

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN THE METROPOLITAN ENVIRONMENT

Ralph Blasingame

If it was not clear before that the term "metropolitan area" is a very broad one, encompassing circumstances both complex and widely differing, it certainly is now. The forces, problems and opportunities in any large center of population present an overwhelming maze of interactions; of matters which seem simple only to those who wish them to be. Close and objective examination of the results of the massing of people in relatively small geographic areas seem only to lead us from one tentative conclusion about a problem to another factor, whose roots are bound up with still others. Furthermore, it is also clear that the examination of one urban area does not necessarily yield useful information about others. Even if a certain problem about which we have some facts in one metropolitan area actually exists in another area, there is some chance that it has not yet been perceived and set forth as an important problem.

To make matters worse, superficially, many metropolitan areas bear similarities to others and thus conceal their real outlines, making agreement as to the relative shape and importance of unusual characteristics difficult to achieve. It is possible to make the case that many, perhaps all, metropolitan areas are very much alike. Each must have certain basic industries, communications media, food and service facilities and so forth. These similarities, however, do not make the central matters for consideration for the public librarian in San Angelo, Texas, (a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area) the same as those for the New York Metropolitan area, and nothing else can, either.

There are also different ways to define what is a metropolitan area. The U. S. Census Bureau definition of Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area has meaning in locating population centers, but it means nothing in terms which influence library development. Were one to raise his sights as to what constitutes a metropolitan area, it is possible that generalization might become simpler and more meaningful. However, there is apparently little relationship between size of metropolitan area, even the largest ones, and stage of public library development, or, at least, no very certain relationship. Boston's Public Library was established over 100 years ago and has been

Ralph Blasingame is Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Library Service, Rutgers University.

relatively well supported for long periods of time. Philadelphia's Free Library was established less than fifty years ago and was poorly supported until rather recently. There seems to be little reason solely associated with metropolitan context, to group the two-headed New York Public Library with its strong orientation toward the scholar with the Enoch Pratt Free Library with its unified organization and equally strong orientation toward studious Everyman.

Looking outside the cities, the picture is equally fuzzy. It is probably generally true that the suburbs, or at least the rather wealthy ones which have grown rapidly recently, are showing great interest in public libraries. However, again, the contrasts are great and there is no obvious consistent pattern.

I have spent these minutes belaboring this matter for one primary reason: to make it clear that, in my opinion, the tendency to talk about metropolitan area libraries often leads to missing the main point; metropolitan area characteristics are those of people, not those of libraries. To see the areas of concern and the opportunities for the public library in the metropolitan area requires that one look outside the library first and try to discern the people-problems clearly. A good part of this institute, as I read the program, is given over to looking outside the library. Hopefully, your discussion will concentrate on those parts of the program at least as much as on library topics. This looking outside should be, of course, a continuous process.

There are reasons for examining public libraries in metropolitan areas, of course, even if our observations about them may be misleading at times.

Let me define "urbanization" for the moment as the swelling of population in the cities at the expense of the rural areas. This process is of rather recent origin. If you will agree that it is not much more than 100 years old, in terms of serious social effect, then some possible relationship of the development and growth of the public library to urbanization may be observed. It appears to me that several factors must be present before a public library can be successful by generally accepted standards today. There must be an economy able to support a variety of educational and cultural institutions and a concentration of people sufficient to provide those institutions with suitable audiences over a period of time. The growth of the city has always been both a result and cause of the concentration of the means of production and producing things in a competitive atmosphere demands skill and technical innovation. Therefore, the means of gaining skill and knowledge receive support. There must also be other factors, not the least of which is leadership of some undefined nature. The process of urbanization as just set forth has always brought the first two factors into being, but not always leadership for the public library. Viewed in this fashion, the city public library appears to be

a prototype which most other public libraries have imitated. Thus, it has been and continues to be a very strong influence on public library development in general.

Some of the outstanding characteristics of most city public libraries from the beginning have been (1) organizational support by a single unit of government, (2) the voluntary (rather than mandatory) nature of that support, (3) development as "systems" with multiple outlets and (4) lack of dependence upon the state except for permissive enabling legislation. Because of the vigor with which these characteristics have been presented to the profession, several of them have been used as models for libraries in areas which have not had the conditions prerequisite to the creation and support of libraries of a quality we now feel is acceptable. To be sure, a few multi-unit libraries have been created and the most significant state legislation of the past 10 or 15 years has furnished some new and workable characteristics of library systems. None of these influences, however, has as yet been especially wide-spread.

If urbanization is defined as the movement of people to the city at the expense of the rural areas, then it is probably drawing to a close. That is not to say that urbanization is not an important force, but that its influences are changing. Now, the development of the metropolitan area is the outstanding characteristic of population growth. For many reasons, the number of people living in cities is declining either in absolute numbers, or as percentages of the population of the metropolitan areas. With this decline, and the spread of industry outside cities, the cities face enormous problems which must sooner or later be reflected in most of the social service (including educational) agencies in the city. The same population shifts are creating equally disturbing, though different, problems for the other parts of the metropolitan areas.

The general pattern in the metropolitan area public library picture today is that of the older central city library, often, though not always, the most advanced in terms of ability to provide service and suburban libraries of widely varying degrees of development. By and large, furthermore, the latter are imitations organizationally and financially of the central city library (with a few notable exceptions); they are not participating in systems either among themselves or in association with the city library or with the state government. There are a few indications that the picture will be changed, but they are limited in number and, so far, in influence.

The central city public library is caught in many cross currents. For one, the people who traditionally have used it and toward whom collections and services are commonly oriented were, according to the doctrine of the Public Library Inquiry, supposed to be community decision makers. They either were not decision makers in terms of influencing the people who allocate funds or else they were not very

aggressive about enforcing their ideas. In short, the percentage of the city budget assigned to the public library has been slowly declining. This is perhaps not significant (percentages often are misleading), but it is a rather obvious indication which should have been followed up. To make matters more uncertain, these middle-class people among whom the "communications elite" are to be found, have been rapidly moving to the suburbs. There, they are sometimes a strong force, or appear to have been, for the development of library services, but their numbers have been so scattered that it has not been possible for them as yet to make their influence felt in many areas. The nature of suburbs is such that the same relative concentrations of persons as exists in the cities is not likely. Meanwhile, educational, economic and social trends make the consequences of not having information more and more severe and so the burden falls on the city libraries. There is some evidence, furthermore, that public libraries in one metropolitan area have been growing less rapidly than the population:

The enormous rate of population growth in the metropolitan region outstripped the efforts of librarians and city officials to provide improved library service. Despite localized efforts to keep up with the increasing population and with library use, which rose even faster than the population growth, the gains were illusory when the total region is considered.¹

At this stage it may be well to acknowledge the paucity of information about public libraries in metropolitan areas and about the forces which may affect them. Looking at the library world, one could comment on the great amount of information librarians gather and publish about themselves and, at the same time, on the many matters about which we have not gathered information which can be counted as objective. Looking outside the library world, there are some matters on which we have precise or "hard" data, some on which we have imprecise or "soft" data, and some on which we have some hard data, but with soft spots. The effect of the lack of information is to make all generalizations subject to dispute. Even were we to launch a massive program of research into metropolitan libraries it would be quite a long time before meaningful amounts of data could be accumulated. Thus, if we are to analyze certain questions, we must be willing to use soft data occasionally and to understand its limitations.

It may be useful to discuss briefly some of the forces in existence which will affect public libraries, especially in the metropolitan areas, in the coming years.

Certain of these forces have some effect on all public libraries in the metropolitan area, some have effect mainly on central city libraries, and others have primary effect upon libraries in outlying

areas. Of course, it is often artificial to separate public libraries from other types of libraries, but I shall not try in this short talk to spell out the interrelationships. It would be impossible to enumerate and study all forces which may influence us, so I have chosen to take a few aspects of the major topics, some already presented in this Institute, as illustrations.

Population changes:

We will experience continuing population growth and dispersal such that a temporary decline in population density may occur in some areas. At the same time, economic changes will cause dislocation of major proportion in some regions. Thus, the pressures to be expected from a growing population in a period of rising educational levels will be made difficult to deal with by the dispersal of library users through migration from the cities of both industries and persons and by stress on parts of the economy.

Unevenness of library development in any region is, consequently, inescapable. It can only be alleviated through vigorous leadership and long-range plans of types acceptable to all or most parts of the region. Since population growth does not observe state boundaries, pressures for interstate planning will increase. But do remember that there is no inevitable relationship between population growth and public library development.

Growth of the population and of the economy will result in a constant widening of the gap between the middle-class and the people at the lower end of the economic scale. Only if such efforts as the War on Poverty are very successful will the widening be checked. The public library generally, not just in the cities, does not have effective contact with poor people and with Negroes. The fact that the spectrum of economic and educational characteristics of the people who live in poor neighborhoods is not greatly different from that in not so poor neighborhoods (though the distribution of persons within the spectrum is different) serves to conceal the lack of effective contact. Other factors, such as our treatment of data about library use city-wide, state-wide and nation-wide, rather than by population characteristic also has helped to make this matter hard to bring into focus.

The opportunities presented to the public library are those inherent in a strong economy and a growing population. We have the chance to develop services at many different levels, the chance to have a most beneficial effect upon communities of widely varying types. The limitations are those which arise from the voluntary nature of support, the dispersal of persons on whom libraries have depended for support and the growing severity of the problems with which local governments (the public library's mainstay) must deal as the population grows and moves about.

Government:

As noted earlier, the public library is now, with few exceptions, the responsibility of local government. It has been popular among planners and people engaged in other types of reform to imagine that government can be rationalized—that is, that the means to our ends can be decided upon through consulting the experts. The obvious move, if this rationalization were to become a possibility, would be to by-pass or amalgamate local governments. A few examples of amalgamation can be cited, but there has been no sustained series of moves in this direction.

It is entirely likely that attitudes toward local government such as to their proper function, the leadership expected, the ability of each citizen to exercise influence, the place of expert solutions and many others will make consolidation of local governments for general purposes impossible. Several of the state library laws passed within the past decade have sidestepped these problems. In these plans, the acceptable characteristics of library systems have been determined and broad agreement reached on programs of cooperative action. It is important to note that the paths to agreement have been smoothed by state financial aid. Hopefully, analyses of these plans will help other states move toward similar programs.

Changing attitudes of librarians and trustees toward the proper organizational form of the public library are under the control of the library profession. Changing public attitudes about the role of local government generally are not subject to our control. The impediments to more or less even development of public libraries in metropolitan areas will be most effectively and quickly removed by modifying our own attitudes rather than through insisting upon the logic of amalgamation of units.

The creation of special purpose districts as units of local government has been popular in some areas. The results have often been good, but not always. The New York Port Authority is one extreme example of the creation of a quasi-governmental unit with certain of the characteristics of a monarchy. At the other end of the scale, a home owner in California can find himself drawn into five or six special districts, each with its own very specific purpose and taxing power. At neither end of the scale has local government really been simplified or replaced.

Local governments have supported public libraries of very uneven quality. If the role of government in our society is to increase (and many predictions support this idea), then there surely will be increasing pressures to involve those levels of government which are able to support more or less equal levels of service. The acceptability of state action in public library support and the degree to which the federal government may support libraries generally will probably increase. The cities have often appealed directly to the federal

government for aid. The creation of an urban affairs department in Washington would encourage request for aid for city libraries on such a basis. It might also stimulate inter-state planning where metropolitan areas cover parts of several states. However, experience at this time suggests that the state government has a largely untapped potential for large scale planning and significant financial aid for all public libraries, including those in metropolitan areas.

State plans for library development now generally presume that the same type of service must be provided for all areas. Undoubtedly, this feature is an expression of the states' traditional place in equalization of opportunity. Special problems of local financial ability and large percentages of poorly educated persons within and without metropolitan areas may lead to the provision of different types or levels of service for differing areas.

Technological Change:

Donald Michael believes that, "This society has chosen to emphasize technological change as its chief mode of creative expression and basis for economic growth."²

With the advent of automation and cybernation, the rate of technological change increased radically. The effects of this increase are wide spread and will touch more and more people. They will present many serious challenges to educational, cultural and recreational agencies. The consumption of highly skilled manpower will increase. Governmental interest in certain fields will cause them to increase in importance while others decrease. The consequence for public libraries will be to cope with the demands made by persons involved in education or training programs as students either registered for formal courses (perhaps federally inspired) or as individuals seeking to upgrade or retrain themselves. In either case, enforcement of library support for such programs will be difficult and will have to be provided as a general matter rather than an allocation of funds from a single responsible local institution. These demands may well put greatest pressure on central city libraries. However, training and retraining will increasingly be required of highly skilled persons many of whom now reside and are employed in outlying parts of the metropolitan area. As certain industries move away from the city, these pressures will come to bear on public libraries which have no tradition of special services or collections.

Educational changes:

Educational changes which affect libraries and which are made in an era of rapid population growth will repeatedly outrun our ability to deal with them unless they are coordinated with libraries well in advance. We can expect, for example, that the compression of the curriculum will continue. It is entirely possible that elementary school

students may put similar pressures for specialized information on public libraries to those which high school students do now. High school curricula will, meanwhile, advance with predictable pressures on public libraries.

The small, private colleges may find a means of meeting the library needs of their students, but the likelihood is that their students (especially those living in metropolitan areas) will put even greater pressure on public libraries. Meanwhile, at another level, special educational programs for the poorly educated given by institutions or commercial organizations on behalf of the federal government will probably increase. Both in terms of supporting those courses and to provide materials for the future use of such students, the public library will have to buy and put to use a new kind of printed materials; that is, having serious content but making relatively low demands on reading skill.

Many ideas have been superficially presented here. Many others have been left out. Nothing truly new has been said. Rather, an effort has been made to suggest the great array of problems and opportunities facing public libraries in metropolitan areas. There is another great area of consideration yet untouched; what need we do to solve the problems; to take advantage of the opportunities? Again, no single presentation can touch on all the possible courses. However, a few possibilities will be presented for your discussion.

Library Education:

Broadening of the base of education for the librarian seems desirable. Acquaintance with social problems in the broadest sense, and true reaction of the library school to the university atmosphere are suggested. Concurrently, a strong move toward the most efficient use of persons so trained will be required if all possible progress is to be made.

Government:

One of the bright spots in the picture of metropolitan area public libraries is the advent of state legislation of experimental character in a very few states. The number of states taking action is increasing. Several new organizational models for the library system have been developed and implemented in those states. Evaluation is or soon will be under way in two states (New York and Pennsylvania) having different, though similar, models.

Experimentation:

The struggle to stay abreast of the rising workload in most public libraries together with a lack of traditional regard for conscious experimentation has frozen many libraries into set patterns of organization and management. The establishment of one or more

centers for experimentation and the development of experimental projects instead of the common "demonstration" financed by LSCA funds would be highly desirable. As is the case with many other social institutions, the public library operates on assumptions which, for the most part, have not been tested. Thus, we lack the ability to refine (or replace) these assumptions.

Evaluation:

Experimentation is, of course, only the first part of the process of change. Evaluation of the results of both existing and experimental programs of service should be expanded. At present, the facilities and personnel which could be directed toward either experimentation or evaluation are severely limited. For that reason, and to insure that library programs be judged in the light of current thought in the social sciences, it may be well to encourage evaluation by individuals who have no personal stake in librarianship.

Evaluation should be a continuous process. When it is not, the results often take us by surprise and become the subject of essentially emotional reactions. If we can develop the means for long-term evaluation, perhaps this surprise effect can be tempered.

Research:

Research, like the weather, is a subject everyone talks about but few do anything about. Furthermore, the word "research" has been so abused that its meaning is often not known with any precision. The proposed federal Higher Education Act contains a title aimed at encouraging training and research in librarianship as you know. This is a hopeful sign, but it should not be regarded as the solution—it is only a means to a solution in a field not attuned to research.

REFERENCES

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2. Michael, Donald N. The Next Generation: the Prospects Ahead for the Youth of Today and Tomorrow. New York, Random House, 1965, p. 16.