

BOOKS BY MAIL SURVEY

by

Janet Schillinger

INTRODUCTION

What is Books by Mail? The term is but one of many titles used for mail order delivery, an extension or outreach program of a public library which typically works in the following manner:

The library produces a catalog of books, usually annotated, listing from 50 to 800 titles, mostly current paperbacks. The library publicizes the service and often bulk mails the catalogs to rural route postal patrons and other potential users. The audience responds...by sending in an order card; the library mails the books in a reusable bag, usually paying postage both ways. (Suvak, 1984).

Delivery of library materials to homes has existed since the late 1800s, but generally was delivered in person because of high costs and disapproval by the post office. Sending library materials through the mail did not gain popularity until 1914, when the Post Office for the first time allowed books to be sent by fourth class parcel post instead of first class. The low cost motivated some libraries to use the mail to deliver their extension services (Lawson & Kielbowicz, 1988).

The next catalyst for sending library materials through the mail came in 1928. Since 1905 the American Library Association had been lobbying for a special library rate in order to bring the advantages of library services to rural areas. However, it was not until 1928 that a law was passed allowing a special lower rate for library materials. The Postal Policy Act of 1958 removed the last barrier to sending library materials by mail when it eliminated the 300 mile limit on the library rate and also withdrew the need to obtain a permit for use (Lawson & Kielbowicz, 1988).

Although the new postal regulations made mail delivery of library materials possible, widespread use did not occur until the 1960s. According to Choong Kim (1977), it began when the Washington Public Library of Pennsylvania received a grant for an experiment in mail delivery from the Council on Library Resources. The Council also funded a books by mail delivery project at the San Antonio Public Library around 1967. At the same time another project was underway in Wenatchee, Washington, which Kim claims became "the first large-scale rural BBM program."

William Knott, (1973) in his book describing how to implement a books by mail program, discounts the San Antonio project, calling it a "random access program" because no catalog was compiled. Patrons simply telephoned the central library for any requests. Along with Kim, Knott credits the Wenatchee, Washington North Central Regional Library with organizing "the first comprehensive mail order program."

In the 1970s and 1980s mail order delivery programs became even more popular as an alternative extension service, but bookmobiles still dominated the scene. According to Teh-wei Hu's (1975) benefit-cost analysis of alternative library systems, 1000 bookmobiles were in use in 1967, while only 55 mail order delivery programs were in effect by 1970. By 1975, Choong Kim's study only turned up 75 programs in the United States.

BOOKS BY MAIL USE STUDIES

In his handbook, Choong Kim (1977) lists the following reasons why libraries choose to use a books by mail service:

1. To fill the pace where the bookmobile was pulled out (because of soaring staff and vehicle costs).
2. To service as an emergency and/or ultimate backup system.
3. To reach the elderly, handicapped and/or homebound.
4. To reach rural people who have not been served by the public library.
5. To serve as an inducement for small communities to establish their own permanent libraries.
6. To service as a community relations program.

However, the primary objective is to "extend the traditional book and media material lending service (Kim, 1977).

There had been a good deal of debate about whether books by mail programs are a viable alternative to bookmobiles. The studies which have been conducted show mixed results. According to Diane Friese's 1976 study, "A bookmobile service has potential for a far greater variety and quality of services to offer than a books-by-mail service, if the bookmobile is efficiently and effectively operated. In defense of mail delivery service, she writes, "a books-by-mail service can service certain types of individual users - elderly, bedridden, working adults - more effectively than bookmobiles...". Children, however, do not fit into this category. Finds from a 1980 study of Alabama's library services state, "books-by-mail, as presently practiced, is an inadequate form of service for young people..." (McCallan, 1980).

Lesser cost is usually the reason cited when a books-by-mail program is started. When Maine ended bookmobile service and substituted books-by-mail, the state library estimated that the new program would cost half of what bookmobile service would have cost and would also reach a wider audience (Plotnik, 1981). Norma McCallan's 1980 study concluded "clearly, on a long term basis, books-by-mail will cost less than bookmobiles; however much postage goes up, it is unlikely to equal the rise in fuel costs..."

Ironically, just when books by mail programs were becoming popular, the Post Reorganization Act of 1970 made it possible for the Postal Service to raise its rates yearly, but it was not until the mid-1980's that postage rate hikes became apparent. In 1982 the thriving mail order delivery service provided by the Boston General Theological Library expressed despair over the 33% hike in the library postage rate, claiming that "for many struggling charitable institutions, the new postal rates will be the last straw, and they will have to close their doors and end their services" (Pragnell, 1982).

1988 SURVEY BY THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF RURAL LIBRARIANSHIP

Since the early 1980s, there have been few articles written about books by mail programs and no comprehensive study of programs in the United States

beyond user studies conducted by individual libraries of their own programs. In view of the lack of literature, rising postal costs and the changing economic conditions caused by the recession of the late 1980s, the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship of the College of Library Science at Clarion University of Pennsylvania determined to conduct a national investigation.

METHODOLOGY

A search of the 39th edition of the American Library Directory and contacting state libraries and other books by mail programs revealed 111 existing mail order delivery programs run by public libraries in the United States. A questionnaire was mailed to each library on May 2, 1988 with instructions to return it by May 23, 1988. 104 surveys were returned. For the purpose of the survey, books by mail was defined as print materials which are sent by mail to patrons who cannot get to the library. Specific programs or services to the handicapped or disabled patrons were not included in the investigation.

FINDINGS

In this summary, only mean or average figures are listed.

The Program

The most popular title for the programs surveyed was "Books by Mail," then "Mail a Book" and "Mailbox Library." Starting dates for the programs ranged from 1959 to 1988, but the greatest number started between 1975 and 1982. Seventy-one percent of the programs were conducted by the extension of outreach department of the library, and the majority of staff were full-time workers, though the number of part-time staff was not far behind. The percentage of volunteer staff was very low.

The Patrons

More than half of the programs served an area of only one county. On average, 67% of the patrons served lived in rural areas (defined as 1 - 2,499 people) and 72% lived more than 26 miles from the library. The mean for the

number of patrons served by each program was 644, but the range was quite large. One program served 6000 and one listed only patron.

The Collection

Books for the program were obtained in a variety of ways. The highest percentage was from book vendors or jobbers, but commercial books by mail services and donations were also used. Most programs kept their books in a separate collection, but about half also circulated books from the library's general collection. The mean number of volumes in a separate books by mail collection was 11,859.

Books by mail programs were promoted in a variety of ways, with work of mouth surprisingly predominating at 32%. Newspapers came next, then library newsletters, radio, local sources, television, catalogs, flyers and bulk mailings.

Circulation

Adult fiction was the most heavily circulated item listed, with adult non-fiction not far behind. Children's fiction was circulated less than half as often as adult fiction, a figure which tends to confirm previous studies' findings that children are underserved by books by mail. Audiovisual items came next and last of all was children's non-fiction.

Most programs had a printed catalog of the items available for loan, but were evenly divided between using a commercial company to prepare the catalog and preparing one on their own. Catalogs were usually revised quarterly. Thirty-nine percent of the programs distributed catalogs to rural mailbox holders, but 29% only gave them out on request and 28% distributed them to all patrons.

The majority of programs accepted requests from patrons by the mailed-in form from the catalog, but the percentages of telephone and in-person requests were not far behind.

The average circulation period was four weeks though some programs circulated books for as much as two or three months.

Cost

Fifty-nine percent of the programs surveyed had a separate line item budget for books by mail. In 1987 the mean budget was \$35,051, with a high of \$294,778 and a low of \$484. The average cost per item circulated was \$2.27. The majority of programs did not charge patrons for borrowing or overdue fees. Of about 20,700 items circulated yearly, it was estimated that 124 were not returned by patrons and 59 were lost in the mail. Most programs paid for postage both ways at library rates.

CONCLUSION

The study found that the number of books by mail programs was still slowly rising; from 75 in 1975 to 101 in 1988, rather than diminishing. The majority of the programs served people in rural areas living some distance from the library. As evidenced from the high circulation figures for adult fiction and non-fiction compared to children's book circulation, books by mail programs appealed mostly to adults. Cost figures would have to be compared with figures from bookmobile studies of the same time period to determine cost-effectiveness. However, in view of the fact that a greater percentage of adults enter the work force each year, and fewer are at home during the day to use the bookmobile, books by mail may have found its niche with adult users.

BOOKS BY MAIL TODAY

For purpose of comparison, the same questionnaires used in the 1988 survey were sent to three books by mail programs in April of 1992. Maine's books by mail program is a statewide service begun in 1981 and run by the Maine State Library. Approximately 1,630 statewide patrons use the program on a monthly basis, and most of them live in a rural area. In 1991, the budget for the program was \$193,055 and the average cost per item circulated was \$3.50. As in the 1988 survey, more adult items circulated than children's.

The Ohio Valley Area Libraries books by mail program began in 1973. It serves about 4,000 patrons monthly and 98% of them live in rural areas. Again, adult fiction and non-fiction circulate more frequently than children's items. The budget for 1991 was \$261,000 and the average cost per item was \$2.00.

The Indianhead Federated Library System books by mail program started in 1984. Covering an area of ten counties, the program has 7,899 registered households. In 1991 the program budget was \$149,500 and the average cost per item was \$1.78. The items circulated in 1991 were not broken down into categories, so it is not known whether adult items circulate more than children's.

None of the three programs surveyed charge their patrons for borrowing items, overdue fees or postage, and all mail items at library rate. The cost of circulation per item has not increased substantially over the average of the 1988 survey which was \$2.27. Although increased postage costs are a problem, none of the programs showed concern about discontinuing service in the near future. Even Maine's program, which is experiencing a budget freeze on new books for 1992, remains optimistic and expects to have its budget reinstated next year. Leah Griffith of the Ohio program writes, "Our patron interest has gone up 30% over the last few years." Amy Alpine (1991) of the Indianhead Federated Library System writes, "The need for a popular materials center that is as accessible as Books-by-Mail will always be there."

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This study was conducted in 1988 by Janet Schillinger for the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, Department of Library Science, Clarion University of Pennsylvania. Ms. Schillinger received her Master's of Library Science from Clarion University of Pennsylvania in August 1992.