

**TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF STOCK MANAGEMENT:
ENTERTAINMENT, “HIGH SERIOUSNESS” AND THE
PUBLIC LIBRARY**

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Abstract

The Government's 1997 Review of Public Libraries in England sparked off a debate on public library stock by claiming that libraries have abandoned their original "high seriousness" in favour of entertainment. This study asks what purpose library stock is meant to fulfil in the context of a public service. It appears from the comments of librarians that stock selection practice is not unthinking, but is based on strongly held beliefs about the role of libraries. However these are individual and rarely formally stated.

The idea of any return to the past is rejected. Although early libraries were dedicated to a kind of seriousness, they lacked democratic accountability. There is now more emphasis on community representation and empowerment. This does not negate the professional's role: the science of stock management is necessary to counter the unbalancing effects of demand and meet latent need.

The increase in popular materials results partly from the attitudes of managerialism, whereby stock is valued principally for its potential contribution to the organisation's efficiency. Another cause is the power of the mass media. Since part of the library's high importance is to uphold independence of thought, it is suggested that libraries make special efforts to stock alternatives to mass media products and to represent minority views.

In the past there has been a body of serious, authoritative works which has been provided as a matter of course, but this Canon has been attacked by modern criticism as unrepresentative. This has increased the swing away from accepted "classics." Yet the idea of inherently important works is still powerful.

The disagreements about highbrow and lowbrow materials occur at the level of policy; it is argued that at the level of philosophy there are important fundamental agreements. If these were formally established, they might serve to lessen the influence on library stock of other ideologies, and to give a strong sense of identity to the library service.

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1. Introduction: education or entertainment?

The original concept of the British public Library system was one of high seriousness and importance. In more recent years, there has been a shift away from that high seriousness towards entertainment. Information technology should help to restore the profound importance of public libraries in our society.

Reading the future

One of the last publications from the Department of National Heritage before the General Election of 1997 was Reading the future, the long-promised review of public libraries in England. Its emphasis was overwhelmingly on the role of the public library service in bringing the benefits of communications technology to all citizens. Other themes were the intention to keep “core services” free of charge, an obligation on all English library authorities to produce a yearly Public Library Plan, and the desirability of investigating alternatives in management such as contracting out of services and partnerships with the private sector.

However, Press interest in the document immediately focused on none of these, but on an issue only briefly touched upon in the Foreword to the Review, and mentioned by Ian Sproat, Junior Heritage Minister, at its launch: this was the question of what the public library is actually for, discussed as a matter of what it should *stock*. By changing the emphasis, journalists suggested that the question of what is to be found on library shelves is of greater interest to the public at present than talk of the “information technology revolution,” and that the nature of what is available is more important than the format in which it is delivered.

Despite this public and press interest, stock management is a strangely neglected area within Library and Information Studies. For example, David Spiller suggests that book provision as a subject has moved down the agenda in recent years as the study of management and of automation has moved up. Stock management has been neglected in practice, education, literature and research. (Spiller, 1991: 5)

The importance of information technology is generally accepted: perhaps the appeal for the press in the issue of stock is that commentators are divided emphatically into two groups, and feelings run high. The dichotomy can be characterised as Education and Entertainment, and it is a debate in which people firmly take sides. The “head to head” feature in the *Guardian* (20.2.97), an exchange of views between Richard Hoggart and Dame Barbara Cartland, well illustrates how polarised the issue is.

Not long after the Review appeared, there was a call for seriousness in a letter to the *Times*, signed by six fiction writers, in which they deplored the closure of Westminster’s Great Smith Street Library. They complained that

opening hours have been shortened and the number of permanent staff halved, the reference library scarcely exists, the inquiry desk is staffed only at peak times and the lending book stock tragically depleted. The one part of the library that has grown is the entertainment section- videos, CDs and cassettes, mostly of a popular nature...Public libraries are apparently now run by [t]he recreation and leisure committees of local authorities, who seem to care nothing for their educational value. (*Times*, 17.4.97: 19)

This witnesses to the truth, at least in one authority, of Reading the future’s assertion, and shares its belief that the public library is an institution of high educational importance. To put a library under the management of leisure services is to misplace it, because leisure is not its proper purpose: education is. This is taken as fact by these six professional (and not all particularly “highbrow”) writers. Libraries are too important to be stuffed with popular entertainment.

Those who take the opposite view defend the leisure function. Robert Snape, in Leisure and the rise of the public library, shows how early libraries were intended as agents of leisure reform as well as educational establishments, and asserts that today, as full employment becomes more unusual, “leisure becomes more important because it can provide the opportunities for self-improvement that were once provided by work and career.” (Snape, 1995: 138) Leisure is a valid activity, worthy of public funding and support.

However, it proves impossible to locate Reading the future on either side. The *Times* of 20 February, 1997 (the day after the launch) in summarising the Review noted as one of its conclusions that

libraries are part of the entertainment world and must compete by providing high-tech reference services and low-brow books outside usual working hours...

Yet the *Guardian* heard in the same document a call to restore “the arteries of an educated society”...and quoted Ian Sproat as saying at its launch “The Government will want to look at a general return to high seriousness.” (20.2.97) The contradiction is in the Review, not its readers. The *Guardian* editorial expresses surprise that a government usually to be heard extolling market forces could call for “seriousness” at the expense of materials for which there is popular demand. Part of the confusion may be due to the fact that the term is not defined. A suspicion arises that they had in mind not great literature or anything else, but economics. As one librarian who took part in this study put it,

the last government thought libraries were a good thing if they had an economic benefit, “creating a literate workforce.” We say that libraries are a good thing, full stop.¹

However the uncertainty of Reading the future mostly reflects the fact that public library policy at all levels, from branch to central government, lacks an agreed

¹ All unattributed quotations are the comments of participating librarians.

and coherent statement of purpose. This was the conclusion of a *Cipfa* investigation in 1987:

...even at the broadest level [the libraries service] is unclear as to whether it is providing a social service, leisure facilities or educational support. We therefore believe that the library service as a whole would benefit from an explicit specification of its objectives and philosophies. (Cipfa, 1987: 6)

Existing policy statements, like the national Mission Statement for the Public Library Service adopted by many authorities, are essentially statements of “function not purpose,” as Muddiman and Black (1993: 3) point out. These authors claim that recreation and learning are both valid, were both part of the original vision, and “have always sat neatly side by side.” But there is no confident statement of this from the public library profession as a whole. Policy does not seem to be resting on an underlying philosophy.

The debate has been continuing for as long as the public library system has been in existence. The claim that public libraries are shifting from seriousness to crowd-pleasing entertainment is not a new one. (See for example Q.D Leavis, 1932: 5) Two factors, however, give a particular urgency to the subject at present.

First, there is a well-attested crisis in funding. A 1985 report of the Association of Metropolitan Authorities described the effect of budget cuts on stock. Materials had to be selected

solely on the basis of price rather than on authoritativeness or merit or reader appeal (Association of Metropolitan Authorities, 1985: 28)

and some minority non-fiction subjects were reported to have been abandoned altogether. The fact that one Northern Ireland Education and Library Board suffered a 50% cut in its bookfund in 1996/7 demonstrates that the problem has not eased in recent years.

The second factor is Information Technology, the convergence of computing and mass communications. Peter Young sees a danger of the tail of technological

progress wagging the dog of public service policy. The ultimate effect of the present combination of economic, technological and market forces

is likely to be the death of our traditional concepts concerning the business of libraries.

It is necessary for society to be sure of the library's role.

What new definition of public good is required in the current transition toward a national digital networked information infrastructure? (Young, 1994: 106)

Public librarians and others must now develop a positive and purposeful philosophy of library stock in order to ensure that the end will dictate the means, and not vice versa.

2. Methodology

Reading the future claimed that public library stock provision has swung from seriousness and importance to entertainment. The aim was to begin by finding out if this is true and if so, what exactly has happened, why it has happened, and whether it is a positive or negative change. Next, since the reaction to the report highlighted a division of opinion within and beyond the library profession as to the purpose of library stock, the research objectives were to discover

- why there are such strong feelings about this
- whether the differences between the entertainment lobby and the education lobby, as they might be termed, really are irreconcilable
- whether practising librarians have any sense of a philosophy of stock management which informs their policies and choices.

The first stage of the research was reading around the topic: I looked chiefly at Government publications relating to the contents of public libraries, at the professional literature relating to collection management and the public library role, and at past and present commentary on high culture and popular culture, seriousness and entertainment, “good taste” and “bad taste.” The themes which seemed to be important were then used to generate an interview schedule (see appendix).

I wanted to collect qualitative data which would be rich in detail rather than statistically representative. No generalisations could be made, but the data would be illuminative of the topic under investigation. The design of the research instrument therefore had to be such that it would focus discussion on the topics in which I was interested, but at the same time leave enough flexibility that respondent’s own categories and terminology would emerge, rather than simple choices between terms chosen by me. For example, I did not want to ask “do you

have a philosophy of stock management?” but hoped that if they did have such a thing, it would be expressed in their own words as they spoke about the issues.

Ideally a completely unstructured, informal interview would have been better for establishing respondents’ priorities, but for a number of reasons the compromise was adopted of a semi-structured interview.

I carried out the interviews in the first three weeks of July, 1997. Three of the four library authorities I approached agreed to help: this gave me access to one London borough, one Metropolitan Authority and one mainly rural Education and Library Board. Unfortunately I could not speak to Library Committee members, as I had hoped, since none of the councillors I wrote to was able to see me. This halved my intended interviews, and with hindsight it would have been better to approach many more people to start with and allow for this “failure rate.”

I also obtained a copy of a written stock management policy from each library service I visited, and used these to shed additional light on the topic.

The interview schedule used some open questions and some statements to be responded to using a five-point Likert scale. The Likert scale was used partly to eliminate bias, partly to simplify analysis: the initial standardised answers invite immediate comparisons, and form points of reference in the mass of more qualified and complex data. It was also a means of guiding the interviews, which was important because otherwise my lack of experience as an interviewer may have prevented me from making the most of the short time available with each respondent.

To a large extent the interviews did elicit the kind of information needed, possibly because of the nature of the topic: it is one that people do feel strongly about (unlike, for example, some more prosaic aspects of management) but also feel they can talk about freely (unlike a “political” issue such as censorship). However, a few of the statements and questions could have been better phrased. Statement 3d was too long, and phrasing it in the negative was an added

complication. With question 4 there was a problem of definition. All the respondents made the comment that its categories were not mutually exclusive. They could have been made more specific.

The interviews were conducted with the rules on interviewing given by Brenner (1985: 19-20) in mind. The respondents' answers were recorded as nearly exactly as possible and any probing or necessary clarification was non-leading and strictly related to the question in hand.

Taking notes by hand had two disadvantages: it meant that what was recorded was selective, and it hindered me from giving my full attention to directing the interview. However, financial and technical considerations (I had had a bad experience with a tape recorder during a group project earlier in the year) ruled out audio recording. In each case the notes were expanded and written up immediately or as soon as possible after the interview, in order to capture emphases and turns of phrase while they were still fresh in my mind.

From the analysis of the data, the pattern which chiefly emerged was of three themes or influential ideas to which comment kept returning. The three middle sections, on the public, the private sector and the "Canon" are based on these.

3. The library and the public

Our client profile- the whole community

Stock Management Policy, Metropolitan authority

The original concept

The breadth of the client community, and therefore the variety of needs which have to be met, makes librarians resist any suggestion of restricting types of provision. One told me that he was “sitting firmly on the fence” as far as seriousness and entertainment were concerned.

We used to be in the Leisure Directorate: we merged in 1993 into the Directorate of Education and Leisure. I think we are in exactly the right position. The two should be complementary. “High seriousness” would put people off. If they saw libraries as academic-type places- which is a common myth- they would stay away...The attempt to focus on one aspect is a mistake- the thing to do is argue for funding so that you can do both.

There is an awareness of the history of the public library movement and its relevance to today. Each person I spoke to, when asked about their opinion on the former Department of National Heritage’s call for a return to “high seriousness,” related the present debate to the early development of libraries. But the relationship of the first libraries to their public was seen in different ways. One opinion was that the public library and its forerunners reflected an attitude to learning which our society no longer has.

Mechanics’ Institutes were self-help organisations very much into high seriousness when people believed education would make for a better life. Now, “post 60’s”... people want things to be easy.

But the others claimed that early public libraries were bad models. One said that he approved of the switch to entertainment.

I'd be opposed to a return to Victorian values. Early libraries were about self-improvement...We are still about that, but not in that austere kind of way.

This was echoed by a librarian who criticised not only the austerity of the first public libraries but also their tendency to be used as a means of social influence.

Libraries *are* about improving and empowering yourself. But they are also about having fun...Libraries were set up partly to teach people what their place in society is...What we want now is institutions that don't take you down a certain route.

The ambivalence among the respondents towards the first public libraries and society reflects what is found in the literature on the subject.

Philip Corrigan and Val Gillespie question the purity of motive of the nineteenth-century founders. Far from promoting literacy, they were seeking to turn the already literate working class into part of a respectable Public, a public created to the specifications of the dominant class. This process of definition is seen as

the *major* motivational thread running through the substance of the [1849 Select] Committee evidence and report, the Parliamentary debates (including much of the opposition), the 1850 Public Libraries and Museums Act, and later developments. Public libraries...were seen as a way of manufacturing, creating, or, at the very least, helping to (self-)define the Public. (Corrigan and Gillespie, 1978: 13)

The aim was social stability, which was seen as an unmitigated good in itself. The lower classes were to be encouraged to think of themselves as part of the same structure as their betters, in a relationship of mutual benefit. Free and elevating recreation, as well as weaning people from "alehouses and Socialism," would create a contented workforce, which in turn would make for economic prosperity. In fact, to put it crudely, the library was to be an agent of social control, initiating the working man and woman into the belief system of the upper classes, excluding any literature which was critical of this system, and smoothing the relationship between worker and employer. The motives for its establishment were essentially self-interested, and a long way from the expressed ideal of

empowerment and self- improvement associated with the public library movement later in its life.

Corrigan and Gillespie claim that the free public library killed off co-operative working class organisations established for the exchange of information, and that it was intended to do so. They also claim what seems to contradict this, that in fact use of libraries by the working classes was very limited. It was because they saw the service as imposed, like compulsory schooling, from above, and not arising from their own needs or running under their own management, that they were not inclined to make use of it. This apparently is the root of the present day problem that use of the service is predominantly middle- class.

Robert Snape, however, suggests that there is “overwhelming evidence” that from the first, the *majority* of users were working class (Snape, 1995: 47) and that stock was largely determined by popular taste. Far from being part of Althusser’s “Cultural Ideological State Apparatus” (ibid: 134), the service was unsure about its relationship to the public and tended to react rather than dictate.

The lack of a clear set of objectives, together with the absence of a model upon which to base themselves, meant that public libraries attempted to be all things to all men. There were no national standards or guidelines to assist in the formulation of priorities at a local level, and library development was piecemeal and largely reactive. (Ibid: 22)

Geoff Mulgan also contends that state public services constituted an attack on already existing information networks and self- help organisations, but does not see them as attempting a rigid definition of the public; rather, the conception of “public” was an abstract one which never had a “coherent theoretical foundation.” Its two basic premises were “selfless service” and “geographical and social universality.” What was missing was

any sense of public control or direct democratic accountability between public servants and their public. (Mulgan, 1993: 7)

It is that missing link which libraries are now trying to forge.

The community decides

The ambivalence about how an institution goes about being a *public* library extends to the present day. Historians and critics of the public library movement recognise and admire the social engagement and sense of purpose which drove its founders, but do not recommend their ideologies as a pattern which the modern public library service will want to follow. The sense in which the library *belongs* to the public has been re-examined. In the mid-nineteenth century, when the control over what materials libraries would make available was not in the hands of the people for whose benefit they were established, William Lovett had a vision of universal libraries and reading rooms

to which the young and old of both sexes should have free access after the labours of the day, as well as to borrow books from them to take to their homes; *as also to have some share in the management.* (Corrigan and Gillespie, 1978 8; my emphasis)

The recent development of community librarianship is inspired by the idea of the state-funded library service as a kind of gigantic co-operative venture, each local branch accountable to and accurately representing its own community because the community uses it as a common good and has helped to shape it. Social empowerment, equality and democracy are key words. The idea of information and education for citizenship is important. Information provision

is a matter of civil rights- if people don't have access to information they are less powerful in running their own lives.

The ideal, at its height before the 1980s and in libraries in Labour-controlled authorities, actively aimed to supply material equally to the whole community, on the basis of need, not status. It survives in mission statements in stock policy documents.

The free public library is a guarantee that alternative and minority views will continue to be accessible to everyone, and therefore an essential element in a free and democratic society. (Stock Management Policy, Metropolitan Authority)

[The] Library Service also seeks to reflect and embody the Council's core values of public service, equality, and equality through empowerment. (Draft Stock Management Policy, London borough)

It takes account of local sensibilities in stock selection, discriminating against what is seen as harmful to the community's life by its potential offensiveness.

One librarian told me

material has to be in line with council policy. We don't buy racist or sexist materials...we don't have an open door policy.

The library is for the benefit of local people; it does not exist for the sake of balanced collections, or for the benefit of employers, publishers or politicians.

"Representation" is an important concept in this approach to librarianship. A library collection can be representative of publication or of population. In this case it is always the latter. Asked to put five library functions (Culture, Education, Information, Preservation, Recreation) in order, a respondent put Culture low on the list and explained:

With culture we are dealing with minorities...though we still want to represent them.

Providing "high culture" is a duty not because it is "great," or recommended, or authoritative, but because it is *required*, albeit by a minority.

Stock management

If "the community decides," where does this leave professional autonomy?

Librarians are trained and experienced in assessing the worth of books and other

materials: is this to count for nothing as library users dictate their own criteria according to democratic principles? Contradictions abound. Policy statements, where they are in use, often include rejection criteria to do with “quality:” one recommends that material “of an inferior literary standard” should not be purchased, but it is pointed out that this is in conflict with the statement of the Library Association that its members are obliged to

promote the rights of every individual to have free and equal access to sources of information without discrimination and within the limits of the law. (Cole and Usherwood, 1996: 122)

If members of the public require fiction which is stereotypical, incompetently written, or written merely to titillate, or non-fiction which is misleading, biased or inadequately researched, it is not clear what authority librarians have to deny them.

To develop the library as a public good requires, as already discussed, a firm definition of what this abstract thing “the public” actually is. Beside this, the alternative looks very simple. The argument that people should not have to pay for what they do not use, leads to the vision of an entirely privatised system, where the buying power of individuals assures their freedom of choice among all published information. If this became the case, the question of stock selection would answer itself.

Even in a non-charging context, there are advocates of completely demand-led stock provision, like Nora Rawlinson of Baltimore County Public Library in the United States, who claims that in practice, demand has created variety and balance. To assume that it will result in libraries packed with nothing but bestsellers is to underestimate the users.

This contrasts with the traditional view of stock management as something of a science. Librarians have always used their knowledge of resources and knowledge of their client community to put together a balanced and useful collection. This approach has its advantages and its dangers. Its chief characteristic is that it

values expertise. Paul H. Mosher's definition of "collection development", though an academic library definition, sums up the "scientific approach" as it has been used in public libraries also.

Collection development is the effective and timely selection of library materials forming carefully constructed area or subject collections, shaped over time by bibliographic experts. It is the synapses linking thousands of decisions into sensitive provision of needed research materials, the capacity to make the parts fit the needed whole. (Quoted by Bloomfield in Corral, 1988: 6)

There is no notion here that a good collection could be achieved just by buying at the clients' suggestion, even though academic researchers have their own expertise. This is a process of active, aware construction rather than passive response. However, in this activity it works towards a perhaps unsubstantiated idea of what is needed. It is normative, because it "aims to make the parts fit." It leaves little scope for innovation, since research (particularly that of students) will to a large extent be determined by provision. It is a narrowing circle, which can only be intensified by budget constraint. There *is* a sense in which professional collection development in the public library can sell its public short.

Two very different forces have been part of the move towards demand-led provision. It is, in a way, the logical extension of the ideal of social empowerment into the area of stock management. Another and more recent influence, which will be discussed in the next chapter on the library and the private sector, is the growth of the consumer culture, according to which the requirements of the *customer* are paramount. Both these ideologies inform the attitude of practitioners to stock.

All the interviewees said that they saw more responding to demand than there used to be, along with a change in attitude among library management.

We are changing to a focus on readers. Previously we were "buying for posterity"...It was a case of "We provide what we've always provided"...There is a bit of an educational job to do with staff.

It is clear that readers influence the shape of library collections more than they used to. “Responding to reader demand” is a tenet of all library policies and customer charters. Unlike teachers, librarians have no direct mandate to educate: readers have a right to be provided with materials they ask for, whether or not these materials coincide with librarians’ own views on what are desirable additions to stock. A 1963 Library Association Statement on censorship indicates that libraries are to provide all materials “other than the trivial” in which readers claim “legitimate interest.” The legitimate uses of a book or other item of library stock are now admitted to be more numerous than might first appear. In the case of light and genre fiction, Rebecca O’Rourke lists relaxing from work, demarcating private space in the family, reading as a psychological “shield” in public places (particularly for women) and satisfying the ancient and strong need for narrative. In literary criticism itself the emphasis has been shifting from the text to the experience of the reader.

Pleasure has been re-discovered as the license and motor of much cultural activity by what we might loosely call the post-modernist critics...Pleasure shifts the focus from object to subject, from the book to the reader. (O’Rourke, 1993: 9)

However readers themselves, when surveyed, tend to consider education the most important role of the public library. For example, a 1993 survey in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area asked readers to indicate which categories of print-based stock they had most actual need of, and which they considered most important. The categories considered most important turned out to be “Reference books,” “People or things of interest,” and “other novels,” in that order, and only then light reading or genre fiction and recent best-sellers. (Francis, 1994: 3)

People expressed many interests other than genre fiction. A sample of specialised topics ranged from ageing, the Black Death and cheesemaking, through morris dancing, naval camouflage and Wilfred Owen, to Victorian prisons, water turbines and Zimbabwe (not to mention “how to murder your husband”!) Yet in fact people borrow predominantly genre fiction, possibly because they have found

that their local library does not cater for wider interests, and are content to take what they can get. As Francis points out:

There is a tendency to assume that if library members do not make their needs known, those needs do not exist. (Ibid: 38)

An essential problem of “responding to reader demand” is that some readers never make demands, while others never stop, and a library collection can be “warped” by many requests for the same kind of book from a small minority of readers.

The practising librarians were aware of this. The new focus on the reader was approved, but with strong reservations and qualifications- so strong as almost to undermine the approval.

There has to be a professional input. Otherwise it can be that the people who make most noises get all the say.

Libraries are a world in which people don't know what to demand. Our love for libraries is based on the fact that we have found so much we didn't know about...I have a view that the public libraries have been taken over by the middle classes who say “you should be supplying us with what we want.”

It is the librarian's skill to listen for the quieter voices and for what is implied by silence- to provide for the needs of all users and potential users equally, not merely for a vociferous and voracious core group. Despite Nora Rawlinson's claim, the second of the respondents quoted above was afraid that too much unthinking response to demand would result in more purchases of fewer popular items, diminishing the scope of the library and hence impoverishing everyone.

The library's purpose is to link people to knowledge. What is the alternative? If we get rid of it, that knowledge is gone...We are at a crossroads- we are driven towards the popular route.

Among the librarians I spoke to there was naturally a high view of the librarian's role in advising and guiding the public. No one saw stock management as merely

functional. *What* they supply is as important as their “quality of service delivery.” They did not see themselves primarily as administrators, though all were senior or principal librarians: instead to a large extent they identified with and were actively engaged in promoting stock materials. One said that when people visit the library

we tend to talk about the weather, when we should be saying, “Did you enjoy that book? Was it the right thing?”

To use a familiar comparison, the management information required by the public service library manager is more complicated than that required by the supermarket manager: instead of sales figures, he or she needs to know, how much *use* was the item? Did it help? Because part of the job is to say, this might be more useful; you might enjoy this...”Recommended reading” need not be a patronising notion. Barry Smith (in Corrall, 1988: 52) carefully defends the practice of deliberately bringing “good material” (in this case non-stereotypical fiction) to the attention of the public. The whole information world is a clamour of recommendation, criticism and partisanship- there is no neutrality. It is harsh to expect librarians, who know books and information resources perhaps better than anyone, to be the only people who are not to judge them.

One librarian called it “evangelism.”

I’d rather librarians were given much more of an evangelist’s role...I do believe that literature is an incredible flowering of the human mind. I feel strongly about this- I feel strongly about poetry, for example. It is evangelism- if you know a damn good book, you want to tell people about it, don’t you?

Francis’s research suggests that what people request from the library is not representative of even their *known* needs. Librarians continue to assert their right to go beyond what the community asks for, not thwarting but extending the community’s own choices.

However, this raises the issue of financial accountability, the library’s other duty to its public being to manage the public’s investment efficiently. Stock must earn

its keep, and this sets up a tension. Issue-counting is a measure by which library services are judged, whether they like it or not, and this can be seen in the answers which were given to the question about important criteria in stock selection. One criterion was *content*:

Content means what is likely to be used by the customer range the library is actually serving...There should be a probability of four issues per year.

Another was

Accessibility to the readership aimed for. It has to be written in the right way- the right *level* of material.

All buying is buying for potential use, but the constraints of “economy, efficiency and effectiveness” in practice restrict that potential. Selectors are buying for known tastes. They have to assume that the type and level of material which is required now, is the same type and level of material which will go on being required. By only buying that, they are going a long way towards making it a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is true that the public library straddles the two worlds of leisure and learning. However, all stock items are not created equal, and items for leisure are more used than items for learning, by their very nature: they are enticingly packaged, they are not specialised, they have a quick turnover (a textbook takes far longer to read than a thriller). So almost by definition the economical use of financial resources means more popular material.

But economy to what end? Adherence to economic principles will result in what John Pateman, in a letter about book disposal calls “a lean, muscular, relevant, high-turnover stock.” (Pateman, 1990: 492) The attitude “if in doubt, throw it out” is a distillation of the principle posited by the Atkinson Report on academic libraries. In the self-renewing or steady state library, use, a function of demand, is the only criterion for continuing to stock an item. The inherent qualities of a work

are irrelevant, because if no one wants to use it, there is no point in storing it. Use alone determines value.

This is an approach which denies a role to the librarian's expert knowledge. It might be characterised as "natural selection." If Ranganathan's metaphor is altered to make the library not a growing organism but a species, then the library operated on this principle exists in what the geneticist Richard Dawkins describes² as an Evolutionarily Stable State. The opponents of the principle might argue that it is essentially a purposeless library, impelled by internal programming and adapting to the external environment. In a kind of circular argument, its reason for existing is to ensure its own survival. This is as far as can be imagined from the deliberate creative acts of "collection development." The institution can be consistently achieving high issues, operating within budgets, and surviving healthily as far as the auditor is concerned, but is it being a public library?

Interestingly, none of the librarians interviewed is happy to operate on this principle. True, Stock Exploitation is embraced as a practical necessity, and as a challenge; but the respondent who explained it in terms of "mechanics" (avoiding the problem of half-used books, "pre-programming" a book when you buy it, developing targets and standards, constantly moving books around) kept referring everything back to the user as the library's *raison d'être*.

It's got to start with choice, with the reader standing in front of the shelves, looking to see what we've got.

There is an assumption that the business they are in is dealing with people according to their needs as information seekers, not according to the organisation's needs as an organisation. Withdrawal of stock was cited as important, but because

people have to see the wood for the trees.

² in The selfish gene, 1976, Oxford University Press

There is a slightly sheepish but very real idealism. Dissatisfaction was expressed with the use of issue figures as a measure of value.

Books I read as a teenager in the Fifties really influenced me. Like “Cry the beloved country”...when I borrowed that, I think it was more than “one book issued.”

These individual library managers have a much higher level of attitude to the relationship between public library stock and public than the merely utilitarian. It is a “public service” attitude. While this is articulated in private interviews and in professional publications, it does not have the influence on stock management which it might have. Librarians select and discard materials according to a complexity of factors which can include financial constraints, professional codes of conduct, selection policies, community sensibilities, local politics, and habit. The practicalities, specified in written policies, are carried out on a basis of often contradictory assumptions.

In an article surveying some of these documents, Cole and Usherwood (1996) conclude that while they are helpful guides, they do not go far enough.

All the policies surveyed contain, in varying degrees, the practical details of stock management in their authorities, clarifying the “who,” “when,” “how” and “what,” yet few of the policies consistently discuss or explain the “why” of stock management. (124)

It is this “why” of stock management which needs to be established.

4. The library and the private sector

The library as an institution now faces the question of how it develops its identity as a public good in a commercial world.

Borrowed time, 1993: 54

The library is a public service, but one which has an involved relationship with the private sector. In the course of the research, questions about commercial factors were included because these factors have an influence on the quality of stock. The relationship is a complex and often uneasy one. It has been argued that the free library is a threat to other information and entertainment providers because it has an unfair monopoly. In fact it is the library which now appears threatened, more so as it attempts to compete directly with these other providers.

Stock provision and management interacts on many levels with the external economic environment. The drive for “value for money” and the emphasis on market forces which has typified government policy since the beginning of the 1980s, has altered the nature of library management. Secondly, libraries themselves are customers, and have established relationships with publishers and suppliers. Thirdly there is the relationship with the wider world of information and entertainment. The difficulty is in the similarity (often) of roles, alongside the contrast in ethos: materials and information as intellectual capital; materials and information as saleable product.

The debate between the supporters of educational materials and the supporters of materials for leisure becomes acute here. As already described, the management of stock upon purely economic considerations will result in predominantly popular materials. This is resisted not just by library campaigners on the grounds

that it is unrepresentative, but also by businesses engaged in manufacturing and selling these materials- popular fiction publishers, record companies, video outlets- some of whom have to worry about loss of sales through the illegal copying which is an inevitable misuse of free lending. Is this really what the library is for? There are, as in other areas, many outside the library service who are quick to say what the library is for.

Service or business?

Public libraries have always wished to be a resource of high quality for their communities. The difference in recent years is that the pursuit of quality has changed its quarry. Government policy in the 1980s and 90s has been influenced by managerialism: an emphasis on slick, efficient, dynamic *management*, rather than on the *thing* produced- quality in service delivery, not quality in stock. The swing has been from choosing the best- intrinsically the best- “product lines,” to choosing the most profitable, those which will best contribute to the organisation’s efficiency. So a 1988 consultative paper says of financing schemes that

The aim is not to find substitutes for public funding of the basic services from taxation but to provide...customers with better, more client-orientated, and more cost-effective services. (Great Britain...1988: 2)

Publications issued by the Government all emphasise costing and performance review. The customer-led business model is held up to be emulated. As the languages of public service and of business are mixed (“citizens” alternating awkwardly with “customers”) it is impossible to decipher from these how the public library system has actually been envisaged by those who until recently funded and superintended it. Is it a kind of public utility, or is it a customer-led, revenue-generating business? There is a growing confusion. The paper quoted above notes with approval that some authorities

provide at almost economic rates such fee-based services as information services to local businesses, publishing programmes, and newspaper cutting services to other bodies.
(Ibid: 4)

These are the activities of a commercial business; but no commercial concern can operate with provision of a “comprehensive service” (Great Britain...1964) as an objective.

Cost-effectiveness has become the primary goal. Yet although it is held to be a function of accountability, in the commercial world it is more often a function of profit-making.

Perhaps there are few people who seriously see the public library service as a source of profit. In all the documents the language of public service is at least aired. But it is clear that the challenge of librarianship, for the writers of recent reports, is a marketing and management challenge. There has been a value shift. Consumerism and competition have replaced facilitation and co-operation as ideals. (Muddiman and Black, 1993: 8,9) The 1995 Aslib report to the Department of National Heritage recommends entrepreneurship on the private sector model.

Future funding will need to be from a mixture of sources. Although local funding should continue as the basis, it is no longer possible to envisage the whole service being funded by taxation. Legislation has for many years allowed for revenue to be raised through fees. Income generating schemes should be developed, as long as the basic free provision of loan and reference services continues. Businesses and institutions should be charged.
(Aslib, 1995: 212)

Palpably what underlies this is respect for good business practice, and an unquestioning acceptance of its applicability to public services. Miriam Braverman, writing in the context of United States public libraries, is a minority voice in opposition. She quotes Adam Smith, of all people, in support of the idea that some enterprises are of such a nature that they ought to be undertaken at public expense. Historically, library provision is such an institution, and if this decision is to be revoked, it should be because it is reasoned, not because

“Reagan economists” like Laurence White and Malcolm Getz unthinkingly apply criteria of efficiency, not equity, to the institution. Her writing has an air of “make your mind up.” She warns librarians against giving ammunition to the market economists by unwitting compromise.

When, for example, you decide that a fee is a good way to cover the costs of a service, you immediately suggest that that service no longer is good for the whole society, or worthy of societal support. (Braverman, 1982: 401)

Consumerism and facilitation are opposites: each is defensible on its own terms, but they cannot mix. Managerialism has been not just rationalising or streamlining unwieldy bureaucracies in public services, but actually changing their nature. Imperceptibly, the contents of libraries come to be apprehended and spoken of as company assets, not public property.

As part of this new orthodoxy, schemes of private sector sponsorship, contracting-out, and privatisation of library services have been recommended.

A question about whether interviewees felt positive about sponsorship if it led to bigger bookfunds elicited broad agreement: public into private doesn't go.

Increased bookfunds- excellent- but would there be strings attached?...Would we be giving respectability to companies using us to improve their image? A partnership that leaves us with our independence, yes. But there are always strings attached.

There is a suggestion here of a world of difference between the library and the commercial sector. Libraries have a unique quality which these managers at least are still jealously defending against the designs of profit-making concerns. “I suppose we all want bigger bookfunds,” one commented; but they do not want them at all costs.

You'd have to ask “What does that company actually want from this?”

I feel positive as long as the needs of the organisation are met...But it tends to be, because they've got the money, they make the rules.

There is a sense of inferiority, or threat, here, as if it is felt that a library run on business principles can only be a poor relative among businesses. There is a deep suspicion of private sector motives, and a conviction that in such an exchange the library is bound to get the worst of the bargain. There are hidden costs. Money equals control, and the fear is of a loss of autonomy. A library stock whose nature is dictated by business obligations is not going to be the same as one shaped by the needs of the community. Association with private sector concerns, which have a far narrower range of concerns, creates a danger of “dumbing down” and narrowing the scope of the collection. To librarians

books are not commodities like tins of baked beans.

The business culture in management was condemned because it devalues professional input.

I see the vandals at the gate...Of course we should do things as economically as possible, but the librarian should have some input into it. There should be some professional territory where you can exercise your professional judgment- like medicine! People are always telling librarians what to do. We should be free to operate, within an ethical context...Real librarians should be real élite front-line combat troops, not managers.

There is a very different tone to this than there is in the documents quoted previously: the practitioner in question does not share their excitement at management *per se*. Its demands are seen as an irrelevant imposition, at odds with the real business of libraries.

A lot of people became entrepreneurs...That jarred with the public library ethos, which was why I and a lot of people got into librarianship. We lost our way in the 1970s and 80s.

The people interviewed wish to reject both commercial partnerships and even to a large extent the commercial approach in management. Yet, tellingly, their very rejections are expressed in the terms of the new approach to management with its focus on the needs of the organisation. (“A partnership that leaves us with our independence...” “As long as the needs of the organisation are met...”) Whether

this is because the attitude has infiltrated so much that they are unconscious of having it, or because the vandals are best resisted with their own weapons, is hard to tell.

Commercial values

The abandoning of the Net Book Agreement was an event in the commercial world of publishing and bookselling which has affected public library stock management. A question about the NBA was included as an indicator of attitudes to the idea of the self-regulating market and its effect on the library's function. While attitudes to entrepreneurial management and business partnerships had been broadly similar, perhaps because they are seen as a direct attack on professional autonomy, there were very mixed reactions to the end of the NBA. The most positive statement was

We shall get better value. The library suppliers will be increasingly competitive. ..There may be an effect on the range of published titles, though apparently that hasn't happened in America.

Since this came from the eldest of the librarians interviewed, who had previously rejected the monetarist values descending upon librarianship, it seems valid to assume that competition and value for money are concepts which practitioners have been happily working with long before the 1980s and 90s. These are accepted elements in the whole business of running a public library service. The younger professionals, however, are less optimistic, perhaps in reaction against having heard competition and value for money vaunted as the be-all and end-all for most of their professional lives, and having seen contradictory evidence.

It leads to a reduction in the number of suppliers- the smaller suppliers, the specialists, go first. This has happened in other countries, and they have set up something like a net book agreement again- I think in Australia they've done that.

We don't know what it's going to do to the suppliers. What is bad for them in the end is going to be bad for us.

The new conditions would reduce the range of available titles, even though they might increase the number of items it would be possible to buy. This was not seen as an advantage. Quality and range, not quantity, were the important criteria.

Again, the idea came through of a great gulf in *values* between the working of a deregulated market and the functioning of a public service. Publishers and librarians have very different attitudes to the same product. One library service complained to a well-known publisher of romantic fiction about the poor physical quality of their books, and in answer was more or less told “we’re not making them for you.” The maker sees the product as ephemeral: once read, it is intended to be discarded. The library, with a different set of values, needs the item to be capable of use over a long-term period. Preservation, admittedly a low priority in the opinion of the librarians I spoke to, nevertheless is still an acknowledged part of what the public library network does, while the producers need not be concerned with it at all. The example shows how the library-as-business is handicapped by its responsibilities. It also shows the particular problems libraries are faced with when it comes to cheap books.

A pattern emerges of some elements of business practice seeming acceptable and some being rejected as inappropriate. One aspect of business culture which has been assimilated thoroughly and unconsciously is the notion of “creating demand.” Upon hearing the statement that demand-led stock provision of itself creates variety and balance, a respondent agreed, yes, it was good to respond to demand; and then added innocently:

You have to have a range of methods for getting demand. If you present things in an attractive way there will be a demand.

Barry Smith says something similar, when he talks of making available to the public material which does not contain racial or sexual stereotyping.

I personally believe that, *given the choice*, the public will respond in areas where we think such choices are important... We have got to back up our basic demand-led stock provision by such measures as circulating special collections to experiment with stock

and bringing things we consider important to the attention of the public. (In Corrall, 1988: 52)

“Stock promotion,” “Reader development:” vilified by some as patronising condescension and by others as denying consumer sovereignty- what is it but *creating demand*, simply a marketing challenge, akin to selling instant coffee to Italians? All talk of consumer sovereignty aside, this is how businesses really operate. It is a piece of sharp business practice which seems to come naturally to these public servants. It seems to be that these representatives of the profession are selective in their approach to “enterprise culture” values. They are not happy about management techniques or business deals which they believe alter the character of their collections for the worse, but they do accept certain other techniques and attitudes- techniques and attitudes which, one suspects, have been present all along.

Mass media messages

The library exists, as does the free press, to foster independence of thought and freedom of expression. This is why many are wary of the encroachment of private sponsorship and commercial values into library management. To fulfil its role, the library needs to present an unrestricted selection of materials to its users. Restriction can be of different kinds, and as well as deliberate censorship, there is a kind that is a simple by-product of unregulated market forces. The lesson may be learned from Curran and Seaton’s (1991) book on the press and broadcasting, and applied to libraries: the first constraints on the freedom of the press in Britain were political, but the later advertisers, press barons and finally multi-national conglomerates took the industry out of the frying pan and into the fire. Harold Evans writes with inside knowledge of what the effects can be. (Good Times, bad Times, 1994) If a newspaper can be prevented from publishing anything against a certain powerful interest, it is easy to imagine that a library could be prevented from stocking some items on the same principle. Its independence would be compromised.

The effect of the powerful owners of mass media is usually, however, less sinister but more invidious than deliberate censorship of particular materials. Public libraries need to establish for themselves and their communities what their attitude is to media output which is so ubiquitous and pervasive that its presence is taken for granted. Otherwise they can find themselves simply giving the public more of the same. In the proceedings of a preconference to the ALA Annual Conference of 1984, Thomas H. Ballard claims that the majority of adults who declare themselves happy to support libraries in spite of the fact that they never use them, do so because libraries are seen as an educational resource. The recreational role is little stressed. Popular fiction publishing, he says, is one of the mass media, and libraries have better things to do than to make themselves

a minor distribution facility in an otherwise enormous network of such outlets that serves the recreational tastes of a small part of the general public. (In Serebnick, 1986: 89)

It is an important point, although the paper describes itself as “A minority report...” and the summing-up of the proceedings does not mention it. It is not that providing entertainment is wrong in itself, but that libraries like individuals can be manipulated. Both blanket condemnations and endorsements of popular materials hide the fact that there are two extremes of popular culture, a kind which is genuinely “of the people,” and a kind which has a corporate source and is mass-produced solely for profit- and of course a vast range in between of materials which have elements of both. Instead of choosing exclusively the highbrow or the lowbrow route, libraries need to chart their own path which takes account of the forces at work in the use of cultural products. Murray C. Bob, in an impassioned critique of Rawlinson’s article on Baltimore County Public Library policy, emphasises the difference between public libraries and commercial media, and exposes the myth of consumer sovereignty.

The real question is: what is a library for? To give taxpayers what they want- when what they want is what they are manipulated to ask for by mass media hype, huge advertising budgets, phony best seller lists..? (Bob, 1982: 1708)

A passivity which lends itself to the manipulation of advertisers is the danger, and critical discrimination- in other words, selection- is the key, if the tendency for the library to become simply one more of the mass media is to be resisted.

The theme of quality not quantity returned when the implications of the convergence of computing and telecommunications were considered.

It is a question of “Are we getting *too much* information?” Our role is to help people through information, not provide a mass quantity.

The reliability and authority of information on the Internet was called into question.

Control of electronic information in private hands was seen as a threat to the principle of universal free access. An interviewee said that new technologies were positive in terms of practical storage and retrieval, but commented further:

Where I would have doubts is about the idea that because information is in a certain electronic medium it can be charged for, or people can deny access to it.

The idealism of the public service ethos is still coming through, according to which (as expressed in the draft Stock Development Policy of this librarian’s authority) what is presented to the public must represent “equality, and equality through empowerment.” Any private sector interest which gets in the way of this is to be resisted.

It has been suggested that part of the role of the public libraries is to encourage more critical awareness of mass media messages. Concerns familiar to the selecting librarian are dealt with by Stout and Buddenbaum in their book on the relationship between various religious groups and mass media in the United States. Mainline churches

regularly call for media literacy programs that would help people learn to examine media messages in the light of their religious beliefs...the problem is not so much that bad

content exists but that shallow news, sex, and violence are over-represented in the marketplace, whereas more thorough and thoughtful voices and other kinds of entertainment fare are virtually absent... (Stout and Buddenbaum, 1996: 54)

Several commentators maintain that there is no such thing as the mass, but only individuals; the public library can have an important part to play in countering the more exploitative aspects of cultural products aimed at the mass.

Alternatives

It is the responsibility of the librarian to provide for his or her community a “comprehensive” library service. Yet, as Chris Atton points out, orthodox and established methods of library supply ignore small, independent publishers. The range of choice provided by mainstream channels of publication tends to be “more of the same,” especially in politics where

all political debate and analysis tends to be carried within the framework of adversarial parliamentary, representative democracy. Notions such as collectivism, direct democracy, local empowerment, anarchism or libertarianism are not considered. As the ownership of the mass media continues to be concentrated into the hands of a few, so the opportunity to hear such dissenting voices is reduced. The voices of the individual, of the community, of the oppressed, of those different from others, are hardly ever heard. (Atton, 1996: 4)

Yet these voices do speak through alternative press publishing. Such small press titles probably outnumber those of the mainstream (ibid: x) but are not represented in libraries. Atton argues that they should be. As the introduction to one stock policy says:

The free public library is a guarantee that alternative and minority views will continue to be accessible to everyone, and therefore an essential element in a free and democratic society. (Stock Management Policy, Metropolitan authority)

The question about the media and library supply was deliberately left vague in its terms in order to find out whether the defensive Ballard/ Bob/ Atton approach to media was shared by these practitioners. All agreed or agreed strongly that

“Librarians should actively seek out sources of information other than the mass media,” but only one specified:

With the mass media what we are getting is a selection of a selection of a selection, which is made for us by the powers that be. Librarians should be looking for sources like independent booksellers, and alternative publishers.

This view, significantly, came from a London borough with a very ethnically diverse population: the library service’s draft Stock Development Policy also makes it a point that publishing which represents minorities will be positively sought out, and that the commercial powers behind publishing will be taken into account. Others were not explicit about this, and it seems another area where library management may be being led by something other than professional judgment as they select stock: in this case by commercial monopolies and habit. If it is true that the media are a “means of social control” (Atton, 1996: 170), and if stock is selected only from this mainstream of choice, then public libraries are at risk of repeating the ambiguity of their early history. Which version is true; library as agent of individual empowerment, or library as agent of social control? The *profession* has to choose.

We need to develop a critical librarianship in order to educate ourselves and our users in what Marshall McLuhan called “civil defence against media fallout.” (Atton, 1996: 171)

Atton’s argument is that alternative press publications are potentially enriching because in their infinitely varied approaches to public life, the mass media, environmental activism, human rights, the arts and more, they give a more detailed picture of the world. They are potentially empowering because alternative literature is activist: it believes it can change society. This compares with both the social engagement of early librarians (Muddiman and Black, 1993: 19,20) and modern community librarianship. The ethos of alternative literature also has broad similarities with the traditional public library values of self-help, independence of thought, commitment to the ideals of free information and freedom of information. To seek out such information and supply it is “political,” as community librarianship has been accused of being political; but it is a

necessary responsibility of librarians concerned to have collections truly representative of the society they serve.

5. The library and the Canon

The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad...

F.R. Leavis The Great Tradition

It has already been noted that the public library as public good must be clear about its definition of “public.” As it selects stock it must also know what it means by “good.” What is good quality stock, and who is to define it?

A stock policy stipulates that material which is “of an inferior literary standard” should not be purchased. (Quoted by Cole and Usherwood, 1996: 122) “Inferior” is a comparative term, but what the potential stock item may be inferior *to* is not stated. In the past, unwritten agreement determined what was worthy of inclusion in libraries and what was not. The advent of cultural relativism, and the influence of Marxist and feminist thought on criticism, have among their other effects blurred boundaries and brought new principles to bear on library stock selection.

Significant works

A strong characteristic of the argument which advocates seriousness is the idea that there is a hierarchy of cultural products. The best works of literature, philosophy, history and science from each of the world’s literate societies form a natural Canon of greatness which ought to be the core of all library provision, regardless of levels of demand. This has become most contentious where literature is concerned.

Richard Hoggart is in this tradition. His claim that

libraries were set up a century and a half ago so that many more people could have access to the “best that has been thought and said...” (*Guardian* 22.2.97)

follows the literary criticism of T.S. Eliot and of F.R. Leavis who saw literature as ranked in orders of quality, the best works transcending their time and joining the Canon by virtue of their aesthetic and intellectual authority.

According to the critic Harold Bloom, the relationship between such texts is what he calls agonistic; it is not mere influence but has the nature of conflict and competition. The Canon he writes about is not a metaphor but an actual entity which has formed itself as a product of the struggle between “past genius and present aspiration.” (Bloom, 1994: 8) It is only by intellectual and aesthetic standards that it is to be understood, and the reader, critic, or selecting librarian is obliged to

raise again the ancient and quite grim triple question of the agonist: more than, less than, equal to? (Ibid: 35)

It is a statement of faith in aesthetic supremacy. Bloom’s book includes frequent attempts to indicate the true purpose and value of the kinds of works he celebrates. They help us to endure ourselves, they are “the image of the individual thinking,” (35) they are “a gauge of vitality, a measurement that attempts to map the incommensurate.” (39) These feel unconvincing because they have to be suggestive, not definitive: probably if great literature could have its purpose circumscribed by definitions it would no longer have a purpose. It is a notoriously difficult thing to express; however one librarian who was interviewed for this study also made the attempt.

There is so much in modern literature and media that is de-sensitising- reducing people’s sensibility to the world around them- literature helps us keep alive that sense of wonder and admiration for the human being...

...Siegfried Sassoon said “props for the mind.” Books are for strength, because they contain human experience...

The “outcomes” of literature are incalculable. Respect and love for books seemed a large part of this particular interviewee’s motivation. For the other two it was less so, and they agreed with the statement that the notion of holding a canon of

great works in every branch library is no longer valid. The idea of the Canon is still current and powerful, but there are many other powerful influences on public librarians. Bloom's The Western Canon engages with all these besieging forces.

Social conscience

Greenhalgh and Worpole, in a book that grew out of the Borrowed time report, describe how libraries were an Enlightenment concept at heart, dating from a time when faith was placed in the ideals of reason and progress and the "literary icons" of a shared national culture were even physically built into its architecture. (Greenhalgh and Worpole, 1995: 56) Today's readers and library users are less likely to accept a version of culture which is set in stone. The loss of religious certainties, the disintegration of empires, the development of representative democracy, and the devastating wars of the twentieth century, have all assisted in shaking the idea that there can be a single monumental literary culture. The belief in Western European superiority has vanished and the old confidence in the Canon has gone with it. Democracy states that no one may decide what the people ought to know except the people themselves.

Critics have begun to apply social conscience to the reading of literature. It is claimed that traditional readings which value aesthetic standards above other criteria are narrow, exalt the personal at the expense of public responsibility, and simply act to preserve social inequalities. To this school of opinion, the Canon is a social construct erected by the dominant classes of dominant nations, as much a product of politics and economics as of art. They deny that canonical works influence each other by a superior literary quality which can be universally recognised. Instead, as Sharon Crowley claims in an essay on the "pedagogy of taste,"

the ideology of taste works to naturalize that which is culturally instituted...The ideology of taste assigns socially constructed differences to nature...(in Reynolds, 1995: 18)

And again:

Teachers' real work, of course, is not to inculcate taste, but to rationalize the preferences of the hegemonic class. Teachers make categories and hierarchical distinctions; in the case of the pedagogy of taste, they turn class-bound preferences into knowledge. It is this work that is crucial to the maintenance and continuing dominance of the dominant class. (Ibid: 19)

What is called "the best that has been thought and written" has been thought and written by such an unrepresentative part of society that it is seen as just another example of cultural exclusion. Many established works cannot escape the charge of racism, imperialism or sexism. The re-designing of society in terms of equality and empowerment (terms which feature strongly in stock management policy statements) must inform the judgement of literature also. It is the shift of vision or consciousness which is described by the writer Toni Morrison, in the introduction to a book on "blackness" in the American literary imagination:

It is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl- the glide and the flick of the golden scales...the barely disturbed water, the flecks of waste and food, the tranquil bubbles traveling to the surface- and suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world. (Quoted by Roskelly in Reynolds, 1995: 139)

Bloom would invoke Shakespeare and argue that no social environment and no ideology "contains" him; it would be truer to say that he contains them. But for a librarian who serves the public, there is clearly a responsibility to consider the social conditions under which works are produced, as well as taking them on their own terms or judging by literary criteria. So more than one stock management policy suggests, by statements such as

we aim to promote understanding and extend experience by offering variety (Stock Management Policy, Metropolitan authority)

we need to be aware of the ethnocentric view, particularly in relation to the needs of our diverse multicultural community, by seeking out, examining, analysing and selecting materials that challenge these [harmful] attitudes...(Draft Stock Management Policy, London borough)

The needs of the community have to be met: that is a clear priority. If seriousness consists of imposing a pre-determined set of works upon the public, then the librarians I spoke to reject it. Education is a vital role of the library, but these practitioners have a broad understanding of what education is. It has already been suggested that curriculum based learning can be prescriptive and limiting; similarly emphasis on canonical works could be socially limiting. “Our literary heritage” can be a very exclusive phrase.

Classification and editing

The ideas of Michel Foucault have been influential in altering critics’ approach to cultural products. He plays down the importance of individual authors and texts (he has famously proclaimed the “death of the author”) and instead talks in terms of groups of statements, which together establish a unity of *discourse*. To think in terms of discourses rather than sciences or literatures as they are presently structured and understood, gives “a more extensive space than the play of influences that have operated from one author to the other.” (Foucault, 1972: 126) These systems of statements consist of writing’s self-conscious relation to itself. To them he assigns the metaphor of the archive, an image of inclusiveness, whereas canonical hierarchy is exclusive. Scientific works and works of art are all within the archive. So are letters, jottings and shopping lists. Works of art have complex relationships with each other, of which Bloom’s “more than, less than, equal to?” is only one, and not necessarily the primary one.

By classifying and ordering knowledge into categories, societies make judgements about knowledge: it is not a neutral activity. Our distinctions are, if not arbitrary, at least dependent upon inherited prejudices and assumptions. Our confidence that we are easily able to distinguish between learning and leisure for the purposes of stock selection is one example. Foucault and others would say that the distinctions are invented and far from inevitable. This is nicely illustrated by a quotation in the Preface to The order of things from one of the fictions of the

Argentinean librarian and author Jorge Luis Borges, where he describes a “certain Chinese encyclopedia.” In it,

animals are divided into (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. (Quoted in Foucault, 1970: xv)

Foucault’s view is that classifying as we know it began in the Classical period. The development of the taxonomy of the animal world ran in parallel with new moves to catalogue archives and similar endeavours. It was not a new desire for knowledge but a new recognition of the way in which things could be viewed, tabulated, described and understood. To us it seems unquestionably the way of going about things, but previous cultures did not, and non-western cultures still do not, classify knowledge in this way. (“Non-western” in the previous sentence is itself an arbitrary distinction.) It is not the only way to approach knowledge. This was conceded by taxonomists Buffon and Bonnet, who each wrote that nature is so graduated that divisions into species and classes are “purely nominal.” The same is true of library classification. The 1993 Comedia report Borrowed time says as much:

Libraries still carry with them traces of that Victorian understanding of the library as a collection of books regulated from the perspective of a Victorian world view- a legacy symbolised by the Dewey Decimal system. Just as most libraries have now moved from closed stacks (which the librarian only had access to) to open stacks, so the service has gradually been turning itself around from a presentation of knowledge based on the way books are classified to looking at the potential user and trying to understand his or [her] needs, or responding to his or her interests in a more thematic way. (Comedia, 1993: 73-4)

This is the response of social accountability: it is not a solution to the problem, if it is a problem, of classification. If there are established prejudices, they will be cultural, not just professional. But the report also introduces the useful metaphor of editorship. What the editor is between reader and text, the library is between

user and stock. The archive of Foucault is a metaphor. A literal library left to grow indiscriminately and not classified at all through delicacy of feeling, is an impossibility.³ Rigorous selection and classification must happen; and the paradox is that this rigid control over library stock is in fact what enables its independent use by communities and hence is what empowers them.

Intellectuals and popular culture

So far it has been seen that the established body of serious literature is being undermined by several forces: the social fragmentation of the twentieth century, the critical conscience which sees “classics” as socially unrepresentative, and the new attitudes to the ordering of knowledge.

All these critical stances associate the canon with what can be called establishment values- the accepted beliefs of a ruling minority. John Carey also attacks this, but from another angle. Establishment values, as far as literature was concerned, took in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the form of intellectual contempt for the “masses.” He claims that the Modernist movement itself was a *conscious* attempt to lift art beyond the understanding of most people. Deliberately difficult and non-representational, it was on a plane where it might be appreciated only by the sensibilities of a self-appointed intellectual élite.

Almost all significant twentieth century writers are demonstrated to be guilty of this deliberate exclusivism, including T.S Eliot, E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, H.G. Wells and W.B. Yeats. The criticism of the Leavis school is also based upon the assumption that culture is necessarily a minority affair. Many writers of distinction actually denied humanity and individuality to members of what they saw as the mob, the mass, the “great unwashed,” whether explicitly or implicitly. There is a revulsion from the public which goes beyond snobbery in some cases to fear and hatred. It was a symptom, Carey suggests, of the same fear of swarming over-population which

³ though Utopian visions of universal access via desktop PCs suggest otherwise.

motivated the Eugenics Society and support for compulsory sterilisation. It is this sinister strain running through the twentieth century canon which subverts its authority as national or public culture.

If serious literature is not the uncomplicated good it first appears, then Entertainment too is a term which conceals more complications than those who are inclined to be dismissive will admit. To Carey's more negative view than usual of the twentieth century's high culture may be added Frank W. Hoffman's positive exploration of popular culture. His generic divisions themselves give a clue to its richness: popular arts, mass media, oral tradition, and "Fads, Events, Trends and Other Phenomena." (Hoffmann, 1984: 3) Educators and librarians make a mistake when they endure popular arts simply in the hope that they will provide a step towards the enjoyment of "real" art and literature, because

the intrinsic aesthetic merit of some of the popular arts items may well outstrip that of other genres with respect to certain criteria. (Ibid: 16)

Examples come to mind. If "high seriousness" is the criterion, many popular songs are on very serious themes, whereas the plots at least of many operas (commonly seen as the ultimate in élitist art) are utterly trivial.

Even mass media culture is not always received unquestioningly by the public as mere "prolefeed." Q.D. Leavis was right in 1932 about the dangerous efficiency of advertising, but not altogether right in her disparaging view of readers. (Q.D. Leavis, 1932: 8) Anyone who has worked for five minutes at an issue desk knows that the passivity of the reader is largely a myth. Demand for genre fiction is very highly specified: Mills and Boon titles will not do for a family saga reader, and family sagas are scorned by "sex 'n shopping" fans. It is the more literate or highly educated user who tends to borrow and read uncritically over a wide range of categories. Paradoxically, it is the readers of lesser fiction who are most discriminating. People have decided tastes, tempered with a degree of detachment and cynicism. The librarian who said that he approved of the switch towards entertainment was not trivialising the library's role but expressing respect for

individuals' capability of judging. Similarly the decision to review genre fiction in *Library Journal* (Fialkoff, 1995: 60) rather than leave librarians to order "by numbers," follows the cue given by library users. If the people we serve take it seriously, the argument goes, so do we.

The uses of literature

All the commentators seem sure, whether they take pleasure in it or not, that serious literature in libraries is a lost cause. With all the different forces attacking the best works of the ages, it is not surprising that The Western Canon is an elegy.

However, none of the interviewees dismissed the idea of the canon out of hand. Of course, democracy, representation, and social awareness, are all part of the public service ethos of public librarians, and stock policy *has* changed in accordance with postmodernist thinking about texts. But despite this there was a kind of vestigial regard for the acknowledged greats. One respondent emphasised the need to represent the immediate community but added:

Then- in a borough of this size- you have, if you like, one set of canonical works or centre of excellence...

"The best that has been written" is kept in a central location, which suggests that demand is low- but still it is kept. There is an intrinsic value. Another comment was "People should have access to the classics." "Classics"- the Canon is not so fragmented by postmodernist thought that this generic term cannot still be used for it. These practising librarians are influenced to a greater or lesser degree by cultural relativism, but do not fully accept it.⁴

Many assumptions about "high culture" did badly need to be challenged and corrected, but to deny that aesthetic criteria are valid at all is to go to unnecessary

⁴ Muddiman and Black (1993: 10) suggest some reasons for this.

extremes. There is a misunderstanding about the nature of canonical works.

Hoffmann (1984: 4) describes “high culture” as

creative output aimed at fulfilling the artist’s inner impulses and private visions without regard to public acceptance.

Misdefinitions like this derive from the habit of contempt described by Carey, which to the present day fosters the idea that art is something expensive, élitist and self-indulgent. On the contrary, art communicates, and the greater it is, the more it is able to communicate. Carey comes to the crux of the matter in his discussion of Nietzsche and D.H. Lawrence. Both were inspired (if that is the right word) by a scorn for the masses and a conviction that they themselves belonged to an intellectual aristocracy. Yet there is a qualitative difference between them which Carey brings out by comparing their typical imagery. The point he makes is that “poetic intelligence,” which attempts to understand and express, is empathetic by nature and itself militates against the violent contempt of Nietzsche and others. Great art belongs in public libraries because it does what libraries are pledged to do. It promotes understanding, and it extends experience vicariously. According to F.R. Leavis, the great novelists

not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but...are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life. (F.R.Leavis, 1948: 10)

It is not even far-fetched to suggest that art can “support the democratic process.”

George Orwell has a plea for good writing in his 1946 essay *Politics and the English language*:

[The English language] becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits...If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think more clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. (Orwell, 1962: 143)

And again,

if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. (Ibid., 154)

This remains a powerful case for good quality in library stock.

The largeness of the library

There are so many opinions on the single question of what “serious literature” means, let alone the issue of dumbing down of library stock in general, that it seems the differences must be irreconcilable. Yet it may be useful to think that public libraries can *contain* dissenting opinions among their staff, in the same way that they silently contain a multiplicity of mutually contradictory materials. Breadth and variety of opinion might be valued in librarians as it is in communities and the stock which represents them. But this breadth and variety is what makes it very difficult , in practical terms, to determine a philosophy of stock management.

6. Developing a philosophy

What are we up to?

A.W. McClellan⁵

The impression which emerges from listening to librarians is one of a profession tremendously committed to serving the public, but with no consensus on the best way to do it. Everyone I spoke to was concerned that libraries' contents should be exactly appropriate, but they were very different from one another in the way they expressed this concern and in the motivation they demonstrated.

Public library stock management is not utilitarian: there is vision, and a move towards articulating the vision. Each of the authorities in question had a mission statement and stock selection policy either in use or in preparation.

In the authority where the policy was under review, a consultant had been called in to help to draft it, because the library service management felt too close to the issues and found it difficult to be sufficiently detached. This admission sheds light on the stock management problem. Each authority is having to build up its own definition of stock purpose within the constraints of its own situation.⁶

A library constitution?

⁵ This section is developed partly from arguments in McClellan's *What are we up to?* and *The purpose of libraries*

⁶ A comparison of policy documents does reveal a degree of borrowing and co-operation.

It is claimed that library policy is not resting on an underlying philosophy. The CIPFA report quoted earlier called for an “explicit specification” of library objectives and policies.

It is true that the public library service is better at specifying means than ends. What is not accurate, however, is to say that policy is not resting on philosophy. Many profoundly held beliefs about the value of libraries to individual and public life have a bearing on stock selection and management. The problems are firstly that these beliefs have not been built up into a coherent system, and secondly that they do not have an influence on stock which is proportionate to their strength. They are expressed typically in private, or in professional journals.

There is a clue to a possible solution in the library service which has recruited outside help in drafting its stock management policy. Detachment may be the key. The purpose of library stock needs to be considered from a viewpoint which allows broadly occurring patterns and common features to be seen.

David Spiller (1991: 18) notes that statements of policy need to be specific, and advises a separation into two levels, *policy* and *methods*. These are “close-up” operations; they can be done by individual library services.

Philosophy is the third level. It needs to be established by consensus across a broader spectrum,⁷ and instead of specifications will provide a *context*. Sets of criteria, at the level of policy, are all very well, but they need to be altered with altering circumstances, when for example governments or systems of financing change. There is a need for some universal basis from which policies can be developed for differing circumstances. An analogy is the American Constitution: it is a context within which individual states frame their laws. This is what one librarian in this study expressed a desire for when he spoke of freedom to operate “within an ethical context.”

Some such statements do exist: attempts to step back and see the overall purpose of public libraries. The Library Bill of Rights adopted by the American Library Association (concerned primarily with issues of censorship and access) lists what it calls “policies” but which in fact aspire to the condition of principles. A similar widely accepted statement on library contents can be envisaged.

The recent Public Library Manifesto of the Library Association does not quite fit the bill, being more of a response to a particular crisis than a proclamation.

However, its call for Britain to rejoin Unesco (which has now, August 1997, in fact happened) points, as one of the interviewees also did, in the direction of the Unesco Public Library Manifesto. This is something which is detached enough from individual nations and services to be able to consider the public library network and its character as a whole. Criticisms can be made of it: of its Eurocentrism, for example, and of the fact that its revised version does not make explicit the library’s role in recreation. Yet it is the nearest thing there is to an accepted expression of what the public library is, and what its contents are for. The Unesco Manifesto is able to be unashamedly idealistic and describe the public library as

an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women. (Unesco, 1994)

This is the advantage of having principles developed and articulated by an international and disinterested (though well-informed) body. A philosophy of expediency is no philosophy at all.

Yet even this document gets caught up in matters of policy. During the 1994 revision, a group of related papers in *Libri* included an Eastern European perspective on state funding by Jean Gattégno (*Libri*, 1994: 164-70) in which the Manifesto’s position was challenged: state funding is linked to censorship and

⁷ McClellan (1973: 126) will not allow anything less broad than “society itself, i.e. the whole structure.”

denied access. It is *policy* which makes statements about funding; *philosophy* is one step further back from the particular, and establishes a culture of awareness. Dedication to accessibility is the end: once this is accepted, the means can be specified.

An ecumenical librarianship

In the above case, both sides of the argument had the same concern: free access to knowledge for all. The disagreement was not fundamental. Could this be true also of the disagreements within librarianship over what libraries should stock? It is an important question because if they could be resolved into some kind of agreement, the profession could give a stronger lead and not be so much influenced by other forces. Both sides of the high seriousness versus entertainment debate have, after all, the same vocabulary: democracy, choice, enrichment, improved quality of life. It is just that the different commentators within the debate, like the six blind men of Hindustan who went to investigate the elephant (is it like a rope? Or a wall? Or a tree?) each have a different grasp of this complex organism the library. Is it a social service? Is it a freelance University? Whatever else it is, it is a natural home to the expression of this diversity of attitudes, which ought not to be forcibly rationalised. Diversity should be recognised as a strength, as the thing which can save the public library system from giving unequal coverage to any one of its legitimate types of stock.

One librarian in the course of an interview mooted the idea of a national “Reader Development Agency,” saying, “the philosophy behind this is that whatever you read is valid.” It is possible to be informed and educated by something one is using for recreation.

Entertainment and high seriousness are not all that far from each other.

This is an ecumenical conclusion if ever there was one: yet there is something similar in Raymond Williams’ note on the “delight of learning” according to Aristotle.

The modern separation of pleasure and learning, rationalized into the alienated categories (which then acquire their appropriate methods) of entertainment and instruction, has been very damaging to our ideas of art and, it may be said, of education. (Williams, 1965: note to 20)

The public library is one place where, given appropriate funding, the effects of this damage can be reversed. In this multi-partisan (not neutral) environment, materials are all present to be judged on their own merits or de-merits, rather than by what category they are deemed to belong to.

Conclusion: a sense of identity

Librarians have a commitment to neutrality in dealing with users. It is important to give access to a world of published materials without imposing any conditions. Unfortunately, the desire not to dictate has led to a tendency in the library service simply to react: disinterestedness is interpreted as indifference, and a complaint of the people who spoke to me was that other ideologies were having too much influence in this perceived vacuum: “people are always telling librarians what to do.”

Perhaps Reading the future posed the wrong question. It asks “what can the public library do to further Information Technology?” An institution with a strong sense of identity would invite the question “what can Information Technology do for the public library?” Libraries are not defining themselves. The stipulation in the report that “core services” remain free of charge, based as it is on an arbitrary distinction according to format, is another example.

One of the surprises in the data was that the consumerist attitude was not expressed at all. This may mean that my interviewees were untypical. On the other hand it could mean that librarians are being carried along, lending themselves unwillingly to the consumer culture because the profession lacks (for all the reasons discussed) the confidence to assert and implement its own vision.

Clearly it *has* a vision. All the evidence suggests a broad agreement that the purpose of library stock in the context of a public service is the enhancement of individual and public life by the use of recorded works. Stock is information; communication; equipment for citizenship; the unbiased representation of all recorded culture; a tool for self-education; a developer of critical thought and judgement; the source of recreation and pleasure through the record in any format of fiction, music, drama, comedy, sport and more. A philosophy of stock management exists, but is largely unwritten. An authoritative statement or Manifesto, formulated independently, would help public libraries to defend and to balance all these roles.

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Appendix: Interview schedule

1.

a.) When selecting stock for the library, what in your own opinion, are the three most important criteria?

b.) In practice, are these the things which actually govern stock selection?

c.) Recent commentators have seen a tension between the educational and the leisure function of public libraries. The Foreword to the Review of Public Libraries in England said;

“The original concept of the British public library system was one of high seriousness and importance. In more recent years, there has been a shift away from that high seriousness towards entertainment.”

What do you think about this? Should libraries consider themselves institutions of “high seriousness,” or should they provide popular culture and entertainment if that is what the public wants?

I am going to read seven statements. Please choose for each of them the response which is nearest to your own opinion. After each one there will be an opportunity to explain and make further comments, if you wish.

2.

a.) Demand-led stock provision will itself create variety and balance.

AGREE STRONGLY

AGREE

NO OPINION

DISAGREE

DISAGREE STRONGLY

What is your experience or observation of this?

b.) It is part of the job of a librarian to advise and guide the public in its use of books and information.

AGREE STRONGLY

AGREE

NO OPINION

DISAGREE

DISAGREE STRONGLY

Would you like to expand on this?

c.) The old notion of holding a canon of great works in every branch library is no longer valid.

AGREE STRONGLY

AGREE

NO OPINION

DISAGREE

DISAGREE STRONGLY

What makes you believe this?

3.

a.) I feel very positive about partnerships with the commercial sector if they lead to increased bookfunds.

AGREE STRONGLY

AGREE

NO OPINION

DISAGREE

DISAGREE STRONGLY

Would you like to expand on that?

b.) The demise of the Net Book Agreement will have a long-term positive effect on stock selection.

AGREE STRONGLY

AGREE

NO OPINION

DISAGREE

DISAGREE STRONGLY

How?

c.) Librarians should actively seek out sources of information other than the mass media.

AGREE STRONGLY

AGREE

NO OPINION

DISAGREE

DISAGREE STRONGLY

What is the reason for your opinion?

d.) The convergence of mass communications and computing has negative implications for the quality of the information which libraries will supply in the future.

AGREE STRONGLY

AGREE

NO OPINION

DISAGREE

DISAGREE STRONGLY

Why?

4.

When selecting stock in times of financial constraint, how do you prioritise? Can you put the following library functions in order of priority?-

Culture

Education

Information

Preservation

Recreation

Is there anything you would like to add on the subject of stock management?

Finally, may I ask some questions which will help me in the analysis of data?

Gender:

Are you in the age-group under 34, 35-44, 45-54, over 55 ?

Notes

1. The first group of questions is intended to find out personal opinions of what good stock is, and whether this differs for any reason from professional practice. Is a philosophy of stock management a consideration for respondents, or is it seen merely as functional?
2. The second group has to do with the politics of provision. Do respondents believe that collections should be shaped by demand from the public or managed on the public's behalf by professionals? This includes the "intellectual atmosphere" of cultural relativism: who can say with authority what is good?
3. Economics, ownership and influence. Have respondents particular concerns about how the quality of library materials is affected by the economic environment?
4. What assumptions and beliefs are held about the relative importance of types of stock provision?