



Main Library Service to Users

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DESPITE WORLD URBANIZATION, with its resultant homogenization of urban problems and the institutions designed to deal with them, some institutions, by their very closeness to the people they serve, tend to resist change. In some cases the nature or tools of these institutions seem inflexible; parts of their operation seem, to outward view at least, everlasting. Most librarians have quoted and been reassured by several passages in that little pamphlet, *The Impact of Technology on the Library Building*, to the effect that "for at least the next 20 years the book will remain an irreplaceable medium of information . . . and the continued use of a central library building will still be necessary."¹ Librarians probably accept J. C. R. Lickliders's scoring of the printed page as a superb medium for the display of information, but the book as bulky and heavy, containing more information than the reader wants or can apprehend, too expensive, circulating too slowly, a poor display device, only fair in storage function, and not easily retrievable; furthermore, it makes no active contribution to organizing knowledge, indexing and abstracting. Libraries of books are even less satisfactory. To overcome this passiveness of books and pages, "a meld of library and computer is evidently required."² In the meantime libraries stubbornly remain places with books; however up to date, called by whatever seeming euphemism, public, university, and school libraries are known by their books and catalogs. No one would mistake any of these types of libraries for record stores, amusement parks, or computer centers.

Nothing then so characterizes the urban main library as its collection of books, and nothing perhaps so much limits the variety of its services to the public as the emphasis that it seemingly must continue to put on the collection, organization, retrieval, etc., of books. Whether to an individual, to a group, or to other libraries, information centers, or what-

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ever, its distinctive contribution and mode have to do with information in a popularly recognizable form, print or non-print. In an elaborate investigation of its users, the San Francisco Public Library discovered that 79 percent of those questioned gave the use of funds to add new materials to the collection as a first and second priority, expansion of book collections in turn being far ahead of expansion of audiovisual materials, rare and special collections, or periodicals.³

As Lowell Martin points out in his study of the Chicago Public Library, "Oddly enough, public libraries do not customarily maintain statistics that show how many different people use them and who these people are."⁴ Earlier studies often gathered such information only as part of overall examinations of public library systems; the survey of the Chicago Public Library, conducted by Joeckel and Carnovsky in 1940, is a case in point.⁵ Only lately do there seem to have been surveys expressly designed to compare or contrast users of branch or suburban libraries with those of the urban main library. Besides the two surveys of San Francisco and Chicago already noted, Mary Lee Bundy gathered information about library patrons in the Baltimore, Maryland-Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.⁶ Nelson Associates, Inc., have submitted a report of methods and procedures to be used during phases II and III of the Detroit Metropolitan Library Project for measuring patron use and costs of patron services at the main library.⁷ The North York Public Library (Ontario) conducted an "exploratory survey of users" in November and December of 1970,⁸ and intends to extend the survey to non-users. Coinciding in time with the North York survey, the Metropolitan Toronto Library Board conducted a survey of Metropolitan Central Library users, and then, in conjunction with a survey of sites for a new central building, a supplementary user survey some six months later.⁹ Analyzed, with the help of a computer, by a systems expert, and related to the findings of the survey of users of the borough of North York Library—the borough is a constituent part of Metropolitan Toronto—the survey reveals some interesting and valuable insights into the relationships of users of a large central library in contrast to a large suburban system. So far, however, such investigations are useful almost solely to the systems conducting them—they have not as yet been correlated in order to determine whether there is any pattern, national or universal, to the use of main libraries vis-à-vis other public libraries. Perhaps the International Association of Metropolitan City Libraries (INTAMEL) will add the subject to its list of projects.

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But the urban main library relates to far more than the public library situation, and there is no doubt but that as main libraries become (as they inevitably must), at the very least, regional library centers, they will become responsible, above all, for research to make the planning of large and complicated operations possible.¹⁰ John F. Anderson emphasizes the lack of basic research needed to make librarianship a true profession, and the lack even of market research needed for decision-making for library development.¹¹ Obviously every large urban main library would be the better for being contained in a research design such as that prepared for *A Research Design for Library Cooperative Planning and Action in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area*.¹² However, obtaining the funding required for this type of program—even if less than 1 percent of the total annual budgets for libraries in the area (for Washington, D.C., the estimated cost is \$559,000-\$691,000, the estimated time is 61-67 months, the estimated man-days are 2,050-2,200), and even if considerably lower than allocations for research made by business and government—becomes very doubtful, so unused are libraries, especially public libraries, to devoting any percentage at all of their income to research and development. Perhaps a consortium of libraries could set priorities among such programs as the nine proposed for study in Washington, D.C. One priority, for instance, might be an overall survey of user needs for programs and services.¹³

Nearly every main library, of course, is in a sense one of a consortium, even if not more than the center of the local city system; many are regional centers of one kind or another; a few, particularly in New York, have been declared state resource centers; and occasionally one acts also as a university library or as a departmental library for a university (as in Amsterdam). Frequently, particularly in England and particularly in the area of business and technology, the public library joins with libraries and other organizations to extend both the services it can give and the publics it can serve—examples include Liverpool and District Scientific, Industrial and Research Library Council (LADSIRLAC) in Liverpool, Sheffield Interchange Organization (SINTO) in Sheffield, Hull Technical Interloan Scheme (HULTIS) in Hull and the Manchester Public Library which is closely identified with the educational precinct in the core of the city. Main libraries are able to play important roles of these kinds for at least two reasons: (1) they have large, in many cases special, collections gathered with a view to satisfying as many needs as possible of as many individuals and groups as possible, in the context of large, varied, and increasingly sophisticated

populations; and (2) they have developed a core of knowledgeable and specialized staff capable of meeting endlessly varied needs on adequate bibliographical levels. Nevertheless, Godfrey Thompson has recently been constrained to lament the falling out of favor, in Britain, of public libraries with newly qualified librarians. Small colleges and special libraries attract the most. Accepting the cachet in being a specialist, one must accept also "sadly, that the public library has failed to make it clear that it offers employment to many specialists."¹⁴ Thompson uses as examples the Shakespeare Library in Birmingham, the Manchester Technical Library, the City Business Library and the Guildhall Library in London. Innumerable collections in central libraries all over Britain, the United States, and in all countries where public libraries exist and flourish could have been cited.

Special collections imply special publics, and although urban main libraries vary widely in their specialist attainments, circulating functions, reference and resource roles—from the heavy circulating aspect of the main libraries of Edmonton, San Francisco, Queens Borough, and most German cities to the almost exclusively reference nature of those of Glasgow and New York—the tendency would seem to be inevitable for general collections to become subject divided and specialized, and for home reading to be more and more taken care of by local or branch libraries. Perhaps particularly in the United States and Canada, borrowing for home use is so identified with the image of the public library that attempts to convert gradually from a lending to a reference institution (as with the Metropolitan Toronto Central Library) may meet a great deal of opposition and resentment, despite the fact that everyone, of course, is equally outraged if the book he wants has been loaned to someone else.

Cities or conurbations in America, Asia and elsewhere are already the most complex environments developed for man and seem fated to become ever larger, more complex, and almost impossible to govern or finance. In any case, their institutions cannot become simpler, and still be relevant. Particularly in the case of the public library, which is responsible for service to the entire community, this increasing complexity of the environment, along with an increased understanding of the multifarious nature of the individuals and groups that make up populations, an acceptance of responsibility to satisfy the needs of all elements and strata of society, and an inability to obtain adequate funding, present library administrators with the types of nearly insuperable problems that are also being faced by mayors and city managers. On

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the one hand, there is the increased awareness that the community includes the undereducated and the underprivileged, the aged and the handicapped; on the other, there is an increasing elitism among the publics of especially the large public library, encouraged by a decline in magisterial teaching and the open university approach, and by the emphasis generally on continuing education to update training and knowledge.

In July of 1971, this writer conducted a survey of large urban main library resources and services.¹⁵ While returns were substantial enough to generalize only in the cases of the United States (thirty-four respondents) and Britain (thirteen respondents), all libraries reporting stated that they consider themselves as serving the general public; they also consider that they serve a variety of special publics, whether or not they have special or subject collections. National differences are most obvious in the stated service to ethnic communities—about 35 percent of British libraries and about 80 percent of American libraries offer such service. Despite the long history some public libraries have of service to the blind and handicapped, particularly in the United States and England, the fact is that in many countries public library services to both these groups, not to speak of the larger and less well defined group of the underprivileged, are in a primitive state. Perhaps chief among the reasons are the ignorance on the part of public library staff of the nature of these publics, the difficulty of reaching them with reading materials, the cost of such service, and the resultant necessity, therefore, of the central library supplying it, if it is supplied at all. Once a public library system goes beyond the business of supplying books to readers, it immediately gets out of the very economic business at which it is expert; and the particular activity or program must be centralized in order to be kept reasonably inexpensive and yet moderately defensible.

The most prominent of the audiovisual forms, the 16 mm. film, is still far from composing a very substantial part of the collection or budget of most public libraries. Outside the United States and Canada it is not even a part of public library service. Even in these countries, collections seldom number above several thousand titles, and because of the obvious mechanical difficulties of projection, cleaning, repair, and having personnel with film expertise, film service is usually restricted to a very few points in any system, if not only to the central library itself. An exception may be Metropolitan Toronto, where the various boroughs stock and circulate films, and the Metropolitan Central Library,

in its search for a unique role, is struggling to divest itself of direct service to the public and devote itself to a back-up service by means of teletype communication and daily delivery, through its greater stocks of films, cleaning and repair service, emergency loans of projectors and screens, preview and consultant service, workshops and exhibits of new equipment, cooperation with schools through educational and cable television, and other newer forms of audiovisual development. As might be expected, a much greater proportion of American than British libraries provide film programs in the central building.

With respect to newer audiovisual forms, only about 25 percent of American libraries responding to the survey mentioned above¹⁵ reported any activity with respect to video tapes; no other libraries reported using them, although a couple of Canadian libraries are experimenting in this field. Very few libraries are involved in television production or radio broadcasts, although the Louisville (Kentucky) Free Public Library is active in radio, and the Denver (Colorado) Public Library reports a television production area. Practically all urban main libraries, at least in the United States and Great Britain, report the possession of reproduction equipment of some kind and of microform readers. Surprisingly, perhaps, less than one-half of the American libraries report that they provide photographic services, while two-thirds of the British libraries provide this public service.

Practically all major central libraries collect and service slides, photos, pictures, prints, maps, manuscripts, phonograph records, and microforms. Based on the survey mentioned above,¹⁵ more American (two-thirds) than British libraries stock audio tapes; more British (one-half) than American appear to collect posters. Almost without exception, all public libraries everywhere collect in all forms everything they can about their communities, and they catalog and index these materials in great detail. In some cases the community extends to the national scene, and even beyond: in Edinburgh where, in addition to the Edinburgh Library, the Central Library also houses the magnificent Scottish Library; in Toronto the Metropolitan Toronto Central Library has a notable collection of Canadiana; and in Cape Town the South African Public Library is indefatigable in tracking down Africanana.

Most large urban libraries have auditoria available to the public; a few, such as Gothenburg, Johannesburg, Metropolitan Toronto, and a number of English libraries have full-fledged theaters; and even fewer sponsor the kind of ambitious repertory season that Manchester (En-

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gland) does. Fewer libraries still have concert rooms (with or without such instruments as grand pianos), art studio facilities, or the kind of art gallery operated by the London (Ontario) Public Library—art galleries of this sort appear most commonly in British libraries. Most libraries have substantial exhibit areas, although few have exhibits, permanent or otherwise, permeating all areas and departments to the extent of the Liverpool Public Libraries' central building.

With respect to what might be considered amenities, about one-half of the large libraries in the U.S. and Great Britain provide study carrels; between one-quarter and one-third provide typing areas; and very few British libraries provide lounge areas while about three-fourths of American ones do. A few in each case provide public restaurants and/or book stores.

About one-third of libraries responding to the survey¹⁵ in both Great Britain and the United States report the use of computer or data processing equipment, the order of frequency of use being technical services, circulation control, listings, and communication. Communication, apart from the mails, is dealt with in almost all libraries by telephone and delivery vehicle; about one-half the libraries use teleprinter; and a very few libraries indicate the use of telefacsimile.

Practically all libraries reporting indicate that the central library is used by other elements of the system for books and other materials, displays, preparation of booklists and catalogs; more American than British libraries appear to consider the central library as having a principal responsibility in the provision of systems functions, publications, and brochures. The publication activities of public libraries vary widely, from the more scholarly catalogs produced by, for example, the public libraries in Toronto and Edinburgh, and the scholarly histories of such public libraries as those in Johannesburg and Boston, to the plethora of attractive lists and brochures produced by such libraries as those of Camden and Westminster in England, the Enoch Pratt in Baltimore, and Stuttgart and Dusseldorf in Germany.

Most urban main libraries are seen as providing coordinating functions with respect to staff, services, facilities, and materials. However, although a few, like Boston's, have had a strong corps of coordinators for a very long time, most central libraries seem only recently to be extending the functions of their staff to supervision, guidance, consulting, coordination, etc., of the services of their system as a whole—that is, changing the development of their staff from a collections to a services function. Few major libraries conduct research. In cases where re-

search is carried on, it is done mostly by library staffs; consultants and specialists are sometimes used for special projects.

More than half of the main libraries reporting are centers of public library networks only; the rest report including such diverse holdings as those of schools, community colleges, special libraries, universities, community information centers and agencies. In some urban public libraries, such as those in Philadelphia, Metropolitan Toronto, and Dublin, a union catalog will reflect the holdings of other than public libraries and provide a special service to publishers, book stores, writers—as well as to other libraries.

This panoramic view of urban main libraries indicates a very great complexity of both collections and services. It seems that when the libraries increase seriously beyond the capacity of their physical plants to provide adequate space for materials and staff, both collections and services deteriorate. There are many examples of greatly renewed vigor brought to whole library systems by new central libraries, e.g., in Buffalo, Gothenburg, Edmonton, Bradford, or by additions and renovations, e.g., in Louisville and Detroit. Further knowledge will be gained when the results of changes of plant are known regarding Washington, D.C., Houston, Boston, Glasgow, Birmingham, Cologne, Hannover.

The users of a central public library are likewise complex. For one thing, they are not always visible—instead of bodies they may be disembodied voices or messages over telephone or teletype, from groups, organizations, agencies, and other libraries.

More and more, and despite the inexorable growth of book and non-book materials, efforts of staff may have to be diverted from the servicing of collections to a knowledge of resources outside, as well as inside, the library. More energies must go into the identification of the central library's place in the information network, which includes an ever-growing number and variety of institutions of all kinds, including commercial. Staff will have to take on roles as coordinators and consultants—or a parallel staff exercise these functions alongside the regular staff more traditionally occupied with the information-user interface.

Changes in the nature and forms of information and in the character and goals of users make necessary a continuing examination of the traditional information-user interface. This is particularly necessary for the large institution which tends to lose sight of its public or which tries to fit its users into its already established categories of operation, i.e., Dewey or LC classification, or whatever. In a world of continuing revolution, one of our most conservative and inflexible institutions, the

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large public library, must try to design itself to conserve and preserve, while at the same time, if not encouraging social change, acting so as not to thwart it. Such a design or redesign program will require extensive changes in the service philosophy of public libraries everywhere, and not least in that vital system component, the urban main library.

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