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KNOWLEDGE IS POWER: THE DETROIT PUBLIC LIBRARY

Francis Bacon said "knowledge is power" and hundreds of libraries have these immortal words inscribed over their entrances. Perhaps T. S. Eliot was closer to the truth when he wrote:

All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance.
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.

(The Rock, 1934)

Anyone interested in information services hears one question with more and more regularity: "What does this work have to do with my profession as librarian?" Libraries across the country are embracing information services as a prodigal returned to the security of its proper home. Library schools are beginning to direct courses toward serving the informationally deprived. Cases are common where the library has announced its entrance into information services, published a few telephone numbers, and then expected its library staff to answer such questions as: "My friend has just taken an overdose—what shall I do?" or, even worse, "I've decided to commit suicide and I want to know the best method."

Urban libraries are more guilty than others of rushing into information services as if their sole justification for being had always been the distribution of information. One suburban library director recently boasted that his library had been involved in information services long before anyone else had thought of it. He was talking about a bulletin board where community meetings and notices are posted. This is obviously a point where some distinctions and definitions must be made.

The suburban librarian was correct, of course. There is nothing new about libraries providing information services in the community.

One of the first distinctions to be drawn is between "crisis information." Crisis, or "hot-line" information generally refers to mental and physical health counseling. Abortion, drug and draft counseling are the main topics for hot-line services, with rumor control centers added at times of civil or campus disorders. I believe that libraries should stay out of the crisis information field since the vast majority of the cases at a crisis information center require the skills of trained psychiatric caseworkers. Library schools are still not equipped to handle this kind of interdisciplinary training. This does not mean, however, that libraries should not become involved with existing crisis centers, as a resource back-up, or possibly even housing crisis centers staffed by trained personnel.

The Detroit Public Library is currently running three separate experiments in information services—one more or less traditional, and two purely experimental. The first, the information and referral service, was started nearly a year ago. A committee of librarians was formed to begin gathering information about existing city services. A 3" x 5" card file was created detailing the essential information about each organization—address, telephone numbers, name of director or contact, type of service, and limitations on that service. Vertical file information, such as hospital directories and United Community Service directories are used as back-up information. Title and subject cards are made for each organization. Information about the organizations was obtained from existing files, newspapers (underground and establishment) and the files of other city-wide organizations. In each case, however, direct contact was made by the committee, usually by telephone, to ensure correct and current data.

At the same time, a central office has been collecting and disbursing the vertical file material and is presently duplicating the card file for distribution to the thirty branch libraries. When this has been completed, the task of the central office will change to a clearinghouse activity, while the data collection activity will move to the branch library level. Each branch library will supplement the file with information about local organizations and activities. These could vary from church basement groups to the names of local people who know how to make rugs. The branch file will augment the central file with local information and send such information to the central office. The central office will act as a clearinghouse for all agencies as well as continue to disseminate city-wide resource information to all agencies. The files will be continuously updated by information from the local branch to the central office.

All of this is only the first step, however. Each organization contacted has been informed of the plan and encouraged to use the files. All files will be available to the public. Contacts have already been made with social work agencies, juvenile court agencies and other city service groups. The goal is to encourage counseling services to

be done in the library, using the local files as primary and the collections as secondary information aids. This will take years to develop, but many agencies have become enthusiastic about the possibilities. This project is an example of a city-wide noncrisis information service, which is a fairly normal adjunct of traditional library service.

The second project is an example of cooperation between city government and the library. The "little city hall" concept has sprung like dragon's teeth across the country. Some of these experiments have been successful but most of them have run into serious credibility problems. Whether deserved or not, the political overtones attached to a city hall program often defeat genuine attempts to serve. The library, on the other hand, has had more credibility than it deserves, i.e., the belief that if the information was obtained at the library, it has got to be right. One other disparity should be listed. The city hall program is a problem-solving, action-oriented experiment, while the library's role has been research and investigation. In short, the library runs the risk of losing some of its own credibility by cooperating with this kind of experiment. On the positive side, there are advantages to this cooperation beyond the natural political ones of aiding city hall.

Little city halls begin with the decentralization of city services such as marriage license bureaus, tax offices, and complaint departments. Citizens usually demand other services rather quickly, and this is when the library can benefit. It is easier to convince city officials that the full range of city counseling services should be available in libraries when they also contain a little city hall. Since neither the library nor city hall officials are certain how this cooperative experiment will work, it is limited in Detroit to one branch library out of thirty, and one little city hall out of four for the city. The little city hall staff will be located on the second floor of one branch library, and the library will be prepared to back up the program with its own information and referral files.

If the little city hall project is an example of cooperation with establishment sources, the third experiment demonstrates another alternative. Christopher Sower of the Sociology Department at Michigan State University has developed a concept of neighborhood organization called the community knowledge center. Based on the precepts of Saul Alinsky, it prescribes change models for social organizations. The community knowledge center is located in a branch library and involves the interaction of the library staff, community organizations, and graduate students in a sociology course. The student work consists entirely of producing studies pertaining to that community, depositing their work in the library and using the library as their base of operation. Office space for the project director is located in the library and the students are responsible for researching details

of the community not available through establishment channels, e.g., what is the landlord pattern in the community, or what is the illegal drug trade pattern? As more detailed information is uncovered about the community, the local leaders have more and more power to change that community. Again, the local library staff will supplement the work of the students with the files gathered from the information and referral service. Even though this experiment is the least traditional, in many ways it holds the most promise. Neighborhood stability is one essential task for all agencies, and this experiment allows the library to fulfill its social advocacy role—a role libraries must acknowledge.

All three attempts by the Detroit Public Library to provide information might fail, for they are at the most experiments. Information service is one of many services available from a library, and if libraries lose sight of the other reasons for their existence, they will be faced with the questions:

Where is the life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?