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# Optimizing Library Services- Donations to Libraries: An Anceint Problem Prefiguring Today's Access to Electronic Resources?

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## Optimizing Library Services — Donations to Libraries: An Ancient Problem Prefiguring Today's Access to Electronic Resources?

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**A**rguably the key difference between the library of the past (before the age of Dewey and the founding of the **American Library Association**) and the library in the age of modern librarianship (1870s to date) is not any of the exciting issues such as library design, reader access to holdings, assistance to readers, retrieval and metadata, or automation. It is the status of book donations. The author's chapter in an **IGI Global** book "Collaboration in International and Comparative Librarianship" (Chakraborty and Das, 2014) discussed book donations to libraries in developing countries. Maybe, however, the lines of argument offered in that chapter can also offer something helpful to libraries in the electronic information age wherever they are in the world. These arguments need a little historical context.

Most ancient libraries, royal, monastic, academic and public, relied on what was donated to them. Whilst it seems to be true that the library of Alexandria acquired books from

passing merchants through a policy of taking compulsory copies of any manuscripts they were transporting, this kind of initiative was not typical. Nor did any but a few libraries have access to the income streams that would allow them to acquire books in a purposeful way. The subscription and circulating libraries of the eighteenth century began to change this. Then came more radical change, through the intervention of government and local government, academic institutions, and the developing library profession itself. Before this, the library was merely an accumulation of what people chose to give to it, but in many of the less wealthy parts of the world this is still true. Today there is further change, with some parts of the world that have had well-founded library systems experiencing shrinking funding and support which brings the idea of donations to the surface again. To this we can add the disturbing way in which the whole problem of access to information unmediated by librarians and other information professionals is returning

through ubiquitous electronic access to information. We could even claim that we now have cyber-donors, most notably Wikipedia.

Despite this claim that the problem of donations was, and is once again becoming, a central issue in librarianship, it is not one that has a large presence in the literature. A quick glance at what has been written shows that the texts and articles written in the USA and Europe tend to see donations as mainly an issue for research libraries receiving material that the donors believe has scholarly value. There is also a certain amount written on how to solicit donations from potential benefactors, envisioned as rich collectors and other wealthy supporters of the library. The literature does show some awareness of the pitfalls of dealing with donations even at this comparatively privileged level. **Holden** (2010, p75) stresses that "An acquisitions strategy developed for donations needs to be part of a wider content development program." Other writers make

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the key point that collection development policies have to stress the acceptability, or not, of gifts, but they do not place a great deal of emphasis on it. Some practical assistance is available, for instance in the form of a set of sample policies from libraries (Futas, 1995) many of which make it clear to potential donors that only selected items will be kept, while unwanted material will be sold or otherwise disposed of. All of this, however, addresses donations as a problem of abundance rather than poverty.

Rather than look at the problem through the familiar lens of practice in North America and Europe, it is surprisingly helpful to look at developing countries which have grappled with this for a long time. **Ononogbo** (2003) puts the case trenchantly: "Desperation has driven many university library managers far afield in search of solutions and in the process begging for book gifts, donations, endowment, bequests, just to have some stock." In these poorer and less library-savvy regions it is undoubtedly true that some donated collections have proved totally useless to the recipient libraries. The librarian is in fact faced with the need to be both a beggar and a chooser. The word beggar is obviously one that does not sit comfortably with the self respect of the library profession in any part of the world, but there is an unpleasant sense that it describes the reality of a library that depends on donations and access to what the world chooses to put on the Internet. Indeed, information users including those who are library patrons are increasingly prey to "fake news" precisely because they have fewer carefully chosen resources and more and more "information gifts."

A reasonably recent article by **Edem** (2010) is useful because it surveys some of the literature on the question that appeared in the previous decade or so. It naturally deals with more than just books, and does so in the context of Nigerian university libraries. The article points out that obtaining donations is important because funding is inadequate, but reminds us that they are rarely looked at to assess their relevance and value to the institution. When **Edem** wrote, libraries in the developing world had already been seeking solutions through electronic information access for some years. This was, however, beset with a range of new difficulties including inadequate infrastructure, preservation problems, inadequate user skills and lack of local content. Despite this, a natural conclusion is drawn that the future lies with electronic resources, development of consortia, encouraging donors to concentrate on infrastructure development, and the strengthening of library collection development policies. In fact, the question of policies is still pivotal whether we talk about print donations or electronic hardware, software and content. What this view from Nigeria helps us to explore is the extent to which experience and ideas relating to book donations can be useful in library policy relating to "acquisitions" in the post-print world.

The centre of the problems that the library profession experiences with book donations is that librarianship has arguably not given sufficient thought to the question of the role of this form of acquisition in collection development. The most useful thoughts on the topic undoubtedly come from the donor community itself, despite the fact it may often look like the villain of the piece. A vision of an ideal shape for responsible donor activity has been generated by the more concerned sectors of the donor community, and this is set out by **Rosi** (2005). The central point is that a programme should take into account the needs and sensitivities of potential beneficiaries. To **Rosi**, speaking for **UNESCO**, this means integrating the donation programme with the "book chain" of the recipient country in a way that will enhance it rather than cause damage. Thus, he talks about donors purchasing locally-published books to donate to libraries, in preference to supplying books published in the donor's country or region. The donation programme needs to take into account its impact on readers, authors and other creators, printing and publishing industries, and book distribution including bookshops. **Rosi** provides a good deal of useful guidance and information on how to create a responsible programme, which respects each of these groups of contributors to the book chain. In effect, he sets out standards by which programmes can be assessed.

What seldom seems to feature anywhere is the idea of gifts as control: the power of the giver over the grateful recipient. The fact is that in some cultures the giving of gifts resembles an elaborate animal display of power and dominance. Gifts are given to assert superiority on the one side and dependence on the other. From this probably emerges the idea of what the author has heard referred to as "forced donations." No donation is actually forced, though some may seem like it if they come from those who hold financial or administrative power. There is, however, a kind of power play implicit in much gift giving. The lack of comment on this suggests that discussion of the matter of unwanted or inappropriate donations has not happened, in part at least, out of social embarrassment. Yet, we do have to grapple with the problem of donations and power, not so much because of book donations as because of the "free" information brought to us by the Internet. If libraries are to exercise any power, they have to be prepared to reject some resources.

**DeWitt** (1988) is unusual in discussing the rejection of gifts in some detail, and **Bybee** (1999) is also helpful. Indeed they do imply or suggest that it may be psychologically problematic to refuse and that this is at least part of the reason why libraries find themselves with unwanted holdings. The problem of refusing donations is also set against a type of giving that is "strategic," driven by self-aggrandisement and with a power-orientation. In the developing world, this issue is placed starkly at the centre of practical librarianship. Donors have the power of their comparative wealth and recipients have the weakness of their poverty. It is instructive to examine the shelves of libraries that are dominated by donations.

These might come from kind individuals clearing their own shelves of unwanted material, from governments wanting to promote their own importance or national philosophy, or from bodies (which include belief groups and churches) with a message to convey. Refusal can be very good librarianship, but ways to refuse that are as tactful as possible are obviously needed. Basically librarians, wherever they are in the world, need to ask themselves why a gift is offered and factor the answer to that question into their response. Then there needs to be a written collection policy, including a gift policy, a copy of which may be given to donors. Precisely what a policy says is up to the library itself. It is the existence of a document setting out well-reasoned choices and procedures and a responsible official to administer it is crucial.

As you read this, you can judge for yourself how far Internet access to information is genuinely prefigured by the book donation problem that has never totally ceased to trouble librarianship. Do the immense, but unmediated, resources available via the Internet truly resemble the donations that have distorted the contents of libraries in the past, and still do so in the developing world today? Are libraries more and more in the centre of a power play by information providers and "donors?" If so, the recommendations of those few contributors to the professional literature who have taken the donations problem seriously have a renewed significance. If nothing else the whole question returns us to two considerations. The first of these is the centrality of strong, well-articulated professional values expressed in library policies, and the second is the promotion of broad and resilient information literacy for every information user. The problems may not change, but neither do the solutions.

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