

Safeguarding the Sources: New Aspects of an Old Function

Reduced to simplest terms, the essential functions of a library can be stated as two: preservation and distribution. During the past century, in the popular mind at least, the second has assumed the greater importance. Nor has this been discouraged by the librarians themselves, as with the growth of the public library movement they sought to progress from the role of purveyors of polite literature to that of educational agents. Time was (and not so long ago) that scorn was freely directed against the preservative instinct supposedly inherent in the old-school librarian. Yet, since the effectiveness of the distributive function depends on the care and discrimination with which material has been collected and preserved, it can hardly be denied that collection and preservation still constitute one of the library's prime functions. Implicit in the term "preservation," however, is the duty of knowing what to preserve and how to make it available.

There is nothing new, of course, in the thesis that librarians should act as custodians of the sources of research. This is what they have been for centuries, following as best they could the changes and developments of research methods—sometimes overwhelmed by the mass of material; sometimes discriminating in selection, sometimes not; often skeptical both of the type of material used by investigators and of the value of the conclusions drawn by them. What Dr. Lasswell has done is to enlarge our conception of the means by which social history can be observed and recorded. Many of us have long realized the value to research of newspapers, letters, diaries, posters, photographs, business ledgers, minutes of societies, files of correspondence, scrapbooks, and numberless other things. In my own case, I found at Oberlin both a well-established tradition of this kind and a community already accepting the library as a natural repository and source of information on local matters. The general problem, however, is to continue to emphasize anew or, in some cases, to begin the exercise of the library's

function as a repository. There must certainly be added an appreciation of the newer media for influencing social attitudes and thought.

When we begin to consider how to adapt our methods to these newer media, as suggested in the article under consideration, two difficulties at once present themselves. First, there is that of determining the field in which we shall work, the material in which we shall specialize, and how to relate our efforts to research in the wider areas. It is my own feeling that research in these areas—regional, national, and international—has never been able to make sufficient use of the more intensely local sources. Whether this has affected in any way the validity of such research is hard to say, but it might well be that the availability of a greater mass of local material would broaden and strengthen its foundations.

Now the accumulation of complete records of the changing experience of a whole community would be an appalling task, and probably a more or less fruitless one. Working on a more sensible basis of careful selection, neighbor communities might better choose to follow the reactions of certain of their own characteristic racial, social, or religious groups. Thus, a heavily industrialized large town with varied foreign language groups would provide data quite different from that available in a small industrial village with a homogeneous native or fully American population. A nearby rural shopping center would yield another type, a purely residential town still another. Any such scheme, it goes without saying, will be effective only after careful study and a well-planned allocation of function. For many purposes social agencies and institutions of elementary and higher education offer perhaps the easiest avenues of approach, because they have often been called on before to furnish material for studies and surveys. In finding and developing other sources of supply, excellent help can be obtained by arousing the interest of competent

citizens who will cooperate in a long-range program, particularly one involving personal contacts. Granting that the American public has become pretty thoroughly accustomed to being interviewed and polled, this part of the program will have to be handled with skill and tact.

Dr. Lasswell's suggestions for gathering the different types of material bring to mind the second difficulty. It is the very real one, on the one hand, of making the public realize the value of what it can contribute, and, on the other hand, of overcoming the reluctance to surrender materials to any agency. This is particularly true of current material. Something old may be respected; anything less than fifty years old is disregarded completely. Let us not overlook, either, the fact that right now the paper salvage drive is one of the most potent agents for destroying some of the very material which should serve as sources for our future historians.

There has always been a time lag of about one generation in the stores of documents accumulated by any library. It is likewise evident that, with few exceptions, these come from families which have taken some part in public affairs and that all too often the papers are limited in their relevance to those public

activities; also, that some of the most revealing—and therefore the best—are withheld or destroyed because of personal association.

The lack of care given to organization records is often amazing. To be sure, many groups are short-lived, but their activities nonetheless are of value to the future investigator. Strange as it may seem, even files of official records are often woefully incomplete.

In dealing with organization records a fairly simple procedure might be set up. Emphasis could be put on the acquisition of those of defunct or suspended organizations. Active groups could be carefully listed by name, with annotations as to changes of officers or quarters. A cross index showing objectives and accomplishments would make it fairly easy to direct investigators to the proper sources of information. Such a file could be kept up to date both by means of local newspaper items and by contact with the people concerned.

It seems entirely practical that librarians assume the leadership in a systematic but discriminating collection and preservation of data pertinent to the changing social consciousness of their communities. A study of Dr. Lasswell's paper should bring a fresh realization of an expanding responsibility.

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Comment by BROTHER AURELIAN THOMAS

Cooperation in Communication

The first reaction of the wartime librarian to the complexities inherent in the suggestion of enlarging the scope of the librarian's work will be one of irritation at the prospect of competing at this busy time with other members of the profession in order to be abreast of modern movements. The second reaction, primarily that of such librarians as those in colleges of engineering, is that there can be no relation between Dr. Lasswell's suggestions and the work of the engineering librarian. A third reaction may be that there has been a straining after effect in an effort to produce a science from a collection of data, a science not justified by the presentation of a few isolated premises.

To enlarge my first reaction, may I say that we should present this prospect in the light

of the halcyon days ahead when war schedules shall have been outmoded, when budgets are once again normal, and when a whole new batch of library assistants is ready and eager to enter the field of service in the library. It is not necessary to deny the need of an expanded program to meet the needs presented in this paper. If the efficiency of the library can be increased, if the field of service can be adequately expanded, the compensations offered by the study of communication can be justified. But is this a propitious time to start such a project?

It is true that the technological librarian, as such, can find small room in his program for interest in materials communicated. He has his own type of growing program. In this very field the means of communication have