November 1998

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Recommended Citation

Fast, Barry (1998) "Issues in Vendor-Library Relations - The Place of the Library," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 10: Iss. 5, Article 31.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3010>

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Issues in Vendor-Library Relations — The Place of the Library

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For twenty-five years we have rented a summer house on an island off the coast of Maine. The island lies three miles off shore, and it could be a movie set for the idealized New England summer colony. Half the island is heavily wooded, with hidden footpaths winding through the gloom created by towering fir trees. The other half is open meadows filled with wildflowers, alive with butterflies, bees, and flashy yellow finches. The perimeter of the island is classic Maine granite and schist, interrupted by two small sandy beaches. The south shore, facing the open sea, is ceaselessly pounded by the surf, while the north shore, facing the mainland, provides sheltered anchorage for our boats. About a hundred families live on the island in the summer, in cottages that perch on the rocks above the sea.

We've rented many of the cottages over the years, and each has a bit of our history attached to it. My younger daughter broke her leg in one cottage, and we called the Coast Guard to rush her to the hospital in the middle of the night. My older daughter fell in love with her future husband in another cottage. My brother wrote his PhD thesis in a cottage that sports a tower; he worked in a room at the very top of the tower, surrounded by sea views on all sides. My sister-in-law was married in the island's church. While we were in a big rambling old cottage, a friend died on the tennis court; when we rented one near the beach another friend drowned while scuba diving. Last summer, in another cottage, our grandson joined the group photo that is pro-

summered there since the beginning of their time. The Indians maintained the right to summer there forever, and so they do now, mingling with us newcomers on the beach, yet still preserving their customs and privacy. The four founding families spent the first few summers in tents, playing at living like natives, roughing it while they divided up the real estate and planned their colony. By all accounts these founders were not sentimentalists; they had made their fortunes in shipping, railroads and logging. They were

determined to build a real civilization, and their model for civil living was the New England village. By the end of the 19th century, the island had all the trappings of a community: a post office to communicate with the outside world; a town hall for democracy to function; a simple white church with dominating spire to worship their god; a tea shop with a wide veranda for socializing over lunch; a big barn to house tools; wagons and the horses for moving freight around the island; and a library.

This is not the kind of library you would expect to see in a community that exists a scant two months a year. It is, by New England standards, rather grand. It is constructed of intricately fitted rocks gathered from the beaches. The floors are polished pine, the two big rooms soar to the beamed roof, and a large

fireplace warms the reading room on cool rainy days. The periodical collec-

tion runs the gamut from *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* (each a day late) to all sorts of nature and literary magazines. But it is the book collection that inspires the visitor, and each volume is represented by a well-worn card in the mahogany catalog drawers that dominate the front room.

I love this old catalog, and sometimes I spend my library time looking at cards instead of books. I can tell instantly that a certain novel was a bestseller in 1923; the back of the card where each circulation is recorded

nearly filled up that summer. Some novels seem to be favorites for years; others are just a flash in the pan. Once in a while a novel will lay dormant for twenty or thirty years, hardly noticed, and then a new movie, the death of the author, or a re-discovery will result in a flurry of checkouts. My wife once created a run on a book called *The Harbor* by a forgotten author named **Ernest Poole**. Every few years she mentions the book in con-

versation, and a new circulation card has to be stapled to the old ones, further proof that word of mouth is the most pow-

erful book promotion method. I know the reading tastes of my neighbors, and have become so expert at this that I can predict whose names will appear on the back of the card. I know who likes the intellectual non-fiction, who is a Civil War buff, who is a murder mystery fanatic, who sits on a porch reading dreamy romances. This is useful information at cocktail parties when stuck for a conversation topic. It is most helpful information when I'm not quite sure what book to read next. I simply look for a name I trust, someone whose taste runs along the same lines as mine, and I am almost never disappointed. I guess there are those who worry about privacy, but if you knew the prim and proper ladies who have been selecting books during the last thirty years or so, there is no danger that a neighbor will know you read only salacious books. There are none. And besides, on a small island everyone knows everything about you already. Gossip beats tennis, fishing, boating and sun bathing as the island's leading recreation.

I often marvel that our island has such a fine library. I see too many towns where the local library is a storefront, and those are permanent year round communities. I will grant you that we are not a poor village. Our library is well-endowed and staffed by dedicated volunteers. We support our library because we believe what the founders of our colony knew: that a library is an essential element of civilization. It was, to them, as important as the buildings that enabled outside communication, housed their government, reflected their beliefs, provided a social set-

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A library is an essential element of civilization.

duced annually, recording all the island's children and the flock of new babies that arrive each year. An old woman, who's been old for twenty-five years, sponsors the photos, providing each child with an ice cream cone from the "ice cream fairy." We have twenty-five of these photos, arranged chronologically on the wall in our den, and they show our daughters and all the others, advancing from innocence to experience over a quarter of a century.

In the 1870s four wealthy men bought the island from the Abenaki Indian tribe that had

Adventures in Librarianship— Deflection Development

by Ned Kraft <NKRAFT@sil.si.edu>

Last week we received a letter from a youngster — let's call him "Kevin" — in Wyoming who asked the Smithsonian Libraries to "send everything you have about space." Of course the first thing a harried librarian in a big research institution thinks is, "Sure, kid. Just tell me where to park the tractor trailer." I would never, of course, say that out loud.

Although librarians might see his request as hugely wacky, you can't help admiring young Master Kevin. He wants the last word, the best information. He's turning to what he believes to be an expert source. None of that mere dictionary-diving, encyclopedia-skimming, or Web-pasting—the guileless plagiarism that mimics research among grade-schoolers and slacker undergrads—none of that for our man Kevin. No siree. He wants the real scoop.

Trouble is, the real scoop is far too big for Kevin's plate. Often it seems far too big for our own plate. Kevin imagines some armful of books and papers, a gathering of all the crucial bits and pretty pictures, while our shelves bulge and creak, the extra space compact shelving gave us nearly gone.

Patricia Senn Breivik (*Information Literacy: Educating Children for the 21st Century*) says that, "In 1954, information doubled every twenty years; now it doubles every 30 to 36 months. By the year 2000 it will double every 12 to 18 months." And for a time, American libraries tried to buy it all, backed by our "just in case" philosophy. We moved away from careful selection thinking that a librarian today cannot accurately predict what may be important ten or twenty years from now.

Thirty years ago, in "An Argument for Selectivity in the Acquisition of Materials for Research Libraries" (*Library Quarterly*, July 1967), Margit Kraft (no relation to me, or none that I know of) argued that American

libraries had not been discriminating, had been too enamored with size and had allowed their collections to grow too far too fast.

Ms. Kraft held as the ideal the "jewel box" libraries of Europe—collections of the finest works in a given field, not collections of every work in a given field. "The most vital decision any library can make," she argued, "is what should or should not be added to the collection." She quotes Nietzsche: "The superfluous is the enemy of the necessary."

Shrinking monograph budgets have, of course, forced us to be more selective ... relatively. From **ARL Libraries: Purchasing Power Continues to Decline (190/purchasing.html)**, we hear the ominous news that, "while ARL libraries more than doubled expenditures for serials from 1986 to 1996, they purchased 7% fewer serials. During the last decade, libraries shifted expenditures for monographs to meet some of the demands of increasing serial prices, thereby reducing the number of monographs purchased by 21%."

Some might argue that, if Margit Kraft was right, perhaps this is not a bad thing, pushing librarians to plan and discriminate, forcing our growth to slow to a manageable rate. As a sign of this trend, in 1994 ARL adopted a new strategy to move away from its emphasis on quantitative measures (collection size included), toward new ways of measuring quality (*In Search of New Measures*).

I occasionally fantasize that selectivity, fully and enthusiastically embraced, may some day be the librarian's ace in the hole, our salvation. Perhaps as automation improves (or that IT automation improves) to the point where it threatens further the role of the librarian, this will be our last fortress, an exclusively human activity. Recall how big an issue "selection" was during the recent difficulties at the public libraries in the state of ...

well, I wouldn't want to get myself or *ATG* in legal trouble by naming names, but it's an island ... begins with an "H." The crucial argument there was that selection is not only an exclusively human activity, but exclusively local as well.

If all this sounds lovely to those of us who believe in careful selection, if it sounds like progress, at the other end of the spectrum the Web is asking us, once again, to take it all, every bit of informational flotsam, every junk site, every lunatic's rave. Oh well.

To our surprise, Master Kevin's letter was followed by a slew of similar letters from a class full of junior researchers. Little Amy wants, "Zack Newton's book on gravity." Young Justin asks, "Do you have Einstein's law for relatives? Can I see it?" And his buddy, Bobby So-and-so, seems to think we can actually supply him with "the Right Brothers." I wish we could, Bobby, I wish we could.

So our friend Kevin was not quite the admirable iconoclast we thought. He was, instead, the tip of the iceberg—the first in a class whose teacher must have suggested the Smithsonian as the font of all (or most) knowledge. Just as Kevin would be overwhelmed by the information available on his subject, we are overwhelmed by the curiosity of his class and their bottomless information needs. We (very gently) deflected the questions, referring those quizzical kids to their local library—with the best of motives, of course.

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ting, and sheltered their equipment. In creating this idealized community (after all, no one really lives in a summer colony) they could not imagine it without a library. It is a central part of who we are as a commu-

nity, and there is always an aura of sanctity about it. Rambunctious children quiet down without their parents' scolding; rain-soaked people enter in a flurry of folding umbrellas and squishy sneakers, and immediately seem calm, at peace. Reading a day-old newspaper means that time is an illusion; it doesn't matter if I know the fire happened a day later. It is a place that encourages civility and consideration; we talk softly so as not to disturb. How many public buildings foster that kind of behavior? Our town hall

echoes with heated words during town meeting; our tea shop veranda erupts with laughter and loud greetings. We mill about the post office waiting for the mail to be sorted and then seem to all push at once to our mail boxes. But in the library we are truly civilized, somehow responding to the realization that this is a place filled with imagination, knowledge, and delight.

For those of us who spend so much time working in the library or dealing with libraries, it is easy to forget the force, the influence, the place a library holds in our community.