Evaluation of Processing Services

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For the purposes of this discussion, processing services are defined as including acquisitions, cataloging and classification, and the physical preparation and servicing of library materials for use. Like all other library activities, processing services can only be evaluated in any real sense in terms of their efficiency, economy, and speed in contributing to the ability of the library to meet the needs of its present and potential clienteles. In practice, however, we make the basic assumption that acquiring materials, providing access to their intellectual content for clientele and staff, and providing for their physical location and use are desirable means to these ends.

What we try to determine by evaluation of these services, then, is whether we are acquiring rapidly and at reasonable cost those materials which have been determined to be most useful; whether we are providing the kinds of access to their intellectual content required in the best possible way within a reasonable balance of costs; and whether we are similarly meeting the requirements for physical access to and use of those and other materials.

More and more we have come to the realization that to serve present and potential clienteles properly we need to make our concept of the required services and the means for accomplishing them—and, hence, our techniques for their evaluation—go beyond the individual library.

The concepts of networks and networking now emerging make greater demands upon the technical or processing services than ever before if library reader or user services are to be provided the physical materials and the access to them they require.

In the narrow sense, there are a number of ways of evaluating—and improving—the performance of specific processing procedures deriving from operations research, scientific management, accounting, systems analysis, and other business, management, and administrative techniques. It is important to note that these are general techniques

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applicable to many types of operations and are by no means peculiarly library-oriented. Indeed, the most effective descriptions and discussions of such techniques are more usually to be found outside of the literature of librarianship proper, although the literature does contain some excellent descriptions of their application to particular library problems. These general techniques are certainly of very great importance as applied to library operations. This is especially true of processing services which may be largely clerical in nature, like much of acquisitions and preparation work; or to areas which, like much of cataloging, may have a high proportion of the intellectual effort they require either centralized or highly systematized so that within a given library most parts of the task may be reduced to clerical or subprofessional routine.

These evaluative techniques from outside librarianship properly focus upon the specifics of job analysis and task performance. Valuable and important as they are, however, they will not be the approach to evaluation and improvement of processing services discussed here. Appreciation of them and their application in libraries seems well established and growing in effectiveness.

Nor will this article follow a basic pattern quite customary for Library Trends. That is, it is not intended to be a picture of the current state-of-the-art derived from a careful and exhaustive survey of the literature of the evaluation of processing services. Currently it seems appropriate to suggest a somewhat different approach to the evaluation of processing services which is intended to be somewhat broader in scope and to supplement, rather than supplant, either the use of general management techniques for task and performance evaluation or intensive study of the relatively recent literature of the technical services for evaluative techniques. This is so because it seems possible now to discern through—and perhaps because of—the stress and travail which have affected us over the past few years, a kind of consolidation or consensus of informed professional opinion about some aspects of librarianship, particularly about the processing services as defined above, both in broad matters and in many matters of detail which have broad implications.

Many of these ideas, concepts or procedures on which there is such consensus are not new, of course. What is new is a kind of professional awareness and sensitivity to the everchanging role of the library and perhaps a sense of wider professional responsibility.

Thus it would seem possible to take a wider view of evaluation than usual in this article. It would seem possible to take the position that
there are at present certain concepts, techniques, methodologies, and
goals for the processing services on which there is truly substantial
informed professional agreement. And it would now seem possible to
suggest that a basic technique for the evaluation of processing services
in libraries would be to determine areas in which there is such a broad
professional consensus as to methods, procedures, concepts, and goals
and to examine the extent to which a given library is applying them.

This technique has its dangers, of course, as all such techniques do.
Not only may the received, informed professional opinion of one
generation be seen as fallacious by the next; but also in applying such a
method it is imperative to keep in mind such clichés as “circumstances
alter cases.” Clichés or truisms may be deadly accurate upon occasion.
The proposed technique also has its advantages, however. It by far is
easier and cheaper to apply than the sophisticated detailed evaluative
methods derived from other disciplines, and it is more likely to result in
gross improvements rather than in relatively minor ones. Ralph R.
Shaw enjoyed pointing out that the way to go was to seek first those areas
where the most improvement could be achieved at the least cost.

Indeed, many of the most sophisticated techniques from other disci-
plines may not really be very suitable for application in just those areas
where libraries are on the verge of the greatest possible advances in
services, if the proper evaluative techniques are applied. These tech-
niques perhaps encourage a view of the trees rather than of the forest.
For some circumstances, libraries may have more need for a crowbar to
tear down dilapidated structures than of tweezers for delicate repair.
Many of the more sophisticated techniques, too, are relatively difficult
to apply—at least within the very libraries which may be most in need of
improvement. It is easier to wield the crowbar than the tweezers.

The smaller library cannot do time-and-motion studies even of the
methodology of one procedure, let alone of comparative meth-
odologies and types of equipment. Often, because of the pressure of
work and the fact that each staff member must carry out a wide variety
of tasks (all of the tasks, obviously, in a one-person library) it is not
possible even to keep an accurate record of the manhours spent on
given tasks.

Even for these libraries, however, it is possible to have—or to gain,
through visits, meetings, the literature, or more formal professional
education—an awareness of the broad and growing areas where con-
sensus exists, and the means to use these as a self-evaluative standard.
There is reason, as we shall see, to believe that this technique can be just
as valuable to the larger libraries, which can also have the further
arsenal of sophisticated methodologies at their disposal.

The procedures, methods, or concepts on whose effectiveness and desirability there is informed professional consensus and which may be used as a means of evaluation of processing services are neither authoritarian pronouncements, nor obiter dicta, nor everlasting truths. Librarians are, by and large, an interested, progressively disputatious, and self-expressive lot. There is probably no substantive concept or technical question involving processing services which is not the subject of debate in or out of the literature and on which Shavian or Gore-like thunder has not been heard. Consider, for example, recent discussion of subject headings as assigned by the Library of Congress, or of the International Standard Bibliographic Description (ISBD).

Indeed, perhaps one flaw in the literature is that it tends to take the existence of massive informed professional consensus on some matters too much for granted, at least in the journal literature, while much of the monographic literature may reflect outmoded practice. Then, too, the matters surrounding consensus are mutable, rapidly developing, and always contingent, and the journal literature may reflect the contingencies even as it largely assumes the existence of the consensus.

It would seem to this viewer of the contemporary scene that informed consensus exists in such broad and basic areas affecting evaluation of processing services as: standardization of bibliographic and cataloging practice; networking—access, interloan, acquisitions; the desirability of larger units of service for processing services; acquisitions, cataloging, and processing procedures and policies for nonprint or nonbook media; and utilization of processing services personnel. Broad and basic as these areas are, the consensus in regard to many aspects of them extends really to matters of quite explicit detail. And, while the focus of the areas of agreement is, as it should be, upon increasing quality and extent of services to users and to library staff serving users, there is involved agreement upon methodologies, that these methodologies are conceived in terms of economies of operation, and that these methodologies are suitable as touchstones for evaluation.

By examining a few examples, perhaps it can be determined whether consensus exists as to a particular concept or practice, and whether evaluation of practice in a particular library in terms of that consensus is likely to prove economic to the library and valuable to its clienteles. For example:

1. The use of standardized, externally provided catalog cards or information without change is significantly cheaper and better than
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either original cataloging and classification or the attempt to review, edit, or adapt externally provided copy or cards. A corollary to this might be that the statement is true even if it involves a basic change in a library’s cataloging policy, or classification, or both.

There are, of course, exceptions to this generalization and problems for users which might result from its application in some cases. For example, extremely brief in-house cataloging of fiction may be both cheaper and faster in some school and public library situations. Some of the subject heading practices of the Library of Congress have been outdated or severely criticized for other reasons, although this situation is rapidly improving. Cataloging coverage of some forms of materials or of some subject areas is slow, or insufficient, or both.

Nonetheless, not only does the generalization seem acceptable as representing a consensus, but it would appear likely that a majority of the general libraries (as opposed to those with narrowly specialized subject interests) not now using outside cards or copy are those which would encounter comparatively few problems in doing so. This is particularly true since recent enormous improvements in LC coverage, greatly broadened prompt publication of cataloging information in various forms, and the substantial and growing acceptance of Cataloging in Publication. Progress in all of these areas, as well as LC’s recent and excellent changes in covering juvenile books (of special importance to school and public libraries), will undoubtedly be even more rapid as the sources of cataloging information (especially LC) receive more and more positive support in their continuing efforts to raise quality and coverage.

Perhaps too much space has been devoted to this first example, but all of the examples to be discussed here are but samples by which librarians may chose their own consensuses to use for evaluative purposes for their own processing services. It may be worthwhile to mention that none of the recent rather vigorous informed professional criticism of, e.g., LC subject heading practice or of the ISBD has suggested or implied that there is any alternative to using LC cataloging copy. Rather, it has been suggesting change and improvement of the central service, while assuming the consensus discussed above.

2. For school and public libraries in particular, and for many other types of libraries as well, centralized or cooperative acquisitions, cataloging, and processing, or the use of commercial cataloging and processing, are cheaper and better than the alternative of trying to carry out these tasks on the individual small library level.

In recent years libraries have made great progress toward this type
of centralization. It is probably safe to say, however, that even where centralization of these functions has been carried out there is still far too much uneconomic individual tailoring of the product in ways which do not really contribute to serving the user. It is almost certainly also valid that consolidation of acquisitions, cataloging, and processing from individual school and public libraries into larger units which are not only more economic but also more capable of maintaining standards of quality would constitute, for librarianship as a whole, a truly giant step forward.

In recent years, libraries seem (rather belatedly) to have suddenly discovered that the kind of administrative centralization which removes a library from its constituency and from community policy formation is not a good thing. It is significant, however, that even in those areas in which it was most evident that community and library identification had been most neglected and was consequently rather vigorously restored, all parties have usually taken it for granted that processing services decentralization is not required to assure community participation or control at the local level and by the community to be served. Indeed, centralization of general processing services may make it possible for local staff to provide tailored information access to meet community needs which would not be possible if every item is locally cataloged, classified, and prepared for the shelves.

3. For many years now, as reflected in various library standards and in the literature generally, there has been substantial consensus that the acquisition of materials to meet user needs should not be limited by form of publication. Indeed, the literature has laid increasing stress upon the need to acquire, provide proper bibliographic access, and proper processing and servicing facilities for films, filmstrips, audio and video tapes, and other nonprint media for an increasingly media-conscious and media-using culture.

It is worth emphasizing that here the consensus is, and has been, that libraries should acquire needed materials regardless of medium within any given budget for materials, not that they wait for a specific budget increase for the purpose of adding another form of publication to the collections. While this consensus certainly does not mean that we ignore the relative cost effectiveness to users of any form of publication, it would certainly imply that almost all libraries (with some school libraries, in particular, as most honorable exceptions) should have far more quantity and variety of nonprint media than is in fact the case. Three film strips do not show an audiovisual awareness. While important strides are being made in this area, especially in bibliographic and
cataloging control, there is so marked a difference between the consensus and the holdings of libraries that it is evident that there is a long way to go, as the crudest of statistical surveys can indicate.

Difficulties up until now have probably arisen, at least partially, because of the lack of adequate listing and reviewing of materials, and of problems in obtaining cataloging information. Even if librarians and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology differ on minor aspects of cataloging, they have come closer and closer together. It is also clear that the bibliographic and cataloging services, represented by LC and the R.R. Bowker Company, in particular, have been willing to lead the way, and that with more support from the field these deficiencies will no longer exist to serve as excuses, rather than reasons, for librarianship matching word to deed. In this case the handwriting is on the wall—go media, or lose out. It is hoped librarians will match action to consensus.

For at least one nonbook (but not exactly nonprint) medium it is evident that the larger research libraries are now totally committed because there was no other way to go. Both with the growth of technological capability and the growth of libraries, microforms have become of tremendous importance. There is evidence to support the conclusion that larger research libraries are now acquiring more than one-third of the titles they add to their collections each year in microform. There is also abundant evidence to support the conclusion that, because of the historical pattern of growth of the production and collecting of microforms, many libraries provide intellectual access to these holdings far inferior to that provided for printed books. The situation is already a difficult one, but projection of existing trends coupled with the growth rate of microform items in major collections would indicate a difficult future indeed for the user. Luckily, growing awareness of the problem—and of the consensus in regard to bibliographic control of these items—seems to be leading to productive solutions as some of the best of library researchers and administrators have recently tackled the problems involved. It would be a happy circumstance if one could be so sanguine about some print forms, like government documents, where there is similar consensus but less indication of positive action—even though the Government Printing Office has recently sent out a questionnaire asking if it should adopt Cataloging-in-Publication.

4. A fourth matter upon which the profession in general has agreed with continuing and growing emphasis and which has a special application to the processing services concerns utilization of personnel.
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Crudely, it may be concluded that it is wise to avoid the use of professionally educated staff to carry out clerical or subprofessional tasks such as typing, filing, searching, or comparing LC cards or copy to books.

Failure to use personnel wisely is occasioned, of course, by many factors, many of which are the result of historical patterns of library growth and administration. Small service units which could profitably combine into larger administrative or cooperative units often do not have sufficient staff to permit specialization, so that administrative patterns have forced limitations on the economic utilization of personnel. This pattern is changing, but greater recognition of our basic professional agreements on both personnel utilization and larger units of service could help accelerate the trend.

The use of professionally trained staff for tasks for which professional training is not required is, unfortunately not, limited to small administrative units, although there is no lack of precedent to indicate what might be accomplished by a more proper allocation of tasks. Proper use of staff is not simply a matter of economy—it is also, and quite importantly, a matter of morale, and a matter of morale for clerical and subprofessional staff as well as for librarians. Here, too, it is possible to discern cheering trends arising, in large part from a new awareness of past discrimination in library employment and promotion, and a growing determination to rectify this situation which has led to overall examination of staffing patterns. Here, too, consensus on mutually related and compatible goals helps to provide incentive for evaluation.

5. In matters of cooperative acquisitions, interlibrary loan, and those other activities which may be grouped under the current umbrella term of networking, it is evident that libraries are making considerable and effective progress, just as is true of a number of the other areas discussed here. It is equally true, however, that libraries are quite far from the situation in which there is a true network of nationwide resources in which each library unit aggressively and positively carries out a program of informing its users that it will locate or get any required information item for its users within a reasonable time, and carries out that program; yet there is a truly substantial consensus that this is the need and the goal. The technical gadgetry which sometimes seems preoccupying—facsimile transmitters, teletype networks, and computer terminal on-line querying—is both a lesser problem and of lesser importance than figuring out how to increase librarians’ own
It is indeed a fact that there are very serious historical, financial, political, and administrative barriers to the kind of full library cooperation in service to the user that one can say has been a consensus—or at least an ideal—of American librarianship since its first stirrings of professional consciousness in 1854. Certainly, we can see current growth in the political and financial barriers. Despite all this, the greatest barrier of all to achieving this kind of cooperation in service to the user is probably not financial, political, or administrative, but within ourselves as librarians.

Librarians are striving to overcome their difficulties and have made progress. The library card valid anywhere in the United States is still a dream, even though it has been achieved in England, but the card valid in at least all public libraries within a county or even a state is not a dream, but a growing reality. If each library continually evaluates itself and what it is doing against the consensus—or ideal, in this case—of what library networks should be, much may be achieved over the next decade.

At any given time in library history generally, or in the history of library processing or technical services in particular, some one type or several types of libraries have led the way for others. It is the unity of librarians across types of libraries which has enabled the United States to retain a position of leadership in library services since the nineteenth century. It was U.S. public libraries who pioneered reference services, which is why U.S. university libraries, despite all the apparent deficiencies, provide better reference services than academic institutions anywhere else in the world except in those countries which have learned from the United States. Public library systems—and our national library—pioneered in the centralization and standardization of cataloging procedures. In the decade just past, it was the special library which led in an alertness to reader needs and user services—many derived from and dependent upon depth in processing services—which hopefully is influencing the growing awareness of the need for such alert, progressive, and aggressive services today in both universities and local communities. It is the information center which has pioneered the new technology of processing services, linking it, hopefully indissolubly, with greater depth of information access and greater user services. The school library indisputably holds the lead today in welding all forms of media to meet user needs—a position of leader-
ship for which other types of libraries have yet to give due credit and the sincere flattery of imitation.

All of these advances indicate that better reader services are dependent upon better processing services—indeed, the case should be made that processing services are reader services, and that the service which does not exist to benefit the user has no place in libraries. To the extent that libraries can organize information, acquire needed materials, locate materials, and make materials easy to access and use, to that extent processing services can arm the reader services librarian with what he or she needs to aid the user.

The basic thrust, then, of this article is that librarians have derived sufficient substantial consensus on desirable goals and procedures to serve, at many levels, as an evaluative technique for individual libraries. While this evaluative technique may lack the precision of other methods, it is both easily applicable by almost any library, and leads directly toward attainment of professional goals. It is not a procedure which may lead us, in Ralph Shaw's words, to do efficiently those things which it is possible we should not be doing at all. In the long run, it is a service-oriented outlook which should lead librarians to make use of any technical device which helps them to give service, but involves no romance with the device for the device's sake. The technique promises rapid and positive results without either the pretense of being a panacea or the denial of the validity of a whole range of other evaluative techniques.

The processing services are on the threshold of an enormously promising period, difficult as some of the short-term problems may be. It seems certainly safe to say that technical capabilities are currently available beyond present program ability to exploit them. Librarians have a comparatively clear idea of where they want to go, and a remarkably deep professional agreement on goals, whatever surface differences may exist. Librarians have the ability to consolidate present gains and simultaneously to apply new techniques developed by information and media centers with a new kind of social purpose and awareness, broader and deeper than the period of progress limited largely to scientific and technical—as differentiated from social—needs. Circumstances certainly make possible productive evaluation and massive improvement of processing services to meet user needs. Whether we succeed or not is up to librarians who are involved in the processing services for the sake of serving the existing and potential users of library services.