

Public Services: 1980 and Beyond

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In the broadest sense, public service is service to the public—a simplistic statement you will rightly think, but in today's library and information environment an enormously complex assignment for those charged with responsibility for carrying out that mandate.

Three Questions

Perhaps the *first question* we should ask ourselves is this: "Who is the public, or rather, who are our publics? As recently as ten years ago, librarians could probably answer that question without a moment's hesitation. Academic librarians could claim primarily students and faculty in their own institutions; public librarians served primarily the citizens of their communities—at least those who used the library; school librarians knew they served primary and secondary students; special librarians, their subject or corporate researchers. We now provide or are expected to provide service to the non-traditional student, the adult learner, the non-user, the exceptional student, as well as the scholar, researcher, scientist, student, public servant, private citizen and a host of others.

It would be difficult for any librarian to pinpoint who is receiving our service. But one thing we do know is that no institution is capable of providing for all of the information needs of all of its users. This knowledge has resulted in participation in networks, systems and consortia which have expanded each library's ability to increase its service to its primary users.

The *second question* then follows: "What events led or drove us to our present service patterns?" The information revolution, the explosion of knowledge, the ever-increasing access demands of our publics coupled with the ever-decreasing levels of our fiscal resources have put an almost intolerable strain on our libraries to meet public service needs. But attempted to meet them we have, principally by developing and using fast-paced advances in technology over the past decade.

Many examples surface of our use of automation and technology, including: on-line cataloging, on-line information retrieval, on-line circulation system, on-line serials control, on-line interlibrary loan, and in the not too distant future, on-line acquisitions and on-line catalogs. This leads us to our *third question*: "What impact has this on-line revolution had for public service librarians?" In almost all cases, an increased demand on limited staff. Let us take just one example, on-line information retrieval. The capability of on-line searching has increased circulation, reference and interlibrary loan work levels; as our information finding tools have become more powerful, they are creating demands for full-text copies of the information identified, but, sad to say, our current mechanisms for providing these full-text copies are still quite primitive, thus

making the document provision mechanism the weak link in the information chain.

Dealing with New Technology

As librarians, we are called upon to improve the accessibility of information to our publics. In order to accomplish this mandate, we have created bigger, but not always better, hardware and software to assist us in achieving this goal. In a thought-provoking article entitled "The Future of Reference Service: Death by Complexity," Joseph Rosenblum makes an impassioned plea for simplifying our complex information retrieval systems, particularly the card catalog. He states: "A system of information retrieval so complex that no one can use it correctly is no better than no system at all."¹ He also quotes an astute fourth grader who summarized the situation thusly: "Card catalogs are so complicated they are really not good for anything but being card catalogs."² And as Martin Dillon has said: "Computer programs should be designed by geniuses so that even idiots can understand them." He adds that "unfortunately, these programs are instead generally designed by idiots so that only geniuses can make them work!"³

Machine-based catalogs cannot yet do some of the things card catalogs do, although machine-based catalogs have other capabilities (e.g., multiple keyword subject searches) that card catalogs cannot effectively match. It will take some time for readers and staff to become accustomed to new formats, and to the gains and losses when card catalogs are given up. More importantly, it will take time for machine-readable files to accumulate enough entries to be useful. Public service librarians will have to devise methods of retraining staff and educating and smoothing the tempers of readers. The number of access points for entry to the database should, however, make accessing the library collections a whole lot easier for our fourth grader.

What other roles have librarians undertaken to help themselves and their users cut through the complexities of our current on-line or manual retrieval systems? To name just a few, bibliographic instruction at various levels, classroom or individualized instruction, printed guides to the collections, audiovisual presentations, term-paper clinics, subject bibliographic instruction, searching techniques for printed sources and mechanized services. In this arena, the key resource to the collections of the library is the librarian, and much depends on his or her attitude and motivation. We librarians must also be approachable, and we are probably most effective when we go beyond the four walls of the library building to become active members of the institution or community which we serve and which we are trying to educate in the use of the library. We should aim to orient all the library's processes and services toward the needs of our users. Although there appears to be a widespread belief in the value of user education, we know from our own experiences that its staffing indicates a low priority within the library. I suggest that public service librarians and administrators ought to reassess and rebalance priorities in order to provide the staff and time essential to do this job.

When discussing bibliographic instruction in the 1980s, we must recognize that most of our current bibliographic tools and structure will be obsolete. The card catalog for major research libraries will presumably be impossible to

maintain and on-line catalogs by the end of the decade will become a reality. With the advent of AACR-2, coupled with the on-line catalog, public service librarians will be called upon to assist and train users and staff to get to the information they need — conceptually no different than we are doing now, except that we will have to be trained ourselves before we can train others. This is a good time to encourage technical service and public service staffs to communicate with each other and within their organizations more intensively than ever in the past.

I support and encourage staff exchange within a library. There is no better way for technical services and public services staff to understand and, yes, even empathize with each other's problems than to put themselves in others' shoes. And I do not mean for a two-hour stint, but for at the very least a few weeks. This is particularly helpful at this time, when both technical services and public services staff are anxious about the advent of ACCR-2.

For most libraries up to now, cooperative activities have been confined primarily to sharing of cataloging information through a state or regional network for on-line bibliographic technical processing. For some networks, such as the statewide Wisconsin Interlibrary Loan Service/Wisconsin Library Consortium Network which I directed until August, 1979, our services to participants constituted, in addition to OCLC services, a broad array of resource sharing functions, including document delivery, building an on-line union list of serials via OCLC, continuing education, a telecommunications network, and very recently a statewide reference service. This statewide reference service is very exciting and very satisfying. It not only provides any Wisconsin library with a reference backup using University of Wisconsin-Madison resources, but the service, we believe, acts as an enabler and facilitator for improved reference service at the local level. And that is really what library networks are all about — to be enablers and initiators of new service patterns, to assist the local library in realizing its potential, and to allow the local library to provide better service to its public.

The Future

We have discussed some selected public service concerns present in these early months of the decade of the 1980s. It is time now to gaze into the crystal ball. Perhaps the best way to address this issue of the "beyond" is to quote some recent statements from the literature.

- 1) "The professional seems to have its head in the sand. The paperless society is rapidly approaching. Ignoring this fact will not cause it to go away."⁴
- 2) "During the 1980's libraries could be reduced to archival repositories because people will be accessing bibliographic data bases and text through computers in their homes and offices."⁵
- 3) "Those librarians who cannot step up to the challenge of serving people thorough the utilization of technological development in the delivery of user-oriented information will have to step aside."⁶
- 4) "An experiment by OCLC, due to be launched in October 1980, will offer 200 carefully selected homes in Columbus a "black box" which, hooked up to TV and telephone, will provide access to an encyclopedia, to banking services, to public information, health information, library services, and games."⁷

- 5) "If an encyclopedia, dictionary, world almanac and statistical abstract of the U.S. were available in every home via a terminal, 80% of the reference questions fielded by librarians could be handled by just those four reference tools."⁸
- 6) "Videotex, Viewdata, Teletext, CableText, Prestel, Viewtron, Telidon, Teletel, Telset, Inteltext, Ceefax, Oracle, Antiope, Captain. Perhaps you've never heard any of those terms, but stick around. All of them relate, in one fashion or another, to startling new ways of using your television set for more than just picking up Laverne & Shirley."⁹

Last year in his own inimitable way, Michael Gorman reminded us that long ago librarians were divided into technical processing and public services staff. This division is hallowed by time and tradition, but not by rationality. Indeed, it creates many problems for us such as catalogers with unused subject knowledge and reference librarians unable to use fully the card catalog. He foresees the melting away of this division and at the same time, a moving away from the hierarchical organization of the library. The budget crisis we foresee should stimulate us not to cut staff in one or both divisions, but to make the difficult transition to the multidimensional library.¹⁰

We have the potential to improve vastly our provision of information service through technology. I remain an optimist that, as a profession, we will rise to the challenge. To paraphrase another optimist, Edward Holley, "I believe we face the eighties from a strong base, and with librarians who are not only better educated, but also more sensitive to the concerns and the information needs of the society they serve."¹¹

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