Introduction

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Multi-media centers are being activated at an accelerating rate. There is little disagreement as to their need and value in providing services and resources that go beyond the printed page. The big problem, however, is in defining what such a center really is, what it should encompass, and how it relates to other library functions. At one end of the spectrum the multi-media center may be viewed as a collection of audiovisual materials and associated equipment localized in an area designed to facilitate their use by individuals or groups desiring to view films, listen to records and tapes, or study filmstrips and mediated instructional packages. At the other extreme is the total concept of the library as a learning resources center which accommodates all materials and equipment that contribute to learning, local production facilities for the preparation of software in any format, modern self-study stations and electronic networks to service a building, a campus, a community, or all of these. In addition, the library resource center would become part of an electronic network for the exchange of information of all kinds from depositories throughout the country and on a worldwide basis in the near future.

Some centers are located in a single large area, others have a major location encompassing materials and equipment of a more general nature with subcenters dispersed in other buildings to serve specialized needs. The diversity of approaches does not need in any way to detract from the effectiveness of the facility. Rather, the flexibility inherent in the formulation of a center permits it to better serve the target population.

Audiovisual as a descriptive term for the field of media utilization becomes less accurate and inclusive with each passing year. Technological developments over the last decade, and particularly during the last three years, have made the big leap ahead. New theories of

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learning, experience with systems of instruction, the rapid appearance of solid-state, miniaturized and self-powered devices, coupled with new modes and networks for communications, make obsolete or at least obsolescent many of the media approaches currently in use.

It would be less than wise to suggest that libraries immediately convert to the use of the major technological developments. Such implementation requires parallel effort in defining goals and purposes, in redeploying and retraining staff, in learning to employ different methods for storing and retrieving information, and in expanding service in areas never before covered. The process is a continuing one and requires that a total plan be developed in advance to eliminate the possibility of a patchwork approach which will neither satisfy needs now nor in the future.

Fortunately, technological facilities can be installed on a modular plan. It is not necessary to make huge capital investments at the outset accompanied by the fear that new developments will very quickly dilute the value of the acquisitions. It is possible and desirable to plan for a total communications and learning network now—to provide ducts, conduits and tray systems—which can be wired, supplemented or modified to keep pace with developments for the foreseeable future. There can be no valid reason to delay action since even a small start will pay off in meaningful dividends in service and learning.