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THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY'S PLACE IN THE CHAIN OF INFORMATION TRANSFER

by

G. A. HAMEL

'Every person is entitled to one  
confrontation in a lifetime.  
Are you keeping up with the latest  
confrontation?'

(Times Literary Supplement)

Those engaged in the library profession holding positions of the type that I hold myself will share the experience that it is extremely difficult to impart to people outside the profession what exactly has moved and still moves a person to devote his or her life to library work, and what really concerns a librarian. On the rare occasions that people such as university directors need - for managerial or financial reasons - to hear the views of the librarian it often happens ( and I am now speaking as a librarian) that one is misunderstood and the interviewers go back to their place of work without the idea being dispelled that professional librarians, like other happy individuals working in the cultural field, hold pleasant positions in life largely pursuing their personal inclinations. In their view the librarian takes great pleasure in studying catalogues of all kinds, and finds great satisfaction either in assembling impressive numbers of volumes or in the mere tracing and ultimate acquisition of some out of the way imprint.

Of course there are still many people within our profession who, by their uncontrolled enthusiastic attitude towards precious literature (a sparkling eye while speaking of some unique edition is already sufficient) daily confirm the picture of the unworldly person standing somewhat apart from the mainstream of life. But who would blame them for that particular love? One must however admit that the difficulty in conveying a correct picture of the profession cannot exclusively be imputed to the stubbornness of the outside world in clinging to old ideas about libraries; basic to all these wrong thoughts may well be the empirical situation conditioned by traditional library patterns, housing conditions, insufficient funds and similar material and immaterial factors(1). To be honest, librarians are also to be blamed not so much for lack of ambition - for most librarians are far from short-sighted people - but rather for what they themselves like to call their modesty which in fact is an euphemism for the lack of mental power, inspiration and push, necessary successfully to bring their case forward and actually play the more significant role they desire, and for their backwardness (defined as innocence = mental laziness) in applying modern techniques and/or methods such as those developed by operations research for the benefit of library management.

Nevertheless those who have made an attempt will admit how difficult it is to characterise the function of the university library. I know of no definition which satisfactorily covers every important aspect. We know that it needs more than a collection to form a library. It is true that a library may not be held to be identical with a collection of graphic documents, though a library without a collection is non-existent. A library does suppose a certain internal structure; items held need be described, and items and descriptions need arrangement in a consistent orderly way that allows one to make use of the information filed. But even this is not a true description of a library, for without human beings to serve and exploit the collection's contents the collection is nothing more than a lifeless heap of records. One could safely say that a collection only comes to life through people, not solely through those on the staff who are supposed to manage the whole enterprise, but particularly through those other human beings whom we habitually, and in my view wrongly, refer to in an impersonal way as library users or customers.

These days we have learned to think of libraries not as a place, nor in terms of collections (which are static), but as a process or in sociological terms as a living organisation, a human institution in the sense of an organised social group, i.e. a group with a particular goal and approximate means to reach that goal. Libraries are not primarily the warehouses of a given society providing reading instruments to that society - the scholarly library housing the archival products or residue of the intellectual activities of the scholarly society - but they are essentially agents with a creative mission. Under the right conditions they are themselves the instruments within and for the society that they are supposed to serve. Libraries can reach that goal if they cover the literature needs of their clientele, not after but preferably before, these needs mature and are formulated by the scholars they serve. In that way they can illuminate the scholar's/ researcher's mind, and we should be aware that the academic comes to the library for the same reason that he goes to his laboratory, namely to broaden his insight in matters unknown to him. If librarians cannot help the searcher he will turn elsewhere, and this is why experts doing basic research in a specific field make use of other information channels, or make use of none at all for lack of existing information.

Librarians in the above view are treasure holders in the positive sense of the word, quite unlike modern embodiments of Scrooge who collect for the sake of collecting (in our case information) from every corner of the world, but rather like those working in banking whose main interest lies in the circulation of assets. Libraries will thus become a dynamic force, but not before we have understood the scholar's directions of thought. In this context I like to quote Rhodes and Evans(2) who cite Line and Taylor:

Line (ref. 1) says, "Academic libraries, like all other libraries, exist as media of communication between knowledge and people."

This view is expanded by Taylor (ref. 6), Director of the Library of Hampshire College in the United States. He believes society is becoming aware of the critical necessity of adjusting social institutions to fit human needs, to make them of human size and scope.

Traditionally the approach has been only of orienting the user to the library, but the need is to function as a communications centre for the users. The major function in Taylor's view is to raise the probability that a person will find messages, both factual and fanciful, pertinent to his expressed and unexpressed needs. The library is seen not as a place but as a process (form of communication) occurring in faculty offices, laboratories, and dormitories. The library as a building is considered as just a warehouse.

Having said this about the librarian's mission it is time to translate these big words into some practical program. But before embarking upon that topic we should realise that we are not the only people within our modern complex society who are in the communication or information business. It would be an understatement to say that information is not always wrapped up so that it can be manipulated by librarians. Investigations have moreover revealed that only a minor part of what we may call structured information is being processed by and consulted in or through libraries. It would seem that libraries are far from having a monopoly of scientific information, and there is a trend in the direction of information being channelled via networks which are operated parallel to individual libraries and/or library networks.

It would seem to me that the dispute of former days on the question as to whether "documentation" fell within or outside the province of libraries - a dispute that apparently died away after organised research had taken full responsibility for producing analytical records of periodical articles - is again alive and kicking. It is now continued on a broader scale (i.e. documentation should now be read as the provision of information<sup>(3)</sup>) and fought as a much more terrifying life and death struggle between libraries on the one hand and the so-called information or resource centres on the other.

In his very thorough and reliable textbook Loosjes<sup>(4)</sup> makes the statement that libraries, at the time of the earlier dispute (i.e. in the early years of this century), were lacking in the staff and funds to undertake the major new task of analysing individual articles in periodicals.

Moreover "libraries had not reached a level of organisation to begin such an undertaking and especially to see it through successfully. In the case of periodicals, librarians clung to their old loyalty of conservation and, therefore, other centres had to assume the task of exploiting the periodicals, a task which had to be faced. It was soon apparent that this was not to the advantage of the development of librarianship, which is all the more to be regretted, because in the early stages the librarians of that time doubtless saw in this a job to be tackled. At that time, however, librarians were more concerned with the pedagogic aspect of their calling: they had emblazoned mass education on their banner and therefore they did not have the time (nor indeed the enthusiasm) when the flood of periodicals rendered imperative a systematic evaluation, beyond the call of library control and storage. From then on, according to Egan and Shera, the ways diverge further and further, since it is a major difference - as they opine - whether a collection be serving pedagogic ends or whether it be giving exact answers to exact questions from science and research. Therefore, in librarianship itself a split occurs into public and special libraries: the public libraries stay behind with their ideal of education and the special libraries revert to their real task. An intermediate position is taken by university libraries, which seek to combine in themselves elements of both types."

Bogaert, whom I have already cited, in characterising the university librarian's main concern in various periods of time makes, for the period up to and including the 19th century, first and foremost mention of the activity of building big collections which, as we know, led the librarians of those days to place the task of conserving literature above other responsibilities<sup>(5)</sup>. In Bogaert's view during the first half of the current century the librarian can be represented as greatly involved in attuning the library to the local university's requirements, his area of concern being the local library, and the upgrading of its adequacy through the design of matching cataloguing devices.

The librarian of our days - and now Bogaert turns to the subjunctive mood - should primarily be concerned with the educative and creative role of the library vis-a-vis the scholarly society. He should pay attention to 1) the growing need for in-depth analysis of documents, 2) the need for a planned co-ordination of library activities and functions both nationally and internationally (network building, standardisation of cataloguing rules, co-ordination of the acquisition of library materials), 3) the extension of the local reader service and reader instruction, and 4) library research (user needs, cost benefit and effectivity studies).

These are the librarian's aims and goals for the present day and the near future, but how should the poor university librarian proceed to reach these goals? Is he still the authority who can decide on the library's policy? We all know that he is not. Furthermore it is all too well known that the time of big university libraries is over and that the growth-rate of all big libraries - with exception may be of the country's national library which at best can grow according to its stature (proportionnellement a sa grandeur, Leibnitz) - has, for decades, been behind the growth of the world literature. This is particularly true for the university's central library which in most fields (subject fields and fields of activity) is losing ground to the departmental libraries. Though it may be true that the central library as a collection is no longer regarded by the user as being of the same importance as in the past, the central library in my opinion still has a future, primarily as a steering and service centre where all strands come together and long range decisions can be taken (of course in concert with the rest of the library's staff). There one finds the accessions, the loan, the cataloguing and the bibliographical information, as well as the library research and automation departments, and there the large reading rooms are situated. It will house the university's central catalogue(s) and the bulk of the university's older literature. In addition to the collections of books and periodicals which are no longer in heavy demand, it may hold some current collections: in my case these are publications of a more general and/or multidisciplinary nature, and material on subjects that are not in the university's curriculum and which therefore need not to be available in the departmental libraries.

The problem of the degree of centralisation versus decentralisation is not easy to solve, but - though too great a fragmentation of stocks should be prevented in the interest of readers in general and only workable units can be accepted - one is tempted to say that the literature should be housed where the largest number of readers who may need the literature are working. The geographical lay-out of the university and the walking distances will, however, decide on the distribution of library services; in this light it would of course be better if the university planners would from the beginning take into account the teaching and research staff's library and information needs, and in so doing have regard for the multi- and interdisciplinary approach of many project oriented studies.

Notwithstanding all that has been said above, the central library's part in the information transfer is on the decline, now that the bias of the university library's system has gradually moved to the departmental or study libraries. One might now believe these libraries to play the role formerly played by the once unfragmented university library, and to act as the information centres of the future, but since libraries as a whole - admittedly the big unfragmented libraries - have renounced, as we have seen above, the task of in-depth analysis of world literature, it is hard to believe that the fragmented libraries that have sprung up by the hundreds in almost any field of learning, will be sufficiently well equipped and organised to cope with this problem, and to channel all relevant information which nowadays is much more complex than in the earlier part of this century.

For those who regard the library as central to the information process there is reason for concern, the more so since the newer information devices allow the individual searcher within a laboratory to tap the scientific resource centres directly thus by-passing the library. In theory this may seem true since for the information user it is immaterial who has processed the literature concerned, provided that the information offered is relevant. But I would be amazed if in practice the said scholar, if trained correctly, did not first check with his own library before proceeding to the terminal. Furthermore, the librarian of the departmental or laboratory library, as partner in the total university library system, would probably with the consent of the systems head librarian have subscribed to the terminal network that he thinks of significance to the unit he serves. There is one more reason for confidence on the side of the librarian, and that is the doubt whether there will ever be a time when the individual searcher will be acquainted with the technical peculiarities of conversational bibliographic systems which differ from one data base to another.

The question as to what extent librarians are more qualified than others to handle sophisticated information sources is more difficult to answer. Libraries have always been information centres and will remain so, provided that they take the trouble to acquire the relevant tools, i.e. take out the right subscriptions and do everything possible to keep up with new developments. However, information provision is not only a question of providing bits and pieces, but rather a matter of familiarising the searcher with the whole of knowledgeable science, either neatly structured or not. The synthesis of knowledge, if at all possible outside the searcher's mind, is more a function of libraries than of any other institution on the field of information handling. The more a retrieval system is structured to solve exactly defined problems, the less it can offer assistance in finding what is not sought, but what is nevertheless relevant. I would think that the librarian's contribution to what is called the information and communication science would lie in this field.

It is correctly stated by the OECD Ad Hoc Group on Scientific and Technical Information(6) that "the challenge of modern societies is the effective use of specialised information to guide the destiny of these societies", but the task of making available in a useful form the right information, reliable and relevant to the needs of those circles who want the information is greatly dependent on the contribution of libraries and the imagination and creative work of librarians. It is therefore, somewhat disappointing to say the least, to read in a recent Advice of the Technical Aspects Group of the European Community to CIDST(7) on 'the role of libraries in the European network', that they consider the supplying of documents to be the libraries' principal function. There is in my opinion no place nor reason for a special library network; all institutions in the information field should be connected to one and the same network that is presently being built up.

Librarians - but the same is true of other information workers - think of themselves as members of a specific species. They would do better to regard themselves as members of the same group who should try in our world of mass production - mass production of scientific workers and students and mass production of (printed) knowledge - to structure the scientific knowledge in such a way that the individual scholar is in a position to obtain that particular part of knowledge he needs. The system as such should be a guarantee that the society remains flexible and humane(8).

## REFERENCES

- (1) For a sketch of the lamentable Belgian university libraries situation see for instance Bogaert, J. Universiteitsbibliotheken in het brandpunt. Bibliotheekgids 49(2), p58-74, 1973.
- (2) Rhodes, R.G., Evans, A.J. The educational role of the university library and the provision of information services. IATUL Proceedings, 7(1), p11-25, 1973.
- (3) Compare Shera who speaks of documentation as 'bibliographical organisation' and understands by this "The canalisation of graphic records to all users, for all purposes and at all levels (of use) in such a way as to maximise the social utilisation of recorded human experience". (quoted from Loosjes, T.R. On documentation of scientific literature. London, Butterworths, 1967, p2.)
- (4) Loosjes, T.R. On documentation of scientific literature. London, Butterworths, 1967, p16.
- (5) If one may believe Paul Wasserman: The new librarianship: a challenge for change. Bowker, New York & London, 1972, this attitude still prevails and has fossilised the library to the extent that it has become an almost irrelevant institution.
- (6) Information for a changing society. Some policy considerations. OECD. Paris, 1971, p17.
- (7) Committee for Information and Documentation on Science and Technology (CIDST).
- (8) Compare: Knight, D.M. and Shepley Nourse, E. Libraries at large. Tradition, innovation and the national interest. Bowker, New York, 1969.

## DISCUSSION

A. J. EVANS: British universities are introducing more and more interdisciplinary courses which draw on a tremendous range of literature. Such developments must surely militate against departmentalisation as opposed to centralisation.

W. DEHENNIN: At Louvain we have 60% interdisciplinary and 40% single discipline courses.

G. A. HAMEL: Teaching staff want the literature close at hand which has led to large Faculty libraries, with considerable duplication in the main Library. The University Librarian must make dispositions appropriate to his own institution.

V. AMMUNDSEN: I entirely agree with your criticism of the views of the Technical Advice Group on the role of libraries in the European network. As far as we know the European networking system will begin with ESRO and most ESRO terminals are in technological university libraries thus bringing us within the system. Everyone here will remember that CIDST is concerned with science and technology and I ask

DISCUSSION (continued)

those present to try and influence the attitudes of their national representatives concerning the role of the technological university libraries.

G. A. HAMEL: I fear that in the eyes of the scientist the librarian's role is becoming less important than formerly since the scientist is now supposed to go directly to the data bases. However, in my view the scientific community will still depend on the librarian for background evaluation of data bases and techniques.

R. A. WALL: It seems to me that libraries can find a new role by sending people to industry to help them to use the literature. I support the work being done by Mrs. Chazan and her group but suspect that legal problems could prove awkward. There is an art in presenting a good research report, and one should provide full documentation of every statement made.

G. A. HAMEL: I would like both students and academic staff to know how to 'cross the forest'. Although readers are not yet so well equipped that they know the paths through the woods a librarian should not accompany them on every occasion. Staffing limitations mean that libraries can only afford to offer guidance; in future readers should be able to help themselves.

R. A. WALL: We have a multiple role to play - as catalyst and interactive chemical.