Library Services to the Masses When No One Knows What We Do

Annelise Sklar
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Annelise Sklar, MSLS

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Librarians have a funny relationship with popular culture. We want very badly to be preserved for posterity as popular artifacts or the favored characters of mass media, but we simultaneously critique every depiction as an unfair stereotype (ahem, Nancy Pearl and the librarian action figure “with amazing push-button shushing action”) or gross misrepresentation of our field (Noah Wyle and TNT’s *The Librarian* who doesn’t have an MLS, I’m talking to you!). On the other hand, librarians have no trouble with diverse or unflattering representations of anyone else, generally upholding the populist ideals of protecting freedom and providing access to all kinds of information, be it government information or romance novels. Many librarians think of themselves as curators to or providers of popular materials or mediators between the populace and the mass media information overload. Librarians do not, however, typically think of ourselves as the *creators* of popular artefacts or *users* of everyday popular culture in a non-personal, non-intermediary way.

I’d like to propose that we think of our reference and research tools, the artefacts and media that serve as finding aids to popular information sources (and yes, scholarly communication is the popular culture of academia) as popular materials. These interfaces are the ties that bind research across epistemologies, and library research—and the subsequent literature review—is a standard of academia. (Or, at least, we think it is or should be.)

The popular culture equation—that basic concept of Pop Culture Studies 101—tells us that the more popular something is, the more reflective that item is of mass beliefs and
values. Thus, if our resources are not popular with our users; that is, our target populations don’t use the resources we provide for them—or if they use them only grudgingly—we’re doing something wrong. We’re not meeting our users needs because we’re not giving them whatever it is they really want or like.

Now, if I wanted to conduct proper library science research—good evidence-based librarianship, that is—this is where I would start trying to quantify things—I’d survey user attitudes of what they like and don’t like, what they use and don’t use, and why, all on a five-point likert scale. Since I’m not completely sure our users are consciously aware of all of their information needs—and by this I simply mean that I don’t think they realize that there’s a problem until it arises and they can’t find what they want—I’m going to use annecdotal evidence and my own observations of library patrons, friends, and family as case studies.

The issue (as I see it, of course): the popular definitions of “library” haven’t evolved with our new, swanky information services. That “libr” comes from that Latin “liber,” meaning book, just as “libro,” “livre,” and “livro” still do in various Romance languages. When people think of the library, they think of a big building filled with books. Teachers send their students to go get a book or a journal and bring it—or a photocopied facsimilie—to class, warning them that they can’t use the computer. Librarians then have to reassure the students that, yes, we certainly do have books and print periodicals, but our finding tools are almost all digital, and a good many of the books and journal articles are available only in electronic format.
Generally, if they need print, we’ve already switched our subscription to the electronic version. If they’ve come to expect electronic, it’s our job to dash their hopes and explain that we only have the print version.

Does that mean we should change our institutional names to something more encompassing of the variety of formats, like cybrary or infotechnica? Well, no, those sound really stupid and forced. More importantly, most people don’t associate these terms with the traditional aspects of the library that are still our big draw, like making books available for check out. And if you add in the word “informatics” or “information,” one winds up with really, really confused patrons who simply want directory assistance.

Then there’s the issue that library users still think of us as a building filled with books. The library is quiet, a good place to study, do homework, or read, or maybe a place to see an exhibit or hear a talk. Public libraries and many large academic libraries are open to the public—even to the undesirables with no where else to go. The library is a good place for poor people—one can stay as long as he or she likes, indoor plumbing is readily accessible, and shelter from the elements is more or less guaranteed. And, we have free internet access! But that somehow alienates people who feel that they can afford to buy their own books and internet access. They think they have no use for the library because, as I hear again and again, “I like to own my own books” and “I have my own computer” or “I do everything online from home.” (Psst! If you’re using our web site, you are using the library!)
The main issue, though (and this is just my opinion), is that library research seems extraordinarily complicated.

[Google screen shot] This is Google, probably the most popular web search engine and a phenomenon unto itself. People seem to like Google because it’s simple. You type words into the box and then you get web pages about those words, ranked by popularity. If you’re an advanced searcher and want something a little more specific, you can use the advanced search [advanced search screen shot] or one of these specific kinds of searches (available under “more” [More screen shot]). [Froogle screen shot.] But they work more or less the same way as the original.

Then you have the library web site. [Elibrary screen shot.] We’ve tried really hard to make it user-friendly, but there’s just so much that the user has to think about. Do you want books or articles? Do you know what book you want? If so, check the catalog. [Libros screen shot] Spelling counts. If it didn’t come up, we probably don’t have it. [Libros 2 screen shot] Double-check under the author. If it’s still not coming up, check the public library. Otherwise, you’ll have to do an interlibrary loan—it takes a week or two, usually. [ILL screen shot]. Have you done one before? Oh, did that one come up? [Libros 3 screen shot] Check the location—is it here or in another branch? Does it say “check shelves”? That means we think it’s here. Make sure you write down the call number—it’s alphabetical, then numerical, alphabetical, and numerical again, but this time those numbers are like the numbers after a decimal point. Oh, if there’s a due date in
the status field, that means someone has it checked out. You can use the request button to have it called back in, but that’ll take a couple weeks, too.

You don’t know what you want? Let’s do a keyword search. [Libros Keyword screen shot] It’s sort of like searching Google, but it pulls from the title, author, subject headings, and sometimes contents. Oh, those and’s and or’s are called Boolean logic. And means you want both those terms. Or means you want one or the other; you use it for similar terms or synonyms. Here’s a cheesy mnemonic: “Or gives you more.” Oh, and you can use an asterisk for truncation. Did it bring anything up? [Libros Results screen shot] Are any of these good candidates? Let’s look at the subject headings. [Record screen shot] Is this a good way to describe what you’re looking for? OK, let’s see what else comes up with that subject heading. [Subject heading search screen shot] Repeat: check status, location, and call number.

An article? What kind of article do you want? [Database list screen shot] Newspapers? Popular magazines? Scholarly journals? What discipline are you going for? We have an online research guide for that, let’s see what it suggests. [Subjects screen shot] How many articles do you need? How far back do you want to go? Let’s try a keyword search. We might as well start in this multidisciplinary database. [EBSCO screen shot] It’s got a little bit of everything. It covers various disciplines and has some full text. See this check box? If you click it, you can limit your search so you only get scholarly journal articles. OK, now remember what I said about the and’s and or’s? Let’s do that again. Hm… zero hits. [no results screen shot] What’s another way to say that? OK, what do you think of
that? [results screen shot] See, some of them have pdf full text of the article. This one’s just a citation, though. See this link, though? [record bottom screen shot] That’ll search the catalog to see if we have it in paper. [Libros screen shot] See where it says it’s in the periodicals section? Here’s the call number. Oh wait, see that gap in our holdings? That’s what we need. See this other link? This will show if we have it full text in one of our other full text databases. [Gold Rush screen shot] Let’s see… it seems that we do. Click on that icon, it’s a hyperlink. [JSTOR 1 screen shot] Now what year, volume, and issue did we want? [JSTOR 2 screen shot] Click that. [JSTOR 3 screen shot] And scroll down… it was on page what? There we go. Click there. Wait, your instructor wanted you to get an article from a paper journal? We don’t have that one in paper, but it looks exactly the same. You need to really make a photocopy? How about this other article…

Oh, and if you want to go back before 1985 (or 1976 or 1953 or whatever, depending on the databases available), you may have to use a print index. They’re in the reference area.

Just for the record, I started to make a flowchart of this process and got too frustrated so I had to stop.

We’re sort of at an impasse. Libraries are in transition, which means that things are starting to come together, but there’s still a lot of companies and services that have a sizable chunk of the market, but no one’s completely monopolized [screen shot, Science Direct], [screen shot, Google Scholar] the scholarly information finding tools market yet. I have to admit, as a librarian, it makes me feel good to know that it takes a little skill to
do what I do, even if choosing the right database really is all about reading a couple of informational screens. In the meantime, though, library users are a little frustrated/disgusted/irritated with what we give them to work with. But if we simplify our search tools, they won’t work as well. I mean, it’s amazing how capitalization of your boolean terms can affect a search. On the other hand, if we don’t simplify, we have to show our users how to use them, and, frankly, they don’t listen when we teach classes, and only a small percentage asks for help when they realize they need it. We labor over tutorials, precise subject guides, and lesson plans; they go to Google and find something that seems good enough. We pay for more online databases and more online journal subscriptions; they find it at home with Google and whip out the credit card to pay for it, not realizing that, if they just went through our site, they already have access to it.

Libraries are not not at war with Google or the internet, though it often seems like it, but we’ve lost our constituency’s interest in all but the most basic resources we have to offer: free information and free help finding it. Maybe this isn’t a bad thing—just because we’re non-profit [ahem, selfless] doesn’t mean we have to monopolize the provision of information services, even the free ones. (Though those people who pay for what we’ll give them for free and know it really have too much money on their hands.)

However, if we want to be popular—I mean, high school cheerleader popular, not student-senate popular—the questions we should be asking ourselves, maybe, in our own information science research—those usability and observational studies we like so much—is: what would make more people use our databases and indexes or at least use
them in a way that they find useful? What would make people like our finding tools?

What finding tools are already popular, and what do people like about them? What could we do to be popular with our users—the academics, the students, the general public?
Figures
froogle (fru'gal) n. Smart shopping through Google.

Learn to shop like a pro with Froogle. Take a tour.

A few of the items recently found with Froogle:

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- It is always good time to review and update your personal and contact information, especially your email address. Be sure to keep your contact information current, and include the Mail Stop Code (MSC) if using an on-campus mailing address. Your department will have a list of current MSC'S; they may also be found at UMM Mailing Systems.

Enter your user information below:
(If you have never used ILLiad before, click on First Time Users.)

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Record 1 of 4
Record:  Prev  Next

Author: Coupland, Douglas

Title: Generation X : tales for an accelerated culture / Douglas Coupland

Publisher: New York : St. Martin's Press, 1991

Edition: 1st ed

LOCATION  CALL NO.  STATUS
ZIM Third Floor  PS3553.O865 648 1991  DUE 02-20-06

Subject: Young adults -- United States -- Fiction
Generation X -- Fiction
Humorous stories, gefdd
Generation X -- Romans
Jeunes adultes -- Etats-Unis -- Romans

Contents: The sun is your enemy -- Our parents had more -- Quit recycling the past -- I am not a target market -- Quit your job -- Dead at 30 buried at 70 -- It can't last -- Shopping is not cheating -- Reconstruct -- Enter hyperspace -- December 31 1999 -- New Zealand gets nuked, too -- Monsters exist -- Don't eat yourself -- Eat your parents -- Purchased experiences don't count -- Remember earth dearly -- Change color

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<td>Enterprises women: television fandom and the creation of popular myth / Camille Bakos-Smith</td>
<td>1992</td>
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Author: Bartel, Julie
Title: From A to zine: building a winning zine collection in your library / Julie Bartel
Publisher: Chicago: American Library Association, 2004

LOCATION: ZIM Third Floor
CALL NO.: 2892.55.B367 2004
STATUS: DUE 04.14.05

Subject: Libraries -- Special collections -- Fanzines
        Libraries -- Special collections -- Underground periodicals
        Fanzines -- United States
        Underground periodicals -- United States

Bibliography: Includes bibliographical references (p. 123-131) and index.

Contents: Welcome to the world of zines -- Zine culture 101 -- Intellectual freedom, the Library
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prácticas de lectura y escritura fuera de la escuela que realizan tres muchachas adolescentes que escriben y publican su propia existencia. El estudio identifica aquello que motiva y permite a estas jóvenes escribir en formas diferentes y describe cómo las leerán, analizado y desarrollan habilidades lingüísticas para formar y expresar su identidad. Se ayudan métodos de observación participante para estudiar estas cuestiones. Los hallazgos tienen implicaciones para la enseñanza centrada en los estudiantes al identificar formas relevantes de inculcar a los adolescentes en actividades de lectura y escritura.

[ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR]

Abstract (French): En tant que le plus grand des trois, les trois filles de birmano (gises sont des abandons de fanzines), que les déclenche à l'âge adulte, les adolescents qui les crée et qui les lisent. Les recherches effectuées sur le livre et la lecture des livres de vingt ans montrent que les adolescents font et vivent sur des questions qui concernent les stratégies et le genre. Cette étude examine les stratégies de lecture extraites de trois adolescentes qui écrivent et publient leur propre zine en créant contre les stratégies de genre, de race et de classe. L'étude identifie ce qui les motiva et rend capable ces filles d'entre de leur propre choix écrit contexte de jeunes femmes utilisant et développant leurs compétences en littérature pour former et exprimer leur identité. On a utilisé des méthodes d'observation participante pour aborder ces questions. Les résultats ont des implications pour un enseignement centré sur l'écrit en identifiant des moyens pertinents pour engager les adolescents dans une acte de littérature. [ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR]

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**Alt title**

Summary of investigations relating to reading

**Subject**

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Educational index 06:13, 1387

**Language**

Summaries in French and Spanish

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Publisher: International Reading Association

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No. 4, Oct. - Nov. - Dec., 1999, pp. 405-504