sotto voce - Seeing Beyond Problems

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The July 31st edition of the Chronicle of Higher Education includes an interesting article about the rising, and complex, problem of non-university members invading libraries to gain access to the Internet. As those of you who are already dealing with this in your libraries know, this problem exists in a number of layers: The number of outsiders using library computers is keeping students and faculty from having access for "legitimate" use related to their research and studies. (Will we someday watch a movie about how the cure for a particularly nasty disease was missed because the potential discoverer could not access a library computer to complete his/her research?)

Some users, mainly young males, are viewing, and sometimes saving as wallpaper, pornographic images. (And we're not talking about reproductions of the Birth of Venus either.) If you think that we can all agree that this type of access is probably not something that most universities will find appropriate, the article points out that some librarians have been accused of exercising unacceptable censorship for chastising boys, some as young as nine years old, for viewing adult sites on library computers. There is mounting concern that libraries will be held liable for corrupting these young boys when their particular use of library computers is discovered by parents. From a public relations standpoint, let alone a legal one, worry runs deep in most university libraries experiencing this phenomenon.

This problem is being analyzed and dealt with on a number of fronts in the affected communities. Policies are being examined and rewritten, papers are being published including one to come out soon in the Journal of Informational Ethics, and librarians are grappling with the effects of having to add Internet-access police to their already many responsibilities.

I don't have any glib solutions to offer to this growing problem. It fascinates me, though, how changing technologies bring these unexpected consequences. While on the surface, this may strike outsiders as something funny, I don't doubt the real and significant impact this has on libraries already straining to efficiently serve their community of users.

What really interests me, though, is the absence of the article of anyone who is dealing with this issue as an opportunity. In twenty years of working with guys like Dan Halloran and Barry Fast, I've learned to always look for opportunities within problems. I think one exists here. Try this out as an idea:

While these kids are today straining library resources and raising legitimate ethical concerns about access and censorship, they are also potential future members of the same academies they're invading. Instead of prohibiting access to computers by non-university personnel, how about creating "visitor's computer room" in the library and placing it as far from the front door as possible? I'd be particularly concerned that pre-university age kids have access to it. The reason for placing this room at the far end of the library would not be to discourage kids from using it. On the contrary, it would be there to have an excuse to show every kid going there just how cool libraries can be. I'd make sure the route they went past, if not through, the map room, special collections, the periodicals collection, and every other library locale that might condescend to Bibliography. Philip Gaskell's A New Introduction to Bibliography was not in the box and is not on my shelves, so it must be in another box. If you are wondering about books by Fredson Bowers, I never owned any and probably never will. There might have been a time, but now he is just too clinical. I do wonder, however, what he would make of all this electronic stuff.

For some reason, most of the books in this box have some personal association beyond just being a favorite book, although one of my favorites, From Here to Eternity, happened to be in the box, too. But I am talking about something like my copy of R.L. Stevenson's Silverado Squatters, printed by the Grace Hooper Press and for sale at the Silverado Museum in St. Helena, California (Napa Valley). My copy was given to me, along with a tour of the museum, by a library school classmate, Steven Corey, who along with Norman H. Strouse, the museum's benefactor, and Ellen Shaffer, the long-time curator of the museum, put the collection together. Sadly, none of the three are with us any longer, and Steve passed on way too soon but not before showing a discriminating taste in rare books and fine printing. His collection was offered for sale in a special catalog by the Brick Row Book Shop but after Franklin Gilliam had sold the shop and moved away.

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