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# METHODS OF LIBRARY RESEARCH

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## **The need for information**

A society produces and uses information. All activity whether in science, industry, commerce or government today takes place in such a complex environment that it must be based on a specially acquired information. At the same time, every act gives rise to information and recorded knowledge grows apace. To find information one seeks within the huge mass now available, becomes even more difficult. If the information is to be accessible, it must be organised.

Diffusion of information comes in many ways. The foremost is by way of mouth — lectures, meetings, conferences, organisations or associations. Bringing people together with similar interests is a potent way of organising the flow of information. More often than not, information by way of mouth finds itself recorded in a documentary form. This in itself becomes a source document.

Many people, from the man in the street up to a head of an institution, help to organise this documentary record. The editor who assembles a series of articles into an issue of a journal is doing the same. But a wider organisation is achieved by the library which arranges a collection of books and journals in a subject sequence. Encyclopaedias are essays organised in a summary form which are whole fields of knowledge. The librarian is always trying to collect, digest and collate existing information, hoping to ease the task of whoever uses the library.

An outstanding feature of the present scene is that information is recorded in innumerable, separately published documents. The user of the library with a problem to solve and actions to take, needs a great variety of information. No matter how well educated he is in his field, information that is new to him is continually being recorded. He needs a selective service to keep him aware of current developments. When faced with the problem, he may find that his fund of knowledge is not adequate. He may wish to obtain data, a process, a method, a theory to help him to solve the problem. On some occasions he may need to survey thoroughly a subject that is new to him. He may need to extract from the documentary mass a high proportion of the available information on this subject.

Information needs have been divided in three main types: current aware-

ness; everyday information and exhaustive survey. To satisfy the three types, documentary information must be collected and stored. The main factor is to select from the library, the information needed by the particular user at a particular time. This is how information is acquired.

Information is recorded in many and varied types of documents. If one needs information on a particular aspect of education one has to refer to publications which survey this particular aspect, books useful for ready reference to facts, methods or theories and primary sources of detailed results and discussions. Among such publications we find textbooks, monographs and treatises: ready reference books include encyclopaedias, handbooks and manuals. Primary sources are even more varied — journals, theses and dissertations, bulletins, reports, literature and, perhaps, correspondence.

Each of these types of documents may contain the necessary relevant information. The information system as a whole has the task of so organising the mass documentaion that the right information wherever it may be recorded, can be located when needed. Up to a point our library is achieving this. While admitting that the the whole of knowledge is available for everyone to use, there is a feeling that it is becoming too difficult to keep track of the mass information which is constantly flooding us. Information retrieval was, is, and will always be, a problem. Tools exist to identify documents like bibliographies, catalogues and indexes. The total volume of documents doubles every ten years and to discover information today is twice as difficult than it was ten years ago. Librarians all over the world talk of this problem as a crisis.

In 1807 Thomas Young wrote that "... there is great reason to apprehend, from the continual multiplication of works, which are merely repetitions of others, the sciences will shortly be overwhelmed by their own unwieldy bulk ..." This is more evident today. Three books come to mind — An Introduction to Economics; Economics: an introduction, and Econimics, a beginner's approach. Clearly this is repetitive work but the library cannot choose one book and discard the others. Even though we have those wonderful abstracts — a very modern tool for discovering information — the task of keeping up with the literature is becoming impossible. The problem of selecting documents to read is even more difficult.

#### **Reference tools**

One aspect of education which is being given little attention is learning how to find out — the art of discovery — whether by direct questioning of nature or the interrogation of books. Literature search should be quickened by making the necessary retrieval tools more efficient, more widely available and more familiar to the user.

## Literature search:

Whenever possible the search for information should go directly to its source, to the paper or the report that contains it. But since these primary sources are rarely known without investigation, the first step is often to a reliable compendium of knowledge — to one in the group of work which are called reference books: encyclopaedic articles, handbooks, treatises, depending on what type of knowledge is sought.

Reference books though valuable first aids, may fail to provide what is wanted, either because the library resources are limited or because the subject is unlikely to have appeared in such texts. In the first instance the next step will be to discover other books covering the subject which can also be consulted: bibliographic guides of all kinds ranging from reading lists to universal bibliographies. These can be guides which introduce the reader to other books not necessarily found in the reference section or the reserved shelf.

Rather than searching for further complete books on the subject, an alternative course can be taken. In this case it is necessary to go beyond the reference book and to look to the primary source. Here an amount of previous knowledge is of no more than occasional help: the volume and the variety of literature is too great. It is at this point that guides are essential.

Bibliographies for retrieval vary as to purpose. Some are designed to encourage reading or purchase; some are provided to give authority to information quoted; yet others aim simply to record the existence of items cited. Bibliographies may be restricted to listing works of a single physical form — books, films, microfilms, manuscripts — or a single literary form — atlases, serials, theses — or they may cover both forms. The subject matter may be limited or universal in scope; the coverage may be retrospective or current; comprehensive or selective. The items listed may be limited to those available at a given point — the library — or not available in the library because they are lost. The style of the list can vary as to arrangement which may be alphabetical by author, title, subject, as to fulness of description of the items listed and as to the physical form of the bibliography itself.

## Lists of books:

All lists of books are only of occasional use in retrieval, valuable though they may be to the lecturer who must recommend books to his students. Reading lists, select bibliographies, literary catalogues, national bibliographies and acquisition lists have their uses but also their limitations which prevent them from being more than a supplementary tool in the information search.

The simplest type of booklist is perhaps the reading list on a given subject, produced by lecturers for their students. The value of a reading list is that it can be intimately attuned to the exact needs of the students.

The catalogue of a library can often serve as a fairly complete list or be

selective, limited to books on a particular subject. The library catalogue is in fact the oldest type of booklist known. The catalogue enhances the value of a bibliography.

#### National bibliographies:

Because of ease of access and also for linguistic reasons, the listing of all publications of a single nation has always been more realistic than world bibliography — though no nation has as yet succeeded in listing its total literary output, even of books alone.

Our library receives regularly the British National Bibliography, British Books in Print and Paperbacks in Print. Unfortunately our library does not receive books by legal deposit, so our catalogue does not act as a national list for books printed locally or received by our library. The value of a national bibliography to the specialist is that it serves as a makeshift list in subjects lacking adequate bibliographic organisation, necessary for verifying references and for additional publication details. The national bibliography serves, therefore, only as a supplementary aid. But it is an essential background for a really complete coverage of books in any subject field.

#### Abstracting and indexing services:

The most important and fortunately the most numerous of the analytic guides, are the abstracting and indexing serials. These are distinguished according to the fullness with which they describe the papers they list. Serials which refer only to title, author and source of each article are simply indexes. Such publications have a long history, and they first appeared in 1683 at Amsterdam. Serials that index current papers have continued and even developed — the latest being computer based indexes to the title of papers.

Usually, however, abstracts are expected to do more than index the items they cite. Some form of summary of the information contained in each citation is required — an abstract which briefly indicates, fully summarises or even even critically assesses this information. Abstracts of this kind first appeared in the beginning of the 19th century. The abridgments took the form of a precis, sometimes running into several pages. The most famous of all abstracting journals is the Chemical Abstracts. There are at present no less than a thousand abstracting and indexing serials published throughout the world. Some are very broad in scope, especially those which cover the whole field of science.