

# Current Comments

## The Library of Congress. Part 1. Looking Back

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Most *Current Contents*<sup>®</sup> readers are individuals engaged in research or scholarship. But a substantial number are information scientists and technologists whose job it is to make the task of research maximally productive. This is not always an easy assignment. Nor is it universally appreciated. However, there is one information institution that is almost universally appreciated by scholars and librarians. Indeed, the Library of Congress is a bridge between these two groups and many others in our society.

The Library of Congress, or LC, as it is affectionately called in the trade, is the mecca to librarians throughout the world. Unfortunately, its close association with the legislative branch of the US government, from which it derives so much of its strength, does not impress on the average person that it is *the US national library*. And its image as a national library is further weakened by the existence of the National Library of Medicine and the National Library of Agriculture. These two libraries, in combination with the Science-Technology Division of LC, constitute a national library of science. Most other countries cannot afford the "luxury" of

such decentralization. Canada, for example, has a single national science library. In the USA we have both a pluralistic and mission-oriented system. Almost every department of government runs something akin to a national library or information system.

In this essay I hope to give you a brief glimpse into the life of and rationale for the Library of Congress. In Part 2, I will tell you something about Daniel J. Boorstin, the person who directs this monumental institution.

As a young man, I spent many hours in the New York Public Library at 42nd Street and 5th Avenue in Manhattan. It was like no other building I had ever visited. To this day I feel a special charge of excitement as I walk up and down its marble staircases.

I had the same feeling when I first encountered LC. I was working on the Welch Medical Library Indexing Project at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. I think it was Bob Hayne who told me about their series of free concerts. So one evening I took the train to Washington to hear some chamber music in the Coolidge Auditorium. It was a wonderful experience.

Paul Angle is probably right when he says, "The very heart of the institution" is the "reading room. That should be seen from the visitors' gallery, and at night. Even though one stands at a back-breaking height above the floor, the dome, lined with book stacks and strung with lights, reaches far above; while below, the dark surface of hundreds of desks, in concentric broken circles, gleam with the shaded lights of intent readers."<sup>1</sup>

The main reading room at the Library of Congress is indeed impressive. However, its majesty, reminiscent of the main reading room of the British Library, masks the range of activities of this institution. For this is a complex, huge, and constantly changing organization charged with the dual responsibilities of being Congress' reference library and the defacto US national library.<sup>2</sup>

The Library of Congress is the largest library in the world; only the Lenin State Library in the USSR may rival it in size.<sup>3</sup> As of September 30, 1978, the Library housed some 74 million items including books, newspapers, magazines, microforms, pamphlets, and almost any other kind of media imaginable. Its Congressional Research Service satisfied more than 300,000 inquiries from members of Congress on matters of interest to their constituents or on public policy. In 1978, the LC staff responded to more than 41,000 letters, 58,000 phone calls, and 220,000 requests in person from members of the general public or libraries seeking research and refer-

ence aid. The Library's budget is more than \$150 million and its staff numbers over 5,000 people.

In the space available here I will not attempt to digest the varied opinions of LC's critics and supporters. Perhaps the present and past LC directors themselves have been its strongest critics. Who else could better appreciate the frustration of running an institution which must try to be all things to all persons? But whatever the Library's failings, Congress has continued to expand its responsibilities. Presumably LC does something right.

The Library began with a \$5,000 appropriation from Congress in 1800. The collection was kept in a room in the Capitol building by its first Librarian, John James Beckley, and increased in size until Congress could boast some 3,000 books in its collection. Beckley was succeeded in 1807 by Patrick Magruder. Both were appointed by Thomas Jefferson. In 1814, the British burned the Capitol, and almost all of the volumes were destroyed.<sup>4</sup>

While Congress debated beginning the Library anew, Thomas Jefferson stepped in. The former President offered to sell Congress his complete library of more than 6,000 volumes. Congress accepted the offer and the Jefferson collection became the cornerstone of the Library of Congress. George Watterston, appointed by James Madison, succeeded Magruder in 1815 and supervised the arrival of Jefferson's library. The former president's collection was diverse, containing many volumes in science and litera-

ture, paving the way for the Library to become more than just a reference service to Congress.<sup>4</sup>

By the middle of the nineteenth century the library "had become an institution in which any American concerned with the cultural stature of his country could take pride. It had grown to 50,000 volumes, with a few manuscripts, some valuable maps and charts, and a considerable number of works of patriotic art . . ."<sup>1</sup> During this time, a law library was established by the Librarian, John Silva Meehan. The period was marred however by another fire in 1851, which demolished about half of the original Jefferson collection and destroyed a number of other priceless objects.<sup>5</sup>

Meehan had been appointed by Andrew Jackson in 1829. He served as Librarian through several administrations. But when Republican Abraham Lincoln took office in 1861, the new president replaced Meehan with a political appointee, physician John G. Stephenson. When Stephenson left the Library, Lincoln appointed his successor, Ainsworth Rand Spofford, a former bookseller and reporter, who served until 1897.

After the Civil War, the collection expanded considerably due to the enactment in 1870 of a new comprehensive copyright law. The legislation penalized publishers who did not send a copy of every printed book, pamphlet, map, chart, etc. to the Library's Copyright Office. The penalty was forfeiture of the right to exclusive publication. This almost tripled the collection. Spofford ini-

tiated plans for a new building, separate from the Capitol. That building did not open until 1897.

The transfer of the collection to the new building became the responsibility of John Russell Young, appointed by William McKinley in 1897. Although an able administrator, Young died after serving little more than a year.

In 1899 Herbert Putnam became the first professional librarian appointed to the post of Librarian. "Putnam recognized his opportunity and seized it, quickly applying his general knowledge of library methods to the collections and services of the Library of Congress."<sup>6</sup> In 1901 he instituted an interlibrary loan system, the beginning of the national union catalog, and the distribution of printed catalog cards. He also started publication of the first classification scheme in 1910.

These achievements furthered the place of the Library of Congress as the country's national library. The distribution of printed catalog cards gave small libraries all over the country access to the expert bibliographic service available at LC. The interlibrary loan program provided access to LC's collections by scholars unable to obtain rare works elsewhere. Putnam opened the second building, the Library's annex, now called the Thomas Jefferson Building, in 1937.

Putnam served as Librarian for 40 years. His successor, poet and editor Archibald MacLeish, appointed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, served as Librarian from 1939-1944. He initiated a reorganization to give

the Library "a momentum of its own . . . . The principal difficulty with the old library, from my point of view as the unexpected and unexpected heir, was the fact that the whole fabric depended from the Librarian as the miraculous architecture of the paper wasp hangs from a single anchor."<sup>7</sup> The entire Library had been personally supervised by one man. MacLeish gave the individual departments their independence.

The next librarian was Luther Evans, a political scientist, who took office in 1945 during Harry Truman's administration. Under his direction, the Library helped to rebuild ruined libraries abroad. The congressional research arm of the Library was enriched, enhancing its prestige as a place Congress could turn for information.<sup>8</sup> In 1953 Luther left LC to become director-general of UNESCO.

I met Luther through Verner W. Clapp, the Chief Assistant Librarian, who became acting Librarian from 1953 to 1954. Verner and I became close friends in 1951 through his membership on the Advisory Committee of the Johns Hopkins Indexing Project. Of his service to the Library of Congress one historian has said: "Not only did he administer the Library with the utmost competence . . . he had also for many years, held at the service of his colleagues an unmatched store of information about the operations of the Library."<sup>1</sup> Verner went on to become the first director of the Council of Library Resources (CLR), established by the Ford

Foundation in 1956. Under Verner Clapp, CLR sponsored the first prototypes of selective copying devices.<sup>9</sup> Verner was interested in any type of aid for the scholar, especially portable microform readers.

In 1954, L. Quincy Mumford, former director of the Cleveland Public Library, was appointed Librarian by President Eisenhower. This appointment, like all others, was approved by Congress. Mumford presided during twenty years of unprecedented growth during the most prolific years of the information explosion. The Library was running out of space and so Mumford lobbied for yet a third building to house the collection. By the time Mumford retired, plans for the James Madison Memorial Building were under way. Indeed, it will open next year.

The function of the Library of Congress remains primarily service to members and staff of the House and the Senate. This work is carried out by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), now under the direction of former Maryland Congressman Gilbert Gude. CRS makes experts available to prepare non-partisan analyses of legislative proposals. In 1977, for example, it provided information to congressional committees, support agencies, and members on subjects ranging from civil rights and energy to taxation and women's issues. LC personnel also conducted seminars and workshops for congressional members and their staffs on various issues facing Congress.<sup>10</sup>

CRS has also been involved in providing automated service to

Congress. For example, the library's data retrieval system, maintained by LC's Automated Systems Office, can be accessed by computer terminals located in more than 100 Senate and 150 House offices. CRS provides digests of current congressional bills and also maintains bibliographic files on current periodical articles, congressional and executive documents, United Nations publications, and other significant publications. The Major Issues System (MIS), another automated system, produces background information on issues before Congress.<sup>10</sup> MIS covers topics ranging in scope from containing hospital costs to labor law reform.

LC's law library, currently directed by lawyer/librarian Carleton W. Kenyon, is a national repository of "virtually all published law."<sup>4</sup> With more than 1.5 million volumes, it effectively serves the Congressional Research Service which uses its collections and staff to obtain information on US and foreign law. Available for use by members of the general public as well as Congress, the law library seeks "to develop both historically and geographically comprehensive collections of legal materials."<sup>4</sup>

Despite its array of services for the Congress, libraries, and individuals, most people become acquainted with the Library of Congress through a number that appears in the front of most books. The LC card number is an identifier for librarians and others who wish to order catalog cards for a particular book. LC's "Cataloging in Publica-

tion" program, begun in 1971, allows books to be cataloged while they are in publisher's proof forms. Verner W. Clapp was instrumental in initiating this program through his position at CLR. The program permits complete cataloging information to be included on the back of the book's title page.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, libraries can use the information to catalog the book. The data are also made available by LC on printed cards or, since the mid-sixties, on machine readable tapes. This machine readable cataloging (MARC) project is a major undertaking at the Library. The MARC project was headed for many years by dynamic Henriette Avram, who now heads LC's Network Development Office. The MARC service will continue to expand as its capabilities are enhanced. The rapid changes in technology and in the role of the private information industry have altered the importance of the catalog cards provided by LC. The emergence of OCLC and other online cataloging systems makes the card service essentially obsolete.

In fact, beginning in 1981, the Library of Congress will no longer file the catalog cards it produces in its own massive card catalog.<sup>12</sup> The present card catalog will be "frozen," and readers will have to consult computer terminals for items cataloged from that day forward and for all earlier items that have been entered on MARC tapes. The decision to close the card catalog, announced in early 1975, created a clamor within the library commu-

nity.<sup>13</sup> The Library has expended considerable effort calming that cry, even postponing the event once. Local library administrators mistakenly thought that the Library was abandoning its production of printed catalog cards. The cards will be produced "as long as there is sufficient outside demand to support the service."<sup>10</sup> But the decision to move ahead with computerized catalogs will spur many libraries towards automation.

The Library of Congress also updates and maintains the two major classification schemes used in this country — the Dewey Decimal System and the Library of Congress Classifications. LC subject headings were created during Putnam's regime. I've indicated elsewhere that they might have used a more rational scheme such as the Bliss Classification.<sup>14</sup> But LC had to come up with something because the Dewey System then in use was unsuitable for a collection the size of the Library of Congress. Nevertheless, since many libraries use the Dewey system, the corresponding Dewey numbers are included on most of the cards LC publishes as well as on MARC tapes.

Another important service of the Library of Congress is the maintenance of the National Union Catalog, a catalog of all books published after 1440 held in more than 1100 US and Canadian libraries. The printed version is distributed to libraries throughout the world. It consists of more than 800 volumes and is supplemented each year by

huge volumes arranged by author and subject. This was made possible by photo-offset printing — a miracle in its time. Some clever technology is required to produce it.

While the Library of Congress serves other libraries throughout the country, it also serves the general public. Anyone over 18 years of age may use its facilities.<sup>15</sup> Books at the Library do not circulate to the public (although they do to library staff and to members of Congress). Members of the public must use them in one of the Library's buildings. The collection is wide ranging, with an international flavor befitting a country whose roots are in many nations. Books and magazines in some 468 languages are included in the collection and a special effort is made to secure important foreign works.<sup>3</sup>

LC also operates the National Referral Center (NRC), which directs individuals to federal agencies or other organizations that may have the information needed. The NRC is attached to the Office of LC's Assistant for Research Services.

Of particular interest to scientists is the Science and Technology Division, one of several specialized reference, bibliographic, and referral services offered by the Library. More than three million books in the general collection are on science and technology. If a patron has a query that cannot be answered at a local library, the Science and Technology Division will check its computerized catalogs and other re-

sources. In addition, over 100 prepared bibliographies, updated regularly, are available on science and technology topics.

The cultural activities of the Library of Congress have long demonstrated the cultural diversity of our country. In 1925, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge donated to the Library that auditorium where I first heard the performance of chamber music. Since then the Library has sponsored weekly concerts with such artists as the Juilliard String Quartet and the Philadelphia Woodwind Quintet.

The Library also sponsors a resident consultant in poetry. William Meredith is the present consultant. Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, and William Carlos Williams are a few of the distinguished poets who have served in this post in the past. Poetry readings, lectures, musical and dramatic performances are all a part of LC's life. The Library has also developed major exhibits of its holdings, many of which travel to smaller libraries, for the enjoyment of patrons all over the country.<sup>10</sup>

A major part of LC's work is carried out in the Copyright Office. This department is charged with the responsibilities of receiving printed and other materials, processing copyright registrations, and coping with the records created by more than 15 million copyright registrations. Items are indexed so that "copyright searches can be made; there are cards for the titles of the works and the names of the authors and copyright claimants. The result-

ing catalog contains more than 30,000,000 cards and is open to the public without charge."<sup>4</sup>

In 1976, Congress passed new copyright legislation. One of the principal architects of the legislation was Barbara Ringer, Register of Copyrights, and one of the most dynamic persons I have met in my professional career. In spirit and appearance she reminds me of Margaret Mead. An attorney, she is an able and vigorous guardian of copyright protection for authors. To cope with the new law, Barbara directed a complete reorganization of the Copyright Office.<sup>16</sup> The new law contains provisions for the Copyright Office to handle the licensing of jukeboxes and cable television. The Office set up a new department to handle this licensing. When the law passed, the Office experienced a 25 percent increase in telephone requests for information and clarifications.<sup>10</sup>

Another division of LC is the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. It operates a network of regional libraries offering "talking" books, magazines on tape and records, as well as braille volumes. I once had a special interest in the work of this division. Robert Bray, its former director, and I often discussed new technologies and how they would affect facilities for the handicapped. There were distinct similarities between the Copywriter and reading aids for the blind.<sup>9</sup> These similarities have become more obvious now that modern devices for reading books

by optical character recognition (OCR) have become operational.

In early 1976, the American Folklife Center was established under the Office of the Librarian. Congress felt such a center was necessary to prevent the loss of expressions of folk culture that are handed down from generation to generation orally or through performance. The preservation of these traditional folk cultures becomes more difficult with each passing year. Therefore, the Center employs experts in ethnic and folk art, music, plays, dance, drama, and handicrafts to find and document these cultural forms.<sup>17</sup>

The Library of Congress may soon have the responsibility for developing a National Periodicals Center. I have some familiarity with these problems since I was a member of the NCLIS Task Force on a National Periodicals System.<sup>18</sup> The Task Force report recommended a multi-level program of local, state, and regional library systems responsible for meeting the needs of scholars. A comprehensive collection of periodicals would be established to provide access mainly to thousands of infrequently used current periodicals and a more comprehensive collection of older periodicals. The Center would *back up* existing services and collections. Since LC may hold more low-use periodical titles than any other single library, it seems like a logical choice to run the Center if it will donate these materials. A recently issued report by the Council on Library Resources provided a technical development plan for the Center

that can be used by LC or any other agency that will assume responsibility for it.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, many people have a simplistic view of this problem. What they really want is to imitate the precedent set by the British Library Lending Division at Boston Spa in Yorkshire. Periodical publishers are justifiably concerned about the potential impact of such a centralized operation. However, the CLR document clearly indicates the intention to pay copyright fees.

Clearly, the Library of Congress not only serves Congress but also the nation. Critics have asked if the Library, serving two masters, can serve either of them well.<sup>20</sup> Although unusual, the dual purpose of the Library of Congress is not unique. India and Japan have libraries that serve both the legislatures and the people of those countries. But, as the Library continues its inexorable growth, its role surely needs constant reexamination. This is especially true as new technology and the continuing information explosion may dictate either expanded or contracted roles as the case may be.

In 1975, Congress confirmed the nomination of Daniel J. Boorstin, a historian and Pulitzer Prize winner, to the post of Librarian of Congress.

Recognizing that the Library had indeed arrived at a cross-roads of sorts, Dr. Boorstin formed a task force to help establish new goals and indicate how the Library could better serve its patrons.<sup>21</sup> I will look at the recommendations of that task force and at some of the issues confronting LC and its twelfth Librarian in the next part of this report.

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