Public Relations of Scientific Libraries in the Federal Republic of Germany

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Hessian State and University Library

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PUBLIC RELATIONS OF SCIENTIFIC LIBRARIES IN THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

Report of a Pilot Study of the Deutsches Bibliotheksinstitut, West Berlin (German Library Institute) Conducted at the Hessische Landes- und Hochschulbibliothek Darmstadt (Hessian State and University Library, Darmstadt)

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1. Scientific Libraries and Public Relations

Scientific libraries are important establishments of the intellectual and cultural life of a country. In the Federal Republic of Germany, however, their public prestige and the general knowledge of their various services is quite low. For a long time, even librarians were of the opinion that anybody who does scholarly work, attends college, or tries to further his education in another way will find his own way to the library and use its services. They were wrong. Studies have shown that even frequent library users know too little about the many different kinds of information and services offered.

Public opinion still views the librarian's job as a very contemplative one, although it has greatly changed, and although the number of books and magazines that have to be acquired, organized, and made available has increased immensely. This negative image also has a bad effect on the administrations financing the libraries.

Therefore, the scientific libraries have of late been repeatedly asked to increase their public relations efforts so that a broader public takes notice of their tasks, services and problems. The libraries are willing to do so on principle. However, they know too little about the specific problems of
public relations for libraries.

2. A Project of the Deutsches Bibliotheksinstitut (DBI)
For this reason the DBI organized a project in 1978 that is meant to create the methodological preconditions for public relations in scientific libraries. One year before that the same institute had started a project for improving the public relations of public libraries. That project’s aim is to find a standardized form of all kinds of public relations for the public libraries in the Federal Republic of Germany and West Berlin.

Such a standardization cannot be striven for at scientific libraries, because they often differ too much from each other in their history, organization and purpose. Instead, the methods are to be tried out in a model of local public relations at one library. The Hessische Landes- und Hochschulbibliothek Darmstadt has been chosen to serve as this model library, since it is almost equally responsible for the two most important functions of scientific libraries:

- providing literature for a city and a region;
- as a central library, providing literature for a university.

The project is financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Science. Work on the project was started in June 1979. It is under the professional control of the library’s director. An employee of the Deutsches Bibliotheksinstitut is at his disposal for the practical realization of the different tasks.

The project is under the critical guidance and supervision of an advisory board, whose members are librarians from different libraries, communication experts from the economic sector, from different cultural areas, and from the public administration. Aside from this, a yearly meeting is held in Darmstadt for public relations specialists of numerous large libraries from all over the Federal Republic, so that they can inform themselves about the development of the project and bring forward suggestions and requests on the basis of their own practical work.
The realization of the project is planned to take three years. The results are to be published in a comprehensive concluding report intended to be used as a sort of manual by the scientific libraries of the Federal Republic, containing suggestions and instructions for the conduct of their own public relations.

3. Tasks and Mode of Operation
At the beginning of the project work a list was compiled of the topics that were to be tested in practical work.

Now, after more than half of the time allotted for the project has passed, work has begun on all problems. In some topical areas results have already been achieved (e.g. the development of a new emblem, close cooperation with the press, a system of signs for orientation), although these topics are still being experimented with.

Public relations of scientific libraries have two objectives: public relations aimed at the external public (3.1 - 3.6), and public relations within the library (3.7 - 3.9). It is also fundamental to use a corporate identity.

3.1 The Emblem ("Signet")
The visual appearance in public is determined by an emblem. A survey at all scientific libraries of the Federal Republic resulted in the finding of three themes of library emblems: the book, the library building, and the initials of the library.

In Darmstadt, a graphic artist was given the task of sketching designs using these themes. He did so - and then he presented a fourth suggestion: "B'thk". This puzzle of letters is the result of a method not used in Germany but which is quite common in the English speaking world, of extracting the four most striking consonants of the German word "Bibliothek" (library). This "B'thk" is used as an identification symbol above the rather long name of the library (see enclosure). For the line between the symbol and the full name of the library he chose two shades of green, which are also
to be used as identification colours within the orientation system.

This emblem fulfills all the important requirements it should: it catches everybody’s attention - though it is also controversial, to be sure - and it is unequivocal and cannot be mistaken. It was presented to the advisory board and other groups who all voted for it by majority.

3.2 Cooperation with the Press

The public relations specialists of libraries complain again and again that the press takes so little notice of libraries, at best reporting about special events like the opening of an exhibition.

The local-news editors of both of Darmstadt’s daily newspapers assured us in various intensive talks that the readers do want to hear about the library’s general problems - but the problems do have to be made interesting and illustrative. Shorts news items have the best chances to get published and read. It is also important that the press is continuously supplied with news items.

For this reason, a group of employees has, for some months now, met weekly with the director at an appointed time in the Darmstadt library to consider which greater or lesser events are important enough to be published. The success of these meetings can be seen in the fact that in the year 1980, 132 news items about our library were printed.

3.3 Public Relations in the University

It has proved to be of special importance to better inform the university students of the library’s services. Their using the library has to come natural from the beginning. Therefore the students are now provided with information material about the library right at the start of their academic studies. In addition, introductory tours are offered, and reports about the library appear regularly in both of Darmstadt’s university newspapers.
3.4 Exhibitions and Other Cultural Events

Organizing exhibitions is the oldest and most popular, often even the only form of public relations of scientific libraries. Library exhibitions have two functions:
- they promote awareness of the library by presenting chosen items of its collection,
- by compiling literature and documents illustrating a given topic they stimulate the drawing of comparisons and contribute to the advancement of knowledge.

There is almost no limit to the topics a library may choose for its exhibitions. To give a few examples, here is a list of only the major exhibitions our library showed during the year 1980:
- theatre in Darmstadt
- the "Darmstädtter Verlag" (history of a handpress)
- books from Poland
- the philosopher Hermann Graf Keyserling
- construction and history of sun dials
- modern book art
- manuscripts from the middle ages and valuable early prints.

In addition, there were numerous small exhibitions shown on our stair-case, commenting special current events.

In like manner, attention was drawn to the library’s holdings and services by giving lectures, readings, concerts, and similar events.

3.5 Publications

By its publications the library, as a cultural institution, has a special impact. This form of public relations is also tested within the scope of the Darmstadt project - as far as the financial resources allow. Examples of different kinds of publications are:
- catalogs of exhibitions
- scientific research reports using the library’s source materials
- publications about the history, function and special collections of the library
- bibliographies of the university’s publications
- reading lists related to special events, e.g. to the theatre programme
- reproductions of valuable manuscripts and prints, also on such media as postcards and slide series.

3.6 Cooperation with Other Institutions
Many activities repeatedly offer the chance to cooperate with other institutions. In this way the respective interested parties are lead closer to the library. In Darmstadt, we take advantage of such opportunities whenever possible.

In the year 1980, such cooperation took place with the Darmstadt Technical University, the Darmstadt Public Library, the German Poland Institute, the Darmstadt State Theatre, the Society of Hessian Friends of Literature, and an art gallery.

3.7 A System of Signs for Orientation
The goal of public relations within the library is to reassure the user that he is welcome in the library. This feeling of welcome is intensified if he is made familiar with everything he needs to work with, so that he can find his way about the library fast and on his own. To achieve this goal, a uniform system of signs for orientation and direction was developed for the Darmstadt library. This system helps the user to quickly obtain a general view of the library’s various services and facilities, and it leads him directly to the wanted location. At the same time, this system is intended to relieve the librarian from answering the many routine questions and instead make him available for giving more professional information.

Right now this system is about ready to be realized.

3.8 Point-of-Use Instructions
Especially when using certain specific facilities of the library people need expert advice. But even there written instructions can be of valuable help. With the help of illustrative leaflets the person seeking information will be enabled to become familiar with the use of the respective facility
by himself. In Darmstadt, such point-of-use instructions are presently worked out for all important catalogs, information services, reading rooms, and lending modalities. In the drafting of their content and formal structure, we also make use of the materials of those scientific libraries that already work with such point-of-use instructions.

3.9 Information Bulletins for Users and Employees of the Library

Very often it is necessary to let the library users know about changes, news and innovations, and also about unavoidable difficulties in the library. Since the beginning of 1980, this purpose is fulfilled by a news bulletin called "LHB im Gespräch" ("Talking about LHB" - "LHB" are the initials of our library's name). It appears not regularly but as occasion demands and is distributed free of charge.

A similar bulletin for the purpose of improving the information flow within the library contains announcements that are of special interest and importance to the employees. The task of collecting and passing on such information is assigned to the same group that meets weekly for the discussion of press items.

4. Costs and Benefits of Public Relations

The Darmstadt project has the goal of creating the methodological preconditions of public relations of scientific libraries. Effective public relations are only possible, if the libraries are adequately supplied with personnel and funds. Every bigger library should have a specialist who spends at least half of his working hours on the tasks of public relations. Although additional funds are needed for this, these costs realize an effective profit, because they make it possible to get more use out of the high budget that is needed yearly for the upkeep of the library and the building-up of its collection.