

DO LIBRARIANS TALK TO THEMSELVES?

By CHASE DANE*

In folklore psychology talking on oneself is a sign of approaching insanity. It is evidence of something seriously wrong with the integration of one's personality. It is often a mark of frustration and of spiritual or mental maladjustment. To accuse librarians therefore of talking to themselves is to make a very grave charge. It is an accusation which must not be made thoughtlessly or humorously, although again in popular psychology it does have humorous implications, for it usually denotes only a mild and amusing form of insanity.

Do, then, now that we are aware of the gravity of such an accusation, librarians talk to themselves? In all honesty we must admit that much of the time they do. But with equal honesty we must hasten to explain that they talk to themselves only in their professional literature—never, we hope, *via voce*. By this we mean that librarians all too often write articles for other librarians about problems which really be taken to a much larger audience.

One or two examples may serve to explain more clearly how they do this. When the book collection or the book selection policy of a library is attacked on the grounds of censorship librarians immediately begin to protest, as indeed they should—but only to each other. They publish articles in professional journals in which they set forth clearly and forcefully the evils of censorship. Unfortunately however the people who should read these articles, the people who would benefit most by reading them, are not librarians and consequently never see them. Instead these articles are read by other librarians who are already well aware of these evils, who have also been shocked by the attack and who have been fighting the good fight.

The narrow minded and censorious citizens who initiated the attack, however, do not read library journals and so they fail to receive the message which might do them some good. The sound arguments against censorship presented by librarians leave them untouched because they are unseen. Consequently whenever a library is attacked on grounds of censorship a furor breaks out among librarians but not among the people on whom it would have the most effect and who are responsible for the attack in the first place. The little furor among librarians goes unnoticed by the general public and the advocates of censorship chalk up another victory.

This is not to claim that librarians would, *ipso facto*, be more effective if they wrote articles on the evils of censorship for the general public instead of for themselves. Rather it is to point out that in that direction at least lies their greatest opportunity. It is somewhat futile to persuade people that something is bad when they are already convinced that it *is* bad. It seems much more sensible to try to persuade those who are not already convinced. In this way librarians would add to the number of their supporters rather than simply render more fanatical those who already agree with them.

As a second example we might cite those articles in which librarians lament the fact that a great many people in rural areas still do not have access to books and libraries. Librarians are well aware of this fact and require no further persuasion of its truth. Librarians however can do little about this situation alone. To correct it they need the help of laymen. Yet by and large librarians describe this situation for other librarians and not for laymen who could do something about it. Once again we see that librarians do talk to themselves.

*Assistant to the Chief, Publishing Department, American Library Association.

Essentially the problem of librarians is the same as that of an unhappy employee who talks to himself because he is reluctant to talk to his employer about his grievance. Librarians are not afraid to talk to their employers, to the people who use their libraries, they have simply never got into the habit of talking to them. They have found that it is easier and sometimes more profitable professionally if not socially to talk to themselves than it is to talk to their patrons. This habit has become so deeply ingrained that they are often not aware that they are unheard by others.

The fact remains however that often the people who most need to read an article on library service are not the people who read the periodical in which the article appears. It is a problem of not reaching the audience for whom the material is really intended or whom it would do the most good.

In another area librarians have recently become aware of the importance of this mistake. For years librarians tacked up posters and set up displays within the library and could not understand why they had so little effect in bringing new patrons into the library. Instead, they discovered that old patrons simply came back more often. This was good but it was not the result they sought. Then someone awoke to the fact that posters and displays are seen only by those people who already use the library. It was then obvious that what was needed was posters and displays outside the library which would attract new customers.

This lesson so obvious in the case of posters and displays has not yet been fully learned in relation to articles and books and news items. That is why librarians still continue to talk mostly to themselves.

What solutions are there to this problem? There are a number of things which librarians could and should do if they hope to reach the audience which justifies their existence. Most of these activities are not new, it is simply that librarians have not engaged in them sufficiently to put across their message successfully.

We need to write more articles for general and national magazines. Only seldom do we see an article on library service in a weekly magazine or in a magazine with nationwide circulation. Occasionally such an article does appear but we need more of them. We need an over-all plan which will insure that such articles appear regularly. Here we must borrow a lesson from the advertisers who have learned the value and effectiveness of repetition. We need to explain over and over again the importance of libraries in a democratic society. That we have failed to do this is proven by the fact that so many people are still unaware of the existence of the library in their community.

We need to secure the publication of more news items about library services. Too often librarians describe their activities and their new services only for other librarians. Thus a librarian in Chicago may know more about some service recently initiated by the Detroit Public Library than does the average citizen of Detroit. We make sure that other librarians know all about our latest experiments but we forget to make equally sure that our patrons know about these experiments also. And in the long run it is much more important for us to tell them what we are doing than it is for us to tell each other.

Books as well as articles need to be written for the citizen, telling him of the services and resources of the library. Often we are so concerned with professional literature that we forget that the layman also needs to be informed of what we are doing. Professional literature is important and without it we cannot hope to develop a sound philosophy of library science or outline a program for future research which will result in the growth of the profession. At the same time, however, we need to keep our patrons informed of the over-all development of library service. Too few books like Ernestine

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Rose's recent *The Public Library in American Life*, which interprets the public library for the citizen, have been written. Such books do for library science what Paul de Kruif's *Microbe Hunters* did for microbiology and we need more of them.

Going outside the field of literature for a moment, we should not forget that librarians often talk to themselves literally. Librarians talk to other librarians at conferences and workshops and conventions. Such devices are excellent but they should not blind us to the fact that we need to talk to the citizens of the community also. We can do this by taking active part in community affairs and by relating the story of the library in terms of its public whenever an appropriate occasion arises.

Part of this work can be done by means of radio and television. Many librarians indeed already use radio and television to tell the public about their work and it is to be hoped that more will do so in the future. The greatest value of these two media, from the point of view of the library, may be the opportunity which they present for the library to tell its story to the public. We may eventually discover that the book is after all the best means by which to transmit knowledge but that radio and television are the best means by which to advertise that knowledge.

Finally, we can spread our message through cooperation with other institutions. By working with schools and clubs and professional associations we can do a great deal to describe and introduce the services of the library to a public which might otherwise never hear of them. In this way we can do more to attract new patrons than we can with a hundred posters or displays inside the library.

None of these suggestions is new: many libraries have adopted all of them. The trouble is that we usually think of them as ways to extend our service rather than as means by which to increase our effectiveness. If we approach them with this added awareness we will not need to lament the indifference with which too often the library is regarded by the public.

The future does look brighter, however. We are becoming increasingly aware of the danger of talking to ourselves. Through extension work and community service librarians are doing much to correct this fault. But that it is still a problem we know well. One of the most important revelations of the Public Library Inquiry was that most people are only vaguely aware of the library and its services. Hence we constantly need to guard against talking to ourselves. We need to make certain that the people we hope to serve hear us, too.