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Public relations work in research libraries

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I Introduction

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Do we need 'public relations' in research libraries? Do we practise it in our daily life? Can we improve it? These are questions which we have discussed and found interesting in the LIBER Working Group on Library Management. Though there are nowadays many experts in this field, we still think that public relation work is a rather neglected subject in many research libraries. This is another reason why it may be worth while to discuss these questions here today.

The concept 'public relations' has been defined by Usherwood as 'the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain understanding between an organisation and its public'. The idea of this concept is old, though the term was not introduced until the end of the nineteenth century and then in a yearbook of railway literature!

Library public relations started in public libraries. It was practised there before the term was introduced into the library world, which happened in the 1930s and then mainly in America. The term did not appear in British and Scandinavian library literature until the 1950s. However, the idea behind the concept of library public relations was known, and this kind of work was carried out, also in European libraries before World War II.

After World War II the concept of public relations was also brought into the research and special library world. In 1958 *Library trends* devoted a whole volume to the topic 'Aspects of library public relations'. In the German language the term 'Büchereiwerbung' or 'Öffentlichkeitsarbeit' was often used for 'public relations'. *Zur Öffentlichkeitsarbeit wissenschaftlicher Bibliotheken* was the title of Sibylle Selbman's book published in 1975, in which she pointed out that public relations work is, or should be, a very important mangement function in all research libraries. This was also our view when the subject was discussed in the Working Group on Library Management. At a time of accelerating growth of library holdings and increasing shortage of funds the motivation for libraries to improve their public relations is getting stronger. Librarians have to market their institutions and to use their resources with a view to making their administrations grant them adequate financial support.

Still, library public relations work is something more than advertising, marketing or 'selling' library. Modern research libraries are sophisticated and complex institutions. To enable these to function a great deal of internal and external information work has to be carried out. This may be done in many ways, such as:

- Internal and external library bulletins and newsletters
- In the field of 'user education': library talks, library tours and other forms of presentation of the library and its resources to individuals and groups
- Different kinds of printed materials, including reports, catalogues, book lists, library guides, picture postcards etc
- Displays and exhibits
- Contacts with news media
- Audio-visual material, such as films, tape-slide presentations etc.

The list could easily be made much longer. It is, however, important to stress that any method used should be introduced at an early stage of library planning, and some kind of evaluation study should also be undertaken to assess the results of the public relations activities.

Although public relations work has been increasingly accepted as an important managing function in research libraries, the subject has nevertheless been rather reglected in practice. This was the background to LIBER's invitation to Mrs Greta Renborg, Senior Lecturer in the Swedish School of Library and Information Sciences, to speak on the subject at the LIBER General Assembly at Nancy last year[1]. Mrs Renborg has also written

an interesting article on library public relations which has been published in the Supplement to the *Encyclopaedia of library and information science* 1980.

The desire of the Working Group on Library Management is to carry on this work on public relations by arranging the present meeting. I am very glad to see you all assembled here, and I am most pleased that we have succeeded in gathering together several experts in the field. Unfortunately Dr Michael Knoche and Monsieur J.-L. Rocher have at the last minute been prevented from coming. Dr Knoche's contribution on the subject of research libraries as reflected in the German press must remain for another occasion[2]. The speakers are therefore as follows:

The paper of *Monsieur J.-L. Rocher,* Conservateur en Chef of the Bibliothèque de la Ville de Lyon, on the public relations of academic libraries in France will be read by Dr Roland Mathys, Vize-Direktor of the Zentralbibliothek Zürich and Secretary of LIBER.

Dr Y A Haase, Director of the Hessische Landes- und Hochschulbibliothek Darmstadt, will speak on public relations in research libraries in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Dr Hans-Albrecht Koch, Stellvertretender Direktor of the Universitätsbibliothek der Freien Universität Berlin and Editor of LIBER *News Sheet,* will speak on information work in research libraries.

REFERENCES

1 Published under the title 'Public relations for research libraries' in LIBER *Bulletin* 14 1980 pp 69—80

2 Dr Knoche's paper has since been received and is published under the title 'Academic and research libraries as reflected in the German daily press' in this issue of LIBER *Bulletin.*