

Practical Aid to Libraries in Developing Countries

Peter D. Hingley

Royal Astronomical Society, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1V 0NL, U.K. e-mail: pdh@ras.org.uk

Abstract. The problems and rewards of shipping astronomical books to libraries in developing countries are discussed, with particular reference to the author's own experience from his base at the Royal Astronomical Society.

1. Introduction

It is a privilege to prepare this account of one aspect of my work for the benefit of astronomers and librarians all over the world. I am often reminded of a once popular BBC children's radio show "Toytown" in which the principal character, Larry the Lamb, whenever he was assailed by Mr Growser, the Mayor, or Mr Plod the Policeman, would reply "I will do my little best". I, too, am Doing my Little Best!

This will be an uncharacteristically brief paper, no more than a short despatch "from the coal face" on one aspect of aid to developing countries. I believe that many people in institutions in the developed world would vaguely "like to help"; I, myself am in the unusually privileged position of being able to do something practical. I have been able to ship material for libraries to countries and places as diverse as Tanzania, Malta, Brazil, India, the Czech Republic, California, the Canary Islands, Bulgaria, Ireland, Lithuania, Madeira, the Slovak Republic and Hawaii.

2. Sources of Material

One of the privileges of working in a learned Society is that one comes to know, and to like, Fellows of great eminence and learning. Even these people have to die, however, we hope full of years and honours, and the Society's Librarian is often approached by the widow to help to find homes for the late scholar's personal library. It is perhaps well to wait until after the immediate grief before taking action, otherwise the Librarian may find himself acting as a Bereavement Counsellor.

Sometimes a scholar will discard many of his books on retirement and then his (or her) own feelings must be considered; one Fellow said to me, as I car-

ried three-quarters of a ton of books out of his retirement cottage in Cornwall, "That's my whole professional life going out of the door!" Recently, I have assisted in finding homes for books and journals from the libraries of Prof. Sir William McCrea, Prof. Gerald Whitrow and Prof. Keith Runcorn.

At first, I operated by mail, sending out long lists of books and journals and waiting for the replies to come by mail or, later, by fax. Now, e-mail has made things much easier and is a more cost-effective method of disseminating offers of material. I have a series of mailing lists and send offers of material to those whose names are on the appropriate list. I am willing to add names and addresses to these lists, subject to the caveats mentioned below; if you wish your name to be added, the first step is to send an e-mail to the address given at the head of this paper.

Of course, this work is somewhat outside my principal duties as RAS Librarian and I have to minimise the amount of working time that I spend on it. The attitude of management can vary. I could usually justify the time and petrol I consumed by pointing out that the RAS Library itself had the first pick of anything that was offered and, indeed, some very significant lacunae have been filled in that way. Under a previous management at the RAS, however, I had been told to stop this activity because the janitor was complaining about having to pack up so many parcels!

3. Distribution of the Material

I make little distinction between developing and developed countries; few libraries ever really have as much money as they need and I tend to think only in terms of the need for information. How does one distinguish between a Third-World country and one whose economy has fallen to bits for political reasons?

I should emphasize strongly that material offered through the RAS is very irregular in supply and often quite old. The lack of material in some Third-World countries can be quite humbling. Recently, I was somewhat diffident about offering a list of 24 books on cosmology that seemed a little elderly, having been published over the last 20 years; they were all snapped up within 24 hours. Responses to my messages are often rapid and enthusiastic. I had filled my car with 250 books from Prof. Whitrow's library and every single one has found a home. I find this deeply satisfying; I think all librarians are string hoarders at heart! I try to be even-handed, sending out lists at different times of the day to favour recipients in different time zones. Prof. Whitrow's books were offered to lists of mainly Third-World libraries and then to my personal list of "Fellows, Library Readers, Friends and Miscellaneous Hangers-on". Mrs Whitrow is delighted that her beloved husband's name is commemorated in libraries in many different countries. I always try to inform the recipient of the origin of the journals and books sent and ask them to write a thank-you letter; sadly, such a letter is not always forthcoming. When books are given by a bereaved spouse, it can be a great comfort to know that the loved-one's name is perpetuated in his books in some overseas library. For large consignments, such as the libraries of McCrea and Whitrow, I had a rubber stamp made so that I could insert the source of the donation in all the volumes, before the material left my hands. Other sources of donated books are the PAMNET list

operated by the Physics, Astronomy and Mathematics section of the (American) Special Libraries Association and a mailing list for astronomy librarians, called ASTROLIB, which is largely inspired by the LISA conferences. The American Astronomical Society maintains a list of offered material on its Web site.

I feel that donations of back runs of journals can never be an adequate substitute for current subscriptions and, as more past material becomes available on-line through NASA's ADS system administered by Dr Eichhorn, the value of such shipments may diminish. I would welcome discussion of this point. My personal belief is that rumours of the death of the printed book and journal, like those of the death of Mark Twain, have been "greatly exaggerated". A day may come when it will no longer be worthwhile to ship printed material around the world, but I do not think that day has yet come, nor will it for some time.

In a few cases, e.g. the break-up of the former Soviet Union, certain Western bodies have given short-term help, in the form of free subscriptions, to tide observatories in those countries over the immediate difficulties; but this can be only a very temporary expedient. The needs of so many can be rather oppressive and the expectations can be a bit unrealistic. One astronomer, from a country locked in a bloody civil war, whose only observatory had just been completely destroyed by military action, sent a desperate message saying that what they really wanted was a remotely operated 1-m telescope with a full set of CCD detectors! This is not the sort of thing one usually finds lying about in the Library.

4. Some Closing Thoughts

Sociologically, one might regard astronomy as a form of conspicuous consumption. I wonder how people survive in some countries, let alone do astronomy, and I am lost in admiration for the determination with which that science is pursued in the conditions described by some authors in this volume. I thought I had been rather radical in suggesting that a library is more necessary than a telescope, but I am interested that Hearnshaw (2001) ranked the priority of a library as 3 while a telescope is 6! Telescopes are nice things to have around and no good home should be without one, but much can be done without a professional-level telescope, even if you use a small one to teach the students.

Each participant in the donation process has both needs and obligations:

- The **DONOR** has a responsibility to provide an accurate list of what is being offered – all too often supposedly complete runs of journals have numerous issues missing. Donors are making a considerable effort to find homes for the material rather than just discarding it; that effort must be respected and valued. They need to feel that their, or their spouse's, long-cherished journal collections have gone to a good home and are being used. Especially after bereavement, donors wish their spouse's name to be commemorated on a bookplate, or in some similar way. Donors have a right to a proper letter of acknowledgment and the intermediary should always pass on an address for such a letter to be sent to.
- The **INTERMEDIARY**, often a librarian, needs to be prepared to ship material worldwide. This is always a big effort, but I am sad to see mes-

sages from American libraries to the effect that they are not willing to ship outside the boundaries of the known universe – which, all too often, seems to be coterminous with the continental U.S.A.! The ideal role for the librarian is as an information broker, connecting the need with the supply, but this ideal, sadly, is infrequently realized. Usually, I end up picking up the material at week-ends in my own transport and then shipping it from Burlington House! The intermediary needs to get responses quickly so that the limited storage space available is not cluttered up indefinitely. I have also had to pay postage and trust the recipient to refund it – and realizing the differences in affluence of different countries, I feel very embarrassed at having to ask a library in a country such as India to refund, say, £100 for postage. There is little point in a recipient asking for the very cheapest form of mailing, usually unregistered sea-mail, and then, as happened recently, expecting packages to be traced, when they are delayed!

- The **RECIPIENT** has obligations to both the other parties – often he must respond very rapidly to obtain any of the material offered. He has an obligation to the intermediary to refund the shipping costs, and to the donor to provide acknowledgment and commemoration.

There are various methods of shipping: using commercial carriers, postal services, and some charities might help. Charities provide services cheaply or even free of charge, but can be very slow; they are mainly suited to general educational material. Things can go wrong with other methods also. Once, 14 large boxes of journals were shipped by commercial carrier to a person building up a library in the western U.S.A.; for some reason they were never delivered and the unfortunate “recipient” had to refund about \$300 to his university which had funded the shipping. Some practical measures can be taken, such as fixing prominent labels on each package giving the nature of the contents.

In trendy terms, “Networking” is very important – I prefer to think of it as just making friends. The LISA II and LISA III (Library and Information Science in Astronomy) meetings had been extremely useful in this respect. To my mind, the refusal of the IAU to sponsor the third of these meetings raises questions about the value placed by the astronomical community on librarians. Are we professional advisers, like telescope engineers or software experts, or are we on a level with those who empty the dustbins? I prefer to believe the former, but sometimes I have doubts!

Perhaps the most useful thing a librarian can do is to be a responsive friend on the end of a telephone, fax or e-mail line, but I am painfully aware that the RAS may have fallen short of perfection in this role, especially in the last two years – in the wake of the 1999 eclipse and various other happenings. I have only one assistant and we have only two hands each.

Returning, however, to Larry the Lamb, if we can all cooperate in a friendly manner and “do our little best” together, maybe we can make a difference to the practicability of practising astronomy in the less well-off parts of the world.

References

Hearnshaw, J.B. 2001, this volume, pp. 15-28.

Discussion

Percy pointed out that IAU Commission 46 has a program to donate suitable books and journals to astronomically developing countries and he is the “contact person” (jpercy@erin.utoronto.ca). The Commission is looking for suitable material and for ideas about how to ship it securely and inexpensively. The recipients would be institutions targeted by the Commission 46 programs and others the Commission selected. Crawford suggested that recipients might be encouraged to approach their national airlines to transport material free to their home countries. He emphasized that not all good research is in preprints. There is a wealth of excellent information in old books and journals. Hingley expressed interest in Percy’s information and welcomed Crawford’s comments. He felt that there is a pressing need for a body with reasonable funds to save us from the embarrassment of asking poor countries to pay the cost of shipping. The recipient country might well be asked, however, to make ad hoc arrangements with its airline – it is probably even more trouble to pack the material and take it to an airport than to mail it! He had recently found that old books (by Eddington and Chandrasekhar) from Whitrow’s collection were very much in demand in developing countries.