

HOW FAR DOES OUTREACH REACH?

by

John Philip

You have heard this morning about the future including the concern that our citizens do not for the most part keep up with contemporary issues. At least the books which cover these issues in depth are not being requested heavily.

You have heard about one way Public Libraries can impact economic development. The potential for elitism coming out of electronic publishing was noted.

These discussions provide me with additional data. This I may be allowed to say is where my comments come in; this is "the rest of the story."

How far does Outreach reach?

Into the heart of Americans
Into the soul of America
Into the very fiber of democracy
Into the weary hands of the aged
Into the eager hands of children
Into the puzzled hearts of immigrants
Into the searching hands of the unemployed

How far does Outreach reach?

From the Native Americans in New York and Washington States to
the Hispanic Americans in New Mexico
To Pre-school children in Baltimore or Hennepin County
To prisoners in Anderson, Indiana
To inner city children of Detroit and Los Angeles

Though I feel compelled to add a caveat to this litany – “at least while extra funds are available.”

A PARADIGM REVISITED

What is a library that we distinguish between “normal service” and “outreach?”

What is the model on which we build library service?

and...

Is it time to rethink?

Its functioning,

Its methodologies,

Its assumptions, and

Its practices?

A functional model on which we have been building the last thirty years might be described as in the phraseology of *Field of Dreams*, “If you build it, they will come.”

This seems to have worked — for a long time — for a lot of people in generations past or so it seemed.

People were predictable.

Neighborhoods were predictable.

Schools were predictable.

In general, Americans were a predictable breed. But professional and social critics have written that:

Things have changed.

People and society changed.

Expectations have changed.

Roles of public institutions **MUST** change.

Somehow, rather subtly, the priority of getting ideas, information, and yes, the “library habit,” into the hands and hearts of citizens and their children has been superseded.

Building libraries, writing procedures, designing management theories, formalizing professional requirements for librarians — but not necessarily for libraries — these have demanded the energies of many of the profession’s best and brightest.

In addition, the rise of a multitude of professional organizations, the fight to get and keep federal money, has come to define the body we call librarianship — at least to too large an extent.

All these activities are necessary to some extent to be sure.

Except for some notable exceptions, bucking this new paradigm of the library and the librarian has some to be seen as, at least, suspect or naive.

But what was an acceptable professionalism is changing; something has happened.

In preparation for a seminar at Clarion University earlier this fall, I studied about 50 future looking library literature documents. It was startling, even though by now I am used to being in the minority of my profession as a bookmobile advocate. What I read was sobering.

After about six months of this digging, one impression became clear. The library environment is different.

If bookmobile and other kinds of outreach had often been hard to sell even in the 60s, and certainly during and since the 70s fuel crisis, it was because the country was so normal and predictable. We had a sort of rosy glow. Even the civil rights movement accepted more or less token extensions of library service. Even some of these have since been denigrated by some — despite some very real breakthroughs in service delivery.

Meanwhile...

A paradigm was being smashed. We were becoming a different country.

What were some of these changes according to these future oriented writers?

1. Library use is qualitatively inconsistent.

Despite some impressive numbers in circulation and registration, use of libraries for information purposes is minimal according to Bernard Vavrek (1990).

In a study assessing the information needs of rural Americans, 37% of those queried stated they used the library for best sellers; 48% were inactive library users.

The clear conclusions: "The public library is not an information source for most Americans." At another time Vavrek (1990) warns of a decline of the public library — more true perhaps recently than when written — he summarizes the changed in the family and the dynamics of the information explosion.

2. Completion is surfacing.

Bernard Vavrek (1992) and others point out the reality that the public library is no longer the "only kid on the block."

In an article not in any way aimed at the library market, "Pay for Call" the use of 900 number use for current information is reported as booming. Peggy Campbell (1991), a freelance writer and a former marketing administrator with experience at the State Library of Ohio points out what are, to me, astounding statistics. For example, that the *Atlanta Constitution Journal* newspaper in November, 1990 received 704,000 pay (900 number) phone calls. In 1992 the paper each month received 50,000 to 70,000 calls. The subjects for which callers may have paid \$3.00 each covered subjects such as sports — including current scores of games in progress, weather, stocks, traffic, entertainment and classifieds. An additional 1,300,000 free general calls are logged. People clearly will pay for information they want, when they want it.

3. The quality and speed of public library information is spotty — according to Mathew Lesko (1992), information is not timely or it is wrong most of the time.

4. The "virtual library" may be in the process of making much of what is traditionally defined as library service to be obsolete and too slow especially for those who are sophisticated and serious about information.
5. The potential is imminent for full text data bases such as the capacity to load 200 books on a CD the size of a credit card, according to Michael Malinconico (1992) and Laverna Saunders (1992). Potential for electronic information is almost unlimited — with or without the librarian.
6. But on the other hand . . . There are numerous problems in delivery and use.

By the 21st century, per Bob Cronenberger (1989), children's education will be sorely lacking, social services and higher education will be beyond the reach of the majority and there will be a conservative mood in the country. 60% Of women will work outside the home.
7. Richard Panz (1989), in the same publication, ticks off a series of similar problems in the delivery of services. These included, among others, the income gap resulting in the need for two income families to keep up. Less family time to get to the library. The escalation of the "latch key children" issue again reducing access to a library. The now common single parent family. Add to this illiteracy, unemployment and homelessness. This litany is from a pragmatic manager not a social service worker, I might add.
8. Thomas Ballard (1988) in the *Future of the Public Library* seminar, argues for larger collections in many more facilities closer to home for more people and also bemoans the lack of public demand for information for daily living.
9. Jonathon Kozol is, I suppose, a living symbol of the concern for illiteracy. His writings are too numerous to list. His comments in *Publisher's Weekly* that literacy in the USA has retreated 100 years will suffice for this paper. (1991).
10. Social needs in this country defy solution and the public good is not being met by government — with libraries not an exception.

A number of writers comment on this.

- A. John Berry (1989) states that the broadest possible readership is necessary for the "public good." Only 30% to 50% are currently being served according to Berry. He takes a strong stand against user fees in this context.
- B. The existence/need for the ALA "poor peoples policy" (ALA) reinforces this position as do comments from Marcia Nauratil (1985) who suggests that we public librarians just may not any longer believe that the public library is essential for democracy or people's growth.

Demographic realities — we are in a essentially changed society. A brief summary (Bell, 1987):

Minorities are becoming majorities.

The population is aging.

Families are no more as we knew them.

An underclass exists in our midst, much of the Great American Dream is no more for the majority.

State and federal governments finances are drying up.

Meanwhile, the traditional paradigm of public libraries — as in much of public policy I would suggest — hangs on. Most libraries appear not to be changing as dramatically as the environment in which they exist, if at all.

What are some of the recommendations proposed by the library leaders quoted or cited above.?

1. Enlarge the circle of information users. The high risk group is outside the circle while the educated are not, says Kathryn Stephanoff speaking at the *Future of the Public Library* conference at OCLC in 1988.

2. Reach out to help resolve the country's education problem (Sager, 1992) and reach out to minorities (Cronenberger, 1989).
3. Recognize and respond to the new family realities (Vavrek, 1992).
4. Provide smaller but better stocked libraries (Ballard, 1988).
5. Stock materials that people want — not what we want them to want (Robinson, 1992).
6. Reach out to all the nontraditional populations (Nauratil, 1985).
7. Train our staff better to respond to information needs. (Vavrek, 1991).
8. Eliminate barriers to access (Panz, 1989)
9. Take illiteracy seriously. (Kozol, 1991 and Szudy, 1990)

HOW FAR DOES OUTREACH REACH?

Outreach can touch every one of these issues — effectively; both the people represented by the concerns listed and the realities referred to.

I will define outreach to include:

- t branches and branchmobiles
- t bookmobile service, for which we now have guidelines available. These came out of the national bookmobile in 1988 and were revised in 1992. (State Library of Ohio, 1992).
- t mail book services with several variations
- t homebound service — also done with several variations
- t child care agencies
- t deposit collections
- t institutional services including nursing, retirement homes, prisons, etc.

Schools still receive bookmobile service widely, though frequently not without controversy.

I will not comment on these methods individually. Much has been written on them.

These noted methods respond also to Nancy Cummings' and Nancy Welsh's comments earlier about no frills, personal service and getting into the community.

Outreach responds to needs in two ways:

- A. By providing actual information.
- B. By exposing the public to information — broadly defined.

A couple of reports from field trips I have made this year may illustrate this.

At a bookmobile stop in Southwestern Ohio, 10-15 miles from the nearest library, a mother with her ten children receives library service because the bookmobile was there. The sight of this mother and her kids grabbing books by the arms full could be adequately described only on live film.

At this same stop or, one nearby, a post-middleage woman, when asked what she did for reading before the bookmobile started up after a hiatus of several years, said she did not read books in the interim.

Another stop saw a middle aged man returning a group of art books some of which had been borrowed via OCLC from across the country. He was able to continue his chosen life in the country without sacrificing his passion for art.

At a trailer park 15 to 18 children jammed into the bookmobile only about 5 miles from a beautiful, new library — only 5 miles away. "Why use the bookmobile?" I asked. The answer? None of them are taken to the library by their parents. One child that day told us his mother would not let him join even the bookmobile library — setting in her immediate neighborhood!

During a morning of homebound services visits in Delaware County, Ohio, I had the following experiences:

An 80 year old widow and her slightly retarded daughter receive a bag of books each month. She is trying to stay on the family homestead about 4 miles from the main library.

Another active octogenarian, 83 actually, a widow also trying to stay in her family home is just a bit less lonely and is able to keep up with the historical material she enjoys reading.

A third woman, 86; her retired minister husband is in a mental institution; has raised 20 or more foster children and now shares her home with a retarded woman. She is still lively and active in church, but getting to the library is a significant strain on her.

We stopped in a mobile home park to drop off books to a woman, probably in her 70's (she did not offer her age as the others had), suffering from a lung disorder requiring her to carry an oxygen tube around the house. She is reasonably able, but can't face the dust she encounters on the way to the library. Even at the library she tires too easily to wind her way around the stacks. Though only a couple of miles or less from the main library, its usability, for her, is questionable at best.

These are just a few (perhaps more poignant) stories, but they can be multiplied. The staff in Riverside, Oceanside and Los Angeles, California libraries certainly have many as they deal with the Oriental and Hispanic communities there. The City of Washington with its inner city elderly and Arlington, Virginia's focus on targeting teens would elicit similar examples .

The people receiving books delivered by mail (with many variations from Maine's statewide service using the full resources of the state library collection to more typical paperback special collection and variations in between, 178,000 are circulated in one system in Southeastern Ohio) elicit many stories. Maybe we can share some of yours today.

Kiosk branches in rural West Virginia provide instant facilities at modest cost where a full service branch would be an unreachable expense.

Service to day care centers may well prove as helpful to library literacy as the head start has done for school preparedness and health improvement. In North Carolina a nurse accompanies the bookmobile and provides screenings and health information.

This is an outreach era.

McDonald's, banks and other retail outlets do not locate in the city center and wait — neither can tomorrow's library assume everyone who needs information service will seek out the central or even a branch library.

Some outreach, if not most of it, is a form of enticement. No argument.

I make no apology for enticement efforts, however... Are some outreach efforts not defensible? Of course.

Programs designed or delivered poorly have no more right to exist than any in house program.

Programs clearly rejected by the public for whom intended, once fairly tried, should not be continued. Absolutely! No argument.

Programs, which after careful evaluation are found to be not cost effective should be discontinued — absolutely!

I would argue, however, that the "playing field be even." I would urge that impact analysis be done with total objectivity; that the users of the outreach program be seen every bit as valid as any "in house" program users; that the cost of such outreach service be accurately compared, cost-to-benefit, to more traditional "in house" programs .

My bias would lead me to see an added value in a program or service which brings into the library or reaches a resident typically identified as a "non user." I would pay a premium for such a recruit to library service.

This premium can be justified perhaps most easily as an investment in the future, if one did not want to be seen too much a social liberal — a categorization for which by the way I never apologize.

Are outreach programs designed out of compassion? — Yes but primarily they should also reflect a valid self interest.

I make no apology for efforts to reach out to those who are in any way barriered. The shake-up in our society is great and the needs acute.

From what I see and read if libraries wish to compete they must both keep up with electronic enhancements, which I think most of us accept even with eagerness, and must reach out to those who stand in real jeopardy of missing the boat in personal growth and in contributing to our society.

I would urge that we not endorse “trickle down librarianship.”

I have suggested how far outreach reaches. I hope I have done some justice to the topic.

I have not focussed on the budget issue, though already there are signs that outreach will suffer with cuts. If that must be in your community, so be it.

I have no illusions about the challenge to respond to the demands on today's library. I am not totally naïve .

Automation of the library must happen.

If economic projections of some are correct, libraries will certainly share the hard times.

I have tried to report to you a face of our society which translates into a challenge to keep the public library relevant to more of our population. Marcia Nauratil asks, “Do we believe the public library is critical to individuals and our democratic society?” (Nauratil, 1985)

The 1982 Public Library Association document, *The Public Library: Democracy's Resource: A Statement of Principles* states it well.

Free access to ideas and information, a prerequisite to the existence of a responsible citizenship, is as fundamental to America as are the principles of freedom, equality and individual rights. This access is also fundamental to our social, political and cultural systems....

And further;

Access to information and the recorded wisdom and experience of others has long been held a requirement for achieving personal equality and for improving the quality of

life and thought in the daily activities and relationships of individuals. (Public Library Association, 1982)

These quotes sound akin to keynote speaker Michael Marien's comments on the importance of a literate electorate.

I challenge all of us to restate our belief in this concept. Outreach, I propose can play a major role .

Make this a reality.

"If you build it they will come." Better yet, perhaps, "reach out and touch someone."

References

- American Library Association. *Poor peoples services policy*. Chicago: American Library Association.
- Ballard, Thomas H. (1988, March). *The best reading for largest number at the least cost*. Paper presented at the conference The Future of the Public Library sponsored by OCLC, Dublin, OH.
- Bell, Daniel. (1987, Summer). The world and the United States in 2013. *Dedalus*. pp. 1-31.
- Berry, John N. (1989). *The fee or free dilemma*. New York:G.K. Hall.
- Campbell, Peggy. (1991, May). Interactive media. *Infotext*, 40.
- Cronenberger, Robert. (1989). External influences on public library management in the 21st century. In *Managing Public Libraries in the 21st Century*. (Pat Woodrum and Sul H. Lee, eds) Bingham, NY: Haworth Press. pp. 209-220.
- Kozol, Jonathon. (1991, October). In public schooling, social policy has been put back almost 100 years. *Publishers Weekly*.
- Lesko, Mathew. (1992). In our information society, why isn't the public library the most important building in the community? *Public Libraries*, 31, 85-87.
- Malinconico, Michael. (1992). Information's brave new world. *Library Journal*, May, 36-40.
- Nauratil, Marcia. (1985). Politics of special services. *Public Libraries and Non-traditional Clientele*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Panz, Richard. (1989). Library services special population groups in the 21st century. In *Managing Public Librazries in the 21st Century*. (Pat Woodrum and Sul H. Lee, eds) Bingham, NY: Haworth Press. pp. 151-171.
- Public Library Association. (1982). *The public library: Democracy's resource: A statement of principles*. Chicago: American Library Association.

- Robinson, Charles. (1992). The public library vanishes. *Library Journal*, March 15, 512-52.
- Sager, Donald J. et. al. (1992). The best of intentions: The role of the public library in the improvement of public education. *Public Libraries*, Jan/Feb. 11-17.
- Saunders, Laverna. (1992). Virtual library today. *ALA Library Administration and Management*, Spring, 66-70.
- Stephanoff, Kathryn. (1988, March). *Interlibrary cooperative relationships and resource sharing activities: The future*. Paper presented at the conference on The Future of the Public Library, sponsored by OCLC, Dublin, OH.
- Szudy, Thomas. (1990). Reaching new readers: Library planning for a literate society. *Occasional Paper Series*, Series 2, 6. Columbus, OH: State Library of Ohio.
- State Library of Ohio. (1992). *National bookmobile guidelines*. Columbus, OH: State Library of Ohio.
- Vavrek, Bernard. (1990). Assessing the information needs of rural Americans. Clarion, PA: Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, Clarion University of Pennsylvania.
- Vavrek, Bernard. (1991). The future of public libraries: Extension of remarks. Part of the H.W. Wilson Symposium on the future of public libraries. *Wilson Library Bulletin*, May.
- Vavrek, Bernard. (1992). Giving new purpose to the public library. "Viewpoint," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, April, 73.

John Philip is the director of Field Operations, State Library of Ohio. The above speech was given at the third conference in the series, The 21st Century: The Future of Rural and Small Public Libraries. The conference was held in Phoenix, Arizona November 19-21, 1992, jointly sponsored by the Arizona Department of Library, Archives and Public Records and Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, in cooperation with the Graduate Library School, University of Arizona and the Department of Library Science, Clarion University of Pennsylvania.