The National Role in Resource Allocation

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THE ALLOCATION OF resources within a system is conditioned by its objectives. These are determined to a great extent by the way those in control look at their problems; this is conditioned by their experiences, which are in turn conditioned by the allocation of resources in the past. There is thus an inherent internal stability of the arrangements within a system. This stability, however, can be destroyed by some major external force. In the library world such a force is now apparent—the continuous growth in the output of publications. This force has begun, but only just begun, to change the approach to library problems.

For instance, not long ago it was regarded as a confession of failure in some British university libraries to have to borrow a publication from elsewhere. That period has now passed. Today it is recognized that no library, not even a university library, can be an island. But this change in the United Kingdon is so recent that there is no generally accepted philosophy as to when a library should rely on its own resources and when it should rely on those of others. This article will try to formulate such a philosophy. It is written with the conditions in the United Kingdom in mind, but it will attempt to consider the problem in general terms. It will, however, approach the problem from the viewpoint of academic libraries.

I will assume that it is axiomatic that the local resources of an academic library are limited. I also assume that the total resources of a national or a regional library system will be limited. The questions to be discussed relate to the division of functions (and hence of resources) between libraries designed to serve particular institutions and libraries designed to serve a wider audience. The discussion will be primarily concerned with the cost effectiveness of a library system as a whole.

Despite the risk of over-simplifying the problem, let us consider that an academic library is concerned with meeting the needs of its students,

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staff and research workers. The students are mainly undergraduates who in general need a relatively small number of publications, but in any institution they may well need multiple copies of a number of titles. In general such students will need the books they want quickly or, due to the competing pressures on students, they may never in practice have time to read the specified items. The extent to which it is the responsibility of the students themselves to provide the publications they need is outside the scope of this article.

The needs of the staff and the research workers are qualitatively quite different from those of the students. First, they need to know what exists which might be useful to them and, second, they need to be able to obtain any publication they would like to see.

These, in brief, are the objectives to be considered for a total library system. These aims give rise to three activities: creating guides to what exists, making these guides available and helping readers to use them, and supplying the items the readers require. The question thus arises about the division of functions between local and national organizations with regard to these activities. This discussion will be more concerned with what this division of functions should be than with what can immediately be achieved using the existing financial arrangements.

To proceed, let us look at what happens in an academic library. It selects and orders publications for the library with or without the faculty's assistance. The library maintains some sort of record of the publications it receives, and it assists readers in discovering what they want to read.

The selection, however it is carried out, is the result of many arbitrary decisions. It should secure the items for which there is any appreciable demand but, as a rule, these are only a small fraction of the total input. The selection process is mainly concerned with making a number of arbitrary decisions about the items which might be required only occasionally. The fear that a library will not be able to supply an item if it is wanted results in its spending whatever resources it can secure for this purpose. Rarely is the acquisition decision process reviewed in light of the subsequent use of the items selected, in spite of appreciable evidence to indicate that a great many of the acquisitions of an academic library are very rarely used. The justification of this situation is that it is the duty of a library to supply a publication when it is wanted. It cannot rely on a slow and uncertain interlibrary service except to supplement local resources. Such a service is only used when the local acquisition policy has failed through lack of resources or foresight. The interlibrary service possibilities are not taken into account in deciding acquisition policy.

However, if the interlibrary service is able to provide most of what is wanted quickly, a new situation arises and a new philosophy is needed. There appear to be two possible bases for such a philosophy. The first is quite simply a question of cost—with regard to the cost of acquisition, storage and issuing, and the cost of interlibrary loans, which will be the cheaper? Undoubtedly, using this basis many large academic libraries would be much smaller than they are at present. This approach to the problem has considerable attraction for those who control the purse strings, but most librarians consider it to be too crude. To resist it, it is necessary to have some other basis than the ancient philosophy that each library should aim to be as large as possible. The only alternative appears to depend upon using "success on demand" or availability factors.

This second approach is strangely alien to librarians. Undoubtedly there is the technical difficulty of measuring availability in an open-access collection, but this difficulty is not insuperable. The real difficulty seems to be the survival of the ancient belief that a library's purpose is to have everything on hand when it is wanted. Whatever the difficulties, it is the responsibility of the management of a service—of any service—to measure the performance of the service it purports to offer.

The use of availability factors would provide not only a rationale for deciding when to rely on central services, but also a measure which would indicate how the local needs and resources are changing. This is important; at present most academic librarians feel that their services are deteriorating but they are unable to cite any figures on this which are meaningful to users. Availability factors could be meaningful to library users.

Availability, however it is measured, is made up of two essential elements: that which is available and the speed with which it is available.

Different systems have been tried for supplementing local resources. In brief, it seems that the systems which depend on union catalogs and library cooperation are inherently slow and uncertain. On the other hand the National Lending Library (NLL) demonstrated that a central loan collection can not only provide a satisfactory service, but can also create confidence in the users that it can provide such a service.

The question inevitably arises as to where the financial resources needed by a central service should come from. Logic might suggest that the libraries which benefit from a central service should pay for it.

However this would require an academic library not only to admit that it did not have sufficient resources to have everything, but also to give up some of its limited resources to the central service. This line is not likely to be successful. The slow development of the Center for Research Libraries (CRL) as a library for libraries is probably an illustration of this. From afar it looks as though the development of CRL has also been hampered by the idea that it should not collect items which were usually available in members libraries.

The alternative approach is to secure direct support from central government funds. This approach was possible for the National Library of Medicine in the United States and the NLL in the United Kingdom. Because in the United Kingdom the NLL's resources came from the central government, there was an inherent obligation to serve all libraries. This eliminated the technical difficulty that CRL faces of identifying but not collecting the serials held by the large academic libraries. It also made it possible for the NLL to adopt from the beginning the policy set down by K. D. Metcalfe: "One final warning if we are to make mistakes, as we are bound to do. Let us try to make them, in the case of *most* libraries, by not getting enough, because the law of diminishing returns will come to our aid. But, and this is a large but, let us make the mistake on the side of getting too much in the National Libraries. The total cost to the library world of this method will be less, and nationally only a drop in the bucket."[1]

The policy of collecting all "worthwhile" publications not only eliminated the technical problem of discovering what other libraries held or were likely to obtain, it also solved another technical problem which was not generally appreciated. The commonly held publications are the ones for which there is the heaviest demand in the libraries which hold them. They are consequently the publications that libraries are the least willing to lend to other libraries; at the same time, within the total library system they are generally the publications for which there is the heaviest interlibrary demand. Thus, the inclusion of such items in a central loan collection facilitates the working of an interlibrary loan system which depends upon the cooperation of other libraries. It reduces the chance that they will be asked to lend the items they do not really want to lend.

A combination of a set of historical accidents and some logic led to the central government making sufficient resources available to start the NLL. As the library developed, its costs were to an appreciable extent covered by some consequential savings in other organizations, many of which were financed from the public purse. This became most apparent with regard to special libraries. The savings here, however, did not arise from any obvious reduction in the expenditure on acquisitions, but from a reduction in the expenditure on increasing storage capacity and in the true costs of making and handling interlibrary requests. Such savings are of the hidden variety which would not predispose a library to make a contribution to the creation of a central collection.

It would be difficult to evaluate these hidden savings for U.K. academic libraries, as in recent years nearly all academic institutions have been expanding in student numbers and in subject coverage. This has inevitably resulted in a substantial increase in the size of academic libraries. There is evidence to support the view that the existence of the NLL gave considerable help to the development of the research activities of the newer academic institutions, but in general these spend less on acquisitions than the older and larger academic libraries. There is no doubt that, relatively speaking, the latter have benefited least from the creation of the NLL; thus these institutions would have been the least likely to have contributed to the creation of the NLL collection. Moreover, if charges had been made on a service basis for items supplied, the large academic libraries would not have contributed a great deal. Consequently an attempt to develop a central loan service by relying primarily on the support of the larger academic libraries would not have been successful in the United Kingdom.

In fact, initially the NLL only charged U.K. users for the costs of postage and of making photocopies. More recently, the NLL has begun to move in the direction of making its charges cover the cost of handling requests (as distinct from the costs of acquiring and storing its collection). However, so far this level of charging has only been achieved for the overseas photocopying services. It now looks as though this level of charging would be acceptable for the NLL's U.K. services, but that to go beyond this would require the broad acceptance of a new philosophy based on cost-effectiveness and availability concepts.

Once a new philosophy of the sort envisaged here develops, librarians will begin to regard their libraries less as independent units and more as local branches of a national system. This will make it possible for librarians to take a new approach to library records. No longer will it be assumed that an academic library should have a comprehensive guide to the publications it holds. This assumption is now so widely held that it is rarely questioned. By tradition most libraries make subject guides to their monographs. They have quietly and unconsciously abandoned the idea which Panizzi once had that a library should make a similar guide to the contents of its periodicals. They are quite happy to use guides to the contents of periodicals which have been made by others, so why do they persist in making, at great expense, homemade guides to their monograph collections? Of course the homemade guides—usually called catalogs—say where the publications have been shelved. But could not a much simpler location guide be made? Have the technical possibilities of using computers to make the sort of records which were considered necessary in the past distracted attention from the more fundamental question: What sort of records will be necessary in the future? Are the published guides to monographs less adequate than the guides to periodicals or is it that the traditions of librarians do not die easily? One thing is certain: a research worker is usually more interested in what exists anywhere on a particular subject than in what exists in a particular library. The bibliographical guides to what exists can clearly be prepared on a national or an international basis. There is no reason why a library should prepare a bibliographical guide to one of its collections unless that collection is fairly comprehensive and the guide has more than local significance—i.e., it is part of the overall plan for guides to what exists.

This approach would mean that most library catalogs could cease to attempt to be complete bibliographical descriptions of the contents of particular libraries. Instead, they need only be simple guides designed to provide a rapid, but not necessarily a 100 percent, access to what is available locally.

This notion runs counter to what most librarians seek to do. Nevertheless, it seems to fit in with a cost-benefit approach and the mood of users. The latter is illustrated by the popularity of MEDLINE, which is mainly concerned with making rapidly available references to only a fraction of the existing medical literature.

One can conclude simply that the continuous increase in the output of publications has reached the point at which the approach of librarians to their problems must change. Objectively, the situation requires the development of central services—of libraries for libraries, etc. But, beset by the pressures on their existing resources, librarians are unlikely to make available cooperatively the resources needed to create the central services. However, once such services exist and can demonstrate their effectiveness, librarians would be more ready to rethink their aims. This would make them more willing to contribute to the maintenance of the central services. Thus, initially, the allocation of funds from some central source to create these central services is essential.

Within the scope of this general proposition it is now possible to discern some priorities. First, since it is the increase in the output of publications which demands action, the first task is to create a central library supply system to supplement local resources. The existence of such a system would in time create a new approach not merely to acquisition policies but also to library records. The introduction of a revised library recording system in the noncentral libraries would be a consequential development and hence should be a second priority.

Reference

1. *Acquisitions Policy of the National Medical Library. Proceedings of a Symposium held 12 April, 1956.* Washington, D.C., National Library of Medicine, 1957, p. 80.

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