The LIBER Groupe des Carthothécaires Map Library Usage Survey, Summer 2003: a Mandate for Change?

by NICK MILLEA

INTRODUCTION

At the 2002 Helsinki meeting, the LIBER Groupe des Cartothécaires Working Group for Education suggested a survey of map usage in our libraries. Using Jan Smits' 1987-88 survey as our reference point, we decided to re-examine map usage in the early 21st century, attempting to identify shifting requirements created by the rapidly evolving technological advances being made in cartography, and, by our map libraries hosting these changes. Could this new survey act as a catalyst for change?

The Chairman of the Working Group for Education acquired Jan's questionnaire, and along with Group representatives Jürg Bühler and Mira Miletic Drder, added a number of new categories whilst removing some of the previously outdated fields. What evolved was distributed to Groupe des Cartothécaires' National Correspondents and made available on the Working Group for Education's website in fifteen different languages. It was therefore possible to ask all respondents the same questions and allow comparison across the continent.

The timing of the survey (1st June to 1st September 2003) was chosen in order to meet the publication deadline for an article scheduled for imminent publication in *Geoscapes*. Unfortunately a number of libraries commented that the summer was their "quiet" period. By way of comparison, Jan reported that 96 institutions returned a total of 2,847 questionnaires in preparation for his 1991 paper, way in excess of the 2003 response rate. In defence of last year's questionnaire, at three months, the survey period was much shorter than that available to our predecessors.

THE SURVEY OF MAP USAGE

Subject categorisation was based on Jan's survey. It was in this area that evidence of change between 1987-88 and 2003 was most profound. Many of Jan's categories recorded very little usage indeed during 2003, whilst employing the benefit of hindsight, more specific 'Environmental change' or 'Urban geography' options would have proved helpful in reducing the number of 'Other' answers recorded. These fields are evidence of changing patterns in map use over the fifteen-year period. By using this formula as a framework for the 2003 survey, it was hoped to be able to identify patterns of change, especially monitoring the impact of electronic resources in the mapping world, both in terms of cartographic innovations and also digital development in terms of library and archive provision. Would cartographic change match map library change?

The number of foreigners visiting map collections ranged from zero in four countries to over 45% in France. The low response rate makes this difficult to analyse, but the high French figure is remarkably consistent with Jan's findings, which identified 33% of Bibliothèque Nationale users as non-French nationals fifteen years ago. Only Ireland recorded a significantly large proportion of foreign users, all of whom had travelled from the United Kingdom.

In terms of the main categories of usage, again, low responses had a tendency to skew the distribution. Those countries supplying over thirty responses are probably more representative of usage, therefore Croatia, Latvia, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom might be given greater significance. Of note is the clear prominence of the category 'History', appearing in the top three for every country. Indeed, 'History' was described by almost 30% of map users as their subject of study. No other discipline recorded more than 10%, with 'Cartography' and 'Other' just above 9% being the next most commonly identified categories. Subjects seldom mentioned included 'Art History', 'Astronomy', 'Bathymetry / Oceanography', 'Geomorphology', 'Glaciology', and 'Mining', all recording fewer than 1% of users, whilst 'Law' and 'Remote sensing' both failed to attract a single map user over the course of the three-month survey period.

As alluded to previously, the lack of an environmental emphasis in this part of the questionnaire was a serious omission, many of the respondents categorically stating their research interests to be 'environmental auditing' or 'environmental change'.

In terms of geographical areas required by map users, foreign mapping was prominent, and budgeting implications for overseas mapping were discussed by Jan. Little appears to have altered in the intervening years given the popularity of mapping of individual countries. How this information can be widened into a discussion on budget sizes and acquisitions policies must remain the privilege of individual map curators, but the real fact that map researchers are using overseas mapping to further their study needs suggests that their chosen map libraries must be able to support these interests.

When assessing types of cartographic document, the 2003 questionnaire split this part of the survey between analogue and digital usage in order to gauge the extent to which digital consciousness has permeated into the European map library. Since 1987-88, digital material has been exposed to the map library community, therefore this question provided the opportunity to measure pivotal change in the working environment. What is surprising is how limited digital data's impact has been. Of the 25 institutions submitting questionnaires, as many as twelve recorded no digital use whatsoever. The thirteen "digital libraries" were located in Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Switzerland, two in Latvia, and four in the United Kingdom. Whether this lack of digital uptake is symptomatic of a digital malaise across Europe is uncertain, but it does cause genuine concern. The Working Group for Education has been contemplating following the North American model of working closely with ESRI to attract GIS functionality into the map library, however progress so far has been limited to informal discussion. Is Europe ready for this? Are European map libraries in serious danger of failing to join the digital revolution and finding themselves marginalised within not only the library and information community but also the cartographic world? Perhaps co-operation with ESRI might be viewed by delegates as all the more necessary given the limited uptake of digital developments revealed by this questionnaire.

Country	CH	E	EST	F	GB	H	HR	IRL	LV	NL	S	SLO	Europe
Means of access													
Card catalogue	31	19	67	73	39	36	24	0	53	31	35	10	**37**
Online catalogue	41	23	7	59	40	0	27	0	22	50	30	50	**37**
Author	3	0	33	36	6	9	3	0	7	9	15	10	**8**
Geographic location	19	13	47	59	34	45	9	62	27	28	25	25	**29**
Thematic	25	0	47	18	5	0	9	0	27	15	0	50	**13**
Online graphic index	3	0	7	9	1	0	0	0	4	2	0	0	**2**
Internet	25	13	33	36	10	9	18	0	18	15	20	30	**17**
Bibliographies	6	3	13	18	12	0	12	0	15	9	5	0	**10**
Other	9	3	0	0	11	18	0	38	11	35	20	10	**12**

As the table shows, the days of dominance of the card catalogue in Europe seem to be over. In 2003 the online catalogue was matching the traditional card as a means of accessing cartographic information. Estonia, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Switzerland seem to have made the greatest progress in this direction, whilst Hungary and Ireland are lagging. The 'online graphic index' has yet to make significant inroads. The impact of 'internet' is starting to become apparent, most notably in France, but also accounting for around a third of all access in Estonia and Slovenia.

But, is access improving? There are certainly more options for gaining access to map collections, compared to fifteen years previously. The most popular methods of accessing catalogues remain unchanged, but as newer means appear, so their value will slowly start to increase. Internet access has been particularly successful, and looks set to continue as map users become more accomplished web surfers.

Let's see how users responded to some basic questions:

- Staff help was required for 80% of enquirers, (slightly higher than in 1987-88). In general though, a map library without staff is not likely to prove a desirable solution for Europe's map users.

- Use of reference materials. These figures are considerably higher than those of 1987-88 when no responding country was able to come close to Hungary's 73% response rate recorded in 2003.

- In all countries, levels of satisfaction far outweighed dissatisfaction, usually by a sizeable margin. A very impressive set of results indeed.

- Were readers satisfied with accommodation in the reading room? Most definitely "Yes". The general impression in 1987-88 had been slightly less favourable.

- Throughout the "Reference and staff" section, responses were reassuringly positive; indicating that Europe's map library user in 2003 is impressed by the facilities and information provision on offer. However, is the map library user significantly different to his counterpart from fifteen years previously? Are map libraries attracting the same people who are more impressed with the enhanced services available over the intervening years, or are they encouraging a new breed of user; those for whom electronic data is expected to be housed in the map collection? We might suspect that the former group may still be of considerable importance, as almost two-thirds of those people completing questionnaires were not new users of their map library.

- How many people need reproductions? Jan found demand to be very high in all countries except the Netherlands. In 2003 Dutch rates were still below average. Overall photocopying was popular, almost two-thirds of users selecting this as part of their visit to the library. Very high figures were recorded in Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, Slovenia and Switzerland – only in Hungary was photocopying of marginal importance. France and Hungary were the most prominent users of photography, whilst scanning and digitisation both proved popular in Switzerland. Estonia, Latvia and Sweden were keen scanners, and as many as half of the Slovenian users chose to use scanning facilities. France recorded the highest rate of digitisation. Ireland and Spain showed little enthusiasm for either.

- In terms of orders placed for various copies, digital scans are making serious inroads into the requirements of the cartographic community. Huge ranges were identified here, probably resulting from small sample sizes. It is this area where most change appears to have occurred since 1987-88. Black and white photography scored very heavily then, and although it remains the most popular option, its lead is likely to be surpassed by the digital scan in the very near future.

The two most common themes expressed were firstly a very genuine appreciation of the staff in Europe's map libraries – there do not appear to be any critical comments, while those congratulating staff on their understanding of the subject, general demeanour, and overall organisation were numerous, and applied to all those countries surveyed; secondly, and even more prominently there were requests for enhanced copying facilities. The following items were suggested:

- large format photocopiers;

- colour photocopiers;

- self-service copying;

- scanners;

- CD burners.

In general map users tend to be in need of greater assistance that the conventional library user, such is the specialist nature of the cartographic materials with which they deal. Books can be read and interpreted by the reader. Maps may require a certain degree of input from an intermediary, especially for readers unused to dealing with digital mapping, or needing to use the map librarian's assistance in creating a digital map. As a result, figures were high in these areas where staff guidance was important. Conversely, computer literacy is continually growing. Existing map library users are becoming increasingly comfortable using computers, while new, younger users expect to benefit from their skills when searching for cartographic data. The expectation of digital data is consequently on the increase.

Jan predicted an increase in usage resulting from automation – can this be confirmed? In terms of completed questionnaires, then this most definitely cannot be substantiated. A longer survey period would be required to ascertain whether this prediction can be verified. Only the figures for the United Kingdom present any real grounds for serious policy making, as questionnaires were returned in reasonable numbers.

It is clear, however, that online resources are starting to make an impact, and were this survey to be repeated in the future it is highly likely that the automated catalogue will become the dominant means of access, probably within twelve months of this paper being delivered.

CONCLUSION

The main concern with the 2003 version has been the poor response rate. Do we have sufficient material at our disposal to determine policy for the future? Are there any indicators suggesting that map curators require specific training? The following concluding hopes were identified by Jan in 1991 – how much progress has been made in the intervening period?

Jan identified union catalogues as a way to progress. Given the European Union's expansion to twenty-five countries on 1st May 2004, the time may be opportune to promote pan-European map collection initiatives, which ought to be explored during this conference.

Jan also argued for standards for map curators to run alongside standards for map libraries. It is hoped that the Working Group for Education website is pointing the map curating community in the right direction. What is beyond the scope of this paper is an evaluation of this site's worth. Feedback is required from users to gauge the site's effectiveness. How many European map curators turn to this site when seeking professional support? How likely are they to receive the required answer? Should we work together, or are we best served working alone within our host institutions?

WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

ESRI. http://www.esri.com/

GIS – Geographic Information Systems. http://www.gis.com/index.html

LIBER Groupe des Cartothécaires Working Group for Education. http://www.maps.ethz.ch/gdc-education.html