

Current Comments

The Library of Congress. Part 2. The Librarian

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I met Daniel J. Boorstin for the first time when we both participated in a conference on quality based information systems, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation.¹ We had our first conversation during a walk to and from the Union Church in Pocantico Hills, New York. The conference group walked there from the Rockefeller Archive Center to see the church's stained-glass windows created by Marc Chagall.

There are rare and special occasions in life when you establish an immediate rapport with a colleague or friend. This was one of those occasions. Before that time, Boorstin had been a name I had seen in library journals.

Shortly after this first encounter I read Boorstin's new book, *The Republic of Technology*. I was deeply impressed by this work. Coincidentally, I had just read a book by actress Liv Ullmann called *Changing*.² This too is a main theme of Boorstin's book. It was heartening to find a leader of an institution as old and stable as the Library of Congress who recognizes the need for and the inevitability of change.³ And so it is not surprising that he made the following remarks to the

staff of the Library of Congress (LC) shortly after he took Office as the 12th Librarian of Congress:

We have lived through a technological revolution more intimate and more pervasive than any before....Photography, motion pictures, and sound production have been newly elaborated. Television has entered our living rooms and incited new uses for the radio, newspapers, and magazines. Novel forms of book production and reproduction—microform, xerography, and near-print—have multiplied. The disintegration of paper, once only a threat, has become an immediate menace. The computer has suddenly revealed a whole new science and technology for storing and retrieving information.... No part of the Library of Congress has been untouched by these transformations....

The Library of Congress has been given a vast range of new statutory responsibilities. Our direct services to the Congress... have been enlarged, made more subtle and more complex by the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946, and by the Act of 1970....Our legal mandate to serve the blind and physically handicapped has been widened.

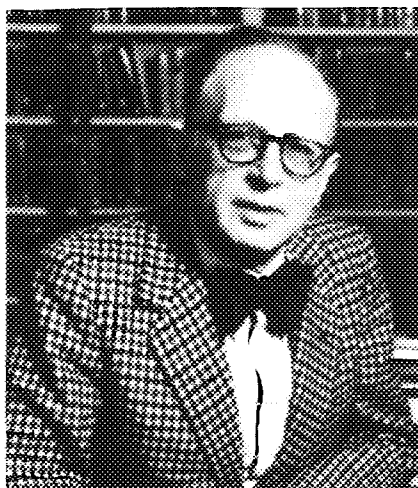
Our obligations under the copyright law...are enormously enlarged. Our Congressionally authorized assistance to the nation's libraries and to the world of scholarship and of science has been extended, increased, and modernized.

Plainly the time has come for a review. The arrival of a new Librarian and the near completion of the Madison Building make such a study especially appropriate now.⁴

With these words Daniel Boorstin set the tone of his administration. It is one of openness and willingness to revitalize and redirect a Library otherwise headed towards burial under its own treasures.

Born in Atlanta in 1914, Daniel J. Boorstin grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma. A 1934 graduate of Harvard College, Dan became a Rhodes Scholar from Oklahoma, traveling to England to study at Oxford's Balliol College. In 1936, he was awarded a B.A. in Jurisprudence from Oxford and a year later, a Bachelor of Civil Laws. At age 23 he passed the English bar examination becoming a Barrister-at-Law, one of the few Americans qualified to practice before the Queen's courts.⁵

When Dan returned to the United States, he studied American law as a Stirling Fellow at Yale University Law School. After receiving his doctor of juridical science degree in 1942, he moved on to Harvard where he taught history and literature and, in the law school, legal history. He was admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1942.³



Daniel J. Boorstin: Librarian of Congress

For a brief time, he served as a lawyer with the Lend-Lease Administration. However, settling on a career in history, he accepted a position as assistant professor at Swarthmore College in 1942. In 1944, he moved on to the University of Chicago where he spent the next 25 years. During this time he wrote his award winning books *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (Bancroft Prize) and *The Americans: The National Experience* (Parkman Prize). These were the first two parts of a trilogy to be completed later. By the time he left the University in 1969, he had reached the rank of Sterling Morton Distinguished Service Professor of American History.⁵

Boorstin left Chicago to accept a great challenge as Director of the National Museum of History and Technology of the Smithsonian Institution. During his four years as director, he supervised many major exhibits.⁶ He then resigned to

become Senior Historian and adviser to the Institution on all projects. While at the Smithsonian, he completed his trilogy with *The Americans: the democratic experience*. For this he won a Pulitzer Prize for history in 1974.⁷ He was nominated for Librarian of Congress while at his Smithsonian position.

Boorstin's appointment faced opposition from the library establishment because of his lack of "formal" library credentials⁸ and from special interest groups who disapproved of his opposition to quotas for minorities in faculty hiring.⁹ He was among 74 signers of a letter to President Ford.¹⁰ Nevertheless, he was confirmed to the post and has proved an able leader.

Robert Wedgeworth, who presented the Statement of the American Library Association⁸ against the nomination, now states that Boorstin seems to understand the library community's concerns. In a telephone interview, he indicated that Boorstin has demonstrated this understanding by "involving the library community" in his plans for and review of LC.

Dan is well respected among historians. His writings have shown how technology has democratized America. One reviewer of *The Democratic Experience* noted, "Boorstin is concerned...with the growing commonality of experience in the United States over the past hundred years, a social change whose principal agent, of course, has been technology."¹¹ His latest book, *The Republic of Technology*, views technology both as the

creator of problems and the means of solving them. A selected bibliography of Dan's books and articles accompanies this essay.

One aspect of Boorstin's genius is his perception of the seeming contradictions in American history. In *The Genius of American Politics* (1953), he observed, "The ablest defender of the Revolution—in fact, the greatest political theorist of the American Revolution—was also the greatest theorist of British conservatism, Edmund Burke.... Ours was one of the few conservative colonial rebellions of modern times."¹²

It is significant that a person with a marvelous sense of history, and a skeptical respect for technology, heads the Library of Congress at this time in its history. While LC by itself cannot harness the information explosion, it can provide the spiritual and practical leadership necessary for the task.

By the time Boorstin came to the Library of Congress it was the largest library in the world. Its operations, however, had not been closely examined since the days of Archibald MacLeish (1939-1944). Having determined a review was in order, he appointed a task force to conduct a study of the organization.⁴

His task force, headed by John Y. Cole, a Library of Congress veteran with more than ten years experience in many phases of LC's work, returned with many suggestions. Dan told the members of the group to "emphasize what the Library *should be* without worrying about budgetary restraints."¹³ They

did so. The resulting document presented both sweeping recommendations and specific solutions.

One of the major problems, as they saw it, was a lack of coordination between the departments within the Library, impeding the operations of the Library as a whole. Many of the recommendations proposed that coordinating committees or liaison offices be established. Reasoning that "improving service to Congress means improving service to all," the task force proposed that a coordinator be appointed to better mesh the activities of the Congressional Research Service with those of other departments.¹³ A coordination office to help other libraries use the resources of the Library of Congress was also suggested. "The Library must establish new, formal channels of communication between itself and other libraries and encourage suggestions and criticism."¹³

One of the most frustrating problems for readers at the Library is the length of time it takes to have books delivered to them. Too often the request for a book will come back marked "not on the shelf." To help alleviate this problem, the task force recommended reform of the delivery system. More pages should be hired and shelving procedures improved and expedited. Another recommendation proposed the establishment of a better reader guidance system that would more effectively show people how to use the Library. Assistants would be on hand to help readers use the com-

puter terminals to look up catalog information.

The task force noted that an organization as complex as the Library of Congress needs planning to cope with the future. They recommended that a permanent planning office be established to guide the Library through the reorganization of many of its departments and the realigning of its services. They also stated that a research office was badly needed to improve the Library's capabilities to perform research into technical matters central to its own operations.¹³ When I visited Dr. Boorstin recently, I expressed surprise that there was no one in the institution designated as the Director of Research. I said the same thing to Verner Clapp about twenty-five years ago. I believe he thought of the Council of Library Resources as a kind of research department for the Library.

The task force report contained some thirty-three recommendations for change, and over a hundred specific suggestions for implementation.¹⁴ Many of these have been instituted, to the credit of both the Librarian and the members of the group that worked so long and hard to produce the document. For example, the Planning Office, now headed by acting director Helen Dalrymple, was established to implement the recommendations, develop a series of new programs, design new organizational units to carry out these plans, perform managerial studies, and produce statistical analyses of the Library's

operations.¹⁴ The Planning Office thus has become the focal point for change within the Library. But a planning function is not research. I believe that if LC is to be the spiritual leader in the field, it must sponsor basic research independent of other government agencies.

In 1977, as a result of legislation strongly encouraged by Boorstin, Congress established the Center for the Book, devoted to the study of the history and role of books in civilization. A part of the Library of Congress, the Center was needed, Dan noted, "because this is a multimedia, electronic, media-ridden, annual model age....As the national library of a great free republic we have a special duty and a special interest to see that books do not go unread, that they are read by people of all ages and conditions, that books are not buried under their own excess, under their own dross, not lost from neglect nor obscured by specious alternatives and synthetic substitutes."¹⁵

When the Library asked Congress for permission to establish the Center for the Book, it asked for no public monies. Instead, the activities of the Center are supported by private gifts to the Library. Of course the Center draws upon the vast resources of the general collection to develop the seminars, research projects, publications, exhibits, and films it provides. Headed by John Y. Cole, who guided the task force on reorganization, the Center brings together the ideas of writers, readers, publishers, booksellers, critics, educators, librari-

ans, and scholars, to celebrate the role of books in American life.¹⁵

In 1977, Dan established a Network Development Office to deal with the Library's role in the eventual National Library and Information Science Network.¹⁶ It is directed by Henriette Avram who, for a long time, had been involved in network development activities and is a former chief of the Machine Readable Cataloging (MARC) development office. The national network will link the resources of all the smaller library networks in the country so that users can locate publications wherever they may be in the US. The Library of Congress will do most of the cataloging on its MARC tapes, supplementing them with data from OCLC, Inc. (formerly the Ohio College Library Center) and Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN). RLIN, formerly called BALLOTS, was started at Stanford University.

OCLC and RLIN are the two major existing national online cataloging networks. All items will be uniformly cataloged to allow standard access and compatibility between all members of the network. An advisory group at the Library is hard at work designing a network configuration and determining the legal and organizational structure of the network.

Although the Library has been using its energy to cope with new programs and new responsibilities, it is not able to simply move towards the future; it must recover the past. The books on the Library's

shelves are rapidly deteriorating because of the acid content of paper used within the last hundred and fifty years. To meet this problem head on, Boorstin began a National Preservation Program. Techniques learned through the program will benefit all libraries that are facing this massive problem. In 1977, work done at the Library led to a patent for a process on the deacidification of paper using a solution of metal alkyls.¹⁴ Eventually, LC will be called upon to make

life or death decisions for some works, since not all can be preserved.

In his remarks upon taking office Dan Boorstin pledged to use all known techniques and to seek new techniques to both cope with the Library's problems and advance its services.¹⁷ In his first three years he has tried to live up to that pledge. The Library of Congress needs innovative direction and open mindedness. His accomplishments tell the tale.

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