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The citizenship information needs of the UK public: the quest for representativeness in methodological approach

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1. Introduction and background to the project

The Citizenship Information project investigates an area of growing significance and concern to public libraries in information service provision. Citizenship information and the role of information in helping the public to participate in the democratic process, in particular via electronic democracy, are at present highly significant issues, both for the information profession and for those involved in political life. Although there has been much comment on these and related concepts, there has been no attempt to gather evidence (positive or negative) as to the general public's interest in and need for citizenship information. Indeed, part of the project involved the attempt to achieve a better definition of citizenship information both in terms of the subject categories which it subsumes and of the respondents' perceptions of the kinds of information that might be connoted by the term. The researchers did not want to impose a definition on respondents but rather to develop and formalise one that would emerge from the data collected. This project seeks to investigate the extent to which members of the public in the UK have expressed or unexpressed needs for citizenship information, and to explore their preferred routes to the acquisition of such information. The project constitutes a piece of basic research, which would have implications for a range of information service providers. This paper reviews the theoretical and methodological approaches taken in carrying out the project rather than detailing the results. The results to date are available in the form of an interim report.¹

The Citizenship Information project has been ongoing at a time of great change in terms of information policy formulation and development. Until relatively recently UK government policy paid little attention to the concept of citizenship information. *The Local Government (Access to Information) Act* (1986) gave the public the right to attend council meetings and to gain access to relevant documents. The *Citizen's Charter* initiative (1991) led the government to introduce, in 1994, a non-statutory *Code of Practice on Access to Government Information*. In support of the initiative the government's Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency (CCTA) established a UK Government Information Web Server. The *Freedom of Information White Paper* was published in December 1997, with a view to establishing a general statutory right of access to official records and information. The *Crown Copyright Green Paper* (1998), mooted the possibility of its abolishment and the placing of all material originated by government in the public domain.

Professional and representative bodies and other interested organisations have indicated the importance of public libraries providing citizenship information. The Library Association's pre-election *Library Manifesto* in 1997 declared that 'if citizens are to exercise their democratic rights and make informed choices they must have access to political, social, scientific and economic information'. UNESCO's *Public Library Manifesto (1994)* highlighted the role of libraries in enabling "well-informed citizens to exercise their democratic rights and to play an active part in society"; and the *Public Library Review (1995)* stressed that "access to fuller information is an aid to democracy, and should increase a citizen's ability to exercise his or her franchise and to influence policy". The Coalition for

¹ An interim report detailing the results of Stage 1 of the project is available from the authors.

Public Information (CoPI) was established in 1996 with the aim of ensuring that information and communications infrastructures in the UK enable individuals and organisations to participate in 'social, economic and democratic activity'. It was within this context that the researchers sought a better understanding of what they termed citizenship information.

In the aftermath of the *Public Library Review*, a Library and Information Commission working party was set up to develop a public library networking plan which resulted in the publication of a report, *New Library: the people's network*. In April 1998, the government's response to the LIC report recognised that 'the proposed public libraries network will play a central role in delivering its [the government's] wider objectives for the role of technology in society ... to allow Britain to increase its prosperity and quality of life' (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1998, p.4). Despite the rejection of the *Information for All* bid for Millennium Commission funds, *the New Opportunities Fund* will disburse five million pounds for the digitisation of educational materials together with twenty million pounds to train **all** library staff in information and communications technology by the year 2001 (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1997). The proposed People's Network will link with the *National Grid for Learning* (Department for Education and Employment, 1997) as part of an integrated network of online learning and teaching materials.

Increasingly over recent years government information in electronic form has become accessible via the Internet. The Government Information Service attempts to provide a coordinated single point for information produced by departments and agencies of government. The Parliamentary Channel Online, the web site for the Houses of Parliament, provides a range of information about the activities of Parliament. All UK political parties now have a web presence. UK Citizens Online Democracy (UKCOD) was established in 1996 by Irving Rappaport, backed by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, to develop opportunities for wider participation in the democratic process and to promote public participation in government. However, as of November 1997, only 25 constituency level Labour Party web sites were found, representing fewer than 4% of the 659 UK constituencies. Only 12 web sites were found for individual MPs, representing only 2.8% of the constituencies with a Labour MP. The majority of local government authorities have established sites.

In November 1996, the Green Paper *government.direct*, was issued as a prospectus for delivery of government services to citizens and the business community using electronic communications technologies. As part of this proposal it was suggested that public access terminals could be provided 'in places such as post offices, libraries and shopping centres' and eventually via cable and digital television. In the aftermath of the 1997 General Election, the incoming government instituted a reappraisal of the *government.direct* initiative. The White Paper on *Freedom of Information* published in December 1997 suggested the likely need for the practical emphasis to be upon Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) in enabling public access to sought information. The *Electronic government* report (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 1998) discussed the benefits and issues arising for government of these and other UK initiatives. It identified three areas of concern, where it was felt that electronic government would have a significant impact: in the use of ICTs to improve efficiency and effectiveness of the executive functions of government, including delivery of public services; in the potential support of greater transparency in government by enabling public access to a greater range of information generated and collected by government; and in the consequent effecting of significant changes resulting from ICTs in the relationship between the citizen and the state.

Existing research into citizenship information needs

The Citizenship Information project has built upon a significant body of existing research, such as that of Usherwood's (1989) work on public libraries and the Comedia report (1993) investigating welfare rights and citizens' advice. Swash and Marsland (1994) suggested that there has been a rise in public expectation as a result of the Citizens' Charter initiative. Watson *et al* (1980) surveyed the community information services of seven public library authorities. Toop and Forejt (1993) surveyed the provision of community information in five UK public libraries. Bunch (1988) discussed the information/advice debate in relation to public libraries' provision of community information. Moore and Steele (1991) observed that this debate led to a general consensus that public libraries should concentrate on the provision of factual information and on referral. Black and Muddiman (1997) identified three conceptions of community librarianship 'the welfarist, based on paternalist and statist philosophies associated with the mid-century welfare state; the radical associated with ideas about decentralisation, community autonomy and freedom of access to information; and the consumerist, based on a commitment to customer satisfaction and market research'. Milner (1997) argued for the move away from a need for 'computer literacy in people' and towards 'people literacy in computers', claiming the need for extensive research into the real potential for achieving improvements for citizens via technology, before huge sums are expended on systems that may fail. The Policy Studies Institute (1995) pointed out that direct evidence of citizenship information need can be found in the records of the number of enquiries made to information agencies and other service providers, while *indirect* evidence of citizenship information need can be drawn from various demographic, social and economic markers.

There is also a significant body of research-based work on information needs, much of which has focused on particular localities or on particular marginalised groups, and a small number of examples are outlined here. For instance, the Centre for Research on User Studies at the University of Sheffield (Beal, 1977) conducted interviews with 206 residents from a representative sample (i.e. according to socio-economic data) of Sheffield wards. The interviewees were questioned on their awareness of the city's information and advice centres, and on their possible courses of action when requiring information on consumer, legal, welfare and medical matters. Bruce *et al* (1991), carried out an interview-based social survey of 595 visually-impaired adults for the Royal National Institute for the Blind. Tinker *et al* (1994) carried out an exploratory study of the information needs of elderly people.

2. Project aims and objectives

The aims of the Citizenship Information project were to measure demand for citizenship information and establish the nature of information need exhibited by users.

The objectives of the project were to:

1. define and describe citizenship information
2. investigate the nature and extent of problems or situations in which users may exhibit a need for information which would fall within the definition established above
3. to investigate the connections or relationship between information and citizenship or democracy from the users' perspective
4. to explore the impact of demographic factors (i.e. age, social grade, ethnicity, etc.) on need and patterns of use
5. to investigate users' preferred methods of accessing information and preferred methods of information delivery, including electronic methods of delivery
6. to explore the attitudes of users (both public library members and non-members) to the public library service and its role in disseminating citizenship information

7. to identify ways in which public libraries might extend membership by increasing awareness of their role in providing citizenship information
8. to explore the impact upon public libraries of the need for citizenship information, in the light of the data gathered above

Stage 1 of the project, which will be described in some detail in this paper has gathered data to support objectives 1 - 5. The second stage of the project which is presently ongoing will not only gather additional data relating to these objectives but will also tackle more directly the final three objectives.

3. Theoretical approach and choice of methodological tools

The project sought to adopt a phenomenological approach where 'a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon' was to be put in place, in that it seeks to investigate a specific problem of the interpretation of meaning in the social world. The project also sought to gather data that would allow of three levels of interpretation, in line with Neuman (1991): *first order interpretation*, by the investigation of the perceived personal reasons or motives of men/women in using information; *second order interpretation*, where the researchers attempted to elicit an underlying coherence or sense of meaning in the data, placing people's need in its context of their broader lives; and *third order interpretation*, where the researchers attempted to assign general theoretical significance to the results

The approach taken by the researchers drew upon Schutz's (1967) theories about the mode of understanding of that which is alien to us, as the experience of all who are other must be. Schutz emphasises the importance of gaining a genuine understanding of the other person, rather than an abstract conceptualisation of actions and thoughts as of belonging to a type. Schutz (1946), in his discussion of the social distribution of knowledge and information need, identified three categories of information user, the *expert* with a narrow and strictly defined zone of relevance and a well developed set of rules for seeking and acquiring information, the *well-informed citizen* who seeks to define zones of relevance and to look for information where appropriate and the *man on the street* who is unaware of the structure of relevance itself and has little sense of requiring information, where he argues that 'imposed relevancies remain empty, unfulfilled anticipations'. He posited that different persons, in different life situations may possess different world views and make different demands on sources of information as a result: he argues that information need may range from a need for recipe information, through reasoned opinion to expert knowledge.

The problems associated with the development of a body of well-informed citizens have been exacerbated since Schutz developed his theory in 1946, by an increasing anonymity in social life and by the exponential growth in the amount of information available to the individual and the alternative modes of access possible in the communication of information. Schutz's theory is particularly significant in the context of the present discussion in that he argues the significance of the need for 'the well-informed citizen in a democratic society to make his private opinion prevail over the public opinion of the man on the street'. This argument is timely in the light of present concerns with the concept of *electronic democracy* and the awareness of political institutions that it is essential to create a body of well-informed citizens who can make informed choices.

Another influential theorist has been Bailey (1948) who emphasised the power of public opinion over politicians yet signals the extent to which such opinion lags behind public events and the degree of public lethargy over many issues: 'they did not know; they did not care; they were confused as to what it was all about'. There is a growing awareness today

amongst political parties and public institutions of the importance of testing what the electorate think about issues. However, as Bailey (1948) comments ‘... public opinion is awkward to describe, elusive to define, difficult to measure and impossible to see, although it may be felt ... Public opinion is so apathetic and preoccupied, so changeful and impulsive, so ill-informed and misinformed’.

With the present project we are dealing with an interesting and complex area, that is the convergence in the ‘man in the street’ between the need to access information in order to take advantage of the rights and to accomplish the duties of the citizen (forming opinion as a result of access to information) and concurrently ‘the man in the street’ as the individual who has formed opinion and is, therefore, a source of information for policy makers and those in government. The work of Dervin (1976) and Wilson (1994) in developing models of information need and information seeking behaviour has also been highly influential in developing the present project, in particular in the attempt to develop a model of this highly complex area of government/citizen interchange.

4. Studying information needs - methodological approaches

In a review of the previous 50 years’ literature on user studies, Wilson (1994) pointed out that, compared with work on the use of library systems and services, research into information users and their needs had been relatively scarce. On describing much of the work that *had* been carried out, he was critical of the “generally inept survey methodologies employed” which were, for example, lacking in scientifically drawn samples and multi-variate statistical analyses. Wilson’s comments echoed the earlier criticisms of, amongst others, Nancy Rohde (1986), who explained that most information needs investigations had been done from the perspective of the information provider, were somewhat descriptive in nature, and were based purely on users’ expressed demands. Indeed, as Craghill (1988) explained, it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that those involved in the field began to question the assumption that expressed demand was indicative of need. Consequently, in addition to the collection of relatively simple quantitative data, there has been a trend towards the use of more qualitative techniques which have examined the reasons why users want particular information, and which have aimed to establish users’ unexpressed or unmet needs. Craghill pointed out that much of this work, in the UK at least, has focused on the users of business information services (for example, Roberts *et al* (1987), who carried out over 500 structured interviews with business library users). This, she suggested, was partly due to financial and political reasons, and partly because business information services are relatively easy to define and delineate.

Studies of the general information needs of the general public, though, have been somewhat rarer. The most notable was that carried out in Baltimore, USA, by Warner *et al* (1973), who interviewed members of almost 1,300 households. These residents were not asked directly to state their information needs, but rather were asked to cite recent examples of their own problems which required information. The survey found that those individuals who were the most disadvantaged were least likely to indicate information problems, which suggested that they were perhaps less articulate or less willing to articulate their needs. Interestingly, the Baltimore study also examined the ability of the city’s information agencies to provide solutions to residents’ problems. It was found, though, that there was something of a lack of knowledge of these problems amongst the information professionals. More than twenty years later, Wilson (1994) still regarded the Baltimore study as a bench-mark for large-scale investigations of this kind.

With regard to the methodologies employed during information needs studies, Craghill explained that these have tended to be the types used in social surveys, namely questionnaires (either self-administered or administered by the researchers) and/or structured

or semi-structured interviews. As Kempson (1990) pointed out, each of these methods has its own inherent advantages and disadvantages. Indeed, she suggested that, in small user communities at least, user discussion groups might be a useful addition or alternative.

Hewins (1990) discussed the several hundred information need and use studies traced for the 1986 - 1989 period and commented on their lack of novelty and applicability because 'most of these types of studies use the method of questionnaires and users surveys'. Sturges and Chimseu (1996) deplore 'the facile view that information needs and use are best explored by means of surveys' and conclude that 'there might be something less than fully revealing about the results of questionnaire surveys'. This argument however is based upon a perhaps mistaken belief that it is impossible to achieve a sufficiently high number of responses that tell us anything beyond the superficial - that one cannot achieve quantity and quality simultaneously, that they are somehow mutually exclusive. The converse of the argument might also be made of course, that it is impossible to generalise from in-depth investigations of small numbers of respondents. It should be borne in mind that many researchers who have used the focus group as a methodological tool have emphasised that it should be used as a preliminary means of developing hypotheses that will be further tested by methods that allow generalisations to be drawn (see, for example, Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). There must be doubts as to the extent to which a small number of focus groups, however well the respondents may have been selected, can ever be truly representative. Those of us who have experimented with focus groups will know the extent to which we can see that individual participants are unique and can be seen as representative of no one but themselves. One of the present authors has taught for more than ten years now, and, despite having worked closely throughout that time with student representatives, has yet to find one that was truly representative of even a type of student. Indeed, on reflection there may be an interesting study there which has implications for educational theory.

Another aspect of information seeking research that requires exploration is that of applied research where the need may be to gather evidence *supporting* a hypothesis, raising questions as this approach does of bias and objectivity.

The present research project in its first stage sought to make generalisations about a very large user group, that is the UK general public across the whole geographic region. There were to be no limiting factors. The decision to carry out a survey was, therefore, inevitable. A sufficient body of data was needed to ensure that any conclusions drawn were valid and to allow statistical analyses. It was also felt that it was important to gather a numerically comparable body of responses to that typically gathered in a valid piece of market research, such as carried out by Eurobarometer, Gallup or MORI. If the results were to carry conviction and be influential with all sectors and in particular policy makers, then it was felt that the numbers had to be quantitatively at a level that would ensure reliability. Such numbers would also be necessary for significant multi-variate statistical analyses to be carried out. However, the researchers were also keenly aware of the potential limitations of the survey by questionnaire as a data collection tool and sought at all times that the data that would be collected would be capable of summation and interpretation that would be revealing and meaningful in terms of understanding of citizenship information needs.

The choice of methodological tool for the first stage was not a simple decision and it was not made lightly. The relative merits of the alternative methods available were weighed. The survey by questionnaire was also intended to serve as the first stage and only one element of a project where other methods would be used to further explore survey results and more intangible questions such as users' unexpressed citizenship information needs. In design of questionnaires and interview schedules, the Baltimore and Sheffield work was particularly influential in informing the process.

5. Methodology execution

Stage 1 of the research consisted of a questionnaire-based survey of members of the UK public, which was designed to elicit preliminary data on their citizenship information needs. For example, it included questions on past problems and situations in which respondents had required the use of citizenship information; their particular subject interests, such as education, health care or housing; the organisations and individuals that might be approached for this information; and the potential level of use of electronic sources of citizenship information. This questionnaire was initially tested locally, on 100 users of Aberdeen City Libraries. The pilot results were fully analysed in order to reveal design deficiencies.

For the dissemination of the questionnaire, the project team enlisted the help of various public library authorities, Citizens Advice Bureaux and other generalist information and advice agencies throughout the country. All, of course, are organisations used extensively by the general public. In order that true nation-wide coverage could be achieved, dissemination took place in each of the 13 official UK regions - that is the 10 Government Office Regions in England, plus Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In selecting the precise areas within these regions where the dissemination would take place, the project team was mindful of the second stage of the research, which proposed that Library and Information Studies students from throughout the UK would gather more qualitative data on citizenship information needs through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with members of the public. With this in mind, dissemination largely took place in towns and cities hosting a library school.

In each of the 13 regions, one public library authority, plus either one CAB or other advice agency, were asked to distribute questionnaires to their users. In addition, in order to reach a wider cross-section of the individual communities, the public library authorities were asked to distribute half of their allocated questionnaires from a central reference library, and the other half from one of their busier branch libraries. Overall, some 2,830 questionnaires were disseminated from 42 service points in 28 different organisations. This took place over a five-month period between June and October 1997.

Each public library authority was asked if systematic sampling might be used, whereby every 10th user approaching the issue or enquiry desk in each distribution point would be given a questionnaire. This was a methodology that had already been used successfully in public libraries, during previous research conducted by the project team. Given that the number of enquiries received annually by CABx throughout the UK is approximately one-eighth of that received by public libraries, the CABx and the other advice agencies were asked if they could hand out questionnaires to every 2nd user. It is appreciated, of course, that the staff involved in all of the organisations will have had many other pressures on their time, so that such an exact systematic approach may not always have been possible. In order to obtain as high a response rate as possible, all organisations were also asked if they could request that the users complete and return the questionnaires at the time of their distribution.

Overall, this methodology proved successful. Almost 1,300 questionnaires were completed and returned, giving a very pleasing response rate of 45.7%. Northern Ireland had the most impressive return of 75%, with most of the other regions obtaining between 40% and 50%. The one exception was Wales which had an inexplicably disappointing response of less than 15%. Indeed, it is worth mentioning that, prior to dissemination commencing, it was suggested by some information professionals in Wales that a better response might be obtained from the Welsh public if the questionnaire was in the Welsh language. With this in mind, and with the invaluable assistance of a Welsh-speaking colleague at the Robert Gordon University, a Welsh-language version of the questionnaire was made available, along with the English version, at the participating organisations in Wales. However, this

appeared to have little or no effect on the response rate, and in fact only 9 out of the 150 Welsh language survey forms were completed and returned.

There was an overwhelmingly better response from the public libraries as a distribution mechanism. They obtained an overall response rate of over 69%, compared with just over 40% in the CABx, and the particularly poor response of just over 8% in the other advice agencies. The staff in the CABx and the other advice agencies suggested three major factors responsible for the lower responses in their organisations:

- Firstly, some clients, because of the nature of their individual problems and enquiries, were simply too angry or upset to want to fill up a questionnaire.
- Secondly, the literacy levels of some clients was such that completing the questionnaire was difficult, if not impossible. While assisting clients with the completion of official forms can form a substantial part of these agencies' workload, the staff felt, perhaps quite understandably, that they could not afford the time to assist users with the completion of what was a 4-page questionnaire.
- Thirdly, a number of the CABx and advice agencies had no central reception or enquiry point from which questionnaires could be readily distributed. As a result, the survey forms often had to be simply left lying in these organisations' public waiting rooms, albeit with posters and signs to attract the public's attention. It would appear that this situation was generally not conducive to encouraging the users to complete the questionnaire, and that it certainly compares unfavourably with physically handing the survey forms to users.

Over 75% of the completed questionnaires were returned by public libraries, so it might initially appear that the survey results would be somewhat biased towards the opinions of public library users, and not really representative of the UK population as a whole. It should perhaps be remembered, though, that the Library and Information Commission's recent report *New Library: The People's Network* points out that libraries are currently used by 58% of the UK public, therefore it might be argued that library users *are* fairly representative of the overall population. In any case, although the survey was not designed to reach a precise, stratified sample of the population as a whole, the respondents' demographic details, obtained from the first part of the questionnaire, revealed that the characteristics of the sample were sufficiently close to national trends, and that no particular groups were excluded or poorly represented.

For example, the male-female ratio in the sample was identical to that nationally. And there was a good spread of age groups in the sample, although unfortunately, because the age groups in the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) standard for Public Library User Surveys were used, and these differ from those used by the Office for National Statistics, no direct comparison with national percentages could be made. The proportions of the sample who were economically active or inactive were also very close to national figures, although when examining the social classes of those respondents currently in employment, using the Standard Occupational Classification, it was found that the respondents came to a greater extent proportionally from the professional and managerial classes than for the UK as a whole. However, the proportion of the sample who belonged to an ethnic minority group was remarkably similar to the UK figure, as was the percentage who were disabled in some way, as well as the percentage who lived in rural areas. It is believed, therefore, that the survey sample was sufficiently representative of the UK population for generalisations to be drawn.

The data from the completed questionnaires were analysed using the *SPSS for Windows* statistical software package; and significant statistical relationships between variables (at the 95% confidence level) were identified using the chi-square test. All demographic variables were examined for all informative responses in terms of significance. In every one of the many instances where a significant relationship was found, variations were carefully considered in terms of the conclusions that might be drawn or hypotheses that might be posited, whether or not the reasons for these variations were evident or could readily be inferred. Variables were frequently found to have a significant impact on results, particularly in identifying groups that might be deemed to be in danger of exclusion from use of ICTs. Interestingly, the geographic variable was found to be influential for many of the results. These results will be explored further in later stages of the research. However, it is felt that it was a major advantage of the quantity of data collected that such revealing analyses were enabled.

In Stage 2 of the project, a major survey by personal interview is underway as this paper is presented. These interviews will elicit more qualitative, extended and individual responses and the results should form a more in-depth and less predetermined set of data. Interviews are planned with 975 respondents across the 13 geographic regions of the UK, ensuring again a sufficient body of data quantitatively for significant multi-variate analyses to be made. These will test and further add to the knowledge gained from Stage 1 of the project. Stage 2 also involves extended, face-to-face interviews with information providers across all regions. The final element will consist of focus groups, drawing together representatives of particular sector or interest groups, where the participants will provide feedback and informed response to the results of both surveys.

5. Conclusions

The first stage of this project has successfully collected valid data across a numerically significant and representative sample of the UK general public about their information needs and information seeking behaviour in relation to what has been termed citizenship information. As a result a definition of citizenship information, and a better understanding of what that concept means to the public, has been developed. The survey by questionnaire has produced data that are held to be sound in that there were no questions that respondents had difficulty in completing or misinterpreted. As this survey was designed to be preliminary it has allowed the researchers to refine and further develop techniques to be employed in the second stage survey by interview and focus group discussions. The authors hope that this will result in more meaningful and revealing data being gathered. They would argue that some such form of triangulation is necessary to ensure that learning in the process of research takes place.

The researchers have gone beyond the first level of interpretation in seeking to elicit an underlying coherence or sense of meaning in the data, placing people's need in its context of their broader lives, in a *second order interpretation*. This has largely been based around an attempt to develop a more general understanding of what citizenship information means to people generally and to particular groups of the population, as defined by demographic variables that impact significantly upon results. A model of government/citizen information interchange is in the process of being developed by the researchers, which builds upon Schulz's conception of the varying levels of expertise of the individual.

In an attempt to achieve a *Third order interpretation*, the researchers have sought to assign general theoretical significance to the results. A number of theories are possible that require further validation and which may be further supported by the results of the second stage of the project. These include: that there are certain groups of the population that may be in particular danger of being excluded from access to information, in particular if that

information is made available in electronic form; that certain demographic variables have a significant impact on information seeking and preferred routes to information and that these require further investigation, as for example in the very significant variations in response that were found relating to the geographic region in which respondents resided.

A phenomenon has also been observed both in the present project and in work carried out by one of the researchers as part of her personal research. This phenomenon would appear to demonstrate that there is a tendency for information users to interpret and measure information needs in different ways according to the manner in which they are asked about (and therefore conceptualise) these needs. This phenomenon, which might be termed one of idealised increasing frequency, can be observed in operation where users show an increasing tendency to predict greater future frequency of idealised needs particularly in relation to active citizen information.

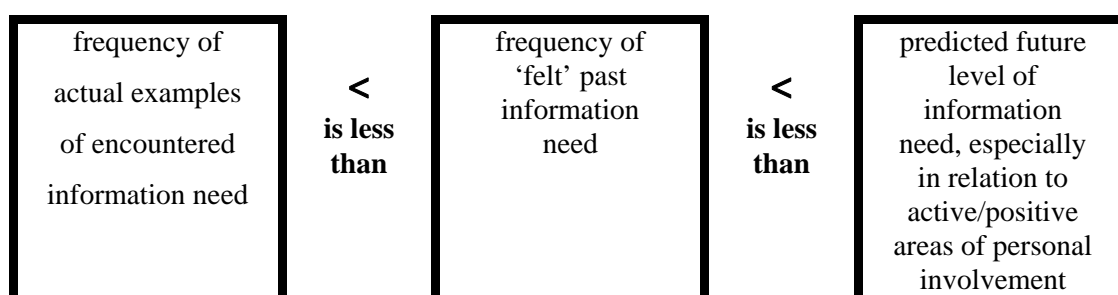


Fig 1: idealised increasing frequency of information need

There would appear to be a tendency for individuals to perceive information seeking as 'good', 'positive' or 'desirable' behaviour, in that it would seem to reflect well upon their vision of themselves as a developing, growing, involved and active person, and that this sense may even be emphasised when we ask users to consider information use that appears to relate to citizenship or membership of society. There is an observable related tendency for individuals to increase their estimate of the frequency of need in relation to such categories of perceived active citizen information, such as political participation or education. The extent to which such idealised visions of information seeking ever become a reality may be debatable, however. This idealisation of future behaviour would also seem to impact upon perceptions of future exploitation of technology.

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