The Materials-centered Approach to Public Library Collection Development: A Defense.

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By and large, collection evaluation studies look to how well highly-variegated and specialized materials support academic research and teaching. Universities engage bibliographers or subject liaison librarians to support the specific requirements of users for comprehensive and pertinent information through an ongoing program of selection of materials. While this is clearly defined in the higher education context (where staff often have formal qualifications in their area of specialization and constant dialog with faculty over selection is assumed), the selection role in public libraries is less-easily defined. As collection specialization does not exist in most public libraries it would seem reasonable to assume that the materials selector requires uncommon insight into the variety of subject areas that the library's users may require in order to provide a comprehensive collection. This paper aims to help better define what a *specifically materials-centered focus* for collection development in non-fiction public libraries might look like and how it might be better understood, specifically with reference to other approaches to collections which are self-referentially user-focused, and with the concept of subject, so crucial to the crux of the debate, at the forefront of consideration.

The Public Library Context

Research on the nature of materials-centered collection evaluation within public libraries is not widespread and, subsequently, what is extant requires supplementation from generalist evaluation research. A starting point can be found in an early study of evaluation in public libraries conducted by Denny (1992, p. 9) who identifies a lack of research on evaluative methods and that "practical applications of the theories and methods of collection assessment" had not found traction in public library environments. Denny (1992, p. 56) also

points to how collection assessment and development activities in public libraries are often curtailed to meet operational requirements.

Public libraries are institutions that express both a visceral and a highly rational character. They are at once repositories for the accumulation and sanctification of types of knowledge that drive civic progress, while offering a value-free, encyclopedic approach to knowledge that does not explicitly privilege science, humanism or any particular epistemological creed. Creating a framework for understanding how such knowledge is sifted and filtered prior to its authorization on a library shelf is important because it allows the assumptions that govern that activity to be interrogated for reliability, truth, representative validity or verisimilitude. Do library users and library sponsors notice though? With reference to the Australian experience, Bundy (2010, p. 329) points to how public libraries tend to be well-used regardless of their quality: “People often do not know what constitutes a good public library, even if they have a sense that the library on which they depend is deficient. They thus do not know when they are being denied one.” This signals the important, albeit somewhat misunderstood role, that the institution plays in the civic and intellectual life of its users. Bundy (2010, pp. 321-322) also highlights how the funding models for public libraries are inadequate to meet the demands of an increasingly information-reliant society. Poor funding leads inexorably to poor collections. In this context of underfunded public library collections it is crucial that the best use is made of these limited resources for building collections. I argue that only a materials-centered focus can reveal how best this can be done.

Why Inquire Into Materials-Centered Evaluation?

Where should the locus for evaluation of a collection be sited in a public library context—with the users or with the collection? Davis (1998, p. 54) provides a clear definition of these two currents through delineation of *effectiveness* as the primary parameter for use

and *content characteristics* for a collection-centered approach. Denny (1992, p. 4) highlights where the horizon between the two might be located: a qualitatively acceptable and representative collection can be formed with a bibliography but risks the charge of sterility if the user's needs are not considered. Separate to easily characterized considerations of use and materials, selection theory, more broadly considered, across most of the twentieth-century, generally coalesced into debates about needs versus wants, or quality versus quantity (Evans, 1995; Ameen, 2006). For materials-centered considerations in the public library we must assay what quality of materials are needed and what ranges and depths of subject treatment can satisfy a broad cross-section of users.

Comparison of collections against their own potential to meet their user's needs and to provide comprehensive and substantive subject coverage in line with their particular mandate has rarely been at the center of public libraries' collection concerns. Measures of public library effectiveness have historically been positioned as unrelated to collections except in the most tangential of ways. While library effectiveness might have commonly been benchmarked through measures such as collection expenditure or materials' use, such approaches cannot really facilitate collection evaluation. A distinction should be made because while the evaluation of the collection can provide information for assessing broader program goals, the existence of other measures of service quality should not detract from the responsibility to look to collections on their own terms; volumes per capita and circulation per volume are examples of an overt reliance on positive data at the expense of looking at why materials are not used, or, why the collection fails to meet the needs of the user due to less than adequate selection choices. It is worth differentiating library assessment from collection evaluation so that we might understand where they overlap, and where they differ, and how they approach measuring what they measure. From an assessment point of view, Lyons (2008) points to the varied ways that so-called input and output criteria interrelate and

how only limited significance can be drawn from these criteria, especially when attempting to make comparisons between libraries. His analysis is somewhat more sanguine on the role of assessment:

> Public libraries should be proactive in insisting that library assessment measures be developed in methodologically sound ways. They should also be vigilant in requiring that assessment findings be used to draw only conclusions clearly supported by the methodologies and data utilized. As a matter of policy, libraries should expect that assessment tools [are] accompanied by statements disclosing their limitations and potential biases, as well as guidelines for responsible interpretation and use of assessment findings. (Lyons, 2008, p. 93)

Attempts have been made to quantitatively analyse the performance of public libraries in the United States using the *Hennan Annual Public Library Ratings* system and a more recent competitor, with differing priorities, the *LJ Index of Public Library Service*. While the methods varied (with the former focusing on, among other things, collections and the latter being almost entirely user-centric) they both agreed that Ohio's public libraries were generally the best in the United States (it is unlikely to be a coincidence that Ohio's public libraries have exceptionally well-funded collections, see Klentzin, 2010). While large collections invariably will have an advantage in meeting user needs and covering subject fields, not all libraries can collect or store a wide range of materials. What can they do to select well?

It is not practical to either keep collecting or, to collect everything, when budgets and facilities are limited. Whilst it is acknowledged in academic libraries that quality research collections take decades to build (Martin, 2009; Shachaf and Shaw, 2008; Wood, 1996) public libraries require a strategy that is geared towards targeting the best available materials *as*

soon as possible: resource allocation constraints (in terms of physical space, collection budgets and staff time devoted to acquisitions) and the changing paradigm that prioritizes digital and user-centered approaches to the library, all militate against the presumption that an incremental approach to collection development is the best strategy for modern public libraries (Pymm, 2006; Vergueiro, 1997). Howard and Davis (2011, p. 16) describe the complexity of collections as examples of wicked problems with "interrelationships and interdependencies between objects, spaces, environments, and people"—within which "we start to see each book or resource as part of a much more complex and macro system." User-centered approaches have a tendency to miss the complexity in dealing with collections as they tend to largely ignore the epistemic issues that are inherent with the study of a particular knowledge domain. Examples can be trite, but the historical context of the scientific revolution to the Renaissance, World War 2's relationship to World War 1, the Cold War's relationship to liberal democracy all show how certain popular topics are contextually orphaned without proper epistemic reference to other areas of focus. Collections that gave us an oversupply of the Renaissance, World War 2 and the Cold War at the expense of the important linkages to other themes would be significantly diminished, whatever the quality of the works covering these popular themes, without the effort to make the connections necessary to promote a global contextuality of meaning.

Facilitating Access Through a Browsable Collection

Recent decades have seen growth in both online information sources and user's ability to exploit information sources that lie beyond their local collection. Despite this, there remains a significant niche for what might be termed the traditional browsing culture (Bates, 1989). Popular reading (Hallyburton, Buchanan & Carstens, 2011) or alternatively, free reading (Shoham, 2001), is not well catered for at present in electronic formats and books

retain significant practical appeal. The presence or absence of materials within a collection, their local accessibility and their ability to meet the demand for recreational reading remains a relevant consideration that is often overlooked in discussions of user-centered collection development.

An assumption is made here that the general use of interlibrary loan capability is undeveloped. Were a system of comprehensive interlibrary loan freely available and users socialized in its use the importance of local collections might be greatly diminished. Jensen (2012, p. 15) found that interlibrary loan supported a “narrow and temporary esoteric research need” in academic libraries. Relying on this type of capability to fulfil core subject needs should not be seen as generally providing access to a substitute collection: if academic library users rarely use the capability why should we suppose that public library users (who are often charged fees for the privilege) would be any more likely to rely on it? The apparent infrequency of interlibrary loan use would seem to highlight the importance of the shelved collection as the primary means by which users can engage meaningfully with a wide range of topics and subject areas

While the set of materials that public libraries choose for their shelved collection is important, what has never been selected, or what has been deselected, is also important to consider in order to understand the ongoing development of a collection—for instance, in questioning the place of the discarded book in a broader discursive formation—what is perceived as “irrelevance” or “those things that were said, but are said no more” (Radford, Radford & Lingel, 2012, p. 262). Radford, Radford and Lingel (2012, p. 256) explore Foucault’s use of this method and identify how he retrieves these types of marginalized texts; “reanimating” the non-canonical Foucault also “foregrounds” these texts providing them with a prominence that is unexpected for the reader considering them. How much of what is discarded as non-canonical and easily marginalized actually provides significance to a

collection is hard to say. By focusing, however, on a browsing culture and the classificatory tools and selection policies that can aid this type of engagement with marginal and core texts (Edgar 2003; Fenner & Fenner, 2004), public libraries can move toward meeting their client-centered mandates far better than if they were to rely merely on studies of their circulation statistics (which, as an evaluative yardstick, lacks the ability to properly accommodate the full spectrum of users' needs).

Rather than being conceived of as an unstructured and chaotic activity that cannot be planned for, browsing may be better contextualized as part of "a necessary process of continuing self-education....an adventure, where new paradigms are discovered or previously unseen connections are made" (Dilevko and Grewal, 1997, p. 378). Gorrell et al. in the context of "metacognitively aware IR systems" note that

> lack of planning by no means necessarily implies ineffective searching...high levels of planfulness may...inhibit effective retrieval. It may often be productive for information seekers to follow ad hoc and unanticipated links encountered "on the fly" during searching...relatively unplanned search behaviour may result in the retrieval of the type of unanticipated information conducive in certain circumstances to generating relatively creative thought. (Gorrell et al, 2009, p. 457)

Browsing is central to all types of humanistic utilisation of libraries (Kautto & Talja, 2007; Perrault, 1984) and since browsing forms a fundamental part of how collections are utilized, planning for this behaviour should be integral to how collections are evaluated and developed. Relying on the in-built potential for co-operative arrangements to provide users access to quality materials to meet their needs will largely fail disadvantaged users (or anyone unable to speak the language of librarianship). Shenton and Dixon (2005, p. 90) found that their research on young people's search behaviour in public libraries was congruent with

other studies (Cochrane, 1983; Fieguth & Bußmann, 1997; Tyerman, 1989) that highlighted how subject searching far outweighs searches for specific items by this user group. Only a collection fit for browsing can meet these users' needs adequately.

Approaches to Knowledge That Transcend Perceived Needs for Objectivism

One of the significant problems with the user-centred model of collection development is that it allows a relativist model of knowledge to emerge. Fallis (2000, p. 314) points out that information science has been particularly disposed to adopt this view of knowledge. The relativist model elevates a set of (arguably narrow) social and cultural schemata (paradigms, practices etc) above a framework that, firstly, can allow for competing ideas to circulate within an agreed *general commensurability*, and secondly, has room within this for some form of universal standard (Bernstein, 1986, p. 11-12). The relativist "threat" is that it promotes an epistemic structure that puts socially conditioned belief on par with true knowledge. While this is not to say that "true" knowledge is a defined set of "essential" knowledge, what is implied, for our purposes here, is that a claim to the nature of social scientific knowledge can be made. Such a claim involves a measure of "interpretation of social meaning" rather than "the search for scientific truth" (Hekman, 1986, p. 3) and it is in the confusion of the two that we find the tendency for the resort to relativism. For relativists, the inability to locate a set of scientific truths that might underpin the inherent subjectivity that they locate in social action automatically precludes delineation of communally defined, "objective," and "true" knowledge. Relativism, within this framework of knowledge, misses the hermeneutic context of making meaning and its immanent, dialectical nature. When this occurs in a collection development framework the tendency is to abjure the task of unpacking the baggage of science, human meaning-making, truth and knowledge and place the onus for interpretation back on to the collection user.

If it is indeed correct to characterize the user-centered approach as an abjuration of interpretation, where might the impetus for this emerge from? Critics of positivist social science, while arguing that different methods stimulate natural and social science, have tended to operate with the Enlightenment belief that "objective…scientific knowledge is that which excludes all historical and cultural distortions" (Hekman, 1986, p. 7) and that, therefore, these dimensions need not play a role in considerations of absolute truth. Hekman (1986, p. 8) points to how in this flawed critique of "impure" knowledge, subjective "socially and culturally determined knowledge" becomes the leftover remnant upon which "the social basis of knowledge" can be explored. Its partisans view the *social* subject matter and associated *method* as, in effect, incapable of sustaining a body of "objective knowledge" and, therefore, similarly, constrained in making claims to "truth." This variety of positivist critique remains foundationalist—it advances the view that "underlying the social and historically conditioned knowledge that structures the social world is a foundation of universal truth" (Hekman, 1987, p. 335). Anti-foundationalist philosophers would claim that what is needed is a radical openness to exploring "the relationship between human thought and human existence…without presupposing…that this examination is subordinate to the really important task of searching for objective knowledge" (Hekman, 1986, p. 9). Meeting collection users' needs is intimately connected with the task of properly contextualising the social sciences, and human knowledge, so that the positivist-humanist debate can be put to bed along with the "individualist paradigm" (Hekman, 1986, p. 10) that sustains it.

Moving beyond the ways to discern objective and subjective knowledge to a more efficacious "way of analysing the process by which human beings understand and, hence, structure, the world in which they live" (Hekman, 1986, p. 10), involves exorcizing the *Cartesian anxiety* (Bernstein, 1983, p. 16) that revolves around our relationship to our own human finitude. It is the choice to reject a stable and fixed point to anchor our quest for

knowledge and to move beyond the fear of “radical epistemological skepticism” (Bernstein, 1983, 18).

Hekman’s analysis of how the two foundational tendencies (anti and pro) play out in the discourse of the sociology of knowledge is telling for our purposes here. She sees the antifoundational approach, as examining “the background assumptions structuring human thought and existence” while the “traditional sociologies of knowledge examines the relationship between explicit belief systems and particular social groups” (Hekman, 1986, pp. 10-11). We can see that when we compare these activities to the materials-centered (antifoundational) and user-centered approaches they intersect. Where the materials-centered approach looks to create a broad context within the collection and invites users to meet the collection at that level, the user-centered approach is oriented toward only the materials that users define as important; the applicable theory of knowledge is oriented toward the cognitive orientation of the group. The argument made here is not that such cognitive orientations should be shunned but that they form a second-order priority when dealing with the broader issues associated with conceptualizing materials selection and a theory of knowledge. When the user-cognitive approaches are acknowledged in this way, as subordinate, they offer the chance for a complementary approach to selection to take place. When they are proffered as guiding principles they leave the selection of knowledge as a fundamentally relativistic exercise and thus create an unnecessary polarity that is unhelpful for attempts to understand knowledge, and use, in context. The user-centered approach looks to a putatively “more real” real world that is amenable to measurement, analysis and scientifically verifiable truths that the materials-centered approach seemingly cannot match. But when we apply Gadamer’s (1975) principle of the universality (rather than simply the textuality) of hermeneutic understanding, and see that it is embedded with both social and natural scientific practice, we come to a very different result. Not needing a grounding *in the user*, a materials-centered

approach allows for engagement in the hermeneutic method of fusing horizons, in this case, fusing the horizons of the subject corpus with the present and future needs of users. It is this failure to plan for future use, for existential growth, that leaves a user-centered approach foundering when it is relied upon to underpin selection and evaluation. User-centered approaches, taken alone, also suffer from an inability, as foundational narratives, to locate the selector within the context of a socially determined matrix of historicity. In not engaging with the fundaments of knowledge, except in so far as looking to how such matters interpolate with a perceived need, selectors fail to bridge objective and subjective knowledge. This remains a practical part of what they should be tasked to achieve. To reiterate, when we work within the antifoundational perspective our aim is to "examine human thought and existence without presupposing…that this examination is subordinate to the really important task of searching for objective knowledge" (Hekman, 1986, p. 9) and that the distinction between subject and objective knowledge is, ultimately, "a meaningless one because it rests on erroneous epistemological assumptions."

An Analysis of the Relevant Epistemological Influences

Decisions relating to selection of materials do not occur in a vacuum but are the result of implicit or explicit priorities that have been identified for satisfying information needs and are the result of assumptions about the status and relevant worth of various branches of knowledge. Feinberg (2010, p. 510) treats the objective design system as at once redundant (*of course* we bring positionality to our validations of collection materials or classificatory structure) but also highly charged at the rhetorical level where structural evidence from the inclusion and arrangement of categories in an organizational system, and resource evidence from the selection of documents and their assignment to categories in the organizational scheme (can be marshalled to) provide a sufficient level of proof for constructing subject

interpretations.

Feinberg argues that when attempting to “create a classification that displays a persuasive interpretation of a particular domain” it is necessary to look to “how each assertion about concepts supports (or does not support) an overall standpoint or theory of the subject area” (2010, p. 509). Feinberg uses *History* as an example—it may very well equally be presented as a humanistic or as a sociological endeavour. However we construe such undertakings it is the rhetorical character of the argument that allows for the appropriate incorporation of the subjective interpretation into the systemic design that we might formulate as either evaluation or classification. By disentangling on the one hand, the “social effects produced when...subjective messages are taken for objective representations”, from “how systems that make no claims to neutrality are able to express arguments” we are able to “systematically and purposefully adopt and defend a specific interpretation of the subject being described and organized” (2010, p. 492).

By seeking to understand the epistemological beliefs of collection librarians and their clients, we are able to render a more informed explanation of information-seeking behaviour (Whitmire, 2003) which, in turn, should be able to create more transparent and more responsive selection policies. Public libraries have historically served a dual purpose, simultaneously aesthetic and technical, with the contrast in what they should *do* and what they should *be* a function of “deeper convictions about the nature and impact of knowledge on individuals and society” (Dick 1999, p. 312). These priorities and assumptions are the epistemic bases upon which selection occurs.

Without bringing light to bear on the nature of these considerations we are unable to make valid claims as to the relative value of collections or the decisions that have spawned their development beyond somewhat vague notions that parts of collections are used by some user cohort. Within such use-centered approaches the quantitative nature of the approach

often reflects satisfaction with the convenience of the information on offer rather than its quality (Osburn, 2005, p. 7). The retrograde tendencies to downplay considerations of quality, as if they sit on one side of an axis—*against usefulness to a reading community*, or, *for quality considerations to be damned with faint praise*—would seem to ensure that an argument still has to be made for the practical value of investigating collections separate from their use. Lee (2000), in an otherwise useful overview of how collections work in an information seeking context, leaves quality issues unaddressed; the perceived inherent subjectivity of collection building makes them too complex in this reading and therefore they can be, quite reasonably, excised from the main concerns of this type of analysis—users' information behaviour. Collections are, in a sense, reduced to being *just information* in this type of analysis and so even when it appears collections are the focus, they are merely the *tableau vivant* that forms the backdrop for the cognitive inquiry (perceived as the important factor) to take place.

The more substantive *epistemological* basis for selection and evaluation relates to how "the human knowledge in the universal domain can be characterized" (Zins & Santos 2011, p. 877). Zins and Santos note how the process of structuring knowledge occurs for two reasons: efficient retrieval and facilitating understanding of domain relations. Their *10 Pillars of Knowledge* is an attempt to provide a reasoned disambiguation of the major classification systems by looking at subject-based classes and subclasses. Epistemological assumptions breed in classification systems such as Dewey Decimal Classification. An oft-cited example is the attenuated treatment of religion, for while *Christianity* holds its own Class and Sub-Class, *Other Religions* share 290 together. New frameworks such as *10 Pillars* allow for conversations to emerge about the individual and collective weakness of classificatory systems (Merkley, 2011).

A specifically *social* epistemology looks towards the way that people and

institutions (such as libraries) disseminate knowledge (Egan & Shera, 1952). The effect of this is not merely theoretical but has practical implications for understanding how learning takes place and provides a means to improve classification systems (Fallis, 2006). Supporters of this view highlight the way that the social epistemology framework, which brings a philosophical approach to the study of information, can provide a "more complete understanding of what knowledge is and how humans engage in the quest for knowledge" (Budd, 2004, p. 362). The potential dividend for implementing such an approach, when dealing with collections, is that greater clarity can be brought to how selection decisions are prioritized. The associated reliabilitstic and veritistic considerations of competing materials oblige libraries to articulate critical evaluation methodologies. Osburn (2005, p. 9) highlights how the quantitative evaluative methodologies which are most often relied upon in use-centered evaluations tend toward being "too normative and subject to misinterpretation or are too narrowly focused." The litany of failings can be condensed into an overall unwillingness to address context in method, but Osburn is also critical of how reliance on a combined approach of (essentially quantitative) methodologies reveals, potentially, a "lack of capacity to be instructive about, or even reflective of, the dynamism inherent in the interactions and potential interactions of the community and the information universe via collection management" (2005, p. 10).

The epistemic project may be thought of as one in which the activist-philosopher attempts to bring forth a form of "justified true belief" from certain "necessary and sufficient conditions" that allow this belief to be reasonably identified as knowledge (Fallis, 2006, p. 479). From this position it is not difficult to justify the premise that facilitating knowledge acquisition is the main objective of information service and that service strategies, such as promoting collection quality and information retrievability, are therefore, merely instrumental to the achievement of this goal. While acknowledging the instrumental nature of these

strategies, Fallis also points to how focus on collections is a practical way that libraries can contribute to knowledge acquisition *indirectly*:

> The effectiveness of a strategy depends to a large degree on the intellectual profile of the information service's users. As a result, in order to achieve its epistemic objectives, an information service needs to be sensitive to its clients" skills and abilities. For example, if its users do not have good critical thinking skills, then an information service probably needs to restrict itself to authoritative information resources in order to be reliable. However, if its users have good critical thinking skills, then an information service can be both more powerful and reliable simply by providing access to diverse viewpoints. (2006, p. 503)

Fallis (2006, p. 490) argues that usage studies can be more easily measured than how well collections facilitate knowledge. While objections to focusing on the importance of truth claims can be broadly argued in terms of the value of other knowledge or the truth condition, these can be rebutted if we acknowledge that the librarian is only obliged to improve the chances of the patron to acquire true beliefs. Pursuit of the truth condition should involve allowing "conflicting accounts of justification"; good evidence, however, should be able to filter through to information seekers, but also, as Fallis makes clear, encouraging acquisition of beliefs that lack "epistemically valuable properties" is not conducive to growth of knowledge (Fallis, 2006, p. 496). Fallis and Whitcomb point to how the role of epistemology, as an aid to our understanding of an individual's fashioning of truth and knowledge, is much better understood, or at least explained, when we apply the framework to communities of people. As a result, while "epistemology may not always be able to provide tight constraints on epistemic value hierarchies that apply in all contexts, it can often suggest default structures for such hierarchies" (2009, p. 183).

The Location of Materials-Centered Evaluation Within the Broader Framework of Collection Development

Materials-centered evaluation aims to understand the size, scope and quality of a library collection (Dobson, Kushkowski & Gerhard, 1996; Agee, 2005). It should not be treated as an entirely separate collection development technique however, as both the selection and the evaluation of materials can be seen as two sides of the same coin; evaluation being a process of making judgements about previous selection decisions. How can the selection decisions for public library non-fiction collections be characterized? What are the types of assumptions that selectors bring to their work about the appropriate range of subjects that the public library should hold? What depth of holdings is appropriate within a subject area and what type of coverage should be sought across subject areas? It is acknowledged that whilst an overtly prescriptive approach to these questions is inappropriate, if only because libraries are analogous to living organisms which change and grow over time (Bhattacharyya & Ranganathan, 1974), general principles can be identified in the literature and elucidated.

When evaluating collections outside of the materials that compose them (jointly and severally), we are involved in a discussion of the use the materials are put to and the experiences of the users of the materials. These studies essentially measure the demand for materials rather than the actual requirements that users may have and "must of necessity ignore potential users, unless it is to be assumed that the potential users will have the same needs and make the same demands as do existing users" (Clayton & Gorman, 2001, p. 172). Use and user-oriented considerations are analogous to a roadmap for travel, showing places of interest and how to get there. Without a well-made road constructed out of a quality collection, however, the journey could not be made. The use-centered collection evaluation

paradigm that dominates much of the collection management literature might reasonably be seen to have emerged historically as a reaction against the mores of an earlier era when a somewhat hegemonic canon overshadowed the profession's role in facilitating access to information. It can be argued that the lack of adequate attention to a viable regime of materials-centered evaluation is something of a twentieth-century artefact, when convention played a far more prominent role in how meaning was ascertained and in the forms by which these meanings could be normatively expressed.

Hjørland provides a significant grounding in why user studies, and the cognitive view of information science more generally suffers from a lack of rigor when relevance is a key issue:

> An essential problem in IS is how people interpret the texts to be organized and searched as well as the information needs that should be satisfied. Some people might call this the cognitive perspective. However, such theories of interpretation are not individual, ahistorical theories, but are epistemologies and ideas that are historically, culturally, socially, and scientifically developed. The cognitive view tends to psychologize the epistemological issues (to study knowledge by studying the individual), but what is needed is the socio-cognitive view, which tends to epistemologize psychological issues (to see individual knowledge in a historical, cultural, and social perspective). (2002, p. 268)

Awareness of the hermeneutic matters referred to above can provide valuable "interdisciplinary foundation for general theories about knowledge organization" (Hjørland, 2002, p. 268) and can "uncover the ideological basis of the subjective expressions of information needs and thus…a more objective reality" (2002, p. 264). This does not, however, substitute for subject knowledge in classification according to Hjørland.

Classification is, of course, central to materials-centered evaluation in determining what bodies of knowledge are relevant and how they are represented in collections. Normative conceptions of library and information science as "essentially a disinterested social enterprise or a committed educational enterprise" (Dick 1995, p. 231) impact the epistemic stance that selectors adopt. The cognitive approach to knowledge and meaning-making is somewhat atrophied in the level at which it approaches the diverse range of issues under study in library and information science. Simply put, it is too narrow to be meaningful. Dick (1995, p. 230), building on the work of Frohmann (1992), points to how this approach has insinuated itself into theoretical assumptions under the guise of user-centrism.

The difficulty of conflicting epistemic objectives, be they materials or use/user-centered in collection evaluation, leads to a requirement for balancing the worthy goals of each method with regard to the epistemic objectives that each furthers in terms of scaffolding the experience of varying cohorts of patrons in their search for knowledge. Fallis (2006, p. 503) takes the position that adaptation to users' critical abilities is necessary for the library to meet its epistemic goals and, therefore, a low skills base will necessitate choices that facilitate higher degrees of reliabilism in collections; commitment to epistemic clarity may also promote recognition of how, at times, users apply the principle of least effort in information searching, with the result that materials may seem adequate for user needs merely because they are used, and not because they are especially pertinent to the information need.

Treating Materials-Centered Evaluation as an Exercise in Handling Complexity

Collection evaluation is not an easy task nor are its methods necessarily reliable. Osburn offers reasons:

> the objects of analysis, as well as their relations to each other are forever changing;
>
> we have little or no control over either the information universe or the community we

> are trying to bring together in the most productive way; there is usually a considerable hiatus in the cycle that separates formal evaluation from the revision of direction for the collection... and the goal of the project is too often ambiguous. (2005, pp. 5-6)

Johnson (2009) provides a balanced treatment of the potential approaches to evaluation. Using *collection analysis* as the rubric from which differing methodological approaches could be seen to derive, evaluation is differentiated from assessment; its aim is to "examine or describe collections in their own terms or in relation to other collections and checking mechanisms, such as lists." *Assessment* is more focused on trying to "determine how well the collection supports the goals, needs, and mission of the library or parent organization" (2009, p. 226). Taken together, analysis and assessment provide a better understanding of the user community, provide a strategy to deal with deficiencies in the collection and a direction to promote its development. The analysis needs to be able to "increase selector knowledge about the collection and its use [to] measure its success and develop and manage it effectively" (2009, p. 231).

Johnson's definition of collection quality is somewhat restrictive however: "a collection is considered good and appropriate to the extent that it matches the goals of the library" and "when evaluation techniques examine the collection in relation to an external measure, that measure must relate to the goals of the collection being considered" (2009, p. 228). Such a view, whilst opening the possibility for sophisticated criteria for measurement of efficacy simultaneously shuts it down as well. What if the goals are imperfectly formed?

Johnson's delineation of the two approaches into qualitative and quantitative frameworks opens the possibility for a discussion based around qualitative analytical frameworks that are, at least somewhat, removed from the user-oriented linkages associated with library assessment. Evaluation as a concept in collection management can spread

beyond technique and look to how the process is carried out more broadly and to the associated consequences. If we look at collection development evaluation as a question of resource allocation and specifically, overselection, Carrigan is persuasive:

> The true cost of an item acquired for a library's collections is the opportunity cost of the item, which is to say, the value to the library's clients of what was not acquired because the acquired item was chosen instead. As the gap widens between what a library would like to acquire and what it is able to acquire, it is inevitable that ever more valuable materials must go unacquired. It is for this reason the opportunity costs of acquired items rise as the gap grows between what is desired and what can be acquired. Rising opportunity costs are an expression of the growing costs of over selection. (1996, p. 274)

Of interest here is Carrigan's potential solution to the problem—interrogating proportional *use* statistics associated with circulation. Determining proportional use of the collection relative to the "extent of use of materials in each subject relative to holdings in each subject" (1996, p. 274) is a pertinent example of the way that use and materials can, and should, operate interdependently.

Criticism of methods that fail to generate *consequential information* regarding evaluation can be found in Grover (1999) and Snow (1996). Snow's treatment of written collection development policies describes a tendency of such policies to reify. This is linked to the propensity for such policies to impose "an intellectual guide to selection rather than [providing] a practical method of selecting material" (Snow, 1996, p. 193). Snow advocates for collection development to flow from evaluation rather than the other way round: the pressing needs are the twin questions of "how the material in the library is used, and why" (1996, p. 193).

Davidson and Dorner (2009), whilst focusing on selection, highlight many of the pertinent matters that influence broader evaluation of collections: the needs-versus-wants debate that prioritizes selection based on quality or on demand and the so-called flexible-selection argument (Clayton & Gorman, 2001; Gorman & Miller, 2001), which is explicitly user-oriented, but also, aims to present "qualitatively superior materials to give people a chance to improve their knowledge and tastes" (Davidson & Dorner, ibid, p. 52). If, as their study of mobile libraries in New Zealand suggests, the selection decisions of many public librarians are largely impressionistic (see also Meera, 1999) rather than systematic, then attempts to conduct materials-centered evaluation as if it were dealing with a structured set of inputs may be ill-conceived. Dorner and Davidson's research indicates that collection development policies seem to play a minor (or even a non-existent) role in guiding selection: there was no formal selection procedure used by any of the six separate mobile libraries that they surveyed. Their findings highlight that selection decisions in public library settings may be governed, more often than is acknowledged, by an explicitly populist approach; two-thirds of their research participants did not incorporate a consideration of the quality of materials into their selection decisions.

Henry, Longstaff and Van Kempen (2008) found that conducting collection analysis led to greater focus in selection; they hoped that the results of the analysis and the improved selection for their college library would see a greater balance in the collection, along with improved institutional effectiveness in how it articulated with the needs of the user community. The use of the WorldCat *Collection Analysis* (WCA) tool to provide data on subject holdings helped provide an informed position to support evaluation of "whether or not collection development at a particular library was on target with what other libraries were doing" (Henry, Longstaff & Van Kempen (2008, p. 116). This peer-group comparison provided the context from which the data-rich results of WCA could stimulate questions

about the nature of the collection.

Support for this methodological approach can be found in Kyrillidou and Cook (2008). They advocate a perspective capable of "tying user success into organizational evidence that can be collected both internally and externally across time and across peer institutions" (2008, p. 903). Their *affective* approach to the task of collection evaluation differs substantially from the more *clinical* approach that Borin and Yi (2008) exemplify. Where for Borin and Yi success at meeting user needs is likely to occur through covering the field by using a range of approaches flexibly, Kyrillidou and Cook remain centered in the notion of evaluation as critical skill. What is shared here though, whether affective or clinical in outlook, is acknowledgement that the "descriptive data and evaluative frameworks—both qualitative and quantitative—are growing in complexity" and that the "reality" of the collection is only captured in "indirect and partial ways" (Kyrillidou & Cook 2008, p. 904).

The Practice of Materials-Centered Collection Evaluation

Hardesty and Mak (1994) offer an overview of core-list development and overlap studies in academic libraries and advance the view that non-research libraries should strive to bring together a more structured and focused "core collection" based on what they perceive to be the "limited needs" of users of these curriculum-oriented libraries. Hardesty and Mak's research on LC call number range *E-F* (American history was considered to be a reasonable common denominator despite course offerings) at 427 liberal-arts colleges using Online Computer Library Center data, revealed that diversity of holdings was the rule rather than the exception. The influence of highly specialized academic selectors is identified as a reason that some of these collections develop inappropriately as a *mélange*, rather than attempting to seek a balance between transmission of "our common cultural heritage and delving in specialized areas for the understanding and creation of new knowledge" (1994, p. 369).

Earlier work by Hardesty (1986) identifies a certain lack of coherence and an inappropriate esotericism applied to the selection process by faculty, especially in smaller institutions, where their role in selection was particularly prominent. Despite this, the pressing issue for Hardesty and Mak is how librarians can quarantine a portion of acquisitions budgets to fill the gaps in the collection, however they have developed. Hardesty and Mak anticipate many of the (separate) arguments made by Agee (2005) and Carrigan (1996) relating to the problems that less-assiduous selection decisions create. Hardesty and Mak (1994, p. 370) argue that an unduly high-degree of diversity creates problems for institutions operating strictly on finite resources. The role that specialized collections play in infusing enthusiasm in teaching is not denied by Hardesty and Mak, but they point to the effects on collections of orphan sub-collections that emerge from specialized—and by extension, interdisciplinary—curricular interests. An approach that is more attuned to the search for coherence and better contextualizes the growth of diversity within collections is favoured by Hardesty and Mak; it is a materials-centered approach, but one that is thoroughly attuned to the needs of the user at every selection decision, and also by implication, how a broader collection development policy is put into practice.

A different approach to materials-centered evaluation is revealed in the work of Dilevko (2008); he examines the socio-cultural politics of collection development through an analysis of the work of James P. Danky, a co-editor (with Sanford Berman) of the journal *Alternative Library Literature*, which appeared between 1982-2001. Danky's approach rejected "mechanical and generic" (Dilevko, 2008, p. 678) selection approaches to developing collections. Whilst the Danky approach to core collections may be in conflict with Hardesty and Mak's, they both reject what Dilevko calls the "Give 'Em What They Want" approach (2008, p. 679).

Dilevko argues that such an approach significantly impoverishes "the cumulated

written record available at...libraries by overlooking material that was not readily available through convenient channels" (2008, p. 679). Budd (2008, p. 7) describes such approaches as "political betrayal disguised as market sensitivity." Danky, a librarian with a keen interest in providing a range of perspectives on history and society, aimed to "extend, deepen, and thus problematize the public's awareness of neglected historical sources that told a story that ran counter to received wisdom in many fields" (Dilevko, 2008, p. 679). As a result, the collection of *only mainstream publications* creates a significant professional, if not ethical, issue:

> While such publications ventured to the left or the right of conventional wisdom on any given topic, they never went beyond a safe middle range of opinion that represented a consensus status quo. Collecting alternative materials– those on the margins of accepted contemporary discourse– was therefore a necessary part of librarianship's commitment to substantive neutrality. (Dilevko 2008, p. 680)

According to this view, centralized selection also created an intellectual ghetto of paraprofessionals trained in rote selection of, essentially, popular books tied into a mass-marketing culture. De-skilling of selection, and disavowing the importance of subject knowledge, lead to easy cost-savings within institutions: "giving the people what they wanted had become a rationale for implementing a collection-development strategy for public libraries based on market imperatives" (Dilevko, 2008, p. 683). What resulted, according to the partisans of this *philosophical* approach, was an unseemly homogenisation; the same core-collection of books purchased from vendors associated with well-known publishers. As this became commonplace in the late twentieth-century, less time would be assigned to identification of alternative materials, and a perception emerged that "more reputable core items from the mainstream presses" (Dilevko 2008, p. 685) were a better use of limited

budgets. For this reading of history, the ultimate betrayal emerged when libraries outsourced selection to private firms who in turn hired fewer librarians; those they would employ were engaged at lower salaries and preference given to the less well-educated among those few employed. Outsourcing of selection was the ultimate de-professionalization; according to Dilevko it "robbed the librarian of subject-specific knowledge" (Dilevko, 2008, p. 688), or more properly, their role in arbitrating this knowledge and saw librarians with collection knowledge assigned to a curatorial role rather than the more appropriate tasks of educating and cultivating through their subject and title knowledge.

Dilevko describes how Danky embraced the view that only by developing subject specific knowledge in librarians as a core competency could adequate and informed collection development occur. The approach embodied in his method seeks a recalibration of the collection development mechanism such that, conceptually, expertise is not judged by how well a selector excludes works "based on artificial criteria" but rather how well they engage substantively with the intellectual content of the subject matter they are considering, and with their own existing collections. This will result in "including as much overlooked material as possible" (Dilevko, 2008, p. 699)—it is inclusionary collection development of the most astute kind.

Conclusion

An explicitly materials-centered evaluation approach for non-fiction collections in public libraries ought to facilitate access to a progressively complex set of domain knowledge that is tangible to all users. Similarly, it should allow for, through facilitating browsing, a significant opening of the spectrum of knowledge at many different points within the collection. Promoting *userism* as the panacea to the difficulties of prioritizing selection and evaluation decisions can only result in a severely degraded information offering that lacks

both clarity and pertinence. Focusing on the subject and the associated nuances that connect and separate the domain knowledge that integrate it, one with another and the whole with the part, is not to avoid the needs of users but to take these needs very seriously indeed. The ability to assiduously aid in integrating a growing desire for knowledge with traditions of understanding that have coalesced around genuinely topical interests is the truly noble task that librarians have always had—continuing to focus on the materials' qualities rather than the simple indices of demand will help to ensure that librarians build knowledge rather than regress into merely supplying information.

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