

THE JOY OF BACKLOGS

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In all the voluminous literature on librarianship, one topic has been almost entirely ignored, although it is a major feature in most libraries and the most conspicuous one in many. This topic is *library backlogs*, which have been so much accepted as a fact of life that no-one bothers to write about them. It is therefore reassuring to learn that serious interest is being shown at last.

Invitations recently went out to the First International Conference on Library Backlogs, which took place in September 1985. At least, it would have done, but unfortunately invitations went out two years late as a result of backlogs of work among the organisers. However, that the topic is of worldwide interest is shown by the acceptances that have already come in; more are expected when those invited have cleared sufficient of their backlogs to read the invitation.

The conference programme as planned makes interesting reading. The first session was devoted to the Uses of Backlogs. As the speakers would have explained, so far from being an accident of nature, an accumulation that creeps up on librarians unawares like a malignant growth, backlogs serve several valuable purposes and should therefore be retained or extended, in some circumstances at least. Advances include the permanent ability to plead understanding and lack of processing space; job security, in that there is always work waiting to be done, and job satisfaction, in that selection can be made from the backlog of work to suit the tastes of staff; and, perhaps greatest of all, the frustration of readers who have little or no access to recent acquisitions or to staff to whom they wish to turn for help, and the sense of power that this gives librarians.

The second session was entitled An Anatomy of Backlogs. In this, the various types of backlog and their various features would have been described in detail. The best known and most conspicuous type of backlog is the cataloguing backlog, which can lead to vast quantities of books awaiting processing. Since these take up room and almost certainly overflow into other areas, they can also serve as excuses for backlogs of

work in other areas. Almost equally satisfying is the acquisition backlog - books awaiting ordering. This should not grow so large that the cataloguing backlog begins to fall to dangerously low levels; nor should delays be so great that books go out of print, for it obviously depletes the cataloguing backlog when books do not arrive. A careful balance needs to be maintained to ensure optimal levels of both acquisition and cataloguing backlogs. Binding backlogs can also be fruitful of chaos and user frustration. There are of course many other kinds of backlog: all kinds of library work are amenable to backlogs, from the chief's correspondence through inter-library loan requests to routine desk enquiries.

The third session was concerned with an International Overview. One speaker would have proposed an International Inventory of Cataloguing Backlogs, kept on the computer and updated every year to keep pace with whatever movement occurred. Another (European) speaker would have advocated a European Communities approach - the building, with the aid of CEC funding, of a European Cataloguing Backlog Mountain, parallel to the Butter Mountain and the Wine Lake (with either of which it could perhaps be merged). Finally in this session, an International Exchange of Cataloguing Backlogs would have been suggested. This could take place at random since the books would remain inaccessible wherever they were.

These three rather general sessions were followed in the programme by more technical ones. One of these was entitled The Measurement of Backlogs; it was mainly concerned with cataloguing backlogs. One measure suggested was linear metres of shelving occupied, but the second speaker would have opposed this because many backlogs are not shelved; he would have advocated metric tonnes or cubic metres.

Performance Measurement followed. The most obvious measure is net growth, but ideally more sophisticated techniques are needed to measure movement. "Backlog flow analysis" was the title of one paper, which suggested similar methods to those used for the flow of slow moving glaciers. One particularly interesting measure is the ratio of backlog to processed stock, since this would enable libraries of different sizes to be compared; another possible ratio is backlog : intake.

In the Backlog Management and Development session speakers would have considered ways of maintaining and increasing backlogs, for

example by using elaborate processing methods such as putting stamps on pages 11, 22, 44, 55 ..., complex cataloguing rules, and very detailed classification with many analyticals. It might seem at first sight that few libraries have much to learn, but at the least some useful tips would have been passed on. As one speaker would have said, the holding of the conference itself would have contributed to the growth of backlogs (is this the real motive behind the enormous growth of conferences, seminars and workshops in recent years?). The organisation of backlogs so as to make them almost unmanageable has also reached a high level of sophistication - for example, in a good cataloguing backlog books will be untraceable, in a good correspondence backlog, individual letters will be buried, and so on; but here too there is bound to be something more to be learnt.

Backlog Erosion might have been expected to attract less interest, but one of the papers on the programme was unusual. This was by a geneticist who had specialised in breeding large and voracious bookworms and termites (as appropriate to the climate). He believed he had cultivated some new species which could eat through large backlogs in a matter of months. The problem with this solution, as another speaker would have pointed out, is that it is not easy to ensure that the creatures restrict themselves to backlogs. Indeed, in an experiment in one library they ate all the processed stock and half the catalogue over one weekend. In another, they started eating some of the more sedentary staff before they were noticed. However, as yet another speaker would have said, all these supposed problems would have had the effect of increasing backlogs all over the library; a huge cataloguing backlog could be created by ordering vast numbers of replacement books and replacing the last catalogue entries, and staff losses would also have led to greatly increased backlogs. It seems that the geneticist's new breeds would be welcomed only if they were either indiscriminate or could preferably be directed to other things in the library than the backlogs.

In contrast, the session on Enemies of Backlogs would probably have attracted general agreement. The obvious enemies are commonsense, efficiency, and concern with users; and ways of overcoming these handicaps would have been discussed, including the suggestion that staff who continued after warnings to exhibit any of the above hostile characteristics, should be asked to leave (preferably the profession, and not just the library where they were doing damage). The governments of many countries are both enemies of backlogs in that they are cutting

acquisition funds and friends in that they are also cutting staff; with good management, libraries should be able to do more to increase backlogs by having fewer staff than to erode them by a smaller intake.

Finally, a rather lighter note would have been struck. The last session was devoted to Backlog Promotion and Publicity. Examples of some striking posters were given in the programme, incorporating such slogans as BACKLOGS ARE THE BACKBONE OF BIBLIOGRAPHY and BACKLOGS ARE BEAUTIFUL. T-shirts had been designed with I'M BACKING BACKLOGS and MY BACKLOG IS BIGGER THAN YOURS on them. A well-known secondhand dealer, parading under the pseudonym of Bach and Logg, offered a prize for the Biggest Cataloguing Backlog as measured in cubic metres. The prize was to add to it the Second Biggest Cataloguing Backlog, for the transport of which the dealer would have paid. An annual competition to choose Miss Backlog would have been initiated, the winner to be the lady with the most impressive backlog figure.

Details were not forgotten in the organisation. For example, breakfast would have been eaten at lunch, lunch at dinner, and dinner at breakfast, because of backlogs in cooking and washing up. Beds would have been made in the evening, in some cases after the members of the conference had gone to bed. A novel dance was initially planned where the band would have been two numbers behind the dancers, but this was not considered practicable.

All in all, serious discussion of Backlogs seems now to have a real future. We can expect new titles to appear in the literature such as *First steps in backlogging and Fifty years among the backlogs of central Europe*. CONSPECTUS has an obvious application to backlogs, both nationally and internationally.

I must get back to my own backlog, which has been growing while I have been writing this.

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