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Adventures in Librarianship: Deflection Development

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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*).

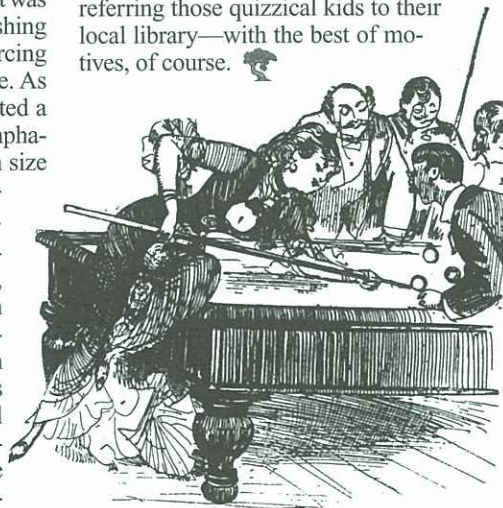
I occasionally fantasize that selectivity, fully and enthusiastically embraced, may some day be the librarian's ace in the hole, our salvation. Perhaps as automation improves (or that IT automation improves) to the point where it threatens further the role of the librarian, this will be our last fortress, 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.