ALTERNATIVE ARRANGEMENT

New Approaches to Public Library Stock

By
PATRICIA AINLEY
and
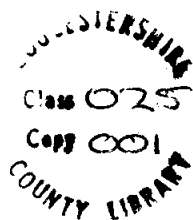BARRY TOTTERDELL
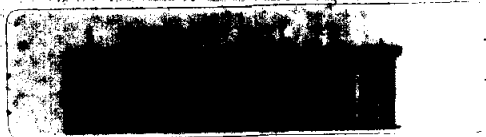
The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not represent the official view of the Association of Assistant Librarians.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful, not only to those who contri-
buted articles to this collection, but to everyone
else who took time to write to us, to discuss
their own schemes and to show us around their
libraries.

We are particularly grateful to Terry Colin
for all her help in typing and preparation of the
manuscript.

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

We set out, in compiling this book, to provide a 'state of the art' look at some of the experiments being carried out in British public libraries, which are attempting to break away from traditional Dewey arrangements and present their stocks in new ways more appropriate to users' needs. The intention was to provide something that was essentially of practical value to working librarians, rather than an historical account or a theoretical justification for change. While, in any case, there wasn't time to research a complete history of 'alternative arrangement' (perhaps a thesis subject?), there is a lot to learn from some of the pioneers. And while this is not the place for an in-depth psychological and sociological rationale of user-orientation in stock arrangement, there is value in pointing to major research findings and their implications.

We also set out with open minds on what forms 'alternative arrangement' might take. While we were already aware of the totally new approach being taken by, for example, Surrey and East Sussex, and of the interesting but more diverse experiments in Hertfordshire, we cast our net wider through appeals in the professional press for details of any other new approaches to stock arrangement. In the event, we could well have chosen 'Stock Categorisation' as a title, for that was the form invariably being taken by all the experiments of which we learned.

So stock categorisation or 'reader interest' arrangement is the main topic of this book. There are, however, other approaches to public library stock arrangement which frequently have as their basis a concern to interpret users' needs. Issues such as integrated stock and the intensive use of paperbacks cannot be ignored, particularly as they are now often very closely related to stock categorisation schemes.

Another important development was that of subject departmentalism. The concept of organising the resources of larger public libraries into separate subject areas, each self-contained in terms of trained staff, reference and lending material, and bibliographical tools, goes back to experiments in Chicago in 1893, but was first fully developed in Cleveland (1925) and Los Angeles (1926).[1] It was not until the re-modelling of Liverpool public libraries in 1961 that the idea found concrete expression in Britain. The first purpose-built subject departmentalised library in the country was Bradford (1967).

This concept alone doesn't necessarily involve any interference with traditional classification schemes, but closely associated with it are two other features – the integration of reference and lending stock and the creation of separate 'popular' sections. A.W. McClellan[2], formerly Chief Librarian of Tottenham, was the

prime theorist of both, although he saw all of these as strands within the overall concept of the 'reader-centred library'. He suggested a categorisation of reading rather than readers and evolved a spectrum of motives ranging from 'escapist' to 'specific'. He proposed an arrangement of book stock based on 'service in depth' with the user being guided naturally from the conditions appropriate to the more 'diverting' types of interest through to those reflecting 'purposive' interests.[3] The immediate implications of this are for a two-tier arrangement with the 'popular' area being the most accessible, and the more purposive reader being led on to a 'subject' area arranged by Dewey. The theoretical aspects are further developed by K.H. Jones[4], who relates these two broad aspects of stock presentation to his two principal functional areas for the public library service.

A 'popular' department is a common feature, not only of two-tier arrangements but also of libraries arranged by subject departments, although within the new Sutton Central Library the popular material was spread throughout the departments to disperse demand and possibly broaden interests.

Opinions differ, however, on what such a department should include and how it might be arranged. A study in Los Angeles[5] suggested that a proposed Popular Department should contain 100,000 books, with subject departments functioning as information centres only. Overington[6] suggests that all books in this department would be duplicates of material held in the subject section. Alan Bill[7] describes the arrangement at the Central Library, Harlow New Town, which involved a rearrangement of Dewey into five broad subject sections, including 'General Reading'. This included those subjects related to leisure interests and recreational reading itself. One of the Editors of this book even had a 'popular' unclassified section on a mobile library as long ago as 1959!

Central to McClellan's 'service in depth' is a merging of reference and lending functions. 'It is not', he says, 'a division of function based on a full recognition of the way readers use books. . . .The relationship demanded of the librarian to the reader is basically the same whether the reader's need is for a reference, information or continuous reading.'[8] McClellan goes on to argue the need for subject librarians rather than lending or reference librarians, but even without a commitment to the Tottenham style of subject specialism, more and more public librarians are realising the good sense of maintaining – as far as physical conditions allow – all material on the same subject together on the shelves.

Just prior to the 1965 London local government reorganisation, Tottenham, then, were on the point of moving towards 'reader interest arrangement' – a 'broad series of groups based on use and interest rather than subject, specifically compiled for the general reader'.[9] As we have suggested, this is not the place for a detailed history of reader interest arrangement. It is of interest, however, that the idea dates back to the thirties. It was proposed in 1936 by Ralph A. Ulverling, then Associate Librarian of Detroit Public Library. He suggested that the classification scheme used in circulating departments should attempt to parallel the 'natural inclination' of users: 'In other words, classify not by subject but by patrons' reading inclinations'.[10]

The idea wasn't taken up at the time – Ulverling had to wait until he became the

Librarian. It was then first tried out in 1941, on a limited basis, in a 'Browsers' Alcove' at the Main Library, and applied to branches from 1948. The scheme was originally devised as a combination of 'categories' or large fields of interest for the browser, such as *Current Affairs, Personal Living, People and Places,* 'subject sections' for the readers who come to the library with a specific need, and 'information sections' containing factual material and textbooks for answering specific questions. Each section or category was broken down into sub-headings and an alpha-numerical notation devised.[11]

Although this and similar schemes were adapted in a number of library systems in the United States and elsewhere (and eventually dropped in Detroit), McClellan appears to have been the principal proponent in Britain until the 1970's. Attitudes to reader interest arrangements, where existing at all, varied from the antagonistic to the cautious. C.D. Needham considered such a solution to be too drastic, 'alienating as it does the serious reader. Pandering to a mass public . . . can hardly do anything to support claims of more of the public's money for public libraries'.[12] Arthur Maltby conceded that 'It is possible that, if a strong challenger to the DC ever could emerge for use in the general library, it would be based largely on 'reader interest'. The great difficulty would be in ascertaining an 'interest based' order that was objective, reliable in a wide range of libraries, and relatively stable. Much more knowledge about popular reading needs and searching habits at the shelves would be needed before such a goal would be possible'.[13]

So how did it come about that almost suddenly, a number of public library systems were experimenting with stock categorisation in the late 1970's? One answer is that, over the past few years there has been a general move towards user orientation in public libraries. Hand in hand with this, and perhaps fuelling it, has been just that research that Maltby was looking for. Finally, the financial problems affecting local government have forced public libraries to look at means of maximising their resources. Paradoxically, reduced bookfunds have caused librarians to question long-held assumptions about 'balanced stocks' and are leading to efforts at producing a closer 'fit' between supply and demand.

There is no need here to detail all the research projects which cumulatively have built up over the past twenty years, with rapid acceleration during the seventies, a dossier of evidence on users' and non-users' attitudes, images and experiences of public libraries. Groombridge[14] was the pioneering study – the first major attempt in Britain to look at the public library from the user's standpoint. Luckham[15] broadened the subject into the adult education and general leisure framework. John Taylor's large scale work for the DES[16] remains the most comprehensive investigation of library use patterns.

The Hillingdon Project[17] demonstrated the value of a variety of research techniques, including user satisfaction surveys, attitudinal surveying and depth interviewing of users and non-users. Cheshire County Library,[18] as part of the planning for a new library at Runcorn, successfully applied market research techniques to library planning.

What was the evidence to emerge from these and other surveys? Firstly, that

the use people were making of lending libraries was incompatible with the assumptions underlying traditional shelf arrangement. In other words, many users were finding what they wanted *despite* the arrangement not *through it.* (Users haven't generally complained about this, but the low level of their expectations of library services is yet another research finding). Only a very small minority of users are seeking, in the course of a visit to the library, specific titles or books by particular authors. Only a minority (although a somewhat larger one) are seeking material on a specific subject. The majority, from perhaps 55% in central or district libraries to 75% or 80% in smaller branch libraries, are browsers – that is, they are seeking something interesting to read, perhaps in a favourite genre. Unfortunately the majority of public library bookstocks are arranged in such a way as to make this browsing function as difficult as possible, with non-fiction arranged according to a numerical system understood by few, and – although this is becoming less common – fiction in one lengthy alphabetical sequence. Users have confessed to being daunted by the sheer numbers of books confronting them and long, formal spine-displayed sequences can only exacerbate such feelings.

It has been shown, too, that most of those who *are* seeking specific subjects, have leisure-orientated topics in mind. Again, public libraries have not, in the past, been very good at meeting this widespread need. Attempts to cover the whole field of knowledge at each library, combined with lack of organised stock control have resulted in simple failure to provide adequate coverage in the everyday subjects that are in greatest demand. A.W. McClellan was the pioneer here, also, and developed a method of systematic stock control that still awaits wide acceptance.[19] A shelf arrangement based on reader interest categories can greatly ease the problem of consistent shelf maintenance in those subjects of majority interest which Alex Wilson (formerly Director of Libraries, Cheshire)[20] claims should be a first call on limited resources. Wilson sees topic failure at the shelf as the key area of concentration for public library management. He suggests that this failure rate at the shelf should be reduced by keeping a minimum shelf stock in every identified topic of interest to a significant number of users. He calls this minimum the 'threshold of choice' – 'a quantity, range and quality of stock somewhere between starvation – the level at which borrowing begins to drop off – and saturation – the level at which borrowing is static.' 'Anything less', he says 'is failure. Anything more is desirable rather then essential.' He proposes that the whole of most libraries and a large part of larger libraries should be laid out 'in the way that most users would see them, in other words by interest categories.' An integral part of this new approach to stock control and arrangement is the development of an efficient back-up supply system.

Finally, the Hillingdon Project, in particular, has been able to draw attention to the unfavourable image still held by many people of the public library, and to the failure of libraries to create an 'atmosphere' congenial to the majority of non-users. It is difficult to analyse this failure, but interviewees – particularly younger people – referred to the quietness, the formality, disinterest on the part of staff, and lack of relevance of stocks. Some of these barriers can be (and are being)

overcome by improvements in design and decoration, easing of 'red tape' in enrolment and loan procedures, and greater emphasis in staff recruitment and training in relations with the public. Particularly relevant here, however, is the role of stock in improving the congeniality of public libraries. Stock selection and control exercised in favour of majority demand, arrangement based more logically on readers' interests, and imaginative display can combine to transform the accessibility of the library to a wider public.

At this point, it is worth stressing the value of paperback collections. Large scale provision can go a long way towards achieving the objectives described above. Indeed, a good case could be made out for imaginative use of paperbacks as a first stage or even an alternative to a scheme of stock categorisation. Paperbacks, if full use is made of their display potential, make ideal browser collections and make possible the purchase of sufficient copies of high demand material. Carefully selected paperback feature collections on popular leisure topics can be employed to supplement conventional sequences. Most important, perhaps, is the potential of effectively arranged paperbacks to create that bright, informal atmosphere so important but often so difficult to achieve, especially in older buildings. Surprisingly, a recent survey of library users[21] showed a clear preference for borrowing hardbacks as opposed to paperbacks, although this preference was weighted towards older age groups. Paperbacks have, however, been demonstrated to be successful in attracting those who are not traditional library users. One library system increased circulation by 25% in one year at two branches serving predominantly working class populations by the introduction of substantial paperback collections.[22] The financial benefits of paperback provision (particularly if overheads are reduced by non-cataloguing of paperback stocks) are obvious and need not concern us here. Little has yet been published in Britain on paperback provision, (although economic factors alone have made at least small scale collections now almost universal), but ambitious and successful experiments in the United States date back to 1964.[23]

The contributions which follow all reflect the assumption that public libraries today have to interpret more effectively the needs of their users, and that if they are to survive in today's harsh economic climate, they must demonstrate their relevance to the whole community. Radical reappraisal of shelf arrangement, leading to enhanced accessibility, is an indispensible element in establishing such relevance.

References

1 Overington, M.A. *The subject departmentalised public library.* Library Association, 1969.
2 McClellan, A.W. *The reader, the library and the book: selected papers 1949-1970.* Clive Bingley, 1973.
3 McClellan, A.W. *Elements of systematic book provision in public libraries.* Unpublished paper, 1966.
4 Jones, K.H. Towards a re-interpretation of public library purpose. (*In* Totterdell, B. *Public library purpose: a reader,* Clive Bingley, 1978).

5 Los Angeles Bureau of Budget and Efficiency. *Organisation, Administration and Management of the Los Angeles Public Library,* 12 vols. 1948-49.

6 Overington, M.A. *Op. Cit.* p.137.

7 Bill, A. Patterns of public library service. *Assistant Librarian* 58 (9) Sept. 1965.

8 McClellan, A.W. *Elements of systematic book provision in public libraries.*

9 Dunklin, P.E. Some aspects of stock provision: Tottenham Public Libraries. (*In Some aspects of stock provision,* Association of Assistant Librarians, 1964).

10 Woodford, F.B. *Parnassus on Main Street: a history of the Detroit Public Library.* Wayne State University Press, 1965.

11 Detroit Public Library. *The reader interest book arrangment in the Detroit Public Library,* 1959.

12 Needham, C.D. *Organising knowledge in libraries.* 2nd. ed. Andre Deutsch, 1971.

13 Maltby A. *Sayer's manual of classification for librarians.* 5th ed. 1975.

14 Groombridge, B. *The Londoner and his library.* Research Institute for Consumer Affairs, 1964.

15 Luckham, B. *The library in society: a study of the public library in an urban setting.* Library Association, 1971.

16 Taylor, J.N. *and* Johnson, I.M. *Public libraries and their use.* HMSO, 1973.

17 Totterdell, B. *and* Bird, J. *The effective library.* Library Association, 1976.

18 Cheshire, Research and Intelligence Unit. *Runcorn District Library market research study.* Cheshire Libraries and Museums, 1978.

19 McClellan, A.W. *The logistics of a public library bookstock.* Association of Assistant Librarians, 1978.

20 Wilson, A. The threshold of choice (*In The public library and its users,* Library Association: Public Libraries Group, 1978).

21 Spiller, D. The provision of fiction for public libraries. *J. Libr.* 12(4) Oct. 1980.

22 Totterdell, B. The librarians' library or the public's library. 2. (*In The Public Library and its users,* Library Association: Public Libraries Group, 1978).

23 Laskey, H.H. The pull of paperback displays. *School Libr. J.* 23(6) Feb. 1977.