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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Infrastructure

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“Infrastructure” is a word we hear a lot these days, and frequently attached to the adjective “crumbling.” Bridges that collapse into rivers, banks that go under, airports where travelers don’t get out, hospitals where patients don’t get in, highways clogged with vehicles that don’t move. These and other sites of public dysfunction give journalists, bloggers, and everybody else plenty of room to point out that the basic structures all of us depend upon to go about our business are showing some age.

Libraries, on the other hand, boast splendid networks of infrastructure. Have a question? In case you do, there’s a Reference Librarian waiting behind the Reference Desk. Need a book? There’s an OPAC that might help, if you know how to use it, and if you don’t mind coming in to get the book, and if you can navigate our stacks.

The infrastructure problem slily alluded to here is not, of course, overdue. While some parts of library infrastructure bear loads that grow heavier, such as inter-library loan systems or public study or computing areas, other library systems suffer from underuse. OPAC searches are not burning up library servers. Nor is the Circulation Desk in constant pandemonium. And like the telephone booths that were once always nearby — on every street corner, in every lobby, in every store — Reference “service points” have been coming down in libraries. It’s hardly an unknown problem. What to Do About Reference? is a question raised in the library literature all the time.

On the other hand, What to Do About the Approval Plan? is a backroom question raised faintly at best in today’s literature. For decades approval plans have been a big part of the collection development infrastructure at academic libraries, while for years usage of print books has been shrinking at many of them. Some approval plans may have been trimmed in size, but each week on schedule most continue to deliver considerable numbers of books, each one of which just might circulate.

With a little luck you can still make a pay phone call on the street, even though they’ve hauled away most of the pay phones. It’s just a lot harder to find a booth now. Phone booths could come down because people have other ways to make calls. But if they hauled away a library’s approval plan because people aren’t calling for books like they did in the old days, what would you do then?

Libraries don’t have other good ways of acquiring large numbers of books. What about firm orders? you might ask. That would require more staff to create, tend, and receive the orders; as well as a selection effort to identify books to place orders for in the first place. This was a reason why approval plans grew as they did. They freed staff to do other things; or rather, they freed library administrators to free staff to do other things. They made it possible to rework the infrastructure.

Now libraries have the opposite problem. All the inertia is with the approval plan. It takes a lot of infrastructure to support one, not to mention the resulting books. Accept the books at a loading dock. Move them around on book trucks. Receive them at work stations. Display them for a week or two on special shelves. Hire and train technicians. Student workers, too. Write up the weekly schedule. Bring on selectors in their role. Educate the teaching faculty when you have to. House the books in the stacks.

Next, let’s not forget the approval plan profile. “I hate this more than anything in life” might be an extreme way of putting it, but once a subject selector did say that to me as I helpfully set out to work with him on defining his section of the profile. Extreme, sure, but over the years I witnessed many a selector more silently suffer the same agonies as I helpfully set out to work with him on defining his section of the profile. Extremes, when it comes to the approval plan. And that again would mean more firm orders — and where then to get the staff to perform, say, the extra pre-order searching? Pull them from the new digitization project or off the metadata team? Again, not likely.

Then, there’s workflow. Libraries have invested a lot over the past decade in retooling workflows from prior eras of book selection and acquisitions, meaning, principally, to retrain and reallocate staff. Oh no, time so soon to do that all over again?

Maybe not. Over the decades the approval plan idea has been nothing if not flexible. At first, libraries had more money for books than they were able to spend by placing orders for everything. Approval plans took care of that. Then money got tighter while academic and scientific book publishing exploded and the approval plan became the way for libraries to define the “core” of books they really needed. Then staffing got tighter and the easiest way to spend the budget, once more, was to grow the approval plan beyond the core. Meanwhile, book selecting became the lowest duty of selectors, who were all busier on other fronts and sometimes the approval plan kind of ran itself. At the same time, serials and then electronic resources began to eat up the book budget. A key component of book selection became coming up with the best way to cut the profile, often on the part of selectors who weren’t too familiar with actual book selecting, and at a time when some people weren’t so sure anymore that there really was a core, and others were starting to ask why the library still needed all those books in the first place.

That’s pretty much where we are today. How does it look for the approval plan? As infrastructure, how long until approval plans seem as ancient as Roman aqueducts in cities where citizens sip their sparkling water from bottles? In another column we’ll look at the approval plan’s prospects in a world where the biggest infrastructure problem might be the kind that isn’t crumbling.

And, for my last hoorah — how about this bad prediction? “This ‘telephone’ has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.” — Western Union internal memo, 1876. http://www.maniacworld.com/bad-predictions/telephone_has_too_many_shortcomings.html

See y’all in Charleston in November! 🏖️

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