INTERLIBRARY ORGANIZATION OF REFERENCE SERVICE

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The greatest development in American public library service has been realized in the large cities. These large city "systems" as they are frequently called, provide equality of service to everyone within the area served. The patron of the independent small library, inadequately financed, and therefore poorly staffed and poorly supplied with books and periodicals has the same need as the city dweller for services of skilled librarians using the wealth of materials available in such a library system.

As is pointed out in the new Public Library Standards "even though local resources are limited, public officials and librarians have a responsibility to provide full library services to the community through a structure of cooperation and government."

In other words, to combine two of the standards: "Every individual should not only have free library service available in his local community but he should also have access through his local outlet to the full range of modern library facilities provided by regional, state, and federal library agencies."

Libraries working together and approaching their problems cooperatively are in a much better position to meet the needs and demands and to offer a more complete coverage and greater variety of services than any one library can do individually. It is this cooperative approach idea on which the new Public Library Standards have been formulated. To quote from Public Library Service: a Guide to Evaluation, with Minimum Standards: "This cooperative approach on the part of libraries is the most important single recommendation of this document."

Some of the types of library systems in existence include:

(1) City systems which consist of the main library and all agencies of its extension program.
(2) County systems organized in compliance with legal
regulations to provide equality of service to all people of the county or counties served, with a central administrative unit.

(3) Regional library service centers serving a specified area.

(4) State agencies.

(5) Several small libraries banding together to form groups but without changing their legal status.

(6) An independent library, or an area in which no library service exists, affiliating with an existing system to receive library service on a contractual basis.

Systems may come into existence, or existing systems expand, by affiliations or agreements—some very simple, some highly complex. The first three types of systems listed above: city, county, and regional, provide fairly well for cooperation within their own units. They may also, and quite probably do, cooperate externally with other like systems and libraries of other types: university, college, special, and state. Examples of regional library service can be cited at all levels of control; multiple county, county, and regions within city systems. No doubt state agencies find need for cooperation with large university libraries—particularly large university libraries within their own states.

Of the cooperative techniques practiced heretofore, the ones that would seem to be particularly useful for public libraries include: interlibrary loan, photostatic and microfilming service, teletype, subject specialization within area, bibliographic centers, union catalogs, and closed circuit television. Brief mention of some cooperative ventures in existence, both here and abroad, will give a glimpse of some of the possibilities for further cooperative development.

Interlibrary loan is probably the oldest, most widely recognized, and most frequently practiced aspect of interlibrary cooperation. The basic philosophy underlying this service is that libraries are not merely storehouses for books and related materials but are agencies established for the promotion of their use. In more recent times, when possible, photostats, or microfilms in lieu of the books themselves have been sent to borrowing libraries.

Teletype between Racine and Milwaukee Public Libraries, having been in continuous use since January 1950, is probably the first example of its use between two libraries. It not only saves time in making interlibrary loans but it also speeds up service in answering reference questions.

To date, the use of closed circuit television in libraries
is limited but the ease and speed with which departmental or branch libraries can obtain information from a book or catalog in the main library or in another branch by this method, will no doubt justify a sharp increase in its use.

Subject specialization, a prime consideration of large systems, has been mentioned as a means of cooperation for several small libraries banding together, each being responsible for coverage of a particular subject. Even though it is a plan now being carried out by the various borough libraries in London it has drawbacks for a small library. However, it would merit consideration before discarding the idea.

The development of union catalogs has proved invaluable to scholars. Besides the National Union Catalog at the Library of Congress, the bibliographic centers provide regional union catalogs. Another type of union catalog is the Union List of Serials.

The question is often, and properly, asked as to the reasons which make cooperation in reference services desirable. Two factors which make such cooperation not really desirable but almost essential are finances and growth.

As pointed out in the new Standards, a library or group of libraries serving 20,000 people require almost twice as much per capita to achieve minimum standards as a library serving 200,000 people. Funds provided locally for a small, independent library are not increasing at the same rate as is the demand for service; in some areas a sufficient increase is not forthcoming without passage of a referendum to increase the tax rate.

The second factor necessitating cooperation--growth--applies to the increased demand for informational services as well as to the increase in volume and variety of publications. This demand for informational services has been prompted by several factors. Librarians themselves have been increasing publicizing their materials and services. The steadily rising educational level of the general population leads to new demands for service. A snowballing interest in scientific and technical subjects is reflected in the demands for such materials and for information contained therein. Cooperation between school and public libraries has helped stimulate increased demands on public libraries. Through such nationwide projects as the Junior Chamber of Commerce's "Operation Library" more and more people are becoming library conscious. The annual "National Library Weeks" are stimulating an even greater awareness of public libraries.

Another element of growth is in the amount of material
available to libraries. One example of the increase in the volume of publishing can be drawn from the tremendous output from the United Nations in the past few years as compared to the number of publications from the League of Nations over many years. The great variety of new serial publications including additional trade journals, house organs and periodicals of a general nature, might also be noted. An increasing number of publications from recently established governmental agencies as well as those long in existence furnishes another example of growth. This increase in quantity and variety of materials requires additional trained personnel to provide adequate dissemination of information.

Cooperation on the national level has not yet developed very far. Exclusive of the Interlibrary Loan Code of Regulations and the services of the Library of Congress, the efforts or attempts at nationwide coverage for cooperative reference services have been negligible. If interlibrary reference service could be organized nationally, perhaps the American Library Association could assume major responsibility for promotion or execution of certain professional needs. These might, for example, include such as:

A. Urging government subsidy for undertaking bibliographical work needing to be done.
B. Urging greater financial support of libraries in general,
C. Providing English translations of fine foreign literature.
D. Urging bringing up-to-date certain standard reference works of the past: for example, Moulton's Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors, and the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences.
E. Compiling more indexes.

It has been suggested that this paper include a specific plan for cooperative reference service, based on some general plan for the systematic organization of existing libraries. An interlibrary organization of reference service implies cooperative use of personnel and materials to provide reference and information service directly to the individual or through a local library of the municipality, system, or region participating in the cooperative venture.

Unless a major organization of a library system is underway any plan made for cooperation in reference service on the local level should be simple, universally adaptable, and should
permit libraries to start cooperating with their present resources and reference personnel. While highly desirable a plan which requires for its support large grants of money from a foundation and a special staff is not practical because very few libraries can secure these.

The best framework for the development of cooperative reference work would probably be the regional library--in such a framework cooperation would naturally grow up, yet there is no reason why reference librarians themselves should not initiate cooperation in their work if they can gain the consent of their boards to doing a little voluntary service for their neighbors. However, the areas of cooperation should be set up in such a way that they will either coincide with the probable areas of future regional libraries or fit neatly into such areas. For instance, Cook County outside Chicago would probably be one regional library unit but since it is a rather large area for such a voluntary project the northern part of Cook County, perhaps the part north of Roosevelt Road might be a section suitable for organization. Let us see how such a project would be carried out.

In the first place the inauguration of a new program of this sort needs strong leadership and may require unusual powers of persuasion. What is necessary is a new outlook--the ability to think of reference service to the whole population of the section chosen for development rather than to the people living in one small library's territory. If trustees, librarians, and reference personnel can be led to catch a vision of the possibilities inherent in cooperation and can interpret this to the public a great deal might be accomplished, if not, little good will result.

An initial meeting to which trustees, librarians, and reference librarians of this region should be invited might be largely devoted to the presentation of the need for cooperation and the mapping of suggestions as to methods of affording mutual aid. At this meeting a simple question sheet which will elicit suggestions as to what aid each library could give to others and what help it would most like to receive could be distributed for early return and tabulation. Before the second meeting the results could be tabulated and then presented to the group and discussion on these findings could be encouraged. In this location a representative of the new Reference Services Division of the American Library Association might be secured to present its plan for chapters and the group might eventually consider whether it desires organization as a chapter or as a wholly

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independent organization. In the first year the plan often used by the chapters of the Special Libraries Association, of meeting in different member libraries might be a good one, and in case this is adopted, each librarian should briefly discuss his own collection, service, and the problems met in connection with it so that the group will be constantly gaining increased knowledge of the resources of the region.

As the work of the organization develops, many plans and projects will require consideration. For instance, one might expect discussion of the provision of funds for telephone calls in connection with reference service, the purchase of copying machines and the best types to secure, the fees to be charged for copies of reference materials, the types of books, periodicals and documents which libraries will and will not lend each other, the use of courtesy cards introducing a patron of one library to the reference staff of another and asking that he be given reference aid; the form of references to be used in citing material on copies or in giving oral citations of material quoted over the telephone. Eventually such a group may wish to undertake for its own use, union lists of periodicals or union catalogs of new reference books or bibliographies which locate copies of works on a given subject of particular interest to the group. Subject specialization with a view to interlibrary loan and cooperative use is also a possible project for development by such a group.

After a few years of successful operation as a working body such an organization might be able to secure county support or support from some other source for a supervisory and searching staff to operate in the largest library of the group—perhaps Evanston in this case, and to search also in the Chicago libraries, or a newly organized Cook County library might take over the work and support it henceforth.

Of course it must be conceded that any plan of voluntary aid from one library to another is capable of abuse and especially one which includes libraries of various sizes. Smaller libraries and their patrons will gain the most from such a federation and the staffs of such libraries must take the responsibility for calling on their neighbors only when their resources are entirely inadequate. If it is found that certain libraries are guilty of making unreasonable demands on the resources and staff time of certain other libraries, or that they are referring questions which can be answered by such tools as the Reader's Guide, the World Almanac, or the Statesman's Yearbook, a conference between the librarians of the two li-
braries would be in order. Nor should this voluntary service be allowed to encourage smaller libraries to relax their efforts to build up more adequate reference collections. One project suitable for the organization of reference librarians to undertake, would be the creation of standard minimum lists of reference books for libraries in towns of different sizes, e.g. 5,000 to 10,000 population, 10,000 to 25,000, etc., these to be revised periodically. These would furnish a standard without limiting any library in its purchases and might serve to insure that each local library will be able to deal successfully with a large proportion of its ready reference requests.

As suggested above, an organization of this sort might also expose those assistants who through unfitness or lack of training are giving inadequate service with their collections and ought either to receive further training, be transferred to other positions, or be replaced by more competent staff members. Thus the association of reference librarians serving in such a highly populous and thickly settled district as northern Cook County ought to result in higher standards of both reference materials and reference service.

Only one example of possible cooperative action can be developed here and for this purpose the example of the writer's own neighborhood has been taken. However, county and regional developments of the same sort are everywhere possible. If every small library were in alliance with the libraries in its neighborhood or a part of a larger system, a large proportion of all referred questions could be answered within a hundred miles of their origin, others could be referred to state libraries, (general, historical, law, public health, etc.) or state university and college libraries, and the libraries of the largest cities within the state. A still fewer might have to be handed on to the national and departmental libraries in Washington. All large libraries even now answer many reference questions by mail and probably could without great inconvenience do somewhat more. If properly publicized a service of this sort ought to appeal to the imagination of the public and perhaps result in greater local and state support of public libraries.

A major responsibility of the several participating libraries would be the promoting of the reference service by making its availability and resources known to the public. Opportunities to talk on reference service and the cooperative program to civic and service clubs, to social and fraternal organizations, and to business and industrial groups should be invited. Good service is always justification for good publicity.
Finally, the results of the project must be commensurate with the time, money, and thought expended on it. Judicious scrutiny of the advantages and disadvantages of the concepts is necessary. Certainly the advisory board and the administrator will want to review the program and its purpose at intervals to assure practicability.

References


2. Ibid.