



Newspapers in the Digital Age: A Case Study in How Public Library Patrons Read the News

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Abstract

A six-week print and digital newspaper use study at the Cambridge Public Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts (USA) showed that patrons continue to access both resources in large numbers. Print serves a particular demographic - generally an older group of regular patrons who read the daily newspapers; whereas digital serves another - primarily those conducting research. Higher use of certain digital titles correlates to lower barriers of access. Local news in both print and digital editions remains relevant.

The study gathered data on the use of the Cambridge Chronicle, the local newspaper serving the city of Cambridge and the oldest continually published weekly in the United States, to determine the preferred method for library patrons to access the news. The Cambridge Chronicle was an ideal title to investigate because the library offers several ways to access the newspaper in both print and digital formats, and statistics can be easily gathered. The study revealed that the most popular access points are the print version and the free digital collection of the Chronicle's historic articles. It was also determined that print editions are read on a daily or weekly basis for news, and digital versions are accessed for research (i.e., local history and genealogy).

Results of the study showed that the high usage of newspapers depends on many factors; most prominently, however, is that free and universal access to both print and digital versions encourages patrons to read and research. It is important to note that free access to news is predicated on public library services not being reduced. Findings from this case study reveal that newspaper use in public libraries may not be in decline but rather may be increasing in the digital age, contradicting assumptions about how

newspapers are consumed. The increase in use in public libraries is of particular interest as academic libraries in America are reporting a marked decline in use. In the public library environment, current news is as popular as ever and “old news” made available in online library editions has gained value in ways that could not have been predicted prior to the digital age.

Keywords:

Cambridge Public Library -- Cambridge, Mass.

Digital -- Periodicals

Newspapers -- Databases

Newspapers -- Use studies

Public libraries

Readership surveys

Background

The Cambridge Public Library, located in Cambridge, Massachusetts (USA) on the other side of the Charles River from Boston, exists in the center of the largest metropolitan hub north of New York City. Serving a population of 105,000 residents, the Cambridge Public Library system includes seven branches, circulates over 1.4 million books annually, and offers a variety of services, such as daily classes in English as a Second Language (ESL), that goes well beyond the scope of a traditional library.¹ The recently renovated main library receives over 1,000 visitors and circulates over 2,000 books daily. In addition to the main library, there are six branches strategically located throughout the city. These six branches are categorized as follows: one large (serving 600 patrons daily); two medium (serving 400 patrons daily); and three small (serving 100 patrons daily). The library’s seven buildings welcome over 700,000 people annually.

Although Cambridge is considered to be a small city it has one of the highest density rates for a United States city with a population over 50,000.² There are two subway lines with six stations and one commuter train station within its 6.26 square miles.³ Cambridge - named as such in 1638 by its first settlers to honor their alma mater, the university in Cambridge, England - is known as the “University City.” Harvard University, Lesley University, Cambridge College, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) make Cambridge their home. Over one-fourth of the city’s residents are students, and one in five of the city’s jobs is in these four institutions of higher education. Cambridge is also known for its vibrant bio-technology, research and development, engineering, and computer and software development industries.⁴ The city has a reputation for political activism and engagement in local politics as well as being an attractive community for immigrants to settle.

Cambridge is ethnically diverse: 67% of all residents are white; 12% are black; 15% are Asian; and 6% are other races, including American Indian, Pacific Islander, or two or

¹ *City of Cambridge Annual Budget, 2014 - 2015* (Cambridge: City of Cambridge, 2014), IV-312.

² *Ibid.*, II-4.

³ Community Development Department, *Cambridge: Just the Facts* (Cambridge: City of Cambridge, Spring 2014), 2.

⁴ *City of Cambridge Annual Budget, 2014 - 2015*, II-4.

more races in combination. Eight percent of all residents are of Hispanic background.⁵ Cambridge residents are also very well educated: 94% of the population who are 25 years or older are high school graduates, while 74.3% of the same age group have completed four or more years of college.⁶ The city consists of 45,000 households with a median income of \$72,225.⁷

Founded in 1858, the Cambridge Public Library can trace its origins to the first great wave of American public libraries - although the library is not a research library in the way that the Boston Public Library and the New York Public Library are. Often described as the “People’s University,” the library holds a prominent place in a community that is home to a rich history as one of the first settled towns in New England, and an intellectual history as Harvard University – the oldest institution of higher education in the United States - is just steps away from the main library. Use of the main library and branches continues to be strong, despite trends across America of a decline in public library use due to massive budget cuts. Public libraries in the United States have been forced to reduce staff, hours, and services in spite of increased public demand.⁸ The high patronage of the Cambridge Public Library is owed in part to the continued financial support by the city; no employees have been laid off, nor have services been cut. In fact, the opposite is true. For Fiscal Year 2015, the library budget is projected at \$9,249,325 with 68 fulltime staff, an increase of 4% in funding and 3% for staff from the previous fiscal year.⁹

The demographic base that makes up the visitors of the library is as diverse as the population of Cambridge itself. The main library, which gets the most traffic, provides a range of services for everyone from infants to senior citizens. The library’s third floor houses a 9,000 square foot children’s room, which provides continuous programming for children 13 and under and their caregivers. There is a separate room serving teenagers who arrive *en mass* when the high school, located next door to the library, finishes for the day. The main library offers traditional research services, providing help with everything from using e-books to finding primary sources. University students also visit in large numbers for a quiet space to read and write. Visitors from all over the country flock to the archives and special collections to delve into the local history. Every day, people come to the library to attend a lecture, participate in a book discussion group, take a class, and use a community meeting space. The main library is the true center of the city’s communal, civic, and intellectual life.

Each of the six branches is tailored to the specific needs of the neighborhood in which they serve. The patron base of the largest branch consists of residents of the assisted

⁵ *Ibid.*, source: 2010 US Bureau of Census.

⁶ *Ibid.*, source: 2010-2012 American Community Survey.

⁷ <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/25/2511000.html>, source: US Census, 2008-2012 People Quick Facts. Retrieved 5 July 2014.

⁸ An example of the financial situation of public libraries across America is the New York City Public Library System, which has received \$65 million in budget cuts since 2008. See David Gonzalez, “A ‘Point of Integration’ Tested by Budgets,” *The New York Times*, 28 October 2013, national ed., News, A20.

⁹ *Annual Budget, 2014-2015*, IV-312 and IV-318. The City of Cambridge’s fiscal year runs on a July 1 to June 30th schedule. The following are the figures for the Library’s budget and fulltime staff for the past three fiscal years: FY14 = \$8,916,205 with 66 fulltime staff; FY13 = \$8,732,350 with 66 fulltime staff; FY12 = \$8,408,320 with 65 fulltime staff.

living facility, located across from the library's courtyard, as well as those living in homeless shelters. The two medium-sized branches, one of which caters to the city's Portuguese speaking community, are physically connected to elementary schools. One of the small branches houses a large collection of Chinese language materials, with a particular focus on titles banned in China. The other two small branches serve the city's more prosperous and less populated neighborhoods.

All seven of the Cambridge Public Library locations provide access to the local newspaper, the *Cambridge Chronicle* - used in this case study - in both print and digital editions. First published in 1846 a few days before Cambridge was incorporated as a city, the *Cambridge Chronicle* was the city's first "really local newspaper."¹⁰ Cambridge has had a thriving newspaper industry since publishing its first paper in 1775. Part of Cambridge's success can be attributed to it being home to the first printing press in North America as well as being so close to Boston, another great center of newspaper publishing in the United States. However, prior to *Cambridge Chronicle*'s establishment in the mid-19th Century, few papers lasted more than a couple of years.

The *Cambridge Chronicle* has been the city's newspaper of record for 168 years. During that time, it has changed owners several times and merged with two papers, the *Cambridge Sun* - its rival - in 1935 and the *Cambridge Tab* in 2012.¹¹ Throughout its existence, the paper has experimented with its pricing model, charging as well as offering subscriptions for free. Unfortunately, the *Cambridge Chronicle* has not been immune to the challenges faced by all established newspapers in America in recent years with the internet offering free online news platforms. Over the past ten years, newspapers across the United States have been reducing staff, cutting back reporting, and ceasing publication at alarming rates.¹² Local newspapers have been particularly at risk. Like many other newspapers, the *Cambridge Chronicle* adopted the model of offering its newest articles online for free, which it does through cambridge.wickedlocal.com, and charging for a print subscription. The paper, now a subsidiary of Gatehouse Media - a publisher of local dailies and weeklies across the United States - is free with a \$35 yearly charge for home delivery. The loss of revenue has forced the paper to cut staff with the result that it is not capable of publishing the in depth, quality reporting on which it once thrived. Despite financial pressures, the *Cambridge Chronicle* serves 18% of Cambridge's households with a circulation of 7,500.¹³

Because of its longevity and popularity, the *Cambridge Chronicle* is an ideal paper to track for this case study. The Cambridge Public Library offers four points of access to the newspaper: First, the library has digitized and made freely available the public domain editions of the *Cambridge Chronicle*.¹⁴ Second, the library has made available current and recent issues of the newspaper through a paid subscription to a database.

¹⁰ George Grier Wright, "Early Cambridge Newspapers," *The Cambridge Historical Society Proceedings* (Cambridge: Cambridge Historical Society, 1928), 85.

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge_Chronicle, retrieved 5 July 2014.

¹² For a brief, recent history of the decline of newspapers in the United States, see Evan R. Goldstein, "The Death of Newspapers," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 23 January 2009 and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Decline_of_newspapers, retrieved 6 July 2014.

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge_Chronicle, retrieved 5 July 2014.

¹⁴ The Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection is accessible here: <http://cambridge.dlconsulting.com>.

Access to this database is restricted to “in library use only,” however patrons with Cambridge library cards are able to search the database remotely. Third, for the years in which no digital copy of the newspaper is available, the library provides microfilm copies to be used onsite. Lastly, the library purchases two copies of the print version of the *Cambridge Chronicle* for “in library only” patron use.

By analyzing the use of the *Cambridge Chronicle* and comparing it to other newspapers, this study seeks to extrapolate how newspapers - both dailies and weeklies, print and digital editions - are consumed in a public library environment.

Previous Studies

This paper is unique in that it adds to the very small number of newspaper use studies conducted in the United States. As Marija Freeland and Marcia Bailey point out in their article, “Print Newspapers: Are They Still Being used in Academic Research Libraries?,” the most relevant studies have taken place outside the United States in Nigeria, Finland, and Australia.¹⁵ Other than two studies conducted in the 1980s by the New York Public Library and the Albany Public Library, public libraries have not participated in newspaper use studies or at least have not published their results. Most studies take place in academic libraries and typically focus on journals and serials with the goal of determining which titles should be canceled.¹⁶

Yet, the purpose of serials and newspaper use studies has not always been for budgetary reasons. The first use studies in the United States began in the early 1970s and were primarily to help with collection development and cross-library resource sharing.¹⁷ Such studies were justified particularly at a time when institutions of higher learning were better funded in the humanities and were looking to establish and grow their research libraries. Beginning in the late 1970s as funding for universities was reduced and universities began to expand their real estate holdings, use studies began to investigate titles with low usage to prepare for budgetary cuts and to maximize highly sought after space. Libraries were also responding to rising serial costs and were looking to make informed decisions about which expensive serials subscriptions to maintain and which to cancel.¹⁸ With the arrival of electronic resources and database services in the 1990s and 2000s, use studies took on a different perspective, comparing the use of print and digital titles.¹⁹ Concerned with the high costs of database subscriptions, libraries pushed publishers and vendors to make usage statistics available, reliable, and quantitative. Challenges and solutions around equity of access to digital resources began to inform use

¹⁵ Marija Freeland and Marcia Bailey, “Print Newspapers: Are They Still Being Used in Academic Research Libraries?,” *The Serials Librarian*, vol. 55(1/2) (2008): 212-213.

¹⁶ Freeland and Bailey’s study determined that newspaper use at the University of Michigan’s Hatcher Graduate Library had significantly declined. For a comprehensive literature review of newspaper use studies, see their article.

¹⁷ Julia A. Gammon and Phyllis O’Connor, “An Analysis of the Results of Two Periodical Use Studies: How Usage in the 1990s Compares to Usage in the 1970s,” *Serials Review*, vol. 22, issue 4 (Winter 1996): 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁹ Pongracz Sennyey, Gillian D. Ellern, and Nancy Newsome, “Collection Development and a Long-Term Periodical Use Study: Methodology and Implications,” *Serials Review*, vol. 28, issue 1 (2002): 40.

studies and libraries sought innovative ways to deliver digital versions of the print titles that had been canceled.²⁰

The methodologies for use studies have also changed in the past 40 years with the introduction of automation, barcodes, OPACs, and digital resources. Most studies, however, have relied on the sweep or reshelving method, where circulation staff record use as they reshelve. Another popular method has been the user check off, where patrons mark a sticker on the item as they use it. Both techniques have their own challenges: the sweep method does not account for patrons who reshelve after use. With the user check off method, often times patrons do not participate or they are overzealous in their participation for fear of their favorite title being canceled.²¹ In situations where journals and newspapers do not circulate and the stacks are open, the observation method works particularly well.²² Most periodical use studies last less than a year.²³ However, they have a reputation for taking up valuable staff time and been criticized in the past for being too costly or ineffective in measuring accurate usage.²⁴ Nevertheless, use studies continue and are now supplemented by targeted online user surveys and analysis of database statistics.

The majority of the serial and newspaper use study literature concerns academic libraries, which raises the important question of why so few public libraries participate in and publish use studies. Public libraries have very different opportunities and challenges from academic libraries and their silence may obscure important data that refutes commonly held ideas about newspaper use. Like academic libraries, public libraries have faced severe budget cuts over the past 40 years, however, as this paper will show, decisions about the acquisition and retention of newspaper titles both in print and digital formats revolve around serving diverse populations with different needs rather than low usage.

Methodology

The Cambridge Public Library conducted a six-week newspaper use study from April 1 to May 15, 2014, focusing on both print and digital editions. The study targeted the local weekly newspaper, the *Cambridge Chronicle*, as a way to sample general newspaper use in the library. A decision was made to conduct the study close to the end of the academic year in order to capture peak research weeks.

The main library has a collection of 44 print newspaper titles that include daily (e.g., *Wall Street Journal*), weekly (e.g., *Boston Sunday Globe*), local (e.g., *Harvard Crimson*), international (e.g., *Le Monde*), and local foreign language titles (e.g., *World Journal*). Each of the six branches contain the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Boston Herald*, and

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ For a comparison of the sweep method versus the user check off method, please see Maiken Naylor, "Comparative Results of Two Current Periodical Use Studies," *Library Resources and Technical Services*, no. 38 (October 1994): 373-388.

²² Charles B. Wenger and Judith Childress, "Journal Evaluation in a Large Research Library," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* (September 1977): 294.

²³ Gammon and O'Connor, 1. Two examples of long-term periodical use studies are the University of Akron eight-year study (see Gammon and O'Connor) and the Western Carolina University's indefinite study (see Sennyey, Ellern, and Newsome).

²⁴ Sennyey, Ellern, and Newsome, 39.

the *Cambridge Chronicle* with a few of the branches offering additional titles like the Chinese language *World Journal* and the French language *Haiti en Marche* that serve their patron base. The library also provides access to many newspaper titles through aggregate database subscription services, such as Gale, ProQuest, and Lexus-Nexus.²⁵ The *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* have separate databases for both current and historic articles. Local newspapers are accessible through Massachusetts History Online and NewsBank. Anyone can use these databases when visiting the seven library locations, however remote access requires a Cambridge library card.²⁶

Like the many of the most popular newspaper titles in the library - the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Boston Herald* - the library provides access to both the print and digital editions of the *Cambridge Chronicle*. Patrons can read a non-circulating print version at the main library (and the six branches) or can use a database, also available throughout the library system that contains articles from 2005 to the present. The *Cambridge Chronicle* is an ideal title to investigate because the library provides access to it in two additional avenues that it does not with other newspapers: first, because the *Cambridge Chronicle* is the newspaper of record for the city, the library maintains a microfilm copy of the full run of the paper. Second, the library has digitized and made freely available the public domain editions of the newspaper (1846 - 1922) along with obituary and subject cards (1975 - 2009). Because of these two additional access points, data can be collected on how access fosters use.

The *Cambridge Chronicle* newspaper use study was designed to be short term and require no additional funding or staff to implement. This decision was made in part to encourage other public libraries that are short staffed and financially burdened to participate in similar studies so that important data can be collected on newspaper use outside the academic environment. Public libraries, in particular large urban public libraries, do not experience a slow season. Staff - especially circulation staff who are often required to participate in use studies - are constantly keeping up with the necessary daily activities that allow the library to operate and rarely have the opportunity to take on additional, time consuming responsibilities. This case study was unique in that it was managed by the library's archives and special collections, whose purview is to ensure that the *Cambridge Chronicle* is made available to patrons and therefore has an interest in the data.

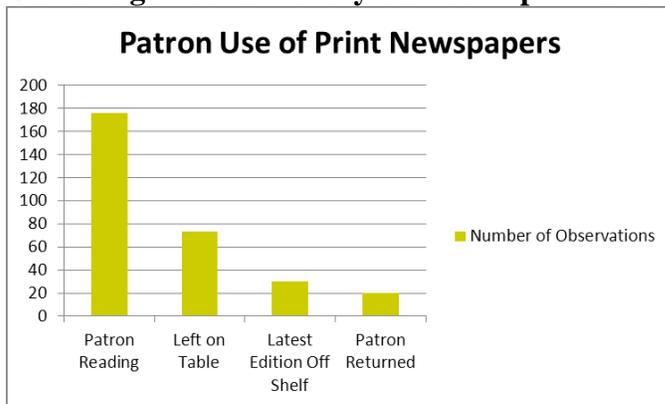
The study employed different methods for each of the formats tracked. The microfilm version of the *Cambridge Chronicle* was easily recorded through the sweep method because staff already reshelve after each use. It is used much less frequently and is easy to count, therefore the typical challenges associated with the sweep method (i.e., patrons returning periodicals themselves) do not apply. The data collected was date, time of the request, newspaper year, and if possible, the patron's area of research. Because the microfilm is not barcoded, the usage was hand recorded on a sheet of paper. Microfilm of the *Cambridge Chronicle* is located only at the main branch. Throughout the study period, staff recorded 30 requests for use of the microfilm.

²⁵ Certain titles like the *Wall Street Journal* and foreign language titles are not available.

²⁶ You must be a Cambridge resident to receive a Cambridge library card. However, exceptions are made for those who work in the city or those who are Massachusetts residents.

For print, the observation method was used rather than the sweep method, which would have required the assistance of the busy circulation staff, or the user check off method, which has been determined to be unreliable.²⁷ Staff conducted a walkthrough of the newspaper area in the main library and other parts of the library twice a day - once in the morning and once in the afternoon - to observe newspaper use. Once a week, staff observed one time in the afternoon and one time in the evening to try to capture a different patron base. No data was collected during Saturday and Sunday hours, nor was data collected at the six branch libraries.²⁸ It is more efficient to employ a walkthrough observation method rather than engaging in longer periods of observed study because public library patrons typically take their time enjoying a newspaper and there is less activity to record.²⁹ The print editions do not circulate and have no barcodes, so staff manually noted the date, time, newspaper, edition (if known), and patron activity. Patron activity was broken down into four categories: patrons actively reading, patrons returning the newspaper during the observation period, newspapers left on tables, and latest edition missing from the shelf (see Table 1). When recording the latest edition missing from the shelf, staff was careful not to count newspapers twice if they were left on the table or if a patron was reading the latest edition. Counting the empty shelf was useful to gather information on the *Cambridge Chronicle* because the latest editions were often missing from the shelf but could not be found on tables or with a patron. Staff recorded 299 observations over 26 days.

Table 1: Observation Method Used to Determine Newspaper Usage at the Cambridge Public Library between April 1 and May 15, 2014



Once the data was compiled, the study revealed that the *Cambridge Chronicle* received the highest number of observations. Knowing that it is unlikely that the *Cambridge Chronicle* - a weekly newspaper - receives more patron use than dailies like the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times*, the study adjusted for bias. Table 2 shows the total number of observations for each newspaper along with the total number of patrons

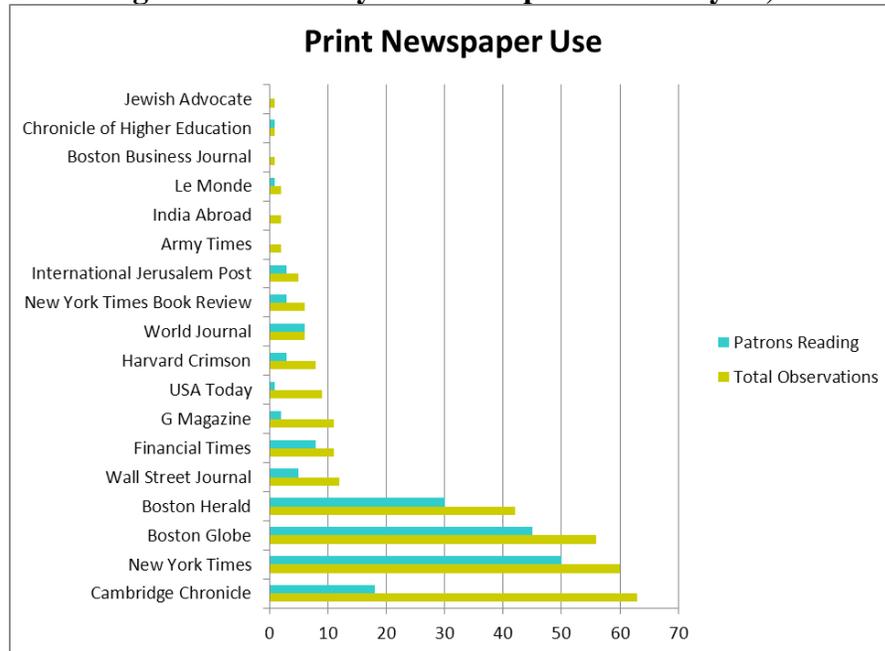
²⁷ Naylor, “Comparative Results of Two Current Periodical Use Studies.”

²⁸ The main library is open Monday - Thursday from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Friday - Saturday from 9:00 - 5:00 p.m. Sundays (September - June) from 1:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m. The six branches have different hours of operation: <http://www.cambridgema.gov/cpl/hoursandlocations.aspx>, retrieved 6 July 2014.

²⁹ The NOAA study conducted by Charles Wenger and Judith Childress recorded only 55 separate acts by patrons during 14 observational periods covering 10.3 hours, which breaks down to 5 patrons per hour and an inefficient use of staff time. See Wenger and Childress, 294.

observed reading the newspapers. The data for the number patrons reading more accurately reflects use of the print newspapers.

Table 2: Number of Observations of Patron Use of Print Newspapers at the Cambridge Public Library between April 1 and May 15, 2014.



For the digital editions, the study sought to compare similar databases that offered access to historic newspaper articles, and national and local newspapers. The Historical New York Times (1851 – 2011) offered by ProQuest, most closely resembles the Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection (1846 – 1922) in terms of offering access to articles that date beyond the past twenty years. The Boston Globe (1980 – Current), supplied by ProQuest, and the Boston Herald (1991 – Current), supplied by NewsBank, are popular newspapers, published locally, that make a nice comparison to the *Cambridge Chronicle*, although print circulation numbers for the *Chronicle* are significantly less than the other newspapers cited in the study.

The digital editions were the most challenging to record because each of the four databases cited in this study - Gale, NewsBank, ProQuest, and the Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection - applies different values to capture use statistics (see Table 3). The study standardized terminology to be able to make accurate comparisons of the data. A compilation of two basic metrics were used: number of sessions and page views/number of article retrievals. Sessions are the number of times the database is accessed. Because the ProQuest database does not count sessions, the number of searches represents its number of sessions. The data for page views/article retrievals counts page views where available (i.e., Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection), and article retrievals represent full text or abstract retrievals (i.e., Gale and ProQuest). The study did not count the Gale database's statistic for searches. NewsBank captures only one metric: the number of times documents are viewed, which the study translates as page views/article retrievals.

The Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection contains three local Cambridge newspapers in addition to the *Cambridge Chronicle*. However, the statistics gathered for the database show aggregate numbers that represent the four newspapers and does not break out usage for individual titles. The *Cambridge Chronicle* represents the largest number of editions in the database.

For historical data from 2011 to 2014, both NewsBank and ProQuest offered access to the *Boston Globe* and the *Boston Herald*. Both databases' statistics were added together so that an accurate account of online usage of these two titles is reflected in the data. To complicate the collection of data further, NewsBank and ProQuest do not provide use statistics on a daily date range; they only provide full months.³⁰ Therefore in order to compile accurate data for the April 1 to May 15 timeframe, the numbers for the full month of May were divided in half and added to the April numbers.

Table 3: Statistics Captured for Each Database

Database	Titles	Statistics Captured by Database	Metric Used in Study
Gale	New York Times (1985 - Current)	-Sessions -Full Text Retrievals -Retrievals -Searches -Turn-aways	-Sessions -Page Views/Article Retrievals
Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection	Cambridge Chronicle (1846 - 1922)	-Sessions -Users -Page Views	-Sessions -Page Views/Article Retrievals
NewsBank	-Cambridge Chronicle (2005 - Current) -Boston Herald (1991 - Current)	-Documents Viewed	-Page Views/Article Retrievals
ProQuest	-Boston Globe (1980 - Current) -Historical New York Times (1851 - 2011)	-Searches -Citations/Abstracts -Any Full Text Format -Total Retrievals	-Sessions -Page Views/Article Retrievals

Lastly, in addition to recording usage on print, microfilm, and databases, staff conducted a survey with nine research librarians at the main library and the six branch managers - all of whom are professional librarians - for qualitative data on newspaper use. The librarian survey questions are available in Appendix A. A targeted online patron survey was also used to collect data. The survey was posted on the library's various social networking sites, such as its Facebook and Twitter pages as well as the archives and special collections' blog. It was also posted on the Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection's website and was sent via e-mail to patrons who register to use the advanced services, such as text correction and tagging, the database offers. Fifty nine people responded to the survey.³¹ The answers to the survey may heavily reflect those who use the Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection. These users tend to be family genealogists and local historians. The survey did not ask respondents where they learned

³⁰ The databases that do not provide statistics on a daily date range are Cambridge Chronicle (2008 - current), Boston Herald (1991 - current), Boston Globe (1980 - Current), and Historical New York Times (1851 - 2001).

³¹ The online survey was compiled using Survey Monkey. The results can be found here: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-8RSDMH38/>, retrieved July 6, 2014.

about the survey; adding such a question is something future studies should consider. The patron survey questions are available in Appendix B.

Findings

Cambridge Public Library patrons are using both print and digital editions of newspapers in large numbers. The most impressive findings come from the use of digital versions, in particular the Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection (1846 – 1922), whose usage far outpaces other titles, including the Historic New York Times (1851 – 2011), the New York Times (1985 – Current), the Boston Globe (1980 – Current), and the Boston Herald (1991 – Current), and the Cambridge Chronicle (2005 – Current) (see Table 4.) This usage can be attributed to two factors. First, the newspapers made available in this database, including the public domain editions of the *Cambridge Chronicle*, are the only digital versions available online. No other library or institution has made these titles freely accessible. Most libraries in the United States make the *New York Times* available online to patrons, along with other prominent national newspapers. The Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, a local agency that supports public libraries in the state, offers funding to provide the Boston Globe (1980 – Present) database to libraries in Massachusetts. There are several access points for someone to use online newspaper databases but only one for the *Cambridge Chronicle*.

Second, the Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection has no barriers to access. Anyone around the world with an internet connection can freely search and use the database whereas the library requires a patron to have a library card to remotely access the other online databases. The Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection also employs Search Engine Optimization (SEO), making it as easy as possible for users to connect to the database when they otherwise might not know about it. The database is optimized to give search engine crawlers, like Googlebot, better directives to accurately index the site. Because the library’s other databases are hidden behind a password wall, users’ queries are not picked up by search engines and receive less traffic.

Table 4: Database Use at the Cambridge Public Library between April 1 and May 15, 2014

Title	Sessions	Page Views/Article Retrievals
Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection (1846 – 1922)	11,209	40,359
New York Times (1985 - Current)	803	2,393
Boston Globe (1980 - Current)	1,161	1,197
Historical New York Times (1851 - 2011)	166	347
Cambridge Chronicle (2005 - Current)	n/a	22
Boston Herald (1991 - Current)	n/a	5

Free access to the Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection correlates to more use. Over the six-week period of the study, users accessed the database in substantially higher numbers – 5.25 times more than the other databases combined for number of sessions and 10.18 times more than the other databases combined for the number of page views/article retrievals. The use of the database has been steadily increasing over the years, only emphasizing how free access encourages research (see Table 5). The historical data shows that over the past three years the total number of sessions of the Historic

Cambridge Newspaper Collection is 4.1 times higher than the other databases combined. These numbers are especially impressive considering that the newspaper only covers local news from the mid-19th Century to the beginning of the 20th Century. The data points to the fact that local news has value well beyond its community and that historic news or “old news” is as relevant as current news. Because only one library collects and provides access to this news source makes it all the more valuable.

Table 5: Number of Database Sessions Accessed at the Cambridge Public Library from January 2011 to June 2014

Title	2011	2012	2013	2014	Total
Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection (1846 - 1922)	n/a	6,472	80,529	45,803	132,804
Boston Globe (1980 - Current)	295	1,026	7,085	4,799	13,205
New York Times (1985 - Current)	2,805	3,064	3,508	3,194	12,571
Historical New York Times (1851 - 2011)	714	1,559	1,310	638	4,221
Cambridge Chronicle (2005 - Current)	276	380	449	236	1,341
Boston Herald (1991 - Current)	463	354	187	27	1,031

Through the targeted online patron survey and a survey of the Cambridge Public Library’s research librarians and branch managers, the study was able to compile data on how patrons use the online versions of the *Cambridge Chronicle*. This data is useful in that assumptions can be made about how public library patrons use other online newspaper resources like the Historic New York Times. The patron survey, which asked specifically about the *Cambridge Chronicle*, revealed that the majority of users access the newspaper online through the Cambridge Public Library.³² The most heavily used online version of the newspaper is the Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection, which corresponds directly to the data collected on database use (see Table 4 and Table 5). The survey also showed that the majority of patrons using the *Cambridge Chronicle* online do so to research genealogy and family history, followed closely by accessing local news (see Table 6).

³² From the online patron survey:

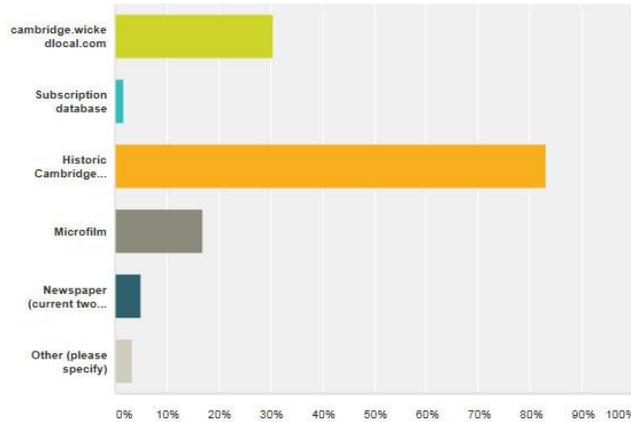
How do you read the Cambridge Chronicle?	
Online	73.68%
Paper is delivered to my home	5.26%
Pick up a free paper	12.28%
At the library	7.02%
Other (please specify)	14.04%

If you read the Cambridge Chronicle online, where to you access it?	
Online at cambridge.wickedlocal.com	41.18%
Cambridge Public Library	52.94%
Other (please specify)	13.73%

Table 6: Online Patron Survey Results Conducted by the Cambridge Public Library in April and June, 2014

The Cambridge Public Library makes the Cambridge Chronicle available in several ways. Which of these formats have you used? (Check all the apply.)

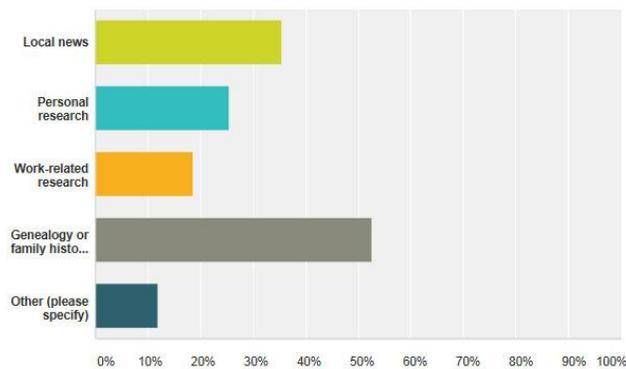
Answered: 59 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses
cambridge.wickedlocal.com	30.51% 18
Subscription database	1.69% 1
Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection	83.05% 49
Microfilm	16.95% 10
Newspaper (current two years)	5.08% 3
Other (please specify)	3.39% 2
Total Respondents: 59	

Why do you read the Cambridge Chronicle? (Check all that apply.)

Answered: 59 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses
Local news	35.59% 21
Personal research	25.42% 15
Work-related research	18.64% 11
Genealogy or family history research	52.54% 31
Other (please specify)	11.86% 7
Total Respondents: 59	

The librarian survey results validate the patron survey results by revealing that most patrons use the Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection, followed by cambridge.wickedlocal.com (the *Cambridge Chronicle*'s website) and then the NewsBank database (Cambridge Chronicle, 2005 – current), accessible only in the library or with a Cambridge library card.³³ Additionally, the survey results from the librarians give more granular information on what patrons are searching for when using the *Cambridge Chronicle*. Nearly all the librarians reported that patrons use the *Cambridge Chronicle* for genealogy or obituary research. Another topic of interest is the police report – fires, accidents, and crime. Current political news like reporting on the city council and school committee meetings as well as neighborhood news and opinion pieces receive a lot of attention. Patrons tend to read this news, along with the police updates, as it comes out on a weekly basis. For historical research, patrons search for society blurbs, local political campaigns, major political events (like the repeal of rent control), and primary sources on specific topics, such as the American Civil War and the sinking of the Titanic. Patrons tend to read the current political news and police reports in print, whereas digital editions are used for research. The patron survey backs up this theory since the majority of respondents said they read the newspaper online but not on a weekly basis, and indicated that the database they use the most – the Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection – they use primarily for research purposes.

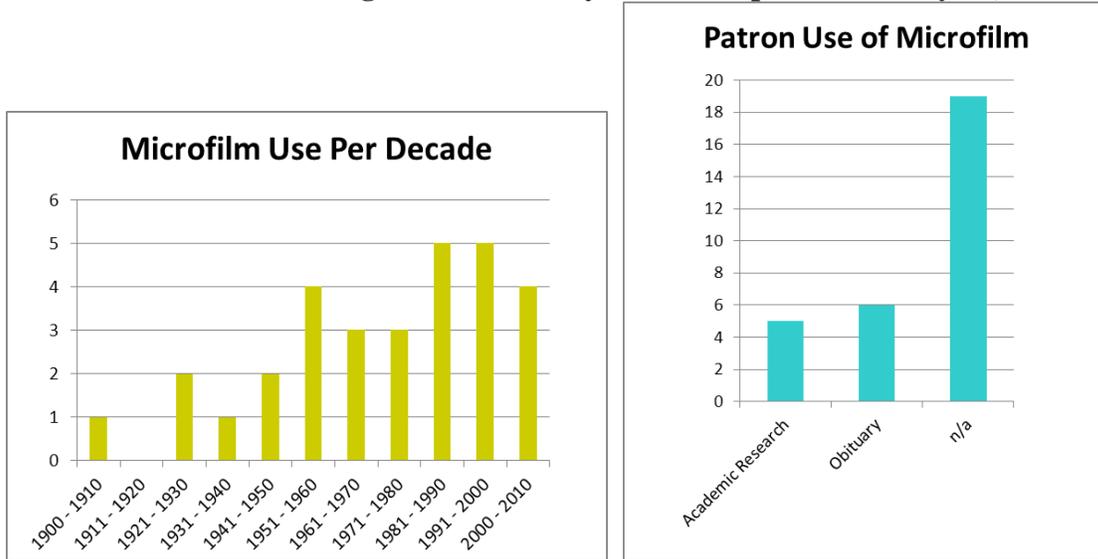
Since not all the years of the *Cambridge Chronicle* are available online, the study found that patrons use the microfilm version of the newspaper to research the years that are not digitized (see Table 6). The microfilm covers the full run of the newspaper from 1846 to 2013; whereas the Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection covers 1846 to 1922 and the NewsBank database version covers 2005 to the present. Although microfilm is not a heavily used medium, patrons continue to use it steadily and even slightly more than the online *Cambridge Chronicle* provided by NewsBank. Over the six-week user study, patrons accessed the microfilm 30 times and the *Cambridge Chronicle* through the NewsBank database 22 times. Patrons used the microfilm for obituary and academic research, and are willing to seek out this information despite it not being readily available online (see Table 7). This trend follows a recent, ongoing study of microform use by Dana Caudle, Cecilia Schmitz, and Elizabeth Weisbrod published in 2013, showing that patrons use microfilm when the digital version is not available and in some instances patrons prefer microfilm over digital.³⁴ In the case of the *Cambridge Chronicle*, the microfilm and digital versions are complementary.

³³ From the research librarian and branch manager survey:
Which online version of the Cambridge Chronicle do you help patrons use?

Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection	56%
cambridge.wickedlocal.com	22%
NewsBank database (2005 - current)	11%
N/A	11%

³⁴ Dana M. Caudle, Cecilia M. Schmitz, and Elizabeth J. Weisbrod, “Microform – Not Extinct Yet: Results of a Long-Term Microform Use Study in the Digital Age,” *Library Collections, Acquisitions, and Technical Services*, vol. 37, issue 1-2 (2013): 2.

Table 7: Microfilm Use of the Cambridge Chronicle per Decade and Patron use of Microfilm at the Cambridge Public Library between April 1 and May 15, 2014



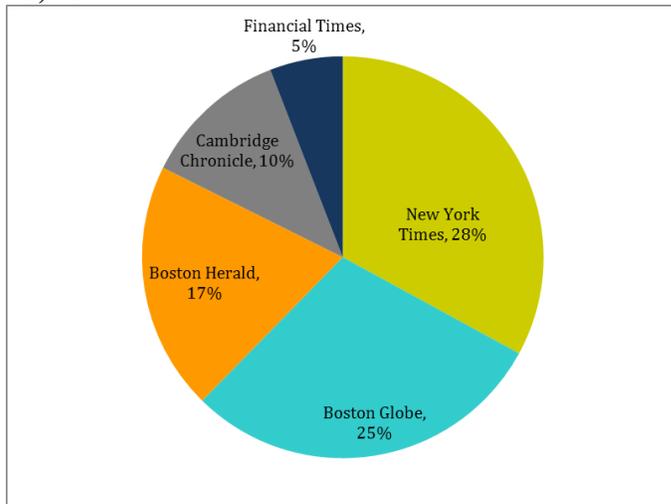
Much like the online databases, Cambridge Public Library patrons are using print newspapers in large numbers. However, unlike the digital versions, which are being used for research, the print versions are being actively read by patrons on a daily basis. According to a research librarian surveyed, “The crowd is hungry for news. People come to the library to sit, read, relax, and have the luxury of turning the physical page.” Another librarian noted that the library’s morning visitors are seeking the dailies: “Of the group of 20 waiting each morning to get into the library, at least half of them go straight to the newspapers.” Others report that the print newspapers serve a particular patron base – those who are less well-off and do not have internet access, such as patrons from assisted living facilities or shelters, or those who have stopped their paid subscriptions but still want to read the print edition, or retirees who have made a habit of coming to the library first thing in the morning to get their news. “Patrons are very attached to the newspapers,” according to one of the librarians surveyed, “They notice if the current edition is missing.”

Patrons are also reading the *Cambridge Chronicle* as it comes out each week (see Table 8). In fact, the study showed that along with major national and local newspapers, such as the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe*, the *Cambridge Chronicle* is in high demand. This data is also backed up by the responses of the librarians of which 100% reported that the *Cambridge Chronicle* gets read on a daily basis, again revealing that local news is important to public library patrons. The librarian survey also reported that print newspaper use has remained steady over the past 10 years, although patrons are accessing digital editions more and more. One librarian with a twenty-seven year tenure at the Cambridge Public Library has seen no decline in print use. Another, who has worked at the library for 20 years, reported that newspaper use has actually increased over time. This data is important in that it shows the opposite of what academic libraries are facing: a marked decline in print newspaper use in the digital age.³⁵ In the public library environment, making print newspapers freely accessible is a necessary service that

³⁵ Freeland and Bailey, 220.

continues to encourage reading and research, especially among a patron demographic who may not have access to newspapers outside the library.

Table 8: Top Five Print Newspapers: Total Percentage of Newspapers Observed being Read by Patrons at the Cambridge Public Library between April 1 and May 15, 2014



Those who are reading print newspapers tend to follow a particular demographic: older, male, and Caucasian. This demographic, as observed by the research librarians and branch managers, continues to follow the profile of print newspaper subscribers revealed by Paula Berinstein in a 2005 study.³⁶ The age of the patrons, in particular, causes reflection among the research librarians when surveyed about changes in newspaper use over time. Age is the dividing line between those who get their current news from print newspapers versus those who do so online. Fewer young people are reading print newspapers. As one librarian explained, “Patrons always want print, but maybe there will be a huge shift in the future. People will always read the *Cambridge Chronicle*, but what version they use in another issue.” The question remains – will print newspaper continue to be in demand as the younger generation ages?

Conclusion

The Cambridge Public Library’s six-week newspaper user study revealed that print, digital, and microform editions of newspapers are in high demand. These findings are important for two reasons: first, free access to news resources continues to encourage reading and research in both print and online environments, again challenging preconceived ideas of how news is consumed in the digital age. In the public library, newspapers are not obsolete; they are still being read in their traditional format primarily by an older demographic. Digital editions, however, are used for research purposes and that research varies from genealogists to academics to those generally interested in local history. Second, the high use of newspapers – especially print newspapers – in public libraries directly contradicts the experience of low usage in academic libraries. This data is important because there are assumptions that print newspapers are becoming less

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 220. See Paula Berinstein, “Black and White and Dead All Over: Are Newspapers Headed 6 Feet Under?,” *Searcher*, vol. 13, no. 10 (2005): 46.

relevant in today's online environment when this is clearly not the case in public libraries. It is crucial that more public libraries participate in newspaper use studies to add data to these conversations.

The most impressive statistics gathered were those around the use of the Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection, a database of historic Cambridge newspapers from the mid-19th Century to the early 20th Century. The use is higher than all the library's other newspaper databases combined and is growing substantially each year. The high demand for freely accessible news shows that in a digital environment, the lowest barriers to access encourage the highest use, and that local, historical news has value well beyond its community and its original intention. It is imperative, however, that libraries continue to fund universal access to these kinds of online collections.

Public libraries are a nexus for local historians, genealogists, and consumers of news in general and local news in particular. Collecting, preserving, digitizing, and making freely available local newspapers is an easy way for public libraries to remain relevant and provide a unique service to users in their community and around the world.

Appendix A: Cambridge Public Library Research Librarian and Branch Manager Survey

1. What is the size of your branch and how many patrons visit daily? (Branch Managers only)
2. What newspapers do you have at your branch (Branch Managers only)
3. How many years have you worked at the Cambridge Public Library?
4. In your experience, what is newspaper use like at the library?
5. Who do you see using the print newspapers? (i.e., demographic)
6. Do you think the print version of the *Cambridge Chronicle* gets read?
7. Do you help patrons use the online versions of the *Cambridge Chronicle*? (i.e., databases)
8. Which online version of the *Cambridge Chronicle* do you see or help most patrons use?
9. What kind of information are you helping patrons search for when they use the *Cambridge Chronicle*?
10. How do you think newspaper use has changed in your time working here?
11. As a professional librarian, what is your opinion on free access of news?

Appendix B: Cambridge Chronicle Patron Survey

1. Do you read the *Cambridge Chronicle*?
 Yes
 No
2. Do you read the *Cambridge Chronicle* when it comes out each week?
 Yes
 No

3. How do you read the *Cambridge Chronicle* (Check all that apply.)

- Online
- Paper is delivered to my home
- Pick up a free paper
- At the library
- Other (please specify)

4. If you read the *Cambridge Chronicle* online, where do you access it? (Check all that apply.)

- Online at cambridge.wickedlocal.co
- Cambridge public library through a database
- Other (please specify)

5. Why do you read the *Cambridge Chronicle*? (Check all that apply.)

- Local news
- Personal research
- Work-related research
- Genealogy or family history
- Other (please specify)

6. The Cambridge Public Library makes the *Cambridge Chronicle* available in several ways. Which of these formats have you used? (Check all that apply.)

- Online through cambridge.wickedlocal.com (current issue)
- Online through a [subscription database](#) (August 2005 to present)
- Online through the [Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection](#) (1846 to 1922)
- Newspaper (current two years)

7. What other newspapers do you read? (Check all that apply.)

- Boston Globe
- Boston Herald
- New York Times
- Other (please specify)

8. For what purposes do you read other newspapers? (Check all that apply.)

- Local news
- National news
- International news
- Personal research
- Work-related research
- Genealogy or family history
- Other (please specify)

9. Please provide some basic demographic information about yourself

State/Province _____
ZIP/Postal Code _____
Country _____

10. What is your age?

- Under 20
- 20 to 30
- 30 to 40
- 40 to 50
- 50 to 60
- 60 to 70
- 70+

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