

CHAPTER 5

The Publicness of Local Libraries: Insights From Local Libraries Turned Festival Venues in Dublin

Bernadette Quinn and Theresa Ryan

Introduction

As Low and Smart (2020, 4) argue, many of the ‘social spaces that are so important to societies and creativity will come back weaker, at least initially’, after the Covid-19 pandemic. Public libraries constitute one of these social spaces, and as these institutions reopen, their future as public spaces is unclear. As public services reliant on public funding, recent years have already been difficult for libraries in many countries, and threats to their public funding will undoubtedly be exacerbated by the recent pandemic. In addition, it is likely that social distancing will continue to feature in public health advice for some time, and the implications of this for how libraries may function is unclear (Jaeger, Taylor, Gorham and Kettlich 2021). These new Covid-19 related challenges will compound those already faced by libraries in an increasingly digital age. They have had to adapt to immense changes in how information is produced, disseminated and consumed. This has led to questioning about whether their physical

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presence matters any longer in this digital age, although some, like Houpert (2019), argue that their importance has become more vital, precisely because they are needed to help people adapt. More generally, in line with the ownership and management arrangements for many other kinds of public spaces, there are signs of libraries moving away from direct state involvement to other kinds of arrangements involving different social actors (de Magalhães 2010). In the UK, for instance, they are being increasingly transferred out of public service into arrangements that involve voluntary capacities. Developments like this which see the state reduce its oversight and involvement with public spaces have generally been interpreted negatively (Low and Smith 2006). Critics fear that it brings in its wake more social exclusion and less openly accessible communal-use space (Carmona 2010). At a time when libraries are under increasing pressure to justify their calls for public funding it is opportune to think about what would be lost if the publicness of the library was to be diminished.

This chapter investigates what it is that people value about public space and how they understand and value the kinds of publicness that library spaces foster. Conscious that libraries of the future will probably have to work harder to maintain their presence as prominent and easily accessible public spaces, this chapter is particularly interested in how libraries try to diversify the nature and reach of their activities, something they have been increasingly engaged in over recent decades (Fouracre 2015). Thus, in addition to trying to understand how people understand and value libraries as public spaces, a key aim is to investigate how functioning as a festival venue informs the publicness of libraries. Empirically, the data presented were gathered from people attending events in six local libraries as part of the Dublin Festival of History in October 2019. The chapter turns now to review literature on libraries as public spaces, before considering the implications of libraries functioning as festival venues. The data are subsequently presented and discussed.

The Importance of the Library as a Public Space

During the Covid-19 pandemic, physical access to public spaces of all kinds was severely curtailed in many jurisdictions, with indoor public spaces being particularly badly affected. People who continued to have access to open and available public spaces because of where they lived fared much better under 'lockdown' conditions than those who lived where public space was unavailable, overcrowded or otherwise problematic. This experience has underscored the importance of public space to quality of life. Public discussions about the closure and restricted nature of public space during Covid-19 have emphasised the fact that being public means open, accessible and available. It means being an identifiable place 'where the public is free to mingle in the company of strangers' (Given and Leckie 2003, 367). It has been painfully clear that these characteristics have been suspended during the pandemic and questions as to

whether the restoration of these public spaces in the future will entail altered forms are now being raised (Low and Smart 2020).

Libraries constitute a type of public space that is often overlooked in discussions about the changing nature and role of public space in contemporary society (Frederikson 2015). Trying to define or classify space, including library space, in terms of its degree of publicness is a difficult, possibly futile task (Given and Leckie 2003). However, trying to understand what it is that people value about public space is important, especially for spaces like public libraries which currently face a number of threats. For Audunson et al. (2018, 774), a functioning public sphere is an essential precondition of democracy. The public sphere is always grounded in physical space (Low 2017) and, in the guise of spaces like parks, squares and city thoroughfares, public space is highly valued politically, socially and symbolically for its democratic qualities (Varma and Tiesdell 2010). For Given and Leckie (2003), the library is arguably one of the few authentic physical, public spaces left. Jaeger et al. (2021, 2) describe libraries as the ‘radiant ideal of democracy’ and argue that shutting their doors during the pandemic felt like democracy itself had gone into hiding. This pairing of the library with democracy points to how public libraries are fundamentally thought of as open, civic spaces that give access to information such that citizens can inform and educate themselves in true democratic fashion (Frederikson 2015). Symbolically, they are seen to epitomise politically neutral, community places that are open and accessible to all (Leckie and Hopkins 2002) and vital to the vibrancy of urban civic life. However, claims like these can unravel under deeper scrutiny. Crawford (2008, 27) drawing on Fraser (1993), wrote that ‘no single physical environment can represent a completely inclusive space of democracy’. Malone (2000) has interpreted libraries as agents of social control and Frederickson (2015) has highlighted how they are strongly conditioned by institutional norms that are culturally situated. Nevertheless, the political and symbolic importance of libraries is not in doubt.

Relatedly, they are crucially important as social spaces. Libraries function as ‘third spaces’ where people frequently spend time. They are one of those accessible, nearby places that anchor communities and lend structure to daily life (Low and Smart 2020). Classic third spaces are welcoming and inviting places where people routinely and casually encounter others in the guise of acquaintances, friends, familiar faces and strangers. As a trusted space which facilitates the mingling and interaction of all kinds of people, libraries are associated with the development of social capital (Johnson 2012) and seen as an optimal setting for the development of objectified cultural capital (Summers and Buchanan 2018). Houpert (2019, 176) suggests that the social importance of libraries is increasing because they function as ‘meeting places for a variety of people, as spaces for cooperation, connection and inspiration.’ In a discussion on the changing functions of the library in the digital age, Imholz (2008) stresses the important role that the library of the future will play as a place for accessing people, as opposed to information. She argues that because technology

can now deliver information directly to individuals, it is the social experience offered by the library that distinguishes it from the experience of 'sitting at home in front of a computer screen' (Imholz 2008, 338). Accordingly, Capillé (2018, 409) deduces that from the viewpoint of sociability, 'the library provision of indoor public space has become its most valuable feature'.

Libraries and Festivalisation

The political, social and symbolic value of libraries as public space is not in doubt. Yet, while libraries are widely thought to epitomise democratic public space, critical observers have long been aware that they are not, in fact, equally open and available to all (Newman 2007). This is well acknowledged within the library sector itself and efforts to widen their appeal and to draw in 'difficult to reach' cohorts of society can be tracked back to the 1970s and early 1980s in countries like the UK. Such efforts are underpinned by theoretical observations that public space is a constantly changing context (Zukin 1996), that space in general is continuously reproduced through a process of ongoing heterogeneous interrelations (Massey 1994), and that the very make-up of the interests and actors who use space strongly shape its reproduction. Varna and Tiesdell (2010) reviewed literature related to the publicness of libraries and concluded that five dimensions are thought to be central to creating publicness: ownership, control, physical configuration and animation. Of interest in this chapter is how the festivalisation of libraries might affect these dimensions.

As Ronström (2016) explains, festivals have become an increasingly important form of cultural production in recent decades, proliferating in number and type, altering cultural consumption patterns, expanding into spaces not historically associated with festivals, and serving diverse kinds of agendas at the behest of various institutions. Jordan (2016, 53) argues that 'festivalisation is both a response to and a cause of changing audience expectations and production processes within the cultural marketplace'. It brings potentially far-reaching implications for all of the actors and institutions concerned. Cultural institutions like public libraries have inevitably become festivalised, ostensibly in order to e.g. celebrate community identities, 'challenge misconceptions, break down barriers, improve community spirit and promote the local library' (Rooney-Browne 2008, 64). However, to date, relatively little is known about what this development means for how people understand, value and use libraries. In contrast, an extensive more general literature now exists on how time, space and social relations can be visibly and affectively transformed through the workings of festivals (Quinn and Wilks 2017). Temporally, festivals are often understood as a 'time out of time' (Bakhtin 1968) that are empowered with the potential to resist, challenge or reinvent normal societal routines. Festivals have the ability to temporarily alter the physical, atmospheric and affective traits of places, changing how they look, feel and sound (Johansson and

Kociatkiewicz 2011). They can create, reshape and embed new meanings of all kinds into ‘place’ (Weller 2013). It seems reasonable to think that the potential for transformation exists in library settings too. When libraries become an ‘activity’ place for staging public lectures, classes, workshops etc., and when they partner with festival organisations to serve as festival venues, they become a different kind of space. Festivals have the potential to enhance the publicness of library space, to improve its functioning as a meeting place and enhance its qualities as a public, social space. In library contexts, festival events can animate spaces that are frequently described as ‘quiet’ and ‘calm’ (Engstrom and Eckerdal 2017, 152). They can add interest and strengthen the ‘third space’ nature of libraries as places of encounters and interactions, as is also the case when libraries host authors’ nights, programmes and courses (Aabø and Audunson 2012). Festivals can increase liveliness, especially at quieter times of the library day, for example, near closing time in the evening. They also hold the prospect of increasing diversity, drawing in clusters of people, regular and non-regular library users, in concentrated moments in time, to express a shared interest in whatever topic the festival is showcasing.

Libraries in Ireland

The public library in Ireland is a free service open to everyone and library space is public space. In 2018 there were 330 local libraries across 31 local authority areas with 1,195,909 members. The current public library strategy *Our Public Libraries: Inspiring, Connecting and Empowering Communities 2022* (Department of Rural and Community Development 2018) explains that ‘the public library supports people and communities through its civic presence’ (7). It describes the library as a trusted space that is ‘integrated into the local community and accessible to all’ (7). Indeed, the strategy’s guiding vision sees public libraries as ‘attractive and welcoming spaces where all members of the community can access knowledge, ideas and information, and where people can reflect, connect and learn’ (15). One of its ambitions is to ‘reinforce the local library as a trusted place at the centre of the community’ (17). While Peachey (2017) found that almost 80% of people said that libraries were important to their communities, the public library strategy recognises that ‘there is clear potential to encourage significantly greater use of the library by the public’ (7).

Methods

Mixed methods were used to gather data. Eighty-six surveys were administered at six local libraries located throughout the Dublin city local authority area. The survey tool employed a series of close-ended questions to gather information on respondents’ profiles, and 19 open-ended questions investigating the topic

in hand. Thus, the bulk of the data was qualitative in nature and the overall approach was interpretivist. Such approaches to public space recognise that 'a place might be more (or less) public' (Varna and Tiesdell 2010, 4) depending on who you ask. As such, the study investigates what people think of public space, believing in the need to study the socially constructed meanings of libraries because these differ greatly from person to person depending on factors like age, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and so on. The questions probed issues relating to the library itself, e.g. how inclusive do you think the library is? How well do libraries work as public spaces? They also pertained to the festival events, e.g. what motivated you to come to the event? What does attending an event like this mean for you? The survey was administered to people visiting the libraries to attend a free lunchtime/evening event hosted as part of the October 2019 Dublin Festival of History. This was left, along with an information note/consent form and a pen, on chairs in the rooms where the events were being held. The research project was introduced by the event organiser before the event commenced. Attendees were invited to complete the questions and were advised that a researcher would be present in the room during and after the event to take any queries. The ensuing data were collated and the open-ended responses thematically coded and analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006). The findings are presented and discussed under the themes of: the library as public space, the inclusiveness of libraries, and libraries turned festival venues.

The Festival Audience

The 86 people who participated in the study included 48 females and 38 males. It was a group of relatively older people, with just 12 people aged under 44 years, 29 aged between 45–64 years and 45 older than 65 years. This age profile is related to the fact that the festival under study is a festival of history, and the events being staged were lectures on topics that related to Ireland's Decade of Centenaries 2012–2023. In terms of party composition, 50 people were attending alone. Eighteen had come as part of a couple or with family, and three had come with friends. Not surprisingly, given the older age profile, 40 people were retired. Numerous different kinds of occupations were noted, with six people describing themselves as teachers, two as students and two as unemployed. All of the audience was white, with the vast majority of people describing themselves as Irish and not surprisingly, because the events were being held in local libraries, and related to Irish history, audiences were virtually all Dubliners.

This audience profile has some striking features, most notably the predominance of older people, the fact that so many attended the event on their own and that so many people were retired. The nature of the festival and the fact that the venues were local libraries help explain these particular characteristics. History events may appeal relatively more to older cohorts, and clearly this

audience found the library venue to be accessible. The events were free of charge; they were housed in a trusted venue that is generally perceived as safe and inviting; they were local, and a large majority of attendees had found it easy to reach the venue on the evening of the event; finally, they were familiar to those audience members who were regular library users and 47 respondents used it at least once per month. The fact that so many people felt sufficiently comfortable to attend alone speaks to the safe and sociable nature of the library space and to the understanding that the easy co-presence facilitated by the library represents an attractive alternative to the isolation of loneliness (Sequeiros 2011).

Understanding the Library as Public Space

When asked about how they recognised and interpreted the library as a public space, respondents answered easily and usually with multiple responses. The characteristics that they identified can be clustered into five categories:

Varna and Tiesdell's (2010) core dimensions of public space resonate, albeit in overlapping and somewhat blurred fashion, with these criteria. Firstly, respondents instinctively recognise and clearly value the library as a publicly owned institution. This public **ownership** is critical to the publicness of the library and to people's understanding that they have every right to be there. The sense of public ownership was such that many respondents felt entitled to be critical, and to comment on the shortcomings of different aspects of the library space. Attesting to the importance of the **physical configuration** of the space in facilitating publicness, respondents most frequently critiqued the physicality of the space, explaining that 'more space' 'more different kinds of spaces', 'more sectioned off spaces' 'more places to sit' were needed. This physicality included location, as libraries need to be 'easy to get to', although overwhelmingly, respondents experienced few problems either getting to the library or negotiating the building upon arrival. Temporality was also important, with some respondents calling for 'longer opening hours' and opening hours that are consistent and predictable. In noting these shortcomings, respondents often referred to a lack of public resourcing. In terms of Varna and Tiesdell's (2010) notion of **civility**, the library's function as a welcoming, inviting centre of information and learning was extremely highly valued and beyond reproach. The six local libraries were generally viewed as being well resourced and well managed in terms of the broad access they afford to knowledge, information and learning opportunities of all kinds. It was understood that libraries section off different spaces for different activities (e.g. reading, using computers) and different users (e.g. children's section) and this was appreciated. Library staff were viewed as helpful, friendly and welcoming, and constituted an asset that was strongly linked to the perceived inclusivity of the library as a public space.

Fundamentally, there was an understanding that the library inherently promotes culture through its collections and activities. This in turn underpinned

Table 5.1: Respondents understanding of the library as a public space.

Criteria	Description
Public facility	The library is recognised as a public space because it is: unambiguously, publicly owned; free of charge, open to all, locally located, wheelchair accessible, and provides facilities like public bathrooms and drinking water.
Information and learning	Above all, the library is synonymous with 'information and resources of all kinds'. It provides study spaces, resources for children's school projects, access to technology, an array of electronic resources and helpful staff.
Social and community space	The library is understood as a social space. It functions as a community hub, offers 'company' and welcomes people of all ages. It serves to 'connect communities' and is cross-generational. Its aura of calm and quietness indicates welcome.
Community resource	The library serves the wider community as a resource centre, providing activities for all ages, venues and facilities for local groups and clubs, and spaces to host events.
Promotes culture	The library inherently promotes culture through its collections and activities.

the understanding of the library as a vital source of information and learning. There were some indications that respondents thought that the kinds of culture being promoted could be expanded or changed in some way, but no overt suggestions for change or signs of contestation were noted. The conception of the library as a public, social space was very strong. The social dimension was critical to how respondents perceived the inclusivity of the library space. In speaking about what constitutes an inclusive public space, respondents explained that inclusivity means 'a place that's available', 'where people feel welcome and comfortable', 'where all kinds of people can feel welcome, all ethnic backgrounds, all genders and ages' and 'a place where nobody feels out of place'. An inclusive library is one that cultivates sociability, that 'fosters community engagement', is 'hospitable, informative and comfortable' and acts as 'somewhere free to gather and talk'. Implicit in much of this commentary and explicit in occasional comments was the idea that inclusive library space is 'safe'. Overwhelmingly, the data showed that these respondents experienced a sense of inclusion. They felt welcomed, relaxed and comfortable.

Responses like these show that the **control** mechanisms being used in the library context were acceptable to study participants. These mechanisms constitute examples of the 'soft power': a 'particular atmosphere, a specific mood, a certain feeling' that Allen (2006, 441) notes can structure behaviour in public space. Here, sound seems particularly important, with silence and quietness normatively acting as a form of control to indicate what is (and is not) appropriate library behaviour (Sequeiros 2011). The data signalled an awareness that

the sounds of the library are changing; that libraries are less silent than they have been in the past: 'I've noticed a complete change since my childhood use where the library was a very strict and silent place.' For some this is a welcome development: 'they are wonderful places, quiet and welcoming.' Others felt the opposite, 'however, a quiet area is lacking.'

Closely connected to the idea of the library as a social space is an appreciation of how it functions as a community resource. A lot of the data reported so far relates to how people actively use the library in line with Varna and Tiesdell's (2010) idea of **animation**. However, multiple respondents voiced suggestions as to how this dimension of the library's publicness could be enhanced. To attract and engage people more fully it was suggested that libraries could: provide further facilities like a café/restaurant; organise more activities like book clubs and courses; and host more events like readings, talks and exhibitions. Many respondents expressed the view that the library 'needs to be more inviting,' it's 'not widely used.' There were suggestions that the library 'needs to target the youth.' Finally, there was a persistent view that libraries 'need more publicity,' 'more promotion' and 'more advertising'; that the general public doesn't appreciate what the library has to offer and that this needs to be addressed. As in the data relating to sound levels in the library, here emerged signs that library space, like all public space, is open to contestation between different user groups who have different ideas about how a public library should sound, look and feel. Respondents pointed to the 'need to balance the core requirement of a library as a place for reading and research and not merely a space for public performance,' and to the need to ensure that users 'are not disturbed.' One person thought that 'this library is already too packed' and so should not seek to attract further users. These views reflect a long understanding of the library as a civilising institution that provides information for the self-education of citizens in democratic societies (Frederikson 2015). However, others recognise that libraries 'may only appeal to particular audiences,' and could 'be used more creatively than they sometimes have been' in how they develop, create and present culture to the public. Thus, while the data show how and why the library is much valued as a public space they also demonstrate a clear understanding that the publicness of the library is not unproblematic. Rather it is a dynamic, changing construct, characterised by tensions and possible contestation, absence as well as presence, openness as well as closure.

Libraries Turned Festival Venues

Much of the data generated in the study indicates a general understanding that library space is dynamic and constantly changes depending on what's going on and how people are using the space. Its pre-eminent function relates to information and learning, and so users engage with it cognitively, but they also experience it affectively, preferring it to sound and feel in particular ways. They

greatly appreciate the sociability afforded by the library, as evidenced by the many comments about the helpful staff, the friendly interactions, the community connectedness that the local library provides and the inter-generational nature of this sociability. The data strongly suggest that these respondents use the library to meet social needs as well as to satisfy their curiosity for knowledge and search for information. However, the question remains as to how the extraordinary staging of festival events in the local libraries alters their publicness and how people perceive that publicness.

At its simplest, the Dublin Festival of History events studied attracted people to the libraries. This became clear when people were asked about their library usage. Forty-seven respondents use the library at least once a month. Among the remainder, 15 said that they use it rarely or not at all, 14 described themselves as occasional users and yet all of these attended festival events in the libraries. Furthermore, when asked for suggestions as to what might draw more people into libraries, respondents most frequently mentioned that libraries should organise 'more events like this', and more 'talks', 'events', 'readings', 'presentations.' Thus, it seems clear that hosting events opens up libraries to new and occasional users. It animates library space and makes it more inviting to more, and possibly different users.

In this case, people were attracted to the events overwhelmingly because of their interest in learning about the historical topic being celebrated, and in learning about the local area. Virtually everyone commented on how they hoped to learn more, get new insights into the topic, and enjoy some intellectual stimulation by attending the events. In the process, people were able to deepen their relationship not only with the library, but with local history, other local people and with the local area. Thus, there was a very symbiotic relationship between the festival and the libraries in that the former crystallised the local library as a forum where people can educate themselves and co-create knowledge about their local place. As such, the festivalisation of the library in this case complemented and strengthened respondents' understanding of the library as a valued community resource. It further enhanced the accessibility of the library by creating a shared space and shared opportunity to engage with locally embedded, historico-cultural imaginaries.

While these events could be seen to bring cohorts of like-minded people together over a shared interest in learning about a topic, there was also a social dimension to their motives. Respondents referred to the social dynamic of the events, saying that they were looking forward to being 'able to discuss with other enthusiasts' and to 'asking the speaker questions afterwards.' In one local library, a small cluster of audience members were members of a local historical society. In response to a question asking about the interactions with other people during the event, responses were mixed: 22 people did not answer the question while eight said they had not talked to anyone, with some noting their own inclination to 'prefer not to chat too much.' However, the remaining 53 had talked to other people who had not accompanied them to the event. This is

interesting because so many audience members had come to the event on their own. By way of explanation, people commented that there was a sense that ‘everyone is clearly interested in the event, (which creates an) immediate natural bond’, that ‘the informal atmosphere is conducive to chatting’, and that ‘many people are friendly at these lectures’. Overwhelmingly, people described the atmosphere using positive descriptors like ‘interesting’, ‘friendly and welcoming’, ‘warm and engaging’, ‘courteous’, ‘comfortable’, ‘relaxed’ and ‘informed’. The suggestion emerging here is that transforming library space into festival venues enhances the potential for creating sociability and for generating bonding social capital (Wilks 2011). However, even as festival spaces, the controls at play in the library environment remained, constraining some people’s efforts to socialise: ‘formal seating – like church pews – doesn’t lend itself to spontaneous outpourings of dialogue!’ In addition access, in the guise of timing, was sometimes an issue. When the event ended at library closing time, audience members were given little opportunity to linger afterwards and this was noted by several respondents who commented on how there was ‘little time tonight’ to chat.

Concluding Discussion

The data reported here were gathered on the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic. Public libraries in Ireland closed within six months of the data being gathered and, as they cautiously reopened during 2021, the manner in which they welcomed the public was different. This underscores the pertinence of closely investigating how people use and make sense of libraries so that as they undergo reconstruction post pandemic, the important functions that they play are not lost. The clearest finding emerging from this study is that people who use libraries value them highly. The library is greatly appreciated as a public space where information and learning can be publicly and freely accessed and as a social space that is welcoming and encouraging of social interactions. The data generated here resonate with Varna and Tiesdell (2010) in finding that people clearly understand publicness in terms of public ownership, civility and accessibility. Furthermore, respondents were aware that the library space is officially controlled and animated in particular ways. Overall, they had clear ideas about how the publicness of the library could be enhanced in virtually all of these dimensions.

The fact that the data presented here were gathered in local libraries probably explains why the findings have strongly highlighted the social, as opposed to the political or symbolic, value of the library. Amin (2006) wrote that the history of urban planning is about managing public space so as to build sociability and civic engagement out of the encounter with strangers. The data reported here attest to local libraries doing exactly this. The library is further valued for its standing as a community hub where local groups (e.g. book clubs, local

historical societies) hold talks and events, all of which encourages community connectedness and promotes interest in, and learning about, the local place. Klinenberg (2018) describes social infrastructures as the physical conditions that determine whether social relations and capital develop. These findings attest to the vital role that local libraries play in the social infrastructure of the city, particularly perhaps for those like the older people, so predominant in this study, and for children and young people, whose lives pivot around the local area.

Nevertheless, there was an understanding among many respondents that the popular rhetoric of the library being public and accessible to all is not always borne out in reality. Respondents were clearly of the view that the publicness of the library is not as optimal as it might be. In particular it was noted that while children are associated with libraries in the minds of respondents, young people are thought to be notable by their absence. More generally, there was a belief that the undoubted merits of the library were underappreciated and even unknown to some sections of the wider public. Accordingly, there were persistent calls for the library to raise the profile of its services and activities. These findings may point to issues with the reputational value of the library and raise questions about its profile in virtual public space. In a sense, this finding is complicated in that the library as a civic institution is widely known about, yet it is underused. This problem has already been identified in the current Irish public library strategy document (Department of Rural and Community Development 2018). The question as to why this is the case needs research. Undoubtedly, the answer is multi-faceted but this study contributes by identifying a range of suggestions that people make as to how the library could broaden its public appeal.

Prominent among these suggestions was that libraries should organise and host more events of various kinds and the findings here show that the Dublin Festival of History did entice occasional, irregular and a few new users into the library. Thus, a conclusion drawn is that events can enhance the publicness of libraries, a pertinent finding in the context where the Library Service is currently striving to increase library usage (Department of Rural and Community Development 2018). Festival attendees benefited in multiple ways through their attendance. Not only did the events ‘broaden ... (their) ... knowledge’, they helped them develop ‘a great sense of what it is to be a Dubliner’, increased their ‘interest in the local area’, made them ‘belong more’ to their area and offered them opportunities to actively participate in activities close to home: ‘it’s nice to do things locally instead of ‘city centre’’. As these quotes illustrate, the library’s function as a cultural hub/resource and as a ‘community connector’ seems to be clearly strengthened through its association with the festival. This finding could be a starting point for further research into how festivals might help libraries surmount escalating societal challenges in keeping people socially connected, cognitively engaged and locally embedded into the future.

Overall, this particular festival did not have a radically disruptive effect on the kind of publics drawn into the libraries, or on the publicness of the library. Undoubtedly, this relates to the fact that the festival and its programme were conditioned by the same kinds of cultural norms that condition the library environment i.e. it privileged learning, about quite a serious topic, in the normal 'calm' of the library (Engstrom and Eckerdal 2017), at an event that was staged in a highly conventional way. The events appealed to an older demographic who tend to appreciate the popularly conceived understandings of libraries as civilising institutions and who may be relatively more interested in attending historical events. However, none of this is to deny the potential that festivals could play in creating a different kind of publicness, if they are specifically constructed with that end in mind.

The heightened sociability associated with attending a festival (Quinn and Wilks 2017) was evident in this study, although the material, and indeed temporal, reconfiguration of the library space into event space was found to be unhelpful in stimulating social interactions. Aspects like this require more consideration if libraries are to strategically use festivals to effectively further specific aims. Johnson (2012) has written of the social capital formation associated with libraries, and here bonding capital was apparent: like-minded people with shared interests, strengthened existing connections (e.g. local library or historical association membership) while reinforcing their cultural capital (Summers and Buchanan 2018). Again, this draws attention to the need to consider the synergy between the library's ethos and mission, and the festivals with which it collaborates, as this will have implications for the kinds of social capital generated. This study sample was particular in the extent to which it was dominated by people attending alone and by older people. Very obviously, future research could usefully focus on different types of festivals, with different audience profiles, to investigate how a greater variety of social cohorts value and engage (or not) with the library. In this instance, festival attendance was not strongly gendered, although females dominated, a finding that is in line with studies on literary festivals (Rossetti and Quinn 2019), which in the absence of much research on history festivals, might be a useful comparison.

Overall, the complex ways in which public libraries are highly valued as vital parts of a city's social infrastructure emerge strongly through this research. The study findings drew most attention to their undoubted social and cultural importance while also problematising their purported status as neutral spaces that are unequivocally open to all (Newman 2007). Like all public spaces, libraries are dynamic, and constantly being reproduced. As they negotiate an uncertain future, creative efforts to outreach, and to develop more inclusive kinds of publicness will become more prevalent. Staging festivals will likely become a strategy that will be increasingly used to this end but to date, little is known about what this might mean for the role and function of public libraries

as important public spaces. This study has only begun to investigate a subject deserving of much further attention.

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