saying that the focus of attention is of more than scientific importance. By examining what comes to the notice of people we are enabled to gain insight into their inner lives. One way to know the mountaineer, the plainsman, or the shore dweller; to permeate into the lives of city people, villagers, and countrymen; to get behind the masks of residents of Moscow, Chungking, or Chicago—in short, one way to understand the thoughts and feelings of man—is to become acquainted with what he has seen, heard, touched, and read. 6

Communication and the Community

Dr. Lasswell's suggestion that librarians take the initiative in promoting and carrying on a piece of social research at the community level—and specifically in the realm of the science of communication—is an extremely provocative one. It is refreshing indeed to find a scientist who thinks well enough of the profession of librarianship to believe that its members are capable of taking leadership in performing a piece of research in his own field. Public librarians (and I think it is clear that Dr. Lasswell's remarks are addressed primarily to them) are not popularly supposed to have any great capacities for research.

Dr. Lasswell apparently is not only willing to have librarians take the leadership in this research project; he envisages them carrying it out in cooperation with a group of amateur social scientists! This is going to be pretty strong stuff for many of his fellow scientists, but I believe Dr. Lasswell is on firm ground. For it is perfectly true that "in America social scientific development has tended to be the province of highly trained professionals who have made little effort to interest the community as a whole in the enterprise," and it is probably high time that something was done about it. As a practical way in which to begin to get community participation in social research, Dr. Lasswell's proposal may be open to question. But in placing emphasis on the greater lay experience in and responsibility for this kind of activity, he is beyond doubt pointing up one of the profound needs of our time. As a matter of fact, of course, the need for greater community participation in this kind of research is beginning to be met in some towns and cities through the medium of the social survey. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of communities have conducted social surveys of one kind or another in the process of making plans for that postwar world. Some have been pretty badly done. But some have been remarkably good. And in all instances quite a number of lay people have become acquainted with at least one tool of the social scientist. And in the process they have come into communication with one another and with the community at large. They may have made no "long-term contribution...to social intelligence," but they have taken a step in that direction.

Librarians, along with representatives of other local agencies, have taken part in most of these surveys. I am afraid, however, that rarely have they assumed leadership. And this brings me back to Dr. Lasswell's proposal. How can he expect librarians to take the initiative in setting up a highly complicated and indefinitely prolonged research project in the social history of communication, when they have on the whole not been able, for one reason or another, to take leadership in research projects at a much more elementary level and in which there is already widespread interest? Has he misjudged the librarians after all?

Comment by Glen Burch

The Function of the Library

I do not think that it is so much a question of misjudging librarians as of misjudging the central function of the institution to which they are attached. It is true that one of the
functions of the public library is to “prepare the sources for future historical and scientific understanding of the ever-expanding present”—especially those sources which relate to the particular community and region in which the library is located. But I think Dr. Lasswell is going a little too far when he goes on to conclude from this that “the anticipation of useful sources is the peculiar challenge of librarianship.”

This kind of statement, it seems to me, assumes that the primary function of the institution in question is that of acting as a “storehouse of culture,” and that the primary function of the librarian in such an institution would be that of preparing, collecting, selecting sources for future scientific and historical researchers. Now there should be, and there undoubtedly are, many libraries and librarians in this country to whom this description applies. But to suggest that this should be the major function—or even a major function—of the public library is, it seems to me, to betray a misunderstanding of the role it plays in modern American life.

It is difficult, as any librarian will confess, to talk in terms of the function of the public library, but William S. Learned came as close as anyone to describing it in a single phrase when over twenty years ago he called it the “diffusion of knowledge.” “A modern public library,” said Learned, “can completely justify its existence only by means of a diversified service that makes useful ideas contained in print helpful and easily available to all of the elements in the supporting population.” To put it another way, you might say that the public library exists primarily to assist in the communication of useful ideas. (And most librarians would not limit themselves to “useful ideas contained in print” but would include other modern media of communication, such as films and radio.) The emphasis throughout is on service, not storage. Books and other materials are for the most part essentially expendable items to be selected primarily on the basis of their usefulness in communicating ideas.

With a clear mandate to promote the diffusion of knowledge, librarians have a much more dynamic role to play than simply that of “deciding what to conserve and what to neglect.” They have to devise ways and means of taking these “useful ideas” to the people. They have to be active agents in the process of communication, and so far they have only just begun to perform this task. It is the performance of this task—the task of helping to keep the people in touch with the knowledge uncovered by modern science—that is the peculiar challenge of librarianship.

The need for greater participation in the scientific study of communication is, as Dr. Lasswell points out, very important. Theoretically there is no reason why librarians should not engage in it, should not at one and the same time be agents in the dissemination of ideas and collectors of sources for future historical and scientific understanding. But since the average library budget and building are painfully limited, the average librarian will probably find himself unable to perform both functions.

I suspect that the answer to Dr. Lasswell’s proposal lies in making the collection and selection of source material for future research in the science of communication a cooperative project. It might be conducted by individual libraries strategically located in the various regions of the country but supported by special grants from public funds and from interested associations and foundations. In this way it would not be in competition with the public library’s primary function of promoting the wide dissemination of the knowledge that is continually being placed at our disposal. For we live in an age of transition, and unless today’s useful ideas are effectively communicated to the people, our carefully collected sources for future investigation may tomorrow be reduced to rubble.

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