



Gadgets: Miscellanea, But Not All Trivia

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JUST WHERE THE FIRST USE in libraries of mechanical trivia was made is, no doubt, thoroughly documented in the literature. Quite possibly, the first "gadget" to gain general acceptance was some device as simple but as effective as the rubber date stamp. Clipped to the end of a pencil, this little gem has saved thousands of man-hours, and assisted in relegating "library script" to the category of interesting leftovers in the card catalogs of university libraries. Somewhere between this charmingly uncomplicated, reliable, mechanical aid and the expensive and touchy devices which work so perfectly in the business shows, lies the burden of this article. To put it more in the style of *Library Trends*, the machines and devices which are to be discussed here are those which may be regarded as simple extensions of the hand or mind and which are designed to speed some operation or to relieve muscular strain, but not those intended to alter substantially the methods commonly used in libraries.

The common aim in introducing tools or machines into almost any process is to reduce the time or energy required to perform some operation or to produce a more uniformly satisfactory result. To stick to this rule in the application of what may be referred to as "gadgets" is sometimes difficult; many of these devices have a kind of fascination for some librarians which occasionally obscures the true economics of their application. The warning, then, which must be held up at all times is this: first, can a new method (or mere elimination of the old) do away entirely with the need for the operation to which the machine is being applied; and, second, if the work must be performed, and if the result is equally satisfactory using the machine, is the unit cost actually lower. Upkeep of the device and personnel training needs, related to its use, incidentally, are factors which occasionally are overlooked in computing costs. Still another danger of the indiscriminate use of mechanical miscellanea is that work may actually be created for them. For example, headings may be efficiently erased,

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using an electric eraser, from cards which might more economically be destroyed and replaced by new stock. With these dire warnings, however, it often is the case that the use of gadgets can both be economical of money and saving of human dignity. A shipping room, for example, which is not provided with hand trucks (perhaps even forklift trucks, if the loads are heavy enough), a well laid-out work space, and such conveniences as tying machines can be the scene of needless toil and sweat, besides being more expensive in terms of personnel time than is justifiable.

The popularity of gadgets is attested to by the space allotted to them in such professional journals as the *A.L.A. Bulletin*, the *Library Journal* and *PNLA Quarterly* in the form of regular columns or departments and of articles proclaiming the success of their various applications. A few examples of the types of items described briefly in the *PNLA Quarterly* for January 1956 are: visible files, copying machines, paper cutter, copy follower, and routing forms. Often these are already in use in libraries, but the wide range of materials listed shows the extent to which librarians search for things which may speed their work.

Relatively few devices of the type to be mentioned here have been developed specifically for library use. Meredith Bloss¹ made the suggestion that the American Library Association Committee on Library Equipment and Appliances “. . . sponsor or undertake to arrange a management study of library operations. This . . . would be an extensive, searching study by an industrial management firm of all library routines and processes, and including the formulation or design of whatever methods and machines would be necessary to bring the technical processes of the library to a high level of economy and efficiency.” So far as is known by the present writer, this suggestion has not resulted in positive action. Perhaps the most serious obstacle in the way of the development of machines for library use is that the market for them is severely limited in comparison to that for devices to be used in general office work. The probability is that, for the most part, adaptation of business equipment will continue to be the rule and that the “library-oriented” gadget will be the exception. For this reason, journals such as *American Business*, *Office Management* and *The Office Economist* should be consulted as sources of information on inexpensive time-savers in addition to the library periodicals mentioned above. A few hours spent in browsing through a well-stocked stationery and office supply store often will be productive of ideas concerning new devices and supplies.

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To attempt even a relatively complete list of the gadgets which have been used in libraries would probably consume more time than is warranted. Furthermore, such a list would undoubtedly contain many applications and adaptations suited to some situation not generally found; the value of the gadget in the library is often apart from its use in its primary market. However, it may be useful to cull from the literature a few samples to show the diversity of devices which have found a place in the library. F. J. Reynolds² listed a variety of office machines—the subject of another article in this issue—but also referred to the following: dry-mounting equipment for pictures, powered paper cutter, automatic folding machine, electric paper drill, vacuum cleaner, and power mower (with snowplow attachment). S. W. Smith³ described the Pot-Devin Marginal Gluer and Quik-Print (a machine used in stationery stores to print names on wallets). In regard to the former device, Smith indicated that it had a variety of such practical uses as “. . . pasting date-due slips, pockets and blurbs in books. From 225 to 250 books per hour can be processed by a high-school girl, and the work is superior in quality to that done by hand. Such a machine will pay for itself quickly in most libraries of any size.” His application of the Quik-Print device is especially interesting in demonstrating the imagination which leads to the adaptation for library purposes of machinery designed for specific commercial uses. In the St. Louis County Library, this gadget is used in embossing the author's name, the title of the book and the class number where necessary. The class numbers are embossed on strips of leather in various colors, twenty to twenty-five of the same number at a time. The labels are then stored and cut when needed.

One of the most novel devices used in libraries is described by Charlton Hinman.⁴ A collating machine in the Houghton Library is employed in “. . . the process of comparing documents that are—or *should* be—identical.” The author goes on to describe the machine: “Its essential purpose is to facilitate the very accurate and detailed comparison of generally identical documents, such as the corresponding pages of two different copies of the same edition of a given book that are presumed to be identical—or, conversely, that are for some reason suspected of *not* being precisely the same.” A better example of the fact that only the imagination of the librarian is the limiting factor in the use of gadgets in their work could hardly be found.

The use of forms, such as multiple copy order slips, postal cards on which the name and address and the message are typed on the same

side, marginal-punched and machine-sorted cards and pre-gummed labels, has increased rapidly in libraries as well as in business administration. Savings can often be made through the pre-printing of information, the consolidation of several typing operations, or the printing of large numbers of stickers instead of typing or hand-lettering them. Firms which sell business systems are probably the best source of information on this type of labor savers. The uncontrolled proliferation of forms, however, can result in loss of time and involved procedures. "Formitis" may be compared to such a disease as pernicious anemia, in which the victim soon "passes on" if he does not maintain the upper hand, but enjoys a long and sometimes happier life if he does.

With the thought that a review of the gadgets used in one library might serve to illustrate the variety of devices available, a brief survey was made by the author in the California State Library. The following list resulted.

Devices designed for library use: electric eraser, fine computer, card sorter, heated stylus, card holding platens.

Standard household tools and machines: sewing machine, pressing iron, vacuum cleaner (heavy-duty model), one-quarter inch electric drill, knife and scissor sharpener.

Bindery equipment: saddle stapler, powered paper cutter, powered paper drill, book finisher's pallet, and the usual array of clamps, presses, weights, brass-bound boards, and glue-pots.

Warehousing or shipping-room equipment: freight trucks of several descriptions, package tying machine, scales with dials which read directly the amount of postage required as well as the weight, wire packaging device, gummed paper holder.

General office devices: collating rack, numbering machine, mimeoscope, lettering guides, copyholders of several kinds, rotary desk files.

Miscellaneous: wheeled market basket, grommet set, eyelet machine, film viewer.

Forms: multiple-copy order slip, "buck" slip for routing mail, marginal-punched charge cards, pre-printed forms for use in recommending books for purchase.

In addition to the devices and pieces of equipment named, several work stations in the library show that considerable thought has been given to arrangement of gadgets so that the work in which they are used may be performed in a consistent and logical flow. Several local improvisations, such as a slanting board on which newspapers are collated before being filmed, tables to which casters have been

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attached, and bins and cupboards arranged for special supplies were evident. Innumerable small items—staple removers, gummed paper moisteners, hand tools, for example—are used in such a variety of ways as to defy counting or description.

The use of novel techniques and strange devices in libraries is, the author found, not limited to association with the modern age of electronic marvels. Commenting on some of the methods of record-keeping in California libraries of some years ago, Susan Smith⁵ humorously described one means of keeping track of circulation as follows: "A sloping board with a hole at the top rested on the desk. Different colored marbles to represent the various classes, fiction, history, biography, literature, etc. were dropped into the hole as each book was issued and the take counted the next morning. A resourceful librarian could make quite a game of this." With such a precedent, the predilection of many librarians to seek new methods and machines seems entirely fitting.

References

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