

SATISFYING THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY'S LIBRARY USERS

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When you, and those associated with you in planning your library's program of service, have defined your objectives and identified the public you seek to serve, it is necessary to consider means of satisfying the needs of the people you serve. It is the function of this paper to explore some possible approaches to the problem of satisfying these needs. . . approaches, many of which will be developed in greater detail in later papers at this conference.

Our objective here will be to consider briefly the importance of a librarian's knowledge of the economic, civic, and social patterns which make up the fabric of community life, then the selection of materials which will give the library the informational resources to meet the particular needs of the community. In this development of the library's collection, the role of intelligent, interested citizens can be an important one. Our staff resources must next engage our attention, as we consider the qualifications of the reference librarian and the planning of staff time which will best utilize the special skills of professionally-trained personnel. Since none of our libraries can encompass all of the recorded information which our users may need, we must give continuing consideration to the means of interlibrary organization that will achieve prompt transmission of information between libraries. Finally, we must see that the public is made fully aware of the resources and services that the library offers.

As a librarian you should be one of the best informed persons in your community. All aspects of community life are of keen interest to you and one of the most important aspects is the economic development of the community.

Your community's economy may be vibrant, expanding, or it may be searching for new sources of income, new products to make. Are technological developments undermining the economic base of your community? If you don't know these things, the executives of your industries or local business

firms do know, and these are problems that they will be willing to discuss with you. The problems and prospects of the economic life of your community are of vital concern to the library, not only financially, but because, if the library is to be the community information center, it must anticipate what demands for information it will receive.

A second aspect of community life which is of special concern to librarians is in the area of civic problems. What is happening in the civic life of your community? Perhaps your city government is most concerned with problems of pending, or accomplished, annexations of new area. Or, possibly urban renewal is the key concern of your government officials. The library staff should know what pattern future development of city parks and recreational activities will take, and why; what ultimate goals planning and zoning activities are working toward; what major problems face the school system; perhaps a re-look at the curriculum, a building program, the addition of special services to special groups of children, etc.

A third vital aspect of the community about which a librarian must have special knowledge concerns the social structure of the community. What is the composition of the population in your service area: in terms of age, nationality, sex, educational level? How is the population organized into groups? The activities and goals of these groups are your concern, also. Most important, do you know how the composition of your population is changing? What picture will your community present in ten or twenty years?

There might be one of two reactions to this brief outline of what the people who are doing reference work in a medium-sized library should know about the community: its economic life, its civic life, and its social life. One reaction might be that all competent reference librarians do know these things about the communities which they serve. This is a matter of degree, however, and this should be an area in which our knowledge constantly is being extended by personal contacts with community leaders, by study of all available reports affecting the community's future, by active participation in community organizations, and by planned contacts between the library staff and professional workers in other fields to discuss the developments and problems which are of mutual concern.

Another reaction might be that, after all, this is the job of the library administrator, not the reference staff. It is also the job of the administrator to know these things about his community and, if he is alert, he should know more about these topics because he has more opportunities and more con-

tacts in the community with industrial, civic, and social leaders than does the reference librarian. But in an adequately-staffed, medium-sized library the administrator is not usually on the direct firing line, working with the day-to-day or minute-to-minute questions that make up the community information service. He is not making the initial selections of reference materials, in most cases, although he may participate in the book selection process at some point. The excellence of the library's service will depend on what all members of the reference staff know about these aspects of their community: economic, civic, and social. This knowledge should be extended and reinforced by staff meetings that devote adequate time to the community's problems and the library's relationship to them, as well as to the purely internal administration of the library.

Development of the library's resources must concern us here for a collection well-chosen for the needs of the public it is to serve is basic to the growth of the library as a community information center, and its development is perhaps the most enduring contribution we, as individuals, can make to our communities.

The public library's collection and services must be determined in relation to the work of all the other library services in the area and their policies. The best of specialized libraries is almost useless to the average man if it is open only at times when he is at work. If organizational membership is necessary to use a library, the public library must build its collection almost as though that special resource did not exist in the community.

Our familiarity with the problems and resources of the community will, of course, be reflected in the selection of reference materials. Basic materials will be needed in almost all fields, but emphasis should fall on the fields of most vital concern to the community. The matter of selection is not a small problem since the library as a community information center must utilize not only books but pamphlets, magazines, maps, government documents, microfilm and other reproductions, and all forms in which information is conveyed. Staff time must be adequate to survey fields and select the best items for acquisition. This conference will provide an opportunity to become more familiar with, or to meet for the first time, new tools in the several fields of interest to the medium-sized library.

It is interesting to note that Robert L. Collison has detailed some of the resources which can confidently be expected

in an average public reference library in a medium-sized town in England. Many of these points will be equally true of the medium-sized public library here. He lists materials on local history, materials about local industries and commerce, information files relating to local organizations, local experts in various subjects, etc. Often found, too, are indexes to local newspapers and to other out-of-the-way items. Materials on local government, collections on law, long files of periodicals, dictionaries of foreign languages, and collections of books and periodicals on librarianship are some of the points that he mentions as basic resources which one can reasonably expect to find in the reference library of any medium-sized town.¹

The points emphasizing local materials should be underscored for here librarians have an opportunity and a responsibility to provide resources that are not available elsewhere. It is often possible to utilize the special knowledge of particularly talented citizens in the community in the selection of these materials. For example, the local city planning director can help alert the librarian to new works in his field; or the local art association can offer worthwhile suggestions for helpful additions to the collection. This does not mean that the librarian gives up his book selection responsibility but rather that he uses the talents of specially trained people to supplement his own training.

Learning your community's problems and building an excellent collection are necessary objectives, but the vital link to bridge the gap between the prospective user and the collection is your reference staff. It is obvious that the link between the two consists of well-educated and well-trained reference librarians.

While the staff for the community information center must know reference sources and how to use them, this is incomplete without the training and personal qualities which make one adept in the art of problem solving. The reference staff needs to know how to find out what the real problem is, how to approach a problem, how to identify the problem within a field or sub-field of knowledge, and how to analyze the problem into its elements. These steps are necessary before the knowledge of reference sources can come into full play with the materials of the library.

Academic training is essential, but not everyone with academic training is the possessor of the personal qualities which make a creative reference librarian. Most important is intellectual curiosity. A person must find problems interesting

and exciting. For really excellent service, the reference librarian must consider the resources of the library merely a first step in problem solving. That the answer cannot be found in the library's collection does not mean that there is not an answer to the question. Other staff members, with a variety of educational backgrounds, may offer a new approach. Here again is an opportunity to utilize the individuals of intellect in the community, all of whom should be resource people for the community information center.

A resource person or agency can often be helpful and we each need a Who Knows What for our own community. In each city the librarians should know to whom they can call for information on electronic computers, artificial skating rinks, photo duplication methods, etc. This may be an actual index or it may exist in the minds of the reference staff. The point here is that there is a problem to be solved, and a medium-sized library's resources should be considered merely the first step, and not also the last, without first tapping this reservoir of creative talent in the community.

What does the reference librarian need besides training and a creative, inquisitive mind? The reference staff bears responsibility for creating the right atmosphere in which questions can, and will, be asked. An attractive appearance is no liability. Most important is a pleasant appearance which suggests that the librarian is approachable, and a personality which convinces the library user that the reference librarian is sincerely interested in his problem. The individual working in this capacity must have respect for another individual as a person, regardless of whether he is a child, a young adult, or an adult.

The best department store and the one that makes the most lasting impression is the one in which you get the feeling, the moment you walk in the door, that you are important. The staff, if engaged in other duties, immediately puts them aside to see if they can help you. It is obvious that other work is secondary, and your problem is of first importance. This should be the ideal in the adequately-staffed, medium-sized library.

All too often the type of service we give is the type where the librarian may be seen at work and will answer questions if one has the nerve to approach and interrupt. What a difference depth of service we would give if, instead, we approached our customers to ask them if we may help them. Department stores apparently do not feel that their staff members must look busy to be considered busy. If we utilize all possible labor-saving devices, have an adequate clerical staff and use it

properly, need the situation be different in medium-sized libraries during the busiest hours?

Reference librarians should certainly be provided with the time to stay up to the minute with current events by reading current newspapers and news services.

However much we may lament the very real shortage of professional librarians, from the standpoint of an administrator there are very few of us who are completely without fault in the matter of having professional librarians do purely professional work. In this acute labor market, professionals should not be doing work that can be done by competent clerks. While we lack patience with any professional who does not pitch in on almost any task when there is an emergency, we need a long, sober look, not at the emergencies but at the everyday duties of our professional staff to make certain that our librarians are not spending their time doing jobs that can be done equally well by clerical people. This is not a problem peculiar to the medium-sized library, and indeed the large library may present the same problem multiplied.

Charles A. Goodrum has some interesting observations to make in his Library Journal article entitled "The Reference Factory." Here is an emphasis on what it costs to have people of differing salaries and competence performing various tasks in the Legislative Reference Service of the Library of Congress. What work can we afford to have done by whom is a problem which must bedevil us in this era of rising costs, regardless of the size of the library which we are administering. Mr. Goodrum's description of how the Legislative Reference Service is organized to assemble materials to answer questions, and to give away materials in many instances, should prove provocative to many of us.²

In summary, we might look at the seven qualities that David C. Mearns has listed as desirable for a reference librarian, or to use his term, "master of materials." The first quality is literacy, the ability to comprehend easily, to receive communication. The second is imagination or resourcefulness, the third enthusiasm, the fourth persistence, and the fifth a sense of media, which makes the reference librarian a true master of materials. The sixth quality is humility, which means that the librarian does not consider it a personal affront if the information cannot be found in his collection, and the seventh point is love for people's service, or that spirit of service which we hope motivates all librarians.³

These competent, creative people who will turn the potential we see in the library as a community information center

into reality must be well paid. We should not force creative reference librarians to become administrators by having a too-low ceiling on the monetary rewards which they may reach as they become more and more expert in their special field of competence.

We have noted previously that in medium-sized libraries we cannot hope to meet fully our public's need for information by using materials in our collections. We need much greater development of our cooperative relationship with other libraries in our area, state libraries, and the large libraries in the nation. Spiraling prices in our economy have caused publishers to more nearly print the number of copies that they think they can sell. The book of yesterday which you would like to buy today is increasingly unavailable, and while it is possible to make worthwhile strides in building basic collections, it is not possible always to build today with all that you want of the basic books from other years.

If the new library feels more urgently the values of cooperation, it is essential that every medium-sized library devote attention to better means of interlibrary cooperation if we are to make best uses of the state, regional, and national resources.

Interlibrary cooperation has been very much a subject of professional discussion in this writer's area of Michigan in connection with the proposal, not successful in its first appearance before the state legislature, for a Saginaw Valley information center which would be a branch of the Michigan State Library. Housed in the Hoyt Public Library in Saginaw, this center would consist of two professional librarians, clerical help, a station wagon, and other necessary materials. This proposal, if ultimately successful, will provide staff to assist in training the untrained personnel in the very small libraries of the area, and will prove invaluable to the medium-sized libraries in coordinating their resources with those of other public libraries, with the library of a proposed tri-county college, and with industrial libraries in the area.

We need to re-think the element of cost in interlibrary cooperation and be more cognizant of the fact that speed is service. Library interloan requests still move by mail. Our new book-trailers, now in the final planning stage, will have compartments which later may be used for two-way radio equipment. These compartments represent optimism that we are going to be able to work out an arrangement with the County Road Commission or the City's Department of Public Works to participate in a radio network. If we do this, our rural communities will be in touch with the central library's information

desk and a person visiting a book-trailer in a remote corner of the county will have the reference resources of the library more quickly at his service. A person who can have his reference question answered while still on the book-trailer, or whose book request is mailed to him before the book-trailer has time to return to the central library is going to get better service than he would get without rapid communication. The use of teletype, two-way radio hookups, and more extensive use of long-distance telephone lines is more expensive than the U.S. mail, but if businesses and modern city and county departments need rapid communication, do not libraries also? Economy is not a matter of cost, but a matter of how much service you buy with each dollar of the library's budget.

In our city, drug stores deliver goods to homes without charge. Could we not deliver library materials in a similar way? It would cost money but do we not now spend funds for services which are not inexpensive to provide? We select, order, catalog, classify, and house some materials which we know will be used infrequently, because we consider it important to have the information available. A well-prepared story hour for a small group of children is not an inexpensive service, but we consider it an important one.

What would happen to the use of our resources if the housewife, marooned at home without a car and with small children, could get library materials delivered to her home as easily as she can now, in most cities, have goods delivered from the drug store? It would be interesting to find out.

It is not enough to develop the library as a community information center. We must consider also what public relations approach is necessary to call this service to the attention of this community and to keep publicizing its resources.

It is always a humbling experience to find out how many people in the community do not know what services the library offers. For example, in January we distributed a questionnaire to our users and were surprised, and chagrined, to find that 50 per cent of the people using the library did not know that they could get questions answered by telephoning the Library. We are doing something about this, and for several months now new books added to the collection have carried an advertising insert under the plastic jacket calling attention to telephone information service. A few weeks ago our printed calendar of educational and cultural events carried a panel advertising telephone information service. This was sent to everyone in the city who receives a water bill.

Do we realize that we have an exciting resource in our

function as the community information center? Should not the story of this resource be constantly told in newspapers, on the radio, on television, and in displays? If commercial firms can apply direct mail advertising to their products or services, should not we be telling the story of the library as a community information center, and what it can mean to individuals, in this way?

We do not have the stimulus of having a library across the street from us which is engaged in competition with us to see who can give the best service, the most efficient service, at the least cost. It might have interesting results for the library's function as a community information center if we acted as though we did.

May we here emphasize the observation made last year by Robert L. Collison that reference libraries are at a turning point. He points to the fact that a traveller arriving in an unfamiliar town knows that he is able to enter any post office and will be able to obtain certain services there. He knows that he will not receive the same services at a sub-post office that he will receive at the main post office, but he has some idea of what services may be obtained where.⁴ How different the situation is with library service! With federal funds now available to demonstrate the practicality of larger units of library service in non-urban areas, we can hope that the process of getting wider coverage of library service will be speeded up.

We must increase our knowledge of the community we serve and develop our collections to meet tomorrow's as well as today's demands. Our reference librarians must be outgoing in their approach to the public, as well as competent in their abilities. We must decide that faster service justified our use of rapid communication between libraries, and link more effectively our medium-sized libraries to larger resource centers. This exciting and unique community resource we are perfecting--the community information center--must be kept in the public eye by constant and effective publicity. This is indeed an exciting time to be considering what will probably turn out to be the library's most important role in tomorrow's society, its function as a community information center.

References

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