

editorial

Time for a national library

The idea of a centralized national library appears eminently reasonable: instead of thousands of libraries around the country duplicating each other's efforts collecting the same books and periodicals, at least for the great bulk of material which is used only occasionally why don't the libraries agree to share one copy of each book or periodical that would be stored at a central location? A cataloging system would inform all the libraries, and the users of libraries, of titles available at the central depository. The money saved through avoiding duplication could be spent to enlarge the centralized collection far beyond what is possible for a single library.

You may be interested, as we were, to learn that this idea of a national library for the US was first proposed in 1899 by the librarian of Princeton University. It took another half century for people to realize that a centralized depository was soon going to be an absolute necessity. In 1944 Fremont Rider, the librarian of Wesleyan University, pointed out that research libraries were growing exponentially with an average doubling time of 16 years. Expanding budgets for education and research enabled this growth rate to continue in the 1950's and 1960's, delaying the moment of truth until the budget crunch of the 1970's.

Last year the National Enquiry into Scholarly Communication completed a five year study under the auspices of the American Council of Learned Societies (available at \$3.95 from Johns Hopkins University Press). In its report the Enquiry observed: "The day of the comprehensive self-contained library is irrevocably past." The major recommendation of the Enquiry is to establish a National Library System that would have two main components—a National Bibliographic System and a National Periodicals Center. Similar proposals are now before Congress in the form of bills.

Fortunately technology has progressed in the 80 years since 1899 to the point where a centralized library system is now truly feasible. Given our experience with the computer-based data search systems that already exist in a number of disciplines, one can easily envision combining these systems into a nationwide—and disciplinewise—information system that would enable a scientist equipped with a terminal at the most remote college campus to search a national bibliographic tape for literature pertinent to his interests. Although in 1899 loans from the central depository would have been received and returned by fast stage coach, in 1980 our scientist on the remote campus could telephone in his literature requests to the National Periodicals Center and expect to receive photocopies by return mail or facsimile copies the same day over his school's telephone-connected electronic facsimile machine.

If the technology is available (the British have been operating a centralized library for years) what remains to be done to bring the national library system into being? A

major task is to obtain the cooperation of the librarians and scientific and technical publishers (for whom the problem is most severe). At this point the two groups are at loggerheads on more than one issue. The first is the obligation of libraries to pay publishers copyright royalties for photocopying their publications. There must be agreement between publishers and libraries over what amount of free copying is proper and reasonable.

Another issue is that although many libraries concede publishers should be paid for certain levels of copying, they balk at committing themselves to act as collection agents for the compensation due copyright owners. The National Enquiry noted in its report that this problem has already been solved by the recently established Copyright Clearance Center, which has been specifically designed to relieve libraries of this burden.

A further area of contention is the tendency of the publishing industry to indulge in the proliferation of new scientific journals, which libraries complain makes their own mission continually more difficult and expensive. Publishers on the other hand worry that a National Periodicals Center would not only accelerate the trend of both libraries and individuals to copy journals rather than subscribe to them but might also act to discourage new journals. In response the Enquiry notes that the trend to copying in place of subscribing is inevitable and that a functioning NPC would give publishers their best chance of collecting copying fees to offset losses in subscriptions.

The Enquiry agrees with the libraries that the unnecessary proliferation of journals acts against effective dissemination of scientific information and observes that, in any case, today's economics makes it increasingly difficult to start new journals and continue weak journals. However, the Enquiry recommends that no artificial barriers be erected against new journals but only that new or failing journals should not be subsidized.

A final recommendation of the Enquiry was that the American Council of Learned Societies, the Association of American University Presses and the Association of Research Libraries establish a joint standing committee to guide the formation of the proposed national information system. We are pleased to report that such a committee has now been formed—the Committee on Scholarly Communication—and H. William Koch, director of AIP, is serving as a member.

We anticipate that other physicists will be called upon to contribute their talents to this effort and we trust that all physicists will lend their moral support and encouragement to the goals of the Committee. For the charge of the Committee is no less than that of assuring that the fruits of the nation's scholarly labors are not lost in the rising flood of printed paper but remain available as an invaluable national resource.

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