

Commentaries on Collection Bias

Marcia Pankake, Karin Wittenborg,
and Eric Carpenter

The following commentaries are in response to the article, "Potential Collection Development Bias: Some Evidence on a Controversial Topic in California," by Dave Harmeyer on page 101 of this issue of College & Research Libraries.

COLLECTION BIAS: ETERNAL VIGILANCE THE PRICE OF LIBERTY

Dave Harmeyer's study exhibits a grave fault when it leaps from the numbers of copies held to conclude that the librarians who built the collections are biased. The only conclusion the study safely makes is that libraries in California hold a larger number of copies, editions, or titles of these particular pro-choice books than of these particular pro-life books.

What is the definition of a balanced collection? Surely not equal numbers of books. By their very individualistic nature, books cannot be equated one for one. One comprehensive book may do the job of several smaller or less ambitious books; one side of a question may be represented by a thorough well-organized book and another side of the question by a half-dozen books presenting specific aspects, or by a subscription. Librarians protect ideas as much as books.

Do these eight books represent the literature of the pro-choice and pro-life movements qualitatively or quantitatively? The author and his judges label the books, but offer no assurance that these books are particularly important, are the most necessary or the best books. Neither do they quantitatively represent

the literature. *Books in Print* lists about 450 books on abortion; only one of these eight titles is listed under the more recently used specific headings for pro-choice and pro-life movements.

Set aside the question of whether a few books reflect the dissemination of ideas. The author's belief that the librarians were biased and deliberately never acquired the books provides only one possible explanation for the disparate numbers of holdings of these books. Many other factors influencing selection must be examined before we accept this assertion.

The author acknowledges that library policies affect selection. An examination of these policies would help more to understand the library collections than does the distance between the judges' interviews. What are the libraries' policies? What are their audiences, their needs, and demands? Circulation needs, for example, may require multiple copies of one title, thus increasing the numbers of "units" identified. Do the libraries serve vocal communities where patrons actively request pro-choice books and librarians buy modest numbers of pro-life books to represent that viewpoint?

Selection and acquisitions procedures may influence collections more than do librarians' prejudices. Where were the books reviewed? Only four of these eight

Marcia Pankake is Bibliographer at the Wilson Library, the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; Karin Wittenborg is University Librarian at the Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, 22903; and Eric Carpenter is Collection Development Librarian at Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio 44074.

books appear in *Book Review Digest* within two years of publication, suggesting that reviews for the other four did not appear in the common sources. Were the books reviewed while they were still in print? Were they published in editions large enough so that stock remained available after the reviews appeared? Were they reviewed positively, offering librarians reasons to select them, or negatively, offering reasons to pass them by? Or compared to other books on the topic which were selected instead? Did librarians reflect biases from other sources? Were the books listed in nonreviewing trade sources such as the *American Book Publishing Record*? Did they move through the organized book trade, were they sold by distributors? While libraries should not limit their collections exclusively to materials handled by jobbers, for very practical reasons most materials in most libraries are obtained expeditiously through vendors.

Local holdings and collections provide only part of the information libraries supply. How do the librarians augment their collections with sources not owned, information available from remote locations, information to which librarians supply access? Online bibliographic databases do not portray how any library publicizes its holdings or directs patrons to electronic information or interlibrary loans.

Identifying shortcomings of this study does not serve to defend librarians charged with bias, or excuse less than rigorous selection practices, nor justify librarians' complacency about impartial collections. The criticism is offered instead to encourage more careful investigation of the topic, which may suggest how librarians can improve their selection practices. Rather than accepting reasons for why books do not appear in library holdings, we need to identify causes of weak selection practices and then counteract them. For example, if the book trade sources do not list certain publishers, librarians must solicit those publishers directly. Librarians must examine their patterns of information for

selection to add supplementary sources, sometimes identifying them through personal contact with readers.

We should not assume that library collections are static. Good collection managers are always engaged in repair and renovation, often rethinking titles not in their collections. Such reevaluation does not refer to the reasons why a title was passed by, but instead reconsiders the title as a new purchase. How does its content relate to local needs and to the strengths or weaknesses of the library, which may differ from when the book first appeared?

Books and the ideas they present can be vulnerable in libraries and society. Librarianship is a privileged occupation, for everyone who works with books and other library materials to make information available engages in a noble and necessary work in a democratic society. Library staff must vigorously promote the right to read and protect minority interests. All library staff must positively defend freedom of information by carrying out their responsibilities honorably, sometimes by acquiring and preserving materials of which they may personally disapprove. Acquisitions staff must order titles expeditiously, from suppliers likely to supply materials quickly, and then receive and move the material into the cataloging stream as fast as possible. Catalogers must catalog fully, accurately, and quickly. The book must be marked and shelved accurately. At every step along this chain of actions the book is vulnerable, to individuals on the library staff or from outside the library who seek to repress it from the public. A huge web of trust maintained by everyone who works in the library makes intellectual freedom possible. When readers realize the variety and number of potential hazards that lie between books and readers, they stand amazed that libraries have any controversial materials at all.—
Marcia Pankake

COLLECTION BIAS: WHAT'S RIGHT?

Dave Harmeyer's article on collection development bias is provocative and opens some interesting avenues for fur-

ther research. His literature review gives a useful overview of the classic and more recent articles on issues relating to censorship and selection in libraries. While I am not convinced that the case has been made that selectors in academic and public libraries are introducing bias into their collections, the article serves a useful purpose by focusing attention on a potential problem and identifying some important questions that could benefit from exploration.

Perhaps the most provocative question raised is both philosophical and practical. ALA's *Library Bill of Rights* states, "Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current historical issues." What exactly does it mean to present all points of view? In the abstract, it may seem desirable to balance a position on one side with a position on another. In reality, it may be neither reasonable nor desirable. Does presenting all points of view require academic libraries to purchase an equal number of books on both sides of an argument? Does it mean that we must reflect certain perspectives in our collections even if the books are not scholarly?

Harmeyer touches on some possible explanations for why pro-life books are not selected for academic libraries. He mentions that conservative books often are not widely reviewed and that both collection policies and budget constraints can present legitimate barriers to representing all points of view on an issue.

Indeed, both collection development policies and budget constraints are key to the building of academic library collections and merit further attention. A number of questions come to mind. Selection in academic libraries is closely linked to faculty research and teaching interests. Once selectors have determined that the subject of a book is relevant, they usually assess whether the material is scholarly in nature. Table 2 indicates that of the sample eight books, three were "very pro-life," but none was moderately pro-life. In contrast, in the sample there were two "very pro-choice" and two moderately pro-choice titles. In

a note, Harmeyer mentions the imbalance and suggests that it may result from the nature of the pro-life issue or simply that a more diversified sample of pro-life titles was needed. It would be worth exploring whether the extreme pro-life titles were not selected by academic libraries because their polemical character was considered unscholarly.

The influence of budgets on collections building has been abundantly clear in the last few years with the rise in serials prices and the drop in monographic acquisitions. It is a phenomenon that affects libraries differently. Harmeyer's study would have been strengthened by more information about the size and the scope of the libraries in the sample. Is there any correlation between bias and size of libraries? Are library collections increasingly being influenced by demand and use? An interesting follow-up study to Harmeyer's might be to examine use of pro-life and pro-choice titles and evaluate the degree to which current selection is based on the use of the existing collections.

As "access" becomes a larger element of every academic library's operation and as scarce dollars are used to purchase titles expected to be in high demand and high use, it will be an interesting challenge to maintain a diversity of viewpoints in the collection. Perhaps the greater challenge will be how we let users know about the universe of materials available beyond the core collection.

This study also made me curious about the possible influence of approval plans. I suspect that the religious-affiliated institutions are smaller and may not make extensive use of approval plans. If that is the case, and if as Harmeyer suggests, the conservative books are not widely publicized or distributed via mainstream channels, the imbalance could be driven by the use of approval plans. The average selector in a large academic library will have a broad range of responsibilities and may not readily observe if the approval plan delivers a disproportionately high number of pro-choice books. A selector who is firm

ordering every title is likely to have a greater first-hand knowledge of the collection and can more readily seek balance. Can the argument be made that the abortion debate is a more significant topic for religious-affiliated institutions than it is for other libraries and thus attracts more attention? Again, it would be helpful to know more about the size and character of the libraries studied.

The article piqued my curiosity about the size of the literatures on either side of the abortion debate. A quick search of the public-access version of the OCLC database surprised me. The subject heading "pro-life movement" identified just over 600 records, while the pro-choice movement identified just under 200 records. Given a pro-life literature that may be nearly three times the size of the pro-choice selection, it may be that the academic and public libraries have many pro-life titles, but simply not the ones in Harmeyer's sample. That might bear further investigation as it relates to the issue of whether the academic libraries did not select the "very pro-life" titles because they were not scholarly and may have been viewed as polemic. A similar study with a larger and more diversified sample might be informative.

Harmeyer's study deserves attention from academic libraries, and I hope it prompts discussion well beyond collection development circles. Sweeping generalizations about balance and diversity need to be interpreted for individual institutions and for selectors. Is bias creeping into the collections inadvertently? What is our commitment to ensuring the representation of multiple viewpoints and how do we ensure that it is realized? What really is our obligation? The larger issue is that academic libraries face a future in which they continue to purchase a decreasing portion of an increasing publishing output, yet we need to teach our users about the larger universe of information and facilitate their use of it. While electronic initiatives show some promise in that regard, the overall environment is much more complex and difficult to navigate.—*Karin Wittenborg*

ADEQUATE REPRESENTATION AND NUMERIC EQUIVALENCY: HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

Dave Harmeyer's article is timely and provocative. It questions an assumption we are loathe to challenge: some librarians are "consciously or unconsciously, biased in building collections on controversial social and political issues." Specifically Harmeyer charges that public and academic librarians developing collections examined in California "consciously or subconsciously discriminate against a conservative social/political perspective, in this case, the pro-life point of view." Harmeyer's charge is based on a comparison of holdings in various academic and public libraries in California with a list of eight books representing the spectrum of opinion on the abortion controversy.

Why were these particular books chosen for the sample? Is this sample meaningful? Four sampling criteria are listed: availability in academic and public libraries, number of book reviews, currency, and "the sense of being a classic." These criteria are weak and inadequate. A more meaningful sample would have included the most important, representative, widely cited and reviewed, and available books on abortion published in a specific period (e.g., the past twenty years). A sample based on these criteria and selected by a panel of recognized experts on opposing sides of the abortion issue would have been more compelling.

More serious than this methodological weakness is the assertion that adequate representation of opposing views in a library collection requires numeric equivalency. Most librarians assume that "libraries should provide materials and information representing all points of view on current and historical issues."¹ This is a basic principle in our professional creed. Harmeyer challenges the adequacy of our response to this quintessential professional responsibility. While his research was limited to California, Harmeyer implies that the conservative point of view on political and social issues is not ade-

quately represented in academic and public library collections across the country. Indeed, Harmeyer calls for similar investigations on "other contemporary social/political issues such as gay/lesbian/bisexual rights, feminism, fetal tissue experimentation, school based clinics, political correctness, or gays in the military." This charge of bias in collection development is a serious matter demanding careful consideration.

The basic question at issue is not whether libraries should represent all points of view on controversial issues, but rather what constitutes adequate representation. Harmeyer tests two hypotheses, both concerning "a significant difference between the number of representative pro-choice and pro-life books selected by California academic and public librarians." In Harmeyer's view numbers alone determine adequacy of representation of opposing viewpoints. His argument hangs on the proposition that a collection must have equal, or very nearly equal, numbers of titles advocating opposing views on abortion to ensure adequate representation of these views. A librarian whose collection does not have this equilibrium is guilty of bias in collection development.

LeRoy Charles Merritt, in a work cited by Harmeyer, refutes this notion. He refers to "The Myth of Library Impartiality" by pointing out that "libraries cannot supply an equal number of titles on both or all sides of every political issue. They must follow the pattern of book publication and cannot wait for a title to appear on the "other" side before making a purchase. It is necessary, however, that the authentic and important books on every political issue which meets the normal selection criteria be acquired as they are published."² Merritt is correct. It is impossible to ensure that an equivalent number of titles on opposing sides of every political and social issue is acquired for a library collection.

What then constitutes adequate representation of opposing viewpoints? Librarians must ensure that major and representative voices on opposing sides of controversial issues are acquired. Do-

ing this requires heroic effort in a poorly funded library, but it will provide adequate representation of opposing views. Excessive concern about numeric equivalency of texts advocating opposite viewpoints is not warranted.

Harmeyer assumes that the absence of equal numbers of titles on opposing sides of the abortion issue is the result of bias by the selector. Is it possible that factors other than bias are responsible? Harmeyer concedes that "collection development policies and limited budgets can present legitimate barriers for librarians striving to select for a collection that does present all points of view on issues." Librarians working in seriously understaffed libraries do not have time to ensure that equivalent numbers of titles are acquired on opposing sides of every issue.

Collection development requires balancing competing needs. Often the most pressing is patron demand. Patron demands may conflict with a librarian's commitment to provide adequate representation of opposing viewpoints on controversial issues such as abortion. Academic librarians on some campuses may face demand for more pro-choice than pro-life books, and a public librarian serving a conservative community may have difficulty justifying expenditure of public funds on books advocating freedom of choice on abortion.

Inadequate selection tools also make it difficult to ensure adequate representation of opposing viewpoints on controversial issues. Harmeyer charges that "quality conservative religious books, critical of liberal social movements" are not adequately reviewed in mainstream reviewing sources. This is at least partially true. Conservative religious and social change publishers are not adequately covered by major review journals. Harmeyer's call for research on this subject is on target. Research is also needed to determine whether books by conservative publishers are readily available through library book jobbers and how quickly these books go out of print.

Though Harmeyer's insistence on numeric equivalency to ensure adequate

representation of conservative views is not justified, there is some truth to his charge that the conservative viewpoint is often underrepresented in libraries. Eric Moon's assertion in 1969 that "radical right pressures on libraries have gained some strength from the general truth of their argument that library collections tend to favor liberal over conservative points of view" is still true.³ How then should academic and public libraries respond to this challenge to provide more adequate representation of conservative viewpoints on controversial issues? The answer is obvious—by exam-

ining existing collections to ensure adequate representation of conservative views. This requires checking holdings to ensure that works by Jerry Falwell, Rush Limbaugh, Phyllis Schlafly, and Cal Thomas are included on library shelves with more liberal writers who oppose their views. Position papers and news organs from right-to-life organizations should be acquired along with those from pro-choice advocacy groups. Such a response by selectors for academic and public libraries will suffice; no undue concern for numeric equivalency is required.—Eric Carpenter

REFERENCES

1. *Library Bill of Rights* (Chicago: ALA, 1980).
2. LeRoy Merritt, *Book Selection and Intellectual Freedom* (New York: Wilson, 1970), 16.
3. Eric Moon, *Book Selection and Censorship in the Sixties* (New York: Bowker, 1969), 7.

IN FORTHCOMING ISSUES OF COLLEGE & RESEARCH LIBRARIES

Cyrillic Transliteration and Its Users

Alena L. Aissing

Students' Perceived Effectiveness Using the University Library

Cheryl McCarthy

Government Information Systems: A Quantitative Evaluation

John V. Richardson, Jr. and Rex B. Reyes