Symposium on Problems of Small Information Groups*

Introductory Remarks

MADELINE B. HENDERSON
National Bureau of Standards, Washington, D. C. 20234

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This Symposium addresses itself to the problems of information groups with three or fewer professionals on the staff. Possible solutions to some of the problems of such groups are presented, as for example, problems of physical storage, distribution, and evaluation of information systems, and cooperation in the establishment and operation of information networks.

In using the phrase "small information group," we do not pretend to have a precise numerical definition, so many volumes on the shelf, or so many people on the staff. But we do have a general sense about the size of the group we are talking to and about. We are thinking of information groups with a staff of three (or fewer) professionals—scientists, engineers, and librarians—and with supporting clerical personnel. However, if there are four professionals, consider this group included. If there is one professional, consider him included too, if he constitutes a staff serving the information needs of others. The problems of the individual scientist and engineer in maintaining his own information resources and filling his own reference needs are a separate subject and outside the scope of this program.

This staff of about three professional people might be a segment within a larger information service—the reports section as contrasted to the library, or the group serving one department of a large diversified company, for example. But this small staff is a distinct group with particular responsibilities and definite problems, to which we address ourselves in this program.

Our general attidude is that the small information group has some problems connected with internally-generated material and other problems connected with the published literature, and that it probably has the additional burden of limited resources of space, staff, and money. We have tried to bring together a sample of approaches to the problems, some based on systems and operations maintained within an organization, and others based on services from outside sources, available now or being established.

Our sample of approaches is neither complete nor very extensive, but we have tried to cover a range from hand-sorted card files to computer-based reference tools. In all cases we have tried to help by discussing primarily the "why" of an operation rather than the "how"—the problem that caused the consideration and adoption of an operation, rather than the details of the operation itself.

The first five papers discuss solutions to problems of duplication, physical storage, manipulation of chemical compound codes, distribution of current published literature, and production of a search tool. The systems discussed in the last two papers are computer-based and represent a particularly helpful concept for the small information group. Such a group might have access to a computer on a part-time or off-hours basis, and can use such access to produce tools or services rather than for storage and search of references directly.

The sixth paper in the symposium describes techniques for evaluation of small information systems. Whether such systems are manual or mechanized or computer-automated, they still need to be assessed. We need to be able to determine whether the system is doing what we wanted it to do, or what it was designed to do, or whether the system's performance is what the users need it to do.

In the group of papers discussing externally-produced tools and services are the obvious sources: Chemical Abstracts Service, the Institute for Scientific Information, and the National Library of Medicine. Another possible solution to problems discussed in this program is that of cooperation in networks of libraries or information systems. Such networks might be industry-oriented or discipline-oriented, they might be voluntarily established or nationally sponsored. In any case, they are designed to aid in the operation of small groups and to tie the small groups to central processing agencies. The last paper discusses such a national network, using the medical libraries as an example.

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