



Library Needs Which Should Be Met

E. W. McDIARMID

THE QUESTION OF what library needs should be met has long intrigued librarians and students of librarianship. The literature of the profession is full of articles touching this issue ranging from such discussions as J. P. Danton's "Plea for a Philosophy of Librarianship"¹ to specific discussions of the relative importance of one type of service or one type of material as contrasted with another type of service or material. The discussion has ranged from the very theoretical to the very practical, but the question is still an open one or an article such as this one would be pointless.

The plain fact of the matter is that the library profession is *not* agreed as to what citizen or public needs the library should meet. This is nowhere better illustrated than by an examination of existing library practices. These vary widely, not only as a result of differences in community needs and emphasis, but because of essential differences of opinion as to what functions the library should serve. These differences are reflected in library literature. In 1938 Douglas Waples² delivered a paper entitled "People and Libraries," which had as its general thesis: the library should set high standards of book selection and leave to the corner drugstore the providing of very popular materials.

Also, for example, J. M. Cory³ and H. L. Hamill⁴ raise and debate the question of whether the Louisville experiment is a legitimate way to meet public needs through the public library. In 1939 C. B. Roden,⁵ Librarian of the Chicago Public Library, advanced the theory that libraries should attempt to provide the materials that people want. Speaking from the same platform, C. E. Sherman⁶ presented the three major differences in the theory of public library objectives, outlining several viewpoints which he grouped under the three headings of censorship theory, sponsorship theory, and leadership theory. While it is probably true that most librarians would characterize themselves as believers in the leadership theory, there are many adherents to

The author is Dean of the College of Science, Literature, and the Arts of the University of Minnesota.

both of the other two, and library practices vary widely in the extent to which these viewpoints govern library administration and library affairs.

If one goes back to the stated objectives of librarianship, one finds, perhaps not directly contrasting views, but expressions in general terms which do not in any sense clarify or refine the issue. For example, the old A.L.A. slogan, "The best reading for the greatest number at the least cost," gives one a good deal of leeway in deciding what departments to have in a library or even what books to purchase for its community. Or take the postwar standards for libraries:

The objectives of the public library should be to assemble and preserve books and materials in organized collections, and through stimulation and guidance to promote their use, to the end that children, young people, men, and women may have opportunity and encouragement:

To educate themselves continuously

To keep abreast of progress in the sciences and other fields of knowledge

To maintain the precious heritage of freedom of expression and a constructively critical attitude toward all public issues

To improve their ability to participate usefully in activities in which they are involved as citizens of the United States and of the world

To equip themselves, and to keep themselves equipped, for efficient activity in useful occupations and practical affairs

To improve their capacity for appreciation and production in cultural fields

To aid in the advancement of knowledge

To make such use of leisure time as will promote personal happiness and social well-being ⁷

These standards, while they set up broad goals, are in a sense statements of objectives. But they, too, give one a great deal of leeway in deciding such a question as what library needs should be met.

The most recent formulation of library objectives is that of the Public Library Inquiry. Suggestions were made by various librarians and these were brought together into a concise "majority" statement of library objectives. In brief the Public Library Inquiry's statement is as follows: "1) To assemble, preserve, and administer books and related educational materials in organized collections, in order to promote, through guidance and stimulation, an enlightened citizenship and enriched personal lives. 2) To serve the community as a general center of reliable information. 3) To provide opportunity and en-

Library Needs Which Should Be Met

couragement for children, young people, men, and women to educate themselves continuously.”⁸ This is a little more limiting and confining in terms of defining what needs should be met, but within its framework a library could provide almost any kind of services it wished and could have on its shelves almost any book.

The history of libraries doesn't help us too much either. For there has been no consistent, central guiding purpose or principle that has operated to define precisely what library needs should be met over the long years of library history. The first libraries brought into this country were primarily aimed at promoting religious beliefs and religious faiths and to aid those who were in a sense missionaries to a new land. The other major factor was to aid education. People, either from their own collections or from materials collected abroad, were anxious to provide the books that could be used in schools and colleges.

Skipping many years and coming to Benjamin Franklin, one of the fathers of the public library movement, one finds again a very different emphasis. Franklin thought of the library as an improving device for business and professional people—sort of young tradesman's library which would help these people understand their work, and the history and traditions which went into the founding of America.

Many years later under the great influence of George Ticknor the Boston Public Library was thought of as a means of disseminating the good literature of the day. (Ticknor's term “popular literature” would imply a quite different type of material from the same term used today.) This library and the many which were substantially influenced by it had, one may safely assume, a goal closely related to the traditional goals of higher education—to educate people, to provide them the opportunity to understand better the great literature of all time, to make them better aware of their own world and their own problems.

During the later years of the nineteenth century a heavy influence on the Americanization function of the library came into being and libraries were thought of as an aid to citizenship information and service. Many people coming to this country from abroad needed education and information about their new homeland, and the library served this purpose well. At the same time there was the belief that the library could help prevent delinquency; that if people were provided good books to read they would keep out of mischief.

In the early part of the twentieth century libraries emphasized the promotion of reading by children and young people. As child labor

became illegal and unfashionable, as schools began to grow and a higher literacy of the population was achieved, libraries attempted to serve children in providing for them continuing education and continuing material for enlightenment and improvement. Later during World War I libraries turned to serving the men in the armed forces and providing materials for their leisure and information.

Following World War I there was a great deal of emphasis on serving the laboring man, based on the realization that now the laboring man was rapidly acquiring large periods of time for reading and other leisure activity and the library could and would serve him well in providing him opportunities to train himself further and understand his place in society better. Correspondingly, service to business men and business groups increased through business branches and technical or industrial departments in libraries.

Then came World War II. This time libraries decided to avoid the former mistakes of just providing light reading for the armed services. They emphasized the provision of material that would help our servicemen understand the nature and the background of the conflict in which they were engaged and the objectives for which they were fighting. During this time and following World War II libraries turned their attention to other types of materials such as audio-visual aids. Particularly in the last few years, but extending over the years of the twentieth century, the revelation that people in the upper age brackets have leisure time and could still learn stimulated interest in, and concern for, adult education, but there again one comes to the essential problem in librarianship. Adult education as practiced in many communities ranges from (if one may avoid any labeling of levels) square-dancing groups to Great Books discussion groups. That is to say, a library may well practice adult education and still have no clear cut answer to the question—what library needs should be met?

This rapid excursion into library history gives us no final answer to our central question. For it makes very clear the fact that at various stages in American history certain library needs have been considered to be most significant and important, but that these needs have varied from time to time. What was once a major and very important objective now may be almost completely forgotten. But is not this in itself a lesson and a starting point for an attack upon the central problem today? History does give guidance and light on the issue, but after even the most thorough study of library history librarians today must make their decision in today's context. The fundamental thesis in this article then is that the decision as to what needs should be met

Library Needs Which Should be Met

should be based upon our best analysis and appraisal of what American society most needs today that libraries can provide. Any decision based upon precedent alone would be likely to be a negation of the library's fundamental objective. Established by society, it should be an agency to improve society.

One could, of course, accept this approach completely and still come out with different answers to the central question. This writer would like to advance the thesis that what society needs most from the library should not be determined by the individual request of established or prospective library patrons. That is to say, the library should not be a place where any citizen can come and find anything he or she wants. It should be a place where society, acting through its regularly constituted channels, has decided what its members most need and what if provided from among these needs will serve best to improve society. To paraphrase slightly what is in essence the "motto" of the University of Minnesota: The American public library is "founded in the faith that men are ennobled by understanding, dedicated to the advancement of learning and the search for truth, devoted to the instruction of people and the welfare of society." It is proposed that the library's service be appraised by these goals, that public needs be appraised in terms of whether or not their satisfaction will contribute to these purposes, and that all else be forgotten. In this way the library would truly serve for the improvement of society and not as just another place for people to find things to read.

Before going on to discuss the specific implications of such a policy, let it be said parenthetically that there will be no proposing here any hierarchy of elders that will impose their standards on library service. Rather it is urged that some such major emphasis, discussed and thoroughly explored by the library board, would be accepted and used by the librarian as a guide in selecting personnel and in establishing major policies. It would guide those responsible for the selection of materials in choosing among the many types of printed and other materials that are available for libraries. It would be used by the department chairmen in assessing relative emphasis in the organization and planning of their departments. It would be the guide of each library assistant in determining how much time to give a certain patron or what type material would best serve the expressed need. But it would mean high standards in librarianship, higher than are now employed, in determining how the library's time and funds are being used. Those responsible for library service would face squarely

the issue—what can the library do for the improvement of society, this it will do and all else it will forget.

Now of course the easy way to handle such a discussion as this would be to stop here. Few people would disagree violently for they would read into the above statement of philosophy their own applications. Let us try to narrow the field a little bit and to make this viewpoint a little clearer.

First, no material should be excluded because of its subject matter; that is, if one could make a good case that a book on palmistry would help improve society it should be included. Second, no class of readers should be excluded, for, if it can be nothing else, the library should be a public library. Third, the library should serve the scholar, for there is no better way for any library to serve society than by doing all it legitimately can for the man who is advancing knowledge.

If, then, we accept as our goal for the library that of improving society, perhaps this can be narrowed down a little by again paraphrasing a statement of objectives of general education adopted by the University of Minnesota. Any need expressed by any person should be met if the desired material will help the person

1. To understand other persons' ideas or express their own more effectively.
2. To understand human behavior, social relations, and problems of working cooperatively with others.
3. To understand one's own health problems and make intelligent decisions about community health problems.
4. To acquire the knowledge and attitudes basic to active responsible and informed citizenship in dealing with social, economic, and political problems of American and international affairs.
5. To understand the fundamental discoveries of science and their implication for human welfare and their influence on the development of thought and institutions.
6. To understand and appreciate scientific methods.
7. To understand and enjoy literature, art, music, and other cultural activities.
8. To develop principles for the development of personal and societal behavior.
9. To choose and become more proficient in a satisfying vocation.
10. To develop the ability to think critically and constructively.

If one developed each of these ten points, it would be possible to have a much clearer picture of just what needs are urged that libraries

Library Needs Which Should be Met

meet. But such a discussion would have to be far beyond any reasonable limits for an article in this series. Realizing that individual interpretations of the above could still be made and that these might well vary widely, these ten points, if carefully applied would serve to a considerable degree to guide any individual library. The central point, however, is that the test of library needs to be met would be a careful estimate of the degree to which meeting those needs would or possibly could help to improve society. Such needs as would improve society would be legitimate needs for the library to serve. Needs about which there might be doubt would certainly fall in a second priority. Needs about which there was no evidence of gain to society would be passed over. This would mean that the library would no longer be saying, all people support the library, therefore all people should receive from the library what they want.

A few specific points may help to clarify at least one person's interpretation of what such a general policy would mean. First, the library would set standards of literary and aesthetic quality for fiction. This point has been extensively discussed before, and there is little to add to the ideas in Waples' article cited above. It is a waste of public money for the library to provide material which patently can do nothing to improve one's understanding of literary values or deepen one's cultural or aesthetic insight.

Second, libraries should clearly avoid competition with the newspapers, radio, and television in the provision of the daily news. Rather should libraries concentrate on providing the background material, historical and philosophical, by which people may better appraise and understand the news.

Third, libraries should be very discriminating in providing the practical or how-to-do-it type of material. In this area the emphasis should be on the careful, thorough, and scientific—as contrasted with the popular picture-book type of thing.

Fourth, information and reference services should be carefully studied to avoid duplication or competition with existing services. Few libraries would think of attempting to compete with the information desk of the union station or the bus terminal, but they come very close to unnecessary duplication in other areas.

Fifth, adult education activities should be scrutinized very carefully to be sure that the library is concentrating on those that are educational and avoiding those that are purely recreational.

Many conscientious librarians will be troubled by the implication in all of this that the library would forget a large group of potential

patrons. Finding nothing in the library that would interest them, they would cease to be library users and supporters. The assumption that people will use the library at their own level and then graduate to better reading needs very careful study, and it is recommended that we neither accept it nor deny it. It is urged, however, that we limit severely the extent to which noneducational material is supplied, and be very sure that when it is supplied good habits of reading are encouraged.

In the earlier part of this article considerable point was made of the fact that library service at various times has emphasized certain especial needs of society. What is society's great need today?

This is an interesting field for speculation. There is some feeling that society needs higher moral and ethical standards. But this is essentially the job of religion, and, whether or not religion is doing the job, it will provide the only answer. Recreation and entertainment is another need of society, but here again, established agencies are spending far more on this than libraries can ever hope to spend. Society needs news and information, but here again society provides elaborate methods for disseminating news. Certainly the library cannot hope to compete with them.

In this writer's judgment the greatest need of society today is education, a need which in spite of the billions society is spending is far from adequately met. This is and should be the most compelling and most urgent of the objectives which libraries should attempt to serve. It is the best way, indeed the only effective way, in which libraries can contribute to the improvement of the society which has established them and maintains them.

References

1. Danton, J. P.: Plea for a Philosophy of Librarianship. *Library Quarterly*, 4:527-551, Oct. 1934.
2. Waples, Douglas: People and Libraries. In Joeckel, C. B., ed.: *Current Issues in Library Administration*. (University of Chicago Studies in Library Science) Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1939, pp. 355-370.
3. Cory, J. M.: Library-Sponsored Group Services. *A.L.A. Bulletin*, 48:208-210, April 1954.
4. Hamill, H. L.: Boon or Booby Trap? Adult Education in Libraries. *A.L.A. Bulletin*, 48:210-214, April 1954.
5. Roden, C. B.: Theories of Book Selection for Public Libraries. In Wilson, L. R., ed.: *The Practice of Book Selection*. (University of Chicago Studies in Library Science) Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1940, pp. 1-19.
6. Sherman, C. E.: The Definition of Library Objectives. In Joeckel, *op. cit.*, ref. 2, pp. 22-46.

Library Needs Which Should be Met

7. American Library Association. Committee on Post-War Planning: *Post-War Standards for Public Libraries*. (Planning for Libraries No. 1) Chicago, The Association, 1943, p. 21.
8. Leigh, R. D.: *The Public Library in the United States*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1950, pp. 16-17.