

KNOWLEDGE OF RURAL CHARACTERISTICS: KEY TO RURAL LIBRARY SERVICE

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In characterizing rural populations it is important to keep in mind that physical remoteness creates cultural and psychological differences as well. It is imperative, therefore, to take these factors into consideration when attempting to create or make more viable library services in rural areas. It shall be the intent of this paper to explore the traits of rural people and their libraries and to suggest some strategies to improve information dissemination in geographically remote areas.

Although one is more likely to see pickup trucks in downtown Clarion than in New York City, most stereotypes of rural residents are unfounded or rapidly disappearing. In 1975, 28% of America's population lived in designated rural areas, but only 2.5% were engaged in agriculture for a living. Most people lived in or around small towns, 98% with populations under 5,000 and 53.5% under 500.¹ This geographic isolation within rural areas, as opposed to remoteness from urban centers, is a leading factor in understanding the problems of linking people with existing services and the establishment of new problem solving services.

Before coming to grips with the methods to overcome the effects of isolation, it is necessary to discuss how this isolation effects the lives of rural people. The National Commission on Libraries' Conference on Library and Information Needs of the Nation (Denver, 1973) identified the ramifications of

isolation. Following is an adaptation of their findings and supporting data from more recent sources:

1. The primary sources of information in rural areas is through oral communication.
2. Rural residents are physically remote from health and social services.
3. Rural residents are physically remote from adequate education and continuing education institutions.
4. Rural residents are removed from economic opportunity.
5. Rural residents are remote from special services for women, children, the elderly and handicapped.
6. And remoteness from choice of mass media.

These six findings are supported by more current data. Point one, "any information tends to bear more credibility if its mode is personalized and individualized."²

An estimated 1.17 million people have no health care facilities in their home counties. Doctors are also scarce in rural areas where a ratio of 49.5 doctors per 10,000 inhabitants exist as opposed to 167.4 per 100,000 in urban centers.³ As recently as 1976 132 counties with a combined population of one half million had no resident doctor at all,⁴ which further substantiates point 2.

As to point 3 and remoteness from educational opportunities: the inadequate tax base of rural areas contributes significantly to below average school programs, facilities and teachers. In 1976 12.2% of all rural students ages 14 to 17 were estimated to be below grade level as compared to 9% in metropolitan areas. Even though functional illiterate (persons age 25 or

above with less than 5 years of elementary education) have statistically declined in rural areas between 1968 and 1975 (29.8% for males and 32.9% for females), the presence of below grade level students indicates the paucity of educational programs in rural areas.

The lack of rapid transportation of material ideas and current information effects both the rural businessman and worker. Although there has been a trend in the past few years for industry to move into rural areas, several factors reduce their impact, leaving rural residents remote from economic opportunity. Rural workers are usually paid less than workers in comparable positions in urban centers and upward mobility is hampered by the policy of controlling corporations to send in outside managerial personnel. This urban control of the new rural industries has reduced the benefits to both the local businessman and the indigenous worker.⁶

Traditional views retained in most rural areas have kept women, children, the elderly and handicapped groups closely confined in family situations. Although these situations can be gratifyingly secure, opportunities for personal and educational development can be severely limited by the families' resources and expertise in dealing with supportive institutions.

Most rural areas do not have a base of support for localized media production. Reliance on media services from the nearest urban center precludes the rapid dissemination of information pertaining to local interest and needs. New technologies, i.e., Cable TV, have not taken full advantage of their potential for service to limited audiences, further supporting point 6.

Lack of transportation and communication facilities to overcome the great distances in remote areas are an obvious factor in the perpetuation of the above conditions. The absence of public transportation coupled with the

longer travel times to work, reduces the time and the opportunities rural people have to use the scanty services that exist. The percentage of rural households without telephones is surprisingly high. In 1970 they ranged from 32.7% to 6.1% in rural areas and from 67.3% to 5.4% in isolated rural counties.⁷ Compounded by the low number of operating hours of rural libraries, it can be surmised that regardless of rural peoples' desire to use libraries, getting to one may be out of the question.⁸

But, as previously stated, cultural peculiarities of rurality must also be taken into consideration in understanding why libraries have failed to become intergrated parts of rural life. Suspicion of outside influence and institutions is a stereotype of rural people that may be more factual than a pickup in every yard. The lack of large concentrations of people and even the scarcity of doctors, businessmen and other professionals can be seen as an asset for this allows most people to be personally familiar with a majority of individuals in their community. Information and assistance from familiars is not only possible but preferred. Outside persons, with no longtime contacts in the community, are suspect. Institutions, with impersonal rules and procedures, are also suspect because they can be viewed as agents of outside control. "Outside" is generally associated with all the ills of urban industrial society.

How are libraries effected by this "anti-outside" feeling? Rural libraries are certainly small personal community places, but regardless of how accessible to their public, they have not been successful in establishing themselves as centers of information and culture. It is this author's opinion that libraries are underused in rural areas not because they have been the

victims of community suspicion, but that because they exhibit the same suspicious characteristics as the rest of the community, they have failed to adept "outside" innovations thus rendering themselves impotent to provide suitable services.

The traditional character of rural libraries (fixed locations and limited hours) is not reflective of the people they purport to serve. Book orientation in an orally predisposed society is also not conducive to maximum use. "In audiovisual holdings, rural public libraries held an average of 320 titles per library, contrasting with 1,000 titles for all public libraries in the United States."⁹ Books which are available tend to ignore the educational level materials available. The low percentage of trained professionals and volunteer staff also ignores the personal preferences and needs of the rural patron.¹⁰ Given the preference of patrons to seek aid from the familiar and to avoid strangers, it seems that those on the staff most likely to be consulted are those who are least likely to provide competent answers.

To increase the use and effectiveness of rural libraries it is no longer appropriate to deal with only the isolation of remote people. Changes appropriate to the character of rural America must occur. In the past bookmobiles and books-by-mail have been used extensively but these have usually been a mere physical movement of books with little consideration for the peculiar information needs of their patrons. Quite a lot of research has been done about the merits of bookmobile service vs. books-by-mail especially from a cost analysis of view. In the writers opinion these people have missed an important point by overlooking who they are trying to serve and concentrating on how they are going to do it. Some have come very close yet emotionalism has obscured their view. In the first year report for MAILIBRARY, a Mississippi books-by-mail program, it is stated:

(I suggest) these people who regret losing the bookmobile so strongly... are people who are using the bookmobile as a social service rather than as a library; they want visits, they want attention, they want some excitement in their lives. If this is a justified library service, then the bookmobile still has a place; if the provision of books and information to people is the purpose of the library, then I believe the bookmobile has seen its day in many rural areas.

I suggest that these people do want visits, attention and excitement.

There is a person aboard the bookmobile with whom they have developed a personal relationship and from whom they receive personalized and orally transmitted information about events and services they cannot get from the far removed and impersonal primary agency (i.e., social services). Studies have shown that these people who want attention are primarily women, juveniles and the elderly. This group covers most of the special groups whose isolation is compounded by "protective" situations. This is not to suggest that bookmobiles are the answer to rural library service for too many problems are associated with them. (In all fairness many of these problems could be solved and more paperbacks, AV titles and high-interest low-reading level materials would be a start). It does suggest, however, that the bookmobile has come the closest to putting together those features most suitable for rural service: mobility and personalization. Mobility can overcome the lack of transportation and personalization can overcome the basic withdrawness of the people.

It may be beneficial at this time to examine two other mobile library services that are not bookmobiles:

The State of Alaska, in order to serve isolated communities with poor or no road connections to the outside, sends a librarian with a small collection of books and tapes by boat. This is not in itself so very remarkable until one discovers that the library does not own the boat. The librarian hitches a

ride with a traveling missionary who visits isolated settlements once each month. The library uses him for transportation and for an introduction into the community. The cost to the library is only for salary and materials.¹²

Portable kiosks set up for a period of time in shopping centers and other highly visible areas have proven to be another successful method of providing library service in underserved places. An important aspect of this method is that about 10,000 volumes can be accommodated by these kiosks as opposed to 2,000 in a bookmobile. Direct phone hook-up to a main library is also possible to facilitate full reference service. In one experiment in using this method on a 2½ month trial period, over 20,000 books were circulated and 2,000 new patrons registered.¹⁴

There are many more examples of innovative outreach programs. However, it is the intent of this paper to propose that the human element is the most important aspect in rural library service. I believe the reason the above examples are successful is that there are people present.

One of the first steps rural libraries can take to increase their effectiveness is to take advantage of their local help's acceptance by the community.

The use of trained indigenous paraprofessionals has been shown to be more effective in dealing with rural people particularly the disadvantaged, than either professionals indigenous to the area or paraprofessionals and non-professionals from outside the areas. Given the shortage of professionals, the need for employment and personalized service, and proven effectiveness of indigenous paraprofessionals, the logical model is a number of paraprofessionals working with one professional, the latter being responsible for locating information and organizing service, the former for the transfer of information.¹⁵

This approach relies upon close cooperation between the professional coordinator and the paraprofessional information disseminator. On the job

training involving communication skills, reference service and source, and community assesment must necessarily be conducted simultaneously.

Interagency cooperation with others possessing information vital to rural residents is needed on a more intimate level. Extension agents, social service works, health care works and a myriad of other organizations from the scouts to church groups must all become aware of each other's services. "One crucial need that interagency coordination can meet is transportation--the transporting both of information to the user and of the user to the service."¹⁶ If libraries already have a relationship developed with their communities, it would benefit all involved if representatives of other vital service agencies could use library facilities. Health service workers providing hearing or blood pressure testing at bookmobile stops is an example of what might result. Conversely, deposit collections of materials, publicity, bibliographies and catalogs should be made available in cooperating agency offices. A bibliography on child care may go over well if placed in a well baby clinic.

All of the above programs and suggestions may sound either very exciting or very improbable according to one's optimism level, but what is the outlook for real change in rural areas? Since the rise of the industrialized world populations have been flowing from the countryside into cities, effecting all aspects of modern history. Recently, however, this flow has begun to reverse, at least in the United States. Change has already begun and with it the potential for more change. Kenneth Bock, Professor of Sociology at the University of California at Berkeley, has recently probed the process of societal change:

Human activities are the conscious doings of people that go beyond and depart from both biological and traditional bonds. Human behavior is the routine doings of people that have become habitual and unexamined as a result of becoming fixed by biological or traditional controls...It is clear...that customs of peoples and the sanctions enforcing them--are powerful shapers of habitual behavior. When, for any reason, the hold of tradition on people is loosened, human activity becomes possible.

We know that societies in different times and places have confined persons in routine patterns of behavior to different degrees. To the extent that a social group is isolated from contacts with other, different groups, persons will be shielded from circumstances in which they can or must react in thought or deed to the new...Societies whose integrity or existence have not been threatened for a long time by other societies escape a major kind of stimulus to action and can safely move along customary lines of behavior. But when societies as such are shaken by intrusion or invasion by other and different peoples, passive behavior is difficult and the possibility of alternate conduct might be presented for the first time. Any new experience or change of conditions opens possibilities for innovative activities, and the greater the contrast to a previous setting the more compelling the call for action.¹⁷

Rural America, therefore may be predisposed to dramatic change and an increase in the need for information seems inevitably a part of this change. Libraries must become aware of the nature of this change in their community. More importantly, an understanding of where their users are coming from is necessary for the development of services and delivery systems which will allow both rural library and resident to change together.

FOOTNOTES

¹Ann Drennan and Henry Drennan, "Rural Populations in the 1970's." Library Trends 28 (Spring 1980): 495.

²Ibid. : 496.

³Ibid. : 499.

⁴Ibid. : 510.

⁵Ibid. : 504.

⁶Joel Garreau, The Nine Nations of North America, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.

⁷Drennan: 497.

⁸Bernard Vavrek, Reference Service in Rural Public Libraries. Clarion, PA: Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, 1983.

⁹Drennan: 497.

¹⁰Drennan: 501.

¹¹Teh-wei Hu, Bernard Booms and Lynne Warfield Kaltreider, A Budget-Cost Analysis of Alternate Library Delivery Systems, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975: 28-29.

¹²"Alaska Library Afloat" American Libraries 4 (July 1973): 416.

¹³"Circulation Figures for Kiosks 'All Gravy'," American Libraries 11 (January 1980): 13.

¹⁴Proceedings of a Conference on the Information Needs of Occupational, Ethnic, and Other Groups in the United States, by Carlos Cuadra, Chairman. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1974: 184.

¹⁵Ibid.: 185.

¹⁶Kenneth Bock, Human Nature and History, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980: 191.

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