



Cooperation Among Public Libraries

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HOW DO THE PUBLIC LIBRARIES of the United States fit into the total picture of providing library resources for all our people as we try to cope with the tremendous problems facing us at this mid-point of the twentieth century? The concept of over-all cooperation envisages a national network of libraries—public, school, college, university, and special—which shall become a library system to insure complete library coverage, much as the school system undertakes to furnish education for all the children.

Both the spirit of the library system idea and a guide for the practical means of its accomplishment are embodied in a statement of new minimum standards developed and approved by the American Library Association in 1956 for the evaluation of "Public Library Service." As the document itself proposes: The cooperative approach on the part of libraries is its most important single recommendation. Only by working together, sharing services as well as materials, can the public library in mid-century America hope to meet the full needs of its users. Nor will the creation of new library systems through formal or informal arrangements necessarily weaken or eliminate a library which now serves its small community well. On the contrary, it will offer that library and its users greatly expanded resources and services which may at the moment be "out-of-reach," but which could actually be made available in the foreseeable future if not at once.

Developed in qualitative but very practical terms, the new standards apply to all aspects of public library service including the structure and government of libraries, books and non-book materials, personnel, the organization and control of materials, buildings, and daily library operations. Each recommendation put forward is advanced from the standpoint of what it will contribute to a functional system and whether it looks directly toward the primary objective of making superior public library services available to each isolated rural com-

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munity as well as to the metropolis. The new public library standards imply that, wherever the library and whatever its size, its resources belong to and shall ultimately be shared by all American communities.

But, if the public library system idea is to be developed in any real sense, public libraries generally must first cross political barriers so that the emphasis is less on the political unit served, whether city, county, or state, and more on bringing service to all the people wherever they may live and, secondly, there will need to be a greater breakdown of barriers between all kinds of libraries.

Progress has been made along both lines. The liberalization of inter-library loans is one example of the breakdown of compartmentalization, both in geographic units and among types of libraries. With the advent of the Bibliographic Center sponsored by the Pacific Northwest Library Association, the libraries in the Pacific Northwest, in 1942, liberalized their code to read: "As an expression of the view that each library holds its books in trust for the region as a whole, the libraries of the Pacific Northwest lend each other books for all kinds and conditions of clients, for any purpose, and for any length of time within reason." As a result of this liberalization of the code and the ability to locate books readily through the union catalog, the larger libraries have stepped up their lending sharply—one large public library's loans increasing over fourteen times since 1942.

The concept that each library holds its books in trust for all the region as a whole, once accepted, inevitably works dramatic changes in library thinking and planning. Recently the Washington Library Association, with the support of the State Library, came up with the idea that all supplementary book service to the libraries throughout the state be centered in the two largest public libraries rather than the State Library, providing that the state would finance this service. The theory back of this suggestion derived from the fact that the two public libraries in question had good book collections and adequate yearly appropriations for the purchase of new books, whereas the State Library's book collection was totally inadequate and could never be improved sufficiently with the small annual appropriation available.

This suggestion has never gone beyond the discussion stage, but there is logic in asking the stronger libraries to assume the greater responsibility in supplementing inadequate service. Actually the Seattle Public Library, one of the two libraries involved, is already edging into this larger service through its enlarged inter-library loan service

and its contact with the King County Public Library which provides full library privileges to all county borrowers.

Much has been accomplished in the mechanics of cooperation between libraries along such lines as reciprocal borrowers' privileges, cooperative book evaluation and selection plans, centralized purchasing of books, centralized cataloging, rotation and exchange of materials, and cooperative publicity. At the same time that we list these techniques looking toward cooperation, however, we must admit that there have been serious barriers to the kind and degree of cooperation which will produce a system of libraries. These barriers have had to do largely with the opposition of officials who fear additional taxes, with the opposition of librarians and library trustees—often passive, but still very effective—because they fear loss of power or autonomy. And then, of course, there is the barrier that comes from the ignorance of the millions of citizens who either never have had library service or who have had such inferior samples as not to be impressed.

It seems possible that the implementation of the Library Services Act will have far reaching influence on the development of regional libraries, and that this "larger area service" will bring out the kind of cooperation between public libraries which will aid materially in securing coverage and insuring equality of service for all the people in those areas where matching funds have been made available and comprehensive plans have been developed.

The Library Services Act is of only five years duration, however, and already there has been trouble in securing the full appropriation authorized by the Act. It is possible that at the terminal date of the legislation we will not have made the progress which has been hoped for. With all the help possible from federal funds, much will be left unfinished when these funds are no longer available.

The planning now going forward in the forty-eight states to take advantage of the Library Services Act may be among the most lasting effects of this legislation, since this planning is likely to set the pattern for public library development for years to come. There are, however, two limitations to this planning. First, that it is concerned almost exclusively with public library development and so is not contributing to the breakdown of barriers between all types of libraries so necessary if an adequate system of libraries is to be realized. And second, because the planning is almost exclusively at the state level, there is little or no attention being given to planning on a regional or national level. Library planning for all types of libraries, and on a re-

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gional and national scale, can alone insure real library cooperation and a national system of libraries.

In this connection, the Pacific Northwest Library Association Library Development Project, now in progress with a grant from the Ford Foundation, is an example of comprehensive library planning on a regional scale. As is generally known, the P.N.L.A. is an international regional library association organized in 1909, comprising the four northwest states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana, and the Canadian province of British Columbia. Recently the province of Alberta has joined this Association. P.N.L.A. has had nearly fifty years of over-all library planning and cooperation, and the Library Development Project is an ambitious attempt to realize the library potential in a comprehensive manner.

The Project is a study in detail of the different types of libraries, public, school, college, university, and special, and, in addition, has made provision for a summary-synthesis of the library complex in the region, from the viewpoint of presenting the total resources of all libraries, and the potential represented in the possible systematic utilization of this wealth.

Perhaps a short quotation from the outline of "Scope and Perspectives of the Library Development Project," prepared by Morton Kroll, director, will clarify the objectives.

The functional division which the staff decided to utilize is certainly not the only way of studying the libraries of the region. Yet there is a logical basis for such an organization. The public library, school library, university and special libraries are considered to constitute separate fields of specialization among librarians themselves. Governmentally, they stand apart. Certainly any attempt to develop pragmatically sound programs to alleviate the basic problems faced in each of these three areas would have to account for the fundamental differences which set them apart from each other.

Functional divisions, however, do not stand alone, for there are aspects and problems of libraries and librarians which cut across lines of specialization. Thus, a fourth division was established, at once a background and synthesizing category. It will attempt studies dealing with those aspects of the Pacific Northwest which constitute the natural and social field or environment in which all libraries as social mechanisms function. In this division we shall examine the total library resources, services and facilities of the region (*its library complex*, as we call it) in an effort to determine rational and feasible

means of treating with problems common to all libraries on a regional basis.

The Project's library complex, a summary-synthesis of the total resources of all libraries in the region, can, we believe, make a unique contribution since it will make possible a systematic utilization of these combined resources and, at the same time, sort out library problems on a regional basis, indicating which can best be solved at the regional level, which can be worked out by the states themselves and, finally, what solutions can best be found in the local community.

It is entirely possible that the interest aroused by the thorough-going involvement of librarians, research workers, and others throughout the territory will continue to pay dividends long after the printed reports of the Library Development Project are filed. Such questions are being asked as "What technical library facilities are available to physicians in the rural communities in Idaho and Montana," and faculty members of the universities and colleges throughout the region are participating as, for example, the botany professor who is making a comprehensive survey of the material in the biological sciences in the region. Certainly all types of libraries are in this library development project together, and out of it should come increasing interdependence of libraries in serving the needs of the region.

The question which opened this paper, "How do the public libraries of the United States fit into the total picture of providing library resources for all our people," has been answered only inferentially at best.

When public libraries have been well supported and well administered their contribution to American culture has been many sided and has served a large segment of the population. We now have to admit, however, that this contribution has reached its maximum effectiveness in too few communities, and that today millions of Americans are without good libraries. Public libraries will never fulfill their destiny until, together with college, university, and school libraries, they provide every American, no matter how isolated, reasonably prompt access to any book, no matter how specialized.