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The Library as a Social Agency, Response to Social Change

Libraries, as other social agencies, must study and evaluate their effectiveness and seek to improve their methods for achieving the external objectives for which they were created. Our information-consuming society demands that libraries establish large interdependent systems, yet maintain methods for supplying individual service. Large systems require change in our institutional structure once new objectives are defined. Action decisions for change can be made rational only if they are based on all available information and alternatives for actions evaluated in terms of objectives. Although little research has been done on the factors involved in institutional change, three general approaches are acceptable today: through the introduction of technology, by redesigning formal organizational structures, and through altering shared norms and values.

SOCIETY HAS SO MANY agencies that many forget that these agencies were created to produce an action of benefit to society. Social agencies, which began with a concern for social problems and which may at their inception have demonstrated that they had effect on problems, have often degenerated into systems where a major concern is the preservation, or even expansion, of the system itself. A subtle shift in emphasis occurs in which the objectives of the agency move from dealing with external problems of other people to that of problems involved in maintaining the professional status of the members of the agency. An underlying assumption of this paper is that social agencies, including libraries, supported by public, voluntary, or philanthropic funds, must study and evaluate their effectiveness and seek to improve the methods they employ to achieve the external objectives for which they were created. It is not enough for those who work within these social agencies to believe, however sincerely, that they are performing a social good.

> It is not enough to invoke "experience" or to collect meaningless and misleading information. . . . It is not enough to rely upon the support of colleagues and those in the same professional group and to accept their endorsement of our work as proof of effectiveness. Professional in-group support does not measure effectiveness and does not absolve us from accountability for our decisions.[1]

I do not wish to convey that social agencies, with their bureaucracies, are evil and that the number necessarily should be reduced. Society with the introduction of massive amounts of technology makes us highly interdependent. Social agencies are fundamentally instruments of human action. Their organization exists for the achievement of specific pur-

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poses and socially useful functions, and they depend upon a consistent relationship between means and ends. As Merton noted, "more and more people discover that to work they must be employed. For to work, one must have tools and equipment. And tools and equipment are increasingly available only in bureaucracies."[2] For a bureaucracy to function successfully, it must have a high degree of reliability of behavior, a commitment to conformity with prescribed patterns of action.[3] A social agency, be it a commercial, governmental, religious, or voluntary organization selling a product or providing service, must have socially accepted objectives and an efficient administrative structure if it is to survive. The ultimate check on a social agency in an open democratic society is the support it receives. A commercial agency goes bankrupt if it cannot sell its product at a profit. The check on other agencies is not often measured in terms of monetary profit, but nevertheless one exists. If the objectives are unacceptable or the operation inefficient, taxpayers or philanthropists will sooner or later threaten to stop support. The social agency under these circumstances must make a reassessment of itself, or die. The purpose of this paper is to examine the methods available to libraries, or other agencies, in making reassessments and how they can bring about changes in structure to allow them to become more viable social agencies.

The pressures being placed on libraries are well known. The Public Library Inquiry which published its reports twenty years ago stated boldly and clearly that purposes for which the nation's public library system had been designed have largely been filled and that if the public library as an institution is to survive, it must relate itself to new functions. The specific recommendation is that the public library become part of a national library network that would encompass other libraries now serving educational and research institutions.[4] With the aid of the Library Services Act of 1956 and through the leadership of librarians and state and county libraries, there has been some accomplishment in the establishment of networks. Nevertheless, an accusing finger still can be pointed at public libraries.

> The public library has more users and more money today than ever before, but it lacks a purpose. It is trying to do some things that it probably cannot do, and it is doing others that it probably ought not do. At the same time, it is neglecting what may be its real opportunities. What the library needs is, first, a purpose that is both in accord with the realities of present-day city life . . . , and second, a program that is imaginatively designed to carry its purpose into effect.[5]

Academic and other resource libraries are similarly afflicted with problems of an inability to define purposes. The academic library administrators can perhaps be exonerated to some extent for this dilemma because as students are pointing out throughout the nation, universities as institutions have not kept up with realities of our society. The ivory tower academic library of only a generation ago had, compared to today, simple objectives. These libraries took on society's responsibility for collecting and storing man's cultural heritage as recorded in books and journals. Certainly it was never a deliberate intent of academic libraries a generation ago to be isolated centers for an intellectual elite, but insofar as library service was concerned, they were. The number of libraries that have to cope with an inventory of over a half-million physical volumes, which contain millions of discrete bibliographic items, are now in the hundreds. The housekeeping problems have become horrendous. This factor alone makes the academic library an almost

unmanageable monstrosity.[6] Further, the number of students physically located on our campuses are beyond the facilities of our libraries to contain. The process of translating theoretical knowledge into applied knowledge has resulted in a constant increase in the number of people who must have access to the scholarly record. We are an information-consuming nation. One need only look at the growth of institutional members of such agencies as the Special Libraries Association and the Medical Library Association to gain insight into some of the problems of academic libraries. Although the hundreds of special library units created within the past twenty-five years have the same purposes functionally as the academic libraries—that is, they must supply library service to a group of people engaged in applied research or problem solving, and to a group of people who must constantly be involved with educating and reeducating themselves—these new special libraries have administratively different objectives. The materials collected are only sufficient to keep their primary clientele currently aware of new knowledge. They are organized to serve as an access point to the total scholarly record. They take no social responsibility for preserving the scholarly record. The assumption is that this is being taken care of by the academic institutions. The academic and other resource libraries are, after all, public institutions, and they have promoted for decades the availability of their collections. Each time a hospital, industry, or other social agency establishes a library unit that serves as an access point, the clientele of the resource library does not increase by one, but often by hundreds. What is even more important is that the service asked for from these access points is the most expensive kind to supply. It asks the resource library to retrieve what librarians often euphemistically refer to as the exotic material—which, because of lack of space, has often been stored inefficiently. Further, the difficult bibliographic and other reference problems are sent to the resource library to solve, because again the assumption is that it has the tools and facilities to solve them. Resource libraries obviously are not infinitely expansible; they simply cannot continue to accept more and more requests without some reorganization of purpose and administration.

The Need and Conditions for Change

Since Wiesner and York had the courage to admit that there are some social problems which have no technical solution, others have been able to come to similar conclusions.[7] I shall join this group and assert that the major library problems of today admit of no technical solutions. By a technical solution is meant one that requires a change only in techniques or application of knowledge of natural sciences. Little or no change in human values or ideas of morality is demanded. Computers, for example, are not and will not be a solution to library problems until society changes its values. Libraries are going to have to deal with books and journals and the housekeeping details that accompany their storage and retrieval as long as society maintains its present publication prestige system and educational methods. Further, until the ethical conditions of intellectual ownership legalized through copyright laws are altered, the potentiality of retrieving from computer memories cannot be realized. Although the difficulties of libraries as social organizations are not amenable to technological solution, it is nevertheless technology which is forcing libraries to change. Prior to World War II when social agencies exploited the development of faster or more efficient means of transportation, communication, or data processing, they merely became larger.

The same things were done only in a bigger way. Suddenly these accumulations of technology made us begin to feel as though we were running out of space. Each "improvement" made us more interdependent and made us feel as though we were crowding people closer together. That our institutions must change and that our value system must also change in order to arrive at new objectives brings up a major question: is it possible for our culture and institutions to adapt to so much change?[8]

Whenever change begins, it must start with conditions as they exist. Any planning and any action must relate to the social agencies now operating, even if one tries to circumvent them by establishing new agencies. The Eisenhower Commission on National Goals defined sixteen goals for the nation to attain.[9] Similarly, the National Advisory Commission on Libraries has recently offered specific goals to work toward. The common recommendation of almost any study group that investigates any social problem or the fate of a social agency, whether it is a national commission or an academic committee, is that more federal support should be provided and that more manpower should be deployed. Some study has been given to the achieving of the sixteen national goals, and it was concluded that the cost by 1975 would be $150 billion more per year than the expected gross national product. Further, it was calculated that a labor force of 101 million would be needed, which is 12.5 million more than can be expected in 1975.[10]

Before discussing the general conditions through which priorities and objectives for social action can be established, a precept of society needs to be stressed. Change in social agencies is aimed at modifying the behavior of people. This seemingly obvious point needs emphasizing because so many people view social change as purely institutional change, and evaluate economic technological and educational inputs strictly in those terms.[11]

If the arguments presented so far are acceptable, (1) that for our society to "progress" we must have larger organizations because only the large organization can secure, maintain, and use the technological improvements, and (2) that the federal government is the major source of funds to create these new bureaucracies, then we face the problem of development of vast bureaucracies which would subjugate individual choice and freedom. This goes counter to the nation's individualistic tradition. The Commission on National Goals had as its first goal that:

> The status of the individual must remain our primary concern. All our institutions . . . must further enhance the dignity of the citizen, promote the maximum development of his capabilities . . . and widen the range and effectiveness of appointments for individual choice.[12]

Libraries share with many other agencies the purpose of providing service to individuals. The librarian in a small library unit gets to know his clientele and caters to their needs and proclivities. If we are faced with creating large library systems, this individual attention will have to be modified. Large systems cannot cope with myriad exceptions to rules. The alternative appears that libraries, as social agencies, are going to have to begin organizing themselves so that they take a more active role in changing the behavior of their clientele. The long held ideal that the library exists to give people what they want when they want it will have to be abandoned. Library systems are going to have to demand that their clientele take responsibility in the use of library services. Manufacturers issue guaranties and warranties with their products, but there are conditions. If the owner of an automobile, for example, does not return

to an authorized dealer within a specified period to have his automobile checked, the warranty is invalid. In other words, if the owner does not act responsibly, the manufacturer is absolved from further obligation to provide dependable transportation. To some this may appear as a kind of coercion in which arbitrary decisions are made by distant and irresponsible bureaucrats over which the individual has no control. This coercion can be viewed in another way: the automobile owner agrees when he purchases his automobile to act in a certain way; if he does not wish to follow the rules of the manufacturer, then he is subject to other sanctions. In some areas of the nation, automobiles must have an annual safety check. If the inspection shows the automobile to be unsafe, and the owner has allowed his warranty to lapse, he has no choice except to pay for the repairs himself or be denied a license to operate the automobile. The point is that society must protect itself from the irresponsible individual. Mutually agreed upon responsibilities between social agencies and individuals has become a *sine qua non* of cultural organizations.[13]

To summarize: libraries, as other social agencies, have not kept pace with social needs. A change in objectives is demanded which in turn changes functions and results in the requirement for reorganization. Because of the growth of technology, existing library units can no longer continue to grow only in size, but must incorporate into their structure new institutional as well as individual responsibilities. Competition for funds and manpower to meet national aspirations are going to require compromises from all social agencies, and libraries are not immune. Some kind of social action different from maintaining the status quo is mandatory. Is it possible to proceed rationally in altering our social agencies? If we want social action—which is better than maintaining the status quo—it will be necessary for us to make comparisons according to some scale, and preferably a scale which enables us to say *how much* better one action is than another.

Rationality in Institutional Change

One would think that since rapid social change is a condition of life, a great deal of study by social scientists would have been done on the sources, directions and meaning, as well as on the methods of effecting change. Unfortunately, this is not the case.[14] Also, since it is through institutions that society effects most of the overt changes by altering the authority structure, one would assume that the social scientists would have collected a great deal of data on the means and effects of manipulating bureaucratic organizations; again, however, little empirical data are available on which to make generalizations.[15]

> It is difficult if not impossible in any given situation to demonstrate in rational terms how one particular organization structure yields a higher payoff than another. What can be demonstrated . . . of an organization structure is: (1) that a proposed plan is different from others in the distribution of authority; (2) that it will benefit some individuals and groups in the balance of power; (3) that plans similar to the one proposed are used elsewhere and seem to work satisfactorily. Beyond these demonstrable features a formal structure in the final analysis represents one design of organization, among a number of options, in which the authority figure invests his confidence as his solution. . . .[16]

Viewed in this way, formal organizations appear to be nonrational and based on cliques, informal leaders, unwritten codes of behavior, and motivations and styles of leaders. However, to admit that social agencies arise through irrational decisions over which there is no control or hope for direction would

indicate a poverty of intellect.

Communication, used in the broadest context, is the instrument through which society adjusts itself to the alterations introduced by technology, political decisions, and other factors which cause social changes. If certainty is sought, scientific method can offer no panacea. Scientists long ago recognized that even in the natural sciences nothing can be stated as completely scientifically true. Science can only produce more technology; but, as noted earlier, technology is not a solution to social conditions. If we are going to solve our nation's library problems, we deal with them on a piecemeal basis, but this does not mean we act randomly or that we ignore the consequences of our actions. We can bring rationality to our decisions for action if we relate them to (1) other possible decisions, (2) the information available, and (3) objectives consistent with our philosophy of society. Let us examine each of these constraints within which we must maneuver.

1. *Possible decisions.* In any situation involving administrative operations, several courses of action are always available. One of the surprising things about the psychology of librarians is their inability to recognize that the practicing librarian, if he is rated as good by his peers, is one who is constantly making decisions. What is more discouraging is to observe the lengths to which librarians will go to avoid the responsibility of making a decision. Some have contended that the major reason cataloging is thought of as the least desirable of professional specialties is that cataloging teachers do not instill in their students an understanding of the need for decision making. There are no "pat" answers to specific problems. There are many ways of doing things. What we do is not as predetermined as we sometimes believe. We have greater freedom to act, to change the structure of our response, and find opportunities in our environment than bureaucratic rules would lead us to believe. If we understand thoroughly how we are determined by examining possible decision alternatives, then we can gain confidence to act so as to transcend the determinism we feel is imposed upon us.[17]

2. *Availability of information.* Given certain conditions, alternative actions are possible, but if changes in organization structure or objectives are to be effected, information about more than the immediate set of conditions is useful. The more relevant information available, the better the decisions that can be made; or to say it another way, the more likely it is that the desired objectives could be achieved and the greater the chance that decisions when effected can cause improvement. There are two extremes with respect to the availability of information that seem to dominate; we either make decisions and act without enough information, or we delay so long awaiting relevant information that the objectives change to the point where the original problem has disappeared—if you wait long enough, the problem solves itself. This kind of nondecision-making is irrational behavior.

Making decisions without making an effort to gain relevant information might be generalized into two dimensions—the wish to remain innocent and the desire to remain ignorant. The wish to remain innocent has some rather extensive research to support the contention that it is not an uncommon phenomenon. If a person is told by some authority, or if he has persuaded himself, that he is in no way responsible for the consequences of his actions, information which is relevant to the problems he is dealing with will be *perceived as* irrelevant.[18] Dozens of examples could be cited in which librarians have appeared to wish to re-

main innocent; perhaps one example will suffice here. At least six times in the past five years an attempt has been made to "experiment" with electronic transmission of library materials. The results of these experiments have been published in at least three cases in exacting detail, and all the experiments come to the same conclusion: with present technology the cost of long-distance transmission of textual material for library purposes is beyond the capability of society to support. What is even more significant is that even if cost is discounted, the time involved in transmitting large quantities is so great that it is faster to use the mail. In spite of this incontrovertible evidence, librarians are still seriously searching for funds from the government and foundations to install such transmission systems with the same set of conditions reported in the studies. Apparently they think that their institutions are unique, or the experience of other institutions is irrelevant, or they do not wish to understand the work of their peers.

The wish to remain ignorant is more subtle and is less supported by social research, but it is nevertheless experienced by most who have worked in bureaucratic environments. An administrator will reject information which relates to the existence of problems or will reject a proposal for investigation on the logically sound position that any information revealed could only be an embarrassment. If no information is available, any decision, either right or wrong, cannot be challenged as irrational. If information does become available, it becomes possible to put forward arguments in favor of some decisions rather than others. Perhaps no one has defined it as a bureaucratic law, but the number of rational decisions will tend to diminish as information increases. "It is possible that if information could ever be complete with respect to any subject, there would be only one optimum and rational decision to achieve any one given objective."[19]

3. *Definition of objectives.* Social agencies are instruments for human action to make groups or individuals more effective members of society. One might consider it a peculiarity of civilization that military organizations have been able to marshal the means to effect specific objectives with dispatch, while organizations which purport to build society have less success in stating accomplishable objectives. This is understandable if one looks at the organizational structure of the military. Authority is vested in a hierarchical structure and orders are followed implicitly. Although the military may point to accomplishments in reconstructing societies they first destroyed, the ideals which guided this reconstruction were not derived from a military organization, but from the ethic of the society which supported it. Modern civilization recognizes but two generalized types of power structures—the centralized hierarchical and the pluralistic decentralized. In a hierarchical structure a few people can establish social objectives and force society to expend their energies to accomplish them. Social agencies are created to support those objectives. In the pluralistic society objectives can never be simply defined. Action is only possible through compromise and consensus. Consensus is, however, a temporary condition in an open society. One cannot have the stability of a hierarchical structure and also the freedom of choice permitted in a society defining its goals through consensus. The social administrator in a pluralistic society is not in charge of establishing the social ethic, he is its servant. Further, any social agency charged with insuring social goals through its action can only validate itself if it questions the general social

ethic. Every social agency should be evaluating itself constantly, and the general method for doing this might be summarized in three questions:

1. What would happen to society if the agency suddenly died, and how many people would it affect?
2. What are the possible consequences of altering any of its stated functions?
3. What other social agencies does it assist or support, or conversely, with what other agencies does it conflict?

The information available will determine the precision of answers which can be given these questions. Library investigators, planners, and administrators must realize that libraries have to perform a social function that must be measured against total social needs and purposes. As a social agency, a library must operate efficiently, yet it is not possible to improve social efficiency without some basis in measurement. As inadequate as it may appear to those who quest for certainty, consensus not of peers but of society is the most important instrument with which to construct worthwhile objectives.

Methods for Effecting Change

If objectives are defined, if as much relevant information is acquired as is feasible within imposed time and cost constraints, and if the alternative decisions for action are evaluated, then the next step is to create an administrative organization to do the work. As already pointed out, very little investigative work has been done to determine how to create, alter, or improve bureaucratic structures. Conceptually, we are still using the descriptions of bureaucratic authority of a generation ago to explain our present social agency structure. Weber described three types of authority:

1. *Legalistic*. Such authority rests on the belief in legality of patterns of rules and the right of those elevated to authority under those rules to issue commands.

2. *Traditional*. Here authority rests on the established belief in the sanctity of traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority under them, *e.g.*, the family, clan, or an aristocracy.

3. *Charismatic*. Because of the specific sanctity, heroism, or character of an individual, and because of the normative patterns of orders revealed or ordained by him, this person and possibly his appointed successors are accorded authority over others; certainly our religious organizations have arisen through this means, but in our secular society we produce schools and cults from whom we accept commands as authoritative.[20]

Weber based his synthesis on the study of late nineteenth and early twentieth century social organizations. With this view of social agency structure, almost the only way an organization can be changed is to bring in new people and let the old ones go. Weber did recognize another way, the introduction of collegiality, a body of legislators, be they executive committees, boards of trustees, or senators, who by employing various pressures limit and control hierarchical authority.[21] This simplistic concept has altered enormously because of the rise of a new kind of authority figure—the expert. Let us examine what methods exist for changing the formal organizational structure of agencies other than by hiring and firing people.[22] There are three basic approaches:

1. *Change through the introduction of technology*. An administrator may think that by bringing in a new machine he can make his organization operate more

efficiently. He ordinarily does not expect that much change will take place; this is a delusion. A new technical device requires skills to operate—skills that the administrator does not possess. In the nineteenth century the boss of an agency could pride himself on his ability to do any job that his people did. Administrators must now supervise people who do things they cannot have time to learn and may not even have the talent to understand. The administrator's life is further complicated by having to hire still another group of people—the mechanics who service the machine. Again, another specialist is introduced over whom he cannot enforce any of the traditional means of authoritative control. The introduction of a technological device into an organization results in the employment of two types of people who do not fit into the old organization, the person who operates the machine but does not necessarily know how to repair it, and the person who repairs it, but does not necessarily know how to run it.

The administrator compensates for his loss of authority by creating still another expert. In industry in the 1920s he was called the efficiency expert, whose name began to be changed to industrial engineer in the 1930s. By virtue of his expertise he began taking over much of the planning function of production supervisors. The modern-day counterpart who has become an even higher-level expert is the operations research scientist who now even takes over the planning for the administrator.

Whereas industry has tried to cope with technological change for over forty years through the creation of new experts, libraries have only recently begun to deal with organization structural change through the introduction of technology. Until a few years ago the chief librarian of even the largest library, if he could type, was perhaps technically equipped to do almost any task his staff had to do. Electronic data processing equipment has now changed not only the role of the chief librarian, but most other library specialities. This situation may soon be equalized because one library school after another is trying to introduce into its curriculum a sequence of courses that will produce the equivalent of an industrial engineer. The title given this person, which in most cases he cannot live up to, is systems analyst. Operations research techniques are also being introduced into the curriculum, and it will not be long before we have library operations research specialists.[23] If we want to change library organization structure, we have the technology to do it. The question is, however, do we have the wisdom to introduce technology to meet new objectives, or will we use it only to build bureaucratic empires?

2. *Changes in shared norms and values.* Authority in an organization is ultimately based on the shared values and beliefs about what is correct, or at least acceptable, behavior by the people working in the organization. If we cannot find an acceptable role, or niche, we soon find ourselves looking for another job, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Changing values and norms within an organization is rarely rapid. There are two general ways in which this is done.

The first is through education. Certainly in librarianship there are now so many institutes, seminars, workshops, and continuing education courses, besides professional meetings, that a librarian could spend his whole time traveling and theoretically learning. Although this is now an accepted technique to promote change, very little work has been done to evaluate how effective this approach is. It does seem to be common sense that unless this education begins at the top, few values and norms will change. If an administrator generously

releases time for his middle and lower levels of staff to undertake additional training without himself doing so, frustration will occur. Unless the top can be influenced by new values, changes made at the middle or lower levels could create even greater problems and at best remain encapsulated in that particular unit.[24]

The other way to bring about an alteration in values and norms is to bring the expert to the social agency rather than send the staff out to be educated. We have now in our society a whole group of behavioral scientists acting as consultants who often refer to themselves as "change agents." This has indeed become a lucrative sideline for many academicians, so much so that library consultant firms have been operating quite profitably for many years.

3. *Changes through redesigning the formal organization.* If little research has gone into the other two methods of changing organizations, the redesign of the formal structure is one that is frequently tried with the least amount of information available on which to make rational decisions. If attempted, it is done almost entirely through intuition and carried through because of a crisis situation. The other common reason to cause a redesigning of the formal organization is outside influence. It may be from a pressure group. It may be from incentive legislation making funds available either through grants or subsidies to which are added restrictions literally requiring new formal structures. If it occurs entirely within an organization, new departments and divisions are created through the amalgamation of old ones; new titles are given to the same jobs but implying new status. One thing can be said about this approach: if there is an alteration in the balance of power, no constructive change will result unless those whose power is reduced are given alternative compensation.

Summary

Our libraries must change to survive as useful institutions. New objectives must be found that are consistent with our technological society. We must create measuring instruments which can demonstrate the value of libraries as social agencies; without such instruments they cannot successfully compete for manpower and financial resources. Although there is little sound research, derived knowledge, or even good empirical information on which to base rational decisions for organizational change, there is sufficient evidence that libraries are going to have to incorporate new kinds of experts who will take over planning that hitherto has been in the hands of library administrators. Techniques and methodology, even though poorly developed, are available to society to improve libraries. The problem in its specific form is the difference between present conditions and desired objectives. To get a problem solved requires that somebody be committed to choose and decide among alternative solutions and moves. The uncommitted man can delay and get nothing done. The committed man creates problems by stating objectives and then trying to bring the actual conditions closer to these objectives.

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