

Research Libraries and a National Information Policy

Although the idea of a "national information policy" appeals to many, there are many obstacles to overcome and special interest groups to satisfy before consensus can be achieved on such a policy. In the meantime research libraries struggle with immense problems, and one must question how a national policy will aid them. The time may be propitious now to begin a dialogue on the requirements for a national policy and then to establish one that will link government agencies and the research library community and preserve the rights of individuals.

MY CHARGE was to address the topic of a national information policy from the viewpoint of publicly supported academic research libraries. I feel inadequate to talk about the subject, since no such information policy actually exists. One can only speculate about how such a policy might impact research libraries.

We do know that the nation's economy is rapidly becoming dependent on access to information. In the future an organization's profitability may be closely correlated with its ability to access and manage information. It is this growing economic dependency that eventually will force legislators to consider a national policy.

The idea of a national policy has an almost seductive appeal to many individuals. There is a faith that the existence of a unifying policy would create a sense of order where now none exists, and it would serve to clarify issues that are now shrouded in ambiguity. To me, however, the thought of a national policy has almost no appeal. Maybe we are too close to 1984 and not far enough removed from Watergate for me to feel comfortable with the idea. The recent

post-Watergate revelations of government abuse of its authority have only served to intensify my distrust. It will be imperative that the framers of an information policy promote the national good, but it is equally important that safeguards are incorporated to insure that the rights of individuals are preserved.

This program was organized to provide academic librarians an opportunity to respond to the committee report commissioned by Eric Moon.¹ The goals of the document presented at the ALA Midwinter Meeting were laudable, but they did not appear to be very practical. Who can argue against the idea of "All information must be available to all people in all formats conveyed through all communication channels and delivered at all levels of comprehension." But how many believe that these "information imperatives" can be translated into actions? We need a framework that is more rooted in reality.

The term "national information policy" itself suggests an oversimplified perception of what exists. Today there is no overarching policy statement that serves to relate different professions and disciplines, but there are many specialized disciplines that have created *de facto* policy frameworks within

Richard M. Dougherty is director, University Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

which specialists produce, evaluate, organize, and disseminate scientific data. Would it be possible to integrate these specialized systems into an overall framework? It's possible but highly improbable. Even if achieved, a unifying policy covering scientific disciplines would represent only a modest first step. The challenge will be to create public policy on issues that affect the daily lives of individual citizens, e.g., consumer affairs, newspapers, television, radio, etc.

Polymakers underestimate the obstacles that would have to be overcome before a consensus on an information policy can be achieved. The information community is composed of many special interest groups, often holding conflicting objectives, and these interest groups must first be satisfied that their roles will be preserved before they are likely to agree to any policy. The realization of a national consensus within the information community would be a monumental achievement.

In the meantime, research libraries are struggling to cope with the problems of declining budgets, increased user demands, and deteriorating collections. Will a national policy aid these libraries in the struggle to maintain and share their vast store of information resources? This, it seems to me, is one important consideration of a national policy.

Large research libraries remain major sources of informational documents. It is these libraries that collectively comprise one of the country's great repositories of our intellectual heritage. Although it is not always clear who has the right to access resources and under what conditions, presumably a national policy would help resolve some of the ambiguities and disagreements that now exist.

One key question that remains unanswered is whether libraries can provide expanded access to additional constituencies without additional funds. It is doubtful, unless libraries are prepared to reduce the quality of services to their own faculty and students in favor of serving greater numbers of users. Research libraries are confronted by enormously complex problems and must cope with these pressures at a time when budgets are in a general state of decline,

while the use of collections mounts and their physical condition deteriorates. The technological revolution has added new dimensions to library operations, but library operations remain labor-intensive, and these costs push ever upward. The recent announcement by the Library of Congress of its plans to close its catalog and to adopt AACR 2 highlights a specific problem that research libraries must soon confront. It is obvious that the Library of Congress' decision will have an economic impact on all research libraries. Sooner or later large libraries must close their card catalogs and adopt the new code. This will be a costly and complicated process.

One general concern that permeates most of the issues I have touched upon is the question of how research libraries can provide better bibliographic control of their massive collections. We sometimes forget that performance to date has not always been exemplary. Catalogs already frequently exclude sizable segments of collections, e.g., government documents, maps, pamphlets, technical reports, microforms, etc. Moreover, we seem to be losing the battle as catalogs gradually become less and less inclusive. The library community has long been dependent on the Library of Congress for bibliographic data, in fact, it may have become overly dependent.

The Library of Congress in several public statements has cautioned that it cannot be expected to alone shoulder the burden of building a national data base. The Library will need the cooperation and active participation of research libraries. The profession must find a way to facilitate a less centralized approach to input and verify quality bibliographic records into a national data base. The growing recognition of this need has prompted organizations such as the Council on Library Resources, Association of American Universities, Association of Research Libraries, and individual libraries to place such a high priority on projects designed to create a national system.

The problems confronting the contemporary research library have never been more complex and the need for solutions greater. Consequently, the time may be propitious to initiate a dialogue addressing the requirements of a national information policy.

Let us hope this policy will serve as a link between government agencies and the research library community—the government can provide the resources so that libraries can improve access of materials to all who need them.

Let me conclude by reiterating my initial concerns. What governmental agency should be given the responsibility of deciding who should or would be granted access to information? If one were to centralize the power to control information, one must also construct an absolute fail-safe system to prevent abuse. Since we cannot even guarantee the security of personal information stored in computer data banks, would it be prudent to grant any agency anything ap-

proaching absolute power?

I view information as power, so vast I believe it would be premature to permit any one group the opportunity to control or even to be in a position to manipulate citizen access to information. In the meantime, the library profession should continue talking about a national information policy. But let us proceed cautiously and with our eyes open.

REFERENCE

1. "Toward a Conceptual Foundation for a National Information Policy," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 52:545-49 (March 1978). Also published in *Information Hotline* 10:19-21 (May 1978).