Random Ramblings-A Digital Dilemma for Public Libraries

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presses far outweigh the differences. If we take a few quiet moments we will recognize that in many ways we are cut from the same cloth: we love words, we believe ideas matter, we are all, ultimately, members of the academy. We are adapting to a digital world as rapidly as we can and as rapidly as we can afford to. We also know, intuitively, that in the midst of information hyperabundance, society depends on us to develop and disseminate and archive reliable scholarship for the common good. My experience at Georgetown and my conversations with ARL librarians lead me toward hope about the future of effective collaborations between academic libraries and university presses — but it is a hope that must always be framed by a modest and realistic agenda.

Random Ramblings — A Digital Dilemma for Public Libraries

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A n undergraduate student at the library of a local mid-size university didn’t like the fact that the only copy of a book she needed to read for class was available only as an eBook. She asked the reference librarian if the library would order a print copy because she preferred that format. The librarian took her request and sent it up the administrative chain. After a bit, the answer worked its way back down to the student. While the response was phrased a bit more politely, its essence was “tough.” This academic library, like many, had a policy of not ordering material in multiple formats even if a user specifically requests another version for whatever reason.

This story, which I heard from a student in one of my classes, got me to thinking about how this scenario would play out in a public library. I can’t believe that the answer would be the same. In fact, a public library might have the same popular book in multiple formats — book, large print, CD audio book, CD audio cassette, and eBook. The public library would have even bought multiple copies of those items in high demand so that patrons didn’t have to wait forever.

Why the difference? The academic library has a captive audience that must complete required assignments with whatever information resources that the library provides unless students buy their own copies or have access to other libraries. If this student has required readings, she had better learn how to manipulate the eBook reader. If she had complained, I expect that the authority figures would repeat the standard response: “By avoiding buying books in multiple formats and in multiple copies, the collection has much more breadth and can therefore support the needs of more users.” I might then respond, “But not this one.” Finally, one student has virtually no power to change this decision. I’m not even sure that a faculty member could unless the faculty member were particularly powerful or influential within the academic community.

The public library, on the other hand, continued on page 64

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has to be more responsive. If the public library
turned down the user in such a situation, this
user would potentially vote “no” in the next
millage election, could complain to the mayor
or the city manager, might write a letter to the
local newspaper, and possibly tell friends and
family about the negative experience with the
public library. Unlike the student in the acade-
mic institution or even in the school media
center, a single user has much more leverage
in the public library. This leverage has limits,
since I will admit that a user who wanted the
library to purchase a vinyl record, a betamax
tape, or even an audiotape might get turned
down; but this decision would rest upon poli-
cies that eliminated entire classes of formats
rather than not duplicating a permissible format
for the user who wanted it.

A corollary from this principle is that mov-
ing into the digital age may have more costs
for the public library because it can’t abandon
users who aren’t ready for the transition. For
early adopters, the public library will be asked
to consider eBooks in multiple formats, lots of
computers with Internet access, and download-
able films and music. Yet the public library
won’t be able to abandon the traditional for-
mats for those who want them. This principle
may extend to at least some reference materials
for those patrons who will tell the librarian: “I don’t like those new fangled inven-
tions like the computer. I don’t know how to
use one and would like to continue to find the
materials I need on the shelves.” I doubt that
many public libraries will have a good response
other than continuing to provide at least the
most used materials for pre-computer users.

I also don’t want readers to assume that the
public library is looking at a generation gap.
A modest computer and an Internet connection
are luxuries that a family facing foreclosure
might decide to forego. (I’ll admit that cell
phones may be an exception to this rule.) The
children of parents who don’t like computers
may not see their importance for their children.
Last week at a local library conference, I heard
the story of parents who wouldn’t let their
children bring home free computers because
the parents would be financially responsible
for their loss. Given the possibilities of dam-
ge or theft, I would judge that the families
were making a rational decision to turn them
down. Those of us in the middle class are too
likely to assume that the rest of the world is
just like us.

I don’t see any easy answers for public
libraries except to wait until the world changes
enough that no one will seriously protest tak-
ing away the pre-digital products. Doing so
will require monitoring use before eliminating
older formats. The public library may be able
to do so more quickly for less popular items as
their use falls or for subject areas where digital
expertise can be assumed. The computer books
could go digital while the cookbooks would stay
in print. Finally, the public library might
simply have the policy of saying yes whenever
a user, like the student at the beginning of this
column, asks for a different format. “We aim
to please. How quickly do you need it?”

As an addendum to this column, I asked the
readers of the Colleges Libraries Discussion
List if their library would buy a print copy of
an eBook already in the collection if a reader
requested a duplicate print copy. I also asked
for comments whether the status of the user
(faculty or student) or an explicit mention of a
digital divide issue would make a difference.
Out of the eleven responses, seven libraries
would purchase a duplicate print copy. Four
didn’t have any conditions. Three did: “after
checking with faculty”; “for compelling rea-
sons”; “for a faculty request.” One response
was “perhaps” with more weight given to a
faculty request. Three responses stated that
the library wouldn’t buy a duplicate print copy.
One librarian said that the library would get a
print copy on interlibrary loan.

Broader issues included comments on how
important eBooks had become because the
eBook packages provided so many books at a
relatively low cost per title, but one librarian
brought up the concern about whether these
were the titles needed by faculty and students.
One response to a “no” answer asked why the
library wouldn’t purchase the format that a user
wanted, the main point of this column. One
library still had a policy of strongly preferring
print to digital. The digital divide issue wasn’t
all that important in the responses but might
be a small factor for some. One response
indicated that their institution required all stu-
dents to have a laptop so that the digital divide
didn’t apply.

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Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of
A Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 12:
What’s Your Role? Executive or Staff?

by Richard Abel (Aged Independent Learner) <rabel@q.com>

A
ter four years, the approval plan
forms and the “backlist” of titles were
available electronically, with the input
provided by punch cards. We modified the
approval plan for non-subject parameters to
eliminate superfluous forms, and libraries now
received only forms for titles in the library’s
profile subject areas or for titles selected by
managers as suitable for their collection.

A request by a couple of the Atomic Com-
mission Agency libraries inaugurated the
firm’s first venture into cataloging as the ACA
libraries awaited Library of Congress catalog-
ing for newly purchased titles, that created a
backlog and delayed circulation. Therefore,
we agreed to perform original cataloging if
the Library of Congress provided no catalog-
record within a brief period. This worked
so well that we began to provide this service
to other libraries. All of this, of course, meant
that we inputted LC cataloging on a regular
basis. We studied our cataloging process for
purposes of timing, comparison, and other
future uses.

In the meantime, several libraries asked us
to select and provide books for new “undergradu-
ate libraries” that were under construction. We
carefully reviewed those institutions’ current
course catalogs to determine a balance among
subject areas. (We were always given a dollar
amount, a budget timeline, and the final size of
the planned opening collection.) Then it was
back to a far more extensive body of bibiliog-
raphies to assist me in making the selections.
One of the more interesting and challenging
collections was the University of California at
Los Angeles. I met with the acquisitions staff
and a group of faculty library advisors on this
project. One of the faculty advisors included
a distinguished professor of Classics. The
advisory committee decided that our firm should
send in 10,000 books initially so that they could
determine if the content quality and subject distribu-
tion of the selected titles. If they found our

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