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Notes from Mosier-In the House of Wind and Rain

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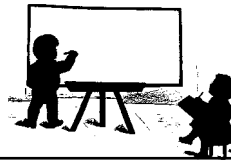


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Notes from Mosier — In the House of Wind and Rain



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“In praise and support of the (very) small.” Well, readers, I’ve just taken up my duties as Library Director of the **Langlois Public Library**, located in Langlois, Oregon. We’re the westernmost library in the lower 48, on the south Oregon coast, about halfway between Bandon and Port Orford. (My friend **Dan Masoni**, director at the **Unalaska Public Library** in the Aleutians, reminds me his is THE westernmost library in the U.S.).

Langlois is a very small town blessed with a very good library. It’s testimony to how devoted and supportive the patron base is that we have an excellent collection, a strong and active Friends group, an engaged and dedicated board, a fairly new and quite functional building, a great consortium with other libraries in the county, and a great staff. It’s a spectacular place in which to live (although in the last week we’ve had 100-mph winds and parts of Highway 101 have been under water; it’s also a tsunami risk zone).

So I’m entering the next phase of my career, directing a library that serves as library, community center, and an almost daily base for a core of patrons who rely on us for books, internet access, DVDs, and more. It’s a challenge I very much look forward to.

We’re so far south on the coast we’re beyond day trippers from Portland or even Eugene, and we’re too far north for most Californians. We have a lot of local businesses devoted to sustainable agriculture, grass-fed beef, and life off the grid. Today one of my patrons brought me a huge bag of Matsutake mushrooms (this part of the coast is mushroom — and oyster — heaven); I tried to pay him, but he wouldn’t hear of it. These things sell for \$25 a pound here and over \$100 in Japan.

The dynamics of small public libraries are very different from the academy; it’ll be a steep learning curve. Little in library school teaches you about special districts, dealing with boards and patron groups, and the sometimes gritty aspects of managing a small library. That said, the other directors have been enormously gracious (including **Buzzy Nielsen**, now director at the **Hood River Public Library District**, who began his career here); I look forward to working with them.

My work in Holmes County back in Ohio well served to prepare me for this job, and I’m very grateful to the staff there for all their help. After nearly thirty years as a book vendor, it’s a refreshing and compelling position to find one in as a library director. I’ll keep you posted! 🐾

- Should vendors protect themselves by discouraging a particular format (or formats) in standing orders and approval plans?

Today, a dichotomy between hardcover and paperback seems like a relatively simple way to structure the problem of content formats. Of course, a choice between paperback and hardcover is still frequently available for print books. But by posing **Ogburn’s** question in the present day and re-contextualizing both the subtle expectations and attendant questions, things become more complicated.

- With the ascension of eBooks to “mainstream” status, do we all have new expectations about the role of libraries in the information marketplace and their underwriting of scholarly communication? If the tension between paperback and hardcover versions was already complicated, what happens when an e-version is sometimes published, made available through a variety of aggregators, and sold in not only traditional ways (librarian-selected, approval plan-supplied) but also via demand- or patron-driven models?

- The question “Should we be concerned about long-term effects of change on vendors?” is somewhat moot, as long-term change in publishing is a foregone conclusion. A more productive line of questioning is “Can we determine what the long-term effects of these changes will be, and can we work with vendors to support our libraries’ respective missions and users in both the long- and short-term?”

- The question about selling different versions of a work is likewise moot. Not only are different versions published, demand for options in the available versions remains high. Again, the questions we need to ask are completely different. For example: is an eBook embargo really necessary and, if so, how long should the embargo really be? How many simultaneous users are the right number and, if we need more than one, how is the content being used? What kind of technology are users accessing e-text on? Do we really need to put up with restrictive DRM?

- Vendors cannot protect themselves by limiting formats; rather, vendors can only enhance their relevance by making multiple formats available. Flexibility is essential in a market that is changing constantly.

Finally, **Ogburn’s** suggestion that obligations may exist that are “neither ethical nor moral, and that perhaps transcend any other responsibilities” puts a problematic spin on the question of obligation, both within its original context as well as in the expanding information universe. Obligations derived from any subtle expectations may well transcend our local situation (i.e., professional obligations) and may well be out of the realm of the moral (i.e., a given obligation may not be easily judged “good” or “bad”). However, as complicated as these questions have been (and continue to be), it is impossible to take our questions out of the realm of ethics (i.e., decisions that are right or wrong). The fact that a given question is difficult (or impossible) to answer *definitively* (therefore making it difficult, if not impossible to judge as good or bad) does not mean solutions cannot be attempted in an ethical way.

What is needed is not a transcendent moral answer to the question of meeting obligations, but rather a fluid and ethical engagement with the vari-

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