THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY
AT HOME AND ABROAD†

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Abstract

The leadership role of the national library is twofold. At home, it undertakes the central role of coordination and innovation: it organizes the various and sundry libraries and related institutions to promote and implement cooperative programs for the common good; and it initiates new projects to test and develop new ideas and new solutions to benefit the profession. Abroad, it serves to represent and give testimony to the nation’s professional commitment, and to be the liaison as well as the advocate for international cooperation.

The task of the national library is a broad one, and at times seemingly varied. Historical factors often condition the specific nature of any particular national library. It would be simplification to assume or insist that a national library would or should focus exclusively on issues clearly defined as national in scope or priority. And the definition of national significance is not easily described. Many a national library in the world today assumes responsibilities above and beyond or in addition to those generally ascribed to the central library of the nation. Large or small, many serve as the public library of the city or region where it is located. And the quality and quantity of the collection

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easily make it the preferred library for academic learning and scholarly research among the schools and colleges in the vicinity. Such ancillary functions of the national library are both 'necessary facts of life' and indeed also useful activities which can benefit the Library and the profession as a whole. A national library that does not engage in day-to-day general library activities may quickly lose touch. A national library is not to be but a 'professional think-tank' lest it become too abstract, or worse, too bureaucratic.

The paper shall also discuss certain major tasks a national library can and should undertake in terms of collection development, technological innovation, and regional, national and international cooperation.

What is a national library? One needs to have some concept of this entity in order to place it in proper perspective within the country, the region, and the world. Many attempts have been made to define it by identifying the characteristics which individual national libraries have in common. Conferences, national and international, have tried to come to grips with a singular, viable definition, but without success. National libraries differ from one another in somewhat the same manner and degree as do university libraries, college libraries, and public libraries. But as Verner W. Clapp, Acting Librarian of Congress at the time, noted in his address before the 8th Conference of the Canadian Library Association in 1953: "The minimum requirements for a national library are that it should be a national institution and that it should attempt to form a comprehensive collection of the national publications; beyond that each national library will create its own personality. Though its personality must be based on its collections, it will not realize its full effectiveness unless these collections are made available through bibliographic services. These, then, form in large measure the determining factor. The library can provide these services without enacting a quid pro quo if it will, or it can, by contract, seek administrative authority to create a system within which there exists a certain unity of
bibliographic effort. Preferably, in our view, such a system should develop not from the hegemony of one institution or from authority imposed on others, but from the cooperative activity of a community seeking similar objectives. The national library, then, should provide more than anything else, the occasion for cooperation.”

Some two decades later an IFLA Colloquium in the on-going struggle to come to some agreement on the subject of a national library decided to identify what a national library does rather than what it is. The fact that the conference could not come to an agreement underlines the fact that there are major differences between national libraries, differences that are brought about by history, relationship with other library developments, governmental responsibilities, and educational or cultural needs. These factors produce a situation today which confirms, indeed emphasizes, the point which Arundell Esdaile, the Secretary of the British Museum, made in 1934 when he said: “Uniformity is not to be expected; the political and social traditions of one country will produce a quite different type of library service from those in another.”

If one looks at the historical development of the hundred or so national libraries, one could divide them into four time categories: pre-1800, the nineteenth century, the twentieth century pre-World War II, and the post 1946 period. The pre-1800 libraries are located mainly in Western Europe and their collections based on royal libraries or, in the case of the British Museum and the Library of Congress, the acquisition of large private libraries. Once established these libraries benefited from the copyright arrangements and, in many cases, from the addition of significant gifts and purchases from other countries. The 19th century witnessed the rise of the national library concept in Latin America with some fifteen countries establishing libraries. The post World War II period saw a concept of national library and their establishment in many African countries.

The role of the national library in a country must be looked
at in relation not only to its formal responsibility to the government of the country, but also to the other libraries in academic, private and local institutions. But before considering the relationship between the national library and the other library organizations and resources in a given country, let us look at the variations in the concept of national library itself. In the foreword to the report of the Unesco Symposium on National Libraries in Europe, held at Vienna in 1958, Pierre Bourgeois, Director of the Bibliothèque Nationale Suisse, wrote that "we still do not know what a national library really is, nor can we name with certainty the qualities a library must possess or the functions it must fulfill in order to be rightly called 'national'.” The summary of this same symposium notes that, in general, "the national library of a country is the one responsible for collecting and conserving the whole of that country’s book production for the benefit of future generations.” Distinct types of national libraries noted in Godfrey Burston’s "National Libraries: an Analysis" (International Library Review, Vol. 5, No. 2, April 1973) include (1) cultural national libraries—the State Libraries of the autonomous Soviets, the constituent republics of Yugoslavia, or the National Library of Scotland, the National Library of Wales; (2) dual purpose libraries—the University State Libraries of Hamburg and Bremen; (3) the national academic libraries—the Helsinki University Library, Oslo University Library, the Croatian National and University Library, Zagreb, and the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem; (4) the national-public libraries—the South African Public Library in Cape Town to 1954, and the State Library in Pretoria to 1964, the libraries in Indian States, Calcutta and Singapore; (5) the national parliamentary libraries—National Diet Library of Japan; (6) national subject libraries—the Scientific and Technical Library of the USSR, the Slovak Central Technical Library, Bratislava, the National Library of Medicine and the National Agricultural Library in the U.S.

From the foregoing we have seen that there is no one single type of library called national, and, in K.W. Humphreys’ paper
at the Rome 1964 IFLA meeting, we see national library activities divided into three categories: fundamental functions, desirable functions, and those which are not necessary functions. In the fundamental category, Mr. Humphreys includes the establishment of the outstanding and central collection of a nation's literature, a system of legal deposit, coverage of foreign literature, the publication of the national bibliography, the establishment of a national bibliographical center, as well as the publication of catalogues and the arrangement of exhibitions. Desirable functions would include inter-library lending, manuscript and archive activities and research on library techniques. On the other hand, Mr. Humphreys would place international exchange service, distribution of duplicates, books for the blind, professional training and assistance on library techniques on his list of services which were not necessary functions of the national library.

Again in 1973, IFLA held a colloquium on the subject of the role of a national library, and decided to identify essential tasks and came up with the following:

Collecting and preserving the nation's literature.
Collecting foreign literature for research and teaching.
Caring for special forms of records such as maps, music, pictures, films, etc.
Maintaining a collection of manuscripts and rare books bearing on the nation's heritage.
Preparing appropriate bibliographic information.
Indexing the national literature and publishing a national bibliography.
Distributing catalogue cards.
Keeping a "national central catalogue".
Controlling the nation's lending services.
Participating in the international exchange of publications.
Providing advisory service to other libraries.
Training the nation's librarians.
Coordinating acquisition policy, documentation projects, and automation at the national level.
Fostering international cooperation at the "supra regional" level.

But objections were raised to each of the proposed elements and only the most general of concepts was agreed to; that "the national library of a country is the one responsible for collecting and conserving the whole of that country's book production for the benefit of future generations." This definition failed to get the approval of many of the librarians in the more recently established national libraries.

That there should be difficulty in getting universal approval for a single ideal concept of a national library is not at all surprising. Indeed one should question the need to continue the search for such a uniform concept instead of concentrating on the role of the national library in individual countries. Each of these libraries must relate to the history of the country, its relationship to not only the governmental structure but also to the country's educational research and social structure. It may also impinge on the region's area and its stage of development.

Placing aside the mammoth national libraries in France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the U.S.S.R., which should be dealt with as special cases, one has only to compare the history and services provided by the older national libraries of Europe—e.g. the Austrian and German libraries of the 16th and 17th centuries—to the Latin American libraries of the 19th and the African libraries of the 20th centuries to see that there are significant differences in concept. The priorities in one country are not necessarily the same as another. This could reflect more a careful identification of what is basically needed at the time rather than a dismissal of other services which another country provides. The older and more solidly established national libraries have a broader range of services and for the most part a substantial level of fiscal support which the newer or struggling
libraries do not enjoy.

A common thread runs through the policy statements of each of the largest national libraries—a depository for all national literature (printed books, manuscripts, prints, drawings). This maintenance of a comprehensive collection—preferably by means of legal deposit for current publications is certainly a priority item in many countries. Even though this concept has been rejected by librarians of some of the developing countries, I feel that short term pressures have been an important factor in their identifying this as a responsibility of state and local universities.

Before further explaining my views on this matter let me identify the seven functions of a national library as reported by Ib Magnussen, Librarian of the Statisbiblioteket Arhus:

1. Collecting national literature
2. Collecting foreign literature
3. Serving as a book museum
4. Giving the public access to the collection
5. Carrying out information service and bibliographical activity
6. Functioning as a training centre
7. Participating in national library planning

These seven topics are broad enough to encompass most, if not all, possible activities of a national library. Now let us look at these topics, not from the point of view of the libraries which have the largest collections, the adequate physical facilities and appropriate staffing, but from the vantage point of libraries struggling to establish short and long term policies, to make up for past deficiencies and to establish their role in the library and research life of the country.

As to number one on Mr. Magnussen’s list established in 1963, we get a confirmation as to its importance in Alexander Wilson’s (Director-General, British Library, Reference Division) 1981 article, “Problems in Determining the Role and Function of
the National Library as Part of Library and Information Science Development”, in which he states: “my own list in defining a national library is one which is legally constituted as such (the Library of Congress being one notable exception) and which maintains:

The national printed archive with the aid of legal deposit;
The national bibliography;
Major research collections of foreign literature;
Official exchange and deposit of publications;
Participation in international bibliographical standards”

The one item on most every commentator’s list, that I would recommend as absolutely necessary, is the collection of national literature. This may be done to a degree in the country’s universities, private or specialized libraries but it will be done selectively, not in the comprehensive, all-inclusive manner which one should expect in the national library. This comprehensive collecting policy is especially crucial in the developing countries. It should include local newspapers (perhaps on microfilm) ephemeral materials, maps, music scores, recordings, etc. While a program of legal deposit can be the source of current material, it would be incumbent on the library to identify any gaps in the retrospective collection of the nation’s publication output and plan a program to fill in these gaps in so far as possible. In fulfilling its role as the country’s guardian of its literary and cultural heritage, rules for library use of materials should be established. Rare and unique items should not circulate, and except for duplicate titles and recent publications, the national collection should be reserved for in-house use.

To cite but two examples of need for collecting and preserving a full range of the literature of a country, I will mention the collecting of American literature since 1890, in the Harvard College Library, and the collecting of children’s literature in the Research Collections of the Boston Public Library. When the
late Howard Mumford Jones was working on his "Guide to American Literature and its Background since 1890", in preparation for his course on American Literature, he wanted to include only the best works. He posed the question:

What is American Literature? Is it composed of the books that critics acclaim; and if so, what critics? Or is it composed of the books that some important part of the population reads? Were we to accept the judgment of one group of critics—only those books which display qualities of style or structure satisfactory to a small and special group of intellectuals, 'sophisticates', academic writers, avant-gardists, or the like, or exhibit the proper qualities of art? Indeed, in any generous or total scheme, even sub-literary work should have its place. Long ago Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. Pointed out the desirability of considering dime novels, adventure stories, sentimental fiction, and other types of books below the literary salt. Fascinating recent studies of best sellers in America merely underline his theorem.

While Mr. Jones' list, which by now has gone through several printings, is not exhaustive, we found, great as the Harvard collections were, a considerable number of the titles of secondary importance to which he wished his students exposed were not in the collection. Many of these titles were long out of print and required considerable effort and cost to acquire. A timely, comprehensive national library would contain these titles and they would be available for all levels of scholarly research. Not many academic or public libraries would have the need to duplicate them, knowing that the national library would have them.

In the case of children's books, the Boston Public Library had acquired down through the years of this century an excellent collection of juvenile titles under the direction of one of the country's outstanding children's librarians, Alice Jordan. These works, not only the copies acquired for circulation but also those which had been added to the central research collection, were loaned for home use. Many were worn out by heavy use and others lost over the years. When it was decided in the late 1960's
to establish a reference collection of children's works, the library was faced with a sizable task to locate and replace a large number of worn or missing copies. In addition, a more comprehensive collecting policy was instituted which increased coverage in this important field. In our country, the importance of children's literature has been given increasing stature in a number of academic institutions as well. Again a national library, which assumed and programmed an effort to comprehensively acquire and preserve publications in this field, would enable a wide variety of institutions to collect selectively according to their specific needs. The quality and the comprehensiveness of the collection of the nation's publications, indeed of its national heritage, would make the national library the preferred library for academic and scholarly research in topics dealing with any aspect of the country's history.

In those cases where the national library has also been given responsibility for academic or public library service, a certain level of duplication must be provided in order to preserve the integrity and maintenance of the country's cultural heritage. Such ancillary functions of the national library are both 'necessary facts of life' and indeed also useful activities which can benefit the library and the profession as a whole. The number of copies to be deposited in the national library can vary greatly from one country to another. In addition to copies for the reference and circulation needs of the national library itself, thoughts should be given to the requirements of an inter-library loan service and an international exchange program.

The national library should also be involved with the publication of the national bibliography and the establishment of a bibliographic reference service. The form in which the national bibliography will appear—printed in weekly issues, cumulated quarterly and annually or provided electronically with the development of the new technology—will vary from country to country. In any event the national library should assume leadership in the development of bibliographic services within the
country and serve as a connecting link with the international library world. This would inevitably involve not only bibliographical control of the current output of publications in the country, but also the establishment of a program of control for its retrospective literature.

Such a program for a national library would cover three of the functions identified by Mr. Magnussen: the collecting of national literature; giving the public access to collections (at least to the nation's publications); and the carrying out of information service and bibliographical activity. These three functions as they relate to a country's publications and services must be provided comprehensively and given top priority on the library's agenda. Then and only then should it turn to the next essential topic—the collecting of foreign literature.

Here, rather than an individual national library attempting to acquire materials in the comprehensive manner that has been recommended as a priority for the country's own publication output, a selective and cooperative plan is suggested. This will vary from country to country depending upon many factors: the established programs of the national library itself; the place of the university libraries in the educational structure; and the presence or absence of special libraries. The quality of any existing public library system will also play a role, indicating the degree to which the national library will need to assume a circulating function.

There will be some areas that the national library will have to consider as part of its responsibility—coverage of the works of international organizations, e.g. the United Nations, or of the significant regional associations. Such holdings are important both from the needs of the government itself but also from the standpoint of research in the fields of international relations and related subjects. Another field that the national library might cover as an important priority is the development of a comprehensive bibliographical collection, for example, the printed catalogs of some of the world's greatest libraries and comprehen-
sive literary or subject bibliographies.

A strong reference collection with world-wide coverage could be a decided asset not only to scholars but to the other libraries in the country. With the rapid development the past decade or two of microforms, and the level of research in the whole field of electronic technology, the national library, particularly in the developing countries, could play a leadership role in acquiring and servicing the important range of research materials now being published in various non-print formats.

Having identified some of the categories for which a national library might assume responsibility, we must turn to the broad topic of coverage of non-national publications. Here, too, priorities need to be established. The wide range and scope of the world's output mitigate against any one library, national, university, or public, from attempting to provide full coverage. Indeed in the United States the Library of Congress leaves the coverage of medicine and agriculture to the National Library of Medicine and the National Agricultural Library; in the United Kingdom we see the British Library with its component parts—reference, lending and bibliographic services, and a research and development department. While it has been suggested that "it would be preferable for the national library to collect all materials from all countries to be made available for loan to any library", this is an unrealistic approach to the role of the national library when one considers just the quantity of the world's annual publication output. This is to say nothing of the quality or of the ability of any one institution to put together or suspoort a staff with sufficient competence to handle this mass of material. Acquisition of this magnitude could not be handled by even the best supported libraries, to say nothing of the many struggling ones.

It is important, therefore, to plan cooperative programs so that the maximum coverage within the fiscal and technical capabilities of the nation's libraries can be achieved. This requires coordination of effort similar to that developed under such
programs as the Farmington Plan, the PL 480 and the National Program of Acquisitions in the United States, and the Scandia Plan in Scandinavia. The American research libraries developed over the years a number of programs which were beneficial in the foreign acquisition field. The Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials, the Archives Library Committee of the African Studies Association and the Library Subcommittee of the Middle East Studies Committee are illustrations.

The expansion of the publication output and the expanding interests of scholarship require that judicious selections be made. This is especially so, because it is not possible for any one institution to do everything. Attainable goals must be established within each national library and a realistic time table be set to meet these goals. Then, with the other libraries in the country, a coordinated program for foreign acquisitions must be established, and built upon the teaching and research needs of the country’s institutions. Only in this way will scholars have access to a wide coverage of scholarly output of other countries. The program suggested should not be a static one but a program that is regularly reviewed, enlarged and refined in the nation’s interest, within the fiscal restraints in place at the time of these periodic reviews.

As to another function identified in Mr. Magnussen’s article, the functioning of the national library as a training centre, I think this is best left to the library schools. The formal library school program should be a postgraduate program and internship activities, either as part of the university’s requirements or as some part time work in a special or academic library, would be beneficial. The role of the national library in library planning is much too complex an issue to discuss at any length here. It deserves a more careful analysis than space or time allows to these considerations.

The heart of a library is its collections. If each national library were to comprehensively collect and provide access to the nation’s cultural heritage, then a planned, coordinated program,
involving the national library and the university and special libraries of the country, should be established to ensure the coverage of world-wide level scholarly collections. Each of the cooperating libraries, in focussing on its clearly defined areas of responsibility, would thereby contribute to an ever expanding national resource. The several institutions would then be devoting themselves, in the words of Oscar Handlin (at a Cornell University Symposium) "not to the mere accumulation of books, but rather to the development and maintenance of collections. Its proper terms of reference are its constituent collections, not the total number of titles or volumes that it may possess."

Libraries have and should play a vital role in the life of the nation. As Verner Clapp reminded us, "that tradition—the ability consciously to retain, recapture and transmit the moment of ecstasy, of revelation and of discovery—is what distinguishes from every other living thing. Libraries are the repositories of man's traditions, and so, in a manner of speaking, of his collective soul . . . . From libraries man comes equipped for his work, armed for his battle, forewarned of his dangers, keen for his explorations, quickened to beauty, extended in sympathy, reverent, awed, informed, refreshed."