheless, the questionnaire could be improved. Based on the gained experience several modifications could be planned in order to make the questionnaire more effective, first of all with regard to its length. Users were often exhausted by the end of the interview, and when not prompted by an interviewer they could answer less carefully, or leave the questionnaire unfinished. However it should not be shortened too much, because its complexity is what can lead to such interesting results.

### **Possible modifications in the questionnaire**

#### *Cut some questions*

Considering the low percentage of people who make use of the library online services, question 4.2 (“What do you do when you visit the library website/Opac?”) could be deleted and saved for a specific online survey (see below).

Question 6 and 6.1 (“Did you increase the use of the library's services during the last 2 years?”) proved to give just a personal impression of the users – the general use statistics of the library show another picture – so it should be deleted too: the answer is unreliable, and more reliable information could come from traditional library statistics.

Question 8 (willingness to pay) could be kept or left out depending on the aim and the target of the research: monetary value is not very useful in order to understand the deeper value of the library and of its services, and it surely doesn't give any useful information about how to improve them. On the other side, it has the huge advantage that the results are quantifiable, and that the respondents seem to be quite able to estimate their library’s value in terms of money. In addition, these results can be very effectual when demonstrating library value to funders, local representatives or the public.

#### *Change, cut or merge some answer options*

In question 3 – “What do you do when you visit the library?” – options 7 (“listen to audio materials”) and 8 (“watch videos, films in the library”) could be easily merged.

In question 5 – “Have you benefited from visiting the library or using its online services?” – options 2 (“I developed new skills, new interests”) and 3 (“The library helped me to keep up-to-date”) could be merged; option 6 (“The library helped me to save time”) was difficult to understand for the majority of interviewees, so it should be explained more clearly. Option 7 (“I got helpful information for business and commerce”) proved to be not significant as almost no one chose it, so it could be deleted. Apparently, currently – of course, things could change in the future – Italian public libraries are not seen as an opportunity for helping business. Finally option 10 (“I made contact with people of many kinds”), that was clearly meant to suggest that the library can be a place of social inclusion, proved to be tricky and often difficult to understand: it could be better deleted. Furthermore, according to this project's results and to the interviewees' answers, two new options could be added to this question: saving money and benefits for the children.

Question 7 (“If the next year the library was closed down could you get the same information/services elsewhere?”) contained multiple answers. But as some options exclude others, this should be clearly restricted to the first answers, showing where the respondents think they could get the same information.

#### *Add a few questions*

At the beginning a question could be added about the time spent in the library: it would be interesting to understand how much time people usually spend in the library, and – for instance – how much time is spent by those who most value the library, or by those who visit it often etc.

Within the personal data, it seems essential to have further information about the respondents' education and occupation.

The option to delete question 3 regarding activities in the library was considered but dismissed: even if it isn't specifically focused on benefits, it helps the respondents to consider what they can do in the library, giving them the chance to answer more precisely to the questions about benefits. On the other hand, it helps researchers to better understand how people use the library.

The revised questionnaire displayed in Appendix 2 can be considered as one of the project's results. It is a tested instrument that could be used by other public libraries, not only in Italy. Compared with the questionnaire used for the interviews it is very much aligned with the original IFLA questionnaire (IFLA, 2011), as many of the deleted questions/answers were previously added in the – mistaken – belief that a few additions could give more comprehensive results.

### **LIMITATIONS AND RECCOMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE IMPACT SURVEYS**

As mentioned earlier, up to 2011 no impact evaluation project was carried out in Italy, so this work was the first attempt to find a method – suitable to the Italian reality – to measure the impact of Italian public libraries. Being a pilot study specific limitations were needed – with regards to the participating libraries, with regards to the survey sample, and also with regards to the number of respondents.

A future impact survey might consider non-users as well as library users. If library users' answers are essential in order to understand the actual value of libraries, non-users opinion would be really important too (Aabø, 2005). They could explain why people don't go to the library, what their image of a library is like, and whether they think a library is valuable even if they don't receive direct benefits from it.

Given the low percentage of library e-services users inside the library, it seems also necessary to plan an online survey addressed to the users of library e-services – on the library website or on its facebook page – and specifically concerning the e-services' use (and benefits).

Finally, though an impact evaluation survey can be effective if done in a single library, it is recommended to carry out an evaluation project on a regional or national level. In a joint project it will be easier to attain the necessary (economic and human) resource, but – above all – only a project based on a broad library community will have the authority for achieving reliable and statistically valid results, and finally decide on a uniform and acknowledged method for measuring impact.

## CONCLUSION

The project was in general successful, and the chosen method (questionnaire + interview) proved to be adequate for identifying the benefits that users receive from the library – or that they believe to receive via the library.

One of the most interesting ideas generated by this research is that the *impact* of a library has much to do with the critical topic of the *sense* or *significance* of the library: what are the library's aims and relevance today – when so much information can be found and downloaded from the Internet – and what is its future? Understanding the value of the library for people means to understand what the library presently is and how it could become still more valuable for the community.

Other studies – not only impact evaluation studies, but also cost-benefit analysis – lead to a similar conclusion: Elliott et al. (2007) found that the output acknowledged by every participant of their research was that they were better able to understand their library. It is also noteworthy that the main Italian specialist for economic impact evaluation felt the necessity to write about the sense of the library directly after publishing a book about the economic impact of libraries (Ventura, 2010; 2011).

So, if advocacy for libraries and promotion of the library's value are the primary reasons for an impact evaluation project, the most important issue seems to be a better understanding of what we could call the *(es)sense* of library.

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Appendix 1  
The original questionnaire

# What are libraries worth.

## Italian Public Libraries Impact Survey

This questionnaire is part of a research project concerning some libraries of Bologna, Modena and Castelfranco Emilia.

We want to know how important the library and its services are for you and your

- study and research,
- vocational training/profession,
- further education,
- personal life and well-being.

Your answer can help us to model and develop still better services for you.

Answers are voluntary and anonymous.

Thank you for your interest and cooperation.

---

**1. Are you a registered patron of the library?**  yes  no

**2. In average, how often do you visit the library?**

- daily
- several times per week
- several times per month
- ca. once per month
- less often

**3. What do you do when you visit the library?**

(Check more than one box, if applicable)

- 1. borrow or return books, dvd etc.
- 2. look at the library's online catalogues
- 3. read books, newspapers, magazines etc. in the library
- 4. interlibrary lending
- 5. use copying/scanning facilities
- 6. study/work in the library
- 7. listen to audio material
- 8. watch videos, films in the library
- 9. use library's computers
- 10. use the Internet with my own laptop
- 11. take part in cultural activities/events/exhibitions (lectures, reading groups etc.)
- 12. meet friends
- 13. eat/drink something at the library cafe or at the drink/snacks dispenser
- 14. turn to the staff for help, information, suggestions
- 15. use the children area together with my son/grandchild/as a babysitter etc.
- 16. other (please describe).....

Please name your 3 most frequent activities (e.g. 1, 9, 4) \_\_\_\_\_

**4. Did you ever visit (from home, work etc.) the library website or the library Online catalogue?**

- yes  no

**4.1. If your answer to question 4 was "yes", in average how often do you visit the library website or the online catalogue (Opac)?**

- daily
- several times per week
- several times per month

- ca. once per month
- less often

**4.2. If your answer to question 4 was “yes”, what do you do when you visit the library website/Opac?**

(Check more than one box, if applicable)

- 1. online catalogue
- 2. check my account, make a reservation
- 3. check the library's opening hours
- 4. ask for information
- 5. browse the library's website
- 6. download full-text resources
- 7. get information about the latest item purchased
- 8. get information about coming events/activities
- 9. I'm registered to the public libraries' mailing list service
- 10. read the librarians' blog
- 11. other (please describe) .....

Please name your 3 most frequent activities (e.g. 1, 2, 5) \_\_\_\_\_

**5. Have you benefited from visiting the library or using its online services?**

(Check more than one box, if applicable)

- 1. I received helpful information for school/university
- 2. I developed new skills, new interests
- 3. the library helped me to keep up-to-date
- 4. the library was important for my leisure/recreation
- 5. the library helped me in my profession
- 6. the library helped me to save time
- 7. I found helpful information for business and commerce
- 8. I got helpful information for job seeking (writing a resume, seeking job ads on the internet etc.)
- 9. I received helpful information about the town/neighborhood (community service, public utilities, events, initiatives etc.)
- 10. I made contact with many different kinds of people
- 11. I experienced the library as an enjoyable place where I like to spend some of my time
- 12. I experienced the library as safe and quiet place for studying and reading
- 13. other (please describe) .....

Please name the 3 benefits that were most important for you (e.g. 3, 2, 11) \_\_\_\_\_

**6. Did you increase the use of the library's services during the last 2 years (2009-2010)?**

- yes
- no
- I don't know

**6.1. If your answer was “yes”, which services did you use more often than before?**

Please describe .....

**In the following questions we're going to ask you to picture an unreal scenario where, in the immediate future, you won't be anymore in the condition to use this library and its services. We'd like to know what that would mean for you.**

**(Nb: This is not an actual possibility: this library's existence is NOT under discussion)**

**7. If the next year this library was closed down, could you get the same information/services elsewhere?**

(Check more than one box, if applicable)

- 1. yes
- 2. yes, but it would take more time and effort
- 3. yes, but not everything (if necessary describe.....)
- 4. no
- 5. I don't know

**8. If you think you could get the same services/information elsewhere, where would you get it?**

(Check more than one box, if applicable)

- 1. via the Internet
- 2. in the media (newspapers, radio, television)
- 3. purchase/rent in a bookshop or specialist shops
- 4. from colleagues, friends etc.
- 5. from another library
- 6. other (please describe .....)

**9. A few figures:**

- average price of a book 10 Euros;
- average price of a newspaper 1,20 Euros;
- average price for a 24-hours DVD renting 2-4 Euros;
- lowest rate of an Internet Point per hour 1,50 Euros.

**If you couldn't benefit from library's services, how much do you think you would have to pay – monthly – to obtain the same information/services elsewhere?**

- 1. 0 to 9 Euros
- 2. 10 to 19 Euros
- 3. 20 to 29 Euros
- 4. 30 to 39 Euros
- 5. 40 to 49 Euros
- 6. 50 to 50 Euros
- 7. 60 Euros and more

**Have you got any story you'd like to tell about your experience with the library?**

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

**Personal data**

These additional questions can help us to interpret your answers correctly.

**- How old are you?**

- under 18
- 18 to 24
- 25 to 39
- 40 to 59
- 60 or over

**- Are you:**  F  M

**- Do you have the opportunity to use a computer at home?**  yes  no

**- Do you have internet access at home?**  yes  no

Appendix 2

The revised questionnaire



# What are libraries worth?

## Italian Public Libraries Impact Survey

### 1. Are you a registered patron of the library?

- yes             no

### 2. In average, how often do you visit the library?

- daily  
 several times per week  
 several times per month  
 ca. once per month  
 less often

### 3. In average, how long do you stop at the library?

- From 0 to 30 minutes  
 From 30 minutes to 1 hour  
 1 hour and more

### 3. What do you do when you visit the library?

(Check more than one box, if applicable)

- |                                                                                         |                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. borrow or return books, dvd etc.                                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. look at the library's online catalogues                                              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. read books, newspapers, magazines etc. in the library                                | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. interlibrary lending                                                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. use copying/scanning facilities                                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. study/work in the library                                                            | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. listen to audio material, watch videos, films in the library                         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. use library's computers                                                              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. use the Internet with my own laptop                                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. take part in cultural activities/events/exhibitions (lectures, reading groups etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. meet friends                                                                        | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. eat/drink something at the library cafe or at the drink/snacks dispenser            | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. turn to the staff for help, information, suggestions                                | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14. use the children area together with my son/grandchild/as a babysitter etc.          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15. other (please describe).....                                                        | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Please name your 3 most frequent activities (e.g. 1, 9, 4) \_\_\_\_\_

### 4. Did you ever visit (from home, work etc.) the library website or the library Online catalogue?

- yes             no

#### 4.1. If your answer to question 4 was "yes", in average how often do you visit the library website or the online catalogue (Opac)?

- daily  
 several times per week  
 several times per month  
 ca. once per month  
 less often



**Personal data**

These additional questions can help us to interpret your answers correctly.

**- How old are you?**

- under 18
- 18 to 24
- 25 to 39
- 40 to 59
- 60 or over

**- Are you:**

- F       M

**- Education:**

- primary school
- secondary school
- University (Master, PHD)
- other (please specify).....

**- Do you have the opportunity to use a computer at home?**                       yes                       no

**- Do you have internet access at home?**                                               yes                       no