Adventures in Librarianship: Deflection Development

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Adventures in Librarianship—Deflection Development

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Last week we received a letter from a youngster — let's call him “Kevin” — in Wyoming who asked the Smithsonian Libraries to “send everything you have about space.” Of course the first thing a harried librarian in a big research institution thinks is, “Sure, kid. Just tell me where to park the tractor trailer.” I would never, of course, say that out loud.

Although librarians might see his request as hugely wacky, you can't help admiring young Master Kevin. He wants the last word, the best information. He's turning to what he believes to be an expert source. None of that mere dictionary-diving, encyclopedia-skimming, or Web-pasting — the guileless plagiarism that mimics research among grade-schoolers and slacker undergrads — none of that for our man Kevin. No siree. He wants the real scoop.

Trouble is, the real scoop is far too big for Kevin's plate. Often it seems far too big for our own plate. Kevin imagines some armful of books and papers, a gathering of all the crucial bits and pretty pictures, while our shelves bulge and creak, the extra space compact shelving gave us nearly gone.

Patricia Senn Breivik (Information Literacy: Educating Children for the 21st Century) says that, “In 1954, information doubled every twenty years; now it doubles every 30 to 36 months. By the year 2000 it will double every 12 to 18 months.” And for a time, American libraries tried to buy it all, backed by our “just in case” philosophy. We moved away from careful selection thinking that a librarian today cannot accurately predict what may be important ten or twenty years from now.

Thirty years ago, in “An Argument for Selectivity in the Acquisition of Materials for Research Libraries” (Library Quarterly, July 1967), Margit Kraft (no relation to me, or none that I know of) argued that American libraries had not been discriminating, had been too enamored with size and had allowed their collections to grow far too fast.

Ms. Kraft held as the ideal the “jewel box” libraries of Europe — collections of the finest works in a given field, not collections of every work in a given field. “The most vital decision any library can make,” she argued, “is what should or should not be added to the collection.” She quotes Nietzsche: “The superfluous is the enemy of the necessary.”

Shrinking monograph budgets have, of course, forced us to be more selective, relatively. From ARL Libraries: Purchasing Power Continues to Decline (1994, purchasing html), we hear the ominous news that, “While ARL libraries more than doubled expenditures for serials from 1986 to 1996, they purchased 7% fewer serials. During the last decade, libraries shifted expenditures for monographs to meet some of the demands of increasing serial prices, thereby reducing the number of monographs purchased by 21%.

Some might argue that, if Margit Kraft was right, perhaps this is not a bad thing, pushing librarians to plan and discriminate, forcing our growth to slow to a manageable rate. As a sign of this trend, in 1994 ARL adopted a new strategy to move away from its emphasis on quantitative measures (collection size included), toward new ways of measuring quality (In Search of New Measures).

I occasionally fantasize that selectivity, fully and enthusiastically embraced, may some day be the librarian's ace in the hole, our salvation. Perhaps as automation improves (or that IT automation improves) to the point where it threatens further the role of the librarian, this will be our last fortress, an exclusively human activity. Recall how big an issue “selection” was during the recent difficulties at the public libraries in the state of...

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...tivity, and there is always an aura of sanctity about it. Rambunctious children quiet down without their parents' scolding; rain-soaked people enter in a flurry of folding umbrellas and squishy sneakers, and immediately seem calm, at peace. Reading a day-old newspaper means that time is an illusion; it doesn't matter if I know the fire happened a day later. It is a place that encourages civility and consideration; we talk softly so as not to disturb. How many public buildings foster that kind of behavior? Our town hall
echoes with heated words during town meeting; our tea shop veranda erupts with laughter and loud greetings. We mill about the post office waiting for the mail to be sorted and then seem to all push at once to our mail boxes. But in the library we are truly civilized, somehow responding to the realization that this is a place filled with imagination, knowledge, and delight.

For those of us who spend so much time working in the library or dealing with libraries, it is easy to forget the force, the influence, the place a library holds in our community.