

USER STUDIES: THE HUMAN CONNECTION AND THE RURAL SCENE

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By now, we in librarianship have a pretty good grasp on the measurement of physical things related to libraries and the frequency with which many of these things are taken from or used in our libraries. We also have been able to report on many of the characteristics of those persons who come to our libraries and to some extent describe what they are doing in the library, why they chose to come, and some of the problems they have faced in using materials, services, and facilities. In fact, we have available some very sophisticated techniques developed from user and library resource studies, such as the ones completed by DeProspero, which provide library decision makers with tremendously valuable data for more effective planning. [1]

These studies and research projects have been and continue to be essential ingredients in developing an intellectual foundation for librarianship and for helping librarians in making practical decisions concerning resource allocation. Many of the studies and developed techniques, however, are undertaken within the confines of the library itself and/or are dependent upon a person actually presenting himself and his needs to the system.

When we consider that public, school, and academic libraries attract only a fraction of the total population served by these libraries [2,p.490] it is apparent that we must be concerned equally with non-users in our attempts to plan library programs. Optimism forces the writers to refer to those who may be considered non-users as potential users.

The most studied of all library users and potential users are

persons who are served by specialized libraries in medical, business, industrial, and scientific institutions and agencies. Such specialized libraries exist not because of tradition or supposition, but because there is clearly demonstrated evidence that the materials and services provided result in some positive contribution to the mission of the agency or institution. Scholars and academicians appear to be the next most popular subjects with the general populace and students in elementary and secondary schools following.

If we give credence to the notion that libraries serve best those persons whose needs and wants are known, we can see the emerging correlation reflected in the statistics of users and non-users.

One of the most outstanding contributions to the defining, describing, and cataloging of information needs of people regardless of user and non-user status is contained within the proceedings of a conference sponsored by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS). Practically every group in our society is represented by this document which provides libraries of all types with the most recent thinking and analysis by informed persons in the profession concerning survival and quality-of-life needs of the aged, the young, the institutionalized, and rural population, to name only a few. [3]

All of the techniques, research findings and cataloging of needs described and alluded to are useless, however, unless they are systematically applied to library programs by practitioners rather than by doctoral students, library educators and other researchers alone. There must be some local application and local determination as to which general characteristics exist in the local library's community.

There is some evidence scattered throughout the literature of librarianship which suggests there are many public, school, and academic libraries which have systematically developed programs of service based on careful analysis of user and non-user studies in communities served. However, both an examination of the literature and recent conversations with colleagues in the profession lead these writers to believe that this approach is indeed as scattered in practice as the review of the

literature indicates.

It is obvious that many people believe that if the librarian either is indigenous to a community or takes an active part in the activities of that community, then he or she will be able to assess and interpret user and non-user needs within the community without the bother of paper and number analysis. There is no doubt that the warmth and personableness of a librarian who cares for the people who live within a community will make a difference in that person's service to the community and, in turn, the response of the community to the library. We recognize, on the other hand, that in contemporary community management, whether it be in a small town or in a large city, empirical findings supported by frequent re-analysis do now and will continue to be the base on which resources are allocated to institutions in those communities.

User and non-user studies can play an extremely important role in this process. First, such studies provide a means by which the individual can communicate to the library a description of personally perceived needs. Second, the library can, through the same process, communicate to the individual what services might be available, thereby helping that person develop some new awareness of the library which would make him a more informed and expectant user of the library.

User and non-user studies also may provide the base on which to develop specific objectives for the "library within the context of local social and economic needs." [4,p.253] This, in turn, could be used in program development, evaluation, and the eventual communication of outputs to governing bodies for the purposes of accountability and requests for continued or increased funding.

There are a considerable number of institutions and agencies vying for the same tax dollars, and some research which has been completed concerning public library users contains indications that the libraries may be expensive icing on many community cakes. For example, in the studies analyzed by Zweizig and Dervin, between 10 and 24 percent of the adult population use the library once each month; between 51 and 64 percent use the library once a year. Less than 5 percent consider

the library as an important source for coping information -- survival and daily decision making information. [5,p,235-237]

It is possible that this lack of use and infrequent use may be a result of inaccessibility or unavailability. The National Inventory of Library Needs, 1975, contains evidence to support such a supposition.[4]

It may be argued that a lack of resources is reason enough for not completing user studies which require personnel time that is desperately needed in more direct user service. The corresponding argument must also be considered; in times of uncertain funding and resource scarcity, it is imperative that the rational allocation of previous commodities take place. If all areas and/or groups cannot be served fully, some priority must be established; thus we return to the need for local assessment and local control.

If the institutions we call libraries are to survive and flourish, we must reach more people, and those who operate them must be able to show governing bodies and fiscal officers what is being done, why, and how effectively. This is not the statement of a mercenary librarian looking over his shoulder at the disapproving stares of PPRS or MBO enthusiasts. If the library, or any other publicly supported institution, no longer has a valid purpose in society, it should no longer be kept as a part of our cooperatively funded investments. However, the writers believe that libraries have not yet attained their fullest service potential. Not only could libraries offer daily coping information, but they could also provide services which might be the basis for helping people realize their fullest potential. Human potential has almost become a meaningless expression through overuse during the past decade; but that is, in fact, what librarians must keep in mind: people and what they are capable of becoming as a result of contact with libraries and information services. This particular mind set, if developed in conjunction with user and potential user study and awareness actions, can help libraries become a keystone of community structure.

We must ask at this point, "So what else is new?" As Jesse Shera said during AIA Mid-Winter 1976, "What we are talking about today

we have been talking about since I was a young man." What we are saying and what the literature reflects is what we do continue to talk about, especially to each other within the profession. The point, however, is that today as in no other time, we have more of the tools needed to do more than talk. We must now encourage their use.

Implementing user and non-user studies is like kicking the smoking habit and taking up jogging. We have convincing evidence that the latter benefits the body and spirit of a person, and the former can benefit the body and spirit of an institution, not just the place, but the abstract concept of service. The problem with both is that we seem to have an unbelievable propensity to put things like this off until tomorrow; tomorrow when I am less tense or tomorrow when the library can afford the personnel.

Conferences such as the one for which this paper is intended; organizations, such as Rural America and the National Rural Center; the reality of the White House Conference and the local focus of its message and assessment; and the continuing education efforts of library educators all provide many opportunities for those in the profession. Through these activities librarians may be better able to learn about the needs of their communities, learn how to apply the various techniques and models for program development, and be encouraged to take action relating to the needs determined from research and their own data gathering.

THE RURAL SCENE

When considering information needs of rural Americans, librarians are going to have to de-mythologize some characteristics of ruralness and they are going to have to rely less upon pious legends of library services past.

All rural Americans are not farmers or rail splitters who, after the chores are done each day, gather around a friendly fire's glow and read from some inspiring volume. In fact, the vast majority of rural Americans are not farmers, but even those who are, are more likely to stare at the TV each evening than read by the fire's glow.

Mythological notions of rural conditions and dated concepts of library service programs give way to more realistic understanding when the penalties of rural isolation are examined in the context of an appropriate role for information services in contemporary rural America. Fortunately, this has been laid out rather convincingly by rural geographers and sociologists who have studied rural conditions and by librarians who have studied information needs. Unfortunately, a number of serious problems intrude when concerned people and agencies begin to plan programs aimed at improving the quality of rural existence. The problem of addressing the information needs of rural Americans has so many dimensions: social, political, financial, educational and informational to name a few. In other words, the problem is difficult to define. It has such complicated systems properties. And understanding the problem is just the first step in dealing with it.

In order to determine what information needs exist, librarians have to know what it's like out there. Librarians must understand the rural conditions, understand the penalties of isolation, observe the information seeking behavior of rural people, and be observed in the process of gaining this understanding. This last point should be emphasized because those who study the information seeking behavior of rural people report that it is usually a much more person-oriented than institution-oriented process. Librarians are going to have to become identified as persons who have something to offer rural people. Through personal intervention, the librarians may identify their institutions as places which fit into the fabric of rural existence, provided this visibility is accompanied by demonstrations that libraries have something to offer.

The purpose here is not to conjure up dated pictures of rural folk as moonshiners who mistrust strangers and are more inclined to blow the heads off all professors, librarians and revenueurs, rather than accept "book larnin'." The point is that somewhere between the two stereotypes, one with the still and the shotgun, the other with the evening fire glowing in anticipation of the next book-by-mail delivery, there exists a person whose rural condition produces a number of very

basic information needs which librarians might address through delivery and referral services, provided they are willing to re-examine some goals.

An examination of the facts is step one in this process. The rural condition has to be appreciated. What are some penalties of rural isolation? "In an organized society, the unorganized don't have a chance. Most small town and rural people are not organized. They have no one to dig out and publish the facts on their special needs and rural discrimination."

A Report on the Community Development Block Grant Program in Nonmetropolitan Areas advises that "after fall of 1979 all nonmetro funding will be discretionary." [7,p.7] The chief implication of this is that local governments will soon find themselves in competition for limited supplies of funds. How will rural libraries fare in the brave new world of zero base budgeting where programs are ranked in order of importance before funding is considered? How able is the rural grantsman to compete with his wealthier neighbor who hires consultants to assist him in his quest for aid?

What geographers and rural sociologists observe are rural conditions which have a direct bearing on the urban crisis. Indeed, they claim that the urban crisis will not be solved until the de-population of rural areas ceases. Out-migration is a function of declining opportunity, and job-seeking persons in their most economically productive years are the most likely out-migrants. When this produces situations which discourage industries from locating in those areas, the systems and cyclic features of the problem become visible. Charles F. Kovacik describes these kinds of problems in detail. [8]

Drennan and Shelby describe other penalties: "Remoteness isolates rural peoples from each other as well as from the 'main-stream.'" [3,p.171] In their report these researchers offer the best and most succinct statement of rural information needs yet produced. Moreover, reports of the Appalachian Adult Education Center clearly constitute the most exhaustive structuring of a theoretical framework for providing information services for disadvantaged adults. [9] It is not necessary for a new team of researchers to pretend that the wheel

awaits invention; what is necessary is for someone to produce a document which can communicate: (1) the need for support to funding agencies; (2) a reasonable action strategy to State Library Agencies, without whose support such efforts are doomed; and (3) a set of rational and understandable instructions to librarians who will implement a needs assessment survey at the local level and relate such findings to available local information sources, their own, or those of another agency.

Many librarians in rural service are not card carrying, born again holders of A.L.A. approved graduate degrees who converse in the codes which librarians and information scientists are fond of using. Any instrument placed in the hands of local librarians must communicate clear, do-able instructions, not in the jargon of librarianship, but in understandable, everyday language.

Again, the need is not for more studies. What is needed is the development of an action strategy that is sound enough to attract the support of federal and state authorities and that communicates a set of logical procedures to implementors. What may be the biggest obstacle to such an endeavor is our tendency as librarians to think almost exclusively of print media and traditional services.

For example, where books-by-mail programs are seen as ways to extend the library's services to the geographically remote, these programs may infrequently be evaluated to determine whether books are what the isolated people really want or need. Since we know so little about the effectiveness of book circulation to patrons who visit the libraries, it is difficult to describe how well books-by-mail help rural citizens deal with rural conditions.

The point is not to mock the fine intentions of books-by-mail advocates who clearly do engineer the extension of library service to the isolated who may not be able to travel to an existing library station. But the danger in investing most of one's outreach energies and resources in such efforts is that the presupposition about books as the business of libraries may be re-enforced and that feedback is generated only about the books-by-mail and not about other potential library services. Even though there is no scarcity of comment regarding the

volume of books-by-mail business, [10] evaluations-success statements based upon numbers of transactions or even upon use by those who would not otherwise come to the library are suspect.

We also ignore Maslow's Theory which convincingly suggests that man's behavior is determined by stimuli which activate his need system, described as a hierarchy, which extends from physiological needs at the base to self-actualization needs at its top. [11,p.300-301] When will we learn that a man striving against formidable odds to feed and clothe himself, to be secure, to belong, to be liked and to be loved, and to be satisfying each of these needs before the next determines his behavior, must view the library as having something to offer him before he will address his needs to the library system? When librarians can free themselves from a fix on the book and can see their way clear to develop programs of information services that truly synchronize with and respond to the information seeking behavior and needs of rural people, then the library will have earned its place in rural society. Now more than ever, the designers of rural library services must weave those services into the fabric of rural existence.

A project currently under way (Project No. 475AH70172 , "Information Needs Assessment of Rural Groups for Library Programs," funded by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Education) involves constructing a needs assessment instrument which local librarians can use in rural areas to:

1. Identify information needs;
2. Scan the array of agencies, groups or individuals with responsibilities to address those needs;
3. Consider a delivery and/or referral role for the library.

Most of the spadework for this effort has already been done.

The intention here is to build upon the solid foundations constructed by George Eyster, Ann Hayes Drennan and their associates at the Appalachian Adult Education Center, Morehead State University. Fortunately, the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Education, which supported the Appalachian studies, sees the need to continue working on information delivery for rural people. After adequate field-testing and refinement, results of the project will be released by the authors.

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