The Metropolitan Matrix of Libraries and Users

GUY GARRISON

The concentration of the population of the United States in its metropolitan areas is so marked that it is hard to separate any discussion of library users, services, or problems into metropolitan and nonmetropolitan categories. The 1970 census of population, for example, revealed that 70 percent of U.S. residents live in the standard metropolitan statistical areas; that the rate of population growth in metropolitan areas between the 1960 census and 1970 census was twice the general U.S. rate; that nearly all of this growth was in the suburban areas around the central cities; that 78 percent of all Blacks lived in central cities, and that all of this metropolitan population was concentrated in less than one percent of the land area of the country.¹

Whether one views the future of America in terms of a continuation of the trend toward dense concentration of population in major urban areas (twelve areas in 1970 had over 2,000,000 residents) or a reverse movement of population into the far reaches of exurbia and back to the small towns and cities, it is clear that the metropolitan area is here to stay for the immediate future.

All of the challenges identified in the cities in the 1950s and 1960s will continue in the 1970s and beyond—unplanned growth, depletion of resources, racial tensions, crime, unemployment, housing shortages, the necessity for changing the orientation of institutions such as schools, churches, libraries and museums. Depending on which pundit one reads, the prospect for the metropolitan area is either stability and balance or a deterioration of quality of life which exceeds anything now considered tolerable. Commentators agree, however, that information as a commodity will be increasingly important in the decades ahead and that libraries, as one of the major links in the information chain, will play an increasingly important role.

In considering the metropolitan matrix of users and library services,

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¹ Guy Garrison is Dean, Graduate School of Library Science, Drexel University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
it is impossible, in a single article, to achieve precision and completeness either in identifying all user groups or in describing their use of libraries and/or information. Any such attempt, even for a single metropolitan area, at dividing the population into user subgroups based, for example, on demographic characteristics (age, sex, occupational status, educational level) and at constructing a matrix of types of user and types of service will fail. Any given individual can be a user or potential user of so many information sources and belong to so many population subgroups that no single categorization will be acceptable.

The approach used in this article will be to concentrate on the user and his needs, not on the institutions and services built to respond to his needs, in the belief that an information delivery system cannot be built, or an existing one evaluated, unless the information needs of people are the starting point.

An effort will be made to characterize some of the research on user needs (as it applies to the subject of this issue) and to point out some of the major gaps. Representative research studies and action research projects that have special significance for urban libraries will be cited and, to a degree, described. With this background, a few generalizations will be attempted on a subject which is probably not amenable to generalization—the user and his library needs in the metropolitan setting.

Inevitably, discussion of this subject will reflect personal points of view and personal biases. The major ones are listed here and the reader is forewarned:

1. The future of libraries depends on less attention to the containers of information (books, etc.) and more attention to information itself—not just for the student, the professional or the specialist, but for the total community.

2. People, metropolitan dwellers or not, have a multitude of information and library needs—both occupational and nonoccupational—that are not met within existing information systems. Libraries constitute only one part—a minor part—of such systems.

3. A user approach will show that library response is even more limited than we like to admit in meeting the informational needs of people. Libraries do poorly in supplying the documents, and even less well in supplying the facts, the interpretation and the guidance.

4. The accepted institutional goals of libraries (for instance, the research collection goal of large public libraries) are often at
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variance with the objectives of the people who use these libraries. A strong corrective, in the form of user studies, is needed in the setting of goals.

The literature of user studies is extensive but not comprehensive. A number of landmark studies exist and a number of methodologies have been developed. Many of the best user studies are concerned with the user of scientific and technical information in job-related activities in research and/or academic settings. Fewer are concerned with the library use or information-seeking behavior of the general public. Too many user studies, both of technical and general groups, limit themselves to library use alone instead of seeing libraries as only one of many possible sources for reading material and information.

The corpus of user studies has been surveyed and summarized in a number of fairly recent studies, and extensive bibliographies exist. Among the most useful are the articles in the Annual Review of Information Science and Technology, the bibliographies in works by Zweizig, Warner, Bates, Grundt and the reports done for the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science.

Although many recent user studies concentrate on urban residents, others that lack an announced urban focus are equally applicable. Most user needs are not distinctive to urban areas, although some may be peculiarly heightened there. While patterns of organization and of fiscal support for information and libraries may be greatly affected by metropolitan versus nonmetropolitan location, user needs are less apt to be so affected.

Examination of the literature on user studies confirms the impression that, despite some excellent studies with provocative research findings, there exists a shortage of data on the library and information needs of urban residents in all the complexity of subgroups and overlapping populations. The general needs of people in urban areas have been the focus of many library demonstrations and action research projects, but they are in general less well documented and less well researched than are the specialized information needs of distinct small groups. The best studies methodologically tend to be restricted to small and carefully delimited audiences.

The literature reveals many studies on the information needs and behavior of characteristically metropolitan subgroups who might be expected to be heavy users of libraries—the well-educated, those with higher incomes, those in managerial and professional positions (especially those in research or academic jobs), and students. Studies, however, even of these groups, focus largely on occupational and
school-related needs and do not explore as carefully other nonoccupational but equally important information needs.

There is a thriving literature on information use by scientists and researchers, well documented in the *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*. These studies range widely over the entire spectrum of the information system—from the invisible college to browsing use of libraries. The studies reveal many deficiencies, including resistance by such professionals to actual use of libraries.

Fewer studies relate to the use of technical information by laymen and practitioners (as opposed to researchers and teachers)—probably because the people doing the research are themselves academicians and researchers and turn to their own peer groups for subjects. Research on the use of information by scientific and technical persons is of limited applicability in the study of more general library users. Relevance and recall studies, for instance, mean little in the context of the public library where much of the use is not task-related but recreational. The lack of recognized output measures makes it difficult to design a valid research project. The very multiplicity of audiences for reading and information services in the metropolitan area confounds the researcher. The wealth of available resources and the wide-ranging habits of metropolitan library users makes precise study difficult.

As compared to use studies in the scientific and technical field, the body of research on public, school, and general academic library use is limited and noncumulative. Available tools for study of general library use are few—the analysis of circulation statistics or of reference questions is imprecise, self-administered questionnaires are hazardous, relatively few structured interview studies have been done, observation studies are generally not rigorous, and critical incident or diary methods of data collection are seldom attempted. Studies are solitary and seldom build on the past. Even when good studies are done at the same time and in the same city, as with Martin and Warner, they are unrelated.

When it comes to rigorous analysis of the reading and information needs of the metropolitan subgroups least likely to use libraries and least likely to display a fair knowledge of available resources and a rational information-seeking behavior—the poor, the undereducated, the social and ethnic minority groups—the number of useful studies drops. Yet, it is realistic to assume that needs for the information and library services do exist here, as Voos and Childers have shown. It is to these groups that many action research projects have been addressed.
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The study of information needs and of library use by these groups, as well as by the more general user of public, school, and academic libraries, will never be as useful as the studies of information use by scientists and professional groups until librarians create services as essential to the general user as those services now supplied to the specialist user. When the school or academic library truly becomes the "heart of the school," and when the public library truly becomes a community center providing information vital to the total community, then their effectiveness can be measured and their success evaluated in the same sense that this is now possible for the scientist's special library or technical information system.

The more or less annual summary articles on information use and users in the Annual Review of Information Science and Technology provide a convenient index to at least part of the literature, although the bias lies with scientific and technical information. Careful reading of the articles themselves and selective examination of the cited literature opens up a wealth of data on the use of documents and information by a wide variety of user groups under varying conditions. The scope of the literature is wide and by no means restricted even to library use of documents. Since such a large number of the laboratories, industrial concerns, and academic institutions of the country are in metropolitan areas, much of this literature is relevant. These articles record a remarkable growth of studies over the past decade, and delineate important differences in the use of information by basic and applied researchers, by professionals and academicians, and by technical personnel. They reveal that accessibility and ease of access to documents and data are no less important to the scientist than to the man on the street, and that both, in their own way, depend greatly on interpersonal communication for their information.

User studies outside of science and technology have been common for years. They gained added stature, however, when the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, as did its predecessor the National Advisory Commission on Libraries, determined that in discharging its responsibility for developing overall plans for library and information service adequate to the needs of the nation, it would focus on the user and his needs rather than on the institutions. The papers commissioned by the National Advisory Commission on Libraries, as published in Libraries at Large and separately, had a strong user orientation and provide useful statements on user needs, as well as making available a great amount of original survey data. Libraries at Large provided a useful categorization of the
users of libraries, applicable to metropolitan and nonmetropolitan settings alike, in terms of the nonspecialist and prespecialist user (public, school, college), and the specialist user (scholarly, scientific, research, and professional).

Studies supported by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science since that time have extended this discussion by a consideration of the needs of special subgroups, some of which are closely identified with the urban environment and constitute identifiable groups within "the general public"—children, aged, minorities, women, foreign-speaking, economically and socially disadvantaged, handicapped, etc. The commission’s interest in such user groups was also reflected in an invitational conference on user needs held in Denver in May 1973, which brought together a number of people with research interests in the information needs of particular groups.¹²

An imperfect but provocative further look at the needs of special groups was prepared for the commission by the Institute for Library Research.¹³ Basically a review of the literature, it is an effort to identify population groups that have information needs differing from those of the general public. It is a useful summation of the literature in the Berelson¹⁴ tradition but contains no new data. Another work which is essentially a bibliography and which has much material applicable to the understanding of a major part of the urban public is Childers’s *Knowledge/Information Needs of the Disadvantaged.*¹⁰ The plethora of outreach programs and of efforts to design library programs to aid the urban disadvantaged proceeded over the last decade without much research into information needs and behavior. The Childers study is an effort to pull together existing data on the needs, not the programs. The literature review shows that data are fugitive, uneven and unconsolidated, and that definitions are lacking. The disadvantaged adult differs significantly from the average adult in his awareness of information sources and in his needs. The survey suggests the need for research and experimentation in the packaging and delivery of information on such crucial topics as health, home and family, consumer affairs, housing, employment, welfare programs, legal matters, political process, transportation, education and recreation. The implications for urban libraries are obvious. Generally speaking, they are not now really prepared to deal with information needs of this kind in a manner useful to the disadvantaged adult.

The need for more studies of the information needs and the information-seeking habits of the adult residents of cities is obvious.
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One good example of a study of information-seeking behavior that took an audience rather than an institutional focus is Parker and Paisley’s interview survey conducted in San Mateo and Fresno, California.\(^{15}\) It is a good corrective to those who think that libraries are places to which people turn for information.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to generalize about metropolitan users, user needs, and library response. The available studies are not comparable, not well controlled, and are seldom designed to yield data on use. Of the hundreds of projects designed over the last decade to improve library service to the urban disadvantaged, for instance, few were designed with evaluation studies or impact measures in mind. They are also impaired by lack of continuity, since they seldom last more than a year or two.

Unquestionably the best recent study of urban information needs is Warner’s work, done in Baltimore.\(^4\) The study sought to find out what the information needs of the urban community are, how these needs are presently met, and what institutional forms could be devised to satisfy these needs better. It is not restricted to the needs of the disadvantaged in any sense, but it comes across not as another look at the library-related needs of the student, the researcher, and the professional, but as a look at the “typical resident in an urban community and his everyday information needs and problems.”\(^{16}\)

Warner’s rewarding study cannot be summarized easily and briefly, but a few of its conclusions are highlighted for their implications here:

1. The study confirms what we all know, that certain groups—the educated, the economically advantaged, the young—are more likely to seek information to solve their problems and are better at the search.
2. Librarians generally have limited awareness of other information systems and how they are used by people. Further, by its reliance on the printed document, the library limits its effectiveness as an information source.
3. Research shows that people want advice and active involvement, but library tradition is strong in saying that we should provide documents and facts without interpretation.
4. The ability of a library to deliver information would be greatly increased by linkage in some formal or informal way to other parts of the urban information system.
5. Libraries—public, school, academic—inevitably favor those subgroups of the urban population best able to respond to that
which is offered—the young, the well-educated, the more affluent, the print-oriented—and fail to address fairly the just-as-real needs of those whose response is less easy to elicit. The “system” sustains itself.

Warner’s research provides extensive data on the information needs not only of library users but nonusers as well, and is valuable because of that broad scope.

Another extensive study done in the Baltimore-Washington D.C. metropolitan area but unfortunately limited to users (public library users) is Bundy’s 1968 survey. Based on questionnaires answered by 21,385 users of libraries, the study provides good data on the use patterns of adults who actually make use of public libraries. The study revealed that, in this metropolitan area, large numbers of adults use public libraries, use them frequently, and are reasonably satisfied with what they find. The public libraries attract a middle-class audience and much of their use is definitely for leisure and recreational purposes. Information demand is less in evidence and library response is less effective. There is heavy use for school-related purposes; attempts to use the libraries for professional and job-related purposes are less successful.

The Baltimore area has been well served by surveys of library use, and at least one other needs to be cited—Lowell Martin’s recent study of library service in the Enoch Pratt Free Library to out-of-school, nonspecialist adult readers. Martin concludes that Baltimore adults do read, but not always books and not always from the library. He estimates that 40 percent of adults are readers of sorts, that 30 percent are potential readers, and that the rest resist print. He classes the readers into: (1) casual readers who read what comes their way; (2) “trendy” readers who are actively curious and keep up with books, magazines, and reviews; and (3) focused readers who keep up with some specialized small area, buying books, subscribing to journals, and seeking out libraries. Martin estimates that there are 80,000 readers out of 580,000 adults in Baltimore and that 14 percent of out-of-school adults use the library in one year. While Martin has doubts about the future of the public library as a supplier of reading to the masses, he recognizes that adults use the library for enjoyment and life enhancement, not strictly for utilitarian purpose. He believes that this deserves recognition.

Another city for which some good user survey data have been published is Cleveland. Changing Patterns, a report done for the
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Cleveland Public Library and the Cuyahoga County District Library, was intended to guide the development of neighborhood library services. The study included a survey done at 21 branch libraries (4,263 questionnaires) and an at-home survey of 2,000 households in the metropolitan area. The former was designed to represent the average public library user; the latter to obtain data on nonusers as well as users. The home survey is of particular interest. Among the findings: nearly 50 percent of the respondents had used some kind of library in the six weeks prior to the survey; virtually all the users had visited a public library, but more than half of these had also used another type of library as well; of those who had not used a library most were adults who “felt no need” or were “too busy”—poor service or location were not the problems.

Also among the better examples of user-oriented surveys is the Ernst and Ernst survey of the Cleveland Public Library branch system. The survey utilized questionnaires at all branches and at selected public schools, interviews at shopping centers and community agencies, and public meetings. In all, 8,567 responses were received from adults fifteen years or older.

The survey showed that: (1) most users of branches were better educated than the public as a whole in their age bracket; (2) most adult users of branches were students of some variety; (3) most users lived quite close to the branch, depending on public transportation scarcely at all; and (4) users found the book collections adequate but the programs poor. The survey of nonusers was chiefly through interviews and shows that (1) nonuse is associated with low educational attainment; (2) nonusers know where the branch is but regard it as a place for others, chiefly youth; and (3) people do not think of the library as a place for useful information.

The survey supports recommendations that the Cleveland Public Library (1) experiment with keying the branch services more closely to the needs of the immediate neighborhood, (2) reduce bureaucratic centralism in book selection, (3) increase the role of the library as a supplementary educational force for the community, and (4) invest heavily in publicity. The survey also urges experiments with minibusses to the library, dial-a-ride service, and more mobile units, illustrating the extent to which much of Cleveland has become a hostile environment through which people hesitate to travel to reach public service outlets, especially in evening hours.

Knowledge of the school-related use of libraries is limited. Numerous articles exist, especially on student use of public libraries,
but little solid research has been done. Unfortunately, the most comprehensive survey of student use of libraries remains unavailable in full detail, though completed in 1970 and reported in broad outline in 1971.21 The Philadelphia Student Library Resources Requirement Project, a multiphased and federally supported project, is now well into its demonstration phase and deserves to be more widely known, since its earlier research phase is the major source of actual data on how urban students use public and school libraries. Although conducted in Philadelphia, this work has implications for library services to students in all large urban areas. Survey data came from 10,000 students, 184 teachers, and staff in 51 school libraries and 9 branch libraries. In addition, resource data were gathered for 320 school libraries in public, parochial and independent schools.

The survey data show that student demand for library material, both print and nonprint, is tremendous and exceeds the supply available in school and public libraries. Students turn indiscriminately to school and public libraries for this material (42 percent use both school and public libraries, 30 percent use school libraries alone, 13 percent use only public libraries, and 13 percent depend on other sources). Students have moderately good success; approximately one-half say they get what they need and are satisfied with their libraries. The more interesting and controversial findings include the fact that attitudes toward libraries and toward reading in general change sharply as students advance in school. A decrease not only of library use but of interest in reading occurs. The drop-off in use is largely accounted for by a decrease in school, not public, library use. The findings of this research project are of special interest because the data came directly from students themselves, not from those who work with them. The adequacy of school and public library service to students, as seen by the students themselves, falls short of expectations.

The so-called “Action Library,” the experimental learning resource center developed as the demonstration phase of this project, has for nearly two years been trying to put into practice some of the concepts of joint planning and promotion of reading suggested by the research data. When the reports are all in, we can begin to see how much of the project can be generalized to the complex problems of better library service to students elsewhere.

Much useful data on urban users and nonusers of libraries, and on the effectiveness of programs designed to demonstrate better services, can be found in Lipsman’s The Disadvantaged and Library Effectiveness.22

Requested by the U.S. Office of Education in an effort to provide data
to guide the funding of library service projects in low-income areas, the study provides a comparative analysis of a number of such projects as well as some survey data on users and nonusers. It is not an evaluation of specific projects but rather an examination of typical projects in fifteen cities. Data were collected by means of a program interview guide, a user-nonuser questionnaire, and a community agency interview guide.

One basic summary statement is that "these findings imply the need for substantial changes in concept if libraries are to meet the functional service needs of the disadvantaged." The book is rich in data and insight into the problem. Only a few points can be highlighted here. The data suggest that the principal characteristic that distinguishes the user from the nonuser of libraries in disadvantaged areas is participation in some type of educational program, formal or informal; and that the collections and programs of libraries are of interest to low-income people mainly when they are engaged in such efforts. The interested group, however, is very small. The heavy emphasis on print and the failure to develop multimedia collections limit the library in gaining a broad audience. Also, it is recognized that the pressure of existence and survival are so great for most of the urban poor that book-oriented library services do not really relate to the satisfaction of needs.

Concern with the information needs of the inner-city resident has led a number of libraries to experiment with information and referral services as a substitute for—or at least an addition to—the traditional book services. The Enoch Pratt Free Library’s Public Information Center is an early example but it never lived up to the description proposed when it was first organized. The Model Cities Community Information Center, a joint venture of the Philadelphia Model Cities Program and the Free Library of Philadelphia, has had some success, at least from the technology standpoint, in linking inner-city residents with the scattered sources of assistance in such fields as health, unemployment, legal aid, housing and education. The reliance on phone contact, even with the use of three-way conference phones, has perhaps limited the impact of the project, although direct outreach services are available through community workers. The vagaries of funding have put limits on the project and the planned provision of information and referral services through branch libraries has not been realized.

There is increasing recognition that the library, and especially the urban public library branch, should be made part of the network of
social agencies providing information and referral services. The city of
New York has announced a program to build up such services in all
branches of the Brooklyn Public Library, tying each branch to a
computerized data bank, which provides basic information on a wide
range of services.26 This Citizens Urban Information Center proposed
for Brooklyn has also attracted attention and support from the Council
on Library Resources.27

Meanwhile, other similar efforts by libraries proliferate, mostly
funded with federal grants. The current status of the information and
referral movement was well summarized in articles in RQ for summer
1973.28 The major funded effort has been the Neighborhood
Information Center project, headquartered at the Cleveland Public
Library and involving demonstration services not only in branches in
Cleveland but in Houston, Atlanta, Detroit and Queens. The concept
of the branch library as an information and referral center is especially
well worked out in the Detroit Public Library, where library services
both at the central library and at branches have been substantially
altered to accommodate a new emphasis on information service.

The final results and evaluation of these projects are not yet
available, nor are we able yet to judge their general impact on urban
libraries, but clearly the role of the library in its relationship to users
and nonusers alike will be enlarged if they are successful.

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8. Lowell Martin is completing a report for the Enoch Pratt Free Library on library services to the nonspecialist adult reader. This report has not been released.


23. Ibid., p. viii.


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