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Group Therapy - A Case of Discredited Research

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From the University Presses
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critiques have displayed the results of the often erratic nature of the scanning that Google contractors have performed, complete with smudges, misaligned pages, and even pages containing images of the scanners’ thumbs. But the problems go beyond simple quality of reproduction. There is a serious concern about metadata here, too, from a scholar’s point of view. As Geoffrey Nunberg so devastatingly catalogued in his article for The Chronicle of Higher Education (August 31) titled “Google’s Book Search: A Disaster for Scholars,” the current metadata “are a train wreck: a mishmash wrapped in a madly wrapped in a mess.” Nunberg’s survey covers errors in dates, problems with classification, and mismatches of titles and texts. I particularly sympathize with his critique of Google’s decision to use BISAC codes to classify books. “Why,” he wonders, would Google “want to use those headings in the first place”? As Nunberg notes, “The BISAC scheme is well-suited for a chain bookstore or a small public library, where consumers or patrons browse for books on shelves. But it’s of little use when you’re flying blind in a library with several million titles, including scholarly works, foreign works, and vast quantities of books from earlier periods. For example, the BISAC Juvenile Nonfiction subject heading has almost 300 subheadings, like New Baby, Skateboarding, and Deer, Moose, and Caribou. By contrast, the Poetry subject heading has just 20 subheadings. That means that Bambi and Bullwinkle get a full shelf to themselves, while Leopardi, Schiller, and Verlaine have to scrunch together in the single heading reserved for Poetry/Continental European. In short, Google has taken a group of the world’s great research collections and returned them in the form of a suburban-mall bookstore.” For most university press books, I can attest, the BISAC codes compel one to be very creative in trying to use enough codes to represent the subject of a scholarly book at all adequately. Just to give one example, there is no way of forwardly identifying a book about modern Latin American politics. One has to cobble together a set of codes covering History/Latin America/General, History/Modern/20th Century, and Political Science/Government/Comparative at a minimum. And to identify a book in feminist philosophy, one has to leave the category of philosophy altogether to find any code representing feminist or gender studies (under the main rubric of Social Science). Google’s decision to employ BISAC codes is yet one more glaring revelation of how skewed the Settlement is toward the interests of trade-book authors and commercial trade-book publishers rather than academic authors and academic presses. And the irony of it all is that the vast majority of books now among the ten million Google has in its database are academic books, making Book Search a potential boon for scholars everywhere — if only Google had talked with the right publishers to begin with.

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I don’t consider it censorship, if the errors in research and in the end product are documented. As an integral part of a teaching institution, the library has a responsibility to try to provide the most valid and up-to-date information possible. If we had the space to keep such a book, I suspect that we would put a note in one of the 500 fields of the marc record to cite the documented grievance against the book and place a similar note inside the front cover. To allow this book to be published and then to award it before discovering the problems with the research makes me wonder about the due diligence of those involved in the publishing and then the awards process. However, a book with discredited information does not really have a place in our library, as far as I am concerned. I would, however, take into consideration the extent to which the validity of the information is compromised — and hope that there are reviews to guide in that determination.

RESPONSE:
Submitted by Meris Mandernach (Collection Management Librarian/ Chemistry Liaison, JMU Libraries & Educational Technologies, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA)

I think that a discredited book would likely get more use in a library collection due to the hype around the situation. I think that if it falls within the guidelines of the weeding policy then it could be removed, but if not, then it could become a teaching moment and used as an example during instruction of what constitutes scholarly misconduct.

RESPONSE:
Submitted by Paul Metz (Assistant to the Dean for Special Projects, University Libraries, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA)

The question you posed on COLLDV-L never came up quite that directly in my 20 years as head of collection development at Virginia Tech, but for what it’s worth here’s some of what I did, and some of what I think I would or would not have done, when/if such issues arose: Fatwa vs. S. Rushdie, we put The Satanic Verses on Reserve for its own protection “room temperature confusion” (if you remember the cold fusion controversy out of Utah), Soviet-style Lamarckian evolution (hopelessly wrong), other discredited science — we never went looking for it because we weren’t going to pull it from the stacks even if we found it. You have to trust your readers, and I think that in the case you cited in your note that’s what I did, and some of what I think I would do — in other words, nothing.

Errata slips sent by the publishers of (usually) scientific journals — we were happy to tip them into the issues, though I’m not sure we always followed through and did so.

One of the most interesting issues for me was gift items. I didn’t mind having the very occasional book saying that global warming was all wrong, the occasional DVD from Scientology, the occasional item arguing against any gun regulation, because I think there’s a place for all views even if I find them nutso. But I was cautious and took only the occasional representative piece because I know that in these debates, one side is always much better funded than the other and so to take gifts too actually feeds a bias... just as the rich right in this country has very cleverly done by founding and underwriting innumerable “objective think tanks” like the CATO Institute.

RESPONSE:
Submitted Anonymously.

This sort of question came up in my library some years ago regarding a book by Louis Farrakhan. My opinion is that however a librarian may find a book reprehensible, and even if the material therein is considered or proven false, a decision must be made on the basis of the importance of the title for research and teaching. There are many books in the library based on incorrect or deliberately misleading research. Mein Kampf comes to mind. I think as a university library these materials must be made available to established scholars and budding scholars. Learning critical thinking and reading is part of the education process. In the case you cite, it appears that the history prize was taken away, which seems right for that body, however it is up to the librarian to decide the importance of the book for his collection. In this case since it is a controversial book I would keep it in the collection.

By the way we kept the Farrakhan book despite the demands of a member of the university community.

RESPONSE:
Submitted by John P. Abbott, MSMLS (Coordinator, Collection Management University Library, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC)

I thank Mr. McKinzie for raising the issue and opening an interesting discussion.

My view is retain it and forget about it. The postmodern library does not pretend to arbitrate absolute quality or accuracy in the materials it holds. If librarians understood deeply the areas in which we collect, we would know that there are thousands of books our shelves containing false or erroneous content. Almost every book I read in an area I understand well contains significant errors due either to typos, poor editing, or insufficient research. By McKinzie’s standard, we would block access to almost all Websites because they are inaccurate and knowingly inaccurate. Students today, after a life of Web-searching, are deeply skeptical and are unlikely to be significantly misled by Bellesiles’ book unless it is the only work they consult for their pro/con Eng 101 paper.

Out of date health works and other works that clearly put a reader in known danger deserve examination for w/d on the basis of content, but little else. Books are w/d everyday for lack of use or poor condition, but much rarely on a judgment about the scholarly quality of content.

Other books offer more significant challenges, e.g., The Anarchist’s Cookbook flapp of a decade ago. Here some of the “recipes” were rumored to blow up someone who cooked them. Here the danger was much more real. William Powell, the author, has publicly repudiated the book on Amazon: http://www.amazon.com/Anarchist-Cookbook-William-Powell/dp/0974458902/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1258038076&sr=1-1. A quick look at WorldCat indicates that 100s of libraries still hold the book.

Any danger, lack of quality, or betrayal of the scholarly enterprise by Bellesiles’ book seems trivial in comparison.

RESPONSE:
Submitted by Jack G. Montgomery (Associate Professor, Coordinator, Collection Services, Western Kentucky University Libraries, Bowling Green, KY)

This is a familiar topic for me. My friend and colleague, John Budd conducted his own research of Medline from 1966 to August 1997 revealed that 235 articles had been retracted, 86 of which were deemed to be due to misconduct. It was alarming to learn, however, that these 235 articles had been cited 2034 times even after the retraction notice had appeared. This issue speaks to long-term, largely irresolvable problems with the whole process of academic research and ethical standards.

As to this book, my thoughts and suggestions are as follows: I did not remove the discredited book from the shelves as, even as a fraudulent piece of scholarship. It could be an object of study for research on academic fraud. I did however, glue a disclaimer inside the book stating the issue but also stating that the book is retained for historical purposes and warning the patron to use this material at their own risk. Here is a sample label that was placed across from the title page of Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture.

“Attention: Discredited Research! Please be aware that this book and the research contained within it has been discredited and the research declared fraudulent by the peer-review process. We are retaining this title in our library for historical purposes only. Use this book at your own risk! WKU Libraries.”

RESPONSE:
Submitted by Douglas Black (Collection Development Librarian, Northern Michigan University, Marquette, MI)

While McKinzie does have a point regarding responsibility for our collections, I’d say his argument presents a false dichotomy between avoiding censorship and maintaining our integrity. As knowledge advances and cultural perspectives develop and change, it’s worth recording not only the honest errors arising from what simply had yet to be learned but also the hiccups and blind alleys arising from human nature. While Bellesiles’ intellectual fraud doesn’t rise to the level of Ptolemaic texts or Mein Kampf, I think the general principle still applies.

The fact that Arming America is unreliable gives it some value as part of the cultural debate surrounding its topic. From that perspective, it’s reasonably good material for continued on page 61.
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studying American political/cultural history. Alerting readers to the book’s history and current status, perhaps by taping or tipping in a respected review, or the publisher’s press release announcing the prize rescission (like errata), makes good sense. We routinely try to publicize our collections and let potential users know what great materials we have available; likewise, added information about individual items can enhance their value. I think that’s a more balanced approach to this particular dilemma than deaccessioning the book as if it had never appeared. The fact is that it did appear and has had some influence — both as it was intended and in how scholarly research is received — and librarians do have a role to play in recording those events as part of the human record. So much for a short comment... I’m looking forward to the compiled responses!

RESPONSE:
Submitted by Christy J. Wrenn
(Director of Library Services, Centenary College of Louisiana, Magale Library, Shreveport, LA)

As well as I remember, our good friend Oprah Winfrey was in this same pickle once when she interviewed John Frey regarding his book “A Million Little Pieces.” Boy was her face RED after the interview! However, her endorsement turned it into one of the top selling books of 2005, but she felt conned by the author. That book was not pulled from bookstore or library shelves.

This is the same type of situation with Steve McKinzie at Catawba College. Mr. McKinzie felt that he had to become one of the Library Police and save a college student(s) from ever reading this book, or using it as a reference in a term paper. According to him, this book did not stack up or was not written in a way that someone else thought that the book should have been written.

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been appointed Director of the Libraries at KAUST (King Abdullah University of Science and Technology). He assumed his duties in September 2009. KAUST is an international, graduate-level research university dedicated to inspiring a new age of scientific achievement. The University is set to open in September 2009 with degrees in 11 fields of study. The core campus is located on more than 36 square kilometers along the Red Sea at Thuwal — about 80 kilometers north of Saudi Arabia’s second largest city, Jeddah. www.kaust.edu.sa/

My son Raymond went to West Point many years ago so I was interested to read that Bryn Geffert, library director and associate professor of history at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, has been named Amherst College’s new librarian of the college. Geffert will start work at Amherst on Jan. 21, 2010. Particularly interested in research instruction, in librarians’ efforts to guide the changes afoot in academic publishing and in facilitating the digitization of special collections, Geffert was the “unanimous and enthusiastic choice of the search committee,” according to Amherst Dean of the Faculty Gregory S. Call. Geffert became the director of West Point’s library in 2008 and went on to help open and oversee the institution’s new library. A high school basketball and football official, Geffert also enjoys cross-country skiing and running and expressed delight about moving to a state “that enjoys good snowfalls and the Boston Marathon.” And I would say that’s a good thing! www.amherst.edu/

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