Measurement of Public Library Book Collections

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Over the years a considerable number of surveys of individual public libraries have been completed and reported upon. In addition there have been accounts of regional and state surveys, and the sweeping description and evaluation incorporated in the published volumes, mimeographed reports, and periodical articles growing out of the Public Library Inquiry. Book collections have occupied a place in every one of these numerous studies, but the treatment has varied from little more than a quantitative report of books owned to highly elaborate descriptions designed to produce qualitative judgments.

Every librarian would like an answer to the question, “How good is my library?” and by this he means “how good” in books. He knows better than anyone approximately how many books he has, but he is always on the lookout for a formula which will tell him something more, in a qualitative sense, about the nature of his collection. His first resource is likely to be the *Post-War Standards for Public Libraries*. Here he will find a number of sensible principles, and in the interpretive text he will find that many of the statements apply directly to his own institution, regardless of size or financial limitations. Though the word “standard” implies generality, in application to specific libraries sufficient variation is permitted to provide for those which differ greatly from one another in the kinds of community they serve. Two libraries may be equally excellent, though their book collections have little in common.

There are various ways by which an evaluation of book collections has been attempted or at least proposed. These range from subjective...
estimates by professional librarians, based on rapid survey of the shelves, through the checking of one or more lists of selected titles against the card catalog, to the use of mathematical formulas which attempt to reduce reader demand and book provision to quantitative terms. Any procedure to be widely practicable must be easy to administer and relatively effective in producing an answer. In the course of time one well-defined method has been evolved.

The method discussed here to test the quality of book collections is well known and has been long practiced. It is that of checking collection against a booklist or bibliography. Such a procedure may be based on elaborate lists like the Standard Catalog or the A.L.A. Catalog (both with supplements), or the Hawkins' Scientific, Medical, and Technical Books Published in the United States; or it may be limited to compilations of "hundred best books" or to highly selective lists on given topics. In either case it will tell the librarian that he has \( x \) per cent of \( y \) titles, but will it tell him anything more than this? And even when he learns the percentage, what does he actually know about the quality of his collection? No one can possibly assure him what proportion he ought to hold. He might compare his showing with that of other libraries, and derive what comfort he can from the fact that neighboring Glenville holds an even smaller ratio or perhaps a percentage not greatly different from his own. Or he might feel a glow of satisfaction in discovering that he has already purchased practically all the titles on the checklist. Parenthetically, it may be noted that if the checklist has been compiled from a tool—say, the A.L.A. Booklist—which he himself used as a basis for book selection, and if the library follows a policy of buying liberally from the listings in that tool, he is wasting his time by using that checklist at all; for the results are clearly predictable.

Having said this much, we must raise the question, "Why undertake an evaluation at all?" Surely it cannot be very important to realize that the collection is good or poor unless one is prepared to do something about it, or at least to understand clearly why the stock is as it is. Before showing how an evaluation bears on this point, we shall report briefly on certain applications of the checklist method and comment on the implications.

Perhaps the earliest use of a comprehensive list was made in a Chicago area library study in 1933, when the collections of seventy-nine libraries were checked against the 1926–31 A.L.A. Catalog.1 The
range of holdings of the adult titles (2,711) was 60 to 2,012; of children’s titles (320), 16 to 299. The aim was to establish certain facts about library service in the district as a whole, rather than in a given community; thus, it would be difficult if not impossible for an individual library to know much or to do something about its own collection as a result of this survey. The same observation may be made about the Westchester County, New York, library study. Here the 2,911 starred titles in the Standard Catalog were selected as a basis for checking the holdings of thirty-five libraries, the resultant range being 41 to 2,497. The most recent use of the checklist on a broad geographical basis was made in connection with the Public Library Inquiry. Several lists were developed, as follows:

1. Thirty-six titles of fiction published in 1948, of which twelve were best-sellers, twelve “notable” as indicated by an A.L.A. committee, and twelve others considered important by professional critics, though not included in the first two groups.

2. Eighty-nine titles of nonfiction published in 1948, one third of them best-sellers, another third “notable,” and one third “important.”

3. Two hundred thirty titles “selected as the most reliable and suitable for general readers in seven fields of serious adult interests.”

4. One hundred twenty titles of periodicals—25 with circulations of a million or more, 25 circulating between 300,000 and a million, 20 from the so-called “quality” group, and 50 professional and specialized, based almost entirely on the Lyle Classified List of Periodicals for the College Library.

These surveys all showed that small libraries were making available only a small proportion of the important literature published; even many books that had reached the best-seller category, especially if they were nonfiction, were absent in a number of cases, and surprisingly many titles endorsed by librarians and book critics were held only by the largest institutions. These facts were reported not as criticism, but as emphasizing a situation which was inevitable as long as libraries were regarded as a local responsibility, to be established or not as determined by the political constituency, and as they were responsive to the tradition of popularity or mass demand. The small library—even one spending $50,000 a year—could not hope to keep up with the output of significant literature and at the same time satisfy a demand for popular books, regardless of their content. Where a
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choice had to be made, it was generally on the side of popularity.

Though the findings of the various surveys have been reported in
general terms, they are all based on the checking of individual libraries.
In other words, the technique is directly applicable to the survey of
any library, whether undertaken by itself or by an outsider. But the
basic question remains, i.e., what will the librarian gain from it? In
every case, of course, it depends on the particular instrument used as
a checklist. If this is made up of the starred items in the Standard
Catalog, he will learn that certain titles which have been considered
clearly superior in one or more respects, such as authenticity, potential
interest, and readability, are not readily available to his patrons. This
knowledge may lead him (1) to order them immediately, or (2) to
place them on a preferred list for later purchase, or (3) to consider the
seriousness of their absence in the light of (a) other books in the col-
collection, and (b) a potential reading clientele for them. Beyond these
considerations there are two others of prime significance: the amount
of money he has in general, and for book purchase in particular; and
the relative importance to the achievement of his library's goals of fill-
ing gaps, as indicated by the checking, as against buying other, perhaps
newer, books in greater numerical demand. In short, he will have a
factual basis for decisions, and for implementing decisions, on a policy
of book acquisition.

A second value is that the checking should lead him to consider
accounting for the gaps revealed. Is there something seriously at fault
in his method of selection? Is he placing too great an emphasis on
popularity for its own sake, thereby neglecting books of real insight
though of more limited appeal? Does he have an obligation to provide
titles of the latter sort, even if it means reducing the number of those
which lead to large circulation figures? The problem is especially acute
for a librarian with a limited budget; he is called upon not merely
to decide whether to buy this book or that one, but this kind of book
rather than another kind. The wealthy library, or the large library,
can airily buy "everything," but the small library is continually faced
with alternatives—the selection of one item means the rejection of
another. When one recalls that about eighty per cent of all public
libraries have less than $4,000 to spend annually for all purposes, it does
not require much imagination to conclude that book purchasing must
be a highly selective process. The problem of choice is present whether
or not evaluation of the collection is involved, but through a check
of the stock the outcomes of whatever policy is adhered to are brought home in the most realistic fashion.

Although the advantages of the checklist method may be conceded, there remain certain criticisms which cannot be ignored. We shall therefore list them, together with the observations they suggest.

1. The method involves a highly arbitrary selection of titles. The titles are not of equal value, and many books not on the list are better than those included.

Comment: The method as such does not necessarily imply arbitrariness in selection of titles. In every case attention must be given to the particular list used. The *Standard Catalog*, for example—and especially it starred items—does not reflect arbitrariness. If one thinks so, let him try making a compilation equal to it in authenticity and general applicability to public library goals. Since the selected titles have been based on the judgment of librarians and book reviewers, we are justified in assuming that they are qualitatively superior, or at least that they have something to say in the area which they treat. Occasionally one may wonder why one item is included and another omitted, but these exceptions do not invalidate the use of the list as a whole. The criticism has greater validity when applied to short lists devoted to single topics, or to those given such captions as “ten best”; but even the checking of such lists has its uses. One must be careful, however, not to regard such checking as equivalent to evaluating the collection as a whole, or even that part of the stock with which the list deals. Finally, it is true that the titles on any list cannot be “of equal value”; but the significance of this depends on answers to questions as to their value for particular purposes or people. To the amateur botanist an elementary text is likely to be infinitely more useful than a monograph, while the reverse is true for the specialist in cytology.

2. The titles, though good in themselves from the standpoint of accuracy, authority, and readability, bear little relation to the community served by a specific library.

Comment: Once more it depends on the nature of the list. It might be nonsensical to use a compilation of technical tools in a library serving a gardening community, but checklists should be selected whose titles bear some relation to the goals of the library being examined. At the same time one should be slow about dismissing lists because their titles seem “high-brow.” One should never forget the presence in almost every community of persons who are genuinely interested in
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the books that do not appear among the best-sellers, but which have more to contribute to understanding and intellectual growth than those which are merely popular.

3. The titles are apt to be badly out of date.

Comment: This may be true, and if so the list should not be used. It must be remembered, however, that a book which is a dozen years old is not necessarily valueless, particularly if it has not been superseded by a better one. An old book is not always a dead one.

4. Titles in the library on identical topics are completely ignored by the checklist method.

Comment: This criticism is made most frequently of all. It is implied in the common observation that though a library does not happen to have these titles it does have others equally good, or at least on the same subject. Needless to say this often is true, and the criticism has merit. However, it fails to take into account the fact that many times a reader comes in search of a specific book. For example, if he is looking for the Thomas biography of Abraham Lincoln, he is not likely to be satisfied with the information that though Thomas' biography is not held, Lord Charnwood's is, or even the monumental Sandburg's. Books are unique; though sometimes one may serve as a satisfactory substitute for another, there are limitations to this principle, and a librarian may serve his community badly if he depends too strongly upon it. In any event, the use of the checklist does not and should not lead to a blind purchase of books wanting; the perceptive librarian will always weigh his gaps against his possessions, and with the gaps revealed he is in a better position to determine what, if anything, to do about them.

5. The services which are available by interlibrary loan are not taken into account; though a given library does not have the listed titles, it can readily obtain them from a central collection or from some other library.

Comment: It would obviously be foolish to apply the method to a small deposit collection or to a library which depends heavily on interlibrary loans to fill patrons' requests. Nevertheless, as every librarian knows, the overwhelming proportion of book circulation depends on what the reader finds on the shelves of the library he visits. A library which consists of relatively few "good" books cannot long endure on the argument that it can borrow the rest. This is not to deprecate the sound principle of interlibrary loan; it is simply to suggest that the
principle cannot be invoked as an alternative to a good collection. Furthermore, if a librarian is interested in evaluating his own collection, the wealth of other libraries is irrelevant. Conceivably, too, the checking of a list by a group of libraries which tend to borrow from one another may point up areas in which all are weak, and may lead to joint action whereby all of them may be strengthened, through a systematic book acquisition program aimed at reducing duplication and increasing variety.

6. A library is not penalized for having poor titles, since checklists invariably consist of approved titles.

Comment: All libraries inevitably tend to accumulate stocks of obsolete and worthless books, and the checklist method does nothing to criticize them for it. As evaluation, therefore, it fails to do a complete job. This is true, but of questionable importance. As well criticize the Louvre because some of its paintings are substandard. The method is designed to reveal riches and to identify areas of poverty, not to set up a scorecard for libraries in which good books are balanced off against poor ones.

7. The procedure fails to take into account special aspects of a collection which may be highly important to a particular library. Examples are simply-written books for adult beginners or retarded readers; and strength in fields which are of great interest to its community, such as gardening, local authors, technical materials. And of course nothing whatever is said about nonprint materials like records and films, which are properly a part of the general collection.

Comment: This is obviously true, but once more it is only necessary to state that the method is not definitive, and for the measurement of special materials or the achievement of particular library objectives other devices must be introduced. Even so, the checklist has something to contribute. If a library does maintain a strong collection on gardening it may wish to use the method as a basis for making it still stronger; and obviously a list of films, assembled as booklists are compiled, may serve to gauge the strength and weakness of a film collection.

In the last analysis, the evaluation of book collections, as of other things, depends on the goals in view. If a librarian uses a bibliography on sculpture as a basis for judging his resources in this area, he does so because he feels that it is part of his job to provide books on sculpture. And conversely if it is unnecessary, in his particular community, to keep up with materials on coal mining, there is no point
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in measuring such a collection at all. Lists like the Standard Catalog and A.L.A. Catalog are essentially collections of bibliographies, and the librarian would be well advised to use these lists with this in mind. For each part of a general list he should tacitly consider what his obligation is in his community to provide books on its topic. If he has practically nothing on a subject in which there is no reason for strength, he certainly should not repair the gap merely to increase the proportion of holdings on any list.

To the question as to whether any one list is better than another, the answer must be that it depends on what the librarian wishes to know. For a general overview of a collection as a whole either the Standard Catalog, probably limited to starred titles, or the A.L.A. Catalog, with supplements, is perhaps the most satisfactory. Since checking is a considerable undertaking, and therefore costly in time and money, it probably is better to limit it to sections where real and serious questions arise. That is, if a librarian is concerned about his collection in the fine arts, let the work be restricted to that. Since most libraries are interested in holdings of recent important books, the latest annual volume of the A.L.A. Booklist may be excellent as a checklist, although the arrangement makes it difficult to use for this purpose. Another possibility, narrower in scope but practicable, is the annual listing of "best books" in media like the New York Times Book Review. The writer recently had occasion to use such a list of 275 titles in a library of 60,000 volumes. The titles on the Times list are divided among the following headings:

- Fiction
- Biography
- World Politics
- Essays
- American Scene
- History
- Religion
- Art
- Science
- Poetry
- Humor
- Sports

It was a simple matter not only to learn that in each of the above fields the library had so many titles, but to ascertain the specific titles it did not hold. The latter point is the important one, for a librarian needs to be in position to consider each item and to decide whether or not its addition is essential. This does not mean that a library can be transformed suddenly from mediocrity to excellence; it does mean that a firm and practical basis can be laid for molding a collection to the
goals of the library and to the needs of the community. If the use of the checklist leads to no more than this, it surely is justified.

References

