Against the Grain

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sotto voce - Seeing Beyond Problems

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sotto voce — Seeing Beyond Problems

by **Bob Schatz** (Vice-President of Sales, Academic Book Center) <bobs@acbc.com>

The July 31st edition of the **Chronicle of Higher Education** includes an interesting article about the rising, and complex, problem of non-university members invading libraries to gain access to the Internet. As those of you who are already dealing with this in your libraries know, this problem exists in a number of layers: The number of outsiders using library computers are keeping students and faculty from having access for "legitimate" use related to their research and studies. (Will we someday watch a movie about how the cure for a particularly nasty disease was missed because the potential discoverer could not access a library computer to complete his/her research?)
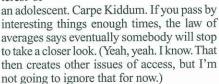
Some users, mainly young males, are viewing, and sometimes saving as wallpaper, pornographic images. (And we're not talking about reproductions of the Birth of Venus either.) If you think that we can all agree that this type of access is probably not something that most universities will find appropriate, the article points out that some librarians have been accused of exercising unacceptable censorship for chastising boys, some as young as nine years old, for viewing adult sites on library computers. There is mounting concern that libraries will be held liable for corrupting these young boys when their particular use of library computers is discovered by parents. From a public relations standpoint, let alone a legal one, worry runs deep in most university libraries experiencing this phenomenon.

This problem is being analyzed and dealt with on a number of fronts in the effected communities. Policies are being examined and rewritten, papers are being published (including one to come out soon in the **Journal of Informational Ethics**), and librarians are grappling with the effects of having to add "Internet-access police" to their already many responsibilities.

I don't have any glib solutions to offer to this growing problem. It fascinates me, though, how changing technologies bring these unexpected consequences. While on the surface, this may strike outsiders as something funny, I don't doubt the real and significant impact this has on libraries already straining to efficiently serve their community of users.

What really interests me, though, is the absence in the article of anyone who is dealing with this issue as an opportunity. In twenty years of working with guys like **Dan Halloran** and **Barry Fast**, I've learned to always look for opportunities within problems. I think one exists even here. Try this out as an idea:

While these kids are today straining library resources and raising legitimate ethical concerns about access and censorship, they are also potential future members of the same academies they're invading. Instead of prohibiting access to computers by non-university personnel, how about creating "visitor's computer room" in the library and placing it as far from the front door as possible? I'd be particularly concerned that pre-university age kids have access to it. The reason for placing this room at the far end of the library would not be to discourage kids from using it. On the contrary, it would be there to have an excuse to show every kid going there just how cool libraries can be. I'd make sure the route there went past, if not through, the map room, special collections, the periodicals collection, and every other library locale that might conceivably pique the interest of an adolescent. Carpe Kiddum. If you pass by interesting things enough times, the law of averages says eventually somebody will stop to take a closer look. (Yeah, yeah. I know. That then creates other issues of access, but I'm not going to ignore that for now.)

Is anyone polling the outsider kids who use university library computers to see who they are? I'm willing to bet that many of them come from homes that don't have computers, though some are just there to keep from getting caught viewing smut on their home PCs. If I'm right, many of these kids may not think of themselves as future university attendees. Yet here they are, hanging out on university campuses. Before we think of effective ways to throw their sorry butts off campus, I hope we'll seize the opportunity to show them what neat places universities and libraries can be. If we make them feel unwelcome now, even though they are creating problems for more legitimate library users, will we stifle their willingness to be a part of the academy in the future? Some of them, too, represent people who will discover cures to diseases or invent ways to improve our lives. Most, though, are just people for whom a college education represents a first step in creating more hope for themselves and their immediate families. Today's hormonal 12-year-old boy may be tomorrow's young adult looking for a way to have a life just a little better than his parents. Let's think about his needs too before we send him back out onto the streets.

Academic Book Trends

ties might. Buying from bestseller lists, for instance, is a form of, "I'll have whatever she's having." To a different extent, so is buying from a peer-library comparison list, or from a list of "best books," or from *Books for College Libraries*.

An interesting case in point was described in the **Back Talk** column from *Against the Grain*, in June, 1998 (vol. 10, no. 3, p.94). In that column, **Stewart Lillard**, of the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, compared a list of **Yankee Book Peddler**'s best-selling Physics titles to his collection, and found that his library already owned thirty of the fifty best sellers. In an editorial note at the end of the article, **Katina Strauch** describes the reaction of her Physics liaison at the College of Charleston, who saw the list and said, "Order whatever we don't have!" Katina asks: Are bestseller lists important selection tools? Librarians would probably agree that, in many ways, they are. Are approval plans best seller lists? Not at all—though vendors may wish, from time to time, that they were.

Oregon Trails

duction to Bibliography. **Philip Gaskell**'s *A New Introduction to Bibliography* was not in the box and is not on my shelves, so it must be in another box. If you are wondering about books by **Fredson Bowers**, I never owned any and probably never will. There might have been a time, but now he is just too clinical. I do wonder, however, what he would make of all this electronic stuff.

For some reason, most of the books in this box have some personal association beyond just being a favorite book, although one of my favorites, *From Here to Eternity*, happened to be in the box, too. But I am talking about something like my copy of **R.L. Stevenson**'s *Silverado Squatters*, printed by the **Grace Hoper Press** and for sale at the **Silverado Museum** in St. Helena, California (Napa Valley). My copy was given to me, along with a tour of the museum, by a library school classmate, **Steven Corey**, who along with **Norman H. Strouse**, the museum's benefactor, and **Ellen Shaffer**, long-time curator of the museum, put the collection together. Sadly, none of the three are with us any longer, and Steve passed on way too soon but not before showing a discriminating taste in rare books and fine printing. His collection was offered for sale in a special catalog issued by the **Brick Row Book Shop** but after **Franklin Gilliam** had sold the shop and moved away.

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