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Random Ramblings--Why Don't Public Librarians Brag More about One of Their Greatest Successes: Providing Pleasure Reading for Their Patrons?

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I have a question for all readers. What is the most popular service in most, if not all, public libraries? My answer would be providing books and media for pleasure reading and viewing. (For the rest of this column, "reading" also includes "viewing.") A Google search with the terms "most popular service" and "public libraries" supports this position; but most of the documents are not formal studies, publicity releases, or annual reports. Instead, I found this "evidence" in more informal discussions among librarians.

I taught the introduction to the profession course at **Wayne State University** for several years before it struck me that students didn't encounter any discussion, either in the textbook chapters or in the supplemental articles, that emphasized the public library's role in providing materials for pleasure reading. The course dealt with general issues such as the nature of library science, the history of libraries, library culture, job responsibilities, and required skills. In other words, the readings were supposed to cover the essence of the profession and impart a fundamental knowledge of librarianship. While some mention is made of books, the emphasis was on the increasing importance of ebooks and issues such as copyright rather than pleasure reading — which may be what brings the majority of patrons to the library. Instead, the focus was on "information" — what it is, how to create it, and how to access it successfully. Within this context, "information" has a strong link to facts, science, research, and academic libraries though many students intend to work in public libraries.

I believe that the same bias appears in most official studies and reports. To provide one telling example, the very recent Pew Report on *Libraries at the Crossroads*, which is a study of public rather than academic, school, or special libraries, says the following in the second paragraph of the first page:

> Many Americans say they want public libraries to:
> - support local education;
> - serve special constituents such as veterans, active-duty military personnel and immigrants;
> - help local businesses, job seekers and those upgrading their work skills;
> - embrace new technologies such as 3-D printers and provide services to help patrons learn about high-tech gadgetry.
> http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/09/15/libraries-at-the-crossroads/

Later on the same report notes that "overwhelming majorities of Americans see educa-

tion as the foundation of libraries' mission." I don't know if these answers depend in part upon the wording of the questions, but I find them surprising. From reading various blogs and discussion lists and from talking to public librarians, my conclusion is that the chief reason many patrons come to the library is to have access to recent best sellers, reading materials for their children, accessible non-fiction, and tons of genre fiction. I'm willing to bet that an analysis of library budgets would support this statement rather than the list of priorities above. The public who participated in this survey apparently has the same reticence as many librarians to admit this "dirty secret" — that is, they want "fun" stuff to read and not necessarily a lesson in democracy or unofficial schooling.

To make my position clear right away, I don't consider this to be a negative. In fact, I believe that the importance of pleasure reading for public library users is one of the main reasons why public libraries will survive. Since their beginning, public libraries have provided great economic benefit by purchasing once for multiple uses though current ebook licensing is reducing, though not eliminating, this benefit. I ask my students to estimate what a family of four might spend each week on reading materials if they are all heavy readers. With three books per person and a few DVDs, the weekly cost of supporting this family's reading habits would easily be over $300 and that doesn't include newspapers and magazines. Even in wealthy suburbs, that's a lot of money and far surpasses the cost of Internet access at $25-75 per month. This economic benefit often appears in annual reports but without any indication that much of it results from the circulation of popular fiction.

I'm going to be so bold as to say that the root cause for the reluctance to celebrate the enormous success of public libraries in providing recreational reading is the same as why Americans are uncomfortable with sex — that is, the Puritanical American prejudice against pleasure. The history of the public library supports this view. The reasons for the founding of the public library include education for the masses, self-improvement, helping immigrants assimilate, and access to the classics. I'll add my personal viewpoint that **Andrew Carnegie** and other philanthropists supported libraries as competitors to the saloon so that their employees wouldn't come to work with hangovers and might learn some new skills. Temperance societies strongly supported the founding of many public libraries.

The practice of public libraries has changed since then to include best sellers with multiple copies, genre fiction, computer games, videos, and other popular formats; but some librarians object to any change that focuses on pleasure rather than learning. While the philosophy of "give-them-what-they-want" has prevailed, the rhetoric of financial and moral "improvement" has not completely disappeared.

To start with youth services, the emphasis is often upon literacy and skill building rather than upon the pleasures of reading. The justification for summer reading programs is that they "boost student achievement" with the assumption students require rewards to read during vacation. *http://www.slj.com/2010/11/students/summer-reading-programs-boost-student-achievement-study-says/#_* While more in the school library domain, arguments against Accelerated Reader include that the normal implementation of offering rewards for reading turns off avid pleasure readers and that restricting reading to the children's grade levels stops students from reading what they want to read above or below their reading skill. This need for extra inducements overlooks library nerds like me who needed no encouragement to read a book a day during the summer because, for me, reading was fun. Furthermore, some public libraries need to defend graphic novels for increasing literacy and computer games because the students have to read the text within them and also hone their problem solving abilities.

Adult literacy seems to be less important except for those areas with non-English speakers and immigrants where the public library fills an important role in teaching English and speeding up the acculturation process. While the term "reading ladders" is most often used in youth services, I would extend the concept to adults. Once again, reading non-quality literature for pleasure is not good enough. The goal is to get adults into the library with best sellers and genre fiction since this theory holds that they will get bored with these materials and then move on to high quality materials. I have my doubts about this theory since, if it were true, television viewers would all be tuning in to PBS and avoiding action series, sitcoms, and reality shows. I certainly know of library users, including the librarians, who have spent their whole lives happily reading popular fiction.

On the issue of funding, I believe that today's public library directors realize that justifying their budgets is difficult due to the prevalence of anti-tax movements and reduced

revenues in many jurisdictions. In the same way that higher education must talk about its practical consequences in growing the economy and training students for productive careers rather than the joy of learning, the public library needs a stronger case than saying it provides reading whose only consequence is that the reader enjoys the book and perhaps escapes from a humdrum reality for a few hours. Instead, the public library, in addition to education, literacy training, and acculturation to American society, often makes the case that it supports economic development by helping individuals to learn employable skills and to find jobs through library resources including Internet access. An even better justification is to argue that the library supports the economic health of the community by supporting entrepreneurs and small business people. If all people do is read for pleasure, the modern-day Puritan might easily say: "Let them buy their own books. Why should my tax dollars support such frivolous activities?"

To be even more cynical, do librarians sometimes refuse to accept credit for this great success because they feel it devalues them and the library profession? When they answer questionnaires about their jobs and the role of libraries, do they feel the need to omit the heavy circulation statistics for popular fiction since these figures don't support the intellectual reputation of librarianship? Is providing popular materials for genre fiction readers less satisfying than helping a patron discover information about an uncommon medical condition? Does the library director worry about the expenditures for the integrated library system, staffing the reference desk,

and purchasing databases when many patrons go right to the fiction shelves, where they know they'll find what they're looking for without using these expensive services? Will my students be less interested in becoming librarians if I tell them that they will spend much of their time pouring over reviews for genre fiction rather than discovering the right databases and formulating searches with both high precision and high recall? Will the same students wonder why they spent years to get their education, graduated magna cum laude, and then got a masters' degree to watch patrons leave the library with stacks of best sellers?

To conclude this segment with a true story, my librarian spouse, **Martha J. Spear**, years ago in the 1980s, worked in a branch library in Salt Lake City that served a neighborhood with a high percentage of Hispanics. Her predecessor had bought lots of Spanish language books, but her academic training led her to choose the classics: **Cervantes**, **Lope de Vega**, **Unamuno**, and other canonical authors. They sat on the shelves with an occasional circulation. To try a different strategy, **Martha** asked her patrons what they wanted. The response was popular fiction in Spanish including best-sellers translated from English. These materials flew off the shelves. On the same principle, her branch subscribed to the *National Enquirer*. While some of the librarians at the main library had raised eyebrows, the publication was exceptionally popular even among librarians from elsewhere in the system when they came to visit.

But enough for now.

Next month, the second installment on this issue will deal with the responses on the PUB-LIB discussion list where I posed this question. Stay tuned for their reaction. 🌿
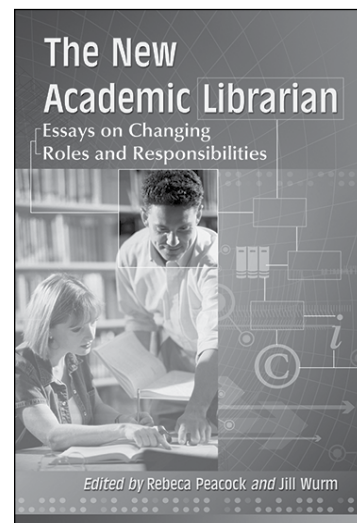

Lessons Learned

This being our initial foray into DDA, we certainly learned a lot from this experiment. This pilot project was initiated to allow users to have access to a much wider array of materials than the library would normally have purchased, and that goal was achieved. Peripheral titles were offered without risk that funds would be wasted if they were not used. The choices made by patrons were not limited to books for which a librarian was able to predict interest, as expected. While our project was implemented on a relatively small scale, it served as a valuable supplement to the large number of books purchased for the selected subject areas.

We experienced a number of disadvantages. The number of eBooks that incurred trigger events or purchases was more than we had initially predicted and our costs exceeded our initial deposit. One of the mistakes we made was setting a price range of $125-$200 per title. This price drove the costs up too fast; many of the books purchased were more than $150. If we continue the plan in the next fiscal

year, limiting the ceiling for DDA purchases to $150 would significantly reduce costs. Also, limiting the number of presses in the plan would keep costs under control and still provide access to peripheral publications, such as those produced by **Ashgate** and **Routledge**. Should we continue with DDA, in addition to considering the benefits of DDA, we will also consider the impact on staff required to run the DDA plan: one acquisitions technician to load MARC records, one acquisitions librarian and one subject bibliographer to monitor the plan and make adjustments, and one acquisitions technician to process invoices and overlay MARC records.
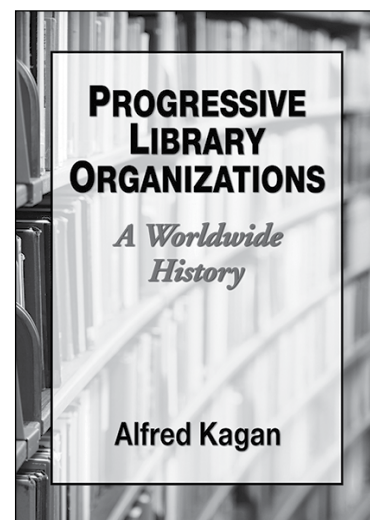
Overall, the plan provided a valuable learning experience with some success and some disadvantages. We were able to offer titles to patrons at the point-of-need, include selections that may not have been purchased through normal processes, and reasonably fit processes into existing workflows. However, the very high price range made it difficult to stay within our initial budget after only a small number of purchases were made. Going forward, we need to determine the best way to keep costs under control and make sure any expansion of the DDA program has a minimal effect on staff time. 🌿