

Article

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V Academic and research libraries as reflected in the German daily press*

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If one surveys the articles in the literature of the field which have treated the public image of libraries, one comes to the conclusion that libraries suffer less because of a decidedly bad image than because of the fact that their full worth is hardly realized.¹ The complaints of librarians in this respect are clear-sighted and are not confined to specific countries.

But which aspects of library work are in fact perceived? Or to put the question more precisely: which events from the area of academic and research librarianship are considered to be worthy of mention in the daily press in the Federal Republic of Germany; and in what form are they reported?

A study conducted in 1980² attempted to pursue these questions with the objective of being able to make a statement concerning the profile of academic and research libraries so that these libraries could adjust their public relations activities accordingly. The basis of research for this study was the daily press, since it is traditionally the major organ for public relations work and serves as the medium which — seen from the sociological point of view — determines the thematic structure of communication in a specific society.

Methodologically, this study consisted of a content analysis of 326 newspaper articles from the time period from 1 January 1979 to 30 September 1979 which had been collected from the entire selection of German daily newspapers as a project of a professional news-clipping service commissioned by the Deutsche Bibliothek in Frankfurt am Main.

For the purpose of formulating a hypothesis, Jürgen Habermas's theory concerning the historical function of the press in Germany³ was considered and the following speculation was then presented: librarians are not the only group in society which demands comprehensive and adequate representation in the media; they are rather in competition with the numerous, much more powerful commercial, political, and other types of pressure groups. Such private and public institutions use professional public relations measures to achieve a positive 'public opinion' and via their interests thus influence a considerable part of the daily work of the editorial staff. The individual journalist is rarely in the situation to verify information submitted to the newspaper voluntarily and evaluate it competently

before it is presented to the public. Jaenicke designated therefore the contribution of the mass media in forming the public opinion generally as 'multi-sided variations and reinforced repetition of the viewpoints of organized groups'.⁴

From these and other preliminary reflections, the following hypotheses could be formed — or more carefully posed as suppositions to accompany the study:

- (1) In the daily press of the Federal Republic of Germany, the news coverage in the area of academic and research libraries is imbalanced. Articles concerning the nucleus of library work (that is to say, collection development, cataloging and classification, use, cooperation among librarians, etc.) are under-represented in contrast to all other topics from the entire area of librarianship.
- (2) The more confined interest of the newspapers for those areas designated as the nucleus of library work is furthermore apparent to a very small degree in original articles and to a greater degree in articles reprinted from other sources.
- (3) Since the daily press usually gives notice to special occasions where important public institutions are placed in the limelight, it is assumed that within the entire study, reports of library anniversaries, new buildings, and exhibitions make up the majority of the articles.
- (4) The tendency of the daily press to fall back on stereotypes might produce the effect that, in the majority of cases, academic and research libraries are presented in their traditional function as places for the preservation of cultural treasures.
- (5) The marginal character of coverage concerning the entire area of academic and research librarianship within the press is shown in that this subject complex is rarely, if ever, the subject of commentaries, leading articles, editorials, and letters to the editor.
- (6) In public opinion, as it is represented in the daily press, there is no decisive 'opinion' per se on academic and research librarianship. It is expected that especially the num-

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ber of negative points of view on this subject complex will be infinitely small.

(7) The lack of a continuous, active coverage of academic and research librarianship causes the phenomenon that the articles very often contain misleading terminology or an inaccurate picture of the state of affairs within libraries. This, however, refers only to reports concerning the nucleus activities of library work.

As a whole, the results — which were mainly achieved via a subjective analysis and analysis of statements of bias in the articles — came out not as negatively as had been expected in several hypotheses. Hence, one cannot maintain that the daily press in the Federal Republic of Germany reports comprehensively and completely, or critically, concerning academic and research librarianship.

In individual cases it was apparent that the nucleus activities of library work clearly received a lower degree of attention than the other topics from the entire area of academic and research librarianship — namely, in the relationship of approximately one third to two thirds. On the areas of central library activities (for example, circulation, reference services, open stacks, and subject cataloguing), there was not a single article registered in the time period covered in the study. Especially striking in contrast to this was the interest in library collections: handwritten manuscripts, as well as issues of protecting the collection against theft and the restoration of items were given great priority.

On the topic of the nucleus of library work, original articles appeared even more rarely than on all other topics; in contrast, however, reprinted articles treated more often precisely with this topic. Also from this, it was concluded that there was only a limited interest on the part of the newspapers in these specific library areas.

At the same time, the suspicion was proved as unfounded that only very few topics which focussed on special occasions in libraries which were very public-oriented would dominate the articles concerning academic and research librarianship. Reports on library anniversaries, new buildings and exhibitions made up only barely one third of the entire coverage.

The verification of the question as to which function was most often ascribed to academic and research libraries in the articles did not provide conclusive results — for methodological reasons. It can only be maintained with any certainty that, in the majority of the cases, academic and research libraries are not presented with a view to their function as institutions of litera-

ture supply and information brokerage in the daily press. Their individuality in comparison to other cultural establishments, as, for example, archives and museums, is therefore not sufficiently clarified.

The marginal character of coverage in the daily press of the entire subject complex of academic and research librarianship is apparent in the form of the articles in which the topic is rarely, if ever, allowed to be the focal point of leading articles, commentaries, editorials, or letters to the editor. There were not even any interviews recorded in the total compilation of articles surveyed. Corresponding to the fact that editorial treatment of the topic is practically missing, only a small number of negative viewpoints were represented in the articles (about 3%). This was seen as an indicator for the lack of opinion concerning the entire field of academic and research librarianship.

However, it was encouraging to see that in the articles investigated, misleading terminology and an inaccurate picture of the state of affairs in libraries had not occurred in the frequency which had been expected. This could, however, also be a sign for the heavy use of publicity materials which are made available to the newspapers by libraries and professional associations.

Academic and research librarianship therefore only figures at the outside edge of cultural and local coverage. Whenever it was considered at all, other topics than precisely the nucleus of library work stood in the foreground. More often than not, a stronger interest in issues of the library collection was demonstrated rather than interest in problems of use. Corresponding to this accentuation, an uncritical satisfaction with the work of academic and research libraries predominated. It seemed unproblematic and not worthy of making a great deal of fuss about.

In the individual regions with a library which actively participates in community affairs and where an avid interest on the part of the local press exists, a more favorable picture results even today as compared to the rather negative impression from the overall situation. This phenomenon, which could not be systematically analysed in this study, provides the basis for hope that the present condition can be changed with time. This, however, can only be achieved with the concept of public relations work¹ which does not propose to try to bias the consumer as in the case of advertising for marketable items, but rather to include the libraries themselves in the lively exchange of opinions with appropriate persons and groups. Only in this way could a new understanding of the social significance of academic and

research libraries take place through which the problem of a poor image in the press coverage could really be dealt with.

Without making it a specific objective of this study, several conclusions could be drawn from the results of the study which are relevant for the current emphasis on public relations activities of the academic and research libraries:

- Academic and research libraries should not only attract the interest of the public upon special occasions such as library anniversaries, new buildings, and exhibitions, but rather specially attempt to place the nucleus of library-oriented activities in the foreground.
- They should focus more attention on their functions as institutions for the provision of literature and information brokerage. If the traditionally one-sided fixation on the 'precious collections' cannot be broken through, a new image for libraries in contrast to other cultural institutions will succeed only with great difficulty.
- They themselves should not instigate issues and questions on the security of the library collections and their preservation to any great degree.
- They should not, however, hesitate to make library terminology and the state of library affairs more understandable through clear explanations.
- They should present controversial problems relating to libraries to the public and challenge an expression of view-

points. Certain decisions regarding libraries require not only the understanding of the librarian.

- They should make clear the political and economic effects of their work within the publicity information provided to the public inasmuch as it is possible in the specific cases.

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- 3 Jürgen Habermas: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*. Neuwied 1962.
- 4 Heinz D. Jaenicke: 'Papier-Seelsorge'. In: *Manipulation der Meinungsbildung*, ed. by Ralf Zoll, 3rd ed., Opladen 1972, p. 169.