



Role and Position of Libraries

*"Even the most misfitting child
Who's chanced upon the library's worth,
Sits with the genius of the Earth
And turns the key to the whole world."*

Ted Hughes, 1997.

WHAT IS A LIBRARY?

A library is a collection of materials, containing information, ideas and works of imagination, organised for use, and staffed by people trained to make them available.

Libraries take many physical forms, ranging from large purpose-built buildings, to rooms in parent institutions, and small temporary structures. Mobile examples include road vehicles, boats, trains, trams and even donkeys and camels.

Their collections range from a few thousand in for example a school library, to several millions. The library experience can range from an evening at the Metropolitan Opera to half an hour at Sesame Street, to the key to an understanding metaphysics.

The term "*library*" is often taken to equate to "*public library*". However, there is a huge variety of other kinds of libraries, fulfilling different purposes and serving different client groups.

Most countries have a "*national library*", which often has the role of coordinating the network of other kinds of libraries throughout that country, in addition to collecting materials and making them available.

Most countries also have a large network of public libraries. The American Library Association, for example, boasts that the public library network in that country has many times more outlets than McDonalds. The UK network consists of around 5,000 service points.

Educational Institutions, such as universities, colleges and schools all have libraries, serving the educational objectives of their parent bodies. In some countries, it is common for them to be open to the general public. Indeed, in Norway, university libraries have to be open to the public by law. In a small number of countries, notably in Eastern Europe, a large university library also acts as the national library.

Libraries also provide vital services in government departments, research institutes, museums, and in many different environments in the private sector.

Libraries are needed more than ever in an age in which people and communities desperately need to consider alternative points of view and information, to challenge the spin doctors and the mass media, to take control

of their own destinies and make up their own minds.

HOW MANY LIBRARIES ARE THERE?

This is difficult to say but it is estimated that in the area of the current member states of the European Union there are 90,000 libraries. On that basis there must be well over 250,000 around the world. They exist throughout the world even in the least developed countries.

WHAT DO LIBRARIES MAKE AVAILABLE?

Traditionally libraries have acquired print-based materials, including newspapers, maps, pamphlets, illustrations and many other items as well as books. Despite the popular misconception, they have never confined themselves to books. Indeed, libraries pre-dated the invention of the book, collecting papyrus scrolls (the original Alexandria library was a good example) and manuscripts (the mediaeval monastery libraries, for instance). It was therefore no great leap forward to collect every new medium that contained information as it emerged. All forms of sound and visual recording (for example, gramophone records, cassettes, CDs, videos, and DVDs) quickly joined the collections in many kinds of libraries as they became available. Computer based sources of information were quickly added to the portfolios and there are now many libraries around the world which have very substantial collections of CD ROMs and electronic journals. Many publications are now "*born digital*" and a good proportion never appear in print form. Where they do, the digital and print versions are increasingly different in content. As a result, there are some libraries which, to the first-time visitor, do not look like the conventional idea of a "library" at all.

It should be noted that there has been a long-term trend towards the creation of global media corporations embracing publications in many different media, created in different countries. Content is much more important than the medium which contains the content. On the other hand for many kinds of media, especially those in the Scientific, Technical and Medical (STM) fields, libraries are a hugely important market segment. An advantage of the application of new technologies recently emerging is the ability to introduce differential pricing in favour of libraries in the developing world. However, there remains substantial cause for concern in the growing concentration of media ownership into fewer, larger corporations. It is increasingly important that libraries collect and make available the output of smaller, more local and specialist publishers.

WHAT SERVICES DO THEY PROVIDE?

This depends very much on the kind of library and the client group or groups it serves. National libraries, for example, usually are required to collect and preserve the national publishing output of the country it serves, making sure that it is available not only for current users, but also for future generations. Typically they also compile the national bibliography of publications, and act as the library of last resort for items, which other libraries in the national library network cannot provide. They are usually assisted in their task of collecting by a legal deposit system, whereby publishers have to make copies of their publications available to them free of charge. They frequently have sophisticated preservation and conservation programmes. Electronic publishing provides many challenges to this aspect of their role. National libraries also often take on the role of making available material published in other countries, especially scientific and technical publications.

Public libraries typically provide services free of charge to anyone who wishes to use them, although lending is often restricted to residents of the locality. Many provide literacy programmes, reader development promotions and act as an information point for the availability of local public services. Typically they collect

and preserve a wide range of materials relating to the history and development of the locality. Special services have been developed to serve the needs of particular groups such as children (including story-telling programmes), housebound people, and the visually impaired.

Libraries in education institutions have developed a wide range of services to meet the educational objectives of their parent institutions. School libraries clearly need to support the curriculum, but they also collect books and other materials to encourage reading and spirit of enquiry, as well as to meet the needs of the teachers and administrative staff.

Universities are among the most advanced in terms of developing electronic based services. Many have large collections of electronic journals, as well as sophisticated searching tools available both to students and faculty. Teaching hospitals are often attached to universities. They require sophisticated library services to make available the latest medical research published in a variety of media.

Libraries in the corporate sector have been in the forefront of developing services tailored to meet the needs of individuals or small groups of clients. They profile their users (the employees of the firm) and package information and provide alerting systems to ensure they are aware of the latest information relating to their current research or project. Increasingly they are involved in knowledge management, harnessing the totality of the knowledge available in their company.

HOW ARE LIBRARIES FUNDED?

National Libraries are typically funded by the government from taxes. But in common with most public services around the world, they need to supplement these funds with money raised from a range of sources, including sponsorship, charging for some services, sales of publications, etc. A recent free exhibition put on at the National Library of Australia of library treasures from around the world raised over a million Australian dollars in sales of publications and related merchandise.

Public libraries typically rely on a combination of national and local government funding, increasingly supplemented by charges for some services and sponsorship or project money.

Educational libraries rely primarily on income from their parent institution. But they too are usually encouraged to raise income from a variety of sources. Those in the corporate sector are usually regarded as cost centres contributing to company objectives.

DO LIBRARIES WORK TOGETHER?

Yes. Libraries have a long tradition of networking both within countries and across national boundaries. Most countries have inter-library lending systems whereby books and other documents not in stock may be borrowed to satisfy the needs of a local user. These systems expanded into document delivery systems once photocopying became generally available and electronic document delivery is becoming the norm in some subject areas.

Libraries also collaborate in such areas as collection development to avoid the duplication of expensive works and to ensure comprehensive collections in a region, and in staff training. Consortia of libraries, either of a particular type or in a particular region are developing primarily to negotiate licences for the purchase and use of electronic publications.

Libraries have grasped the opportunities presented by the application of new technologies to revolutionise the

technical processes required to deliver services. Examples include shared cataloguing, whereby many libraries share the task of preparing catalogue records so that duplication of effort is avoided. Other examples include self-issue and return systems, and security measures.

A recent trend is the convergence of the so-called memory institutions, including some kinds of libraries, archives and museums. One objective is to take advantage of new technologies to make available the collection of all three types of institutions to users in one of them, or indeed remotely from all of them.

HOW ARE LIBRARIANS TRAINED?

In most countries librarians are educated in universities in what used to be called "*library schools*" at undergraduate, masters and doctorate level, depending largely on the overall educational tradition in the country or region. This is supplemented by periods of practical training and experience. In some countries this leads to a licence to practise. In others, the courses themselves are accredited by the professional body. The curriculum includes studies of information science, computer based information systems, electronic publishing, legal considerations, including intellectual property laws and understanding user needs, as well as the more traditional subjects such as reference sources, cataloguing, indexing and classification. Specialist, optional programmes treat serving user groups such as children, the visually impaired, those with learning disabilities, and specific industries, etc.

DO WE NEED LIBRARIES NOW THAT WE HAVE THE INTERNET?

Yes. Although a great deal of information is available on the desk top of anyone with a computer linked to the Internet, much of it is spurious and disorganized. Some of it is of course dangerous. Much of the information that is authoritative is available only in return for payment. Thus users need to access materials through libraries which have skilled staff to search efficiently, are able to identify authentic sites and can obtain access to paid-for sources through site licences.

And finally

"The information superhighway should not just benefit the affluent or the metropolitan. Just as in the past books were a chance for ordinary people to better themselves, in the future online education will be a route to better prospects. But just as books are available from public libraries, the benefits of the superhighway must be there for everyone. This is a real chance for equality of opportunity..."

Tony Blair, *New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country* (1996)

Quotations are taken from *New library; the people's network*. London: Library and Information Commission, 1998.

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