

FILM LIBRARIES: PROBLEMS IN INFORMATION SHARING

Jean (Jennie) Paine
Department of Communications Media Librarian
University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta
T2N 1N4

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to point out a major reason for the current lack of information sharing between "film libraries", identifying the basic problem as one of a serious lack of adequately trained staff.

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INTRODUCTION

There are a number of reasons why resource sharing between film libraries is difficult. The physical awkwardness of the medium, the high cost of replacing damaged film, shipping problems and the absence of adequate cataloging information are some that immediately spring to mind. However, the subject of this paper is the present lack of adequately trained personnel at all levels of film library staffing that creates a major barrier to resource sharing.

Lack of adequately trained staff is a problem common to most special libraries. This deficiency arises chiefly because special libraries are independent units, usually established by a firm or institution whose administrators have very little understanding of the training and expertise required to maintain them.

Most special libraries are print collections dealing with a specific subject. A film library is special because of the medium. Consequently a broader expertise is required. Ideally a present-day film library requires staff who are trained in library techniques, have some knowledge of computer science, and are also thoroughly familiar with the medium they are handling. Furthermore, in order to keep abreast of current developments in all three fields, the staff need to monitor a wide range of information.

TYPES OF FILM LIBRARIES

"Film Libraries" are of two major types. Those that deal specifically with the film medium, and those that include collections of film as part of a multi-media service. Of the former kind, there are:-

- National collections, like the National Film Library in Ottawa
- Provincial collections, like the Film Library Service of the Public Affairs Division of Alberta Government Services
- Special collections in museums, and a variety of other institutions, both public, private, and educational

The latter kind, more accurately called "collections" are found in:-

- Provincial and city Education Resource Centres
- Provincial and city libraries
- College and University libraries

and are usually part of a multi-media collection. However, these institutions sometimes have film libraries that are completely separate from the main library, usually as a section of a Media Centre of some kind.

FILM LIBRARY STAFF

By looking at the list of institutions housing film libraries or collections, it can be seen that there must be quite a diversity of administrative personnel, including civil servants, librarians of one kind or another (more about that later), personnel from the Education

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profession, and people trained in what is known as the "Communication Arts". These administrators have a variety of titles like Director of the Audiovisual Centre, or Resource Centre Manager, or even, Professor, Faculty of Extension, University of Somewhere. The staff employed by the institutions is equally varied. The personnel employed to organise and distribute the collections differs from one institution to the next. This depends not only on the type of institution, i.e. whether it is educational, special, or a regular library organisation, but also on whether the "Film Library" is merely a collection of films which are loaned out to clients, or is also a unit responsible for the provision of viewing and projection equipment and facilities.

The simplest staff structures exist in the libraries that merely loan out their films. Here, the majority of the staff are clerical personnel because the organisation of the material is kept at a simple level. The films are often stored in sequential number order, and an alphabetical listing by title plus an index of very broad subject headings provide access points. An information and reference service of any depth is not available unless a professional librarian, with the necessary funding and staff to establish such a service, is included in the staffing structure.

The most complex staffing structures exist in the audiovisual or media centres which provide total audio-visual services to educational institutions. Here, there are a variety of professional and technical specialists on the staff, who have to be integrated into a mutually co-operative unit. To allow for competency and training at all levels to be adequately recognised and rewarded, these staff structures require a complicated system of overlapping salary scales and status levels. There is a tendency within some of these units for the emphasis to be placed on the audiovisual technology rather than on the information function, and a professional librarian employed in one of these staffing structures can be at any level from the equivalent of a senior clerical assistant, to the head of such a department.

In between these two extremes lie the established libraries where a film loan service has become part of the total library service. Here a film cataloging and reference service is usually given, which is equal to similar services provided for the print materials in each library, but the librarian responsible for administering the film service usually has to do so in addition to other library duties.

THE COMMUNICATION GAP

The reasons for communication problems between people working with educational film may now be apparent. There are two major problems:-

1. The "Film Libraries" or collections of films are administered by a diversity of administrative bodies without a central unifying

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authority, thus creating an overlap in work, service and funding, and making communication channels hard to establish.

2. The staff employed to operate the different libraries are not equal in education, training, and expertise. The term "Film Librarian" for example, is used indiscriminately to describe anyone from a clerical assistant who books out films and keeps a typewritten list of the holdings, to a professional librarian who has specialized training in handling film and administering a collection.

As a result of these inequalities, the people responsible for the film collections are found at a variety of authority levels within the individual staffing structures, or, worse yet, the different areas of operating a film service (i.e. acquisition, reference, cataloging, and distribution) are split between people from completely different disciplines within one staff structure.

The result of this lack of even minimal standardization of institutions and staff requirements is that important information is frequently not relayed to the people who need and can utilise it.

CURRENT INFORMATION EXCHANGE IN ALBERTA

Within the city of Calgary and the province of Alberta, information on local film holdings is via phone, mail, and by exchange of printed catalogs. Where professional or para-professional library staff is hired, there are channels of communication that enable the sharing of purchasing information, and cataloging and reference information to take place, but even this is hampered because the library profession is divided into specialized sections. There are School Librarians, Special Librarians, Public Librarians, and College and University Librarians. In any or all of these sections there will be found individuals who deal partly or specifically with films, consequently the communication channels tend to be informal. In other words, individuals contact each other whenever information is required. For example, an informal network regularly exchanging information on purchasing, new additions to stock, reference searches and cataloging information, and extending between a variety of institutions, might include the following personnel:-

- a Public Services Librarian in a college
- an Audiovisual Librarian in a special library
- a Library Assistant in a Public Library Fine Arts Department
- a Cataloging Assistant in a college
- a Film Librarian in a Media Centre
- a Technical Services Librarian in a University Library
- a Library Assistant on a University information desk
- a Reference Librarian in a University Fine Arts Department

Despite their different titles and functions, these individuals share some mutually understood expertise. However, where the film libraries are staffed by clerical personnel who do not have the time or the training

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to adequately document the material, the only information that is usually available is confined to specific titles, and depends on the exact title being known.

The printed catalogs that are the main source of information on each library's holdings, vary considerably in format and in the amount of information given about each title. Most of them have indexes where the material has been arranged by broad and non-standard subject areas, making subject searching a time-consuming chore.

CONCLUSION

These current variations in organisation and staffing of film collections prevents any effective resource and cost sharing just because the communication channels are so poor. The technology presently available for improved sharing can only be effectively utilised if regular channels of information can be established between people who can:-

- ask the right questions
- give the right answers
- interpret information correctly
- accurately anticipate possible problems
- make effective decisions

If the administrators of film libraries were to review their hiring policies and hire staff who would be able to liase successfully with their opposite numbers in other film libraries, it would be possible to organise effective channels before thousands of dollars are invested in electronic systems, since the quality of the input and the effectiveness of the output of any system is dependent on the quality and effectiveness of the people responsible for providing and utilising the information.