A Proposal for Coordinating
Library Research

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Science editor of the London News Chronicle and former chairman of the British Association of Science Writers, Ritchie Calder, tells an amusing story about a friend of his who became involved in "operational research" during the war. In 1941 Calder went to see his friend Dr. Cecil Gordon, a geneticist. He was working in his basement laboratory at Aberdeen University. He was very excited. He was counting the hairs on the antennae of the banana fly and had just found an extra whisker on the offspring of a fly which had been fed on Vitamin B.

The next time Calder heard of Gordon he had doubled the capacity of the Coastal Command—without adding a man to the personnel or a plane to the Command! What he had done was to apply his scientific training and experience to the problem of getting more planes into the air when there weren't any more planes to be had or men to fly them. He studied the organization of the Command and found that its capacity could be doubled—not by adding more planes and men but by re-organizing the Command so that the planes it had would be in the air longer and oftener. He did this by improving the methods for servicing the planes.

As Calder pointed out, doubling the capacity of the Coastal Command is a far cry from counting the whiskers on a banana fly. But the training and experience gained in the one made the other possible. This is only one example of how the scientist, who has been thoroughly trained in research methods and procedures, can help solve problems outside his laboratory. Operational research has now become an important part of industry, management, and labor and as the several papers in this issue so abundantly point out, of librarianship as well.

While many of the library schools are beginning to organize systematic research, and there is at least one proposal, as described in

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the Editor's Preface, for a cooperative approach by several schools, further steps need to be taken, and soon.

Therefore, it is proposed that further efforts in fostering and encouraging library research be made by strengthening and enlarging the Committee on Research of the Association of American Library Schools. The A.A.L.S. has under recent leadership strengthened its financial position, clarified its objectives, and is now ready to move into an active program. However, the affiliation of such a Committee or Round Table is not the important thing. If the A.A.L.S. is unable to develop it, the committee could be a part of any library organization or association interested in promoting library research. The important thing, at least in the minds of those who have proposed this scheme, is that a Research and Development group be formed as soon as possible.

What should such a committee try to do? There are a great many things it could attempt. However, it should not try to do too much, especially in the beginning. Part of the modesty of this proposal lies in the fact that the Committee would not try to do everything at once. It would not attempt to do the impossible overnight. That is a mistake which other schemes for encouraging library research have made and which this plan must avoid at all costs.

In the beginning the Round Table, which this author prefers to call it, might well content itself with reporting progress on projects already under way. This would be a modest beginning and there is a need for this type of reporting. Good research cannot be carried out in a vacuum. It needs to be criticized and evaluated from many points of view and particularly while it is being carried on, rather than only after completion. Too often little or nothing is known about a research project until after it has been completed. The profession at large usually does not know about a project until the results of it have been published in some journal. Then it is too late. For by that time the mistakes and oversights have been made which could have been prevented by constructive criticism while the work was still in progress. Then it is too late to go back and collect additional information or to broaden or narrow the base of the investigation so that it would be more meaningful and helpful to the profession at large.

The old adage about two heads being better than one is as true in research as in anything else. Teamwork is a vital part of good research. If a Research and Development Round Table started out by reporting on the library research which was being done at the time it would
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do a great deal to improve that research and to foster additional re-
search. In reporting on projects under way attention could be called
to difficulties which had been met and not yet solved. Making these
difficulties known to all interested librarians would be one way of
asking for help in solving them. Other librarians might have en-
countered similar problems in a different situation and have worked
out solutions which could be applied to the project under discussion.
By discussing and describing the way they licked the problem they
might be able to save another investigator the trouble of having to
go through the process all over again. Or out of their experience they
might be able to suggest a solution which would never have occurred
to him. They could give valuable aid to the librarian who has lived
too long and too close to his problem.

Reporting current research at a Round Table twice a year, once
during the American Library Association Midwinter Meeting and once
during the Annual Conference for example, would not in itself be
enough to arouse interest in that or other research. Something more
would be needed to reach a wider audience than could attend the
regular meetings of the Round Table. If the scheme stopped there it
would more than likely meet the fate of similar schemes. It would end
up in talk instead of action. What would be needed would be some
means for getting the Round Table’s reports on research in progress
to all those interested in such research. For if enough people know
about a problem and talk about it the talk is more apt to result in
some kind of action.

It has been suggested that the proposed Research and Development
Round Table might start out by issuing a newsletter which would
summarize the reports made during its meetings. This would be one
way of letting more people know about what is going on in library
research. It is hoped that such a newsletter would not only acquaint
many librarians with research in progress but that it would stimulate
further research as well. Through a newsletter the Round Table could
attempt to create a more favorable climate of opinion for investigating
library problems. In the past lack of interest in library research has
often been one of the reasons why there has not been more of it. By
publicizing research the Round Table’s newsletter should do some-
thing to help overcome this obstacle.

If the Round Table’s newsletter proved a success it could pave the
way for something more elaborate and consequential. After proving
the value of reporting on research projects under way it could experi-
ment with something more pretentious. This might take the form of
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an annual volume of proceedings or of a serial publication which would attempt to summarize and comment on the projects which were completed during the year. However, since this is a modest proposal dreams of the future should be pushed aside until the newsletter had definitely shown that there was a real need for a more formal means of communication. An elaborate publishing program should not be the concern of the Round Table in the beginning.

Librarians have often been criticized for referring to “research” when, according to the true scientists hidden away in their chrome and tile laboratories, what they really mean is a kind of amateur snooping. Like counting the number of books circulated and finding out whether the patron actually read them or not. It must be admitted that some of what passes for “library research” is not research at all. The sort of Round Table envisaged here might do something about this. It has been suggested, for example, that scientists from other fields should be invited to the meetings of the Round Table. They would listen to the reports on various projects and would take part in the discussion which followed.

It is hoped that these scientists from other fields would be able to point out the strong and weak points of the research being undertaken. Out of their broader experience in research techniques and methodology they should be able to give valuable and constructive criticism. They would be able to furnish the objective and outside point of view which is so often crucial in the progress of any research project.

Although this would not be exactly what Calder meant by operational research it would be very close to it. The geneticist who has learned the importance of noting and counting the whiskers on a banana fly should be able to help the librarian who needs to observe and count the number of people who use the imprint information on a catalog card. He has learned what to ignore and what to pay attention to and this knowledge might be of great value when shared with the librarian. Documentation supplies us with another example of how the librarian can benefit from the knowledge and techniques of the scientist, in this case the mathematician and communications expert.

Besides issuing a newsletter to inform all interested librarians of what research in library problems was going on and besides inviting scientists from other fields to evaluate and comment on research in progress, there is one more service which a Research and Development Round Table might provide. It could attempt to coordinate the research which was being done in library science. At first this
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might be only a by-product of the reporting function of the Round Table—but it would be a very important by-product.

By acting as a kind of clearinghouse for library research the Round Table would be in an excellent position to help coordinate that research. In library research especially there is always the danger of duplicating work which has already been done elsewhere. This is partly because library research is usually not reported in the various professional journals until it is nearly complete or because it is not reported at all. Partly it goes back to the fact that most library research now has to be done by librarians who have a regular job and can devote only their spare time to research. As a result they are forced to work alone. It is to be hoped that the Round Table's newsletter, along with the reports made at its annual or semi-annual meetings, would do something to correct this.

However, there is a real need for something which would do more than just prevent the duplication of research effort. There is also a need for some group or body which would attempt to coordinate library research insofar as that may be possible. The Round Table should be the best informed group as to what research was being done or planned or contemplated. Part of its reason for being would be to collect and make known information about such research. Consequently before a librarian started a research project he would first clear with the Round Table to find out if anyone else was working or planned to work on a similar project. If he learned that a librarian in Chicago or Los Angeles was already doing the same thing he would be able to spend his time on something else and so avoid duplicating the work being done elsewhere.

This does not mean that a librarian would have to give up his pet project simply because someone else had registered a similar one with the Round Table. If he wanted to go ahead with the project anyway there would be nothing to stop him. The Round Table would not and could not do anything to prevent him from doing what he wanted to do. But at least he would know that someone somewhere was doing the same thing.

If he learned through the Round Table that a librarian in Boston or New York was doing a related piece of research he would be able to get in touch with him and exchange ideas. The two librarians might then discover that they were working on two different aspects of a larger problem. This knowledge would enable them to coordinate or correlate their individual projects, if they wanted to, so that both would form a united attack on the main problem.
This would be one way of coordinating library research. Through its newsletter and its reports the Round Table would provide the means for integrating library research but it would not necessarily take an active part in the process. That would call for a more aggressive program. If the Round Table wanted to work directly toward coordinating research it would have to do more than simply issue a newsletter periodically. For the coordination which would come from that alone would be largely accidental. In addition it would have to work out a plan which would aim at covering problems which needed a solution but which, for one reason or another, were not being worked on.

In the beginning this plan would not have to be elaborate. If all librarians engaged in research would report on the work they were doing to the Round Table it would be in a position to know what was being done as well as what was not being done. It could then take steps to see that the areas which were not being covered would be. In some cases it might do this by providing a small sum for initiating research in an uncovered area. The Round Table could set aside part of the money received in dues for this purpose. Or it could attempt to secure small grants which would be used for the sole purpose of encouraging library research. In other cases it might achieve the same result by compiling a list of projects which needed to be undertaken. By publicizing such a list it could call attention to needed research.

Librarians interested in research and looking for suitable projects would know where to turn for suggestions and would be aware of what needed to be done first. In this modest way a beginning could be made toward coordinating library research into a comprehensive program. Eventually such an over-all program would have a great influence on the study of library problems. The growth of our knowledge about library science would be steady and progressive. No longer would library research be like the knight who mounted his horse and rode off in all directions at once. It would be a unified rather than a haphazard assault on the problems which too often now interfere with our progress.

The Round Table would always do everything it could to encourage library research but it would never try to control or regulate it. It must not be thought that the coordination recommended here would in any way be restrictive. Coordination would have to come voluntarily or it would be worthless. However, it is hoped that a Research and Development Round Table, by its very existence, would do much to encourage cooperation in attacking library problems.
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Surely this is a modest proposal. It calls for no great expenditure of money or a herculean effort on the part of anyone. A Research and Development Round Table, by reporting and coordinating the research which is already being done and by bringing together the men and women who are interested in library research, could do much to bring order out of chaos, and to give direction and purpose to what is too often a hit or miss. Such an unassuming proposal certainly seems worth a try.
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