

How successful was the BBC Big Read?

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Abstract

The BBC Big Read was a reading scheme that was aimed at finding the nation's favourite novel. It had support from educational institutions and libraries, and hosted a number of events throughout the year, encouraging people to vote and get involved in the project. But the BBC said they were aiming at more than that. They wanted to primarily get people reading more and talking about books in general.

Through the time the Big Read was on, book sales and borrowing figures from libraries grew steadily for those books involved in the Top 100 list, and reading groups sprang up in libraries and the workplace.

However, when it comes to asking people for their opinions about what they thought of the Big Read, their views suggest it was not as successful as the BBC would like to believe. Few found it affected their reading habits, even though they believed the scheme to be worthwhile. Many remembered the Big Read, with its celebrity champions fighting for their favourite novel, but this is not necessarily enough to proclaim the scheme as a success.

But then due to a case study carried out in a small library, there is the possibility that the project did change some people's reading habits. Librarians there witnessed a change in people's choice of books, and even had to purchase other novels to compensate for renewed interest in certain books.

In a commercial sense, the Big Read was a success, but when concerned with changes in what people are reading and how often they do read, the results are not so clear, and it is difficult to say whether the Big Read was a success or not.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1. Primary Aim

The main aim of this dissertation is to find out how successful the BBC Big Read scheme truly was, from both a commercial and personal point of view. That is, comparing book sales and library borrowing figures with people's opinions and viewpoints. But before the aims and objectives of this study are described, it is first necessary to understand what the Big Read was and what its aims were, so as to truly conclude whether it achieved its own aims and objectives.

1.2. The Big Read

1.2.1. The launch

On the 5th of April 2003, The BBC launched the Big Read (Harrison, 2003). It was a hunt for the nation's favourite book, from any genre and written at any time, just as long as it came under the category of 'novel'. The first evening of the launch was marked with a 90 minute show of 'captivating literary programming' (BBC Press Release, 2003a), with well-known faces revealing their favourite books and why they mean so much to them. Then, the public was asked to get involved, by voting for their own favourite novel. The nation responded, with more than 140,000 people nominating over 7,000 different novels (Holman, 2003a) and in a month's time, on the 17th May, the top 100 choices were released.

1.2.2. Support

Over the next few months, posters, activities and events sprang up across the country, encouraging people to read from the Top 100 list, and to vote for their favourite either via the phone or the internet. The project gained support from libraries, schools, and educational institutions, not to mention the publicity spread by publishers and book retailers. (BBC Press Release, 2003a). The BBC even launched a database online, containing all activities that were happening across the country in conjunction with the Big Read. For those who did not have online access an action line was offered, where

advisers would search this database for callers and would also offer one-to-one advice and information on how to set up a book club. (BBC Press Release, 2003b)

1.2.3. Reading Groups

Reading Groups were also encouraged through ‘The Little Guide to Big Reading’, a downloadable pack offered on the Big Read website. It contained handy hints and friendly advice on starting a book group, with ideas on how to find members and get started, and also specific ideas concerned with reading and talking about the BBC Big Read Top 100 books (BBC Press Release, 2003c). Nearly one in every five libraries set up new groups with their users, and there were more than 110,000 downloads of the Booktrust guide to setting up new groups (Clee, 2004). But it was not only in libraries that people were moved to form reading groups. The notion was also influencing the workplace, with a number of companies encouraging their employees to get involved in workplace reading groups. The Unilever ice cream and frozen foods office in Walton-on-Thames is one such place, where at lunchtime on the first Wednesday of every month, workers meet to discuss their favourite books and enjoy ‘literary delights’ (Deeble, 2003). Swap a Book day, the Big Read initiative to recommend your favourite book to others was also popular within such workplaces. Employees were asked to write a synopsis on their recommended book and then leave it somewhere central for others to peruse and maybe even borrow and read. Many offices and businesses took part in these types of schemes, suggesting that the Big Read had quite an effect on a vast amount of different environments.

1.2.4. Public events

The BBC visited a number of public events throughout the summer, including the Hay Literature Festival and the Edinburgh International Book Festival. Celebrity authors made guest appearances and read extracts from their books to their avid listeners who attended the events, all with the view to getting ‘people talking- and arguing- about the Top 100 books’ (BBC Press Release, 2003b).

1.2.5. Libraries

Every one of the 208 library authorities signed up to take part in the outreach activity (BBC Press Release, 2003a) and each chose to promote the scheme in their own way. Most offered reading schemes and had voting stations within their libraries. But some went a little further in their ingenuity. In Essex, they aimed at the often excluded readers, by carrying out debates and voting at residential homes and the prison, whilst at Camden they used students from the local drama school for a reading by ‘the stars of tomorrow’ (Update, February 2004). The Gwynedd library sector even went as far as hiring an actor to read extracts from the top 100 books at bus stations and on the buses themselves, whereas in Sandwell they had their own ‘battle buses’ which circulated their local area canvassing votes.

1.2.6. Education

With help from the National Literacy Trust, the BBC offered a Big Read Teaching pack to help in schools and educational institutions. Over 18,000 of these were downloaded over the summer, with more during the autumn and winter programming as the voting began to heat up.

1.2.7. Literary Showdown

In the Autumn the Big Read headed towards a ‘literary showdown’ (BBC Press Release, 2003c) as the nine-part television series started in October. In the first show the presenter Clive Anderson counted down the Big Read Top 100 novels, from numbers 100 to 22, before revealing the most popular 21 in random order. In the next 7 weeks these 21 works of fiction each gained their own celebrity champion, who gave their arguments as to why they have chosen such a book and what it was that made their book suitable to be given the title of ‘most popular read’. In the final week a show was held live on BBC2 where the nation’s most popular book was revealed.

1.2.8. Aim of the Big Read

It was a project that lasted for most of the year, with lots of publicity, and even the creation of its own mascot, the bookworm.

It was stated by Tim Holman that

‘Many now feel that the Big Read has the potential to be the greatest ever co-ordinated promotion of reading’ (2003b:11)

Although such activity and publicity had the ultimate aim of finding the nation’s favourite novel, the BBC defined their scheme as more than that. According to the BBC Press Release (2003a)

‘The Big Read hopes to get the whole country enthused, excited and talking about the books that bring pleasure to the nation, from avid readers to anyone who hasn’t opened a book since school’

The desire of the BBC reading scheme according to its promoters was more about getting people reading and enjoying books once more.

BBC2 controller Jane Root went as far as saying she had a dream that she would go on the tube and she would see that everyone is reading the same book, thanks to the Big Read (Kean, 2003a). The BBC pledged that the Big Read was more than a television series (Holman, 2003b), and not just about getting people reading only as long as the scheme did. The proclaimed main aim of the project was to change people’s reading habits for the long term, to celebrate avid reader’s love of books and to encourage those who may not read as much to do more of this great favourite of an activity.

1.3 Aim of my investigation

Although it does seem like a very grand scheme with a selfless aim of encouraging people to read, the question brought to mind about the program is ‘was it truly successful in its aim?’

The material aim to find the nations favourite novel, or put more accurately the novel that gained the most votes, was definitely achieved, with Tolkien’s trilogy ‘The Lord of

the Rings' coming out on top with 174,000 votes (23% of votes cast) (Observer, 14th Dec 2003). But what about their other aim, which the BBC said was just as important, that of encouraging people to start reading more in general, and ultimately to change the public's reading habits permanently? Did they succeed in this goal?

This dissertation shall be concerned with this aspect of the scheme, looking into how successful the Big Read actually was. The hope is to look at data from the time of the BBC project which has been collected concerning book sales and public lending from libraries in order to see if the books mentioned in the scheme grew in popularity. But this piece of work shall also be concerned with the opinions of the public, looking into what they thought of the Big Read and whether it truly changed their reading habits, or even encouraged them to read just one book from the Top 100 Big Read list.

1.4. Research Layout.

This dissertation has already started to introduce the BBC Big Read, making the reader aware of what it was and a brief synopsis of what its aims were. This is an important aspect to be aware of when considering the results with this piece of research. The aims of the Big Read will be referred back to as often as possible to see how close to achieving their aims the BBC really was.

Next there will be an analysis of the literature on the subject. This will mainly include press releases and newspaper and magazine articles, due to the fact that the topic of the Big Read is fairly new, therefore little academic work has been done concerning the scheme. An analysis of book sale figures and the Public Lending Right issue numbers for library books shall also be included. This shall be the quantitative part of the study, and should offer valuable insights about the more material aim of the BBC in their reading program.

A methodology is included to state why certain methods were used to collect data, giving the benefits and problems of using both quantitative and qualitative data. This is included to show the researcher is aware of what problems may be faced and how to benefit from different types of information.

Results shall then be plotted, with data from questionnaires that have been distributed to a number of participants from all age ranges and gender orientation. They will be displayed in both tables and graphs, with descriptions as to what they show, or don't show. There will also be a separate chapter included on the opinions of those respondents, which were given after they were asked an open ended question at the end of the survey. Many used it as an opportunity to voice their opinion about the Big Read scheme, whether positive or negative. This form of input will help to offer more conclusions about the success of the Big Read.

The final set of results which will be offered will come from a case study of a public library in a small village just outside Cardiff. Two of the librarians there will be interviewed about what they thought of the Big Read and what impact they saw because of it.

The dissertation shall then finish with conclusions about each section of results. These will then be grouped together to form a final conclusion about how successful the Big Read really was.

1.5 Summary

The Big Read was a project by the BBC which lasted for almost a year. Its aims were simple. To find out what novel was the nation's favourite, and in the process encourage people to start reading more. Due to the amount of activities that occurred across the country because of it, it is already possible to say it had a certain amount of impact. But all the publicity and events do not tell whether the Big Read was actually successful in its aims. That is what this research will be looking to find out.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The literature available on the Big Read has been very important to gain an understanding of what went on within the scheme and what it was heading towards. A variety of sources were used, and all had their benefits and problems.

2.2. Newspapers and Magazines

The BBC Big Read scheme occurred in 2003, so happened relatively recently. Thus far very few reports or academic pieces have been written on the subject, making a literature review quite difficult to compose. But much of the background information discovered about this reading project came from the Big Read website, and also from newspaper and journal articles. The dangers of using such sources to gain understanding is fairly clear, that of bias by the writer, especially concerning the BBC's own press releases. It is in their favour to convey a positive spin on the scheme, so a poor report is unlikely to be given as to how successful the Big Read was.

However the newspaper reports do suggest that the numbers of people who watched the show was high, such as the fact that around 2.5 million viewers watching the first aired program in the autumn that was to give the watcher the run down from 100-22 of the most popular books (Holman, 2003). Many other national newspapers such as 'The Guardian' and 'The Times' offered rising sales figures of the Top 100 Big Read books and showing the lift which the classics have gained due to their renewed exposure to the public as a result of the scheme. BBC news reported a five-fold increase in sales of the Top 21 books (BBC NEWS, 2004), whilst the Daily Mirror stated that the sales of Pride and Prejudice went up by 700% after the book was championed by Meera Syal on the Big Read program aired on Saturday 25th October (Daily Mirror, 2003). All this is generally used to imply the success of the Big Read, with a quote from Ottakar's Jon Howells summing up what is felt by many of the book sellers about the Big Read:

‘The Big Read was the most important thing for the book trade last year- more so even than Harry Potter 5. It benefited all booksellers and a wide range of publishers, it boosted sales of flagging or almost forgotten titles, it got people to

read books they'd been meaning to read for years and got people who hadn't read a book in years to rediscover the habit. OK, so the book that everyone knew would win won. But getting there was great fun- and great for business' (in Holman, 2004, p24-25)

But although this quote has been found from someone who was affected by the Big Read, they were only involved in a commercial sense. In some way yes, this can be seen as evidence that the BBC's reading project was a success. But it fails to include the opinions of those others who were involved, those that the Big Read was actually meant to be aimed at. That of the public, whose reading habits were meant to be rejuvenated and changed forever by this project. What of their thoughts? Did they feel they had been affected in their choice of books? Had they started to read more because of the scheme?

2.3 Book sales

This theme of marking the success of the Big Read continues into sales figures and reports issued by journals and the BBC themselves.

Second hand shops claimed to be in desperate need of donors as they were caught in a 'reading frenzy' of which Barnardo's put down to the Big Read vote. John Ellis, the head of retail development at Barnardo's is quoted as saying 'Customers seem to be requesting those titles which made the top 20 of the BBC list, with titles like 'Lord of The Rings', 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' and 'Pride and Prejudice' in great demand' (BBC NEWS, 2003). Kean (2003) on her piece on the Big Read in 'The Bookseller' was already reporting the Big Read as a success in July, only halfway through the scheme, due to publishers and retailers reporting substantial sales increases on the featured items. Statistics such as the sales of Penguin's 'The Catcher in the Rye' more than doubling in May, from 5,600- 13,500 books being sold of from one publishing company alone were used as examples. Add to this the healthy sales increases of neglected back titles such as 'Black Beauty' and

‘The Count of Monte Cristo’ and it can be suggested that many had already decided the Big Read was a success well before it had even ended.

In January 2004 ‘The Bookseller’ went back to the theme of the Big Read and had a proper look at the sales figures of the Top 100 books, to see what great differences had occurred. The writer Holman talked of how although ‘The Lord of The Rings’ had won the public’s vote of the favourite novel, with Harry Potter and Philip Pullman’s ‘Dark Materials’ close behind, all these books suffered great loses in sales figures, with Tolkien’s trilogy being the biggest loser in 2003 in sales terms. The year before the book had sold 889, 895 copies, whilst in 2003 only 386, 739 copies were sold, which is – 56.5% (Holman, 2004). Whereas modern classics definitely felt a sales lift, with Daphne du Maurier’s ‘Rebecca’ gaining an almost 10 fold increase in sales in 2003, selling 95,213 copies compared with the 9,969 from last years count. It can be suggested that many of the books which had a sales gain within the year of the Big Read were books that adults had always wanted to read and had now been given the incentive to read. So in this way, success can be seen due to the Big Read.

But an interesting discovery also shown in this edition of the Bookseller was through the comparison they made between sales figures and voting for the Top 21 novels.

Pullman’s ‘Dark materials’ sold the most books in 2003, but came third in the voting of the nation. ‘Lord of The Rings’ came second in sales figures, selling almost half the amount of books that Pullman managed, but came top in the public vote. ‘Pride and Prejudice’, which was voted the second most popular novel only sold 59, 789 copies, coming thirteenth in the sales rank. As suggested by Holman (2003) the correlation between votes and sales is haphazard. People were not necessarily voting for what they bought, nor buying what they voted for.

2.4. Audio visual sales

But there was another interesting sales fact given by ‘The Daily Telegraph’, which was printed in December 2003. According to the reporter, the Big Read may have not only helped book sales, but also DVD and video sales. Britten (2003) stated that although the

scheme had been aimed at getting people to rediscover the art of reading and move away from the nation's couch potato status, some chose the easier option and headed for the film version of the book, rather than reading the actual novel for themselves. Amazon registered a distinct increase in film adaptations of books featured in the Big Read, with book sales of Joseph Heller's 'Catch 22' rising by 24%, whilst the film version of the novel had sales which were up to six times that. 'Gone with the Wind' and Winona Ryder's version of 'Little Women' gained the same sort of popularity. Ray Johnson, professor of Film Heritage and Documentary at Staffordshire University described a DVD as 'a ready made meal' and a book as more of a 'gourmet meal'. The main point he put across was that many find it difficult to find time to sit down and read a book because of conflicting obligations, such as work or children (Britten, 2003). This piece would suggest that although the Big Read got people interested in the story of the novels on the list, they did not reach people enough to actually get them to read. Viewers found an easier solution to finding out the ending of the story that intrigued them.

2.5. BBC Report

The Press Release issued by the BBC on 11th May 2004 suggests that people's opinions were finally being asked for concerning about the Big Read. According to a survey carried out, one in three viewers say they read more as a result of the Big Read. Miranda McKearny, Director of The Reading Agency, said that 97% of those questioned in libraries said the BBC's reading scheme had stimulated debate about books and 83% said it had widened their reading. Other statistics within the report included the fact that the Big Read website attracted more than 350,000 users, had 50,000 downloads of teaching resources and 113,000 downloads of The Little Guide to Big Reading. Jane Root, Controller of BBC TWO said:

'These statistics clearly demonstrate that the nation engaged with the Big Read above and beyond the television programmes, which was one of my main aims from the outset of the project'. (BBC Press Release, 2004)

This report does suggest that the Big Read was a success, both in terms of people's interaction and also in the aim of getting people to read more. However, it does not really give the full report, only the writer's summary of the survey. Due to this being a press release by the BBC, i.e. those who organised the Big Read, there is a large possibility of bias. It is in their favour to paint a nice picture of the success of their own project, and does not give the reader the chance to analyse the findings for themselves. It is not an academic paper, and it does suggest that this 'report' is more about publicity than academic worth, otherwise it would have been published properly and not as a press release.

2.6 Libraries

2.6.1 Newspapers and magazines

There was also said to be a great effect on libraries and lending numbers because of the Big Read. Both the image of libraries, concerning what they are capable of providing for the public, and also basic lending figures are meant to have improved for the better as a result of the BBC's project. These issues were also discussed within newspapers, with 'The Times' reporting that new figures showed that library lending of the top 21 titles in the Big Read had increased by 123% (The Times, 2004). 'The Bookseller' offered further figures, discussing the apparent positive effect that the Big Read had had on reading in public libraries. More than three quarters of library users were said to have discussed the Big Read with friends and family and two-thirds of them took part in at least one library activity organised around the reading scheme. A reporter from 'The Guardian' mentioned the growing fashion of reading groups, an activity made more popular by the Big Read project. The further growth of the number of library members helped the reporter to conclude that 'the Big Read did entice reluctant readers', so therefore saw the project as a success (Clee, 2004). McKearney, director of the Reading Agency said 'The Big Read has shone a spotlight on the creative work libraries do every day with readers' (The Bookseller, 7th May, 2004). Jane Root also expressed how thrilled she was that people were now visiting libraries (The Times, 2004) and in general, a number of CILIP 'Update' magazines have talked of their involvement with the Big Read scheme and what a positive feedback that they got from all their hard work.

2.6.2. Public Lending Right Report

However this is one area in which there is a actual academic report, put together by the Public Lending Right (PLR) company. The top 100 titles were monitored with the purpose of being able to assess whether the promotion has actually had a positive effect on borrowings within the PLR sampled library authorities (Beamson, 2004). The aim was to compare the 2003 issue numbers of the Top 100 titles with the previous year to see if there was any change. Early interim figures provided by the PLR in September 2003 indicated that the borrowing of the top 21 appeared to have experienced significant increase. Within the analysis they limited the selection of ISBN's of books to 10 years old or less, as older issues were thought to be less likely to affect figures in a significant way. Another problem with the analysis included the fact that some editions were published in 2003 making comparisons with the past years issues impossible. Also if an edition showed zero issues then it could not be expressed as percentage increase/decrease, so these items were not fed in to the overall percentage calculations. What was found was that out of the 100 analysed titles, 82 show an overall percentage increase in borrowings from July-December 2002 compared with same period in 2003. Below is the composed list of the top 10 titles with the overall highest percentage increases

1. I Capture the Castle +807%
2. Rebecca +597%
3. The Magnus +595%
4. The Hitchhiker's guide +380%
5. War and Peace +272%
6. The Secret History +245%
7. Night watch +239%
8. Nineteen Eighty-Four +215%
9. A Prayer for Owen Meany +210%
10. Gone with the Wind +205%

Taken from The PLR report, 2004

But what is more interesting is the list of those books that suffered from decreases in issues. Of the bottom 5, 3 of these titles were fantasy fiction, i.e. the same genre of the top voted book, ‘Lord of the Rings’. One of those 3 fantasy novels was ‘The Hobbit’, suggesting that although there has been growing interest in Tolkein it does not necessarily extend to his other works. Another of the top voted books, Harry Potter, was also affected. But in general borrowings of children’s books the figures were generally encouragingly high, with a mixture of both modern (such as ‘Dark Materials’ trilogy and ‘Artemis Fowl’) and also more classic novels (i.e. ‘Charlie and the Chocolate Factory’ and ‘The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe’) being borrowed.

This report also chose to monitor 2 books which were not involved in the Big Read Top 100 for comparison and to see if issues had improved in general. ‘Our Mutual Friend’ by Charles Dickens had an increase of 6% from July- December 2002 to the same period in 2003. Whereas Colin Dexter’s ‘Morse’s Great Mystery and other stories’ suffered a 49% decrease from one year to the next.

The basic summary made from this report is that the Big Read had a largely positive affect on borrowings of titles participating in prize. However as can be seen this does not necessarily include all reading, and since one of the stated aims of the Big Read was to get people reading more in general, the suggested success of the Big Read can be seen to be wavering.

2.7 Summary

In general the literature available on the Big Read is commercial, so often needs to be considered for bias. Even the only report/survey offered concerning people’s opinions on the Big Read was published as a press release for the BBC and not as an academic document. This does cause a question as to its merit and value.

The PLR report on the lending of the Top 100 books within libraries does offer much light on the subject and helps to reinforce claims of a promotion that successfully has helped lending to increase. However borrowing of a book does not always mean that those books issued have been read. To discover whether this has occurred it is necessary

to ask those who borrow the books if they do read them all, and primarily they are the only ones who can truly answer the question ‘How successful was the Big Read?’

It is felt by the researcher that this literature review has helped to show that there is room for a more quantitative analysis of the Big Read, looking at people’s opinions to see if the BBC managed to achieve its underlying goal of affecting people’s reading habits for the better.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1. Introduction

The methodology of this investigation is a key element to the whole dissertation. It will give the essential information necessary to effectively evaluate whether the Big Read was a successful scheme or merely a flash-in-the-pan ideal.

3.2. Choice of methods

It is important to choose the methods of investigation that will help to gain information that will be of most use to the study. This may be data-gathering, such as interviews, questionnaires and observation, or it may be data analysis, such as content analysis and statistical analysis (Chandler, 2003). Information from these types of methodology are usually categorised under the titles of quantitative or qualitative data. Kohler's (1994 in Punch, 1998) description of such data simplifies these titles. He sees qualitative research as 'measurement with words', whilst calling the quantitative approach 'measurement with numbers'. His definitions can be said to be correct, to a certain degree. Qualitative data is collected from people's opinions and perceptions, also observational notes and records. While quantitative research expresses information about the world in the form of numbers. The key concept is quantity and this approach uses numbers to express that quantity (Kelly, 1999).

3.3 Benefits and criticisms of approaches

Both qualitative and quantitative research have their benefits and criticisms.

3.3.1. Benefits

Qualitative methods, such as surveys and interviews, are fairly flexible, which means they can be used in a wide range of situations and purposes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This makes them suitable for studying real life situations, such as people's opinion on the Big Read. This then allows the analysis of people's views, making it very much a humanistic approach to surveying. Whereas quantitative measurements are all about numbers, including sampling methods and data analysis procedures. All these generally

originate from statistics, the science of collecting, describing, analysing and interpreting data. This research approach allows the reader to view how variables are seen and organised in respect to each other (Chandler, 2003). For example, it can be used to find out how many books are selling in a certain month compared with the previous month, which will be an incredibly useful tool within this study.

3.3.2. Criticisms

However, as stated before, both approaches do have their criticisms. Qualitative measurements, while encompassing people's opinions, can in themselves be opinionated and biased. The collection and analysis of such information both happens through the researcher, who may have pre-conceived opinions which may be difficult to move away from. This can affect what information is presented and how it is shown, which can change the whole outlook of the piece, and can end up presenting what the researcher believes and not what was actually discovered (Kelly, 1999). Another problem with qualitative research is that it can be very time consuming. The basis of this type of research is collecting opinions, views and basically words. These words need to then be reduced into a manageable amount for analysis. If this means taking 50 peoples opinions and putting them in a format which can be analysed effectively this could take quite a while. The quantitative approach also offers problems to the researcher. The main issue is that such measurements may fail to obtain critical information. Since only numbers are collected, underlying motivations and explanations may not be determined. The 'why' and 'how' is generally found in qualitative research and is often necessary to form the complete picture of the situation (Punch, 1998). This is a good example of what this study hopes to find out.

If this study were to be only based on statistical evidence what would be learned may only be what happened in book sales, and therefore would only answer whether the BBC was successful in a material way, in that people were buying more books than before. It would fail to answer whether the BBC achieved their goal of getting people to read. By using qualitative research as well this study hopes to give a balanced view, by citing both numeric data of book sales and also people's opinions. Just because someone buys a

book doesn't mean they are going to read it, or that their opinions on reading have changed. This is why it has been decided to also use a qualitative set of results as well, in order to gain a good balance and approach the research question from a humanistic viewpoint as well as a statistical one.

3.4 Questionnaires

For the qualitative side of this study, the researcher shall be concerned with people's opinions and perceptions of the Big Read, whether they remember the scheme, whether it changed their reading and primarily posing the question 'What did you think of the Big Read?' Such information will be gathered through the use of questionnaires distributed both via email and by hand. Such questionnaires are to be kept as simple as possible, as suggested by Oppenheim (2001) in order to try and increase the response rate. There is an example of the questionnaire within the appendix. It is designed using the filter approach, so that the people surveyed will not feel they are answering pointless questions of which they do not really have answers for. The questionnaire is separated out into basic sections of which there are four. Each has their own title and brief introduction as to what the section will entail, to help those being questioned to navigate the survey with as much ease as possible. As Levine (2004) suggests those participating in the research have a right to understand what the researcher is doing, and the study should not only empower the researcher with new understandings but should also empower those who are participating in the project. The sections flow in as logical a way as possible, starting with questions on reading habits, and then moving on to the Big Read. This section is then followed by quandaries on the effects of the Big Read, and then finally finishes with a short section on the personal details of the participant. It is mainly closed questions that are used in each section, so that the survey is as simple as possible for both the participant answering the questions and also the researcher when analysing such data. Both semantic and likert style of closed questions were adopted in an attempt to avoid any confusion (de Vause, 1993). These are basic styles of questions which are usually found to be fairly easy to understand, with either the choice of 'yes', 'no', or 'don't know', or alternatively the choice from a list of opinions.

3.4.1. Graphs

From the data taken from these questionnaires, graphs will be plotted in order to aid analysis of the recorded information. As Henry suggests ‘Audiences for research findings expect to find graphs when they read about a study’ (1998, p527). They help to communicate basic info and good graphs often answer some questions and encourage others. They can give good visual stimuli to the reader and can also make the study much more eye catching and easier to understand and read.

3.4.2 Open ended question

There is only one open ended question at the end of the survey, that of the primary question ‘What did you think of the Big Read?’ for people to add their own opinion in their own words. This is used to let the respondent put any views across which they do not feel they managed to do previously in the questionnaire. Often this is a valuable tool, as people may have interesting views and suggestions that can change the whole outcome of a piece of research. These views shall be analysed and presented in their own chapter. The aim shall be to write the views in the respondent’s own words, so that there can be no possibility for bias from the researcher. There will be an attempt to group the opinions together as much as possible, without changing the view point that is trying to be put across.

3.4.3 Advantages and disadvantages of surveys

There are great advantages to using such a mail survey. They are inexpensive and allow for a large number of people to be surveyed in a fairly short period of time. It offers the participant privacy when responding to the survey and allows them the opportunity to answer in their own speed and time (Mangione, 1998). However, this also means it is essential that the researcher has done their work and made the questionnaire as easy to understand as possible, because it becomes difficult to answer any queries about the survey. If the participants do not understand, they will either answer poorly, which will effect the outcome of the research, or worse still, will not answer at all. And such research is impossible, without the input from the public.

3.5 Written records

Within this dissertation archives and written records will also be used, in order to further back up any included arguments. There was much coverage of the Big Read in magazines and newspapers, and the hope is to use them in order to gain the more official opinions, of both famous people and the projects co-ordinators as to what they hope the Big Read would achieve. This will also make a good comparison, between those who were officially involved and those who were not.

3.6 Interview

Another way of gaining information about how successful the Big Read was will be in the form of an interview, using a single library as an example of what the BBC project may have done to readers who use libraries. This gives the opportunity to talk closely to people who may have been influenced by the Big Read, more so than those answering the questionnaire. The interview will be conducted in a face to face situation, so as to gain the interviewees trust, so they feel they can be totally honest in their responses. This will mean that there is more chance of gaining a truly accurate account. It will be a semi-structured interview, with mainly open-ended questions being posed, so as to make it as relaxed an atmosphere as possible. This means that those being questioned will be able to answer in their own words. Their responses will then be recorded by the researcher and used to help answer the question of how successful the Big Read was.

However, as Chandler (2004) states it is necessary to be aware that people do not always say what they mean or mean what they say. This means that it is vital that quotes are checked closely for their meaning, and recorded precisely. It can effect the whole section, if the interviewee's words are put in the wrong context or misunderstood in some way by the interviewer.

3.7 Sales figures and borrowing numbers

The quantitative side of this study will mainly be concerned with collecting and analysing factual data about book sales and lending at libraries. Much of what is available in this area has already been looked over previously in the literature review. Gaining official figures from those involved within the scheme such as employees at the BBC has been quite difficult. However Jim Parker of the Public Lending Right offered a number of useful figures concerning public lending. The book sales figures used are those found in publicly available journals, and not from official contacts, mainly due to the lack of response from that area. It is not the concern of this study to discover how much money was made due to the Big Read scheme, so that area of interest will not be included within this research. It will be concerned with how many books were sold during the time of the Big Read and will hopefully allow standardised objective comparisons to be made about the selling success or failure of the Big Read.

3.8 Summary

The research shall be carried out in as professional a manner as possible, with total awareness of possibility of bias and respect for the information that may be discovered. All those who participate will be made aware of what the study is concerned with, and are under no obligation to offer any information which they do not wish to give. But all that is offered will be carefully put together and analysed to answer the question of how successful the Big Read was.

Chapter 4 Results

4.1 Introduction

From all the questionnaires that were sent out, there were 73 responses, from a number of different sexes and age ranges. Over 150 questionnaires were distributed, but not all resulted in successful responses. The main age groups that suffered were 65+ and 0-18 years of age. This can be concluded as the product of a certain amount of apathy from those who were sent the surveys, either about the questionnaire or actually about the Big Read project itself. People may not have been bothered enough about the scheme to give their opinions on it, so may even be giving an early suggestion that the Big Read was not as successful in exciting people about the scheme as has been implied by the BBC.

It is necessary to point out here that only one was returned from those aged between 0-18. Although their results have been included within the dissertation, it is fair to say that what is discovered by this research should be seen as evidence for how successful the Big Read was for adults only i.e. 19 year olds and above.

4.2 Personal Details

Of the 73 surveyed, there was involvement from 48 females and 23 males, with 2 responses opting not to give their details (See appendix for full table of males and females involved). Therefore this made a 65.8/31.5% split, with the ‘unknown’ participants making up the final 2.7%. The largest group surveyed was that of the females aged 19-25, being 39.7% of the total amount questioned. 14 of those included were males of the same age category, which was the second largest group within the survey. The smallest group for both males and females were the 0-18, of which there were no males, and the 65+ age range. This does already suggest that the results may be unrepresentative of these age groups, an issue which should be considered when making conclusions from the results.

4.3 Reading Habits

People’s reading habits were very interesting, with a mixture of responses from those surveyed (see Table 4.1). Most people said they read books, with the greatest amount

saying they read every day i.e. 69.8% of respondents marking that this concurred with their reading habits. Only 2 people questioned, both of which were male, said that they never read books. This does not necessarily mean that they do not read at all, because the survey did not allow for other types of reading, such as newspapers, magazines and the internet, as it was not the topic of interest when concerned with the Big Read scheme.

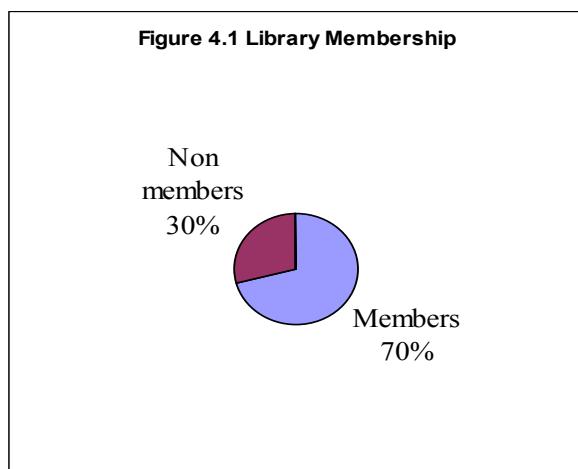
People's book buying habits were fairly evenly distributed when marked out on the table, with 20.5% buying every few weeks, 20.5% once a month and the largest group being that of 38.4% of participants purchasing books every few months. These were the main options that people chose when being surveyed. So although sales figures apparently rose as a result of the Big Read according to BBC NEWS and 'The Bookseller', by the look of the results, the participants may not of been the ones who helped that sales boost.

Table 4.1 Participants Reading habits

	How often do you read books?	How often do you buys books?	How often do you borrow books?
Once a day	51		
2-3 times a week	9		
Once a week	3	4	1
Every few weeks	4	15	8
Once a month	1	15	5
Less than once a month	3		
Every few months		28	21
Once a year		5	14
Never	2	1	3
N/A		2	21

4.4 Library members

Through the results, it was discovered that 70% of those questioned were members of the public library (see Figure 4.1). The ages of members were very mixed, but only females aged 36-49 had a great percentage of non-members than members (see Table 2 in Appendix). However, just because a person is a member of the library does not mean they use it, frequently or otherwise, hence the fact that a comparatively large amount of subjects only borrowing books every few months. This information can also be translated into the concept that they also only went to their libraries every few months. This does have great suggestions when considering later questions within the survey, which shall soon be discussed. The survey also discovered that most participants were more likely to read fiction than non-fiction, with 68.5% claiming that their reading taste was more fiction based than non-fiction. This is important when researching a topic like the success of the Big Read, because the books involved in the BBC's reading scheme were all fiction, with the basic criteria of the books involvement being that they were categorised by society as a novel. And if most of those involved in the questionnaire read comparatively more fiction, then it may be more likely that they had heard of or better still were affected by the Big Read.



4.5 The Big Read

4.5.1 Remembrance

One very important question within the survey issued to participants was whether they actually remembered the Big Read Project. For if they did not, they would be unable to properly answer later questions in the survey. Although 2 questioned were already not deemed as viable to be questioned (i.e. they stated that they did not read books), 64 out of the remaining 71 participants questioned remembered the scheme. That is 90.1% of respondents. This positive response in itself can bode well as to the success of the scheme, because over 6 months on since it finished people still remember it. This can suggest that it did strike a cord with a number of people and left a lasting impression. However whether it was a positive or negative imprint that it left still remains to be discovered. And this is what was further looked into by the questionnaire.

4.5.2 Participant Involvement and Interest

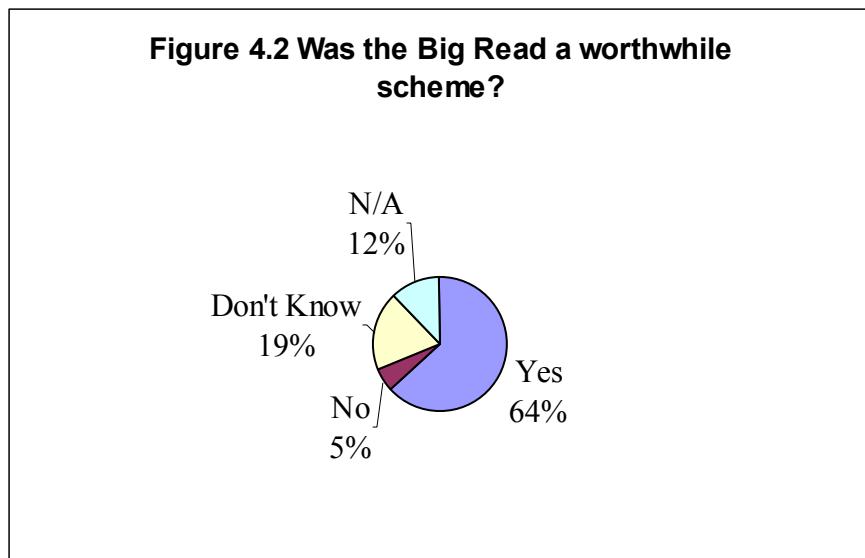
To find out how involved participants were, they were asked about whether they watched the shows, whether they voted and whether they were actually interested in what novel came top of the list. Although a mixed number actually watched the show, with about a 50-40% difference a lot less chose to vote for their favourite novel. This can suggest that although they were interested enough to view the shows on the scheme, it didn't spark enough interest in them to actually vote. This is quite a strange response especially when compared with actual figures given by the BBC, who claimed they had nearly 140,000 votes alone, merely to get the top 100 nominations (Harrison, 2003). So maybe there were many votes, but they clearly were not made by most of those surveyed.

However, although they were not willing to act and actually get up and vote, most were interested in what the most popular books was overall, whether they agreed or disagreed with the decision. 73.4% of those who answered the question were interested, whilst 21.9% were not. Only 3 participants were unsure, which could also be described as not caring. Although it is not possible to gain everyone's interest or get every viewer's approval, it is slightly damaging to the possible success of the Big Read. 3 participants out of 73 is quite large should these results be seen as a blue print of the nation's opinions. Here it can be seen that it didn't seem to spark enough interest in a number of

people to the point of them not even knowing whether they wanted to discover the nation's most popular book.

4.5.3 A worthwhile scheme?

Despite everything, most believed that the Big Read was a worthwhile scheme. Of those involved in the survey, 64% believed it was a worthwhile project, though 19% were unsure (see Figure 4.2). Interestingly, more males than females were unsure, suggesting that maybe the scheme effected the female of the species more than the male (see Table 3 in Appendix).

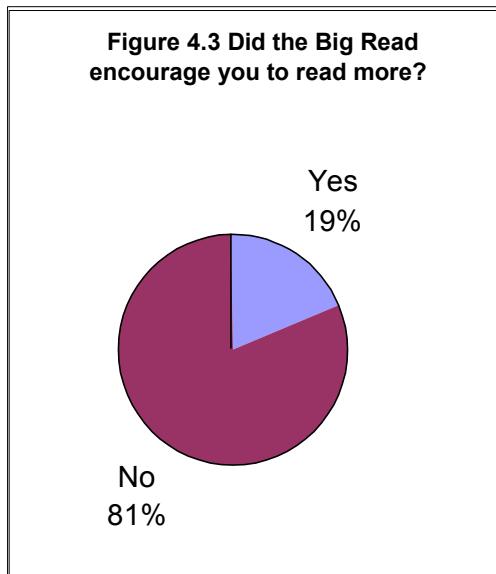


Another discovery was that the highest percentage of those who were unsure about how worthwhile the scheme was, in female age category, the 36-45, were also the category with the highest percentage of those who did not belong to a library, an issue mentioned earlier in this chapter. From a number of articles within the CILIP 'Update' journal it is clear that the libraries worked hard to encouraged people to get involved in a variety of different ways, from debates and coffee mornings to author visits and the hiring of actors to read snippets from the novels (Update, 2003). Maybe if those who were unsure, especially participants who were not members of a public library, had entered the

libraries they would have seen more of the activities on offer. This could then have changed their view points and made them more certain about the Big Read's worth, maybe even for the better.

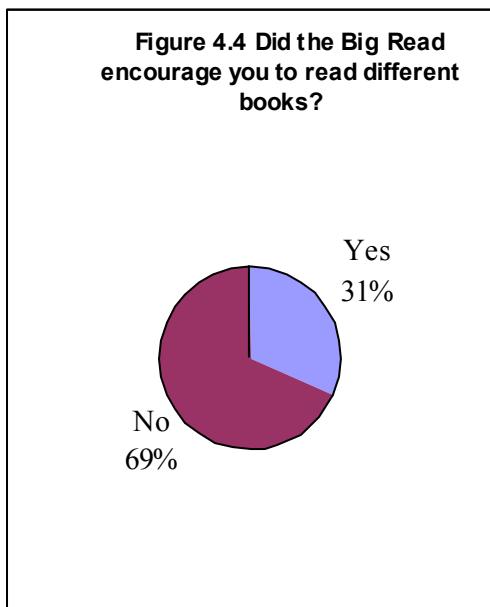
4.6 Effect of the Big Read

The main aim of the Big Read which has been commented on by Jane Root and also Miranda McKearney (BBC Press Release, 2003b) has been to get people reading more. So a large aim of the questionnaire was to discover whether people felt their reading habits had been changed as a result of the BBC reading project. This is why questions were asked of the participants to find out whether they felt the Big Read had effected their reading habits in some way shape or form. Out of the 64 viable applicants, 81% said that they did not feel the scheme encouraged them to read more (see Figure 4.3).



In general there was no difference in age or sex. In each category there were more people saying 'no' than 'yes' in response to this question. This is a very big result when concerning the success of the Big Read, almost suggesting that the BBC failed in their attempt to influence people. Especially when this insight is followed up by the 68.8% of

participants who said they did not feel they were moved to read different books as a result of the scheme (see Figure 4.4).



This puts into question exactly how successful was the Big Read in achieving its goal of changing people's reading habits and getting them to read more. However of those 20 participants who said they were encouraged to read different books, 80% of them said they read books featured on the Big Read (see appendix for list of books they read as a result). In this group there were more females than males reading Big Read books, suggesting that maybe females felt affected by what the BBC was trying to do. This can also be said when concerning age ranges. Older groups of females seemed to be more positively affected by the scheme, saying it encouraged them to read different books. However, in saying this, it is necessary to point out that still a third of the older age ranges, i.e. 50 and above, still saw themselves as unaffected in their reading habits.

4.7 Summary

The results offered here give a mixed view on the success of the Big Read. Some did seem to believe it was a worthwhile scheme, and watched the shows and had an interest in what book came top. However, not all participants chose to watch and very few actually voted. And although most said it was worthwhile, very few said it had any effect on their reading habits. So the question is raised by these results, did the scheme really change anything? Judging by the response to these questions in the survey, the answer would most likely be ‘no’.

Chapter 5 People's opinions.

5.1. Introduction

A main objective of this dissertation is to discover how successful the Big Read was according to people's views and opinions. These were the people who the scheme was aimed at, and who the BBC hoped they could reach and maybe even encourage to read more and discuss books in their everyday life.

Therefore a space was left at the end of the survey with the open-ended question of 'What did you think of the Big Read' being posed to the participant. This then invited them to write whatever opinions they wanted to put across which they didn't feel they had been able to previously. They were also welcome to say nothing at all and leave it blank, a choice which some chose to exercise.

But many did have an opinion to share, all with interesting insights, ideas and notions about the Big Read and what it meant to them.

5.2. Memories

All those who answered the question remembered the scheme to a certain extent. Some admitted their ignorance on the topic and said they knew 'almost nothing about it'. This led to comments such as

'It was not publicised enough. Was hard to get involved with no knowledge of what it entailed'.

Others only commented on seeing the television adverts, or just the programmes. This can suggest that many felt they were not properly made aware of what the project was about, so they could not truly get involved and therefore benefit from what the BBC was trying to achieve.

But then there are others who seemed to feel it was the exact opposite, that the project went on too long and they got bored with it. One such quote was by a female participant who said 'It dragged out too long. I lost interest with it quite quickly'. As with many

shows and schemes everyone has a different opinion, with different levels of interest. So keeping everyone happy is a difficult task, therefore dissatisfaction was bound to occur with the scheme in some shape or form.

There were others who did enjoy the project with memories of the shows ranging from their enjoyment of ‘a very well structured and presented series’ to a memorable comment of ‘Ruby Wax was good as the voice over for one of the worms in the advert’. The use of famous champions for the books was quite popular with the participants, many of whom mention they enjoyed seeing well known celebrities getting so excited about books that they themselves knew and some had even read.

But one participant did remember it in quite a bad light, as he described it as ‘An exercise in marketing for publishers with my license fee’. But this was not the only negative. Others did mention the BBC’s interest in hyping up buying of books, and it was the publishers of the books who would really have benefited from the scheme.

5.3. Movies

Some did mention the possible influence of films and television programmes on people’s choices. One participant summed it up in her opinion:

‘The top books were obviously effected by recent films, the fact that Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and Gone with the Wind were in the top books shows this’.

Others did mention the same concern about the nation’s choice of books, with one cynically saying he failed to believe ‘that “War and Peace” was also read by a significant proportion of the people who voted it to the top 20!’ Although these are people’s views it does coincide with what was reported by ‘The Daily Telegraph’ in December 2003. According to Amazon.co.uk sales of the film versions of the feature films ‘Gone with the Wind’ and ‘Catch 22’ were selling between four and ten times more than the novels (The Daily Telegraph, 2003). Clearly some of the participants were aware of the possible influence on voters from the visual world of TV and film.

5.4. Outcome

Many of those who responded to the option of giving their views on the Big Read mentioned their opinion on the final choice of the Top book and also others within the Top 100 list. Some mentioned their surprise at some of the novels, whilst others felt some books had been unjustly excluded. One stated that they felt that the classics suffered because of more pop culture fiction, whilst others said they were happily reminded of books that they had forgotten about. A female respondent said that as a result of the show her friend reread Daphne du Maurier's 'Rebecca'. 'I read it for the first time as a result of her enthusiasm'. This suggests that the interest in the Big Read did also go through some to get to other people, so the idea of reading different books spread without the aid of the television shows and library activities.

Some also said that the final list did not effect their reading in any way because they had either already read most of the books on it, or they already had their own list of books to get through as it was, 'without needing to consult someone else's!' This could maybe suggest that some who knew of the Big Read were already quite large readers, so did not feel they needed any outside help with their reading habits. This would also help to suggest why so many did not believe their reading habits had been effected by The BBC scheme.

5.5. Worthwhile?

But despite some negative comments about the books featured and the programmes, a number of people did say it was a worthwhile project. The general consensus was that if it got people talking about books and becoming more interesting in reading then it was a good thing. It was 'an interesting and valuable attempt' by the BBC according to one participant, while another suggested it made reading 'a bit cooler'. One full quote which offered a positive view was that the Big Read was:

'Excellent publicity for the joy of books'

Those who did like the reading project were full of praise calling it an interesting scheme which they enjoyed thoroughly. Many named books which they had been inclined to read again because of the scheme and they also felt that anything like this project that encouraged reading was a good thing and there should be more of them.

However one feeling that came across from quite a few respondents was summed up by one female who said:

‘[It was] great for some people- but not for me personally’.

Many implied the same notion, that although some were moved to read more, most felt they already read a lot and that therefore the scheme was not aimed at them. But that they felt for those who did not read as much, it was an excellent idea to encourage them and broaden their reading habits. Another participant believed this, saying of the Big Read that :

‘maybe it was best for turning non-readers into readers, rather than providing existing readers with anything much...?’

But if everyone was thinking ‘This was great, just not for me’ then who was it truly aimed at?

5.6. Ideas

The questionnaire answers also offered up some suggestions of what people would like to see as a result of the Big Read. A couple suggested that maybe something could be set up along the same lines, but for children instead. It is true that although a few children’s books were included within the Top 100, it was mainly a culmination of adult books. Another suggestion came from the fact that the participant felt the Big Read shows were making the books inaccessible to people because presenters were getting too analytical when discussing the books. This led to the idea that maybe the BBC could have encouraged those who weren’t too sure about reading the entire book to just read

snippets, and then have a ‘light-hearted discussion’ afterwards on the radio or television. This idea seems to suggest a more relaxed way of getting people to read the novels.

One male participant was so moved by the Big Read that he said he hoped it would continue.

‘It would be great if there was a book club on TV where we could actually hear people talking about current books they are reading. Seeing celebrities reading could encourage kids to feel it is a ‘cool’ thing to do. I thought Oprah Winfrey’s book club was a great idea, I would like to see a British version.’

The Big Read can be seen to have been successful in its aim here, because the respondent clearly wants more done with books, and has been encouraged to state this in his opinion.

5.7. Summary

Although many of the responses were mixed as to what people thought of the Big Read, all had clear messages. Most believed it to be a worthwhile scheme, but not all thought it helped them personally. Others were not so enamoured with it, feeling it was too popularist, and greatly affected by the audio visual industry. But some wanted more, and had further suggestions to where the BBC could go from here.

However, whatever people had to say about the scheme, nearly all remembered or had at least heard of the Big Read. This does suggest that it did leave some kind of imprint on people’s minds. In fact, one participant’s quote can be used to conclude this argument nicely:

‘these issues could all be argued with and in themselves appear contradictory, which just proves the success of the project in encouraging reading and the debate about reading and books in general – raising its profile to people’s minds.’

Chapter 6 Case Study

6.1 Introduction

In order to gain another view point about how successful the Big Read was, a small interview was carried out at a local library in order to gain insight from those who work with books, in an environment that is very much influenced by reading habits and books in general.

6.2 Radyr Public Library, Cardiff

The library in question is a small public library in the centre of a suburban village just outside Cardiff City centre. According to the Cardiff Government website ‘Fiction, non-fiction, large print, talking books and newspapers are available to adults children and teenagers for both leisure and learning’ (2003), with story times videos and a countywide computer link available to users. It is a busy part-time library run by two experienced staff Anne Jakeman and Caroline Noall.

An impersonal interview was carried out with both these members of staff to ask them about the Big Read, concerned mainly with what they thought of it and whether they had seen any of its effect in their readers and borrowing in general.

The interview took place at the library itself, whilst they were also serving customers. However it was not a busy time of day, so there were few interruptions.

6.3 The Interview

6.3.1 Big Read effect

The main question asked of both was about how much effect they felt the Big Read had had on the readers that came into the library. Anne stated that it had had a large effect on the users of the library with ‘everybody wanting to read the [Big Read] books’. She said that people had been reading different books and had actually been talking about them.

Some had agreed with the result and others had not, whilst some discussed the programs and the celebrities who were championing the books. One remark that they remember hearing a number of times was that the final list ended up being ‘a bit predictable’. But the main thing was that people were actually talking about books, just like the BBC had aimed towards. Requests had also changed, with books such as ‘Catch 22’, which apparently there had been so little interest in that the Radyr branch didn’t have their own copy. Due to the number of requests, it was ordered from other branches and Radyr now actually has its own copy, which is still being borrowed fairly regularly. Caroline reiterated this point, saying that there had been immense interest and many more requests for books that had often been ignored. It often coincided with the programs airing, with books championed on those shows being popular immediately after their cause was argued. Jane Austen’s ‘Pride and Prejudice’ ‘suffered’ this fate, especially after it was featured in the show and requests for this classic novel grew immensely. ‘Captain Correlli’s Mandolin’ and ‘The Catcher in the Rye’ were also quite popular. Anne added that they had had an old copy of Anya Seton’s ‘Katherine’ which had to be replaced as it became more popular after the Big Read because it wouldn’t have survived its comeback in reading popularity. Another book which was also popular and many people came back talking about was the actual Big Read ‘Book of books’ from the BBC, which contained all the Top 100 books. It was requested by many, and what most said was that it was a nice book which had offered them many new authors and areas to try in the book world, and had given them things to think about.

There was also mention from both of new interest from adults in Pullman’s ‘Dark Materials’, and that more were requesting them than had previously done so. But Caroline said that she didn’t really feel that teenagers or children themselves were really affected by The Big Read. She did not remember any one below the age of 18 coming in and requesting a book in the Big Read list just because it was featured. She said that the children already knew what authors they liked and continued to read them and ones like them because they always had, and not because of the Big Read. This can be said to coincide with the lack of responses to the questionnaire sent out to that age group, in that they were not really effected by the scheme so couldn’t warrant answering a survey on it.

6.3.2 Activities

Another question that was asked of the librarians was about how many activities they carry out to coincide with the Big Read. They said that lists were put up in the library and people were encouraged to vote on the internet or at the voting station that they set up. There were no activities primarily for children but they did hold a Big Read discussion evening which they said was quite popular. They already had coffee mornings where people discussed books they were reading and offered recommendations. But because of the Big Read this turned into a proper reading group. Caroline said she advertised in the local paper and had much more interest than she was expecting. 8 adults showed up in total. It started with them talking about the top 5 books or a favourite of theirs, as Caroline said she thought there wouldn't be one 'champion' for each book, but apparently there was. This has now led to them meeting every 2 months to discuss different books with different themes. This month's is 'The Sea', with books concerning the sea and other nautical genres. They also discuss what to read and what to avoid. As a result of the group many within it have avoided 'Perfume' by Patrick Suskind due to bad reports, whilst more have decided to read 'Birdsong' by Sebastian Faulks. Caroline herself said she wouldn't usually have chosen a book championed by William Hague but she heard such good reports from the group that she decided to give it a go and thoroughly enjoyed it.

6.3.3 Reading schemes and book lists

They also both mentioned the lists that were put out in the library of the top 100 books. These also sparked interest in other reading schemes, such as the Richard and Judy reading project and the Orange fiction awards. It also started questions about the option of an adult reading scheme. They already have the 'Reading Rollercoaster' in place, which is a reading scheme for children. But adults were starting to request their own. So Caroline said they have now set one up and they have around 40 participants, a third of which are teenagers, which was a surprise to her. They set their own targets of just books, or new genres of books or novels by new authors, and then once this target has been reached they get a free video rental. When asked Caroline said that the idea had

stemmed from the Big Read and that it had definitely got people thinking about reading more and not only that but in new ways and directions.

They also said that because of the Big Read, they felt encouraged to put together their own list of recommended books. Due to the library being in Wales it seemed right that they chose Welsh authors, written in both the English and the Welsh language. This list was offered alongside the official Big Read list, and although none actually made it to the top 100, they said that many readers were interested and borrowed a number of the books on the list.

6.4 Summary

According to the librarians Caroline and Anne, the Big Read did have an effect, on both themselves and their readers. They saw people chatting about books, and branching out into different areas of fiction. Requests grew and even a book group was created. They themselves were also encouraged to do their bit to help with the Big Read, suggesting that maybe the BBC project did have some impact on the book world.

Chapter 7 Limitations of the study

7.1 Introduction

Unfortunately no research is perfect and all have certain limitations to them. However, as long as the researcher is aware of this before drawing any conclusions from the data, the results can still be beneficial to the research topic.

7.2 The Big Read

Since the subject of the Big Read is a relatively new topic, there is very little in the way of academic works and information from journals. The Bookseller was invaluable, offering a number of articles about the topic. However, much of what was available on the BBC project is contained in newspapers and press releases from the BBC itself. Many of these have a greater possibility of containing bias opinions and accounts, something which it is necessary to be aware of when using information within a research study such as this.

7.3 Available information

When looking into sales figures, it was only possible to use those available to the public. The ones used within this study were found within the Bookseller journal, a well known publication available to all. The Public Lending Right figures were legally offered by company employees and was used with their permission. Although they did also issue all the ISBN numbers of the books and their issues, it was requested that they were only to be read by the researcher and not actually used within the publication. This wish had to be respected, as it has been.

7.4 Questionnaires

The method of gaining information through the use of questionnaires does mean that there are certain limitations as to what can be discovered in this study. The information found is usually only as good as the questions asked. So questionnaires need to be carefully put together with great consideration by the researcher as to what is wanted

from the participants. If they are not asked the correct question then relevant answers cannot be expected in response.

There are other issues which the researcher cannot have total control over and that is who actually responds to the questionnaire. Although a large number of surveys were sent out to a variety of people, no one can be forced to respond. This means that there can be an uneven balance of males and females or of different ages, an issue which did unfortunately occur within this study.

7.5 Case Study

When making conclusions from the case study concerning how successful the Big Read was, it is necessary to firstly acknowledge that it was only one public library where the employees were approached and questioned. Other libraries may have seen different effects of the Big Read, and may have considered it a failure instead of the success that Radyr library employees said they saw.

Another thing that needs to be considered is the library itself. Those who work within the library are dealing with people who generally are already interested in books, and are looking for new novels and literature to read. They deal with readers already. Whereas those who were questioned in the survey were not all members of the library or even read that much. These will be harder people to reach and be affected by a project such as the Big Read than those who are already visitors of the library and interested in reading.

7.6 Summary

There has been every attempt to make this as viable a study as possible. Not all limitations were overcome, such as the slight imbalance in the participants, concerning their age and gender, and the lack of academic work on the topic due to how recently the BBC project occurred. However, even taking into account these limitations, the research offered does give interesting results which can have an impact when answering the primary question of how successful the Big Read was.

Chapter 8 Conclusions

8.1. Introduction

The main aim of this dissertation was to discover how successful the Big Read was. This was to be found through analysis of book sales and library issues, and by asking people their opinions as to whether they felt it changed their reading habits and what they actually thought about the scheme.

Within this section conclusions will be drawn from each chapter separately then an overall conclusion will be given, looking at the dissertation as a whole.

8.2. Book sales

For the publishing world, the Big Read appears to have been highly successful. The sales figures offered by The Bookseller show a profound increase in book sales from the year of the Big Read and the previous. Modern classics got a boost in sales and were being remembered by the nation. But then those who were voted some of the most popular reads started to suffer, with sales figures declining. As Holman (2004) suggested people were not buying what they were voting for and vice versa. But the basic conclusion concerning book sales is that the Big Read was definitely a success when the sales figures are considered. People were interested in the novels as they were buying them in increased numbers, and this would suggest that they were reading them too. Therefore in this way the Big Read succeeded. Here it seems that people are reading more.

8.3. Book loans

According to the report issued by the Public Lending Right, book loans had also increased due to the Big Read. Out of 100 titles, 82 showed an overall percentage increase from year to year, with classics doing much better than before. It even showed that children's books featured in the Top 100 did well too, in terms of issue numbers. This suggests that either children were actually effected by the Big Read, or that adults were reading more children's books than before.

However, it also showed that not all books did as well. Some science fiction books failed to improve, and other books such as 'Morse's Greatest Mystery and other Stories'

did not do as well. This can be concluded in that although people were reading more of the books involved in the Big Read, it did not lead to people reading other books more. Here it can be said that the Big Read was only partially successful in getting people to read different books, as people were not drawn to branch out into novels that were not on the Top 100.

8.4. Results

The results found out through the questionnaires help to give a different view point on how successful the Big Read was.

Firstly there was a certain amount of apathy from a number of the respondents, who were unsure as to whether it was a worthwhile scheme. Some didn't even send back a response. A number of these were from the 0-18 age bracket, which can be used to suggest that the BBC failed to reach them with their project.

But then there were those who responded positively, stating that it was a worthwhile scheme that encouraged people to read more and widen their reading choices, even though most said it did little to change their own reading habits. But to be fair, most already read at least once a day, so how much more could they be expected to read. In this area there was an interesting set of results concerning females aged 36-49, where over a third were unsure about whether the scheme was worthwhile. This was the same age group where two thirds were not members of the library. As stated earlier, the libraries were greatly involved in the scheme, with reports of many different activities to encourage people's interest in the project. It can be suggested that there was question in this group about the Big Read's use because they were not subject to these activities organised by the libraries. But this can also be seen as a failing of the scheme by the BBC, because they were not publicising in the right areas to get everyone involved, and not just those who used libraries and bookstores.

More people watched than voted, suggesting that maybe it didn't involve people enough to get them to take an active part in the poll. Many were interested in what was most popular, even if they claimed it to be an obvious choice that was effected by films and television programs.

But one definite fact which can suggest that the Big Read was a success is that most who were questioned remembered the Big Read 6 months on, suggesting that it must have had some effect or at least done something memorable enough for people to still be actually able to answer questions on it.

8.5. People's opinions

The final question on the survey definitely gave much information to think about concerning the Big Read.

The memories offered by participants were mixed, some being positive and some negative. Some thought there was too much publicity whilst others thought there wasn't enough. Many enjoyed the programs and fondly remembered the famous champions fighting for their favourite book to be voted as the most popular. Those who did enjoy it were very praiseworthy, though a general consensus was that it was a good reading scheme but it just didn't benefit them.

There was no real agreement about the final list, with some calling it predictable and others just being happy that classics were regaining a bit of status in the book world again. But there was a definite feeling by some that the final list was too influenced by movies coming out at the time. The fifth Harry Potter film and 'Lord of the Rings' had just appeared on the big screen surrounded by vast amounts of publicity. All of the top 5 books had been a film, a television program or a theatre production. Amazon.co.uk can concur that there were sales increases of movie adaptations, with a spokesperson saying that for every book of 'Captain Correlli's Mandolin', 10 copies of the Nicolas Cage film were sold.

From all these opinions it is possible to say that people did not truly believe it was of any help to them in their reading habits, but once again, the fact that people can offer an opinion about it, whether good or bad, suggests the Big Read had some effect. People are still able to talk about the books and that was the fundamental goal through out the scheme.

8.6. Case Study

According to what was found through the case study, the Big Read was a success. Caroline and Anne, the librarians at Radyr Public Library witnessed readers looking at different books and requesting novels that had not been as popular before hand. But more importantly they said people were talking about books, whether they felt positively about them or not. They had to purchase some new books to deal with the new interests, and the actual Big Read book went out regularly. They saw a coffee morning turn into a proper reading group where new books were discussed, recommendations made and views on books often changed due to input from the group. Both agreed that maybe the final outcome was obvious, and that children were not reached in the way they should have been, but the scheme was good and has definitely succeeded in changing their readers choice of books.

8.7. Final conclusions

With the differing results from each section it is difficult to say whether the Big Read was actually successful or not. The sales figures of the books do not coincide with people's opinions, but then buying or borrowing a book does not necessarily mean that it gets read.

It is clear that the BBC failed in the area of children, especially when looking at the views of the librarians within the case study.

The research gives the suggestion that the Big Read really only skimmed the surface of the nation and their reading habits. They made a certain amount of impact with it, and made an impression, but as far as changing peoples reading habits, there is much more to be done before it can be said that they succeeded in this area.

Chapter 9 Further recommendation

9.1 Introduction

As thorough as the researcher has tried to be, there are still things can could be done to this study to make it better, and also other areas to explore and follow on to after this piece of research.

9.2 Changes

9.2.1 Official input

The inclusion of actual quotes from those involved in the organisation of the Big Read would be extremely valuable. Although a number of press releases did have quotes included in them from people such as Jane Root, the BBC TWO Controller, asking them directly and gaining personal quotes would have been a worthwhile addition to this research. Gaining quotes from workers at book shops would also have been useful, because just like the librarians questioned in the case study, they saw what books people were buying during the time of the Big Read, so may have been able to offer new insight to the study. Contact with the head offices of bookstores, and also with the BBC was attempted, but with little success. Perhaps if they were approached again, maybe even in person, those involved in the Big Read and its organisation would have been more forthcoming with quotes.

9.2.2 Wider range of participants

One recommendation that could be made to this piece of research is by including a wider range of participants. As stated earlier, because the questionnaires were handed out via email or post, it meant that the researcher, after the delivery of the surveys, had no control about who was to respond. To improve the chance of getting a more balanced distribution of males and females, and also different age ranges it would be necessary to do one or both of two things. The first would be to increase the amount of emails distributed. This could mean sending them to people of certain age ranges to get a good balance. The second option would be to change the way the surveys are handed out. This may include approaching people in the street or within certain environments such as libraries or shopping areas. Hopefully this would increase the number of questionnaires

filled out and then there could be a better choice of participants. This then could hopefully offer a more accurate reflection of society on how they feel about the Big Read.

9.2.3 Questionnaires

Concerning the questionnaire itself, more questions could be included within the reading habits section, aiming for more detail about how and what people read. This could then be compared to the Top 100 list, and whether the genre of those books included coincide with what people say they prefer to read.

9.2.4 Focus groups

What would be another asset to this piece of research would be the use of a focus group. This could be made up from a number of different people, all who could offer different views. Librarians could say what differences they saw occurring with their readers, whilst book store employees could talk about what people were buying and whether customers were heading more towards the Top 100 books than they were before the Big Read project. What would be even more interesting would be using members of a reading group, maybe one which was started up as a result of the Big Read, within a focus group. Then questions could be asked about whether the Big Read affected what they read and how much impact it really had on the group's discussions.

9.2.5 Interviews

Another change which could bring more to the research could be a more structured interview with the librarians in the case study. Although it was very insightful, and offered a different perspective on the possible success of the Big Read, through having an interview in a controlled environment, with the possibility of recording the interview, much more could be discovered. Everything they said would be available and could be listened to more than once and analysed to use as much of the interview as possible.

9.3 Further investigations

This piece of research has also brought forward the ideas for a number of different ways in which to do further investigations within this area.

9.3.1 Non-readers

One idea would be to aim at looking at people who do not have so much of a reading habit, and see what effect, if any, the Big Read had on them. Since the aim of the BBBC project was to encourage people to read more, it would be interesting to see whether the scheme was effective enough to actually reach those who don't really read much at all.

9.3.2 Other reading schemes

Another interesting piece of research would be to compare and contrast the Big Read project with other reading schemes, such as the one by Richard and Judy, or Oprah Winfrey, and also the Orange fiction awards. Maybe looking into how successful each have been, who came first and how much each have influenced the other.

9.3.3 Libraries

According to the case study featured in this dissertation, libraries definitely felt the effect of the Big Read, and employees noticed a difference in their readers and their requests. A whole piece of research could be carried out on libraries and the effect the Big Read had on them. This could include visits to a number of different libraries across the country, including large city centre libraries, smaller village ones and even those of the mobile variety. Talking to staff would be a must, and focus groups would be a very effective way to do this. They would be in a controlled environment where some ideas could spark off ones from other people present and much could be discovered.

Information found could also be compared with Public Lending Right figures to see if they coincide with what employees of the libraries viewed at the time of the Big Read.

9.3.4 Independents/second hand stores

Large bookstores and libraries were not the only ones effected by the Big Read. Smaller shops may also have felt the effect, and, as reported by the BBC, charities such as

Barnardo's and Oxfam are in need of those books feature on the series (BBC news, 2004). It would be interesting to visit a number of smaller bookstores and second hand shops to ask about what effect the employees working there saw as a consequence of the Big Read, and maybe look at the sales figures of books featured in the scheme.

9.4 Summary

Even though this piece of research was not perfect, the researcher was aware of its possibilities, and what could be improved should the study be carried out for a second time. The study also helped bring about further ideas and concepts for other pieces of research, making it a valuable dissertation.

Appendix

Table 1. Participants Reading Habits

	How often do you read books?	How often do you buy books?	How often do you borrow books?
Once a day	51		
2-3 times a week	9		
Once a week	3	4	1
Every few weeks	4	15	8
Once a month	1	15	5
Less than once a month	3		
Every few months		28	21
Once a year		5	14
Never	2	1	3
N/A		2	21

Table 2 Library Membership

Are you a member of a public library?	
Yes	52
No	19
N/A	2

Table 3 Genre choice

	What type of books do you read more of?
Fiction	50
Non Fiction	21
N/A	2

Table 4 Those who remembered the Big Read Project

	Yes	No	N/A
Do you remember the Big Read?	64	7	2

Table 5 Concerning the Big Read project

	Yes	No	Don't know	N/A
Did you watch any of the shows?	36	28		9
Did you vote?	10	54		9
Were you interested in finding out what was the most popular?	47	14	3	9
Do you believe the scheme was worthwhile?	46	4	14	9

Table 6 Effects of the Big Read

	Yes	No	N/A
Do you feel the scheme encouraged you to read more books in general?	13	51	9
Do you feel the scheme led you to read different books?	20	44	9
Do you feel the scheme led you to read books featured in the Big Read?	16	4	53

Table 7 Participants, categorised in age and gender

	Male	Female	N/A
0-18		1	
19-25	14	29	
26-35	5	6	
36-49	1	3	
50-65	2	7	
65+	1	1	
N/A		1	2

Table 8 Percentages of each age range and gender of members and non-members of public libraries

		Are you a member of a public library?		
		Yes	No	N/A
Males	0-18			
	19-25	71.4%	21.4%	7.1%
	26-35	50%	50%	
	36-49	100%		
	50-65	50%		50%
	65+	100%		
Females	0-18		100%	
	19-25	72.4%	27.6%	
	26-35	60%	40%	
	36-49	33.3%	66.7%	
	50-65	100%		
	65+		100%	
	N/A	100%		
N/A		100%		

Table 9 Participants views of whether they thought the Big Read scheme was worthwhile, separated into ages and gender

		Do you believe the scheme was worthwhile?			
		Yes	No	Don't know	N/A
Males	0-18				
	19-25	6	1	4	3
	26-35	1	1	4	
	36-49	1			
	50-65	1			1
	65+			1	
Females	0-18	1			
	19-25	21	1	4	3
	26-35	3	1		1
	36-49	2		1	
	50-65	6			
	65+	1			1
	N/A	1			
N/A		2			

List of books participants said had been encouraged to read from Top 100 list

- ◆ Noughts and Crosses by Malorie Blackman
- ◆ Catch 22 by Joseph Heller
- ◆ His Dark Materials trilogy by Philip Pullman
- ◆ Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte
- ◆ The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams
- ◆ The Magnus by John Fowles
- ◆ One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia Marquez
- ◆ Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien
- ◆ To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee
- ◆ Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier
- ◆ Gone with the Wind by Margaret Mitchell
- ◆ The Great Gastby by F. Scott Fitzgerald
- ◆ I Capture the Castle by Dodie Smith
- ◆ Nineteen Eighty-Four by George Orwell
- ◆ Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen

Questionnaire issued to participants

The Big Read

The Big Read was the BBC reading scheme which encompassed much of 2003. This questionnaire's aim is to find out what you thought of the Big Read and if the project affected your reading habits.

1. Your Reading Habits

This section is aimed at assessing your reading habits in general.

a. How often do you read books? ()

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Once a day | 1 |
| Two to Three times a week | 2 |
| Once a week | 3 |
| Once every few weeks | 4 |
| Once every month | 5 |
| Less than once a month | 6 |
| Never | 7 |

If your answer is never, please go to section 4

b. What type of books do you read more of? ()

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| Fiction | 1 |
| Non-fiction | 2 |

c. How often do you buy books? ()

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| Once a week | 1 |
| Every few weeks | 2 |
| Once a month | 3 |
| Every few months | 4 |
| Once a year | 5 |
| Never | 6 |

d. Are you a member of a public library? ()

- | | |
|-----|---|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 2 |

If your answer is no, please go to section 2

e. How often do you borrow books? ()

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| Once a week | 1 |
| Every few weeks | 2 |
| Once a month | 3 |
| Every few months | 4 |
| Once a year | 5 |
| Never | 6 |

2. The Big Read project

This section will be concerned with your knowledge of the scheme

a. Do you remember the Big Read? ()

Yes	1
No	2

If you answered no to this, please go to section 4

Please place a cross in the appropriate brackets

	Yes	No	Don't know
b. Did you watch any of the shows?	()	()	()
c. Did you vote?	()	()	()
d. Were you interested in finding out what was the most popular?	()	()	()
e. Do you believe the scheme was worthwhile?	()	()	()

3. The effect of the Big Read

This part will be asking whether the BBC scheme had any effect on you and asking you for your thoughts.

a. Do you feel the scheme encouraged you to read more books in general? ()

Yes	1
No	2

b. Do you feel the scheme led you to read different books? ()

Yes	1
No	2

If your answer was No please go to question 3d

c. Do you feel the scheme led you to read books featured in the Big Read? ()

No	1
Yes	2

If your answer is Yes, please state bellow which book(s)

d. What did you think of the Big Read?

4. Your details

This section is asking for your statistics. This is not compulsory, but it would be immensely useful to the study if you could fill out as many parts as you feel comfortable.

a. Sex ()

Male 1
Female 2

b. Age ()

0-18 1
19-25 2
26-35 3
36-49 4
50-65 5
65+ 6

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