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A Sense of Mission—Libraries in Wartime—Readings for Perspective
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As a librarian coming to terms with events of recent months, it seemed useful to indulge our natural instinct to do a literature search. How have libraries handled war in the past? How have they served their patrons—for that matter, who have those patrons been? How have libraries contributed to the concerted national effort—if, indeed, they have felt called to do so? What’s different in the circumstances we face now, and what remains unchanged even as the world in which we have faced these periods of conflict has itself changed?

The Library Literature database and the Penn State Libraries OPAC (known as the CAT) yielded some interesting items. A number of these seemed worth the effort to find in the stacks or, in some cases, awaken from their long sleep in the Annex (an off-site long-term storage facility at Penn State). What follows is a meander through some of these items along the path highlighted, in hindsight, by some identifiable threads that ran through them.

Evolution in the Scope of Conflict-Related Issues Over the Years

As the “reach” of information has changed over the years with evolutionary (and revolutionary) developments in the instruments and media of communication, the scope of issues faced by libraries in wartime has changed along with it. This change reflects, in part, a confounding of the definition of “the collection,” a term that every early-twentieth-century librarian could easily have defined clearly and unambiguously.

In the period of the First World War, by sheer numbers, most public libraries were small, local organizations providing access to locally held resources for a constituency in the immediate community. Public reading rooms were a place (often the place) where members of the public came to read and thus were often the primary source of information in these communities. Even though the books, magazines, and newspapers held in the collection were manufactured using industrial methods and technology, their presence in the local library was the result of conscious selection followed by physical procurement and delivery. It’s useful to mention that the newspapers of the early twentieth century were already benefiting from a system of rapid, long-distance communication: the telegraph. Indeed, it is no accident that the word “telegraph” cropped up with some regularity in turn-of-the-century newspaper names, conveying a modern, up-to-the-minute, state-of-the-art approach to newsgathering, akin to modern phrases like “live by satellite.”

United States and the Great War: Neutrality

At the start of what, at the time, was called the Great European War, the United States’ policy was officially one of neutrality, and libraries were ready, even predisposed, to exemplify that neutrality in every aspect of their activities. A comparatively recent and widely referenced book covering the period is Wayne A. Wiegand’s An Active Instrument for Propaganda: The American Public Library During World War I.

Wiegand’s account paints a picture of American public libraries drifting—badly in need of identity, a sense of purpose, and approval from their constituents—when Woodrow Wilson proclaimed American neutrality and asked Americans to remain “impartial in thought as well as in action.” Wiegand’s depiction is one of libraries ready to seize that call as a welcome opportunity to become relevant. For example, he describes the St. Louis Public Library’s Divoli branch providing meeting space for such groups as “… the Arbeiter Ring, the Capmaker’s Union, the Karl Marx Study Club, the Jewish National Workers, the Lithuanian Socialists and a variety of war relief organizations.”

Wiegand relates that some libraries’ efforts to keep their collections “balanced” were confounded by British embargoes that prevented them from obtaining German books through Leipzig. This prompted Matthew Dudgeon, secretary of the Wisconsin Free Library Commission, to write to ALA President Walter Brown and complain, “We are starved for German books in Wisconsin. Do you know anywhere that we could buy, borrow, beg, or steal any new, secondhand, bound or unbound?”

Indeed, the German propaganda machine responded to such demands with great energy, feeding pro-German publications that arrived through the German consulate, then were routed through a German Information Service office in New York and distributed through German-American organizations across the country. Wiegand highlights the work of organizations such as a German Literary Defense committee, sponsored by the German-American Alliance, that distributed 20,000 copies of Burgess’s The Present Crisis in Europe and 10,000 copies of The Truth about Germany.
United States’ Entrance into the Great War: Patriotic Fervor

Wiegand’s fairly scathing portrait of American libraries turns next to the activities of the public libraries after the United States’ entrance into the war. He says the war provided the libraries—caught up in what he terms the “wartime hysteria” and ready to follow the crowd—with the solution to their identity crisis “because they were able to transfer the locus of their authority ... to the easily defined needs of the state.” Wiegand depicts a kind of heyday for the libraries during the eighteen months of America’s involvement in the war: “Never before had they enjoyed such hearty responsibilities; never before had their goals been so clearly articulated, so precisely defined.”

Libraries rode the sea of change that occurred when the United States entered the war and embraced their newly perceived civic mission with the same zealousy they’d brought to their neutrality. Books and materials of uncertain loyalties were removed from shelves in many libraries. Gone were books with recipes for sauerkraut; in their place were publications extolling the virtues of food conservation, the Victory Garden, and recipes for Victory Cabbage. Wiegand calls what he describes as the libraries’ willing participation in censorship “reprehensible” and concludes that librarians “seemed blissfully unaware that many of their actions actually reflected the antithesis of democracy, a form of government they were pledged to support.”

Libraries Extend the Reach of Their Services

During the war, libraries extended their services to another constituency in need: the men and women of the U.S. military. An examination of a 1919 ALA publication titled Books at Work, In the War, During the Armistice and After provides a fascinating glimpse into the ALA’s efforts to carry forward the momentum built up by American libraries during the war effort. It details the ambitious programs undertaken during the war to provide circulating reading material to soldiers at their training camps, sailors on board navy and merchant marine ships, and the Coast Guard at their stations and serving lighthouse duty. The publication concludes with the observation that at war’s end, probably 70 percent of the country’s population had “no access to any adequate collection of books or to a public reading room” and that returning military personnel, “having learned the value of library service while in the Army or Navy, are now asking the American Library Association to lend them the books they need and to assist them in the establishment of local libraries.”

This slender volume concludes on a tone that seems neither insecure nor anxious as to the role of libraries in American life: “Free public libraries exist to make men intelligently moral, intelligently productive and intelligently active in the affairs of community and nation. They must become as universal as free public schools. They are great continuation schools where there are no restrictions of any kind but the energy and ambition of the student.”

The 1930s and ’40s: Impact of New Media

By the time war broke out again in Europe in 1939, the news content in the newspapers physically delivered to the local library reached the publisher by technological means well out of the reach of news organizations of the First World War. Dispatches could arrive in the editor’s office by telephone or Teletype and be relayed across oceans by radio. In addition, people augmented their primary news information sources with the movie newsreel and the radio—media that had come into their own in the years following the Great War.

In a talk titled “New Rivals of the Press: Film and Radio” (part of a series of ten lectures at the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago in spring 1944, published in 1945 as Books and Libraries in Wartime), Harold D. Lasswell, chief of the Experimental Division for Study of Wartime Communication at the Library of Congress, presented examples of how new communications media had changed how people learned of distant events. He observed that in 1776, a messenger, dispatched with urgent news of the first shots of the American rebellion against England, took four days to make the 225-mile trip from Lexington and Concord to New York. By contrast, word of the attack on Pearl Harbor broke in the form of a “flash” message interrupting regularly scheduled radio broadcasts at 2:26 p.m. Eastern Time—approximately an hour and a half after the first bombs fell at 7:55 a.m. local time in Hawaii. Lasswell mentions that it was during that first afternoon that NBC sought and received permission to set up a radio microphone in the White House pressroom for the very first time, with the first live broadcast occurring at 4:10 p.m.

Already in the 1930s, Lasswell points out, Germany beamed propaganda broadcasts to England, ostensibly from the so-called “New British Broadcasting Corporation.” These broadcasts advanced their credibility by taking a restrained, measured approach to the packaging of pro-German content—disguised, for example, in bogus “public survey results” from the equally bogus “Institute of British Opinion,” results that cast doubt on the British government’s war efforts. In short, those who knew how to take advantage of it were exploiting the tendency toward an uncritical acceptance of information sources, especially when that information is delivered over a dazzling new medium. This would appear to parallel the similar tendency (against which high school and college instruc-
itors battle daily) among today’s students to give unreflective credence to material they find on the Internet.

December 7, 1941

If there was a degree of ambivalence among Americans toward the prospect of the United States’ entrance into World War I, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor so galvanized the nation that within a very short time, nearly everyone was focused on the efforts needed to sustain total war. The libraries were no exception. In a 1942 American Library Association publication titled *National Defense and the Public Library*, articles written by librarians in Oregon, Pennsylvania, Colorado, and Indiana detail efforts to respond to the immediate need for rapid and near-continuous access to technical materials, maps, reference books, etc., in support of War Department-coordinated activities in their areas. The book is prefaced in a publisher’s statement with language adopted in December 1941 by the Council of the ALA embodying what it terms “six activities vital to a wartime library program”:

Every library must:
1. Become a War Information Center.
2. Supply technical information to industrial defense workers and students.
3. Disseminate authentic information and sound teachings in the fields of economics, government, history, and international relations.
4. Make available valid interpretations of current facts and events.
5. Help to relieve the strain of war by maintaining its supply of recreational reading for men and women, and especially for children.
6. Help and support postwar planning.  

Pandora’s Box Revisited

On September 11, 2001, most Americans heard of the attacks within minutes and quickly became live witnesses to the day’s unfolding events. People rushed to their televisions or the Internet, both media of global reach, for immediate information. Truth be told, those who turned to radio or TV did better in those first hours than those who joined the throngs swarming to news Web sites, whose servers quickly bogged down under the onslaught. A radio transmitter neither knows nor cares when the number of listeners tuned in suddenly increases by a factor of two or three or ten, a circumstance that can bring a Web server to its knees.

As the initial period of transfixed attention gradually passed and people began to process what they had experienced, many turned to the library for their specific needs. Reference desks responded by assisting patrons in selecting credible background material, pulling out maps, or helping them navigate to online information. The range of available resources is considerable, from sites on Islam (www.islamicity.com, www.al-islam.org) and Afghanistan (www.afghan-web.com) to the FAA’s Travel Briefings page (http://www.faa.gov/apa/traveler.htm) and the State Department’s Travel Warning and Consular Information page (http://travel.state.gov/travel_warnings.html). Even such obvious searches call for a degree of user awareness. A simple Google search on the term “Islam” produces a result set in excess of 3 million Web sites; a search on the terms “state department travel advisories” yields 24,200.

In contrast to 1915, today’s small, local public library enjoys routine access to global communications horsepower vastly more powerful than was available to the Allied generals planning the landing at Normandy, and is harnessed to more computing power than we sent to the moon during the Apollo missions. Such power comes at a price, however. *Library Journal* reported stories in the *Washington Post* and the South Florida *Sun-Sentinel* saying at least one of the September 11 hijackers had been seen using publicly accessible computers at the Delray Beach Public Library to access the Internet. Those who had observed the man reported that he had appeared to be “on edge and wary of being monitored by staff while using the computer.”

We face questions about our roles as builders and guardians of diverse collections relevant to our patrons’ needs—about the evaluative nature of our decisions to select or not to select an item, especially in light of the essentially uncontrollable nature of materials to which we provide electronic access. Does a simple statement of disclaimer get us off the hook when it comes to public Internet access in our libraries? Theater owners don’t leave megaphones hanging on conveniently placed hooks just in case somebody decides to yell, “Fire!”

It’s possible that the sheer reach of the information tools at our disposal has vaulted them ahead—into the lead, at least for the moment—in the eternal contest between technological development and human policy. We race to catch up.

References

2. Ibid., p. 11.
3. Ibid., p. 134.
4. Ibid., p. 135.
5. Ibid., p. 136.
Putting Knowledge to Work –
Special Libraries Association
Annual Conference, June 2002

By the time you receive this issue of the Sci-TechNews, information on the Transportation Division programs for next year’s Annual Conference in Los Angeles will have been submitted to SLA. The planning process began in January of this year at the Winter Meeting, and it continues.

Mark your calendars for these dates: June 8-13, 2002. CU - NLA!
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