The Best of Times,
The Worst of Times:
The Politics of the Library Collection

by Katherine R. Cagle

I n the best of times, library collections have the potential for reflecting the political and personal biases of the community and the librarians who select materials. Regardless of our attempt to be non-partisan, librarians, like all other people, come equipped with personal biases. Selection is subjective. No hard and fast selection rules have ever been formulated, nor could they be, so we are left with the dilemma of overcoming our biases and the biases of the community if we expect to develop collections that are reasonably fair to our users and potential users. Any decisions we make about the collection are ultimately political—what audience we serve, how we handle censorship issues, whether we opt for quality or quantity, how much emphasis we put on technology, whether we charge for any services. All of these decisions have an impact on our community and make political statements, whether we realize it or not.

To further complicate matters, our world does not remain static. Decisions made yesterday may be outdated tomorrow. Changes in community demographics, altered perceptions brought about by societal change, fluctuating tax revenues are but a few examples of conditions that might require selection policy revisions.

Over the past few years, the national, state, and local economies have created our greatest dilemma: the cost of library materials is rising while budgets are falling. As long as this situation exists, we are forced to analyze not only our budget priorities, but also our entire philosophy of collection development. To quote Lee Ash, " After the profligate days of Title II-A, during which some libraries were hard-pressed to acquire all the books their government dollars would buy—and harder pressed to process them—we have returned to the reality of fiscal austerity in our libraries. Careful selection of materials has been restored to its former elevated status as one of the fine arts of librarianship."[1]

In practicing that art, our first priority should be to examine some differing views of selection policy. "Generally, the library's

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goals are summarized in the collection policy statement, and whether that be a page or a small volume, inevitably it begins by defining an audience."[2] When we define the audience, there is an element of choice. At this point, the collection becomes a highly political statement—what members of the community will the library serve and to what extent. According to Bill Katz, there are basically three philosophies: the traditional, the liberal, and the pluralistic. The traditionalist will choose to concentrate on giving in-depth service to those who are already library users. Traditionalists do not believe that materials should be purchased "simply because they are demanded by the public." The liberal viewpoint is basically a "belief in activism ... both in selection and dissemination of information." The liberal believes in reaching out to people who are not already library users. "There is a particular effort to choose materials people want and at the same time, materials people do not even know exist but that will be useful and rewarding." The pluralistic philosophy is a blend of the traditional and liberal viewpoints. "Here the rationale is that there are more than two types of reality, and to opt for either one or the other is to defeat the purpose of the library, which is to serve, equally all groups in society."[3]

Most librarians probably fit into the pluralistic category, at times leaning toward the traditional view and at times toward the liberal view; but whatever the philosophy, pragmatism seems to rule in today's economic climate. Since we can't meet all the needs of our communities, we have to make hard choices, and those hard choices could mean that some segments of our population will be underserved.

It is sometimes quite surprising to realize just what segments of our population are underserved. Librarian Carol Hole, in a recent *American Libraries* article, came to the conclusion that men are an underserved group in most public libraries. After reading and reflecting on Bernard Vavrek's study of rural Pennsylvania, where he found that 80 percent of public library users were women, Hole stated that libraries had become "feminized." She concluded that public library collections often leaned heavily

toward materials of interest mainly to women, while neglecting more technical fields. The results of this feminization [have] skewed our collection balance and driven away a large segment of our population, including most men. Our attempts to correct this have caused an overemphasis on information gathering at the expense of equally important recreational reading of both fiction and non-fiction. Yet due to subconscious classism and our tendency to underrate the demand for books on "male" subjects, we have still not succeeded in attracting men, especially working-class men to our libraries.[4]

This is a good example of how our perceptions can change as a result of societal change. In this case, we can see that even though the movement toward equality for women has resulted in a heightened awareness of inequities for both women and men, gaps in perception will still surface from time to time. When our perceptions do change, then so must our policies.

It is also hard to ignore Hole's reference to "classism." She asserts that "[l]ibraries have a long, depressing history of hostility toward working-class people of either sex, and, whether we admit it or not, when we don't buy what they want to read, we send the message 'we don't want your kind in our library.'"[5] In a similar statement, Katz said, "The economically and educationally disadvantaged (and they tend to be much the same) are locked out of the library by barriers which need to be carefully studied."[6]

From a pragmatic point of view, it is easy to understand the existence of barriers that lock out the economically and educationally disadvantaged. There is a history of intellectual elitism in most educational and cultural institutions. Even though libraries have changed greatly, there is still a remnant of that elitism. And when selection choices are made, the influence of the business community, the educated, and the affluent is likely to be reflected in our collection. After all, these are the people who occupy positions of power that ultimately determine our very existence. While it is certainly important that librarians be politically astute enough to win friends among those with political power, most of us are also conscious of our need to serve other segments of the population as well—the question is, how adequately do we serve those others?

Stephen Akey's article in *The New Republic* entitled "McLibraries" deals with another direction some libraries have taken to ensure their survival. According to Akey, public libraries have been in decline since the 1970s when library directors and trustees, in reaction to severe budget cuts, began boosting circulation figures "by stocking the shelves with trash." While this policy seems to work in boosting circulation and thus justifying the library's request for additional funding, Akey also believes that libraries are neglecting their "traditional constituency: serious adult readers" and the role of the library as an educational resource. He says, "No one, as far as I know, is arguing that public libraries should stop buying and making available popular and entertaining books. Yet traditionally libraries have maintained a balance between their functions as a leisure activity and as an educational resource."[7]

Will Manley presents a similar point of view in the November 1990 issue of *Wilson Library Bulletin*. He believes that "... the people need and deserve a community book collection that is balanced, diverse, and of the highest quality." As Manley says, "America does

not need public bookstores. It needs public libraries ."[8]

In the best of all possible worlds, library directors would not be forced to choose between having McLibraries and community book collections, or between serving users and reaching out to non-users, but would have a balanced collection which would include both the popular materials people want and the materials that have been traditionally a part of library collections. Whether today's budget worries will find us merchandising libraries or providing the community book collection advocated by Manley is a question still to be answered. Or will we find that a combination of merchandising and providing book collections is the answer?

If public libraries are in danger of becoming McLibraries, school libraries are in danger of becoming health food stores—having vitamins but no dessert. The first priority of a school library is to support the curriculum; therefore, the collection is, to a large extent, driven by the curriculum. While it is certainly reasonable to expect school libraries to support the curriculum, anyone who has followed the history of public schools knows that the curriculum changes with the prevailing political climate. The cry for "back to basics" usually results in heavy textbook use in the classroom and little in-depth library research. When "enriching the curriculum" is the prevailing educational theme, library research is back in favor. If the English curriculum is following the trend of "back to the classics," those books must be dusted off and/or reordered; but if the English teachers change their minds and assign current adolescent literature, there is a mad dash to add extra copies of adolescent literature. School library collections are very much governed by the whims of educational trends.

Censorship attempts can also have a devastating effect on library collections. Groups from every side of the political and/or religious spectrum have targeted library materials deemed offensive by their particular group. Just this year in Florida, *Snow White* was placed on a restricted list in a Duval County elementary school library "because parents complained that it contains graphic violence." Eighteen other books have been challenged in that same school system this year.[9] Duval County might lead the nation with such a high number of challenges in a single school system in one year; however, no school or public library is immune to challenges. When we consider other recently challenged titles—*The Merchant of Venice; Huckleberry Finn; Brave New World*; Shel Silverstein's *Light in the Attic*; and even Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*—it doesn't take long to realize that our shelves would be empty if these censorship attempts succeeded. Even if an attempt fails, there is always the danger that librarians will be intimidated and decide not to purchase materials that have been challenged. We seem to be winning most of the censorship battles at this time; however, the voices of censors are still ringing out loud and clear.

At a recent conference of the American Enterprise Institute, the Associated Press reported that former secretary of education William Bennett and Georgetown University professor Walter Berns were critical of the American popular culture and said "they would welcome censorship if it were possible to reestablish it."[10] If such prominent, well-educated public figures advocate censorship, our struggle for a balanced collection will include fighting the censors for a long time to come.

Another factor that has an increasing impact on library collections is the expense of keeping up with technology. There have been incredible changes in technology in the past few years.

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Installing and updating information technology in our libraries will take an increasingly larger share of our budget money. Although the benefits of information via technology are certainly without question, there is evidence that the library often has an "... inclination to put the library before the user ... most alarming is the extraordinary assumption that ordinary people may be deprived of traditionally free service in order not to disturb the technological process, and by inference, the needs of a few who profit most from the shift of concentration on collections to the concentration on processing and delivering."[11] Will we be able to continue to expand information technology, or will it be necessary to limit such services? What effect will our decisions have on the collection? And how will our audience be affected?

There are no absolute solutions to any of the issues affecting the politics of the collection, any more than there are hard and fast rules for selection. At times there seem to be more questions than answers. Each library must face the issues and deal with them according to the needs of that particular community. We must, however, remember to consider all facets of the issues. When developing a selection policy, do we try to involve people from different segments of the population? Do we conscientiously set our goals to reflect the needs of all population groups? Do we review our selection policy periodically to adjust for changes in the community? Are we aware of the political pressures and social conditions that can affect a collection? Are we, as librarians, aware of our own biases? And are we committed to keeping our library collections as free of bias as possible?

Not only do we need to keep all of the preceding questions in mind when developing our selection policies, but we constantly need to rethink the questions and generate new questions as new situations develop. We may not be able to predict the changes tomorrow will bring, but we do know that tomorrow will bring changes. Librarians must determine how to respond to the changes. We must decide what policies to revise and what policies to leave unchanged to ensure that the collection serves the entire community without bias—providing the information, the educational and cultural resources, the recreational reading, and, yes, even the "trash" if that is what our community needs.

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