

SERVICES IN GOVERNMENT LIBRARIES

By Paul Xuereb
Head Librarian, University of Malta

It is ironical that the Near East and the Mediterranean region, which saw the birth of archival collections and libraries, should for so long have lagged behind other regions such as Northern Europe and, of course, North America. This is true of national, public and academic libraries, but is even more depressingly true of those libraries that are, or should be, involved most closely with the administration, economic and social development of a country: Government libraries.

My own country has been extremely neglectful of this most valuable type of library. Even our Parliament has only a modest collection of books unorganised for quick information retrieval and without any full-time staff. Fortunately in the Central Bank of Malta Library, Malta has an excellent example of what a special library in the public sector can be like and what it can do, and there is also an efficient Trade Documentation Unit, formerly part of the Central Bank Library, but now attached to a parastatal organisation, METCO. I cannot speak about the standard of Government libraries in Cyprus since I have no recent information. I trust, however, that the first-rate library in the Museums Department which I was able to visit on my first visit to Cyprus in December 1977 has maintained its high standards.

A famous English poet once wrote that "no man is an island", a view now widely applied to libraries and information units of all types. The concepts of national information systems, first made universally acceptable by IFLA through its conference and publications on what used to be called NATIS, and that of library networks (computerised or not) have now become familiar to all librarians. No one in his right senses would try nowadays to create a self-sufficient library for even the most comprehensive specialised library has its limits and needs to rely on external sources to complete its collections.

Libraries serving Ministries, Departments of State and parastatal bodies are no exception, and the smaller the country's economic resources, the greater the need to avoid duplication of services as well as of human and material resources in this sector. The discussion of the services that can be offered by Government libraries that will occupy the bulk of this paper must not mislead you into thinking that each and every information unit needs to engage in the full gamut of activities being suggested, and towards the close I shall suggest methods for the most economical use of all the resources in public sector information services.

Government libraries are special libraries

Government libraries are normally - and rightly - classified with that class of libraries known as special libraries, for indeed they have more in common with libraries serving industry, research institutions or, say, newspapers than with the other libraries in the public sector known as national libraries and public libraries. The special library has been defined by Wilfred Ashworth as one **'which is established to obtain and exploit specialised information for the private advantage of the organisation which provides its financial support'** (1). The only part of the definition which does not completely apply to Government libraries is that which speaks about 'the private advantage of the organisation which provides its financial support', since in actual fact a good many Government libraries offer their services and collections to individuals and institutions outside the body they serve or even to those in the private sector. To give just one example, the Home Office Library in London, which specialises in penology and criminology, receives more enquires from outside the Home Office itself than from within it.

"Putting knowledge to work" is the motto of the Special Librarians Association in the United States, and this better than anything else describes that the special library, whether it is in the public or in the private sector, is basically about. The Government special librarian, whether he is serving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or an Agricultural Research Unit, puts knowledge to work by taking an almost aggressively dynamic approach to information service. To quote Herbert S. White, 'Special libraries are not self-service institutions - at least they should not be. In an educational environment teaching the student how to find the answer to tomorrow's question for himself is considered more important than convenience or if necessary even accuracy with regard to today's question. In special libraries, today's question is the only question that matters.' (2)

The scholarly public servant who enjoys nothing more than tracking down for himself the information he needs is a well-known figure, but there can be little doubt that the average public servant is not scholarly and, if a senior person, has little time for digging out the decisions, statistics or scientific finding he requires. Hence the need for an information unit which has a good staff including at least one expert in the unit's field of specialization, with a good stock and easy access to external sources of information and, above all, the services that can provide the user as speedily as possible not with a citation of a referral to some source of information, but with the item of information itself.

Since, to quote White again, 'today's question is the only question that matters' to the Government librarian's customers, the nature of his stock and its up-to-dateness are essential considerations. The stock will often contain a proportion - in some cases, a high proportion - of books and serials commercially available, but it will almost certainly contain much more, materials such as reports, memoranda, specifications and standards, laboratory notebooks, catalogues issued by manufacturers of equipment and so on. Much of this material is ephemeral in nature, so the Government librarian must carry out regular weeding-out exercises if he expects his customers to put any trust in his stock.

A number of Government libraries are also the depositories as well as the managers of the archives and records of their parent organisation. In countries having National Archives, the only archives that can be kept within the organisation are normally those for the previous twenty-five or thirty years, but of course even the archives for such a relatively short period can be extremely extensive and their management will require the services of a person qualified in modern archival science. It certainly makes much sense to combine the management of the organisation's archives with that of its library, since those archives will often contain the information, or part of it, required by the customers. Moreover, placing the archives in the library will have the beneficial effect of bringing to the library people who would not otherwise have come anywhere near it, and thus making them aware of what the library can offer them in the way of services that can help them in the efficient carrying out of their duties.

This is an important consideration since, to quote J.H. Wormald, 'in common with most special libraries, the problem in departments is often not the provision of services but making potential users aware of them.' (3) Government libraries tend to be more neglectful of public relations within the institution than special libraries in industry or scientific research from whom they can learn a few lessons. There should be regular library induction courses, say twice-yearly, for new members of the organisation, lectures, the publication of printed guides to the library's services, and regular news bulletins and notices. A distinctive library logo will serve to make all library publications and notices immediately recognisable. On the other hand, one must beware of luxuriously produced publications as they can serve to draw down on the library criticism that its budget is excessive.

When it becomes clear that a library with regular services is needed

The second edition of Paul Xuereb's *Special libraries: a guide for management* (New York, 1981) gives a very useful list of 'symptoms' that should lead to a diagnosis of 'unhealthy from an information point of view' and thus in need of a properly stocked and staffed library with a range of services. These are:

1. The perception that funds are being wasted in the purchase of multiple copies of books and periodicals because of a lack of centralization and control.
2. Large and expensive collections of materials scattered in offices or in storerooms, where they take up considerable space and still don't yield the desired item when it is demanded.
3. A flood of mail announcing new publications, information services and data bases that nobody has the time or the inclination to screen to determine those of interest.
4. An awareness by organizational professionals, from contact with others at professional gatherings, that they are not keeping up with developments in their fields. This is particularly upsetting for researchers, but it is also disturbing for business executives if they suspect that there are things others know and they don't.

The Guide also suggests reasons that are more direct and immediate and that might lead to a higher level of initial expectation for library and information service. These include:

1. Professionals are spending a great deal of time in the attempt to track down needed information, including trips to other libraries.
2. An important decision has to be delayed because the needed information simply has not been found.
3. There is evidence of duplicated effort, with a resulting waste of both time and money, because the results of earlier work simply were not known.

The two main types of services

The main types of services given by Government libraries are two: reference and research services, and current awareness services. While the latter are the services which most clearly distinguish special libraries, even the former will normally involve a much greater participation by library staff than they do in the average public or even academic library.

What Erik Spicer writes about parliamentary libraries is applicable to all Government special libraries: "It is not enough for librarians to provide facts, books, articles, films, newspapers, etc. Someone should also be there, in the library, to simplify, compress, explain and question what is provided ... Many of those we serve think that if they read it it must be true! Of course, they are now being succeeded by those who say, 'it's from the machine, and computers don't make mistakes!'"(4) The Government librarian must regard himself as being not just a purveyor or neat packager of information, but also as an annotator or commentator, a sceptical one if needs be. The more active the role of the Government librarian, the greater the perception of his usefulness becomes. This often leads to the Library's receiving more resources and, best of all, to a greater exploitation by its parent organisation of the Library's stock and expertise.

The Government Librarian knows that when his Library does not hold the source of a particular item of information he can often find it in some other information unit in the country or overseas but his selection of the stock must always aim at achieving the maximum probability of finding profitable leads to enquiries within the resources available to the Library.

If the Library is serving a Governmental organisation that carries out research, it will normally house and organise the collection of research reports produced by the parent organisation, and in some cases the library may be made responsible for the editing and publication of these reports. As these reports are already of importance to future research developments, they need to be fully exploited and thus have to be indexed in great detail. If the reports contain material that is confidential or even classified, it is usual to house them in a special Reports Centre having strictly-controlled consultation and loans procedures. J. L. Hill's chapter on 'technical report literature' in W. E. Batten's **Handbook of special librarianship and information work**, 4th ed. (1975) is a useful survey of this topic.

Objectives for special libraries. A document issued by the U. S. Special Libraries Association in 1970 lays stress on the rapid delivery of items that are requested by readers, the undertaking of literature searches and the compilation of bibliographies and indices.

In Government libraries, the customer is often someone who needs a document, an item of information, not in twenty-four hours but within a couple of hours, if not there and then. Hence the need to limit loans of material to a minimum and the loan-period similarly to the minimum needed for the document's consultation. The plain-paper copier has made it easy to supply copies and thus retaining the originals, but of course the librarian has to see that he is not thereby infringing copyright legislation. If the item is not held by the library, then it may be difficult to satisfy an urgent request. A telefax machine can in some cases solve even this problem, and luckily more and more libraries and information centres are acquiring this valuable time-saving apparatus. If the Library has an online searching service, and the item needed is obtainable from a local or overseas database, then again the urgent need can be satisfied - but sometimes at a considerable cost. Government libraries in London which between them have an enormous and impressively varied stock, have a van service which ensures that documents can be sent over from one library to another in a fairly short time.

The undertaking of literature searches occupies a considerable part of most Government librarians' time. A Minister in the Government may require a comprehensive search of the relevant literature in order to be well briefed for a Parliamentary debate on reforms in the social welfare legislation; the Director of Trade needs local and foreign reports and yearbook material in preparation for the drafting of an official Government statement; an expert in the Fine Arts Dept. of the Museum needs to find out the most important publications issued during the previous ten years on the restoration of frescoes. If the library serving that Minister of Department is reasonable efficient, it should provide within a reasonable time - anything from twenty-four hours to one hour, or even less! - not only a list of references but also a good proportion of the documents themselves represented by the references. If it is more than reasonably efficient, the list will be annotated by the Librarian or some expert on his staff and will also contain a note that documents still undelivered have already been ordered - by telephone, telefax or telex, or by mail - depending on the urgency with which they are known to be needed.

According to Ashworth (5), 'Experience has shown it most profitable to the parent organisation if from two-thirds to three-quarters of the information-searching is taken over by a library or information unit. By doing so it is possible to save from half to two-thirds of the total cost to the organisation of its literature searching'.

Computerisation has greatly facilitated the task of the librarian who has to carry out a literature search. Most fields in science, technology, the health sciences and the social sciences are well catered for by immense databases: only the humanities are not so well off. An experienced online searcher who knows his databases and has an array of thesauri which he can use intelligently can obtain, sometimes within a few minutes, the references needed by a customer on his monitor and, should he so wish, on his printer shortly after. Those who find online searching expensive can in some areas - a growing number of areas - acquire databases in C. D. ROM format. The fields of the health sciences, psychology, education and civil engineering are areas already catered for reasonably well by databases produced in this format. The lawyers are even better off than most others, since they now have access to some databases which contain not just references and abstracts but the full text of legislation, etc.

Government libraries with large staffs that include subject specialists are also capable of providing their customers not just with an annotated literature search but with a report, sometimes as long as a substantial monograph, on subjects requested by their customers. The Library of Parliament in Ottawa, Canada, provides this service regularly to Canadian Parliamentarians as do the Parliamentary libraries of the UK, Japan and Australia. Many of the reports so compiled are subsequently printed and made available to all readers or even to other libraries requesting them. One should point out, however, that this work is carried out not by librarians but by research officers, and sometimes outside experts have to be called in. This type of absolutely custom-made information service is perhaps the utmost a Government library can aspire to.

Another service provided by some Government libraries is a translation service. The translators may be part-timers on whose services the library can call whenever needed or they can be from a translation bureau, expensive but reliable. It is probably unwise to utilise libraries with foreign language skills to do this type of work for,

apart from the fact that it is time-consuming, they may not be good translators at all, despite their knowledge of the languages in question. Translations can be made to order, but some libraries mostly those serving research units, have the policy of regularly translating some journals, regarded as essential by the parent body, in full. Others limit themselves to producing abstracts in the local language of important foreign-language articles.

The considerable expense incurred in translation, particularly the regular translation of a number of serials, has led to schemes by professional bodies, e.g. the British Iron and Steel Institute, to create translation programmes beneficial to all research workers in the field, but even this might well be beyond the means of smaller countries, except perhaps in a limited number of subject areas.

With the exception of those libraries serving Government bodies engaged in work of a certain delicacy, e. g. research work for the Ministry of Defence, most Government libraries try to cater for a wider community than that of their parent body. Use of their collections and services for reference and inter-library lending purposes are common, whilst a more restricted number even allows borrowing. In less developed countries it is most important that Government libraries should allow as much access as possible to their collections and services, since other libraries in the country are likely to be undernourished, but even in more developed countries the collections of those special libraries often make an important input into the literature available throughout the country and sometimes contain material unavailable elsewhere.

In Malta which, while not being one of the LDCs, is relatively undeveloped in its national information system, the library of the *Central Bank of Malta* plays an important role not just by keeping the Bank's Research Division well supplied with the information it needs but also by allowing economists, businessmen, civil servants and University students access to its fine collection of serials, report literature and monographs. It is also generous in its disposal of duplicates to other Maltese libraries and is always ready to lend items from its collections on the inter-library loans system.

Current awareness services

The quality of the current awareness services given by Government libraries to the members of their parent organisations is the basis for any judgment we can make on the effectiveness of those libraries. A Government Library without efficient and constantly

developing services of this kind cannot hope to attract good funding from public sources and risks finding itself sooner or later either closed down or else merged with another information unit.

Like any other special librarian, the Government Librarian has to base these services on as accurate a knowledge as possible of his customers, the standard way of obtaining it being the creation of what is normally called a 'profile' of each individual. Libraries serving a large Ministry or Department will probably find it difficult and regard it as unnecessary to have profiles of all the members of the organisation, and will almost certainly limit such profiles to persons who are decision-makers or who rely on a constant flow of information for the efficient conducting of their work. The profile is a record showing the interests and qualifications of each individual as well as the projects on which he or she is working. Profiles need to be kept up to date, so the individuals in question may be asked every so often to revise them. In libraries where the current awareness service is automated, it is possible for the Library to keep a record of all the material that each individual has made use of, thus enabling it to update each profile automatically.

Armed with this knowledge, the Librarian is able to direct to each person whose profile is held the incoming material that matches his needs as an administrator, legislator, research scientist or what have you. In an automated system, the computer matches keywords or subject headings for each item added to the database with headings used in each profile, and whenever there is a match the individual in question is sent a printout of the item. In a manual system the task is more laborious and often less accurately carried out, but of course in a library where the customers with profiles are only a few score, the library staff become so familiar with the needs of these customers that they are able to route to each one of them relevant items without the need to check the profile each time.

Profiles are very useful for those librarians having the policy of routing to individual customers the various periodicals received in the library, especially when the number of periodicals received runs into several hundreds or even into a couple of thousands. Routing of periodicals has its great advantages, since it ensures that the customers are in constant touch with the serial literature relevant to their interests, without their having to go regularly to the Library. On the other hand there are grave disadvantages, the greatest one being the absence from the Library of all the latest issues of periodicals received. Some libraries get round this by adopting the expensive expedient of subscribing to more than one copy of some titles.

Other libraries prefer to photocopy the contents pages of the periodicals they receive and circulate the photocopies, perhaps highlighting those articles matching the profile of the person to whom the contents page is being sent. Yet others subscribe to the Current contents services commercially available and circulate each issue as it comes. This is preferable, since these **Current contents** services cover not just the serials received in the library, but many others as well.

As electronic journals become much more common than they are now, it will be a simple matter for their texts to be accessible to customers on the monitors in their own offices where, if they have a printer, they will be able to download an item falling within their field of interest.

Although most subject areas are covered nowadays by general or specialized abstracting and indexing services, it usually takes some time, in some cases several months or a year, for an article to be indexed or abstracted in those services. Clearly the efficient Government Library should not be satisfied with this, and thus it is that the best among them index and sometimes abstract the materials they currently receive. They then issue regular bulletins - monthly, fortnightly, or even weekly - which they send to all customers whose profiles are kept in the library. The library of the Department of Health and Social Security in London issues monthly Hospital abstracts, covering the whole hospital field with the exception of strictly medical and related professional matters. These Abstracts are so important, however, that they are published each month by HMSO and made available on subscription to whoever is interested. More modestly, the library of the External Affairs Dept. in London publishes a weekly Development Index, a list of periodical articles on development topics.

Libraries having small staffs which do not include subject experts cannot hope to go in for ambitious abstracting services, but even a small staff can produce much that is useful in the way of current awareness. Thus the Central Bank of Malta Library issues a weekly digest of local and foreign news based on its newspaper clippings service, and practises selective dissemination of information to various members of the bank's staff.

This same library, like many other Government special libraries, publishes regular lists of new material acquired by the Library, and also lists of international documentation received by it. This Library, I should add, maintains large collections of documents issued by the European Communities, OECD, the U. N. Agencies, etc.

Publications

Apart from publishing the results of its own work, such as abstracts, accessions lists and other current awareness lists, the Library may also be called upon to edit and issue its parent organisation's publications e.g. research reports and annual reports. This is, of course, a task that calls for the expenditure of much time and energy from the library staff, especially if it includes detailed dealings with printing firms. To give the Central Bank of Malta Library again as an example, it is responsible for most Central Bank of Malta publications and in particular for the Bank's quarterly report. Since the Library staff is fairly small, whenever the quarterly publication date draws near, the library's activities tend to slow down as most of the staff's energy is dedicated to meeting the deadline. Organisations saddling their libraries with such a task should ensure that they endow their libraries with enough staff to cope with publications on top of all their many other jobs.

Cooperation

Government libraries can cooperate in one or more ways. The commonest type of cooperation is of the informal type, such as that between a group of Government libraries to lend material to one another. This type of cooperation is of a day-to-day nature without any definite commitment for the future, but in fact some of these arrangements can be lasting ones.

Other cooperative schemes, normally called networks especially when they depend on the use of high technology, can be very formal indeed, laying down in detail both the duties and the rights of each participating library. Networks are invaluable, especially when computerised, for shared cataloguing, for interlibrary loans based on a database formed by a union catalogue of all the participants' holdings, and for rationalising collections development. Cynthia Durance has given a short but lucid account of networking in a paper published for COMLA by the Canadian Library Association in the publication **Government libraries for the nation: services and training**. (6)

Some cooperative schemes are undertaken by the libraries themselves acting through national or local associations. In the USA, for instance, the Special Libraries Association, which includes Government special libraries, has been organising cooperative activities, such as the publication of directories or the exchange of duplicate materials, since 1910. In Britain, the Association of Special

Libraries and Information Bureaux (Aslib) sponsors seminars, workshops and training courses as well as publishing several journals, reference works, etc, but other cooperative activities between Government Libraries are either informal arrangements or schemes decided upon by a committee called the Committee of Department Librarians. Thus in the early 'Eighties it was this Committee that undertook a revision of automation in Government libraries and highlighted the need for a system for the control and circulation of periodicals. Another body, the Circle of State Librarians, publishes an excellent journal, **State librarian**, and organises annual conferences on matters of common interest, such as technology and information.

In some countries, these cooperative schemes have considerable support or even direction and coordination from the National Library. Thus, the National Library of Canada has a mandate "to coordinate library services in the Government of Canada. Collectively, federal government libraries form a group that gives each federal library ready access to additional library resources. In turn, the group is a part of the national resource-sharing library system". (7) The National Librarian issues directives to federal government libraries on library policy issues, such as the acquisition and disposal of books, advises them on standards for library technology, etc. Since 1976 there has also been a Council of Federal Libraries which advises the National Librarian on policies and plans relating to federal government libraries and assists the National Librarian in the coordination of federal library services.

In her paper **The role of the national library in information for development** (8) Hedwig Anuar discusses this role at some length and has some interesting recommendations regarding the ways in which the national library can liaise with the national archives and with Government departments and ministries to improve public access to unpublished reports some of which contain valuable information for economic and social development.

Small countries such as Cyprus and Malta have another option: that of setting up one fairly large library and documentation unit to serve the entire public sector. This makes it possible to economise on the use of valuable and often meagre resources, both human and material, and can work very well if all, or most of, the Government bodies served by it can be found within the fairly small administrative capital of the country.

Evaluation of services

We are now living during a period when every organisation, and possibly every individual within it, has to justify its or his/her existence. Libraries have traditionally been the first institutions whose funds are cut when an organisation realises it needs to economise, so it is very important indeed that libraries be clearly seen to be both efficient and cost-effective.

P. Vickers' 'Ground rules for cost effectiveness' (9) is a useful introduction to the tricky problem of evaluating the cost-effectiveness of information services. He warns against excessive concern with creating and refining highly detailed classification systems or with procuring the latest technological gadget at all costs. Once the librarian ceases to think of these things as mere tools for satisfying readers' needs and regards them as ends in themselves, he may easily find himself out of touch with those readers.

Vickers, and all more recent authors on library management, stresses the importance of formulating the objectives and scope of the various services. This can be done best of all through a survey - questionnaires or interviews - of the likely customers, and a study of what the organisation as a whole will demand from the library.

The formulation of objectives will be of little use unless there is a regular monitoring of the services to ensure that these same objectives are being met. Monitoring can be done through the analyses of library statistics, but needs to be supplemented by e.g. sample surveys of customers.

I shall not go into the intricacies of cost-benefit analyses of library services, as this is a task for the expert in the area. Cost-effectiveness analyses are relatively straightforward, since in some cases it is not too difficult to relate the level of performance with the cost of achieving that same level. Some of the criteria used in such analyses are: coverage, recall (the ability to retrieve the information required), precision, response time, and the degree of effort required of the customer.

I would like to close by referring to a study of 46 libraries by the Indiana Chapter of the Special Libraries Association, which throws light on various reasons why library users sometimes feel frustrated. A full account of this survey is given by Herbert S. White (10) who says

that many of the problems encountered had their roots in "a failure to communicate, particularly the failure by librarians to make it clear what they could accomplish if only given the opportunity to perform effectively." It is an account I would recommend to the Government librarian who would like to check what is going wrong with any of his services and thus be in a position to improve them.

REFERENCES

1. Special librarianship (London, 1979), p.6
2. Managing the special library (New York, 1984), p.8
3. 'Government and Public Authority libraries', in British librarianship and information work, 1976-1980, ed. by L. Taylor (London, 1983), v.2, p.4
4. 'The role of parliamentary libraries in providing information for legislators' in Information for development: proceedings of a COMLA seminar, 3-4 March 1983, ed. by Paul Xuereb (Mandeville, Jamaica, 1984), p.41
5. op. cit, p.11
6. 'Networking: an effort of will' in Government libraries for the nation: services and training (Ottawa, 1987), p.9-13
7. Marianne Scott, 'The role of a national library in providing services for Government and Government libraries', in Government libraries for the nation (1987), p.20
8. Published in Information for development, ed. by Paul Xuereb (1984)
9. Aslib proceedings 28(6-7), June-July 1976, p. 224-229
10. op. cit.,p. 59-62