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## THE RESEARCH-ACTION-TEACHING EFFORT AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY'S SCHOOL OF LIBRARY SCIENCE

This paper gives a very brief overview of the kinds of activities which are going on at Syracuse University which relate to information referral projects. The School of Library Science is involved in a multi-dimensional effort which focuses on the information needs of minorities and the disadvantaged—through research action and research teaching.

For the past several years, the school has been undergoing a major refocusing of its approach. A great deal of emphasis is being placed on the "people" aspects of librarianship. The clearest manifestation of this change is the fact that the school now has four social scientists on its faculty of fifteen members. In addition, the school is now in its third year of offering a social science-oriented doctoral program emphasizing the problems of information transfer. The following discussion briefly describes the kinds of activities the Syracuse School of Library Science is involved in and some of the insights they have provided.

### RESEARCH PROGRAM

For the past seven years, I have been actively involved in doing research on the communication behaviors of the U.S. urban poor. This research has fostered much of the basic design of both the teaching activities and action program at Syracuse.

The research with which I was involved was conducted through Michigan State University's Department of Communication and is the result of a long-range program trying to describe the communication behaviors and begin to tap the information needs and problems of the U.S. urban poor. Studies were conducted in three U.S. cities—Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Lansing, Michigan—and all the available evidence in the area was thoroughly reviewed.<sup>1</sup>

The following is a summary of the discoveries and implications gleaned as it applies to information referral projects.

1. *It was concluded that the U.S. urban poor (and, indeed a large proportion of the U.S. urban population) lives in an electronic village.* For example, it was found that:
  - Almost 100 percent of U.S. households have at least one television set.
  - Almost 100 percent of U.S. households have at least one radio. At least 75 percent even the low-income households own at least one phonograph.
  - The average low-income adult watches television anywhere from 3 to 6 hours a day; one study showed an average of 5.2 hours a day.
  - At any given time during the afternoon or evening, at least 25-40 percent of the low-income population is watching television.
  - The low-income adult listens to radio two or more hours a day. In terms of a 16-hour waking day, the average low-income adult spends almost 8 hours on electronic media. (This compares to 4 hours for the average general population adult.)
  - Television is the preferred and most believed medium of most U.S. citizens. Low-income adults show even stronger preference for television than general population adults.
  - Low-income residents believe that television portrays an accurate picture of reality—"that life is like it is on TV."
  
2. *It was concluded that the U.S. urban poor live in a closed system which is essentially isolated from the major society.* For example, it was found that:
  - The crucial center of low-income existence is kinship, peer, and group life.
  - Visiting family and friends, gossiping, talking about neighborhood and family events are among the major activities in the low-income community.
  - In one study, 366 low-income Black adults were asked with whom they had spoken yesterday. It was found that (a) 85 percent of their contacts were family or friends, (b) 93 percent were black, (c) 66 percent took place in the respondent's home, and (d) 82 percent of the conversations related to topics dealing with home problems, family and friends.

It must be added here that this emphasis on in-ghetto life has been termed dysfunctional by many social scientists and others. However, many believe that it is a very functional and healthy response to a world that blocks achievement and constantly puts barriers between the low-income resident and success in the establishment.
  
3. *It was concluded that the establishment is only used for help under duress and is not trusted.* One in-depth study of information

sources asked 366 low-income blacks what sources they would use in ten nitty-gritty problem areas like finding a house, helping a friend in trouble with the police, and so on. Results showed:

Of 5,000 possible sources of information named by all respondents, across problem areas, the library was mentioned only once.

The most named sources of information for most problem areas were family, friends, and neighbors.

A large proportion of the respondents named only family, friends, and neighbors.

The most usual reference to an establishment source came for crisis problems. For example, lawyers were mentioned as an information source in connection with police trouble but not in connection with consumer problems. Welfare was mentioned for a family that needed food but not for help in finding a good place to buy food.

The low-income resident usually only tolerates the establishment caretaker imposed on him. Very often, he misinterprets the social agencies' purposes.

Establishment agencies often do not reach those that most need help. Some evidence even suggests that establishment agencies avoid those who really have problems because their concern is self-maintenance. Difficult problems are hard to solve and failure does not look good on progress reports.

Some evidence exists that those low-income residents who are most in contact with "establishment" helpers (social workers, etc.) are doing the worst in terms of information processing. For example, in one study the residents most in contact with professionals least often named professional experts as possible information sources.

The important point, however, is that this research leads to a number of conclusions about establishing an information center to reach low-income urban residents. Many of these conclusions are not easy to take psychologically and most are extremely difficult to implement. The basic conclusions were:

1. A center must not depend on the written work for information dissemination. Interpersonal contact and electronic media are needed.
2. A center must be an integral part of the low-income neighborhood. Ideally, the center should be run by neighborhood people.
3. The center must be, first and foremost, a comfortable environment which is in accord with neighborhood norms. A fancy location looks establishment. Desks and files look establishment (and suggest establishment recordkeeping and spying).

4. Any non-neighborhood person who works in this area must totally immerse himself in understanding the community. He or she must be relaxed, unbureaucratic in his approach, and patient. Trust is a long-time proposition. He or she must not be the only representative of his non-neighborhood organization working on outreach in a non-bureaucratic way, since he or she is going to need a lot of emotional support.
5. The needs of the low-income resident are for information which meets everyday crises—emergency money, finding a job, getting the furnace fixed, getting insurance, finding a day care center, finding a doctor. Other issues such as government activities or being aware as a citizen are luxuries when one is cold and hungry.
6. Because the information needs are crisis needs, they change from day to day and month to month. In September the needs are school clothing and getting responses from the school system. In December the house heating system fails. In June it is camps and how to keep the kids out of trouble. At the end of the month, the welfare check runs out. By fall it is construction worker lay-offs and the need for jobs.
7. The only way to find out the real information needs of a community is from the community itself.
8. No matter how often and how loud existing agencies say they are already handling the information problems of the poor, they are not doing so. What is needed is not only the presence of information in the system, but delivery of information to those who need it. In addition, what is desperately needed is information advocacy—getting a person in need to a person who can help and then making sure that that help is delivered.
9. Running around and finding a former community resident to serve as the link between the establishment and the neighborhood is not necessarily the ideal solution. A former low-income Black who has gotten education may be as unempathetic to the needs of low-income Blacks as the typical middle class white.
10. The problems under discussion are not those only of low-income residents. Evidence is mounting that most of the U.S. population is suffering severe information problems on nitty-gritty everyday issues. Many of the problems of the blue-collar worker and the middle class person are the same as those of low-income residents. They simply differ in frequency and intensity.

These were the basic conclusions. In the past year, some strides have been made in implementing some of them in two major ways: (1) by including in the master's degree program a strong emphasis on libraries—finding out who they are, learning about their life styles, learning about their needs, and (2) working on a partnership basis with a neighborhood organized and run information center in Syracuse.

## TEACHING PROGRAM

The School of Library Science at Syracuse has instituted a course called "Minorities: Library and Information Centers" now in its second semester. The best overall description is that the course is designed to "blow the students' minds." Only a bare minimum of the emphasis in the course is placed on traditional content as such. The aim is to immerse the student as much as possible in the people problems of establishing and running information referral services. During the course of the term, the students do the following:

1. *Fieldwork at a neighborhood information center.* This includes five or more hours each week actually working with the neighborhood staff on whatever that staff feels needs to be done. In the past, this has included helping with clients, filing materials, writing reports, and typing letters. Students have accompanied the staff to the jail, to welfare homes, to burned-out houses, to family crises. Overlying every activity one rule is imposed on the students. They must respect and honor the neighborhood staff. They must take neighborhood staff orders even if they disagree until enough trust has built up to allow open discussion. They must try to learn to cope with the non-bureaucratic and often seemingly chaotic procedures used. To help in this process frequent "therapy" sessions are held and the students write weekly diaries on their reactions.
2. *Background information searches.* Whenever the neighborhood staff pinpoints an information need within the community, the students do background information searches. This requires them to search out data and then organize it to fit the specific needs of a specific audience. Searches have been done, for example, on day care centers, temporary help firms, and utility company practices and regulations.
3. *Talking to community leaders.* During the term the students visit with various community leaders. The guests are selected with the purpose of exposing the student to as full a range of approaches, philosophies and personalities as possible. The strict establishment leader is invited as is the unpaid ex-junkie street worker. Students are encouraged to explore not just the content of various programs but the jealousies and agency rivalries as well. Through this they begin to formulate ways in which the various activities of social service agencies might be coordinated through an information agency. Very few of the guests are actually from the library field. They are from civil rights organizations, parole and probation, welfare, United Community Services, etc.
4. *In-depth exposure to different life styles.* Throughout the term students are exposed through reading, field trips and guests to as



many different life styles as possible. One semester, for example, they were immersed in the problems of American Indians, dope addicts, ex-convicts, the aged, and minorities in the schools. They read autobiographies, they shopped in various ethnic neighborhoods.

Some of the students call the course "over-kill." Many of the "therapy" sessions are spent on talking about the very personal problems of coping across such cultural differences. Much time is spent exploring whether each student feels he is suited for this kind of traumatic work. In their talks with the neighborhood information center staff, they get feedback on how the neighborhood sees them. In addition, they learn to clear up communication problems with the neighborhood workers.

If the course has a moral, it is simply "Do not go into this area of work unless you dig it and unless you can stand it emotionally." The students are very honest in their own self-evaluations. Here are some anonymous quotes from their diaries:

Although this has been an interesting experience, I'm glad my stint is through. Frankly, it bothers me when I see a report we have done mis-filed and when I see the center staff sitting around doing nothing.

Four hours at the neighborhood center and I'm dead, emotionally and physically. Everything is crisis. People's problems are overwhelming. I love the place but I don't know if I could ever take 40 hours a week.

Finally I got up enough courage to readily answer the phones at the center. I realized that everything here is very personality oriented and somehow I just don't fit. Slowly, though, trust is building.

We talked today to a radio station that runs an information service on the air. I can see a possible rivalry developing here. They should cooperate, instead.

I'm beginning to understand why neighborhood people must run the Center. They live in the community. They know where the hidden streets are. A woman with a broken furnace called today and we used the information files to get help. But I didn't know where the woman lived.

I talked to a woman today who had a problem but wouldn't tell me what it was. None of the neighborhood staff were in. It took two hours. We talked about the weather, TV, just about everything. Finally she told me her landlord was collecting rent and not paying the utilities even though her lease specifies utilities paid. I found a housing agency in town to represent her.

This is just a sample of their reactions. There is no real measure of the change that occurs in the students during the term. My own gut

reaction is that remarkable change does occur. About half of the fifty students involved so far have left the course more aware of their own strengths in outreach activities and anxious to be involved. The other half left realistically wary of whether they could take an outreach speciality.

There are plans in the works at Syracuse University for more courses which will be geared to community involvement. This summer, for example, a course will be given on "Mass Media: Its Content and Audience" designed to totally immerse the student in U.S. mass media and develop understanding of what electronic media society is. In addition, a proposal is being developed which would institute an "urban information" speciality within the school. The plan is to make this a legitimate master's degree speciality. However, individuals without college background could be admitted.

### ACTION PROGRAM

Finally, a discussion of the school's partnership relationship with a neighborhood-run information center is in order. The center is called the "Greater Syracuse Resource Center" and was organized by a group of fifteen residents of the poorest, low-income Black neighborhood in Syracuse. The center board of directors is made up of at least 51 percent neighborhood residents. At present, its composition is also 60 percent Black.

The School of Library Science became involved with the center over one year ago by chance—a friend-of-a-friend kind of contact. Since that time, it has worked cooperatively in opening the center, establishing procedures for helping clients with information needs, developing information files, publicity, etc.

The two organizations cooperate through a partnership that has been informally recorded on paper. The center is the expert on neighborhood problems and relating to the neighborhood. The school is the expert on information collection and organization and research. This all sounds very neat. The process has not been. The center board and staff mistrust the school, by definition. The school is part of a university which is seen in Syracuse as a leader of the establishment and a robber of neighborhood resources. Every meeting between center staff and school staff is touchy. Slowly but surely, however, trust is building.

The center's aim is to serve as a link between agencies who have help to give and people who need help. Its purpose is stated not only in terms of informational referral but information advocacy as well. The center staff does not drop a case until they are sure that an effort has been made to help. They often take a client to an agency in order to interpret and ease the way. They run neighborhood rap sessions to find out what needs are. They sit in bars, barbershops, and

on corners to listen and learn what is happening. They have had their doors open for one year on shoestring--begged and borrowed--finances. In that time, they have served approximately 300 clients a month.

This kind of cooperative effort between a neighborhood-run organization and an establishment agency like the school seems, in many ways, the best compromise solution to the many problems of opening neighborhood information referral centers. It brings neighborhood expertise and information expertise together. It is, however, admittedly a difficult solution. A great deal of time must be spent in communicating. Most of the effort must be made by the establishment agency to understand the neighborhood point of view. The neighborhood is impatient and unfortunately understands most of the establishment point of view all too well. The neighborhood does not want to hear words like "Well, all university or library people are not alike." They want to see trust and respect in operation, not hear words about promises.

The effort, however, has its pay-off. In my experience, I have never seen a center in a neighborhood that is as in tune with real needs and as trusted by the neighborhood. And, I have never seen a center in which so-called establishment type people worked side by side with neighborhood residents and got something meaningful done with so little friction.

What are the plans for the future? Currently, the center and the school are developing a joint proposal to be submitted to a major granting agency. This proposal would allow for the partnership relationship to continue, but on a grander scale. Specifically, the aim is to:

1. Enlarge the center so it has full-time paid staff instead of volunteers with at least two full-time neighborhood workers.
2. Test an on-line computerized retrieval system which would be the information core the center staff uses to get answers to people's questions. The system is conceived as one which would be constantly modified to reflect changes in the actual information environment.
3. Develop means of using the electronic media as a crucial core of the center's operation.
4. Do research on the responsiveness of the information system to people's needs. Such research would focus on these questions: What problems are information-based and what problems are based in lack of resources? Are agencies providing the services they promise? Can this type of monitoring of the information system be used as a constructive means of changing the system?

This has been a very brief overview of some of our activities.



## REFERENCES

1. Rather than cite the many individual studies which support the data cited, two review sources are given: Greenberg, Bradley S. and Dervin, Brenda. *Use of the Mass Media by the Urban Poor*. New York, Praeger, 1971; and Dervin, Brenda. "Mass and Interpersonal Communication Behaviors as Related to Information Control Behaviors of Black Low-Income Adults." Ph.D. thesis prepared for Michigan State University, 1971.