
Nationally co-ordinated library promotion

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This paper is a comparative study of approaches to nationally co-ordinated library promotion. The best of current practice in Australia, North America and Europe is reviewed. Recommendations for action in the UK are based on a critical appraisal of four possible schemes.

INTRODUCTION

With the demise in the 1960s of National Library Week the library profession in the United Kingdom was deprived of its first and only attempt at nationally orchestrated publicity and promotion. Whatever the shortcomings and limitations of National Library Week, the event did at least give expression to the idea that libraries could usefully co-operate in the promotion of their services. An impartial observer of trends in British librarianship cannot but be struck by the continuing lack of co-operative planning in this area, not least since nationally co-ordinated promotional campaigns are a feature of many other equally developed countries (developed in terms of librarianship, that is) whose library traditions, service structures and administrative processes differ markedly from one another. Unfortunately, there is no single, simple explanation of this anomaly. Whatever the reason for the United Kingdom's resistance, or apathy, towards co-operative promotional ventures it seems likely that ignorance of what has been, or could be, achieved in this respect contributes to the prevailing negativism. In this paper I propose to outline a variety of approaches which have been tried successfully in other countries and to consider their suitability in relation to the UK. In so doing I am in effect making the assumption that co-ordinated library promotion is, *per se*, a good thing, but since the rationale behind promotion has been explored previously on numerous occasions I feel a return to first principles is not called for here.¹

FOUR MODELS OF CO-ORDINATED PROMOTION

There are many possible approaches to systematic promotion on a national scale, but those outlined here are perhaps the most impressive candidates for consideration. I have chosen to label the four models: the *Horizontal-Independent*

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(inspired by the Australian Library Promotion Council), the *Graft-on* (suggested by the activities of the American Library Association's Public Information Office), the *Centralized* (reflecting Euro-Scandinavian practices) and the *Interventionist* (modelled on the role of the German Library Institute). Discussion of each one's merits will be preceded by a brief description of how that model functions in its particular setting.

The Horizontal-Independent model

An examination of the constitution and objectives of the Australian Library Promotion Council (ALPC) should make clear what is meant by the term *Horizontal-Independent*. The ALPC's origins can be traced back to the Library Week Committee of Victoria (circa 1940) which, as its activities grew more successful, was eventually transmuted into the Australian Library Week Committee. In due course, as promotion evolved from a once-a-year to a continuing activity, the committee was replaced by the ALPC, which in its present form comprises an executive with a salaried staff of three and a federation of regional committees. The ALPC has outgrown its early dependence on grants-in-aid and voluntary effort and is now self-financing, thanks to a publishing turnover in the region of A\$100,000 derived mainly from the sale of library promotional graphics. Revenue from the sale of its graphics, imported and home-produced, provides the ALPC with the greater part of its untied income, and, as is also the case with the American Library Association, allows it to finance a variety of professional supportive activities, e.g. exhibitions, awards, committees, etc. Basically, the organization's goal is to increase awareness and use of libraries throughout Australia, and this is undertaken without any subvention from either the Library Association of Australia or central government, though naturally the organization's council and membership committee include representatives from the library, education, literary and publishing worlds. By describing the ALPC as Horizontal-Independent I mean to suggest that the organization represents the aims of the profession at large without occupying quite such a central or policy-shaping role as a national professional association or national library agency. In a sense it is unaffiliated and financially autonomous. It succeeds because it understands the needs of librarians and because it can effectively and profitably meet these needs.

The Graft-on model

This approach is best exemplified in the operations of the American Library Association's Public Information Office (PIO), which over the past few years — more precisely since 1975 when it inherited responsibility for National Library Week — has become the inspiration for and engineer of a national promotion

programme for libraries in the United States. The expansion of the PIO's activities to include the elaboration of a library graphics programme was possible because the organizational and financial infrastructure already existed. Start-up capital for the graphics programme was taken from surplus revenue of the Association's Publishing Division, and there was, therefore, no need to formally create a new and independent body, comparable, say, to the ALPC. The PIO's primary objective is to increase the visibility of libraries nationally. This it does, principally, by commissioning, marketing and distributing high-quality promotional aids, the income from which (approximately \$250,000 per annum) allows the PIO to produce a range of public service advertisements for radio, TV and major circulation magazines, and to finance a variety of related activities which it might not otherwise be in a position to undertake. The PIO's achievements have been widely and justly acclaimed, and despite (healthy) competition from other organizations in the promotional aids market, both commercial and not-for-profit, the PIO continues to act as a national focal point for the library community's efforts to establish and maintain a strong and positive public image. As in Australia, the PIO has broadened the concept of promotion from a once-a-year jamboree in the form of National Library Week to a systematic year-round activity, but, despite the surface similarities, it is important to remember that these two bodies differ in certain respects. To repeat: the ALPC is functionally independent whereas the PIO is an executive arm of a national library association. Hence the typological distinction.

The Centralized model

In many European and Scandinavian countries there exist national library supply agencies whose *raison d'être* is the efficient and cost-effective provision of centralized services to libraries, particularly public libraries. Dewe's comprehensive, now somewhat dated description of library supply services in Europe remains the best introduction to a subject largely unfamiliar to British librarians.² In both the UK and North America the library supply business can fairly be described as a mixed market; in many European countries, however, the business is effectively monopolized by the national supply service. In Denmark, for example, Bibliotekscentralen attempts to stimulate professional interest in promotion generally by providing sustained initiative in the form of gentle guidance and prompting, and, of course, the manufacture of high-quality promotional materials. For Danish librarians this is a natural extension of Bibliotekscentralen's activities and the organization has continued to offer leadership and encouragement in this area since the 1950s. The profession's expectation that the central supplier can and will provide the necessary initiative for co-ordinated national campaigns also helps explain why the Nederlands Biblioteek en

Lektuur Centrum (NBLC) was able and prepared to launch a house-style for Dutch libraries. In essence the NBLC is a hybrid organization comprising a national professional association and a central supply service. Although it receives a 70 per cent state subsidy in respect of work relating to the association's activities, the NBLC's library supply business has to be self-supporting, though the organization is content, in the words of its director, to aim at 'a financial zero line'. As, for example, was the case with the PIO of the ALA, profit maximization is not the organization's primary objective. The NBLC is at the heart of Dutch librarianship and is accordingly ideally positioned to provide the impetus and managerial guidance for intelligently conceived promotion on a national scale.

The Interventionist model

The three variants so far considered have one thing in common, they are all outgrowths of established professional organizations or movements within the profession. The PIO's library graphics programme was added to the ALA's HQ activities because the organization felt it had a responsibility to promote libraries generally; the ALPC, as was noted, grew out of a highly successful National Library Week programme, and in the case of the European library supply agencies the development of a combined commercial/professional interest in the manufacture of library promotional materials was seen as a perfectly natural broadening of those organizations' operating base. In the case of the Interventionist model the inspiration comes, as it were, from without, rather than from within the ranks of the profession or bodies serving the needs of the profession. Perhaps the best illustration of this is provided by the Deutsches Bibliotheks-institut (DBI) (an organization whose role and functions are in some respects similar to those of the British Library Research and Development Department) which was the catalyst behind the evolution of the recently unveiled national symbol and graphic design package for public libraries in West Germany. In this instance the programme's development costs were underwritten by the DBI on a scale which almost certainly would have been beyond the capacity of a national association, a library supplier (the Einkaufszentrale für öffentliche Bibliotheken (EKZ)) or an entrepreneur, however deeply persuaded they might have been of the scheme's merits. The German libraries' house-style was made possible only by the willing intervention of the DBI for whom there was no prospect of partial or total return on monies invested. In all other cases which have been considered there is an abiding, though not necessarily overriding or consuming need, for the national body to recoup costs. Even the NBLC obliges those libraries interested in adopting the Dutch house-style to pay a contracting-in fee, which is based on the size of the community served by the library. In this way, it can, in the fullness of time, redeem its capital investment.

EVALUATING THE ALTERNATIVES

Promotion is an important part of library management and requires, as we saw in each of the four case studies, continuous commitment of effort and resources if positive results are to be achieved. In the United States, the PIO not only supplies a wide variety of materials and 'ideas packs' on how best to exploit its materials, but is the organizing spirit or force behind the country's national campaigns. The PIO and its counterparts elsewhere combine the role of manufacturer and motivator, by virtue of the fact that they can feel the professional pulse, can fashion their campaigns accordingly and use their strong professional ties to achieve a degree of co-operation which a commercial concern could not hope to match. Promotion is as much about people and co-operation as the materials used to promote the service, but promotion none the less is a business. To arrive at some idea of the market for library graphics in the UK one can look at the *per capita* expenditure on these materials in the countries discussed so far and, assuming that the relationship between sales volume and population is meaningful, come up with a best and worst case projection for potential sales in the UK. Remembering that these figures are purely indicative, it seems that the minimum level of expenditure would be £150,000 and the upper limit somewhere in the region of £500,000 per annum.³ Accepting these figures as rough indicators of the sales potential for library promotional materials in this country, it remains a mystery that no concerted effort has been made to tap this market, though in its 1978 report to the Library Association the Working Party on Display and Publicity Materials proposed that the LA should undertake to produce centrally a limited range of publicity materials and to encourage the adoption of a national symbol.⁴ Neither suggestion, however, was adopted by the association, and the UK's anomalous position remains unchanged. There is, of course, no reason why this state of affairs should remain as it is, so let us consider how each of the four models might fare in the United Kingdom.

The Horizontal-Independent

The appeal of the ALPC-inspired model is considerable (if it can work in Australia, then why not here?), but the immediate difficulty is that of finding sufficient pump-priming capital. Maybe such a body would after, say, five years become self-financing, but a sponsor would still be required to establish the operation at the outset if, as its name implies, it were to be independent of library authorities and professional bodies. Perhaps the resurrection of National Library Week under the aegis of a strong steering committee could be the starting point, and maybe funds could be coaxed from a charitable foundation, an organization like the Book Marketing Council, or even a commercial sponsor. Children's Book Week, it is worth recalling, is sponsored by the National Westminster Bank.

The Graft-on

The appeal of the Graft-on model resides in the fact that individual libraries or local authorities are not required to make any financial commitment, as for instance is the case with Bibliotekstjänst in Sweden, which is a joint stock company owned by the Swedish Library Association and the Swedish Union of Municipal Authorities; nor, for that matter, is there dependence on state backing. The obvious candidate for the 'graft' is the LA, which, like the ALA, has a central position in professional affairs, a healthy publishing programme and a most valuable mailing list. The LA also has an Information Office whose staff and functions could, theoretically at least, be enlarged to enable it to undertake the administration of what would in effect be a continuous public relations programme for libraries throughout the UK, comparable to that currently undertaken by the Public Information Office of the ALA. The US precedent, which is a considerable success by any standards, suggests that the LA is the natural platform for any UK 'graft-on' experiment, though that is not to say that a joint operation involving both the LA and Aslib could not be contemplated, with the added attractions of reaching a wider public and spreading the operating costs.

The Centralized

This is probably the least suitable option for the simple reason that the UK does not have a national library supply centre which could co-ordinate the manufacture and distribution of promotional materials. The notion of a centre, in the full physical sense of the word, dedicated to the supply of library promotional aids, is certainly appealing in the abstract, but this appeal would be outweighed by the disadvantages of having to employ staff on a permanent basis, which would in turn necessitate a large and constantly changing product range, and investment in machinery and premises. Even if the UK could support an operation as capital-intensive as this, there would still be the problem of trying to find someone prepared to invest an appreciable amount of risk capital.

The Interventionist

In each of the three scenarios above the involvement of a genuinely all-embracing national library body has been noticeable only by its absence. For this model to work in the UK it would be necessary to persuade a body comparable to the DBI of the long-term benefits to the library community of developing a national house-style and support materials. Perhaps the idea would be more attractive if the Dutch contracting-in principle were to be applied as a cost-recovery technique, but even under these conditions the project calls for a not inconsiderable degree of idealism and conviction, two elements which are notoriously susceptible to

shrinkage during a recessionary period. It could, perhaps, be argued that the role of instigator should be undertaken by a body like the Office of Arts and Libraries or, alternatively, the British Library Research and Development Department, but there is also the possibility of a diluted version of the Interventionist model, in which a consortium of library-related organizations combines to provide the necessary finance for the scheme. Unfortunately, this type of inspired co-operative approach is alien to the British way of thinking and must be considered something of a non-starter.

The four approaches sketched here are, perhaps, an expression of our need to categorize and compartmentalize actual practice under handy rubrics. In reality, none of those whose operations have been described here would necessarily endorse or agree with the four-fold typology; practice, after all, is a response to perceived local requirements and constraints, not slavish mimicry of a particular conceptual model. It is, therefore, possible that the best solution for the UK would not necessarily mirror that model which, if only by default, appears more suitable than other contenders. In other words, the most plausible or efficacious solution might combine elements from a number of so-called models, though assertions or predictions as to the most desirable alternative are likely to be based on little more than educated guesswork.

Rather than debate the likelihood of a particular model being sanctioned by the profession, which would in fact boil down to a discussion of the politics of British librarianship (for politicking rather than an objective and dispassionate assessment of the possibilities would in this instance determine the outcome), a scheme is proposed which ignores sectoral interests and prejudices, but seems to constitute the ideal in terms of its intrinsic merits.

TOWARDS AN IDEAL

Thirty years ago Charles Elliott argued that 'the arrangement of a national or regional scheme for publicity would make it possible to promote a planned campaign of ensured continuity'.⁵ Fifteen years later Michael Dewe advocated standardization and centralization in the production of library promotional materials.⁶ In 1976 the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Public Libraries in Australia recommended greater co-operative promotional effort as an antidote to professional inertia.⁷ More recently, as we mentioned, the LA chose not to implement, even on a trial basis, the proposals of its working party for the development of a national library symbol. Despite these and countless other exhortations to action, and despite the wealth and weight of evidence based on other countries' experiences, the UK has failed to respond, even in the most tentative fashion.

In view of the leeway to be made up it is recommended that the profession address itself with urgency and wholeheartedness to the matter of national library promotion. Though it may not have emerged from this brief review of comparative practice, the achievements of the ALA in improving the image of libraries generally, and the commitment of the DBI to the concept of a unifying house-style for libraries in the German Federal Republic, are perfect illustrations of how what may seem like idealized or impractical objectives can be translated into actuality. Interestingly, the ALA is currently considering the feasibility of designing and promoting a national library symbol, which would help consolidate its efforts to increase public awareness of the library service nationally. As far as the UK is concerned, I feel that the LA's working party was thinking along the right lines when it suggested that the association should (a) become involved in the manufacture and supply of promotional materials and (b) consider the possibility of a national house-style for libraries, but I also feel that its recommendations suffered, understandably it should be added, from a lack of boldness and vision. Half-hearted commitment will result in only partial accomplishment of one's goals; the success of the ALA and the DBI in their respective endeavours is due to the fact that professional judgement and conviction are matched by financial commitment. As we saw in the case of the ALA, the library graphics programme has proved itself to be a significant money-spinning operation. Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect a professional association to take full responsibility for the development and maintenance of a continuous programme of library promotion, but if this is so, then compensatory attention should be given to the question of enlisting support from other quarters (e.g. the British Library, Aslib, the Institute of Information Scientists, the Office of Arts and Libraries, the Publishers' Association, the Association of London Chief Librarians).

CONCLUSION

The case for nationally co-ordinated library promotion can be justified on its own merits. This is not merely another example of keeping up with the Joneses, in this case the ALA, NBLC, DBI, or any of the other national agencies alluded to, but an explicit acknowledgement of the fundamental importance and value of systematic library promotion at the national level. An approach which combines the best of ALA practice with the kind of inspirational input provided by the DBI in its championing of the German house-style is, contestably, the ideal. Whether this ideal will ever be aimed at, let alone achieved, remains to be seen.

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