Grey Literature Past and Present:
The Evolution of Library Annual Reports

Susan E. Searing
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA
searing@illinois.edu

Introduction

Librarianship was professionalized in the late nineteenth century, when university-level programs of study were established to train librarians in the United States.   As the field of library management developed, the annual report became a vehicle for communicating the library's mission and accomplishments to its stakeholders, including funders (both private and governmental) and the general public. Writing and reading annual reports also allowed librarians to share professional knowledge and to benefit from each others' experience. Today, library historians and local history researchers can discover in rich veins of source material in annual report series that may date back a hundred years or more.

Many American libraries still produce reports every year. Today's reports are different in form and content from their ancestors and are just one means among many that librarians now use to communicate with library users, donors, and government officials. Nonetheless, this genre of grey literature is worthy of collection and preservation.

The annual report is a genre rooted in the world of commerce:

> A printed publication, usually less than 100 pages in length, submitted each year
> by the officers of a publicly held company to its board of directors (or other
> governing body) and issued in softcover for distribution to current and
> prospective shareholders, describing the firm's activities during the preceding
> fiscal year and its current financial position. … Some nonprofit organizations also
> publish annual reports. (Reitz)

In the United States, state laws usually require governmental agencies such as libraries to submit annual reports. Beginning in the second half of the 19th century, legislation that authorized the establishment of tax-supported public libraries often mandated annual reports as an accountability measure, to assure taxpayers and government officials that their money was being spent well (Cannon 1923). Today, American librarians still compile reports to meet legal requirements imposed by local, state, or national governments.

Early library annual reports served an important additional purpose. In the fledgling days of the profession, before the emergence of widely-read professional journals, American librarians exchanged annual reports in order to learn about innovative facilities and programs. Extensive statistical data was compiled and used to benchmark a library's performance compared to libraries in similar communities and to justify requests

for increased funding (Lear 2006). Library annual reports played a similar role in the dissemination of professional knowledge in Great Britain (Peatling and Baggs 2004; Peatling and Baggs 2005).

Despite the importance of annual reports in the development of public librarianship, many librarians dreaded the yearly exercise of writing them. In 1896, Caroline Harwood Garland, a public librarian in Dover, New Hampshire, wrote, "It is usually with a profound sigh that the librarian sits down to write his annual report" (Garland 1896). Librarians were reluctant to take time away from more pressing work to compose a report that, they suspected, few people would actually read (Munn 1923; Rosser 1930; Danton 1949). Modern librarians still question the utility of annual reports, yet they continue to produce them and strive to make them informative and engaging.

Today it is generally believed that improving public relations is the primary purpose of library annual reports (Brown 2003). However, an examination of twenty-five recent English-language books about library public relations, communication, and marketing found that three-quarters of them did not mention annual reports at all.[1]   Of the six that did, only one devoted more than a single page to the topic (Hartzell 2003). Have annual reports become such a routine component of library management that lengthy discussions in the professional literature are not needed? Or have such reports diminished in importance?   Today's librarians have multiple media at their disposal to share information with the public, and professional journals, email groups, conferences and online communities facilitate networking to share ideas within the profession. Nonetheless, the library annual report persists as a unique sub-genre of grey literature.

Review of the literature

Although public libraries have been producing annual reports for more than a century, and there has been a fair amount of writing *about* them over the years, little substantive research exists. The available literature is of several types. The largest portion consists of short pieces with tips for producing high-quality, attention-getting reports. These sources offer advice on content, organization, design and distribution. However, the last complete, detailed instructions for report preparation appeared more than two decades ago (Bradley and Bradley 1988).

Back in the 19th century, annual reports were so important to the training of future librarians that schools, like the Library School at the University of Illinois, collected and preserved them (Curtis 1912). Library science students in the 1890s were assigned to analyze library annual reports as part of their curriculum (Carman 1895; Warwick 1896). Annual reports were so highly valued as sources of information about library development that the American Library Association (ALA) in 1913 published an index that covered the reports of 170 library commissions, state libraries, university libraries and public libraries in the United States and Canada (Moody 1913).

Both British and American library historians have written convincingly about the value of older annual reports as historical evidence (Peatling and Baggs 2004; Peatling and Baggs 2005; Lear 2006). However, these remarkably rich sources of information remain under-utilized by historians, perhaps because they have been difficult to obtain and tedious to examine. As more and more older documents are digitized, this will hopefully change.

Until the 1980s, professional magazines often carried notices and reviews of exemplary annual reports, especially ones that were creatively designed. For example, *Library Journal*, a long-running magazine for American librarians, drew attention in the late 20th century to reports that mimicked a recipe card, a federal income tax form, and a restaurant menu ("An annual report worth cribbing" 1985; "A taxing recipe" 1989).

A small number of studies have gone beyond mere description and compared reports, usually in order to derive a set of best practices for content and format. In 1934, Ridley and Miles rated library annual reports from nineteen American cities. Their criteria included promptness, visual appeal, readability, length, cost, and breadth of distribution, as well as elements of content, such as diagrams, pictures, the balance of topics, and evidence of "social significance," i.e. impact upon the community (Ridley and Miles 1934). The most comprehensive comparative study was conducted in the mid-twentieth century by Madeline S. Riffey, a librarian at the University of Illinois. She examined fifty current annual reports from American public libraries, choosing a sample that "represent[ed] attractive and readable reports from libraries of various sizes and regions of the country" (Riffey 1952, p.1). Riffey conducted a detailed analysis of the reports, assessing them on numerous dimensions of organization, content, format, and distribution. Riffey's carefully chosen sample forms the basis for my own study, which looks at digital representations of 21st-century reports from the same set of libraries.

Identifying a sample

There are over nine thousand public libraries in the United States (American Library Association). To identify a representative sample, I relied on Riffey's earlier work. I visited the websites of the fifty libraries in her 1952 study and searched for their annual reports. (All of the libraries are still in existence, although some have changed names or merged.) I was able to discover digital versions of current annual reports for only eighteen (36%). "Current" in most cases is 2009 or 2008. Typically the annual report is linked directly from the "About Us" section of the library website. In two cases, there were no visible links to the report, but I was able to find it by using the site's search engine. All but one of the reports are PDF documents; a few are also available as interactive web files.

What can annual reports tell us?

Statistical information

Today's annual reports present statistical data very selectively. The report writers choose numbers that will impress the average reader, such as the total number of books borrowed during the year or the number of people who accessed the internet on library computers. Historically, librarians counted many more things, and statistics were a constant topic of discussion among early librarians. In 1902, the journal *Public Libraries* published a model form for annual statistical reporting. It was four pages long. Among other data, it required librarians to track the number of books added to their collections in

23 categories, including broad subject classes such as "religion" and "useful arts," document types such as government publications, and books in the languages of major immigrant groups, such as German, Norwegian, and Bohemian ("Official reports for libraries" 1902).

The following year, a paper presented at the 1903 conference of the American Library Association outlined a staggering total of 131 questions to be answered in an annual report, most of them statistical in nature (Foster 1903). Repeated proposals were made in both Great Britain and the United States to standardize library statistics. The American Library Association issued a succession of guidelines, and for years many library annual reports stated explicitly that their statistics followed the format recommended by ALA. However, the ALA guidelines were not adopted universally.

Today, the federal Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) collects statistics from over 9,000 public libraries. The data covers facilities, staff, revenue, expenditures, collections, and services, and the IMLS website displays a handy tool for generating comparisons between libraries (IMLS library statistics). The Public Library Association, a division of the ALA, also collects statistics from a representative sample of 800 libraries and publishes an annual compilation which complements the IMLS data. (Public Library Association 1991-). Consisting solely of numerical data, these national-level reports lack the rich narratives of local annual reports but do facilitate comparisons and benchmarking.

One component of older annual reports that is rarely seen nowadays is a statistical breakdown of the items library users checked out. The most concise reports simply presented the numbers or percentages of fiction books versus non-fiction books that were

borrowed during the year. But in other reports, the totals, especially for non-fiction, were further divided by subject, such as history or science, or genre, such as biography. Thus library annual reports depict the changing reading habits of American citizens over time and may reveal local and regional differences in literary taste.

With the software available today, it is a simple matter to record statistics and generate eye-catching, informative graphics. But even before the computer era, some librarians tried to lend their statistical reports some visual impact. The reports of the Salt Lake County, Utah, Public Library, for instance, although inexpensively mimeographed on low-quality paper in the 1940s and 1950s, made frequent use of illustrations and photographs to liven up the quantitative data. A more recent approach to making the numbers interesting involves calculating the value that public library services would have on the open market – the cost of purchasing a book, attending a cultural program, renting meeting space, and so on – to demonstrate a high return on a small investment of tax dollars.

Narrative information

Some library annual reports provide only the most concise, factual narratives, while others are long and opinionated. From a historian's viewpoint, the verbose reports are the best. Bernadette Lear writes, "It is exhilarating to read about the rise of open shelves; business, technical, and other special collections; young adult services; bookmobiles; and other advances…One can often glean important dates, staffing changes, milestones, city ordinances, a sense of how the library operated…" (Lear 2006, p.467) . Whereas statistics recorded how many books were borrowed, the textual portion

of a report might bemoan the fact that borrowers prefer light fiction to more serious

books, or might speculate on why books on certain subjects were suddenly popular.

Library annual reports also reflect broader trends in American history. For example, in

our present economic downturn, it lifts one's spirit to read how public libraries coped

with budget cuts and survived during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Testimonials from members of the community rarely appeared in older reports,

but they are a very common feature today. Photographs of happy library users are

accompanied by their own words recounting the positive impact the library has had on

them and their families. Today's reports often include long lists of individual and

corporate donors. Such lists were not unknown in earlier years, but they were not so

common. Because public libraries, although still supported by taxes, increasingly rely on

donations and grants, the annual report has evolved into an important tool for fundraising.

For this reason, perhaps, the names, quotations, and images of library users are prominent

in today's library annual reports.

Staff activities, on the other hand, have largely disappeared from annual reports.

Members of the public are simply not interested in the staff's professional development

activities or individual accomplishments. Older reports often identified every staff

member by name, even janitors and part-time employees, but today's reports typically list

only directors and top-level administrators. Volunteers are more likely to be recognized

by name than are front-line staff members, especially in reports from large multi-branch

systems like the New York Public Library or the Denver Public Library. Members of

boards of trustees are *always* listed.

In general, library annual reports have always focused more on the past year than on the future, but goals and plans are sometimes discussed. Today, some reports enumerate strategic goals, and many reprint the library's mission statement. Despite widespread budget cuts and staff reductions, public library reports for 2008 and 2009 are relentlessly upbeat in emphasizing the library's success. In some older reports, by contrast, the librarians honestly acknowledge disappointments and areas needing improvement. For example, Milton Ferguson, director of the Brooklyn Public Library in the 1940s, wrote eloquently year after year about the desperate need for salary increases and shorter work hours for librarians.

Visual information

Today's annual reports are treasure houses of visual information. Nearly all of them feature full-color photographs of people using the library – choosing books from the shelf, peering at computer screens, listening raptly to storytellers. Racial, ethnic, gender and age diversity are evident in the photographs, signaling that the library is a resource for everyone in the community.

Library buildings are also depicted, especially new or renovated ones. Whereas casual photos of users were less common in the past, photos and drawings of buildings have been a staple of library annual reports for more than a century, making them a source of information for architectural historians. Occasionally, library reports even contain original floor plans.

Snapshots of interiors reveal the library furnishings of earlier eras. Some photos show new service locations in a pristine state, but others depict the active life of the

library as readers interact with staff and use the collections. When a library acquired new equipment, such as a microfilm reader or audiotape player, a photograph of it was often inserted in the next annual report. Less frequently, photographs depict services offered outside the walls of the library, such as book delivery to hospitals or storytelling in outdoor parks.

Library annual reports also contain images of the people who work in and use public libraries. Photographs of staff appear with some regularity in older reports, often working behind the scenes in cataloging or binding departments. In 1947, the Buffalo (New York) Public Library used its annual report both to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary and to make the case for better facilities. "What is the Buffalo Public Library?" the report asked.

> The Buffalo Public Library is not the drab and crowded buildings with their dark, congested book stacks. Nor is it the books alone, for books unread are no books at all. No, the Buffalo Public Library is the people. It's the people who use the Library, you and I and our children, over 2,000 of us a day, every day. It's also the people who make the Library tick. It is the men and women—professional librarians, clerks, bookbinders, and maintenance men—who make up the small but smoothly functioning team we call the Library Staff (Galt and Foster 1948, p.8-9).

Pictures of the staff at work in cramped spaces were eloquent visual arguments for a new building. Today, by contrast, when staff members are pictured, they are nearly always

shown interacting with users in public spaces. Usually, however, library users are depicted utilizing the library without any assistance.

When it comes to graphic design, library annual reports continue to mine ideas from advertising and other media. For example, the latest report from the Salt Lake County, Utah, Library is formatted like a fotonovela, while other libraries use color, multiple fonts, and creative layouts to generate excitement on the page.

Future research

The present research is just the beginning of understanding library annual reports as a genre of grey literature that carries information not readily found in books or in librarians' professional journals. Restricted to a population of libraries selected in 1952, the present study is necessarily limited in scope. Riffey's original set of criteria for comparing reports needs to be updated to note the presence of content such as URLs, mission statements, and return-on-investment analyses. A rubric for evaluating visual information should also be developed and applied.

From Riffey's original group of fifty, only 18 libraries have mounted current annual reports on their websites. Therefore, a future direction for this research project will involve contacting librarians at those libraries from the original sample who do not make their reports available on the web, in order to learn whether they still produce annual reports and, if so, how their reports are distributed.

Further, given the clear indication from contents and design that today's library annual report is intended as a marketing and fundraising tool, it could be enlightening to

interview librarians who prepare annual reports, in order to discover what audiences they have in mind and what outcomes they perceive from their efforts.

Academic libraries in the United States, in particular those at large universities, also issue annual reports. The available research on academic library annual reports is very limited (Swanepoel and Smit 2003; Sauer 2006). A future phase of my research will identify a sample of annual reports from academic libraries for evaluation and comparison.

Implications for collecting library annual reports

I do not doubt that there are many more questions that one could ask about this body of grey literature, and the answers would reveal overlooked aspects of library management, library outreach, the library's idealized self-image, and the role and position of the library vis-à-vis its community of users and supporters. And a larger question remains as well: how and where will such reports be preserved for future scholars and librarians to study and enjoy? The University of Illinois Library ceased systematically collecting such reports in the 1970s. Some continue to arrive as gifts, but circulation statistics and informal observation suggest strongly that current library annual reports are not used by today's students and researchers. In the past, a student preparing for a job interview at a public library might seek out and read its annual report; today that student will explore the library's website instead. Thus, under increasing pressure to reduce the labor-intensive processing of gift materials, reports that have a web presence are no longer cataloged and retained in print at my university. Can we count on the

originating libraries to retain archival copies? Will historic annual reports be digitized as

part of mass digitization efforts? Alas, although the University of Illinois is a partner in

the Google Books project and the Open Content Alliance, many of the historic annual

reports are in fragile condition or too tightly bound to be scanned.

The University of Wales Aberystwyth has preserved a large collection of British

public library annual reports from the period between 1850 and 1919, and created a

bibliographic database of the collection (Peatling and Baggs 2000). No such project has

been undertaken in the U.S. Nor is there, to my knowledge, any systematic effort

underway to capture and preserve the current output of annual reports. Neither DLIST,

the US-based digital repository for library and information science, nor E-LIS, its more

successful European counterpart, have made an effort to incorporate annual reports,

though I believe they would not be unwelcome.

The question of preservation becomes more complicated as libraries adopt new

media for their reporting. Consider the 2009 report of the Topeka and Shawnee County

(Kansas) Public Library, which is in the form of a multimedia website. Incorporating

audio and video content and page-turning technology, as well as multiple static web

pages, it is a lively portrait of a library energetically engaged with its community. What

access will future historians have to this document? Because this same question is being

asked about digital grey literature in other areas, I am hopeful that a solution will be

found that will enable today's library annual reports to be as useful to future historians as

the old ones are to us today.

NOTES

[1] I examined twenty-five English-language books in the University of Illinois collection, published since 2000 and bearing the subject headings "Libraries—Public relations," "Libraries—Marketing," or "Communication in library science."

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