



## Freedom of Access, Partially Achieved

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SUBSTANTIAL ADVANCEMENT toward complete freedom of access to American libraries occurred with the end of legally supported segregation. If segregated library service is illegally practiced anywhere, it would likely be accompanied by a poverty of library materials.

For many people, however, public libraries still have a variety of barriers such as: a) unfavorable historical images, b) legal integration, but with staff reservations, c) uninviting physical facilities, d) collections of materials inadequate to meet reasonable needs, and e) personnel seriously lacking in service attitude, service efficiency, and knowledge of library materials. Similar barriers can exist in private institutions. An illustration is a large retail store in my home community which features fine clothing for women. Open to all, the store has an aura of prestige from years of service to chauffeur-driven, affluent ladies. Some of my friends are reluctant to enter the store. Once inside, they are reconciled by the gracious hospitality of the store's personnel. Librarians, other public service administrators, and retail personnel need to find a means to see and know their institutions as others see them, and to take steps to remove any barriers.

Few libraries directly serve a majority of the people in their service area. Freedom of access often turns out to be more a freedom *not* to use books and libraries. There are many involved reasons for the lack of use of libraries. This article is not intended as a complete enumeration of the reasons, rather, it is mostly a commentary on some of the concerns of the writer as applied to public libraries.

In dealing with retail stores, customers do not continue attempting to buy in a store where the stock is inadequate or the service too poor to meet reasonable needs. They cut off the store so far as future visits are concerned. Thousands of potential library users are cutting off our

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libraries when they fail to get desired materials, information, or service. They may have access to their buildings, but their needs are not being met.

Gerald W. Johnson, writing on "The Role of the Public Library" says: "One obligation resting upon every public institution in a democracy is that of standing ready at all times to render an account of itself to the people and to show cause why they should continue to support it. No institution is so lordly that its right to existence is beyond challenge, and none, except perhaps public monuments, can rightfully claim present consideration on the basis of past distinction."<sup>1</sup>

Whereas some users do not come back to libraries, great numbers never come at all. Freedom of access has not knowingly been their concern. In this mass of non-library users are the illiterates and the poor readers. Libraries have appealed to "nice" people—the well-dressed, literate, and cultured. This will be difficult to alter, but the need is so great that every reasonable effort must be extended to do so. What could make the illiterate and the poor reader more skittish than an institution with row after row of books serviced by personnel certain to spot literacy deficiencies with the first spoken word? If the poor reader does brave the storm of concern to enter, he may immediately be embarrassed when he realizes that books of his reading level are segregated in an area for children. To serve both the advanced child and the beginning adult reader, some community libraries are interfiling adult and children's non-fiction.

Also, the most socially conscious librarians, imbued with a desire to serve the poor reader, can create an unintended barrier with a misunderstood word, motion, or facial expression. Due to their background and necessary training, librarians are at home with words. In contrast, the beginning reader often comes from an environment where words are less important. Actions, tones of voice, and facial expressions are their keys for welcome and equal treatment. Love and kindness must undergird the librarian's efforts with the poor reader, and through that love should evolve an appropriate attitude for service.

This same idea was stated in the National Book Committee's *Neighborhood Library Centers and Services*: "It is well known that the poor—as all of us—will accept help from those who treat them as persons of worth and will resist the worker who acts 'as one having authority.' Thus, there is need for an educational institution with an informal atmosphere which will meet the poor on their home ground

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and whose workers will give individual help on a basis of mutual acceptance.”<sup>2</sup>

At the other extreme from the deprived and the poor reader is the intelligent, trained, highly paid person who cannot allow time to be occupied by some of the established library routines. Earning ten dollars or more per hour and being under pressure to achieve, he finds that an hour going to and from a library plus the time to find the information is more expensive than a cross-country telephone call to get information from an unimpeachable source. To serve such people effectively, the red tape must be cut by providing excellent telephone reference service, photocopy and messenger service, telephoned and teletyped interlibrary loan services, and wide use of the mail to get information to the time-conscious user.

Between the poor reader and the busy, affluent citizen are many adults who also have been alienated from books and libraries. The causes for this alienation may include long forgotten childhood reading deficiencies, slow maturity as a student, curriculum-oriented library images, or torture with the sacred cows of literature which were mandatory reading during school days. Whatever the causes, these citizens tend to limit their reading to portions of newspapers, magazines, and the instructions for operating newly-purchased gadgets. These people have no desire to enter a building filled with books.

For some persons, life is dull and unappealing if their bodies are not in motion or if they are not spectators of other bodies in motion. Reading has rare appeal for these action-oriented, auto-driving, ball game-watching people. Serving their informational needs requires libraries that provide other types of media to supplement the printed page and good telephone reference service.

Libraries are the most economically effective educational institutions man has devised, but their use depends upon the will of the user. Today, libraries serve a minority directly, and the majority only through scholarly and research productivity, media newswriters and commentators, ministers, and leaders.

To reach and serve the unreached, libraries must use new means and develop new images. For our complex society to achieve its potential, people must repeatedly revise social attitudes, political viewpoints, technological know-how, and manual dexterity. Libraries and library science have the materials and techniques to serve mankind for these renewal processes, but to be fully effective libraries must reach and appeal to more people. The problems cry out to libraries

and other educational institutions to be more effective, for them to try new approaches inside and outside their walls, to work from new or more inviting quarters, to provide more varied media vital to people's needs, and to serve with personnel not only competent but imbued with a desire to serve all of mankind.

For that small percentage of determined library users, the library cannot be hidden. For the majority, however, a prominent building location with convenient access is a major factor in the extent of use of the library. Even with the recent federally subsidized construction, the average age of public library buildings in the United States is about fifty years. Not only were these older buildings planned during a period when printed resources were limited and the communities which they serve smaller, but many of the buildings are located on sites removed from points where a majority of the people pass frequently in the normal pursuit of their day-to-day activities.

Most of the older public library buildings are monumental in style. The user must brave a long flight of steps and pass through Corinthian columns to enter through enormous doors with bas-relief into formidable interiors. Some never enter, and others who do enter have an impulse to flee from these monuments for books. For the physically handicapped, entry may be impossible.

Too few librarians are preparing statements of programs to indicate conclusively the inadequacy of their buildings and to demonstrate the size and nature of new facilities required to extend good library service to their area. Even more deficient of their trust and community responsibility are thousands of public library trustees across the land who appear to interpret their trusteeship to be that of maintenance and preservation of what exists. Their most vital job is to interpret needs and to campaign for funds to provide quarters, materials and personnel so that their libraries may reach their potential for service.

Some communities with an adequate main library facility have neglected to extend service through branch buildings or rented space in newly populated areas. Successful sites for branch outlets can rarely be found in residential areas, in parks, or on school property. In the majority of suburban communities, the most frequently visited spots are shopping centers. Branches in or immediately adjacent to a large shopping center are assured of success if the hours of service are long and the material and personnel budgets meet reasonable needs.

More and more, I am developing a conviction that construction of

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a branch library building should be the exception, and that most branch libraries should be in prime leased space inside shopping centers. Many shopping center managers recognize the traffic-generating power of a library and will provide advantageous space rental rates. Whenever the lease expires, library administrators and trustees have the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the location. If a move is then indicated, the permanency of a library-owned branch structure would not hamper the decision.

The interior design of library space should exhibit the utmost in flexibility to accommodate the changing tide of activities, and to take care of future adjustments in space utilization. The seating should be comfortable and inviting. Row after row of multi-passenger reading tables must be avoided. Lounge groupings, individual reading tables and displays should be used to break the awe of massive reader seating areas.

For the more deprived neighborhoods, branch outlets or stations need to be more closely spaced than for communities where families have one or more cars for transportation to shops and libraries. Again, rented space may be the logical solution, since the neighborhoods served may be converted for other uses as housing patterns are evolved. A less imposing but inviting rented structure housing appropriate materials, along with an ingenious staff, may be more successful during the period of need than a more permanent branch library building.

Wherever the building is located and whatever the nature of the space to be used for library purposes, both heating and air-conditioning will be necessary features in most climates of the United States. To attract readers, deprived or affluent, library space should be as comfortable as a theater or tavern. For a small, temporary space, window air-conditioning units are economical, easy to install, and satisfactory.

To effect freedom of access to libraries, adequate buildings on good sites will not be enough. There is no substitute for long hours of service. Like the gasoline station, drugstore, or modern shopping center, libraries must be open and available at hours convenient to the people in the area served. As with the suburban shopping center, some libraries will conduct a major portion of their service after the hours when many offices are closed for the day. Library personnel should be aware of this character of library service when accepting the challenge of library work.

Fine quarters open long hours will not achieve their potential if the public service personnel are grouchy, possessive, authoritarian, or unapproachable. To be sure, the library personnel must be competent at finding the information and material to meet the needs of the users, but courtesy and helpfulness are necessary characteristics if the unreached are to be reached, and if the reached are to continue to come. This competency, courtesy, and helpfulness should be apparent to both the walk-in user and the telephone customer.

Like the retail store to which we return again and again, the successful library must have the materials desired. The diverse media available to libraries today, plus the rivers of literature flowing from the presses, present a selection problem for the library personnel. The community should be studied to assist in determining the needs. Although present customers cannot be ignored, their needs should not dominate. The following are some sample questions about materials and material services that librarians and trustees can ask as they survey their efforts to reach the unreached:

- Why only books? Why only non-controversial books?
- Why only hardcover books?
- Should titles popular at paperback outlets be added?
- Are titles being acquired to meet the needs of non-users?
- What types of material would serve beginning readers?
- Are staff members released from desk duty to work in deprived neighborhoods to learn to select materials for this segment of society?
- What happens when the beginning adult reader enters the library?
- What means are used to invite the beginning adult reader?
- Is there an adequate supply of titles that are most used by the beginning adult reader?
- Does the collection meet the needs of students?
- Are paperback copies of titles in demand by students used to supplement the collection?
- Is the business and technology collection adequate to meet the needs of the businessman and technician?
- Are the telephone lines overloaded for those who seek telephone service?
- Is a photocopy machine available to save the reader's time?
- Why so few magazine subscriptions? How can the library dollar be better spent than for a wide selection of current magazines?
- Are the back files of magazines maintained to improve resources for reference service?

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- Why is the phonorecord collection limited to classical music?
- Is prompt, aggressive attention given to interlibrary loans?
- Are most reference questions answered? If not, why not?
- Are 16 m.m. motion pictures available for individual and for group use?
- Are the popular 8 m.m. films available for loan?
- Is the library stocking and lending the new cassettes?
- Are toys, games, and puzzles available for children who are not ready to read, or who are not in the mood to read?
- Are story-telling sessions conducted in the library and by television to help introduce children to the world of literature?
- Does the library have large-print books for the visually handicapped?
- Does the library exhibit the work of local artists?
- Does the library lend framed prints of art works, and pieces of sculpture?
- What are the current issues in the community, state, and nation?
  - Does the library have appropriate, useful materials on these issues?

Finally, there is the continuing need to tell the library story. If good service is provided, the satisfied customer will pass the word, but this will not suffice. A planned program of publicity is a necessary ingredient of library management. Even with good service and wide publicity, some people will not be listening. Some in fact will not be reached, but the unmet needs of the people in our relatively affluent nation cry out for libraries and for all educational institutions to go to the people—to meet them on their own levels, and to find the means to serve their needs.

Freedom of access, in itself, is not the only responsibility of librarianship. Until the service is actually rendered, and the informational, inspirational, and educational needs of the entire community are met, the job is not done.

## *References*

1. Johnson, Gerald W. "The Role of the Public Library." In Public Library Association. Standards Committee. *Minimum Standards for Public Library Systems*, 1966. Chicago, ALA, 1967, p. 1.
2. National Book Committee. *Neighborhood Library Centers and Services; A Study for the Office of Economic Opportunity*. New York, National Book Committee, 1966, p. 1.