Emerging Patterns of Community Service

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Like all professions, librarianship has made itself up as it has gone along, a product of its unique functions, its clientele, the social context, the available technology and resources, and the creative imagination of its leadership. The historical growth of patterns of library services document well the introduction of new, evolutionary service concepts. Samuel Swett Green's famous paper of a hundred years ago on the desirableness of "personal intercourse between librarians and readers"1 is the classic monument to the evolutionary style, where the simple, camel's-nose insight opened the way to forms of librarianship that have taken over the tent.

Samuel Rothstein's record of the development of reference services (1955) and this author's similar tracing of the evolution of adult services (1963) document scores of instances of emerging patterns of service. These historical reviews provided a perspective that allowed the service functions to emerge into clear view. Rothstein identified information, guidance and instruction as the basic functions of reference service, and this author added stimulation as the fourth function of adult services. These broad functions provide the basic palette from which the library practitioner draws the colors that structure each unique pattern of community service.

Rothstein traced a basic continuity in the evolution of reference services from reference as a collection of materials available to users, to reference as the librarian's provision of authenticated information reviewed and selected to meet the user's specific need. Within the long

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evolution of this reference function, Rothstein identified the emergence
of a multitude of patterns, including provision of subject collections,
staffing with subject bibliographers, development of legislative reference
service, and other forms of special librarianship.

Such new patterns of service might spring full-blown from a new
intellectual construct, or might evolve as an elaboration of service patterns
already in use. The creative leadership of Charles McCarthy and the
Wisconsin Free Library Commission in 1900 led to the innovation of a
completely new service: the Wisconsin Legislative Reference Service, an
instant information service based on telegraph inquiries to an informal
national network, and a bill-drafting service available to legislators at
their explicit request. This service became the prototype for state and
municipal library service to government over the years. On the other
hand, the introduction of subject bibliographers to serve the already-
organized subject collections of the Library of Congress and other major
public and academic libraries was an innovation derived from daily ex-
perience of the need for expertise in servicing the collections, and was an
elaboration on basic reference service. Within this area, the development
of selective dissemination of information (SDI) built directly on the
availability of computer technology to make current awareness services
economical and effective. Emerging patterns of reference service, thus,
are seen to range from highly innovative responses within creative intel-
lectual constructs, to major extensions of existing services, to specific
techniques that enable better performance of currently useful services.

In the area of adult services, emerging patterns of community service
illustrate the same range. The highly individualized service of the reader's
advisor in the 1920s was a completely innovative application of an intel-
lectual construct from the adult education movement. The evolution of
program planning assistance to community organizations, on the other
hand, included a variety of services already available: reading lists, group
film-preview sessions, and interpretation of film utilization. As 16mm
film collections expanded in public libraries, the program planning assis-
tance model was elaborated in this area of service, since selection of films
for the general public required the help of knowledgeable librarians in
choosing and utilizing the then-novel format. The organization of annual
program planning institutes, involving community cosponsorship, devel-
oped in Baltimore and Detroit in the 1940s. These were highly innovative
patterns composed of familiar elements.
EMERGENCE OF NEW PATTERNS OF SERVICE

The fluid nature of library services to the community must be recognized as an inevitable characteristic of the library's responsiveness to the unique need which each instance of service represents. Librarians have generated relatively stable, sometimes rigid, structures for the delivery of this flexible, adaptable commodity. A glass or pottery container will enable easier management of wine or water than a thin plastic bag, yet jars, bottles, pitchers and flasks of different sizes and designs are needed for specific uses. The geyser and spigot are each useful in quite different circumstances. Community-service librarians, sensitive to the requirements of specific occasions for service, automatically adjust the flow of guidance, information, stimulation and instruction through the media of special collections, exhibits, booklists, film showings, information and referral services, discussion programs, and so forth.

Recognition of a new pattern of service as the need for it emerges — for example, when the children's librarian sets aside time to confer with a social agency head about an identified need for a specific day-care service — is an important aspect of professional responsibility. By the ninth time the children's librarian has found the need for this kind of advocacy on behalf of children, the moment has come to ask, "If we do this, how do we best do this?"; and the emergence of a new pattern of community service is on its way. When conversations among children's librarians and articles in current journals show the emergence of this particular service to be frequent or widespread, then discussion of forms of such service begins the critical, refining process that leads to the establishment of a new pattern of service.

Because society is fluid, because needs of special publics regularly change, sensitivity to these natural adaptations of service is important. It is equally important that these emerging patterns of service receive widespread discussion and refinement, just as the eyedropper was developed as a far better system for delivery of fluid to the eye than a garden hose. Such discussion and critical review best take place in an atmosphere of careful consideration of needs, objectives, concern for alternative forms, and evaluation of results — in short, in an atmosphere both critical and appreciative.

At the same time, it is essential to review standard forms of service delivery for their adaptability to specific needs, and to review methods of administration for their tolerance of variation and their sustained sensi-
tivity to the need for adaptation. Only in such circumstances can librarians feel secure about the long-term benefits of established patterns of community service. Community analysis has become recognized as a way of resensitizing library staff to the need for responsive, flexible service patterns. Equally important is continued awareness of the small adaptations which community-sensitive librarians make in daily service responses to users.

ELEMENTS OF A SERVICE PATTERN

New patterns of community service are frequently the response to the identification of unique needs of a special public. John Cotton Dana's introduction of the Business Library as a downtown branch of the Newark (New Jersey) Free Public Library provided the full range of reference collection and services tailored (in location, hours, collection, staff expertise, publications, and reference assistance) to the special needs of business in 1906. The adaptation of library service to trade unions in the late 1940s, under the leadership of Dorothy K. Oko of the New York Public Library, followed closely the changing structure and needs of union leadership and membership. Better educated, the trade union membership in the late 1940s no longer needed the book deposit collections initiated for labor in the 1920s, but came directly to public libraries for materials and service; however, the union officials had increasing need for well-researched information documented from labor's perspective, and the union education director relied heavily on the public library's special services for resources and advice in selecting and using labor training program materials (films, books, manuals and journal articles).

Each model of service, as it emerged in the context of a special public and a special situation, was composed of a cluster of activities (whether collection building, current awareness service, information service, state-of-the-art searches or training workshops) that typically combined several of the service functions (information, guidance, instruction and stimulation). For example, the program planning institutes emerging in the 1940s from the need for guidance in modern program techniques, as well as in the selection and use of materials by community organizations, included such activities as lectures, panel discussions on important aspects of socially significant topics (war and peace, avoiding obsolescence), screenings of films and exhibits of books and journals relevant to the topics, reading lists, and oral "book talk" interpretations of these
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materials and suggestions for their use in organizational programs. Such activities involved all the major functions of community services: information (about the topics and sources of materials), instruction (in program presentation techniques), guidance (in selection of resources for programs and in program planning with committees), and stimulation (of attention to socially significant topics and to the idea of using library resources as the basis for organization programs).

Library-sponsored discussions of Great Books, on the other hand, emerging in the late 1940s through the influence of the University of Chicago's extension program of adult education, and from such adult education leadership as that of Ralph A. Beals of the New York Public Library, combined in the single activity of series of group book discussion sessions the multiple functions of guidance (to the rich, classic resources of the "great ideas" of Western culture), stimulation (to in-depth exploration of these ideas and their application to modern issues and human situations), and instruction (in the art of analytical, critical reading; logical thinking; and discussion for clarification of personal values).

The models of community service, then, may be profitably viewed in terms of the activities involved, the publics served, and the functions performed. A "pattern of community service" may be said to have evolved when each of these elements is closely interrelated in the service model. As the need of special clientele groups for library services gains priority within the community, the library's responsiveness may show in the acquisition and organization of new phases of the collection. This may mean the expansion of gardening resources from the flower-gardening focus of the community garden club to include vegetable gardening for those seeking wholesome food and balanced budgets. Collection expansion might mean introduction of a wholly new area, such as current adult literature needed for the follow-up phase of an adult school program. Such collection expansion, it would seem, misses the mark of a "pattern of community service" unless it is closely integrated with the personal services of staff, and unless identifiable activities put the collection to use to fulfill specific functions for an identified clientele. The discussion of service to adult new literates by Helen Lyman (1976) illustrates well the multidimensional texture of a "pattern of community service" in which the needs of the special public are clearly identified, the collection and activities are tailored to those particular needs, and a diversity of library functions are related to this particular area of service.
STIMULI TO GROWTH OF NEW PATTERNS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE

New clientele, new technology, broad social change, and the findings of research all serve to stimulate the development of new patterns of community service.

The new clientele in the inner city of the 1960s—a rural population fresh to urban living, possessing limited education, low income and often minority, ethnic backgrounds—forced the public libraries not only to modify their collections, but to develop new kinds of staff (paraprofessionals sharing the ethnic minority perceptions of the new clientele), new activities directly relevant to the lifestyle and needs of the new clientele (street conferences, fiestas, ethnic music, local survival and crisis information services, and literacy programs), new functions that met the clientele "where they were" (building reading-readiness), and new administrative styles (sharing policy-making with representatives of the local community). Thus, a multidimensional change created a successful pattern of service to the inner city that, in its skeletal structure, has equal validity for service to any special public.

New technology is a major force for development of new patterns of community service. The availability of computer-controlled data bases is converting library information services into a pattern of brokerage, with the library offering a vast array of rental information services. The new patterns of community service related to satellite communication systems and closed-circuit television still await development.

Broad social change was a significant element in the two cases just cited—urban outreach and data base information service. However, a third illustration seems appropriate: the Learner's Advisory Service. The great shifts in the role of women, in the lifespan of the average citizen, in work mobility, and in the pace of information production and technological change, all have created an environment for the "learning society." In its close links to independent study programs, to the College Entrance Examination Board, and to focused educational counseling as a library function, the Learner's Advisory Service offers a new pattern of community service responsive to basic changes in lifestyle for midlife career women; leisured, retired adults; and people shifting careers in their middle years; and to the frantic need of most members of society to "keep up." Rising educational levels in society, the rapid pace of social change, and the dominance of information-oriented occupations are social forces that add support to this new pattern of service.
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The role of research in stimulating the growth of new patterns of community service has only just begun. Within the past ten years research in information-seeking behavior has begun to affect patterns of service in public libraries in the same way it affected special library services twenty-five years ago. The work of Childers, Dervin and Zweizig set patterns of inquiry followed by Duran and a number of other investigators, whose findings confirm several insights about users' approaches to information: that information users are active participants in many aspects of society (voters, organization members, etc.); that information seekers typically turn first to people and then to printed resources for the information they need; and that library resources are the point of first resort for very few inquirers and are the last resort (or no resort at all) for many. There are further refinements of these findings that point with equal strength to the need to develop the credibility of community-service librarians as sources of information, and to the need for new patterns of service that involve librarians in the major social projects of the community so that information delivery may be timely, relevant to the purpose, and acceptable in format. Revolutionary as these changes are, they represent the barest beginnings of the contributions of research to the redesigning of patterns of community service.

The findings of research concerning reading, education, the social change process, the utilization of knowledge, communication theory, and community development await the attention of designers of community services. Equally important, librarians' cooperation in the various areas of research, their readiness to ask questions of particular relevance to the assumptions, values and problems of library community service, is needed. The door has just begun to open on a major source of power for the redesign of services, in which the librarian need not be just reactive to social forces and new clientele, to public demand or to the opportunity of new technology, but will be in the position to be pro-active, generating new forms and new technologies, and educating the public demand by the strength of insights gained from research.

CHOICES TO BE MADE

Approaching the design of the community services program from this position — open to needs and possibilities and reflective of new insights and organizing principles — puts the community-service librarian in the position of zero-based planning. Fundamental restructuring is essential from time to time, and any planned restructuring ought (within a
5-year period, perhaps) to solve both the problems that forced the change and the problems of staff and community adjustment to new patterns of community service. Continuity in service patterns supports the public's expectations of library service and permits staff energies to flow freely into well-developed channels of service. A balance, then, between innovation and continuity must be maintained for effective service.

Weighing the factors that promote innovation in patterns of community service is essential. The size, urgency or social significance of the need for new service models by specific groups may be the prime considerations in a case for such innovation. A second cluster of factors to be weighed in setting priorities for change is the relevance of meeting the needs (1) to the library's goals and objectives, and (2) to goals of other community agencies, organizations or population groups dealing with the same area of need. Collaborative planning can be highly efficient and effective in the institution of new service models. A third cluster to be considered is that of available resources (funds, staff talents, facilities and materials); although these are essential factors, often, if the first two clusters are strongly positive for change, resources can be recruited at least for the period of innovation. On the other hand, if the innovation has high importance, the deployment of resources to the new model and away from a displaced model becomes a meaningful alternative to new resources.

The role of resources in the innovation of service models is an interesting one. When resources are available (in categorical grants from federal or state programs, or from foundations or publicly funded institutes), the goals of those programs are more easily espoused and the program models fit more readily into the library's program of services. The leadership of government has been exercised in this style so extensively in the past fifty years that innovation from other channels, such as staff evaluation of services or community planning, has been in danger of dropping from sight. On the other hand, the lack of resources for any "additional" effort has consistently negated moves toward even essential innovation. The philosophy of zero-based budgeting, however, has broken through the wall of custom to release librarians from bondage to "the way it has always been done."

Innovation, traditionally, has been a process of accretion of new service models to established service patterns. Even the thorough restructuring of inner-city service in the 1960s in most public libraries paralleled the traditional styles of service, with gradual displacement of the less effective traditional services as the successful new models devel-
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Logical, planned restructuring is only beginning to emerge as a way of introducing new patterns of community service. This may, however, be the breath of eternal life to an aging library system.

Reference


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