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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 slyly 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 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.

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 this expressive colleague did. Writing a profile is work. Some people dislike it. Others invest themselves in this work, take pride in it, enjoy it even. For a library, the process brings staff together into a social experience that can at some moments be as solemn as a courtroom and at others seem more like a quilting bee. Either way, the profile becomes part of a library’s collection development wiring. Do we just rip it out?

Then there’s a book budget to spend, a budget over the years nurtured lovingly enough that spending seven figures on new print books annually is not an unusual thing for the top tier of libraries, and high six figures not unusual in tiers below that. The staff isn’t in place to spend that kind of money in any way other than through an approval plan. If usage justifies the money, fine, but if making that case becomes difficult, what does a library do?

A library could say, Well we’ll just buy the books we need, then. And that could either mean saying, Thanks but we don’t need nearly so much money for print books anymore, which isn’t especially likely. Or it could mean saying, From now on we’ll just respond to demand for books, instead of anticipating the demand. 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.