



Introduction

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THE EDITORIAL BOARD of *Library Trends* exerts significant leadership in providing a medium for subjecting contemporary library practice and theory to critical review. This issue contains a symposium on the circulation function. The authors bring into sharp focus our methods and procedures for performing the circulation function and in a very real sense evaluate recent trends in circulation services. The papers do not represent a definitive coverage of the subject, but they do treat the subject comprehensively. Some of the authors raise provocative questions about the circulation process in relation to basic professional objectives.

The circulation function in libraries involves every user of library materials and the successful performance of the function is a measure of the effectiveness of all other duties to which librarians devote themselves. The best equipped library located in the most modern plant and staffed with the most capable librarians would be a mausoleum of recorded knowledge if the circulation function was omitted. The processes and services which result in bringing users and library materials into productive relationship is the circulation function in libraries. Obviously a library user must have access to material before he can make use of it at all, but given access, the library material must be what he needs before the relationship between user and material can be productive. The fact that a library user's request is fulfilled can be a sterile achievement unless at the same time he gets what he can use to personal advantage for his current need.

Today, the educational and recreational potentialities of libraries are greater than they have ever been. While libraries are stocked with literally millions of books and other resources, the ultimate goal—their use—is only partially achieved. A relatively small percentage of those who pay the bill use library material available to them. How

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do we know that the library materials made accessible to users, actually do make a desirable impact on the user? We don't know; and one of the reasons is that most of the reader service has been eliminated from the circulation function without compensating for the lost services in other ways.

In the pre-Civil War Library, the librarian, or some one working directly under his surveillance, determined from discussion with the borrower what was needed from the library collection, charged it to the borrower, and cleared the borrower when he returned the material. Circulation service was the sole reader service. Inherent in the situation was the opportunity for the librarian to know the borrower's need. The librarian also knew his resources, and was thus able to fulfill the need within the limits of materials available and of his own competence.

During the past one hundred years the concept of the circulation function has changed radically. Circulation services were first departmentalized and subsequently were decentralized. A de-emphasis of reader services, or an emphasis on the personal resourcefulness of the user, has occurred during a period when the sources of information in libraries increased enormously in quantity and form, but also during a period when the successful retrieval of information grew increasingly more dependent upon technical skill. In all sincerity and through a sense of obligation in a scientific age, librarians have used machines to replace critical manpower, speed up processes, and reduce unit costs. Faced with acute shortages of professional personnel, librarians have conscientiously replaced professional with clerical personnel in identifiable clerical operations. The circulation function was both favorably and adversely affected by progressive administrators. It is now symbolized by the charging machine, and the reader services, formerly an integral part of the circulation function, are gone. Most important is the loss of control over the effective use of library materials.

To reduce costs, librarians must be as realistic as any seller of services who understands that continuing an unwanted service, however cheap, is the surest way to bankruptcy. Libraries, of course, do not die in bankruptcy court, but the apathy of their constituents is worse than bankruptcy. Therefore the authors of these papers will achieve a useful purpose insofar as they assist the librarian in drawing a balance sheet on circulation services by which the gains are contrasted with the losses. The latter are problems only as long as they are allowed to

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limit the achievement of library objectives. Fortunately complacency among librarians is unusual. A great many librarians are earnestly and critically examining professional concepts in an effort to assess their contemporary relevancy and to clarify their fundamental values.