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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Not Good at What They Do

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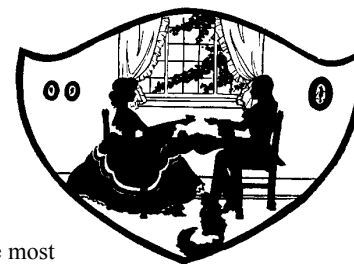
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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Not Good at What They Do



Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services) <bnardini@couttsinfo.com>

The other day while minding my business walking down one of the long white hallways of Ingram's "Building 14" where I work in La Vergne, Tennessee, I overheard a conversation in one of the offices as I passed by. Someone was describing someone else as being "good at what they do."

That common phrase has always struck me as a little odd. Mainly since you can't be good at what you don't do. Sometimes I've heard the phrase used as a kind of backhand semi-compliment, to mean that someone is indeed good at something they do, but according to tone and context, the unspoken message is that they are not so good at other things they do. But other times it's meant as an out-and-out compliment, possibly expressed as "good at what they do," with the emphasis, meaning either that someone is good at everything they do, or a notch down, that they are only good at part of what they do.

So to one degree or another, my Ingram colleagues were saying something at least mildly positive.

All this reminded me of a program I attended at this past ALA conference in San Diego. There were four well-known speakers. Their topic was "Is Selection Dead?" A lot of people must have wanted to find out, since the program drew a full house in a large room, SRO in fact. Speaker after speaker said that the prognosis isn't good for selection in academic libraries, that the pulse is weak. Selection is in its "twilight," the job of selectors has "morphed" — those were among the gentler words we heard. Statistics were presented, harsh numbers showing that if you found yourself at the betting window of a race track, you wouldn't want to put even \$2 of your money on the horse named "Book Selector."

Today we hear all the time that the bets selectors place on the books they choose for their collections are way too often throwaways. That there's hardly any collections money left anyhow. That patrons — meaning anyone, really — would do a better job with the money that is left. We heard, when you get down to it, that selectors are not good at what they do.

Of course nobody ever comes out and actually says it that plainly, but when it comes to selectors, that's the message these days. In fact I don't remember a group of librarians who have received the public "beating," as one of the San Diego speakers put it, that selectors have taken in recent years. The closest parallel I can think of is catalogers, who used to get knocked regularly for being reclusive social misfits, who turned out a miniscule number of cataloging records per week, records that didn't matter much anyway, with their manuals of codified rules and procedures that only they understood or cared about. But catalogers fought back like tigers. They discovered metadata, and ran with it. They invented acronyms that sounded more interesting than AACR2 ever did, such as FRBR and RDA. People began paying attention to catalogers.

But selectors have taken it all lying down so far. They have not fought back. Maybe they are too busy promoting information literacy. Maybe they are occupied all the time with faculty liaison duties. Maybe they are too busy managing the institutional repository. Or too busy setting up arrangements for their patrons to select the books. Or maybe they really don't have an answer to the negative performance reviews they now receive so regularly and so publicly for the job they do in carrying out what used to be considered, and not all that long

ago, the most prestigious, most important job in the library, book selection.

That's nothing like the selectors I remember. Having visited libraries across North America for some twenty-five years on behalf of companies who offer approval plans, I've probably had more meetings with more academic library selectors than anyone in history, one-on-one meetings in their offices, small group meetings in conference rooms, meetings with a dozen or more selectors at once in wood-paneled, trophy-room, showpiece spaces with portraits of university dignitaries of the past hung on the walls, in between shelves of old books captive behind grilles in cases that were never unlocked.

The selectors I remember always had an answer. When I started out in the mid-1980s, selectors ruled the roost. Everyone catered to them. I remember early on visiting a big library in the Midwest where there was a selector who wanted to meet with me to discuss problems he'd had with our approval plan. I had heard stories about this selector, who from most accounts ate acquisitions staff members alive and had the same taste for vendor representatives. His office was deep in the lower levels of a library building that, to a non-native, was nearly un-navigable. As I descended through warrens of stacks, in and out of surprising dead-end turns, and across unmapped annexes of the building, I thought of Kurtz and *Heart of Darkness*. I wondered how long it would take me to find my way out.

Kurtz was pleasant that day. I heard later that sometimes he was. And of course that sometimes he wasn't. In any case, "he built some great collections," one of the other librarians told me. No doubt he did, from his office fastness crammed with books, catalogs, national bibliographies, and, since he was the European history selector, paper bibliographic slips, white ones from the **Library of Congress** as well as piles of others in a spectrum of colors from the vendors who came from the respective countries and regions of the continent and UK.

Little did I know it, but I was witnessing the beginning of the end for bibliographers whose job was to "build great collections." Whether or not a book circulated anytime soon was beside the point for them, then. Some were scholars. They often had languages. Sometimes they had good stories of travel abroad for their research or book-buying. Quite a few were Ph.D.s or almost-Ph.D.s, usually from History or English, who hadn't gotten a teaching job and ended up as librarians, sometimes happily, sometimes with a measure of bitterness. My encounters were not always as pleasant as my

continued on page 77

Collecting to the Core from page 75

academic disciplines. Without **Jane Jacobs**, major themes in urban studies would not exist as they do now: the advantages of mixed-use zoning, the injunction that planners should seek input from community members, and the observation that neighborhoods have natural, organic rhythms are all firmly established in urban studies and in urban planning. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* is essential not only to an urban studies collection. Reverberations of **Jacobs'** theories can be found in numerous other social disciplines, making this the exceptional transdisciplinary and transnational work. Her discussion of "eyes on the street" and the role of "social capital" in functioning communities remains relevant

to fields like sociology, and her emphasis on mixed-income housing influences economic study. Academic libraries may very well retain multiple copies of this canonical work. It has remained relevant to the undergraduate curriculum, as well as to the general public, for the last fifty years and will likely remain fundamental for the next fifty. 🌸

Endnotes

1. **Jacobs, Jane.** *The Death and Life of Great American Cities.* New York: Random House, 1961.*

2. **Manshel, Andrew.** "Enough with Jane Jacobs Already." *Wall Street Journal.* 29 June 2010. Web. 7 March 2011.

Editor's note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries.*

Vendor Library Relations from page 76

appointment that day. Some could be arrogant, obtuse, dismissive. Some would have as little as possible to do with you, as the vendor rep. Others would launch impromptu lectures on some point of minutiae that would carry on and on and leave you, or leave an entire roomful, weary with boredom.

But more often these selectors were delightful, engaged with their subject, engaged with the library and the university, and engaged with you as the vendor making rounds. You could learn a lot from them, about subject areas, about publishers, about the book trade. They might wear their learning lightly or they might be bombastic about it, they might be businesslike or they might be witty and sarcastic, they might be charming or they might be peculiar, they might be organized or they might be in perpetual disarray, but they knew their stuff. These selectors were good at what they did.

Then book selection changed into a part-time job, for selectors who might have little or no background in their assigned areas and whose real focus at work was someplace other than collection development. Their job was not to build great collections, but to spend the book money they had — which was often a small amount — as wisely as they could manage to, while engaging more of themselves with the online world developing so quickly around them. The selectors who remained book-oriented began to seem out-of-step. When administrators began to look at how often books circulated, a page had certainly turned.

Today many libraries are focused on turning over some selection duties, at least, to their patrons. Occasionally in these earlier days members of the teaching faculty were involved closely enough in book selection that you encountered these patrons face-to-face. There was one fast-growing new state university where I went every year. It was not well known nationally, but even so was an up-and-coming

institution, already a large one, with faculty who came from everywhere. At this school there was a member of the philosophy department who had the librarians more or less terrorized. I would meet with her alone, since everyone else would clear out when her session came around on the agenda.

Her Ph.D. was from an elite national university and her mission at this new institution seemed to be to do everything in her power to transform what she could at her sprawling new campus into a respectable home. The library was within her reach, and she was so controlling there that for several years, I had things set up so that we mailed weekly paper selection slips to her house in a nearby suburb.

One year the budget news looked grim, and the focus of my visit was to cut the size of the approval plan. She and I sat across from one another at one end of a long rectangular table in a conference room which of course we had to ourselves. At one point I suggested that books from a certain publisher, one which I knew was prestigious, were of consistent enough quality that they might remain in the approval plan without any change.

She stiffened, sat up, dropped whatever thought she'd had, and looked straight at me, more engaged with me at that moment in fact than I'd ever seen. "I'm one of the leading philosophers in the country," she told me, "and *I know* which publishers are appropriate for this library." Of course I backed off, but wondered to myself why it was, if she was one of the leading philosophers in the country, that she was spending her time to meet with me.

When I returned to the office — this was the pre-Web era — from curiosity I looked her up in the "Author" volumes of *Books in Print*. To my surprise, she had two or three books to her credit, including one from an Ivy League university press. If that meant anything at all, she was one of the leading philosophers in the country.

If it had been up to me to pick selectors, I'd have taken Kurtz any day. 🍌

Rumors from page 74

Huffington Post, **AOL**, and **Ariana Huffington** herself. We do indeed live in interesting times! See "Why Tasini's Blogger Lawsuit Against the Huffington Post Makes No Sense" by **Dylan Stableford**. <http://www.thewrap.com/media/column-post/why-tasini-lawsuit-against-huffington-post-makes-no-sense-26399> **Jeff Bercovici** "AOL-HuffPo Suit Seeks \$105 million" <http://blogs.forbes.com/jeffbercovici/2011/04/12/aol-huffpo-suit-seeks-105m-this-is-about-justice/> <http://buscainc.blogspot.com/2011/04/thanks-to-all-of-visitors-to-busca-at.html>

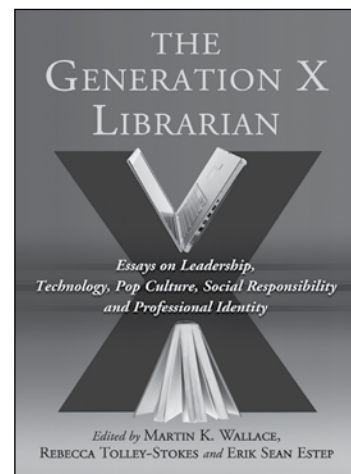
Speaking of the **Charleston Conference** — the **31st** is coming up. Can you believe it? I sure can't! We have already gotten lots of emails and phone calls about the **2011 Charleston Conference** "**Something's Gotta Give!**" (November 2-5) and the **Vendor Showcase** (November 2). The whole **Charleston Conference team** (at least most of them) are meeting this very weekend in

Charleston at **Katina's** house on the **Citadel** campus. And some will be calling in on **Skype** and others will be using cell phones but we will be assembled to work out several of the issues with registration and a new Website among other details. <http://www.katina.info/conference>

Oh! And the **Charleston Conference Call for Papers** is up and we have already gotten submissions. Was reading that **TRLN (the Triangle Libraries Network)** has received a grant from the **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** to develop business models and licensing terms for the **cooperative acquisition of eBooks** and **TRLN** plans to present some of their findings at the **2011 Charleston Conference**. Ho ha! For more information, see the entire press release at <http://www.against-the-grain.com/2011/03/trln-to-investigate-e-book-models-with-mellon-foundation-grant/>. www.katina.info/conference

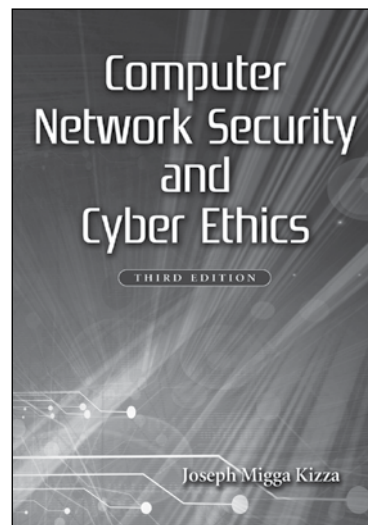
Well, they have squeezed me out of space in this issue so I have to sign off. **Rumors** will be continued in June and on the **ATG NewsChannel**. I have a lot more to say! Have you visited? www.against-the-grain.com/ 🍌

 **McFarland**



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