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"Futures" in International Meetings

MINING INFORMATION about forthcoming international meetings is one of the most challenging specialized assignments that can be given a library or information service. It is challenging because even the dimensions of the field are obscure, fully adequate service has not yet been provided, and the development of procedures is in an elementary stage.

These generalizations are based on nearly five years of work on the problem in the International Organizations Section of the General Reference and Bibliography Division of the Library of Congress (GR&B IO for short). In that time the number of multilateral meetings held has greatly increased. Unfortunately for neat statistical reporting, no one is known to have ascertained the total number of meetings held. The section has identified and recorded in its files 3,249 for 1957 and 2,377 through April 28 this year for 1958. It already lists 342 for 1959.

These totals include some national meetings, both foreign and United States, with international participation. Proportion of increase cannot be determined from the section's files because all increases noted (1,008 in 1953 compared with 1957, for example) also indicates more man hours spent in discovering information. Preliminary sorties into subjects not now systematically covered by the section's one and one-third researchers, show that the records in the files are far from complete. This experience, plus that of others, suggests that there are in the neighborhood of five

thousand international meetings annually and that the number is increasing from year to year.

The aim of the International Organizations Section in supplying information about international meetings is to have it available at least four months in advance of the convening of the meeting. At present, the information is used primarily by the United States government (including the Library of Congress, itself, for acquisitions work) and by the occasional reader directed to the section when obvious sources fail to produce the data required. Special effort is given to identifying international non-governmental meetings.

The chief category of sources of information is a motley but indispensable assortment of weekly, monthly, quarterly, annual, and occasional calendars in all languages. Of these, twenty form the hard core for the section's cumulative record.

For accuracy and comprehensiveness within a specified scope the *List of International and Foreign Scientific and Technical Meetings* published quarterly by the National Science Foundation is excellent. It is more nearly complete for its fields than any other list now published.

The Union of International Associations, of interest to librarians and documentalists for its founders, La Fontaine and Otlet, publishes a monthly magazine, *International Associations*.¹ A feature of this publication is the bilingual list of forthcoming international meetings of all kinds. This list is supplement-

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¹ "Short History of the Union of International Associations," Union of International Associations, *Monthly Bulletin* (Jan. 1949), 5-6.

ed monthly by a mimeographed list giving additions, corrections, and new meetings. This can be subscribed to in addition to the magazine.

Another list which is diversified in subject coverage is the *List of International Conferences and Meetings* published quarterly by the United States Department of State. Still a fourth is *World Convention Dates*, a monthly commercially published in Hempstead, New York. It is extensive but the arrangement by place makes it difficult to check against a chronological file which is the screening file used in the International Organizations Section. The annual listing is the most useful issue.

A fifth general calendar is the Pan American Union's quarterly, *Forthcoming Inter-American Conferences and Meetings*.

A less extensive but important general calendar is found in the *Unesco Chronicle* published monthly by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in Paris.

Two periodicals listing international fairs are very useful and regularly checked, *Fièrè e Mostre* (Milan) and *Les Foires Internationales* (Brussels). The former is monthly, the latter bi-monthly. Of course the Office of International Trade Fairs of the Department of Commerce remains the chief source of information in this field.

Six other calendars, all in the field of science, are also checked. These are: *Conferences and Meetings*, a monthly list issued by the Canadian National Research Council; *Forthcoming International Scientific and Technical Conferences*, a publication of the British Department of Scientific and Industrial Research; the *Quarterly Bulletin of Information* published by the International Council of Scientific Unions; *La Ricerca Scientifica*, the monthly journal of the Italian National Research Council, which contains an important calendar;

the calendar in *Science*, the weekly journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; and *Scientific Meetings*, the new quarterly calendar of the Special Libraries Association.

The section also checks four medical calendars. These are: *Forthcoming Medical Conferences* prepared quarterly by the British Medical Association; the calendar in the weekly *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Chicago); *Presse Medicale* (Paris, 96 numbers per year) with the most extensive calendar in one of the February issues each year and additional meeting information in most every number; and the *Quarterly Bulletin* of the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (Paris).

Two chemical journals with particularly useful calendars are *Chemiker-Zeitung* (Heidelberg) and *Chemisch Weekblad* (The Hague). New information in all of these calendars is added to the cumulative dictionary catalog of meetings maintained by the section.

Beyond this basic core is an indeterminate number of calendars appearing in scholarly journals, official bulletins of societies, trade magazines, etc., etc. If the sponsoring organization of a meeting is known or if the meeting held by a specific body is wanted, an appropriate periodical can usually be identified for searching, even though the effort may prove unrewarding. However, if the aim is to collect information about all kinds of international meetings, locating and scanning these miniature calendars is not worthwhile.

Calendars, including the core group listed above, duplicate each other to a considerable extent.² Yet taken together they do not reveal all the international meetings scheduled. Add this to the time-consuming job of finding which journals of the thousands of possibilities carry

² Kathrine Oliver Murra, "Organization and Servicing of Information About International Meetings," Union of International Associations, *Monthly Bulletin* (May 1953), 211-16.

calendars and in which issues, and futility is compounded.

The decisive determinant in eschewing "little calendars," however, is that most inquirers want more information than a calendar usually gives. Knowing the name, place, date, and address of the organizing committee is, of course, basic. But it does not necessarily assure access to the program, the names of participants, preliminary papers, etc.

It will be found that the section checks calendars, some in the core group of twenty, which have also been used in the preparation of the National Science Foundation's *List* . . . This seeming duplication is actually evidence of the time factor involved in the GR&B IO operation. By checking these calendars when received and not waiting to receive the NSF *List* . . . many days are saved in sending out letters for pre-conference literature.

In addition the National Science Foundation provides us with a carbon copy of each letter it sends for meeting information. New addresses are often obtained in this way. Also, much of the necessary lag is shortened between the time their calendar goes to the printer and the time the section receives a copy.

In an examination of 239 meetings in the fields of science and technology to be held from May to December, 1958, it was found that the first notice of nearly one-third of the meetings had been found in sources other than calendars. "Notes and news" or similarly titled sections in a wide variety of periodicals frequently carry announcements of forthcoming meetings. Generally such information is not indexed anywhere at the time the journal is published. The publication's own annual index may reveal the contents of these departments but is obviously of no use in obtaining preliminary information unless the meeting is announced several years in advance of convening.

Often information in a periodical about a future meeting will give much more information than most calendars. Sometimes the entire program is published in this source. Therefore, working the rich ore of periodical literature, costly and taxing as it is, is very rewarding in terms of information obtained.

Not only does this source provide first, and sometimes complete, advance data on a meeting, but it is a necessary supplement to information already found in calendars. The uninitiated, examining calendars, frequently say "Oh you just need to get on a mailing list" to get the rest of the information wanted. The experienced acquisitions librarian will have no illusions about the automatic functioning of mailing lists. To remain on a mailing list rewardingly requires eternal vigilance, clairvoyant propensities, and a modicum of genius.

But the International Organizations Section tries. When an address for a meeting is found, be it in calendar, journal, or from any other source, a special form letter is initiated in the section and sent out by the library's exchange and gift division where a supporting international organizations unit has been set up for this purpose and for other acquisition in this field.

Sometimes as many as four letters are sent about one meeting. In such cases, letters number two, three, and four are written for the particular recipient and circumstance by GR&B IO. At the same time useful supplemental sources are being sought in the hope that if no response to the letters comes prior to the convening date some substantial information can be supplied. Frequently the search may yield a different address which in turn may bring a program or even a third address to write to.

At the present time one researcher in the section has identified 335 periodicals from the library's current receipts of thousands of titles which have provided information about meetings in the field

of science and technology. These are in languages using the Roman alphabet. Only forty-eight of this number are publications of international organizations. One hundred and sixty are society or association publications in various countries. Some of the best sources for international meetings are journals of national learned societies.

Identifying these 335 titles required a continuous screening process on the part of one person for more than a year and a half. Unfortunately for the stabilizing of the research process in this area, next year these periodicals may not have information about meetings subsequent to those noted in them this year. Even the official journals of international organizations are not consistent in the attention given to their own meetings. Thus the screening process must continue. New or newly found titles may be more useful than those now used. The latter will then be discarded.

Only a small amount of time can presently be given to this kind of operation for other subjects. But, as was mentioned earlier, it gives promise of yielding a great deal of information new to the section. One point seems clear: A large diversified periodical collection is necessary—the larger the better.

When a title for this article was being considered, "Documentation Service for International Meetings" seemed a possibility. However, it was discarded as giving an erroneous impression that the International Organizations Section was created to conduct an experiment in documentation within a research library. On the contrary, it was set up to give service in a difficult field where there was no service.

It is necessary to state this categorically here because in the ensuing account of the acquisitions and processing procedures the documentation characteristics of the work are obvious.

There is no doubt that much has been learned about the problems of conducting a documentation service within a large library. However, this is the increment from pursuit of efficient service for information on forthcoming meetings. It should also be remembered that "future" meetings have a built-in deadline. When the opening gavel strikes not only is the meeting no longer future, but pre-conference publications are anachronistic.

Some of the more interesting facets of recording, obtaining, and processing the information gathered will be sketched. To do so clearly requires first a brief description of the system used.

Meeting information is typed on a perforated four-section fanfold of 25 per cent rag paper. The ribbon copy becomes the main entry. Others are used for subject headings, for a chronological heading, for initiating a letter of solicitation in the Exchange and Gift Division. Often more than one "quad" is typed for the same meeting to provide extra 3 x 5 slips for subject headings and added entries. A copy of the record of a meeting for which special requests have been made goes into a suspense file. This enables periodic review and follow-up.

Catalogers may be interested to know how an entry is determined when there is no publication to describe. An entry is developed (in English if possible) from the citation found first, plus any entries for it already in the section's catalog; plus cataloging entries for meetings in the same series previously held and entered in the library's catalogs. *ALA Rules of Entry* are followed as far as they go and when they apply to the section's catalog. The *Rules* state the consensus here most adequately when they say: "No definite decision as to the final best form of entry can be made until a considerable body of material has been assembled. *In the meanwhile, references must be relied upon*

to make the entries readily available."³ GR&B IO cannot search extensively or wait to arrive at a best entry. A usable entry with necessary cross-references and added entries must be in the catalog within twenty-four hours of noting the meeting. An effort is made to adhere to established practices of the library so that the catalog under a given entry will be hospitable to cataloged proceedings and other documents, records of which may come from the library in due season. As letters from the sponsoring body or organizing committee come in, the name of the meeting is edited accordingly. However, the information at hand is the real crux of the matter. That must be used effectively.

Much of the present know-how for recording information has come through trial and error. As such entries as the following increase, it is obvious that a more manageable and approachable entry is required:

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural organization. International Advisory Committee for Humid Tropics Research. *Symposium on Ecological Studies of Tropical Vegetation in Relation to Soils in Abidjan*. [place, month, and days not yet announced] 1959.

The entry is now made under *Symposium . . .* with appropriate added entries. Retrieval is particularly critical because there is an arrearage in making subject headings for the meetings. Therefore, considerable thought must be given to other approaches to the main entry in lieu of a subject.

Without going much deeper into the problems of preparing the record, it perhaps should be mentioned that it is often far more difficult to assign subject headings to the name of a meeting than to set up the name itself from a calendar or other preliminary announcement.

With the record of a meeting in hand,

³ American Library Association, Division of Cataloging and Classification, *ALA Cataloging Rules for Author and Title Entries*. (2d ed.; Chicago: ALA, 1949), p. 133.

plus an address, what are the problems of acquiring preliminary materials? The undependability of mailing lists has been mentioned in this connection. More striking, however, is the contrast between acquisitions and processing of material for forthcoming international meetings and for the library itself.

Materials needed to provide information about future international meetings are roughly of four kinds: A small group of conventional-type reference works, a large current serial collection including official documents, a large body of ephemeral materials, and correspondence. The primary work, perhaps, in the first group is the *Yearbook of International Organizations*. Supporting this are a variety of directories, treatises, histories, bibliographies, and other materials illuminating international organizations and meetings of all kinds. Little of this pinpoints specific forthcoming meetings but is of assistance in discovering current sources.

The contribution of current periodicals was alluded to earlier. The tremendous collection of the Library of Congress is an unparalleled boon to such an operation as the section has undertaken. Yet at times it appeared to be a will-o'-the-wisp beckoning the searcher with delectable but out-of-date issues. These gave promise of having just the data needed if the latest issue were at hand.

The problem of keeping entirely current for 90,000 titles is tremendous. The urgency for specific (and not always important) ones on the part of a small section in a huge library was not easy to transmit rewardingly. Many details both of acquisitions and processing had to be adjusted and that has understandably been a slow process.

At some points periodicals required for effective service on international meetings merge this category of materials with the ephemeral materials which distinguish the reference collection.

Many normally would not be acquired by the library under any circumstances. Some which have been received in the past have been discarded or only a sample retained. The acquisitions problem for the section then is a matter of justifying the requests and fully informing the proper officers and their staffs to insure acquisition and retention, once the piece is received. Few of such periodicals will, or perhaps should, be retained permanently in the library's collections even though they are held for a few years for use of the section.

As for the other ephemera they consist of announcements, circulars, preliminary and final separately-issued programs, pre-prints and abstracts of papers, etc. The acquisition and processing of these materials created difficulty because librarians, after years of conditioning, come to consider such paper little more than "junk."

The danger of losing these frequently unprepossessing, but uniquely valuable, pieces of paper in the flood of publications that moves through the library's processing routines was enormous. So much so, that a special arrangement was permitted whereby solicitations for the section sent by the Exchange and Gift Division carried the address of the section. Responses thus come directly to the section unopened.

Until this seemingly slight change in procedure was approved, it was uncertain whether a reference service for future meetings could be given by the library. The very size of the library seemed to militate against it. Inherently a huge library is not geared to sustained reference service with inflexible deadlines, which is what an information service for future meetings requires.

To insure receipt of any publications of relevance to this work entering the library through the exchange and gift division, one person from GR&B IO examines the week's intake. Processing

directions are inserted in publications wanted by the section. When the selection officer of the library has reviewed the pieces from the standpoint of the library's permanent collections they are ready either to be hand carried directly to the section without further processing or hand carried through the processing routine prescribed. Since relatively few pieces are involved, the small amount of time required to do this is well spent.

The fourth category of reference material is the correspondence which results from writing the organizing committees and others for information. Not infrequently a chairman or secretary will type out what, to our knowledge, may be the first outline of a forthcoming meeting to appear. Sometimes it will be a list of participants and the titles of their papers.

So valuable is this correspondence for reference work that it is filed in the pamphlet collection with the other ephemeral material in folders, headed with the name of the meeting or the organizing body as circumstances dictate. More and more of these folders contain material which constitutes a fair organizational picture of the development of a meeting.

Whither reference service for future international meetings? It is conceivable, but seemingly improbable for another decade at least, that a service in this field will be required by many libraries or information centers. For the use of the government, it appears that the need for such service will increase. This is not just because the number of meetings is increasing but because more agencies of government are concerned with international meetings. Although a special library or documentation service is required, it is, nevertheless, essential that the service have unrestricted access to all the facilities of a great research library.