

TRENDS IN COMMUNITY AND CITIZENS' INFORMATION SERVICES IN CAN-
ADA AND ABROAD: THE EMERGENCE OF "ONE STOP" INFORMATION "SUP-
ER-MARKETS" (TENDANCES ACTUELLES DANS LES SERVICES D'INFORMAT-
ION DANS LES COMMUNAUTÉS DU CANADA ET LES PAYS ÉTRANGERS:
L'APPARITION DE CENTRES D'INFORMATION DE TYPE SUPER-MARCHE)

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ABSTRACT

In Canada, in the U.S., and in Western Europe, numerous local "one stop" public information facilities, which provide free information services in all fields of knowledge as well as free guidance and educational services, are being established. The nature of their services, which increasingly extend well beyond the emergency referral, crisis intervention, and library reference services currently offered in most Canadian and U.S. cities, are discussed. The training of their staffs and their relationships with other educational, social welfare, library, mass media, and computerized information services are indicated. The reasons for their instant popularity with almost all segments of the public and with professionals are analyzed and their shortcomings discussed, along with their potentialities for serving as components of the information utilities of the future, as well as the local nodes of what some futurists call the "Emerging World Brain/Encyclopedia/Network". (Au Canada, aux États-Unis et dans les pays d'Europe de l'Ouest s'établissent actuellement de nombreux centres locaux d'information au public qui procurent des services gratuits d'information dans tous les domaines ainsi que des services gratuits de conseils et d'éducation. Le présent article expose la nature de ces services qui, de plus en plus, dépassent de beaucoup le cadre d'intervention d'urgence et des bibliothèques que l'on trouve dans la plupart des pays du Canada et des États-Unis. Nous indiquons comment le personnel de ces centres est formé et les contacts qu'ils entretiennent avec les autres sections de l'éducation, de l'assistance sociale, des bibliothèques, des mass-media et les informations que leurs procurent les ordinateurs. Nous analysons les raisons de leur grande popularité dans presque toutes les couches du public et nous discutons les lacunes qu'ils offrent encore ainsi que la possibilité de les employer comme base pour les services d'information à l'avenir, tant dans les centres locaux que dans ce que les futuristes appellent "début d'un cerveau, d'une encyclopédie, d'un réseau mondial d'information".)

COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICE TRENDS

During 1974-75, while on sabbatical leave, the writer was engaged in a research project the undertaking of which took him to many of the major cities in the eastern half of Canada and the United States and also to urban centres in twelve countries in Western Europe and the Middle East. The project, in part, involved an examination of the nature and quality of certain information services - local, state or provincial, national, and international - which were available to the public in the countries in question. Information services which incorporated educational components, to the extent that the information provided by such services was at least partly "tailored" to the individual enquirer's background and "learning needs", were scrutinized. It is the purpose of this paper to attempt to impart an overview of some of the most intriguing and significant features of the various information services encountered.

Evident almost everywhere was the rapid development, at the local level, of what, for lack of a better term, might be labelled "one stop" (or "one telephone call") citizens', neighbourhood, community, or civic "information super-markets". These new enterprises are increasingly undertaking not only traditional forms of library reference services and emergency or "crisis intervention" referral services, but also direct and immediate educational, economic, social welfare, and cultural guidance and consultative services. The following paragraphs summarize what appear to be the emerging common characteristics and functions of these novel institutions, whose work goes so far beyond what is currently being attempted by our own relatively new, but by now almost traditional "Hotline" emergency services and factual information referral centres.

Perhaps it would be well to begin by stating one or two caveats. Even though there appears to be a clear trend for these facilities to assume the functions and characteristics noted below, there exists, to the author's knowledge, no one centre, as yet, which manifests all of these characteristics or which has attempted to undertake all of the listed functions. Understandably, too, major local and national differences are still evident.

Among the most salient characteristics of these centres, then, are the following:

- 1) They attempt to provide services to clients/patrons of all ages, at all levels of intellectual ability, in all subject-matter or knowledge fields, in all areas of entertainment and cultural activity, and in all professional, vocational, and avocational endeavours.
- 2) They provide their multi-disciplinary information services (and not merely information about information), without charge or at a very nominal fee.
- 3) They seek, insofar as possible, to provide "on the spot", "in real time," "one stop" information services, and to keep to a minimum the need for their patrons to be referred elsewhere.
- 4) They are largely staffed by non-professional, volunteer, middle-

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ages or older women. Among the few professionals on their staffs, either as volunteers or as paid personnel, social workers appear to comprise by far the largest group, followed by theologians, with the librarians, media specialists, educators, information and computer scientists, other scientists, and medical and legal practitioners following far to the rear. In a few instances, schools of social welfare, library schools, medical schools, and law schools have begun to encourage, or even require, their students to engage in varying periods of voluntary assistance or internship on the staffs of these centres. It should be noted, however, that schools of education do not appear to have made provision as yet for such activities on the part of their students.

- 5) With some important exceptions, they have no official or administrative connections with local, state, or national governmental institutions in the fields of education, social welfare, library service, or information processing services, even though they may be financially assisted or totally supported by governmental agencies and even though they may be housed in community-owned or rented property, such as community centres, libraries, or even educational institutions.
- 6) They have, quite commonly, developed close and/or co-operative working arrangements and relationships with local and other mass media facilities, such as television (broadcast and cable), radio, and newspaper enterprises, as well as with public utilities, such as telephone systems.
- 7) In order to improve their capabilities for service, their staff members are increasingly expected or required to engage in pre-service and in-service training, training which is usually provided to them without charge. And such "on-site" multi-disciplinary professional assistance as is required for this training is surprisingly often forthcoming, again usually without charge.
- 8) They engage in a continuous search, among their patrons and others, for new recruits to join them in their ever-broader informational, educational, and other functions.

With the passage of time, the personnel of these centres tend to discover that the performance of their functions can, in varying degrees, be facilitated through the ready exchange of information with similar centres located elsewhere. As a result, nascent networks or systems of such centres are beginning to emerge. The possible development of regional or national networks, or even of an international network, can be foreseen. These centres could doubtless serve very effectively as important nodes in such an international network. Hence some futurists deem them to have the potentiality of constituting the local nodes of what they term the "Emerging World Brain/Encyclopedia Network".

The numerous functions which the information centres commonly seek to perform are both complex and extremely diverse. Despite the fre-

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quently interdisciplinary nature of their tasks, they endeavour to maintain a reputation for immediate service to their clientele. One of their major areas of concern is the provision of what might be termed "custom tailored" or individualized information services. In brief, the centre personnel, in their provision of information services, seek to take into full account the background and interests of their individual clients. In addition, they attempt to ascertain the nature of the immediate problem for which relevant information or a solution is being sought, and the reasons behind the request for information are also explored. For example, before the client's questions are responded to, he or she is requested to answer such questions as "Why do you need this information?"; "What do you expect to do with it once you receive it?", and so on. Insofar as possible, the patron is then provided with information about the entire range of alternative courses of action that could be followed, and he or she is encouraged to consider the advantages and disadvantages of each such course of action. Throughout these processes, the client is invited and encouraged to participate in, or at least observe and follow the step-by-step procedures according to which the requisite information is searched for, and hopefully, found. The attempts on the part of the information centre staff to accomplish these tasks as expeditiously as possible with the full participation of the clients are deliberately designed to serve as educational experiences for the clients. It is hoped and assumed that in the future the clients, through their participatory actions, will have improved their skills in thenceforth solving their own information and other problems.

It is with regard to the matter of providing this essentially educational service of individualized information that these new information facilities differ most from the traditional library reference services. In particular, it is in the variety of resources which the centre staffs are prepared to call upon that the distinction becomes most evident. For example, in order to determine the most appropriate media and other resources, including human resources and even computerized resources, required to satisfy his or her information needs and to assist in solving the problem(s) in question, the centre staff members frequently attempt to obtain information from the client concerning his or her reading, television watching, and oral communication habits.

But the educational and counselling services of the centres do not end at that point. Where desired, staff members are often prepared to provide mediation services on behalf of their clients and, where necessary, to assist them in implementing the results of the decision-making process in which they jointly engaged, or in applying the determined solution to the problem. If, for example, a client is unable to undertake, or is unused to undertaking the writing of letters of application for a job, the staff member will assist in the drafting of the letter, or even actually compose the letter.

Beyond assisting, educating, and advising individuals, the information centre staff members commonly endeavour to provide similar services on a community-wide basis. Where, for example, the information sought by a client appears to be of abiding concern, or is likely to be of wide-spread interest to others in the community, with the permission of the client a tape or videotape of portions of the transaction is made

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and, in some instances, the interview is presented to the public, either immediately and live, or subsequently, in broadcast or cable TV form.

Again, with the permission of the patron, and with appropriate guarantees of confidentiality of personal information, a summary record of the proceedings, particularly the steps which were followed during the transaction, is composed by the staff member. These records are made available to the client for use in connection with any further consultations that he or she might seek to have at the centre. Hence, neither staff member nor client needs to start at the beginning each time the client re-appears for further assistance.

Above and beyond their educational, economic, and cultural information functions, many community and citizens' information centres have demonstrated a capacity to serve a novel broad social function as well. Through analyses of their files and records, and as a result of their relative objectivity and freedom from identification with particular political groups or pressure groups, they are often in a position to pinpoint matters of immediate or long-range social or cultural concern. These are concerns which might not have otherwise come to the attention of the public or the civil authorities in the community in question. Objectivity and freedom from political pressure is not, however, a universal characteristic of these centres. In many countries, including Canada, members of certain political parties have infiltrated the staff of certain local centres for the purpose of converting the centres to the political purposes and the "party line" of the party in question. If unsuccessful in this tactic, these political partisans are likely to attempt to wreck the centre, whereas if they are successful in taking it over, the centre is likely to lose its former community-wide support. It is doubtless the participatory and democratic nature of the functioning of the centres, together with their desire to accept all competent volunteers into their fold, which makes them prone to the above type of political manoeuvring. The most successful centres appear to be those which have, by one means or another, precluded such partisan political "take-overs".

Another shortcoming suffered by some of the information centres apparently stems from the largely non-professional and part-time nature of the staff members, whose enthusiasm and personalized approach cannot always compensate for their lack of subject-matter expertise. Or to put it somewhat differently, the actual quality of the services provided by the centres varies according to the training, background, and personal qualities of their individual staff members.

On the other hand, the almost instant and, to all appearances, relatively durable popularity of these centres, among virtually every segment of the local population, obviously stems from the personal and "human concern" approach and the desire to be as helpful as possible which pervades the functioning of the staff members. Apparently these desirable characteristics usually far outweigh the inevitable inadequacies in the professional training of the staff in the eyes of the patrons of the centres. As a possible result, even though many of the centres originated as, and continue to be "store-front" volunteer enterprises, with ever-increasing frequency they are gaining governmental

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support, financial and otherwise. And they are often doing so at the expense, budgetary and otherwise, of the traditional library, educational, and social welfare establishments. The level of financial support given in recent years to these centres by the Government of the Province of Ontario, the support provided to the literally hundreds of Citizens' Advice Bureaux by the Government of the United Kingdom, and the financial assistance recently granted by the Preventative Social Services Branch of the Alberta Provincial Government to the Family Information Resource Centre at Mount Royal College in Calgary, all attest to this new fact of institutional life.

Assuming that the foregoing trends are indeed correctly perceived, it may be concluded that despite their obvious acceptance by their respective communities, the evident shortcomings of the centres could probably be minimized by an infusion of professional expertise, provided by information scientists, educators, social welfare workers, media specialists, lawyers, medical practitioners, etc. However, such an infusion must be accompanied by a deliberate avoidance, on the part of everyone concerned, of a dilution of the "personal concern" approach upon which the very success of these centres appears to depend. Perhaps it would behoove the "establishments" among the foregoing professions to seriously examine the possibility of having an appreciable portion of their practitioners trained, able, and willing to play a more significant role than hitherto in these novel facilities.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of CITIZENS' ADVICE BUREAUX

in association with the National Council of Social Service

26 Bedford Square
London WC1B 3HU
Telephone 01-636 4066

Chairman: Dr Dennis Brailsford
Chief Executive: A J Leighton

SELECTED STATISTICAL INFORMATION ON THE CAB SERVICE IN THE UK

Number of Bureaux

The total number of Bureaux was

416 in 1960	566 in 1972/73
427 in 1963	600 in 1973/74
473 in 1966	625 in 1974 (December)
498 in 1969/70	675 in 1975 (April)

Number of Enquiries

In the period April 1973 - March 1974 Bureaux received 1,910,000 enquiries.
These break down as follows:-

Family and Personal	402,000
Housing, Property and Land	391,000
Civic, Local and National Information	352,000
Consumer, Trade and Manufacture	274,000
Employment	116,000
Social Security	101,000
Health and Medical	84,000
Communications and Travel	90,000
Education and Training	43,000
Taxes and Duties	40,000
Private Insurance	17,000

1,910,000

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SELECTED STATISTICAL INFORMATION ON THE CAB SERVICE IN THE UK

Staffing

At the end of 1972/73 the total number of staff working in Bureaux was approximately 6,500. Of these 435 were paid staff, both full- and part-time. Almost all other staff were part-time voluntary.

Local finance

Virtually all Bureaux receive financial support from their local authorities. Besides financial support, some Bureaux receive help in kind in the form of premises heating, lighting, cleaning, telephone and other help.

The size of local authority contribution varies, ranging from £5 to over £5,000. In some cases, the authority contribution covers total Bureau expenses.

In 1972/73, the extent of local authority financial contributions to Bureaux in England and Wales was over £500,000. This figure excludes help in kind.

National finance

The total grant aid to the National Association of Citizens' Advice Bureaux central office for its support services in 1973/74 is approximately £190,000, comprising:

Department of Trade and Industry	£132,000
Home Office	£ 32,000
HCSS grant	£ 25,540

J A EASTABROOK, January 1975

BUREAU'S BUSINESS IS BOOMING

A BIG increase in the number of inquiries investigated was reported at the annual meeting of Hinckley Citizens Advice Bureau.

Mrs. Joan Malpus, the Bureau Organiser said the total was 3,740 compared with 2,660 a year ago.

"As time goes on we gained experience which enables us to deal with the public's problems in greater depth without having to pass them on to other agencies and this is always an added help to people in trouble," she said.

"We continue to receive inquiries from a very wide area and the change in local authority boundaries now brings home to us the need to extend the service to the Bosworth side of the district."

To do this efficiently, however, we must increase our present number of voluntary workers, said Mrs. Malpus.

Miss D. M. Haslam, chairman of the Management Committee, said the bureau's work on consumer protection had greatly increased the load on the volunteers.

A bouquet

I AM writing to voice my appreciation of the volunteers who run the Citizens' Advice Bureau, Spital Hill, Sheffield.

I have visited the CAB on several occasions and nothing is too much trouble for them; they are friendly and this is a great advantage because, when you're at ease, you can put your problem over much better.

If they haven't the information you need they will follow it up for you or advise you what to do.

I would recommend anyone with a problem who doesn't know how to solve it, to visit the CAB or give them a ring!

Sandra Bagley, Thorndon Road, Sheffield.