

## A NATIONAL LIBRARY NETWORK

There are about 24,000 U.S. libraries listed in the Bowker "1972-1973 American Library Directory." Of these, 12,000 are public, 3,200 university and college, 1,000 junior college, and the remainder special libraries. Not included are the many thousands of public school libraries, the many thousands of libraries in small towns in the United States, and those libraries which did not respond to the survey.

These thousands of libraries, plus the approximately 2,500 libraries within the federal network, constitute a tremendously important national resource.

Because libraries, especially those in the public domain, are an essential national resource, it is appropriate to take a hard look at the overall system and to determine how it could be changed into a more meaningful, effective, and economical national resource.

Public libraries, like Topsy, just grew. They are products of another time and other needs, and few, if any, are in harmony with today's educational, intellectual, or cultural environment. There is little, if any, coordination among public, high school, college, special, and federal libraries.

That public libraries are anachronistic, in that the major ones tend to be geographically within the center city, where few people live nor wish to be beyond daylight hours and where convenient parking generally is grossly inadequate, may be the weak link in our present library network system. Expansion of the inner city public library with satellite libraries and bookmobiles merely compounds the problem at a relatively high cost.

Whereas the public library has been the backbone of the American library system, it must evolve into a different role for the needs of today and of the future.

The most under-utilized public buildings in our society are those of the public school system. The most neglected libraries in our national library system are those in the public school system. Public schools, especially those constructed over the past 25 years, generally have been located in population centers and have adequate parking facilities (especially after school hours), and the student body and faculty constitute a high proportion of those who need or should be using library facilities.

As I see the picture, the greatest need with the highest priority is to evolve a national library system by which libraries are placed where they can be accessible easily to those who wish to use them. The most obvious step is to place the library within or adjacent to a high school and to organize the library to serve and to be in harmony with both the school population and the surrounding community.

The inherent advantage of the high school/community library concept is the high degree of visibility which the library will have to the potential user population. Such visibility is extremely important if tax money is to be the major financial support of the library. Visibility is also a prime factor in the successful solicitation of gifts and donations. Many public libraries today are experiencing financial problems because they lack visibility to tax payers, politicians, and benefactors.

If the high school/community library concept is viable, then the proper role for the central public library may be as the coordinating mechanism among the high school/community libraries and between them and other libraries, such as college libraries and special libraries within a reasonable geographical area and with federal libraries. An additional role for the central public library may be as a special library for the given geographical area.

The above thoughts were prompted by a letter I received from the chairman of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS). The NCLIS, an independent agency of the executive branch, was established by the 91st Congress on July 20, 1970 (Public Law 91-345). Among its several objectives, NCLIS is to develop overall plans for meeting national library and informational needs and for the coordination of activities at the federal, state, and local levels. Toward this end, NCLIS has been holding regional meetings to gain input from those who use and provide library and information services. On December 31, 1974, President Ford signed Public Law 93-568, authorizing a White House Conference on Library and Information Services to be held no later than 1978 and to be planned and conducted by the NCLIS.

HERMAN SKOLNIK