
Tomorrow's Illiterates

DON ROBERTS

ALMOST ALL THE WRITING in library publications about the so-called "disadvantaged" has been of the pep talk variety, urging librarians onward and upward in evangelical style, often detailed with operational plans for this or that program. Librarians continue to be non-activists in a post-civil rights period, encumbered with a battery of self-conscious words and phrases like "functional illiterate," "non-reader," "cultural deprivation," etc. Librarians' print biases and educational prejudices are illustrated in documents such as *The Public Library and the City*.¹

A similar paradox can be found in Hiatt and Drennan's *Public Library Services for the Functionally Illiterate: A Survey of Practice*, in which the "illiterate" might be considered "functional" and a call is made to "use all the arts and techniques of communication, at whatever degree of complexity or simplicity is needed."² But the "techniques of communication" which follow turn out to be simple (albeit important), and media, communication theory, community organizing technique and other vital subjects go almost unmentioned.

Belaboring the problems of the past with tedious retrospective wisdom is unnecessary; however, it should be noted that there are two continuing problems of focus—print delivery systems and locations—which prevent librarians from really getting down to business. Reading about some of the pioneers of outreach approaches in recent journals, one wonders why so much is made out of variations on a theme in delivery and location. We have had mobile library service for many many years. Margaret Edwards describes her forays into poverty areas with a horse and wagon.³ Dorothy Oko and Bernard Downey⁴ detail much of the material which has been endlessly repeated in Library Service and Construction Act project articles. The fact that this or that system has covered one more housing project or nursing home and added a film

Don Roberts is Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Information and Library Studies, State University of New York at Buffalo.

projector, a phonograph and a few colorful stickers to a bookmobile is relatively meaningless except as one more pep talk or a "we-do-this-better-at-our-place" type of thing.

Until librarians can get over their value judgments about educational hierarchies and the assumption that individual librarians are subsidiary to the educational establishment (especially the publishing interests and institutional chain of command), they will simply be unable to deal with the learning problems of the unemployed/unemployable, emotionally or physically disabled, and non- or post-literate person. Our compassion for the unlearned is too often confused by simplistic definitions, and we forget that we are talking about sophisticated learners in the "global village"⁵ intermedia network sense.

The potential patron in the community is typically provided with a "list" of this or that (a major part of the delivery system). Thousands and thousands of valuable hours have been burned up on these bibliographies (something which shows up on the monthly institutional report), and so we are caught, as individuals, in the translation of the problems of society's subcultures into knowledge transfer systems. Librarians have become print-dominated, tradition-oriented persons, thereby distorting the whole process of learning and information survival in the present, and the right to read emphasis threatens to extend the process to the future.

Even the best locations and the most "McLuhanized" library vehicles will not do the job without a major change of consciousness on the part of the librarian. It has been the librarian's task to deliver less than disadvantaged service to the disadvantaged. Undoubtedly the consciousness patterns of librarians in projects have been changed. Many have learned to select materials well, in terms of real needs. Fewer have succeeded in using the materials under all the incredible conditions which exist.

The incredible conditions and how to cope with them are not generally the kind of information which is passed on at institutes. Largely overlooked and given little emphasis (especially by the federal government) is imaginative inservice training with the use of media, group dynamics, communication theory, information handling, etc. Institutes tend to pass on past attitudes, and to extend and solidify the consciousness patterns of the recent library past. This amounts to a mass conscious/subconscious dodge of the implications of the revolutionary changes needed in personal work styles and knowledge transfer techniques.

Tomorrow's Illiterates

The people who have done the most and gone through the greatest number of personal changes deny the exigencies of agency, project, and book selection meetings, list making, etc., and go to the streets. They have defied location and delivery systems and have worked with the people on a one-to-one or small group basis. Sometimes this means putting on overalls so that information can be exchanged during a work process period. Or it might mean going around at the crack of dawn with a voter registrar as she or he contacts people who are on their way to the bus. This behavior means a distancing from institutional behavior (i.e., activities which look good on monthly reports), in favor of a very different space/time life style. An article by Evelyn Geller about the Venice, California, experience touches on this.⁶

The question arises about the availability of people who are willing to hit the street and hustle. If the librarian-hustler is unwilling to live in the community and to take the risks of real personal involvement and unusual hours, then community aides should be used instead. Community aides must be a part of any location or delivery system which hopes to succeed, because community people must be on the staff anyway. *Library Issues: The Sixties* wisely avoided a section on the "disadvantaged," and it is significant that the best articles on the subject appeared in the part devoted to "identity." John Berry quotes Kenneth Clark on the problems of sensitivity and life style when working with people who are constantly reminded of their incompetence by persons working for the educational/informational establishment.⁷

Again, this identity problem relates to consciousness, to the ability to work with community people the way they are and where they are (and obviously not through their agencies, peer groups and self-styled leaders). Today this has a political base which is tricky and inescapable. An individual's identity is sorted out in a survival training sequence wherein he learns to convince and be convinced. Self-defense procedures, which might include karate, either keep one in the street or find one retreating into the institution. One either develops facility or leaves; one learns to shut his mouth and come back later. In this work, ultimate success is becoming a needed part of the intimate information network within the total community environment.

The library's very tardy entry into the post-civil rights era of public service may mean that it will not be able to progress beyond a certain point, and that the advocacy positions proposed by individual, and organized groups such as the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) may fall more and more behind because of accelerating con-

ditions and changing needs. Meanwhile, the new leadership of ALA, the SRRT and some of their divisions have kept people from dropping out of the profession, since they have been given hope that future accelerations may occur.

What will survival necessitate? Library services will have to be integrated into an intermedia, multilingual network which will offer maximum personal flexibility to the librarian. Intermedia means that librarians will not dominate services with print and print mentality, but will truly integrate their collections and services. Intermedia integration is not going to solve things automatically, but the mentality of integration and use is essential. Print and non-print will compete for space and money on an equal basis. Where neither can compete on a basis of up-to-date need (now the author is speaking of production materials), quality and pertinence, the librarians and community must originate materials to do the job. We can never assume that materials produced on national or international levels will serve the information needs of a specific community.

Our integrated collections will have to be dominated by post-literate styles and innovations, because acceleration via the McGuffee Reader route will not happen. Print will be secondary, as it is in the national education process at present. Video and audio cassettes, film cartridges, programmed instruction, cable television and radio broadcasting, the imaginative use of assumed communication channels (e.g., the telephone), and the important media of the past (16 mm. film, phonograph records, filmstrips, etc.) will enable librarians to deal with people in the present. These channels and devices will require new sensitivity and an enormous amount of hard work and commitment. They will have to be managed by young people, community aides and groups.

The primary focus will be on "hot" or directly applicable information within a community network (as opposed to ditto information on a national level, whether print or non-print). Information power has rested in the hands of the institution/establishment (networks, publishers, etc.), and it has been white power all the way. So the community information system must feature data banks (the data working within different media translations to reach different sensibilities and learning preferences); profiles (selective dissemination systems) on community leaders, groups and problems would enable rapid crisis information distribution possibilities. Alternate coverage of events and problems in

Tomorrow's Illiterates

the community would protect local people and enable them to have a voice in media manipulation.

Multilingual means that all appropriate languages will be used, including computer language, street language, English as a second language, foreign languages, the languages inherent in media production and use, and the ever-changing English language. It is imperative that county and city computer data banks be available to the individual community for problem solving, and storage and retrieval of community-based data. We can no longer allow the so-called power structure to control and dominate computer use. Disastrous results will occur in censorship and community retaliation (destruction) will result if librarians allow this to continue.

There is only one place to learn street language—on the streets. Most of the valuable survival information (ingredients of the “hot” information system) are coded in this language. The more diverse the community, the more street languages there will be. (In a place like Venice, California, there are at least five.) Some of these will defy translation into standard English for inter-community use and will have to be recorded in the original. Others will lend themselves to use in many ways. Much of what is transmitted is non-verbal, and this is included in the street-language category.

Sometimes the librarian must master a street language full of a foreign language. (A good fictionalized version of this is the gang language in Anthony Burgess's novel, *A Clockwork Orange*.⁸) In Southern California and in the Southwest in general, English is merged with Spanish (all kinds of Spanish: Sonora, New Mexico, Baja, etc.) which really requires a knowledge of Mexican Spanish to recognize.

Languages will continue to be a problem, especially as schools drop language requirements, and students assume that non-verbal and intermedia languages will bridge the gap. Library systems should provide librarians with cassette and programmed instruction learning systems and community tutors (especially to deal with idiomatic use and to meet people like merchants, clergymen and others who communicate primarily in the language).

Media languages can be learned by getting to know media producers and specialists, young people who are involved with it, hi-fi and electronic shops, communications/broadcasting people, and audiovisual supplies' distributors. This must become part of the librarian's working vocabulary if he is to survive in community knowledge transfer.

These languages will enable the librarian to cooperate with other communication and information systems. Robert Haro has suggested university and college cooperation with public libraries in establishing library branches in the ghetto.⁹ These branches could help translate academic, specialized jargon into the languages of the community and vice versa. Cooperative networks of all kinds must be accelerated in order to overcome the credibility gaps in our information-sharing and problem solving.

Panthers, Brown Berets and other radical groups can be valuable allies. They are suspicious of those who want to work with them, and rightly so. A library must prove itself in the community before it can expect any respect from these groups. The librarian will often have to choose between blocks of alliances and if he does choose the more radical, he may lose the more conservative social agencies (which in the West would be the coordinating council types). The experience of the author has shown that cooperation (everyone attends everybody else's meetings, includes them on reports, distributes flyers to them, etc.) with the agencies means a tremendous loss of time, so he would disagree with the Hiatt and Drennan collection on the importance of agencies for contacts.¹⁰ This subsidiary system can become just another bureaucratic nightmare.

The most valuable potential institutional allies are the intermedia networks in the community: newspapers (including the underground press), magazines, radio, television (which is now referred to as the "fourth branch of the government"), film-makers, theater and puppetry groups, musicians, storytellers, and people (like salesmen, organizers, mailmen and others) who traverse the community constantly. These people enable the librarian to do programming, to create information events and files, and to draw people into information nets.

Related to these allies are specialized information contacts and resource people: auto mechanics, lawyers, doctors, real estate agents, employment counselors, etc. One must know these contacts well because wasted referrals or bad information can jeopardize anything gained in the community. These people must trust the librarian's sense of fairness (e.g., he will not burden these people with unnecessary requests—such as sending them individuals merely to rid himself of them) and understand his problems. The librarian's memory must work so that he helps these cooperating people as much as possible and remembers their needs in a reciprocal way.

Tomorrow's Illiterates

Anything different causes turmoil among library personnel; therefore, anything innovative is bound to run into censorship problems. Intermedia approaches to community information power (especially black information power) must resist extensive criticism from the library establishment. When we start plugging communities into the city and county computer, we will know we are making progress, as we will when we can do alternative television documentaries on controversial events in our communities. The careful little-ventured, little-gained stances have left librarians naive in the trials of information gathering and sharing today.

Evelyn Geller's excellent editorial on the financial discrimination of public library funds points to another crucial censorship problem: "We have been predicating service on surface demand rather than real need because of our simple failure to budget *branches* on a pure *per capita* basis in terms of the *total* population they serve. As a result, we fund the poor on the assumption of benevolence, forgetting that they are *entitled* to equal library service." Geller further states that "equitable funding would force libraries to recognize that the 'demand' for information does indeed exist, though not in the terms in which we prefer to see it."¹¹ Thus, until we do "see" our funding responsibility in very different terms, the problem will not be solved.

To see it we must risk ever wider departures from our reliance on modified traditional delivery systems and locations. The Lowell Martin Chicago Public Library Survey is the best incorporation of practices which are fairly standard by now: storefronts, librarian advocates, library aides, educational themes, study centers, information and culture centers, improved service to the blind and physically handicapped, a library without walls, and a "diversity of personnel matching the diversity of its programs."¹² But the problem of which areas to concentrate on remains. Shotgun techniques (fire in all directions, and maybe the librarian will hit a patron or two) just are not going to make it. The money is not there, and librarians using this technique would not succeed if it were. (LSCA proved that in too many instances to remember.)

We are in the middle of a communications revolution which shakes the very basis of our society. Rationality and literacy are at stake, because what is "rational" and what is "literate" have changed immensely since the Second World War. Sukarno said it for the poor, and we must understand:

The motion picture industry has provided a window on the world, and the colonized nations have looked through that window and have seen the things of which they have been deprived. It is perhaps not generally realized that a refrigerator can be a revolutionary symbol—to a people who have no refrigerators. A motor car owned by a worker in one country can be a symbol of revolt to a people deprived of even the necessities of life. . . . [Hollywood] helped to build up the sense of deprivation of man's birthright, and that sense of deprivation has played a large part in the national revolutions of postwar Asia.¹³

The above holds true also in Harlem, Detroit, Watts, etc., and if we updated Sukarno's "window" to include the transistor radio and television, we might sense the categorical deprivation of the poor when they watch the sophistication of moon-to-earth information handling. The same comparison may be made for the elaborate devices used by municipal authority (police) to control and manipulate poor communities.

One of the smallest windows on the world for the poor is print (although in the past it was one of the largest). Librarians must understand that this awareness of information networks, the response to the transistor radio and color television as the major carriers of information, will not go away. Librarians will succeed or fail in terms of how they use the newer windows, especially cable television. The Martin Chicago Public Library Survey recommends the "provision of audiovisual resources in which interest now runs high."¹⁴ Gene Youngblood puts it this way: "The intermedia network quickly unearths and popularizes any new subculture [and old subculture] in its relentless drive to satisfy the collective information hunger."¹⁵ All of the minority groups are constantly recreated as subcultures by media. Their definitions are there. The question is whether the library is going to continue to allow the distortion of definition by refusing to enter the present arena of delivery.

"Information hunger" is juxtaposed to sensory and information overload. Print prejudices suggest that the poor lack information, and that this information is essentially contained in books, which, for the most part, is false. There is more than enough information around, but the poor recognize that survival and growth in their environment necessitate the control, integration and manipulation of information within that environment in the newer formats.

The senior citizens of Venice, California, did not want books (a few did, and delivery and deposit collections worked for them); they wanted an information community.¹⁶ They wanted a telephone calling network to make sure that their people were well, and so they called each other

Tomorrow's Illiterates

in a cooperative system. They wanted legal help; they wanted to share information about medical services, food bargains, places to live, etc. The library happens to be a good base for these information systems (and the telephone is crucial to the success of them). This is but a simple exercise in consciousness, in enlightened information handling.

Information events and environments (including the flyers, posters and electronic announcements to make these happen) are more important than bibliographies and print-dominated programming. Community events create information, focus and pride. Alvin Toffler stated:

Rational behavior, in particular, depends upon a ceaseless flow of data from the environment. It depends upon the power of the individual to predict, with at least fair success, the outcome of his own actions. To do this, he must be able to predict how the environment will respond to his acts. Sanity, itself, thus hinges on man's ability to predict his immediate, personal future on the basis of information fed him by the environment.¹⁷

So perhaps we can begin to understand the angst mentioned by Kenneth Clark in the John Berry editorial: "The library is another assault on their [i.e., the poor's] egos. The war on poverty cannot be waged in terms of public relations, promises and verbal concern."¹⁸ The information "war" must be waged in intermedia approaches which will complement the total environment, rather than frustrating it.

The crucial issue for librarians is consciousness and life style. Learning is in the community and with the community. The library is the environment, the total environment. As McLuhan says, "Everything is Information." "Delivery" is interpersonal, secondary and electronic. Élan, energy, and timing are the driving forces which keep work and life styles current and authentic. Our own knowledge changes to the extent that we admit the absurdity of senseless categorical words like "deprivation," or the foolish illusion of calling anyone an "illiterate" today. We are all "disadvantaged" in information transfer. Only the younger librarians realize the paradox here, and they are threatened for their awareness by what one of the Venice, California people, America Dunnavant, called "psychic murder"¹⁹ (the "gap" between levels of consciousness, especially when they are between the community and supervisor, the information environment and the more entrenched librarians). The sooner librarians face these problems and work actively to overcome them, the faster they will be able to get on with challenges and solutions which will be the models for all post-literate library service.

DON ROBERTS

Tomorrow's illiterate will not be
the man who can't read; he will be
the man who has not learned how
to learn.

Herbert Gerjuoy
Human Resources Research Organization

HOW DO YOU
KNOW WHEN
AN WHAT DOES
NOT MEAN
ANYTHING?²⁰

Tommy Morehead
Street hustler and community worker
Venice, California

References

1. For example, see the quizzical comments on the non-reader by: Cushman, Jerome. "Reflections of a Library Administrator." In Symposium on Library Functions in the Changing Metropolis, Dedham, Mass., 1963. *The Public Library and the City* (A Publication of the Joint Center for Urban Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University). Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T. Press, 1965, pp. 132-33.
2. Hiatt, Peter, and Drennan, Henry T., eds. *Public Library Services for the Functionally Illiterate: A Survey of Practice*. [n. p.], 1967, p. 9.
3. Edwards, Margaret A. *The Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts; The Library and the Young Adult*. New York, Hawthorne Books, 1969, pp. 50-62.
4. Oko, Dorothy Kuhn, and Downey, Bernard F., comps. *Library Service to Labor*. New York, Scarecrow Press, 1963.
5. McLuhan, Herbert Marshall, et al. *The Medium is the Message*. New York, Random House, 1967, p. 63.
6. Geller, Evelyn. "This is My Beat: Venice Branch of the Los Angeles Public Library," *School Library Journal*, 14:39-44, Jan. 1968.
7. Berry, John. "Identity of the Librarian: Precious Irrelevance." In Eric Moon and Karl Nyren, eds. *Library Issues: The Sixties*. New York, R. R. Bowker, 1970, pp. 295-96.
8. Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange*. New York, W. W. Norton, 1963.
9. Haro, Robert P. "College Libraries for Students," *Library Journal*, 94:2207-08, June 1, 1969.
10. Hiatt and Drennan, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-16.
11. Geller, Evelyn. "Financing Discrimination," *Library Journal*, 95:3943, Nov. 15, 1970.

Tomorrow's Illiterates

12. Chicago Public Library Survey. *Library Response to Urban Change; A Study of the Chicago Public Library*. Lowell A. Martin, survey director. Chicago, ALA, 1969, pp. 39-42.
13. McLuhan, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
14. Chicago Public Library Survey, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
15. Youngblood, Gene. *Expanded Cinema*. New York, E. P. Dutton & Co., 1970, p. 112.
16. Geller, "This is My Beat . . ." *op. cit.*, pp. 40-41.
17. Toffler, Alvin. *Future Shock*. New York, Random House, 1970, pp. 311-12.
18. Kenneth Clark quoted in: Berry, *op. cit.*, p. 296.
19. Geller, "This is My Beat . . ." *op. cit.*, p. 43.
20. Morehead, Tommy. From unpublished slips of paper in the glove compartment of a 1958 Buick sedan in Venice, California.