The Technological University Library's Communication with its Public

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University libraries are channels through which communication is effected, yet "they are not closed and static systems, but must continually develop in relation to their environment, must be prepared to change the organisation of their various parts if the situation requires, in order to survive and to fulfil the purposes for which they were created".[1] Being more than a mere channel, therefore, the library "engages in transactions with other systems, the local community, university, research institute or industrial firm".[2]

Hence the university library interacts and communicates with its public, but in fact with a number of different publics, of which the most important and varied are the public made up of members or close associates of the parent university and the public whose members lack such a close and formal contact but who nevertheless at times may be aware of the library or need its services. It has been argued that another public is that upon which the library depends for funding, but this group, even if it can be distinguished from the first two, has relations with the library which although of great importance are of a relatively uncomplicated nature.

If the need for interaction and communication with its public is accepted for the library it has sometimes been held that libraries need not be particularly active in the field and that such activity may indeed be in some way slightly improper. "As non-profit service institutions, whose primary product is an intangible concept called information, it may at first seem unlikely that academic libraries have much in common with industrial or business firms in the profit sector of the nation's economy".[3] It has been stated, under the ominous title "The selling of the library"[4] that the library is a "serious, substantive, essential institution whose mission is to provide information and the means of education that an enlightened public needs" and that, even in the U.S.A., it should not be necessary "to hire hucksters to create a phony pitch to draw crowds".

One sees how readily the relations between the library and its users can become involved with commercial attitudes and jargon. There is an easy transition from communication with the library's public to promotion of library services and thence to marketing. Those who advocate the active promotion of the library may freely use terms with commercial overtones, but within marketing there is a recognised element of communication which is acceptable to those who dislike the commercial aspects. One may wonder however whether it is true that "if the non-profit organisation does not satisfy its clients it does not necessarily face the loss of support from the funding source".[3] That funding public mentioned above may be of little importance for the purposes of this discussion but the other publics can express dissatisfaction quite clearly since communication is a two-way affair. In any case the marketing definition of communication can well include what has been called atmospherics. In that way even a library not consciously active in the field will communicate whether or not it wishes to do so, and if it does not act positively it runs the risk of communicating to its users an impression contradicting its own perhaps

unavowed aims.

In dealing with this communication problem the technological university library will discover an overlap between the two publics mentioned above. It is perhaps easier to provide for those closely linked to the library and its parent institution. The classic and now generally accepted devices of library handbooks, instructional programmes, audio-visual aids, guiding of the building and its stock, and those vaguer but important influences lumped together under the term atmospherics are all available for use and the repertory is growing.

Within the relatively closed area of the institution there are however other forms of effective communication. For example, the opportunities open to the library staff to take part in various ways in the teaching and research work of the university can provide occasions for informing and influencing non-library colleagues. This type of communication and opinion-building should never be neglected and can of course produce indirect effects upon the attitudes of colleagues who may at other times be called upon to judge the library's financial needs and evaluate its services. Communication is easier if it is not always the library addressing the rest of the institution but emerges between colleagues aiming at a common goal using different means.

People more loosely connected with the institution present more difficulties, but also better opportunities for ingenuity on the part of the library. They may well have pre-conceived notions of what the library can and should do. Not being closely connected with its work they may have excessive expectations of its abilities, or on the other hand be reluctant to ask for what can easily be supplied. For example, one may find in the former case little knowledge of the extent to which libraries are now inter-dependent and in the latter a surprising degree of ignorance (sometimes in those who from scientific or industrial training should know better) of the increasing competence of electronic means of information handling.

The library's communication with its public is therefore a complex and surprisingly subtle network of relationships. The library must for example compete in some ways with commercial forms of communication which assault even members of technological universities. Its audio-visual presentations may be compared with highly professional television productions, its atmosphere with that of shops cunningly designed to put the visitor in the right frame of mind to buy.

There have never been so many devices available to help communication with the library's public or such a variety of services to explain, yet the library need not despair. Recent experiences in introducing to a technological university information services from the British Prestel system and the analogous radio services seem to show in fact that the library, used to handling a range of information sources and regarded with some confidence by its publics, can more effectively explain and promote a basically commercial service than the providers of the service can do themselves. In the same way it seems likely that a library can better demonstrate the strengths and short-comings of on-line information services than the most persuasive of technological advocates.

As the library becomes more complicated it is less easily understood by the user and communication between the two becomes more and more necessary. In technological universities this has long been recognised and there have

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even been dreams of a library which could almost communicate itself: "If all the library's staff were propped up dead at their posts, like the Legionnaires in Beau Geste, it should be possible for a student on his first visit to find his way to the books he needs".[5] Even if such a basic self-explanatory library were possible, desirable, or acceptable to the staff, there would still be a great deal to do in other forms of communication.

We walk a knife-edge therefore with on the one side the perils of advertising, for which one pays, with many consequent problems, and on the other the risk of failure to achieve among the public that understanding which produces intelligent appreciation and perhaps incidentally financial and other support. In the middle are the more generally accepted aspects of communication: publicity in all its forms, for which one does not pay, the network of personal contacts, and all the less tangible atmospherics.

A technological university may well have advantages in this field. Many members of its public after all should have some understanding of the effective functioning of systems, and those who fear the knife-edge may take heart from the dictum that "there is no need in the library context to examine the tortuous arguments about what is public relations and what is advertising."[6]

Communication between the library and its public seems to be inescapable. It should therefore be regarded with care by the library. It is something more than the instruction of readers which we have grown to accept as a normal part of library activity in technological university libraries. It seeks to inform, but it also seeks to inculcate an attitude of mind and a broader understanding of the purposes of the library and of its relevance to the institution's activities and the wider world outside with which the institution has relations. These needs are easy to lay down in statements of policy. They are less easy to bring about in the work of a busy library possibly meeting economic difficulties.

Communication is above all a relationship between human beings. It therefore makes particular calls upon the capacities of those human beings responsible for running libraries. In times past a university library might well have had on its staff many people to whom the type of communication now being suggested would have been uncongenial or apparently quite irrelevant to their work. With the change in expectations we may therefore argue that those members of staff coming into the service of technological university libraries must have a greater awareness than their predecessors of communication needs and that their personalities and training will encourage such awareness. There is work here for the educators of librarians.

We may be at the end of a period during which many developments took place which seemed to produce a form of library organisation markedly different from that seen in the past. "The 'new men' in libraries, in their search for greater efficiency and improved use of resources, turned to the business world and adapted some of the methods of the economists or the sociologists to the library milieu".[7] We may have been guilty of feeling that after doing this we had reached a summit and that little real advance would be possible beyond that point. There are however stirrings which indicate that further examination of our work in the communication field might be appropriate. For example user education (a restricted but nevertheless essential part of communication) may not have achieved all

one hoped and perhaps never could do so.   It has recently been
commented that "user education still remains more isolated than
integrated just as it is formal rather than informal.   Our academic
colleagues generally are unmoved by our efforts".[8]   Is this not an
argument for moving forward on the broader front of communication?
Furthermore communication between the library and readers is essentially
human while one could argue that the information contained in the library,
and the methods by which the library must dispense it, is inhuman.
It has been said that " 'information' has been transformed into a
commodity, with the resulting assumption that the more we have the better,
and that the purpose of libraries is to buy larger and larger quantities".[1]
That is perhaps over-simplified but may serve to stress the importance
of communication between library and reader.

"The more we communicate the way we do, the more we create a hellish
world... a place which is void of grace-the undeserved, unnecessary,
surprising, unforeseen.   A paradox is at work here: ours is a world
about which we pretend to have more and more information, but which
seems to us increasingly devoid of meaning".[9]   Any small effort the
library can make to increase the amount of meaning, even if it is
professionally unable to diminish the amount of information, is surely
worthwhile.

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