

The needs of library users

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The needs of library users are described in the context of a self-service, user-oriented library

Introduction

It is estimated that the average scientist spends between 20 and 25 per cent of his working time searching for information.¹ Because of this, it is obviously desirable that information needs should be studied with a view to improving the libraries' role as an information transfer agent.

Sources of information

A review of the literature describing user studies makes it abundantly clear that the flow of information is by no means simple. An individual's information gathering processes are determined by such diverse factors as job function, organizational size, personal qualifications and academic discipline.²

All of the various channels which are used as a means of acquiring information, for example journals, books, colleagues, conferences, reports, trade publications, vendor catalogues and advertisements, can be classified as formal (written) or informal (oral).

Since informal sources supply users with at least half of their information requirements, librarians must be aware of specific research projects, skills and interests that can serve to facilitate interpersonal contact.

In spite of the libraries' traditional role as the primary source of formal information, numerous studies have shown that researchers do not as a rule seek out the assistance of librarians. Why is this so? Could it be that librarians have failed to maintain adequate subject expertise? Have librarians underestimated the need for efficient management and housekeeping? Lawrence Clark Powell in a recent article³ describing the transition from library administrator to library user states: 'Library housekeeping is important and the librarians who practice it are indispensable. As a library user I take housekeeping for granted, and am concerned only when it is bad housekeeping.'

1. J. M. Lufkin, 'Reading habits of engineers', *IEEE trans. educ.*, E-9, 179 (1966).

2. D. N. Wood, 'User studies', *Aslib proc.*, 23 (1), 11 (1971).

3. L. C. Powell, 'Shoe on the other foot', *Wilson lib. bull.*, 45 (4), 384 (1970).

User needs

Perhaps the most underrated factor in evaluating users' needs is the somewhat transient nature of the need itself. Studies of users who failed to find what they were looking for at Birmingham University, revealed that 65 per cent of the undergraduate students and 58 per cent of the graduate students failed to consult catalogues, abstracting-indexing tools or library staff members.¹

This raises some rather troublesome questions in regard to administrative practices in libraries and suggests the following working assumptions:

1. Information sources are selected primarily on the basis of ease of use (i.e. browsing *v.* searching the catalogue).
2. Libraries have not provided adequate information on the availability, function or use of basic reference tools.
3. Library procedures are too often designed for the convenience of librarians. In short, libraries have not developed a user-orientation.

What is a user-orientation? This is perhaps best illustrated by the following example. Research workers using a variety of information sources (for example *Chemical abstracts*, *Engineering index*, *Science citation index*) will tabulate a list of references to articles in books and journals which they are interested in reading. A user-oriented library will have:

1. Provided references to each periodical title on the subscription list from the titles as given in the various abstracting and indexing services.
2. A firmly established procedure for cataloguing books in monographic series under their separate titles (for example, *Technique of organic chemistry*).
3. Treated title changes of periodicals as a cessation of the old title and the beginning of a new title.
4. One card catalogue which can be searched for books and journals both acquired and on order.

In this way the information-gathering activities of users are not dependent on the assistance of library staff members. This is the essence of user-orientation.

In areas where users must rely on the assistance of librarians (for example acquisitions and cataloguing) there is the continuing problem of acquiring and processing newly published books, prior to their availability in the bookstores. One solution to this problem is the library publication of a 'newly-announced books' newsletter, tailored to the research interests of its users. This is, in a sense, the basic area where librarians can assist in the information gathering activities of research workers and is obviously the *sine qua non* for more ambitious attempts to supply highly specialized information. By giving users advance notification of new titles, orders can be generated and processed prior to publication dates, obviating the major justification for dealer plans.

The receipt of new books and journal issues should be announced both through library display and subject-oriented personal notification (for example individual announcements to each requestor and monthly lists to all staff members). Finally, a well-defined, fail-safe system of reserving new books (or those charged out) should be provided with either personal notification or delivery of the book.

User orientation in science libraries

Implementation of a user-orientation largely depends on the ability of the librarian to 'think like a user'. Gratuitous as this might sound, the approach is often very difficult to attain. In the absence of experiencing the problems scientists have with the literature, the librarian is often faced with attempting to solve the

1. B. C. Vickery, *Report by Birmingham University Library in University Grants Commission. Report of the Committee on Libraries*, London, HMSO, 1967.

insoluble and as a result is both pitied and despised for his assumed indifference and/or ignorance. Traditional literature guides are no longer of much assistance since their bibliographic approach neglects the need for a ready access to the really important sources. Thus, to function in a user-oriented environment, librarians must possess the qualifications of literature searchers: not that they must actually perform the searches but that they must be familiar with the attendant problems.

Library automation

The preceding description of information seeking activities by research workers makes no mention of the possible use of computerized systems for information retrieval. Speaking as a representative of the academic community, I feel that libraries are overly ambitious when they attempt to provide assistance in the area of information selection. Professor Ziman of the University of Bristol, in a recent talk on 'Information, Communication and Knowledge', charged that:

much effort has been expended on the idea that what everybody really has been waiting for is a daily alerting service that will tell each one of us about the latest papers in the topics which interest us. Thus, after giving instructions on a punch card to be kept up to date on 'the theory of liquids' or 'electron theory of metals', the latest abstracts or papers on just these topics will be waiting on my desk each morning. But I don't really care that much about what everybody is doing in these subjects; and I don't have time to read all this stuff carefully, since it is worse than the leaflets distributed by publishers.¹

The rationale for large mechanized systems is generally based on the current 'crisis in documentation' or 'literature explosion'. The fallacy inherent in this approach is that many academic scientists seem unaware of the impending doom. The quantity of scientific communications is obviously on the increase but few librarians seem to appreciate the difference between the quantity of literature and its quality. It may not matter all that much if a scientist does not know about 90 per cent of the work in his field, as long as he reads the small number of core journals which usually contain all the most important research.

Conclusion

In summary, the anomalous dilemma of rising costs and decreasing service² suggests that libraries are straying from their essential business of gathering, putting in order and giving.³

Current emphasis on the mechanical aspects of acquisitions and cataloguing not only overlooks the prime importance of collection usage but also fails to realize that the giving function must be expanded to include self-service use (i.e. a user orientation). Unless libraries are successful in the area of uniting book and reader their very existence, as we currently know them, is threatened.

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Documentation, libraries
and archives

Studies and research 2

Public library legislation: a comparative study

by Frank M. Gardner

It has become increasingly evident that effective public library services cannot be developed and maintained without appropriate legislation providing for a nation-wide service, offering, as far as possible, equal access and opportunity for all. Unesco, therefore, concluded a contract with the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), for a comparative study of existing library legislation that would be helpful to developing and developed countries alike in drafting legislation. The present volume contains the study which was carried out by Mr Frank M. Gardner on IFLA's behalf.

Mr Gardner surveys legislation in fourteen countries, ten developed and four developing, all of which he has visited in recent years. Since in some federal countries legislation is restricted to the states, in all, twenty Acts are considered. The countries were chosen to show different aspects of existing law. Particular attention is given to Europe and to Africa, where rapid development is taking place, and the basic legislation has important lessons for other countries.

The study shows that while a general pattern for library legislation is emerging, general conditions and local-government arrangements in each country are so different that only general guidance can be given. The last chapter sets out twenty-two principles to be taken into consideration in the drafting or revising of public library legislation.

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