



Committee Control of the Industrial Research Library

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EVERY ARGUMENT has at least two sides. Any discussion of library committees or boards in the "non-public library" field will quickly bring the Pros and the Cons running to the dais to speak their views.

In public library administration the board of trustees or library board is an accepted, traditional, conventional fact. The only problem may be how to get along with them. For libraries in colleges, universities, governmental organizations, eleemosynary institutions, and other quasi-public organizations, the place and operation of the library are quite formalized, and the question "Should there be a library committee?" seldom provokes much contention.

But "non-public libraries" (which for the purpose of this paper shall hereinafter be restricted to industrial research libraries) are a different breed. Most of the great growth in numbers of industrial research libraries has come since World War II, and most of these libraries are small. (In the 1960 Special Libraries Association survey, of the 1,137 that reported, 721, almost 63 per cent, had only one professional staff member.) And private industry is not consistent in the paths of organization and administration which it uses to reach its goals.

Thus, it is not surprising that industrial research librarians differ in their reaction to the question, "What do you think of having a library committee?" It is slightly surprising, however, to find comparatively little in print on the subject, whereas there is an almost endless supply of printed advice, opinion, experience, and conjecture on the many other problems of organizing, administering, and operating industrial research libraries. Perhaps this paper may stimulate a thorough survey and review of the library committee problem.

To state the two main sides of the question, we invited advocates

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of Pro and Con to face each other across the table while we sat nearby making notes. What follows is a fairly accurate transcription of their debate.

PRO: On the basis of communications alone, the library committee is worthwhile. The committee can receive and pass along suggestions and complaints to the librarian which individuals may be reluctant to make directly. One of the librarian's greatest responsibilities is constantly to keep alert to deficiencies in his library's services and to correct them. This is never an easy job. People tend either to be too kind or too shy in making complaints, even when the librarian tries to invite them. But an objective, impartial board, understanding the library's problems, but not a part of the library staff, can induce both complaints and positive suggestions for improving the performance of the library.

At the same time, the library committee can interpret the services of the library to the users and to management better than the librarian whose opinions and suggestions are bound to be colored and discounted because of his entrenched interest. The committee can also serve as a sounding board for the librarian's complaints, problems, and ideas. He can try them out on the committee members and get their reactions.

It has often been said that 'Your horn sounds better when someone else is blowing it.' The librarian who has an active, vigorous, alert, and interested committee to help him can do a much better job of telling his and his library's story of service to the users and to management. If the library committee members feel that the library is doing a good job, they can have a great influence in carrying this conviction to their coworkers and to management.

Most librarians—even industrial research librarians—are a shy, modest lot, and they need all the help they can get to promote and advertise their library's fine services. And there is an added dividend when past members of the library committee return to their regular status as library users. They carry with them the knowledge of and insight into the library's ways and problems which they achieved while they served on the committee. Through the years, this 'education' and sending out of library disciples is bound to have its effect in stimulating greater appreciation of what the research library is, how it works and why—not only with these former members, but with all the people they work with every day. Furthermore, these people, having seen the library's side of the fence, often become valuable

contributors of ideas and suggestions to the library for improving its service.

Finally, every librarian knows the problem of keeping up with what is new in his organization. The library committee, through its many contacts with the various divisions and with top management, can help the librarian to know in advance about new directions or shifts of emphasis in research or new plans, new projects, new programs which are being considered. The librarian, thus forewarned, can better prepare his library for the new demands that will be made upon it in the future.

CON: I am glad you used those words 'active, vigorous, alert and interested committee.' You apparently haven't heard from the librarians whose advisory committees never met, or irregularly, and even when they met, seldom took action on the ideas and proposals suggested by the librarian. And what makes you think they will just automatically devote their time and energy and talent to promoting your library? Most of them have problems of their own which are a lot more important to them, and many of them look upon this committee service as a drag and a nuisance. It makes a difference who appoints them to the committee (top management, their immediate superior, the library supervisor) in how seriously they take their responsibility.

You've got a fine story there, but 'that ain't the way I heard it.' The time the librarian spends trying to educate and generate enthusiasm in the members of his committee he could better spend either doing his job or stirring up his immediate boss, who has the authority to take real action. The same goes for public relations. The library's best public relations is a good job well done. Every satisfied user then becomes a booster.

And I am not convinced the librarian will hear about what is new any faster through his committee than he will via the good old grapevine or from his boss. How often does the committee meet, anyway?

PRO: An industrial research library has one major reason for its existence: service. The more creative this service can be, the more valuable the library will be to its organization. Part of the creativity function in library service is in the librarian's ability to develop policies which add to, strengthen, and create new means for providing better service. With the help of a committee of people who represent a cross section of the organization's activities and interests, the li-

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brarian finds it easier to decide upon and make these policy changes. Once the new policy is decided, the committee can help by advertising, promoting, and interpreting that policy to the library users and to top management. I suggest that you read how Rose Boots at McGraw-Hill found that 'the committee was blamed for the establishment of some new policies, which were unpopular at first but were gradually accepted.'¹

CON: Here we are using the committee for public relations again. Who decides the new policies? The librarian? Why can't the committee decide? Because they don't know enough about the technical side of running the library. And how much time does the librarian spend explaining the reasons behind new policy to the committee?

The idea sounds good. And I am sure it worked in this particular instance. But suppose you have an apathetic committee? Or suppose you have a nose, aggressive group that wants to have a lot to say about what new policies are decided and wants to have a hand in deciding them? The typical research librarian has enough problems without the additional burden of professional policy-making by an amateur committee. I suggest you read Herb White's comment: 'Few laymen would dare to offer advice to a doctor on how to treat a rare disease, and even fewer would want to overrule an engineer on how much weight a bridge span can support, but it's amazing how many people think they know how to improve the running of a library.'²

Every time you set up a committee to help you enforce library policy, you run the great risk of getting a committee which wants to establish policy. Then the very job you were hired as a professional to do is taken away from you, by nonprofessionals.

Every one has his own individual axe to grind. The librarian's only concern should be better library service. If every policy is carefully thought out to promote better service, and if it is a sensible, realistic policy, he will have no great problem either promoting it or enforcing it. After all, he is dealing with mature human beings; he shouldn't have to trick them or baby them.

PRO: I think you will have to agree that no librarian, even the smartest one, knows enough about all the special fields his library may cover to be an authority in judging the quality and value of new published materials. The library committee can be of great service in helping review new publications, in evaluating them, in helping to decide which are worth adding to the collection. Many libraries report that

specialists in various fields do much of their reviewing and recommending for purchase. These specialists also are usually well acquainted with new trends in their special fields and can advise the librarian about new publications to watch for and even about new areas which may be developing. Such advisors become an active part of the 'library team' and, again, give added weight to the validity of the library's recommendations when it comes time to buy new publications.

CON: I will agree—that most librarians need help. But I don't think they have to get that help through a committee. Most librarians are smart enough to keep up with book review sources in many fields. They acquire through experience an awareness of who the reliable publishers are, who are the outstanding authors in various fields, and which reviewers can be relied upon. This is one spot where even the gifted specialist can be misled.

And no intelligent librarian is going to buy an expensive new book in a strange new field without checking first with someone who he knows can evaluate the book for his organization. But suppose that person doesn't happen to be on the library committee? The librarian has much more freedom if he can go to the expert, no matter where he may be. This is what most industrial research librarians do.

But the librarian, in the final analysis, is responsible for the quality and value of the books in his library. Only he can finally decide if the book should be bought. An expert may tell him the new book is good, but the librarian has to decide if the money should go into that new title or into some other (assuming that he does have some limit to his budget and to his shelf space). This is a decision no committee can make for him. It is possible that no matter how good the new title is, it may still duplicate material already on the shelves or add so little more that is worthwhile as to make its acquisition less nearly necessary than that of another title, not quite as good, but filling a vital gap in the library's collection.

Finally, almost every expert, if he had *his* way, would want to buy *all* the new books in his specialty. Should a metallurgist decide between buying a book on metals or one on aerodynamics? The librarian has to keep the big picture in mind. He has to represent all interests of his organization and know their relative value, their relative needs, and his library's ability to answer those needs with the materials on its shelves.

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PRO: Let's talk about money. Budgets. Salaries. Space.

Few management people in industry claim to understand why an industrial research library has to spend so much money for books and magazines. Most librarians in industry fight the battle of the budget every year. It is the businessman's instinct to ask, 'What am I getting in return for my money spent on the library?' And unless he is convinced that the money is better invested in library service than in some other area, he is apt to put his cash into a more profitable activity.

The librarian needs every bit of help he can muster to convince management that money invested in accurate, up-to-date information, is bread cast upon profitable waters that will return manyfold.

The library committee, if it properly represents a cross section of the organization's interest and activities, can help maintain an adequate library budget by reviewing the needs of all departments and groups for library service and by constantly reminding management that books are as necessary as beakers to efficient research.

With its understanding of what the librarian is up to and up against, the library committee can help establish throughout the organization a better appreciation of the truly professional aspects of the librarian's job. Such appreciation, especially among top management, inevitably increases the respect with which the librarian's suggestions and recommendations are received, and—hopefully!—will also increase the size of his paycheck. This latter reason alone should be enough to make any librarian welcome the establishment of a library committee.

Because every library is a constantly growing thing, the library committee should be the agency for reviewing periodically the needs of the library for more space, more major equipment, new or added personnel. Who, for instance, and on what basis, can best decide if the library should be moved to a different location, to larger quarters, perhaps be split (or combined) to serve two areas better? And who has the experience, the judgment, the responsibility for deciding matters of personnel administration in the library? The head librarian, of course, which is the way it should be. But can he use help in screening, interviewing and selecting professional assistants? Most librarians would admit that they could. And even more important, if the head librarian should leave, die, be promoted, or move to another position, who is competent to find his successor (remember, our 'typical' library has only one or two professionals on its staff)? The library committee should be the logical agency to do this job.

CON: We've got a lot of ground to cover here, but most of our former rebuttals still hold. Yes, the librarian does need help with his budget requirements. And here again you are using the library committee to run interference, when perhaps its members need someone to run interference for them in their own department budgets. But let it pass. Just note that first the librarian has to convince the members of the committee that his budget is adequate, or else they are buying a pig in a poke and serving neither the library nor their organization as they should. If the librarian can convince them (they must not be a rubber stamp), why couldn't he just as well be convincing his own boss or top management? He could. In fact, it is one of his major responsibilities, and he cannot abdicate it.

Every boost helps. But again, we are using a committee of valuable people to do something which only the librarian can truly do—that is, establish himself as a person of professional caliber. If the librarian acts like a professional, if he maintains professional standards, if he performs like a professional, he will be accepted as a professional. Nothing else will do this for him. He can have three Ph.D.'s after his name, but in industry he will be finally accepted only on the basis of his performance. And industry will pay him accordingly. If not his present employer, then another one, because there is a great shortage of truly professional industrial research librarians.

Library committees *are* often set up to consider and decide upon the establishment of a library for an industrial firm; sometimes they may be set up to decide upon major library movements, divisions, and consolidations. Business likes to operate through committees. But most of them are special committees, named for a particular purpose and for a limited period of time. Quoting Herb White again, 'Industry does not have committees of mathematicians, metallurgists and chemists who tell the chief aerodynamicist how his section should be run. I see no reason for the necessity of a committee of mathematicians, metallurgists, chemists and aerodynamicists to tell the librarian how the library should be run.'³

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Here the debate ends. When we offered time for rebuttal, our two antagonists declined, referring us instead to the list of references appended and each contending that a good, thorough survey of the actual library committee situation in the industrial research libraries of America will prove them right. We will wait for the results of that survey.

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

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