

ONE VIEW OF LIBRARIES IN HARD TIMES
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There are many homely maxims that accompany us through life, each adding its little piece of wisdom to that bank from which we withdraw when we make some decision or other. "You pays your money and you takes your choice" is one of these, and it applies to all kinds of situations, not the least of which is that decision facing each librarian at some point in his career--probably some time around now for most: "what to do in periods of budget restriction?"

In the reaching of such a decision, I think there is little doubt that the very reasonable policy of wishing to offer service to as wide a group of library users as possible, is most widely held. Indeed, how could one defend any other position? Since we live in an age of accountability, the librarian has to justify his existence by such means, the same as the next person. But while there is no doubt that this is the correct short-term position, I am not at all sure whether it is right for all libraries to adopt this position in the long term. In fact, I would seriously suggest that had all libraries been formed on such principles in the past, the world would be a much poorer place.

At the foundation of most of the great libraries of the world there rest, most probably, a number of private collections formed by individuals for their own delectation, which, by one means or another have come into the possession of the library. Many scholars and bibliophiles see, in their books, something equivalent to progeny and would as soon see their children butchered as their collections dispersed. The assurance that a collection will remain intact with its founder's name immortalized by it, has certainly brought many worthwhile things into national collections and university libraries, as well as municipal collections.

The other method of acquisition, used by national collections, is to have a library legally made into a deposit library. Under this system, anything printed with a legal jurisdiction must be preserved by the depositing of at least one copy in the national collection. Thus, the collection becomes a kind of national archive of ever-increasing richness and since the method of acquisition is not open to most libraries, the system ensures that the national collection and one or two privileged others, will preserve and increase their lead over more humble libraries.

I suggest that far too many libraries, particularly institutional libraries, have succumbed to the attractions of this second method of acquisition. For what better way can there be of fulfilling the first article of the librarian's Credo: "I believe it to be my duty to provide as good a service to as large a number of people as possible," than by possessing everything that anyone can ever ask for?

The present state of affairs is quite complex in its origin and in its ramifications. Part of it is to be found in the fact that the last decade has been a period of growing prosperity and during that time no-one has thought it necessary to question the expansionist, imperialist librarian, who was quite as much entitled to share in the good times as anyone else. Expanding budgets, which have to be used up in order to justify further growth, made possible the placing of blanket orders with publishers and such devices, which are the logical outcome of times of plenty.

Another part of the problem is to be found in the nature of the librarian, who naturally has a fair share of the Seven Deadly Sins in his makeup. Envy and Greed can rationalize their existence in the librarian's soul far more easily than in most other people, however, since he can always say that it is not for himself that he wishes to possess all the books in the world, but for the benefit of others. In the age of accountability, Society will not frown but will rather bless the altruist, as long as he does nothing to line his own pockets. It is worth noting that the librarian who both aims to provide the future with as complete a repository as possible, as well as to satisfy his own frustrated acquisitiveness has an unforeseen effect upon the marketplace. The placing of blanket orders assures the publisher a secure market and consequently enables him to undertake works which otherwise he might reject. This, in turn has an effect upon the creative artist, though whether that effect is for the better or worse may well be debatable.

The final part of the problem that I want to allude to is to be found in the nature and ideals of scholarship as they frequently are to be found. Many teachers require evidence of a nodding acquaintance with a very wide list of authors and titles from their students, while seeming to require a thorough critical knowledge of very few. Then there are those who tend to treat the library as a substitute for a personal library and they encourage their students to do likewise. Thus, library materials are subjected to an unreasonable amount of wear and tear, suffering damage and defacement.

And so it would appear that when it comes to the matter of library acquisitions, all roads lead to the Rome of serving the largest number of users with the largest number of books, since one is almost forced to conclude that the days of the private collector are over, and one can wish in vain for the kind of legacy that has been left in the past to lucky institutions. It would not be at all surprising if this were indeed so since books tend to force a stationary existence upon their owners, and a collection has an even better chance of becoming great when it is the work of more than one generation. Life these days, however, is not like that, and there is nothing that can more easily dissuade one from the attempt to build a good personal library than the certitude of having to move it every couple of years.

What then is to happen if and when financial restrictions become so severe that budgets are drastically cut back? What possible solutions can there be to a problem that appears to be so deeply rooted in the total fabric of a society? It may be, of course, that there is no complete solution, and we may simply have to reconcile ourselves to a general decline in library services and library growth. But it behoves us all to think as positively as we can in all circumstances and there may be real benefits to be reaped in hard times.

In a nutshell, I believe that the real benefit from hard times is going to arise from the forced exercise of discrimination. In the years of plenty the problem for a librarian was not whose requests could be satisfied but rather the order in which they could be satisfied--the speed with which orders could be processed. These years made possible the acquisition of quantity. The lean years will force any acquisitions through such a sieve of processes as will rule out quantity and substitute a much more desirable attribute: quality. Instead of items appearing on shelves, unknown except by name to anyone other than their creator, their known quality will have to be the first requisite in the ordering process.

Since our imagined hard times will preclude the possibility of fulfilling every request for an acquisition, some machinery will have to be set up in order to deal with the decision making process. In most institutions this will be done by bodies already in existence, such as library committees. But in disciplines such as music it is most likely that a music library committee will, of necessity, be made up of interested parties. In this situation, one of the greatest benefits that will accrue to the wise librarian will be found in the increased voice that he will have in the way decisions are reached. Who can better arbitrate in difficult decisions than the librarian, whose views go beyond the parochial and the immediate.

When the librarian can see himself no longer simply in the position of offering a service to users, a kind of guide for the neophyte, a machine to process orders, and so on, but rather as one whose main professional interest lies in the development of a library, then the wheel will have turned full circle. History never repeats itself in all aspects. The days of the old-style bibliophile may have gone forever. But his place in society may well be taken by the wise librarian, gifted alike with wisdom as with strong and persuasive personality. In an age of machines and plenty, the library has been in danger of becoming simply another machine and librarians automatons, whereas at its best, the library is capable of developing a personality and an individuality that even the Library of Congress Classification has to fight hard to overcome. Hard times may well so cut down on the amount of time spent in mechanical processes that the librarian may be able once again to become a bibliophile; no longer solely an administrator but a scholar in the great tradition, finding in books not only a living but a real fulfilment. If this ever comes to pass as a result of hard times, then the benefits will have been great indeed.

Dr. Philip Downs,  
Faculty of Music,  
The University of Western  
Ontario.