

"Building the 'Popular Library'"

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LIS 660  
Collection Development  
Term Paper

The debate over the nature of libraries in America has been going on since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the first public library was opened in Boston. What should be the focus of libraries and their collections? How can libraries attract patrons? Are libraries still relevant or have advances in technology and changes in society rendered them obsolete? Ultimately, all of these inquiries lead to one overarching question - How can we build an institution that will be in total demand by the public, a "popular" library? Now examining the concept of "Building the 'Popular Library'" is a difficult one as it is extremely broad topic. Popularity can mean many things and varies from community to community. But overall, any type of library, whether public or academic or specialized can be termed "popular" if it does one major thing - encourage its patrons to continue using its services. No one can argue that a library, no matter how beautiful or well stocked or staffed, is popular if nobody uses it. So what this paper must look at are which elements need to be found in any kind of library in order to develop and keep a large, solid pool of patrons. The following paper will look at three major elements that libraries require to become popular in order to explain how "Building the 'Popular Library'" might be possible.

What are the three broad major elements that are needed to build a "popular" library? They are the physical collection, customer service, and social purpose. The physical collection refers specifically to the material that the library can offer the public. Before the age of computers, this referred almost exclusively to books. Modern libraries however offer much more, including video/DVDs, audio (CD/MP3), and even video games. Libraries in the computer era also offer their patrons Internet access and are moving towards providing

wireless access as standard service as well. In other words, library collections are now a combination of technology and books. So how should a library relate to its collection in order to become "popular"? Two major points are involved in answering that. The first point is to focus on a question librarians have been arguing about for the entire existence of the profession in the United States - quality versus popularity in collection development.<sup>1</sup> Should the collection that libraries maintain be composed mainly of quality materials such as Shakespeare, Homer, and other classic works of literature? Or should the collection be made up mostly of bestsellers and current fiction?<sup>2</sup> Is the circulation difference between quality and popular material, with its constant tilt towards the popular, what should determine the type of material that a "popular" library would stock?<sup>3</sup> In other words, should the need of a library to draw a crowd, which in a manner of speaking would define it as "popular", play a major role in determining the basis of the collection? Should a "popular" library have a collection that is made up of just Danielle Steele novels and DVD Season collections of Battlestar Galactica, particularly if that is what will draw people in? Definitely not - a collection based exclusively on popularity ignores other factors that libraries must

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<sup>1</sup> Quality versus popularity in libraries is a very long and at many times circular debate in library history so I decided to limit my notes and comments of it to its modern incarnation that dates to the debate of the early 1980s.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this section of the paper, I am focusing on books as the collection but the question of quality versus popularity applies to the technological side of the collection as well. It's a valid question to ask if any of that material (DVD/MP3/etc) can be considered quality material or is it all just a concession to popularity so that the library will draw a crowd?

<sup>3</sup> Nora Rawlinson's main quote in her article "Give 'Em What They Want" in the November 1981 issue of Library Journal was that "Circulation of Material is the Key". Her argument was not ultimately either for or against quality or popularity. It was an attempt to define collection development outside of those terms by basing it on patron demand rather than any other factor.

pursue in order to justify existing at all.<sup>4</sup> Popularity is not the only thing necessary to create an overall "popular" library.<sup>5</sup>

The second point is something that dates back only to the mid-1990s - The Long Tail. Chris Anderson first put "The Long Tail" concept forward in an article in Wired Magazine.<sup>6</sup> It calls into question the entire organization of business following the success of Amazon.com in the late 90s and early 00s. The Long Tail concept puts forward that before the Internet, all merchandise and products offered anywhere were in an 80/20 split; 20% is constantly visible and hyped to the public (like a bestseller for instance) while the remaining 80% remains below the radar and is not only largely unknown but is also hard to obtain. The rise of the Internet however makes that formerly unavailable 80% of material not only easily available but also profitable to provide. People are no longer limited to just 20% of material that is generally advertised and hyped.<sup>7</sup> So what does that mean for the creation of a "popular" library? Essentially it implies

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<sup>4</sup> A collection made up of just "popular" material such as best sellers and the like may end up making a library less popular. If a library is all about only entertainment then it is ultimately nothing more than a publicly supported Barnes and Noble. And after a while the public will find itself in the position of not wanting to pay for that since no library (or any government institution for that matter) can really compete well against a faster adapting and less constrained private sector business like Barnes and Noble or Borders or Waldenbooks. A library must have some greater purpose and usefulness to the community in order to justify existing. A purely popular based collection can't meet that need.

<sup>5</sup> The Quality/Popularity debate rages on and will probably continue to do so for as long as libraries continue to exist in the United States mainly because the points made between quality and popular material are so very subjective. Majority opinion on the matter will probably remain where it is - ignoring any "either/or" position to instead create a mixed collection with a solid base of quality material and popular material.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson, Chris. "The Long Tail." **Wired Magazine** Issue 12.10 October 2004. [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html?pg=1&topic=tail&topic\\_set=](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html?pg=1&topic=tail&topic_set=)

<sup>7</sup> In other words, the public now has in theory 100% availability as compared with the pre-Internet 20%.

that building a collection based on "popularity" or "quality" is a dead end. For a library to be "popular", it must adhere with religious fervor to the Long Tail. The nearly two hundred year old debate over quality versus popularity in collection development no longer fits into the mold of a Long Tail based library. Rather it is speed and availability that matter in building a "popular" library. A library collection must be able to cater to the instant demand of the patrons and must be easily available. Material cannot take days to arrive<sup>8</sup> and no library will be popular if it cannot at least match the speed of Netflix.<sup>9</sup> A "popular" library collection would be required to be able to fill the needs of patrons who are looking for anything. And it must do it with a speed that will allow it to rival its competitors because we now live in an age where the library *has* competitors. It is not enough to have the New York Times Bestseller list and whatever Library Journal is pushing that month.<sup>10</sup> The collection must be like an amoeba, constantly shifting, growing AND shrinking to meet the demands of the public.<sup>11</sup> To do this and to be a "popular" library, the community must

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<sup>8</sup> In the age before the Internet I waited a whole summer to get my hands on a copy of the Boy Scouts manual; I had no alternative, as it wasn't something that was available on any bookstore shelves either. Today I'd just buy a copy for 3 dollars (plus shipping) off Amazon.com and have it within 2 or 3 days.

<sup>9</sup> I am unconvinced that Amazon.com is a model for libraries because ultimately libraries do not sell material; they "rent". This means that Netflix is the structure that would be more relevant to their development of a Long Tail based library.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, relying on existing review material can be problematic, as they are not structured to fit into the world of the Long Tail. Supply and demand to the individual customer and his/her tastes is what the Long Tail is about. To build a "popular" library, its necessary to have a deep relationship with the customer, even on the review level. This is perhaps the one aspect of Amazon.com (customer reviews) that I think a popular library should adopt for its own collection.

<sup>11</sup> Obviously any library must have some sort of "core" to its collection, the sort of material that people have traditionally expected to see in libraries such as copies of the classics and reference. I would not consider eliminating traditional expectation for a library collection even if it might not fit with the Long Tail because a library is not really a business. While it should try to

be courted and pursued relentlessly for its input and suggestions in making collection decisions.<sup>12</sup>

The second of the three broad major elements that are needed to build a "popular" library is customer service. Customer service is becoming the more dominant manner in which modern libraries refer to the act of serving patrons. As the public begins to forget life before the Internet (and as librarians begin to mentally accept Amazon.com's model as the baseline for how libraries should be managed) a "popular" library environment would be one where patrons are regarded as "customers" to be served in a marketing manner. So what would be the customer needs in a "popular" library? That boils down to three specific points - library architecture/design, automation versus personal service, and a concept broadly known as Library 2.0. At first it seems curious to include library architecture and design into a discussion on customer service and needs. But it is one of the most important concepts for building a "popular" library. In the pre-Internet days, although there were many grandly build libraries, they had a basic structure to them - shelves of books, sitting area made up of long tables, and usually a microfiche nook. However if libraries are now relating to patrons as customers then the layout of the library has to be in a customer-pleasing manner. It can no longer resemble a

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follow the Long Tail as much as possible, there are other aspects of its mission that will always keep it from fitting into that structure completely.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that any library should become hostage or surrender control over how it shapes its policies or collection but a library cannot lock the community out. Libraries used to be the gateways to information but now the Internet has built a bypass highway away from that gate. To remain relevant we must move to where the road is now. Patrons need a bigger role than what libraries and librarians might be comfortable with and to serve them libraries must include them, much in the same manner as competitors such as Amazon.com and Netflix do.

high school cafeteria with the bookshelves in the background.<sup>13</sup> Does that mean that to be popular a library must morph into a cross between Barnes and Noble, an Internet Café, and Starbucks? Perhaps. It would depend on a variety of factors including customer appeal, financing, and how the Library defines its mission. The design of the library must meet the needs of the community, not some static standard of how a library has classically looked.<sup>14</sup> Even before the rise of the Internet, libraries served as de facto community centers to some degree. It is not much of a stretch to imagine that in order to serve the customers and to remain relevant (not to mention become popular), libraries would begin to design themselves to be information "superstores", meshes of business approaches that have been tested in other parts of the economy and that meet customer approval. If the Borders/Starbucks model works then it makes no sense to ignore it.

The second point - automation versus personal service, ties into the physical reshaping of libraries. If the patron is a customer and the library is a coffee bar/Internet hub then is there a need for a librarian? Can a library function with just a manager and an automated checkout? Is a librarian really necessary to aid a customer or can a kiosk with an Internet connection that links to reviews and interactive readers advisory pages substitute? The truth is that no matter how shiny and bright new technology seems, there is no substitute for a

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, that resemblance to a room out of a public high school may be responsible for the fact that patrons stop using the libraries from about 18 until old age. Who wants to have a flashback to their high school experience? Lord knows I'm barely able to stand it.

<sup>14</sup> In fact, in building a "popular" library, some consideration should be given to remodeling the physical structure every five or ten years. If the library looks the same as it did when your grandfather used it in his childhood (with the exception of some added computer stations) then the library has a problem. After all do you really want to drive the same car your great-grandparents had?

live human being.<sup>15</sup> Customer needs vary and as we still do not live in the age of artificial intelligence that means that computer interaction is by nature limiting to helping a customer. The margin of error that is accepted from using Amazon.com at home is not acceptable to a customer standing in a building that is not his home. That does not mean that librarians must be available in the same manner perfume salespeople are in Macy's at Christmas time. A "popular" library must have a staff that will make it competitive; that means that service and satisfaction is key. No matter how tech savvy society gets, if they are not at home then most people will not want to stand in line to get advice from a computer. That means that a living breathing human librarian<sup>16</sup> is necessary to insure the popularity of a library.

This leads us to the final point in how customer service can help us build a "popular" library - Library 2.0. The idea of Library 2.0 is built on the foundation of the concept of Web 2.0. Basically, Web 2.0 is a broad reference to the "second wave" of Internet development that appeared roughly around 2000-2001. The Web 2.0 concept covers technologies such as Wikis, Blogs, Instant Messaging, RSS, and Podcasting among others. Library 2.0 is a reference made among librarian community<sup>17</sup> to the adoption of these materials for library

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<sup>15</sup> A library, no matter how beautiful and grand, is not really a library without books and a librarian. Automation has its positives but nothing can really replace the unique awkwardness of having to deal with another human being. Besides, given how isolated in many ways computers make us, there should be a place where we actually have to deal with a real, live person. (Full Disclosure - Yes, if my audience hasn't guessed it already - I am an aspiring Librarian and I'd like for my future job to not be replaced by a mall kiosk. Please don't sue me.☺)

<sup>16</sup> Or his/her Vulcan equivalent ☺

<sup>17</sup> The Library 2.0 concept name first appeared mainly in blogs and on listservs. A short but excellent article on Library 2.0 is:

use. Library 2.0 is the application of library structure redesign to the library portion of cyberspace. It is impossible to build any sort of a library in this age that is not Library 2.0. Any attempt at popularity for a library is doomed without it because of the importance that Web 2.0 has taken in the lives and jobs of ordinary people. In order for Libraries to be able to deal with their customers, it is necessary to have not just an understanding of the base ideas and programs of Web 2.0 but also proficiency in them. More and more people Instant Message, get their news by RSS feeds, check Wikis for reference information, and listen to podcasts on their iPods. These technologies will be hardwired into the structure of any library that is built with the intention of becoming "popular". If librarians claim to be masters of information and that libraries are the main hubs of information for the public, then they cannot be behind the public. More than physically changing the library to meet customer needs, Library 2.0 is a technological, online transformation of the library. A library that remains mired in a 1.0 system not only does not have a chance to become popular, it cannot even serve its customer base properly.<sup>18</sup>

The third of the three broad major elements that are needed to build a "popular" library is Social Purpose. Ultimately, regardless of any questions of popularity, there is the matter of justification for even attempting to build any sort of library, not just a "popular" one.

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Lawson, Steve. "Library 2.0: Rapid Response to Rapid Change." **Colorado Libraries** Issue 32.3 Spring 2006. Found at the NYPL Library Literature Database. I list many other excellent articles on Library 2.0 in my bibliography.

<sup>18</sup> In fact, to be a "popular" library, they would have to be ahead of the curve in terms of Web 2.0 developments. For example, joining the podcasting revolution now that everyone has shifted to videocasting is damaging to the image of libraries and librarians in the eyes of their potential customers. Libraries should have been among the first to harness new technologies. If they can't then why bother to claim that the library is a vital information hub for the American people?

The key reason that justifies that construction is social purpose. But how can social purpose mesh with the goal of building a "popular" library? If a library focuses on two broad points, it can help the community and attain unimagined heights of popularity and appreciation. The first point is a focus on citizenship and education. No matter what a person's opinion is on the state of education in America today, the fact is that the library is free high school and college education waiting for anyone to take hold of it. While degrees are emphasized in our society and in the rat race of the working world, obtaining a degree doesn't really educate a person. Only a thirst for knowledge can drive someone to really learn anything. And a library is perhaps the only place outside of the home where a person can pursue learning without pressure.<sup>19</sup> In terms of citizenship, the library should not be underestimated, not just as a force for helping new immigrants to acculturate and assimilate into American society but also as a place to educate citizens concerning the guaranteed freedoms that are usually taken for granted. The library is the one major institution that can offer a laissez-faire environment where people can pick and choose what they desire to learn, making the library into the "working man's college".<sup>20</sup> The easier it is to use an institution, the more it will be repeatedly used, and thus popularity of it is assured. The second point is a focus on the community needs specifically. A "popular" library will not just offer a free area for people to educate themselves but will also offer some structure in the form of Book

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<sup>19</sup> The most exciting part of libraries and librarianship is the voluntary aspect that is built into them. Its not just that they are a place where a person can better themselves with knowledge but that it is a place that an individual must choose to use of his or her own free will. "Its all up to you" would be a great motto to splash across the entrance of a popular library.

<sup>20</sup> Gelinas, Nicole. "A Social-Uplift Program That Works." **City Journal** Volume 16.4 Autumn 2006. [http://city-journal.com/html/16\\_4\\_queens\\_library.html](http://city-journal.com/html/16_4_queens_library.html)

Clubs, Tutoring, and other types of programs and speakers. A library can become popular even without massive resources as long as it has a solid understanding of the community it is serving and what their needs are.<sup>21</sup> Libraries are often called upon to prove to their communities and to the world why they should continue to draw funding and take up space in an age of Internet and digitization. The only way to keep libraries alive at all and then make them popular is by making them useful, even indispensable to the communities that they serve. The social purpose is really the only reason to bother designing a library at all, especially when amazon.com is offering such good deals as it is.

In conclusion, building a "popular" library is possible and requires only a little bit of imagination, dedication, and a willingness to experiment.<sup>22</sup> Overall in order for a library to be "popular", it must pay attention to the three core elements discussed in this paper - the physical collection, customer service, and above all social purpose. A "popular" library must adapt itself totally to the principles of the Long Tail because barring the collapse of the Internet and a reversion back to a 1940s level of technology, that is the only structure that will continue to gain traction in every aspect

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<sup>21</sup> Staffing is another aspect that should be touched upon in this discussion. Any institution is ultimately created and driven not by the abstract mission it has or by the funding it gets but by the people on the ground that put in the effort to make it work. A library could be made up of three rooms in a basement with a Commodore64 machine running Windows 3.1 as the sole computer access. But if the staff is committed, if the librarian is interesting, dedicated, and keeps an ear to the pulse of the community then the library can still be popular.

<sup>22</sup> Libraries have competition now so advertising and marketing are more important than they ever were before. Libraries seem to rely on just word of mouth and memories people had of using the place as kids and in high school. In the visual and busy world that we live in, that is just not enough to cut it anymore. Libraries have to sell themselves to the public as much if not more so than the competitors they now have to face.

of our economy and society. A "popular" library must look at its patron as a customer and seek to serve him/her as such. The days when libraries were the only option for information are long dead. Libraries must learn to be able to stay afloat and thrive in the marketplace. Innovation and speed must be the constant companions of any librarian seeking to create and run a "popular" library. And while that library must already firmly be a Library 2.0 institution, it must not rest on its laurels - Library 3.0 is probably right around the corner. A "popular" library is one that is not running at pace with the community but seeks to stay ahead of their needs. Libraries must fill a specific and irreplaceable gap in their communities by providing them with something that no other institution gives - the ability for quality *self-enlightenment* and *self-entertainment*.<sup>23</sup> Finally<sup>24</sup>, it should be remembered that building a "popular" library is the easy part. Keeping it popular is more difficult. As every single Disney

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<sup>23</sup> I personally believe that libraries missed a tremendous opportunity by allowing schools and the computer industry to co-opt areas that it could have used to emphasize its continued relevance in an Internet world. Librarians all repeatedly sell themselves as mavens of information and the library as a gateway to information. So why make all the skills such as web design and network administration, all the keys to the new portals of technology part of a separate and different profession? Why should Information Specialist mean Computer Tech and not Librarian? It is not the rise of technology that has scrambled the ability of libraries to explain themselves but the loss of key points of that mission to two other professions. In light of this libraries must emphasis other ideas to justify themselves such as that libraries are vital in creating well-rounded self-made and independent individuals. That is a classic message that would resonate with large portions of the customer/patron public.

<sup>24</sup> In the interests of brevity, I have left out many points that I would have liked to include in this paper or shoved them into short footnotes. In particular I would have liked to mention decentralization and its role in building a popular library. Basically, a library has to be completely accountable to its community and customer/patrons. The more responsive and in touch with your community a library can be the better. And that means that the less centralized a system is the better. Because ultimately the smaller the system (or more specifically the smaller and less cluttered the bureaucracy is) the more appreciation and popularity it will accumulate. If the library is run like the DMV then we have no right to complain about lack of popularity.

after school special and most young adult novels have taught us, there are no quick fixes to popularity that last. Building and then maintaining a "popular" library takes work and dedication. Just ask your local librarian.

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