

WHAT DO THEY NEED TO KNOW? FEDERAL GOVERNMENT INFORMATION FOR  
THE PUBLIC ON TELIDON

SUSAN KLEMENT  
Information Resources  
Toronto

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The Public on Telidon

"Gracious," I thought to myself when I first received the assignment to write this report, "What an easy request!" But the more I thought about the question of what people want to know from their federal government, the more difficult the task became. I decided to approach the problem by first putting the question to various people in my vicinity, Toronto, who are receiving queries from the public. I asked the staffs of libraries, information centres, constituency offices, and government offices just what members of the public are asking about. I have arranged the replies in rather rough and ready categories at the end of this report. What follows are my reactions to my informal survey.

The response that one hears over and over again in a survey of this sort is that the public puts questions about everything under the sun to everybody under the sun. Very few people seem to have any concept of the division of jurisdictions, either between departments or between governments. This is not new information. Both the 1969 report of the Task Force on Government Information<sup>1</sup> and the 1975 study of the Law Reform Commission of Canada, Access to the Law<sup>2</sup> reported this phenomenon very clearly. But the matter is of considerable importance to a system designed as Telidon is. If people have to designate the category, federal government information, they won't find what they want if they think it is within provincial jurisdiction. If they have to specify a department of the government, they will not have much luck if they have no clue whatsoever as to which department is in charge of the matter that concerns them.

<sup>1</sup>To Know and Be Known; The Report of the Task Force on Government Information (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1969).

<sup>2</sup>Friedland, M.L., Access to the Law (Toronto: Carswell/Methuen, n.d.).

The Better Business Bureau reported that people called to ask them to solve their marital difficulties. The Toronto Star said that a telephone caller asking to speak to the "Supreme Allied Commander" was not an uncommon phenomenon. The Toronto Citizenship office gave, as examples of the queries it receives, "What do I do about the garbage that has been dumped on my front lawn?" and "What shots do I need to give my dog?" When I asked whether the inquiry officer had any idea why people were putting these questions to her department she said yes, it was because people felt that, since they were citizens, they could get what they needed from that department. I asked my nine year-old nephew what he thought the Citizenship office did and he said, "Help citizens." It would seem that many people have the mentality of a nine year-old.

People call the Justice Department because they expect justice in Canada. They call the provincial government because Ottawa is in Ontario. They call the Passport Office with employment problems because the Passport Office's telephone number has the words "General Inquiries" in front of it in the blue pages of the telephone book. Both Toronto's and Scarborough's municipal offices receive immigration inquiries because city hall is in charge of everything--it must be because "you can't fight city hall". Or perhaps the reason they receive these calls is that people feel more comfortable with their local officials. However, there are some people who call any telephone number they can find when the one they want is constantly busy. Frustration, not logic, governs their actions.

My respondents frequently told me that 40 percent of their calls were, in their opinion, misdirected. Does this mean that 60 percent of the callers knew how to find what they wanted? No, it doesn't. In all likelihood, a sizable portion of that 60 percent had made one or more unsuccessful attempts before being directed to make the appropriate call. While most of the telephone inquiry officers despair over the logic,

or lack of it, that the public displays, one has to credit people with some intelligence. In fact, the procedure they use is remarkably efficient when you consider that they often have no idea at all about where to turn. After two or three or six telephone calls, they will usually be referred to the appropriate department.

Because my company's name, Information Resources, appears in the white pages of the telephone book under the word 'information', I too, receive my share of questions. These range from "How many miles is it to Kitchener?" to "Are people more warm-blooded in cold climates". The calls come despite the fact that I have purposely not used bold type for my listing. And some of them come at two o'clock in the morning. I can refer my callers to appropriate sources of information, if I'm reasonably conscious, but I wonder whether a more or less random pushing of Telidon buttons will accomplish that end for the searchers.

Although I am sure that I have made my point, I cannot resist giving a couple more rather telling examples. One provincial government librarian of my acquaintance told me that members of her own family can never remember whether she works for the province or the federal government. But it is not only members of the public who are confused about jurisdiction. Many of my respondents answered my query about the questions they receive which relate to the federal government by citing provincial government matters. If they are confused, so are we all.

There are other reasons for confusion. Not only do people not know who is in charge of certain programmes, they do not know what the programmes are called. This is particularly true when names have been changed. Members of the public still ask about the baby bonus and everyone, including government departments themselves, after more than a year and a half, still cannot remember that CMHC's name has been changed to Canada

Mortgage and Housing.<sup>1</sup>

What is the solution to these problems? I think it will be necessary to integrate the governmental information from all jurisdictions. If this is not possible, it will be critical, at least, to include frequent--very frequent--references to other data bases that can be searched. However, regardless of where, or how often, these cross references are made, we must expect a high percentage of Telidon users to get lost.

Second, I feel strongly that there must be an index to supplement the tree structure. However, I realize that, until it becomes possible for users to punch in their own search terms at a keyboard terminal, such an index will offer little help. If many people are unable to use a telephone directory, how much less likely is it that they will be able to use an index? We must remember that the lines and lines of print in an index would not be well suited to a Telidon screen. As every reference librarian knows, and as many of my respondents remarked, people's stated queries often bear little resemblance to their actual needs. The index will, therefore, have to be a model of expert and careful preparation. Even after it becomes possible to use a keyboard for input, we must expect that the system will be difficult for many people to use.

In many cases, people approach help givers with situations rather than with subject-specific requests. They say, "I am a widow under 65. What services are available to me?" or "My mother can't live alone any more. What can I do?" Perhaps Telidon is not the right avenue to pursue if one wants to deal with such requests but it may be that a high percentage of problems are posed in this manner. In such cases, the assistance of an intermediary may be essential. Indeed, many of my respondents suggested that the primary thing for many people

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Supply and Services Canada's Weekly Bulletin of Business Opportunities, VIII, ii for the week ending January 16, 1981, p. 1.

is not the information actually sought but, rather, the person of the help-giver.

Some people want a sympathetic ear to listen to their troubles with bureaucracy, others need reassurance that what they are doing is correct, while still others are simply lonely. One community information centre staff person estimated that 60 percent of her 7,000 annual clients came because they were reluctant to use the telephone themselves. It may be that some of these people would be more comfortable pushing Telidon buttons. Then again, it may not.

At least one of the questions which, according to my informal survey, is very frequently asked, would be difficult to put into the Telidon tree structure format. If one were to examine the questions from this point of view, one would undoubtedly find other examples but let this question serve. It is, "Who is my MP?" We definitely cannot assume that people will know the name of their riding or even the fact that the federal and provincial ridings have different boundaries. It would, therefore, be necessary, I assume, to answer this question by presenting successively more detailed maps until the user spots his or her own neighbourhood. Since riding boundaries sometimes divide streets, there will still be some confusion, the more so if the user is not a good map-reader.

One Telidon expert assured me that such a question would pose no problems in the future since terminals would automatically identify their users. How users will respond to the fact that it would clearly be a simple matter to compile a list of the questions they posed last month I leave to other writers.

One of the difficulties involved in a number of other frequent information queries is the amount of written material that would have to appear on the Telidon screen to answer the request. One librarian I spoke to said that it would be "very

important" to include access to the Criminal Code of Canada, a document that other librarians reported to be in frequent demand. (In fact, I understand that copies are often stolen. Perhaps the irony escapes the thieves.) My respondent had seen Telidon demonstrations and was also aware that QL Systems is experiencing difficulty in selling statute searching to lawyers on its more sophisticated system. Nevertheless, he urged that the full text of the Code be available.

Other librarians also suggested that the texts of statutes and reports be available on the system. I cannot agree. Perhaps it would be possible to respond to the needs that prompt these suggestions by including summaries of the important points and directions for obtaining more information. A study of CCH publications or self-help manuals might assist in determining exactly which points to include.

Several respondents, librarians and others, urged that a federal counterpart to the KWIC Index to the Government of Ontario be available on Telidon. This index briefly describes the function of virtually every branch of every ministry and agency of the province and gives addresses and telephone numbers. The 1981 edition has been considerably revised to include more thorough indexing, more addresses of field offices, and a clearer depiction of the organizational structure of the government. Interestingly enough, the staff person in charge, David Carmichael, was planning to load the index onto the Telidon system but now believes it to be unsuitable for the Telidon format. Perhaps it would be helpful to have even a printed federal version.

Until now in this paper, I have been assuming that the federal government material that will be available on Telidon will answer specific requests for information rather than more general needs. It is possible to view the system as more of an educational tool than a means of obtaining answers to individual questions. Education and information are often, I grant you,



similar and overlapping concepts but one can separate them. To give an example, Telidon could provide general coverage on such matters as safety in the home or what one needs to know in order to prepare a household budget. It may be that people will request these more frequently than lists of plants whose leaves are poisonous or details from the consumer price index. Actual usage will provide statistics on this question but, until then, I tend to suspect that more people would prefer to obtain their education through other media and methods.

If one regards Telidon as primarily a question-answering system (leaving aside such other applications as teleshopping, meter monitoring, or whatever) there remain numerous details to be settled. One issue that I would not have posed myself is that of the language in which the information ought to be presented. Two or three respondents, including Elizabeth Wray, the Executive Director of the Community Information Centre of Metropolitan Toronto, said that they believed it to be important to present information in a variety of foreign languages. They felt that, to do justice in our democratic society, the system would have to reflect our multicultural society accurately. They argued that many non-English speakers have few means of obtaining information. Presenting the material on Telidon would be cheaper than printing and distributing paper copies in many languages.

I put this matter to several people in my informal survey. The Programming Director of Multilingual Television Toronto Ltd., which operates Channel 47, Farouk Mohammed, thought that the majority in some ethnic groups, such as Spanish-speaking or Vietnamese, would find the price of the system too high while many among other groups such as Germans, Italians, and Poles, would not. He felt that, while the person earning the money to pay for the system might be comfortable in English, other family members might not be. Such people would use the system both for information and for entertainment.

An outspoken opponent of this view was Robert Kozlowski, the director of Problem Central Information Agency which serves many immigrants. He doubts that members of ethnic communities would use the system. Most of them, he stated, are very immersed in the work ethic, through inclination and necessity. In their few leisure hours, they are family-oriented and too tired to do much beyond work in the garden or seek entertainment in sports or television. They would not allocate their limited time or money resources to Telidon.

Joan Milling of York Community Services, believes that only the English speaking middle-class members of ethnic groups would be likely to use the system. She pointed out that many immigrants come from countries which have an oral tradition and they feel more comfortable obtaining information in person rather than from printed materials. Anne McDonagh, a teacher of English as a second language, suggested that if immigrants were going to use the system at all, they would use it in English, if that were all that were available, because people will go to considerable lengths to do something if they perceive it a being in their best interests.

I agree that everything on the system should be available in every language--just as I think that no one should be poor in a just society. Reality rearranges our priorities. The costs and problems involved in making information available in English (and French?) will be quite sufficient for the foreseeable future. I would not expect non-English speakers to comprise a significant percentage of potential users. Once the system is operating well in all respects, its designers could turn to the problems of serving the foreign-language market. Perhaps one method of bridging the gap in the interim would be to purchase appropriate programs from other countries; Canadian federal government information would not, of course, be available in this way.

I have suggested that non-English speakers are unlikely to

be among potential Telidon users in any great numbers. Well, who are the users likely to be? This is not the primary subject of this paper but it is a question which must be answered before one can decide what information the government should make available. For the most part, I shall leave the matter to others--the field trials may provide some clues--but I shall make some comments.

Is it likely that people who are unable to fill in simple forms will have the ability to obtain what they are seeking on Telidon? We cannot assume that such people are all members of the lower socio-economic classes (certainly not if one reads reports of the literacy levels of university students) but I would doubt that people in those groups would be very likely to choose to spend their limited disposable income to have Telidon in their homes. Again, we cannot assume that people who have queries about unemployment insurance or manpower problems would not be potential users but the likelihood is that few of them would be frequent paying customers. Does this mean that the system should not contain information on UIC or telephone numbers that one can obtain through the blue pages of the telephone directory?

This question is a difficult one. If the designers of the system chose to exclude information on the grounds that those requiring it were unlikely to be users, they would be accused of withholding critical information from those most in need of it. In addition, they might be ensuring that certain groups would not become users since they would find little of what concerned them in the data banks. Perhaps the solution to this dilemma--and to some of the problems involved in finding just what one is looking for which I discussed earlier--is to direct the information on such subjects not to the ultimate consumers of it but to the intermediaries. These intermediaries include librarians, community information centre staff members, social workers, police officers, and even government employees.

For those people who bypass the linking agencies and experience difficulty in finding what they want on Telidon there must be frequent referrals to intermediaries and to government departments. That is, the system must supply addresses and telephone numbers, not only at the end of each segment, but at whatever point the user is likely to give up in frustration, which could be anywhere. Such a service could be more than just a "for further information, contact..." referral but a function similar to that offered by the action desks of computer data base vendors. It would not surprise me if this Telidon action desk became enormously popular.

If there is any thought that Telidon will reduce the number of queries for government information and thus reduce the workload of information officers throughout the land, I must warn that I would not expect this to be the case. First, many people will experience difficulty with the system or will have queries for which the system will provide insufficient or even no answers. Second, many demands for federal government information are now being answered by some other type of agency. Telidon's service might encourage people to turn to the proper source of the answer. Third, many federal government telephone lines ring busy almost non-stop, as I can testify after my survey. Thus the current totals are not indicative of the demand. And fourth, Telidon will, itself, create a greater demand for information by educating more people to the value of information. It will show that there is a greater diversity of resources than many of us were previously aware of.

A Telidon action desk will probably be unable to handle the demand. The community information centres and citizens inquiry bureaus will continue to assist but there aren't enough of them; those that do exist do not have the staff or budgets to cope with their workloads. What is needed is an agency(ies) with offices throughout the country funded by all levels of government. While it may be naive to make such a recommendation I would be remiss if I left the impression that I thought that

Telidon alone will answer the need for federal government information.

Well, I have not yet answered the question as to who I think the Telidon users will be. I cannot give a complete answer but, doubtless, many of them will be members of the middle classes, business people and students. It may be that the rural and small town populations will be over-represented since they have fewer resources to tap now. The more financially secure senior citizens and disabled persons may also welcome additional links to society.

Neither these speculations nor the recommendations I make in the pages that follow will settle the question of what to offer on the system. Indeed, even the field trials may be misleading since what interests people when it is free of charge may be very different from what they request when price tags are attached. The trials will also be unlikely to discriminate sufficiently between interest in the content of the data versus interest in the system itself. People's demands now, while they are impressed with the novelty of the system will differ from their concerns when they become more sophisticated and blase. Furthermore, selections from a limited offering will likely not resemble those made from a more extended menu.

So, what federal government information should the system offer? The suggestion from the respondents to my survey that I found most helpful came from David Carmichael, the Director of the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation's Citizen's Information Branch. He recommends forgetting, for the time being, the question of what people want to know. Rather, we should ask each government department what it wants to tell the people. Of that total, each should select those items that are most suitable for effective Telidon presentation. I agree.

But--there is always a but--telling people what the gov-

ernment wants them to know is dangerously close to issuing propaganda. However, it is impossible to be non-political or to avoid politically sensitive issues. Including information on abortion or divorce, for example, may upset some Canadians; excluding it may upset others. The departments should be guided by their own knowledge of their public's actual needs. And they should pay close attention to user responses. A feedback mechanism must be built into the field trials and into the system itself.

It will be necessary, in the beginning, to interest people in the system and this can best be done with effective presentation. This does not mean that the content is secondary, only that the content of the data will be less important in the beginning than it will be later on. Telidon has enormous potential, potential which will never be realized if the public is uninterested. We must first attract users. Then, and only then, can Telidon satisfy their needs for information.

SURVEY OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT INFORMATION NEEDS OF THE PUBLIC

The points that follow, arranged in rough and ready categories, indicate the most useful suggestions I garnered from my respondents. Those items that were mentioned frequently have been marked with a # sign. The ones which were referred to most often are marked ##. I have attached an asterisk (\*) to those items which I, myself, regard as particularly suitable for Telidon. The first category, called Questions, suggests types of information that people require; these questions could, obviously, apply to many of the items listed in the subject categories.

QUESTIONS

- what are the eligibility requirements?
- how do I register?
- where do I get forms?
- how do I complete the forms?
- what information am I required to send?
- what documents am I required to send? are photocopies permissible?
- how long does the procedure take?
- what are the procedures? can I see the procedures manual?
- why was my claim disallowed?
- how do I complain?
- can I appeal? how?
- how do I trace lost cheques?
- how do I replace lost documents?
- how do I report a change of address?
- who is the best person to speak to?
- who is in charge?
- what is the address?
- what is the telephone number?

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

- ## - who is my MP?
- # - how can I contact my MP?
- what riding am I in?
- ## - immigration
- ## - citizenship, including the questions on the test
- the rights of a citizen
- # - passports
- Social Insurance Cards
- who is the Minister?
- who is the Deputy Minister?
- internal federal government organization charts
- # - the federal government telephone directory
- # - a federal counterpart to the KWIC Index to the Government of Ontario
- where is the closest local federal government office?
- how do I get a job with the government?
- Canadian representatives abroad
- \*# - party policies on particular issues
- \*# - MPs' policies on particular issues
- \* - statements made by Ministers, MPs, etc.
- \* - government press releases
- # - where to see and/or obtain government publications including bills, statutes, regulations, royal commission reports, maps, annual reports
- where to write for input into commissions
- \* - new government programs
- \* - summaries of bills and acts

BUSINESS

- for what does one need a license?
- # - customs and excise taxes
- allowances for small businesses
- starting a business



- # - assistance; loans and grants
- markets abroad
- Canadian markets
- how to incorporate
- bankruptcy
- private company records

#### CONSUMER ISSUES

- automobile recalls; what problems have been dealt with?
- fuel consumption rates for automobiles
- metric conversion
- radio and television interference
- radio licensing
- prepurchase information for various types of purchases
- budgeting
- safety in the home
- packaging and labelling requirements
- packaging--insufficient quantity
- advertising--what is permitted?
- # - product safety--particularly for children's toys, car seats, cribs, playpens, hair dryers
- which brands meet requirements?
- lists of firms convicted of misleading advertising
- food complaints--foreign matter, discolouration, off-taste, off-smell
- # - guidelines for insulation values
- how to have houses tested for heat loss
- postal information--causes of delays; how to trace lost mail; postal codes; postal rates; branch locations and hours; insurance; postal standards for envelopes, parcels; business services offered such as Telepost and Intelpost; new issues of stamps
- tourist information for planning holidays
- Parks Canada
- transporting drugs across the border

- transporting animals across the border
- road conditions
- small boat registration
- pilot licenses
- air charter flights; complaints
- how to make train reservations
- train, plane, bus, ferry timetables

#### CRIME

- bail
- parole
- sentences imposed for various crimes
- erasing a criminal record

#### ECONOMIC ISSUES

- ## - manpower and employment--statistics; wage rates; strikes and lockouts; industrial accidents; employment standards; minimum wages; how to get manpower training; what sorts of jobs will be in demand; how to get a job
- \* - budget highlights
  - regional disparities
  - government spending
- # - cost of living; consumer price index
  - rate of inflation
  - prime interest rates
- # - census data

#### ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

- ## - the energy crisis
- # - acid rain

- conservation
- weather; what is a cold front; what is the humidity index; surviving cold; what is the forecast (for several days ahead, for specific purposes, etc.)

### HEALTH

- # - food additives
- drugs; side effects; safety
- medical devices--X ray machines, sun lamps
- lead in kettles
- microwave ovens
- video display terminals
- asbestos in hair dryers
- cosmetics--what's in them
- nutrition
- smoking
- fitness
- infant formula
- # - insulation dangers

### HOUSING

- house plans
- grants
- where and how to get accommodation
- house financing
- amortization tables
- how to buy a home; home selection
- rehabilitation of housing
- how to read a lease
- ## - insulation
- conversion from oil to gas

LAW

- # - the Criminal Code
  - rape
  - child abuse
- # - drugs
  - divorce
  - abortion
  - wills and estates
  - immigration
  - business corporations
  - income tax
  - customs

MONEY

- ## - Old Age Security
- ## - Canada Pension
- ## - Family Allowance
- ## - Unemployment Insurance
  - Department of Veterans Affairs pensions
- # - federal funding for community groups
  - assistance for those unable to renew mortgages
- ## - CHIP
  - government bonds
  - housing grants
- ## - income tax; personal exemptions; moving expenses; rental income; income tax and the senior citizen; capital gains; child exemptions; refunds; filling in those forms
  - RRSPs
  - annuities

POLITICAL ISSUES

- regionalism vs federalism
- history of confederation
- # - the constitution
- biographies of prime ministers
- provincial capitals
- human rights
- \* - election issues
- \* - current events; names in the news

SOCIAL ISSUES

- euthanasia
- capital punishment
- abortion
- \* - special year information, e.g., year of the disabled

INDIVIDUALS OR DEPARTMENTS CONSULTED IN THE INFORMAL SURVEY

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Canada Mortgage and Housing

Consumer and Corporate Affairs, Kay Williams, Regional Manager,  
Consumer Services

Department of Communications

Department of Health, Health Protection Branch

Industry Trade and Commerce, Business Information Centre

Justice

Post Office

Revenue Canada

Secretary of State, Citizenship Office

Statistics Canada, Ottawa, Andy Billingsley

Transport Canada, Dean Smith, Public Affairs (formerly with In-  
formation Canada)

PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT (Ontario)

Ministry of Agriculture

Ministry of Community and Social Services

Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations, Consumer Infor-  
mation Centre, Stella Cohen

Ministry of Culture and Recreation, Citizen's Inquiry Branch,

Marna Snitman, Coordinator, Ann Kemp, Jackie Van Veen;

Information Access, David Carmichael, Director, Nuzhat Jaffri,

Information Access, London

Ministry of the Environment

Ministry of Health

Ministry of Labour

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

City of Toronto, Public Information & Communications Services

Scarborough Resource Centre, David Hawkins, Manager

Metropolitan Toronto Police

CONSTITUENCY ASSISTANTS to

Broadview-Greenwood, Bob Rae  
Rosedale, David Crombie  
St. Paul's, John Roberts

COMMUNITY INFORMATION CENTRES AND REFERRAL AGENCIES

Bloor Bathurst Information Centre, Aletha Shirtliff  
Community Information Centre of Metropolitan Toronto, Elizabeth  
Wray, Executive Director  
Link Community Information Service  
Neighbourhood Information Post, Cindy Wilkie  
Problem Central, Robert Kozlowski, Director  
York Community Services, Joan Milling

LIBRARIES

Brampton Public Library, Gangadhar Deshpande  
East York Public Library, Leaside Branch, Pat Goodfellow  
Etobicoke Public Library, Richview Branch, Mary Flannagan;  
Albion Branch, Gloria Andrews  
Metropolitan Toronto Library Board, Business Department,  
Pat Dye, Karen Melville; General Information Centre, Anne  
Mack; Social Science Department, Robert Gardner (now with  
the Legislative Library)  
North York Public Library, Bathurst Heights Branch, Philip  
Singer; Central Branch, Allen Baker; Fairview Branch, Calley  
Stacey  
Toronto Public Library, Forest Hill Branch; Northern District  
Branch, Stephen Lee; Parkdale Branch; Parliament Street  
Branch, Keith Stratton  
Scarborough Public Library, Albert Campbell Branch, Derek  
Quinn; Cedarbrae Branch, Susan Rickwood

OTHERS

Better Business Bureau, Paul Tuz, Director  
Civil Liberties Association, Alan Borovoy, General Counsel  
Infomart, Susan Collins, Manager, Videotext Design  
Linda Jewett, law student, former business librarian, collaborator in Access to the Law  
Jewish Information Centre, Joel Verdun, Director  
Legal Aid, Jay Waterman, lawyer  
John Marshall, Professor, Faculty of Library Science  
Ann McDonagh, teacher of English as a second language  
Multilingual Television Toronto Ltd., Farouk Mohammed, Programming Director  
Ontario Educational Communications Authority, John Syrett, Project Manager, Telidon Education Project  
Toronto Star, Bill Campbell, Public Affairs

Note: In selecting my respondents, I attempted to talk to those who deal with the areas which I thought would be most often in demand. I selected libraries and information centres with an eye to a balanced sample of urban, suburban, rich and poor neighbourhoods. I have recorded the names of those I talked to if I thought this would be helpful. Where names are not given, I talked to the most appropriate person I could find, usually an information, public affairs, education, or communications officer or, in the case of the libraries, a reference librarian or branch head.