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Cable Television as an Information Tool

Public libraries are going through a period of great change. Historically they have provided the majority of their services to educated people; have emphasized collection development in the area of literature and history; and have been essentially a middle-class institution. For public libraries not only to survive, but to play an important role in the community, they must change their operations to reflect the idea that information is their most important product. Most libraries say that they do provide information, but few of them consider information in its fullest context. The information I refer to could be provided by one institution. Not only information needed for education and self-education, but information needed for everyday life should be provided.

Having done many home projects, I am very much aware of the information problems for these kinds of activities. For example, where does one go to find the best bonding agent for putting paneling on a cement wall? Most people ask their lumber yard, which, in many cases, knows the answer. Many public libraries have on their shelves magazines such as *Popular Mechanics* which can answer these questions, but the person needing the information immediately seldom thinks of the library as a source of this kind of information.

The public should be educated to use the library for these kinds of information. The problem in getting them to do this is two pronged. First, libraries have to convince the public to use them in this way. This takes a great deal of time and effort. In many cases this has to be done on a one-to-one basis—one staff member telling one person about the kinds of information available. The second problem, of course, is that once the public is convinced to use the library in this manner, the library must deliver. Delivery is a tougher problem than educating. The user wants to find specific information about a specific

thing, and wants it immediately. Libraries have channels for finding this kind of information. Library schools teach reference techniques. It is unfortunate, however, that reference seems to be in the areas of literature or history. With the vast proliferation of handyman and crafts magazines, it would be helpful to have some training in library schools and other traditional education to provide sources for materials in these areas.

I am continually amazed by the number of librarians who do not use their own library to find information. They all know that virtually any information is available somewhere; the main problem is locating it, then obtaining it. Inter-library loan is a tremendous tool, but it is geared for the student or professor or someone who is working on something that they have several weeks to do. Inter-library loan is not terribly effective for the person making stock investments or to one who has a piece of machinery spread into a hundred parts on the garage floor. Libraries must develop major efforts for streamlining. We need to give serious consideration to networks and how these networks can function rapidly.

There are some technologies which libraries can use to solve these problems. It will be necessary for librarians to become familiar with these technologies so that they can adapt them to their own purposes, and hence expand the capabilities of the technologies themselves in relation to library usage. There are three technologies discussed below, two of which have been used in libraries for years. I do not think any of them have ever been utilized to their fullest extent and it will probably take more time before they are.

1. The computer is generally hailed as a revolution in American life that has had or will have as large an impact as the industrial revolution. Libraries can no longer say "we can't afford them," "they don't do what we want to," or any of the other excuses that are heard. The primary reason computers have not been able to do what libraries want them to is because librarians have not applied themselves to refining them as a tool for library purposes.
2. Libraries have in many ways overlooked or only superficially looked at microfilm. Microfilm has been around for a long time. Virtually every library in the country has some type of microfilm—generally periodicals—where it is used to save space. Few libraries have used microfilm as a way of capturing source information in such a way that it can be readily utilized as part of the overall information package.
3. Cable television is being viewed, depending on one's viewpoint, as major technological revolution in this country, or as a bust. The Sloan Commission, which did an exhaustive study on cable television's implications for the future,¹ predicts that by 1980 more than 60 percent and as much as 80 percent of the homes in this country will be wired for cable. Many people feel that the commission is wildly optimistic. There is a general

consensus, however, that cable television is on the verge of becoming a major factor in our lives. The Natrona County Public Library was the first public library in the country to operate a cable television channel on a full-time basis.² I will not go into details on the background; it is sufficient to say that we are operating the channel, we have demonstrated that it can be done, and we have demonstrated that it is a tool that can be used by the library.

The Natrona County Public Library has recently received \$81,000 from the Natrona County Commissioners to design, implement, and operate a microfilm information system. The initial purpose of this system will be to convert county records to microfilm and to design the continuing system for capturing this type of information on microfilm. Many aspects of this system lend themselves readily to our "normal library operations." We will be able to use the microfilm to capture a variety of information, primarily related to our own locality. We can use it to convert the information into a standard format so that it can be handled under normal procedures. As a part of that microfilm project, we have the funds for the use of a computer (an NCR model 101) for a maximum of eight hours per day.

Hopefully, in the next one to five years, we will be able to utilize the capabilities of the cable television system, the microfilm system, our own traditional library system, and the computer to answer the informational needs of the people of the county. The system will use microfilm, or the traditional book, periodical or pamphlet file to store bulk information, or it will use videotape. The computer will be used to index all of this information to the great degree necessary to utilize it rapidly. The computer may also be used to provide limited storage for informational items which have a high frequency of usage. This type of information file will be determined by using the computer to operate our management information system, thereby predicting requests for types of information or specific items of information. The cable television system will be used to provide one of the communications links with the user. We will be able to utilize three methods to communicate with our patron: in person on the premises; via the telephone, which plays a very important role in our services; or via cable television, which will become increasingly important as we develop the methodology and the mechanics to answer questions quickly. Television also gives us the added capability of storing information in the videotape format. It may also be used to capture, at the time of occurrence, items about the community that are of an important informational nature.

Many public libraries now consider themselves information centers for the community. This is certainly a heartening trend. In order to make this concept fully effective, however, two adjectives must be added to the words "information center." Those two adjectives are "immediate" and "comprehensive." The

question is not: Can it be done?—it can be. The question is: How well can libraries do it, and what is the definition of immediate and comprehensive? I tend to use the narrowest definition possible for immediate and the broadest definition possible for comprehensive. I am optimistic that this approach provides a viable future for public libraries in America. But first it must be demonstrated to the common man and woman that libraries can and will do it.

REFERENCES

1. Sloan Commission on Cable Communications. *On the Cable: The Television of Abundance*. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1971.
2. Dowlin, Ken. "Broadcasting Reference Service Over a Community TV System: CATV + NCPL = VRS," *Library Journal*, 95:2768-70, Sept. 1, 1970; and "Get into CATV Picture, ALA Urges Libraries," *Library Journal*, 96:3709-10, Nov. 15, 1971.