

On communicating information

FRANK SLIGO

Lecturer in Business Communication,
Faculty of Business, Massey University

Marie Keir's article in the September 1980 issue of *New Zealand Libraries*, entitled 'Information for industry'¹, sketches as a crucial issue for New Zealand librarianship the distinction between communication and information. The essence of Ms Keir's article could perhaps be summed up in her sentence:

The problem is no longer one of finding information, but of communicating the abundant information we already hold.

From the extraordinary advances made recently in computer-based information banks, it seems clear that the role of the larger libraries throughout the world will at the very least be substantially altered. It would appear that access to information will in the future normally be secured by means of the new computer-based services, and the principal role of the library and regional storehouse will be to supply to the user the paper or fiche copy which the computer-based information system has identified and located. In educational institutes worldwide, librarians are having to come to terms with the growing independence of their largest client group, what we may call the scientific-scholarly clientele. Just as the new access to micro-computers has recently facilitated the innovation of scientists performing do-it-yourself statistical analyses, so also are the advances in both the technology and software of information retrieval systems now enabling this group to carry out their own data collection, without anything like the old dependence on traditional library methods. If librarians are no longer necessary in identifying and then locating material, what is to be their role, other than as warehouse minders? I suggest the answer to this question lies in the success with which librarians can communicate with their clientele, find out and understand their needs, and match the information produced to those needs. It may be argued that this has always been the librarian's role: not so, however. The reference services which we take for granted are of comparatively recent origin, and are still today of an essentially undeveloped nature. Generally speaking, our understanding of the small group dynamics of the reference interview is poor, and librarians are normally not trained to employ the most advanced interviewing techniques.

The theoretical basis

Librarians have long been concerned at the paucity of the intellectual foundations of their discipline. In this country, attempts have been made by such eminent figures in librarianship as R. N. O'Reilly to construct a philosophy of the profession. Of greater long-term significance for librarianship is Jesse Shera's concept of social epistemology, which emphasises, as he says,

the whole man and the whole society, and all of their ways of thinking, knowing, feeling, acting and communicating.²

Shera's scope is interdisciplinary: he calls for librarians to acquire familiarity with the subject matter of their collections, but he specifies also that librarians should develop an understanding of the importance of the knowledge they communicate to the individual and to society. To do so effectively will require a much more sophisticated understanding both of the nature of knowledge and also of the relationship between the structure of knowledge and the librarian's tools for intellectual access to and control over that knowledge.

The implications of Shera's concept of social epistemology for the emergence of a philosophy of librarianship are yet to be fully developed. Unusual among the attempts to develop such a philosophy, however, Shera's approach is holistic, respecting the breadth and variety of librarianship, and thus it avoids narrowing the scope of the library's function in order to make it fit the confines of a related discipline. By way of contrast, through their traditional disposition towards the humanities, New Zealand librarians have sought in the values and ethos of the arts the foundations of their occupation. This striving to create a philosophy in the humanities always seemed self-conscious and arbitrary, however, and none of these efforts ever quite jelled, or was accepted by a significant proportion of the profession.

Nor has the quantitatively-based approach once known as 'library science' proved to be an adequate foundation for librarianship. For one thing, the discipline of information science on which library science was largely based has long since developed in other directions, leaving the latter without conceptual or methodological roots. For

another, most librarians are neither trained in nor inclined towards the 'hard' quantitative and statistical approach, and would reject it as inappropriate for their discipline. The interest in communication issues that appears to be emerging among librarians may eventually derive strength from the basis of communication studies. A useful perspective on this topic was provided by Kevin McGarry in the mid-1970s in his book *Communication, Knowledge and the Librarian*.³ McGarry analyses the library function in terms of its contribution to the societal communication system, particularly in regard to the ways in which individuals seek information, and to communication patterns within and between groups. He suggests that librarianship is essentially a personal service profession, and therefore more attention needs to be given to the central significance of interpersonal contact, and to the importance of the communication problems that are thereby raised. Especially since the late 1940s communication has been evolving as a discipline in its own right, and it may be to this source that librarians will turn to develop the theoretical base their profession has so far largely been without.

The need for better rapport

Before librarians can make a successful transition into an enlarged future as communicators, they may need to develop a better rapport with potential clientele of all walks of life, as well as the traditional, middle-class, scientist-scholar group. In particular, there appear to be some librarians — more 'academically' inclined — who display an apparent lack of understanding of, for example, the business community's needs for reliable and timely information. Perhaps more contact with business people would sharpen librarians' awareness of this group's needs. It should be noted, too, that business people in New Zealand have a lot to gain from information services properly organised for them. Likewise, public support for library services would be multiplied once the business and organisational clientele started to make proper use of the information services available.

An interesting commentary on this topic was provided in a Radio New Zealand interview with Helen Stephen-Smith, a Wellington library consultant, late in 1980.⁴ Discussing the relationship between librarians and business users of information, she suggested that:

What librarians have to decide is not to be so fussy about systems . . . we have to go out and convince people that we have the information they need . . . The library is a place where you should have a professional librarian and that person should be part of the management structure. The librarian can probably contribute more than any other person towards better

decision-making by the whole team in a business firm.

Before this idealised scenario of the librarian as a fully-fledged member of a management team can be realised, we have two significant problems to resolve. Firstly, there is what we could describe as a credibility gap between people in management and librarians. Through lack of familiarity with the other group's values, attitudes and work ethic, neither side is well placed to understand and work effectively with the other. While I hold this to be true as a broad generalisation, there are of course some significant exceptions to this rule, including SATIS and ACTIS librarians, and many librarians with experience in special libraries.

Secondly, and more importantly, librarians need to develop their understanding of how decisions are made in organisations. This is one point at which information becomes modified by passing through oral communication networks, and an improved understanding of the decision processes could help provide librarians with an expanded role in the 'information society' that we are beginning to experience.

Some relevant studies

The emerging interest in communication issues may denote a new direction for librarianship. Insofar as librarians approach the study of communication, they are following the same route as researchers in a variety of other disciplines, such as rural sociology, agricultural extension, marketing, organisational communications and engineering.

In all these areas, there is an active

programme of research into the communication of information. (Unhappily, though, there appears to be little cross-fertilisation of ideas from one discipline to the next, so in each subject researchers struggle on, unaware of the benefits to be gained from advances in similar disciplines.) In marketing, for example, researchers are interested in the process by which innovations are diffused in a community or segment thereof. They are keen to establish if there are given characteristics that distinguish 'early adopters' of specific new services or products. They are interested too in the dynamics of small groups, in the processes by which opinion leaders exert their influence, and in the phenomenon identified by Lazarsfeld *et al.*⁵ as the 'two-step' theory of communication. Briefly, it was found that mass media information flows to opinion leaders of a variety of groups, who then interpret and communicate the information and opinions via personal contacts to others. Rogers⁶ modified this theory to a 'multi-step model' of information flow, demonstrating the existence of a more complex communication network. It is not difficult to recognise that there are fairly immediate implications in these theories for librarians concerned with dissemination of information to client groups.

For at least the past forty years, researchers have been concerned at the length of time it takes agricultural extension workers to persuade farmers to adopt useful and profitable innovations. An abundance of studies exist, such as those by Barnard⁷ and Maltha⁸, which explore the problems involved and evaluate different ways of resolving them. The issues under scrutiny include the

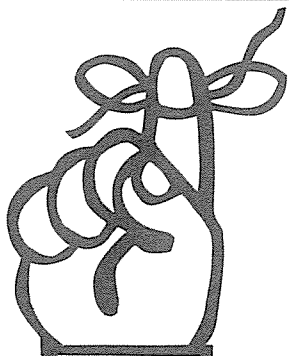
conservatism of the client group, and the difference in interests, values and outlooks among agricultural scientists, extension officers, and farmers. In short, these are problems relating to the communication of information, and again they are of some considerable relevance to librarians.

In a survey of the way in which engineers acquire information, Allen⁹ found that customers and vendors were the most used information source and printed information the least used. This of course contrasts with the primacy of the printed source for scientists and researchers in the humanities, and most current training in librarianship probably reflects the bias towards the printed source.

Studies of how people in business acquire information (such as those by Keegan¹⁰ and Mintzberg¹¹) lay emphasis on the importance of oral contacts. Human sources of information predominate, being used far in excess of any printed source or computer-based financial and administrative information services.

In common, perhaps, with some other disciplines engaged in facilitating the 'information age', librarianship seems to lack a unified understanding of its basic commodity, information. In seeking to improve our understanding of what we really mean by information, we need to return to the principles first articulated by Shannon and Weaver in the 1940s¹².

The Shannon-Weaver theory of information and communication suggests three levels. Firstly, there is the technical aspect of accurately transmitting information. Next, there is the semantic problem of evoking the desired meaning in the mind of the receiver. Lastly, there



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is the effectiveness aspect, whereby the behaviour of the receiver is modified in various ways as a result of accepting the information.

In the context of librarianship, the first level has to do with considerations such as, for example, architectural design to maximise use by borrowers, planning of the print and microform catalogues to promote effective reader access, and provision of staff who are at least sufficiently versed in library services as not to mislead enquirers. The second level involves more complex aspects of librarianship. Here we encounter the problems of designing index languages that evoke meanings similar to both librarians and client groups. The relationship between librarians and their clients falls into this context; if understanding on a semantic level is widely different between the two groups, effective communication and information transfer cannot take place. In order to achieve a shared understanding of what symbols (especially words) mean, librarians need to be trained in the basics of their clients' disciplines.

It is at Weaver's final level we see the relatively narrow information-passing role begin to broaden into communication. In general, librarians have not in the past concerned themselves with the outcome of the passage of information; they have been satisfied that once they have passed on what appears to be the requisite information, their task is ended. The key implication of a communication orientation is that the libra-

rian takes a measure of responsibility for the information that is obtained, and continues to interact with his client in order to ascertain the usefulness or otherwise of the information. In so doing, particularly in a special library context, the librarian becomes bound into the decision and policy making process.

Future goals

If librarians are to adapt themselves to a communication orientation as well as an information one, some consequences seem likely to follow. Firstly, we have to give up the idea of achieving 'economies' through large-scale library units. Library departments will tend to become smaller rather than larger, and specialised rather than generalised in their orientation. 'Small is beautiful' will remain an appropriate concept, and the trend apparent in some overseas libraries towards training librarians as subject specialists will be greatly strengthened.

As the nature of recorded knowledge becomes more complex and specialist, the trend to subject specialisation of library enquiry services must increase, if librarians and enquirers are to speak the same language. Of course, some responsibility rests with enquirers to come to terms with terminology and jargon employed by librarians, but overall the onus is on the librarian to make him or herself part of the oral network from which the enquirer derives the greater

part of his or her information requirements. Presently, libraries are designed to facilitate the transfer of printed information; an important assumption underlying library design is that people arrive there on an individual basis, locate the printed information they require by searching printed catalogues and indexes, and then depart, normally without interpersonal contact of any significance with library staff. It is sometimes said that the modern supermarket was first designed in imitation of libraries: whatever the initial relationship between them, it is clear the supermarkets do now offer the only useful model for library design and functioning.

The challenge for designers of library services in the future will be to retain the 'supermarket' structure of libraries to accommodate those enquirers who are capable of finding their own material, but also to fashion services in such a way as to take account of the oral networks from which people obtain most of their information.

The most important way of facilitating the latter development is to ensure that reference librarians are as knowledgeable as possible about their clientele's concerns. In the context of a special library, the staff need to develop a working knowledge of their clients' subject areas.

There is already a trend towards this goal in the provision of library services in primary and secondary schools.

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Librarianship	Hitherto	Henceforward
Role characteristics	1) Traditional 2) Adequate for past needs	Developing More suitable for future needs
Education and training characteristics	1) Trained in (usually) one discipline plus librarianship 2) Humanities orientation	Trained in librarianship, communication skills, plus the basics of several other disciplines. Multidisciplinary orientation
Personal characteristics	1) Relatively introverted 2) Passive — waits for client to express needs	Relatively extroverted Active — goes out to discover client needs
Work characteristics	1) Disinterested 2) May be replaced by information - retrieval systems 3) Makes information available 4) Library system centred	Involved Cannot be replaced by information - retrieval systems Disseminates, then helps employ information Client system centred
Organisational implications	1) Irrelevant to the decision process 2) Irrelevant to policy information	Part of the decision process Helps determine policy

There, the demand is for *teacher-librarians*; justifiably, it is considered that a person trained only in librarianship will be inadequate with respect to the pedagogical aspects of school librarianship. Thus, in New Zealand, we can expect further development of the trend towards recruitment of teachers for library jobs, whose training and experience in teaching will be enhanced by training in librarianship. This trend is in line with the principle discussed above whereby librarians need to be *au fait* with the specialised character of the information needs. However, instead of librarians being trained in teaching, teachers are receiving training in librarianship, which is probably not as satisfactory an outcome from the librarians' point of view.

The key differences between traditional librarianship and what I suggest is the logical form of development for the future, are set out in the figure above. In short, the librarian as communicator represents a very considerable extension of the traditional role. The emergent role is in fact towards the librarian as a change agent, actively engaged in promoting and facilitating development. One appropriate analogy for librarians might be the profession of sharebroking: the sharebroker, like the librarian, has expert knowledge and access to current information; unlike the librarian, he does more than simply offer access to that information and knowledge, he advises clients on what is and is not appropriate to their particular needs. Another role model might be the solicitor, who also has access to information, but again unlike the librarian, does more than merely offer clients this access. His function is to give personal advice, based on his understanding of the client's needs and problems, and on his control of the information sources.

The current attempt by librarians to attain a more 'professional' status will come to nothing, I suspect, until librarianship remodels itself on 'information

broker' lines, using role models such as sharebroker and solicitor.

Ultimately, the difference between the two roles is this: the traditional librarian is irrelevant to the issues on which he or she supplies information; the librarian who communicates becomes capable of influencing the decision-making process and hence transforms the nature of his or her profession.

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