

Institution: University of Roehampton		
Unit of Assessment: 27 - English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Living Libraries: Using oral histories of libraries in the United Kingdom to advocate for libraries and to shape practice		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2012–2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Shelley Trower	Professor	September 2012 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014–2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Since local authority funding was reduced in 2010, the UK's libraries have experienced a period of unprecedented change, with almost a fifth closing their doors and a drastic reduction in the number of paid librarians. In this difficult climate, the AHRC-funded projects 'Memories of Fiction' and 'Living Libraries' (2014-20) have used oral histories to investigate the role of reading and public libraries in peoples' lives. Through targeted dissemination in the form of policy briefings, creative outputs and public engagement the research has enriched the cultural lives of project participants, revitalised public awareness of the role and value of libraries and encouraged engagement with local libraries. Moreover, the projects have inspired creative practices and enriched the professional development of creative practitioners and informed the advocacy of library organisations and professionals, influencing the future directions of libraries.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Research undertaken by Professor Shelley Trower as PI of two projects has explored the role libraries play both for their users and for the communities in which they are situated. The first project was 'Memories of Fiction: An Oral History of Readers' Life Stories' (MoF, 2014-18) (G1), for which Trower was PI and worked with Amy Tooth Murphy (Research Assistant), Sarah Pyke (PhD), and Graham Smith (Co-I, at Royal Holloway).</p> <p>Reading is an immensely important cultural activity (over 70% of adults report reading as a main free time activity) but leaves few physical traces. The MoF project expanded the study of reading and its histories, by investigating the use of oral interviews. This investigation contributed to the available resources for finding out about the reading experiences of 'ordinary' or non-professional readers (who are less likely to leave written traces as typically studied by book historians). The team drew on Trower's well-established research in both oral history and literary studies to develop the methodology (R1). The team carried out 52 interviews with members of library-based reading groups in South London, and another 18 interviews with LGBTQ readers across Britain (the latter for the PhD project), creating a rich history of people's reading experiences and memories, and helping to demonstrate the significant mental health and wellbeing benefits of both reading and libraries (R2). MoF's key findings (R2) challenged the team's focus as literary scholars on textual interpretation; the interviews instead highlighted the importance of the extratextual contexts of reading as readers interviewed were less inclined to remember <i>what</i> they were reading and more likely to remember how they felt and where they were when reading. A frequently remembered reading context was libraries, and a major strand of the project's findings also included the multiple ways in which libraries benefit people as public and social spaces alongside their function as providers of books; participants described spending time in libraries as children rather than on the streets; studying in libraries; escaping to libraries; making friends in libraries; and even using libraries to survive.</p> <p>In recognition of the project's impact and its potential for further transformative benefits, follow-on funding was awarded for a one-year project, 'Living Libraries' (LL, 2019-20) (G2), with Trower as PI and Pyke as Impact and Engagement Officer. As this research could provide a means for libraries to advocate for themselves, the project was developed in close consultation with stakeholders from the outset, including Libraries Connected, the Chartered Institute for Librarians</p>		

and Information Professionals (CILIP), the Libraries Taskforce, and National Life Stories at the British Library. A further 48 oral history interviewees were selected from library users and workers reflecting a diverse range of people, including from different classes and ethnicities and expanding the spatial dimension of the research to have national reach. Interviews were carried out in towns and cities across England: Falmouth, Newcastle, Chester, Peterborough, and Colliers Wood. The project team also interviewed key national library figures, such as the Arts Council's Director for Libraries and the CEO of CILIP, the UK library and information association.

Four key themes were identified from the MoF (R2) and LL oral histories: (1) the importance of reading and libraries for health and wellbeing; (2) libraries as safe and social spaces; (3) libraries as trusted sources of information; (4) the current and potential role of libraries in contributing to a sustainable future. These findings fed into project outputs, including a policy briefing for library organisations and staff. An over-arching finding is that libraries continue to play an important role in diverse lives, despite ongoing pressure from funding cuts. In these contexts, the underpinning qualitative research provides enhanced understanding of the role and importance of libraries as well as improving the relationship between library users and professionals. It also creates a framework of research-based evidence to allow libraries both to advocate for themselves and to raise awareness of the value of local library provision with the wider public.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1 Trower, S., Smith, G., Tooth, A. (eds.) (2019) Interviews and Reading, *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 16(1). With introduction and contributing article, 'Me mum likes a book, me dad's a newspaper man': Reading, gender and domestic life in '100 Families'. <https://www.participations.org/Volume%2016/Issue%201/contents.htm>.

R2 Trower, S. (2020) Forgetting Fiction: An Oral History of Reading, *Book History*, 23, pp.269-298. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bh.2020.0007>.

G1 'Memories of Fiction: An Oral History of Readers' Life Stories', AHRC funded Standard Grant; value £357,000; PI Trower; 2014-2018.

G2 'Living Libraries', AHRC funded Follow-on Project; value £100,743; PI Trower; 2019-2020.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

At the core of the project are the oral history interviews (R2), which had an immediate impact on the readers and library users spoken to, enriching the cultural lives of project participants. 118 interviews were completed with 84 participants drawn primarily from 11 public libraries and four key national library organisations. At the end of each interview, participants were asked how they had found the process. Responses to this question demonstrate that the interviews provided participants with thought-provoking new insights about the role that libraries had played in their lives. One commented that she was, '*surprised at how enthusiastic I am about it all*', and another that, '*it set me to thinking back to... how libraries have affected my life... I found that I have largely educated myself [through] a library and an art gallery*'. Others commented on the fact that due to the 'taxing' nature of their roles they did not have much opportunity to '*take a step back and reflect on... what you're looking to do in the future*'. The CEO of CILIP commented that the interview caused him to consider the difference in libraries as a theory and the '*physical day to day of those places*' and the interview had given him cause to reflect on how to '*close that gap*' (IMP1).

Following on from the interviews, the research (R1-R2) underpinned a series of public-facing events and media appearances which have revitalised **public awareness of the role and value of libraries and encouraged engagement with local libraries**. These events and appearances have reached approximately 330,000 members of the public between 2015 and 2020 and include: talks at Balham Library, Putney Library, Ibstock Place School, the University of the Third Age and Wordstock Festival; a theatre production hosted by Omnibus Theatre; an exhibition at Clapham Library; media coverage, websites and blog posts; three one-hour radio shows broadcast on Soho Radio; and two creative audio pieces - a documentary and an interactive digital installation called 'The Living Library' - hosted on the project website (IMP2).

In 2018, MoF commissioned interactive exhibitions and performances based on the oral history materials, exploring memories of reading, reading groups and libraries. 'The Living Library' was a two-part event running through May 2018, consisting of sound installations and six performances at Omnibus Theatre and a small outpost exhibition at Clapham Library, which contributed to combined public engagement with over 500 people (IMP2). The launch of the 'Living Library' event included a keynote address by the Vice-Chair of the Libraries All-Party Parliamentary Group, and was attended by project participants, local librarians and key library professionals, including the Director of Libraries for the Arts Council and the President of Libraries Connected. These professionals reported that the event reenergised their support for shared reading and libraries as vital public spaces. The Director of Libraries for the Arts Council reported that *'I will use the example of the production and the experiences I shared with others there to advocate even more strongly for the cohesive benefits of shared reading'* (IMP3). After viewing the performance and installation, attendees reported feeling more inclined to use public libraries, to join reading groups, and/or to read more broadly. The production prompted 70% of respondents to think differently about libraries and encouraged them to engage more with their local library. Specific responses to this effect included: *'It made me want to visit them again, as I haven't been to one in years'; 'much more incentive to go to one again'; 'encourage the children I work with to visit more often'; 'I want to explore more and see what's on offer locally'*. Asked if they would do anything new or differently as a result of the production, 85% said they would, including numerous responses which mentioned reading more frequently and talking with others about reading more often - as well as the intention to *'Take some ideas back to school to help engage young people in reading'* (IMP3).

Wide public engagement work has further extended the reach of the research (R1-R2), shaping public understanding of and attitudes to the value of libraries, informing an estimated 330,000 members of the public about diverse changes in library provision. This activity included appearances on television and radio and contributions to print/web media aimed at bringing awareness to the project. Trower discussed the research on *London Live* on 4 May 2018, reaching the programme's approximately 214,000 viewers and also wrote an article in *The Big Issue* (circulation 83,073). Beyond their own websites, both projects also produced blog posts on external sites, including those of the Libraries Taskforce and the British Library (IMP2). Trower and Pyke produced three one-hour radio shows for Soho Radio's Culture Channel in October 2020 and Soho Radio supported the project with free studio, editing and production time. Living Libraries' audio material was used as the basis for these programmes, further encouraging engagement with public libraries by raising the profile of their role and value among 32,220 listeners (IMP2).

The websites for both projects (www.memoriesoffiction.org and www.livinglibraries.uk), held 70 blog posts in total, and links to the project's outputs and resources allowed further opportunities for the public to engage with the research. To date, the websites have attracted 16,498 views from 7,711 visitors in 110 countries. A 15-minute audio documentary and two sound collages are among the resources that feature on the website (www.livinglibraries.uk/listen) (IMP2). Engagement with the Living Libraries website shows that visitors were more likely than before to visit their local libraries and use the oral history content themselves. Site-users wrote on evaluations that they were *'More inclined to visit my local library'* and *'More inclined to check out my library's digital offer'*. One wrote that he *'would like to include some quotes'* whilst *'designing a library app in collaboration with staff and students to try and modernise the library service and make it more accessible to users'*, and another that they would share the website with their *'Colleagues, as an example of innovation & new approaches during Covid-19'* (IMP4).

The art and performance events, including 'The Living Library' production and performance and the 'The Living Library' digital art installation on the project website (<https://www.livinglibraries.uk/living-library>) have also inspired the creative practices and enriched the professional development of the non-academic creative practitioners who worked on them. Their involvement has proved crucial to their professional development, in particular through providing opportunities to work in new media. The Director of the original Living Library production reported that the project transformed her understanding of academic collaborations and research contexts. The collaboration also gave her the *'opportunity to work with sound and scenography'*

and led to a significant change in professional direction, inspiring her *‘to move towards live arts rather than “conventional” theatre’*. Work on ‘The Living Library’ online installation provided her *‘a unique opportunity to work in a digital medium’* (IMP5). Each member of the creative team emphasised the benefits of using academic research and the interview material as a stimulus for art.

Finally, Trower’s research (R1-R2) has informed the advocacy of library organisations and professionals and influenced the future directions of libraries. Whilst consulting stakeholder library organisations and professionals in the planning phases of the LL project, Trower established that library professionals had particular interest in the oral histories (R2, as informed by the research in R1), both as a tool for more convincing, strongly-evidenced advocacy and as an aid to better understanding the changing role of libraries in peoples’ lives. Consequently, the interviews were planned to deliver these benefits to the leaders of major library advocacy organisations, providing them with unique evidence to better achieve their aims. The research has since been used to inform this advocacy, enhancing and illustrating the statistical information of other studies already undertaken. As the President of Libraries Connected has attested, *‘The stories told ... give voice to the value of libraries, demonstrating the vital role we play at the heart of communities, the health benefits that library events and activities bring and, the still important role of access to a wealth of literature and information’*. The interviews also allow Libraries Connected *‘to more closely examine how people use libraries and how those uses have changed over time and might further evolve to suit community needs. [It] offers Libraries Connected a unique and vital resource for achieving our aims and mission’* (IMP6). The National Director of Libraries for Arts Council England further states that, *‘As a result of your consultation, you’ve provided me with so many vivid and evocative quotes from library users, staff members and advocates that I have used and will continue to use in the talks I give to advocate for the future funding of libraries’* (IMP7).

On 1 June 2020, a policy briefing based on the interviews was published, providing libraries with up-to-date and in-depth qualitative research into their most pressing concerns and allowing them to use the findings to make the case for themselves. Despite the cancellation of a round of release talks and the launch happening at a time when libraries had closed their doors due to the COVID-19 lockdown, the policy pack has been employed by a range of library organisations and professionals. The Head of Library, Heritage & Adult Education Services at Merton Council notes that the *‘website and materials [G2] are a great tool and something that we are using to continue to improve our understanding of how users engage with libraries’* (IMP8). The President of Libraries Connected has stated that, *‘The pack complements and adds strength to the work Libraries Connected have focused on around advocacy for libraries in our ever-changing world’* (IMP6). The Director of Libraries for Arts Council England states that *‘Your policy pack makes a clear and compelling case for the potential that public libraries have... To have academic rigour reiterating all of the assertions that I and my colleagues... make about the case for public libraries has been absolutely invaluable in advocating for a strong public library service’* (IMP7). Other project participants have also commented on their use of the policy pack to support *‘my work as an advocate for Public Libraries and their massive potential’* or as a point of reference for *‘the town councillors to emphasise what an important part a library plays within a community’* (IMP1). The Co-Chair of the Libraries All Party Parliamentary Group states that the policy recommendations, especially for public health, will *‘form the basis for the APPG’s ongoing work [currently with Health Education England] for the rest of the year – and beyond’* (IMP9). Further, the project has informed how managers and colleagues are taking major public libraries forward. The Manager for Community Hubs and Libraries in Newcastle, reports that the recommendations *‘form a key part of our advocacy to citizens, colleagues and local councillors and MPs. They will also help us shape our vision and plan for the coming three years.’* (IMP10). The research is informing library communications, practices and policy, with a view to shaping how libraries will provide essential community resources in the future.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

IMP1 Selection of oral history interviews from Living Libraries (G2) attesting to participants’ new realisations about their roles in libraries. Available on request.

- IMP2** Memories of Fiction and Living Libraries Metrics Report, 2014-2020 showing approximate attendance numbers at public engagement events and members of the public reached through media appearances.
- IMP3** Responses to evaluations from attendees at library talks (2015-2018) and 'The Living Library' exhibition (2018).
- IMP4** Responses to evaluation from the Living Libraries website from June 2020 to December 2020.
- IMP5** Testimonial from Director of Seadog Theatre dated 20 December 2020 describing the professional opportunities provided by her involvement in creating both the production/performance and digital art installation versions of 'The Living Library'.
- IMP6** Testimonial from the President of Libraries Connected dated 20 August 2020 about her use of the interviews (**R2**, **R3**) and policy pack in advocacy for public libraries.
- IMP7** Testimonial from the National Director of Public Library for Arts Council England dated 13 October 2020 about her use of the interviews (R2, R3) and policy pack in advocacy for public library provision.
- IMP8** Testimonial from Head of Library, Heritage & Adult Education Service, Merton Council dated 6 October 2020 illustrating use of the policy pack in directions of library service.
- IMP9** Testimonial from former Co-Chair of the Libraries All Party Parliamentary Group dated 18 December 2020 describing uses of the policy pack.
- IMP10** Testimonial from Manager, Community Hubs and Libraries, Newcastle City Council dated 25 September 2020 about how the policy pack will shape community resources provided by Newcastle City Council.