

# WHY HAVE A COMPREHENSIVE & REPRESENTATIVE COLLECTION? : GLBT Material Selection and Service in the Public Library

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In these harried times public librarians are adapting as fast as they can to cope with changes in information volume, format, and user demographics. We wonder how we find time to give much attention to comprehensive collection development. Keeping up with technology, the census and deflating budgets is truly challenging. In recent times, we have seen librarian job attrition, shorter service hours, and slower collection enhancement in our local libraries. It appears something would have to “give” for many public libraries and, indeed, it has.

Just as our local libraries, public libraries throughout the United States are feeling not only the financial pinch, but also the disregard of a government whose priorities are not focused on the institutions that uplift the general population. When the highest national priorities place war, tax cuts to the richest and diminishment of civil rights ahead of funding public libraries, morale plummets. We might begin to think, “Why bother? Our institution is no longer considered important!” But the people still need the libraries to improve their lives and help them preserve what is left of their freedom. Libraries provide access to reliable information the public needs to live, not just intellectually, but emotionally healthy lives. It is therefore imperative that the information needs of the entire population be served diligently, regardless of the obstacles.

Most librarians would agree that information needs should be met, but it is arguable that not all public libraries are meeting the needs of certain segments of the population they serve. For instance, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people appear to be underserved by many public libraries. Jennifer Downey, in her article “Public Library Collection Development Issues Regarding the Information Needs of GLBT Patrons,” writes,

despite the surge in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) awareness and resources that has occurred over the past several decades, the GLBT community often remains the “invisible

minority” (Loverich & Degnan, 1999), especially in the public library setting. Even when librarians work to develop collections that reflect the diversity of their communities, the GLBT segment of those communities often goes unacknowledged (86).

Downey is not alone in this assertion.

Ellen Greenblatt wrote that “Many librarians have never questioned the heterosexism that pervades library services, policies, and collections. In fact, a 1996 article surveying 465 library school graduates found that almost half (47.7%) had not received any information about GLBT issues in their library school curricula.” (Greenblatt). The author of this article is a third-year library science student in an ALA accredited program. She had not been exposed to any GLBT references in classes until the current semester, where some of the readings mention selection of material for this special segment of the community. Greenblatt continues:

A longstanding contention regarding LBGT library service has been the lack of availability of LBGT materials in libraries. Although there has been an enormous growth in LBGT publishing over the last two decades, studies continually show that library holdings fall far short of publishing output. A poll of 250 public and academic libraries conducted by *Library Journal* in 1995 showed that 14% of the libraries had no holdings of LBGT materials while 76% held fewer than 150 titles this despite an estimate that 975 titles had been published in the preceding year. (Greenblatt)

Even more evidence that the GLBT community has been underserved is offered by Greenblatt when she writes that many GLBT people turn to the internet to get their information because libraries are often bare-shelved of GLBT materials and “[t]he use of filters in public and school libraries effectively shuts off this lifeline, creating additional barriers between LBGTQ users and the information and services they seek.” The internet’s pan-sexual content is essentially inaccessible and blocked out by the filters. Greenblatt also noted:

A 1998 study examining the holdings of LBGT classic and award-winning books in major public libraries in the US and Canada found that on average the libraries surveyed held approximately three quarters of the 222 titles examined. While this shows some improvement over the earlier study, one must question why the holdings were not higher considering that the titles in essence formed a LBGT core list. Turning to periodical holdings, a 1996

study found that only 17% of the 92 journal titles examined were held by more than 26 OCLC libraries. These statistics show that LGBT materials continue to be under-selected in libraries.

All of this evidence led Greenblatt to conclude that “LGBTQ users are still vastly underserved and library collections vastly underdeveloped.”

Governing bodies’ sensitivity to public pressures to conform to “community standards” in these more restrictive times is still an issue for librarians. In a 2001 issue of *American Libraries* an article described the March 6th meeting of the Mecklenburg County, North Carolina commissioners where on live television, a man threatened to read from a sexually explicit lesbian-themed book he had checked out of the public library. The man had “... repeatedly complained about sexually explicit library books.” (Goldberg, 31) Though the man was ejected from the meeting and never read from the book, “[a] month later, Mecklenburg County Commission Chairman Parks Helms and Vice Chairman Becky Carney were...responding to Davis’s concerns: In an April 5 joint letter, Helms and Carney advised commissioners that they had instructed library officials to recommend measures to ‘...safeguard [children’s] access to adult controversial books.’” (ibid) Adult controversial books most assuredly include GLBT books. Taking this action would likely make any GLBT materials more difficult to find in the Mecklenburg County library or cause these materials to be unavailable to younger people.

The author of this paper became curious about local public library collections and chose to briefly experiment with a library’s online catalog by searching for material with bisexual content. After searching the Scott County (Minnesota) Library’s online catalog using the search keyword “bisexuality,” only four titles appeared in the results, written by three authors, with publication dates ranging from 1995 to 2003. There were a total of six monographs. The Prior Lake branch had three of them. Prior Lake, Savage and Shakopee each had just one book available cataloged under bisexuality. The keyword “bisexual” brought up nine more titles. Among those there were only two novels. There were an unimpressive two books for youth, one book about black men “on the down low,” one about GLBT families, one that was politically-themed, and the others appeared to be autobiographies.

With the burgeoning population of Scott County, one would expect more than a total of thirteen titles when searching under the keywords “bisexual” and “bisexuality.” This author found a grand total of twenty-three monographs. There were no videos, documentaries, audio tapes, compact discs or DVDs under these keywords. Just twenty-three monographs spread

out through the entire county. According to the 2000 United States census, there were 89,498 people in Scott County at that time, and it was one of the fastest growing counties in Minnesota. It has been estimated that roughly 3% of women and 5% of men identified as bisexual according to a study published in 1993 called *The Janus Report*. (Janus 70/Burleson 50)

Though estimates vary, this is probably a conservative percentage. Assuming the population of men is equal in number to women, we could guess that about 4% of the population identifies as bisexual. That would mean there are possibly 3,580 identified bisexuals in Scott County. This author argues wholeheartedly that thirteen titles on this subject are not enough! Twenty-three monographs distributed over seven branches, averaging three per branch, to serve the information needs of over three-thousand people arguably shows materials with bisexual content are under-collected in Scott County Public Library. If someone were trying to learn something about bisexuality anonymously by browsing Scott County Library shelves, he would not be able to find enough material to learn anything. Some may think, "So what! Who cares!?"

Librarians should care pointedly about serving these populations to maintain the very integrity of their profession. American Library Association (ALA), which heavily influences library practices, states that "American libraries exist and function within the context of a body of laws derived from the United States Constitution and the First Amendment. The *Library Bill of Rights* embodies the basic policies that guide libraries in the provision of services, materials, and programs." (ALA)

Article I of the *Library Bill of Rights* states that "Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation." The Association affirms that books and other materials coming from gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgendered presses, gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgendered authors or other creators, and materials regardless of format or services dealing with gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgendered life are protected by the *Library Bill of Rights*. Librarians are obligated by the *Library Bill of Rights* to endeavor to select materials without regard to the sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation of their creators by using the criteria identified in their written, approved selection policies (ALA policy 53.1.5).

In Article II of the *Library Bill of Rights* maintains, "Library services, materials, and programs representing diverse points of view on sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation should be considered for purchase and inclusion in library collections and programs." Article V of ALA's *Library*

*Bill of Rights*, which is reiterated in the interpretive document, *Access to Library Resources and Services Regardless of Sex, Gender Identity, or Sexual Orientation: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*, “mandates that library services, materials, and programs be available to all members of the community the library serves, without regard to sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation. This includes providing youth with comprehensive sex education literature (ALA Policy 52.5.2).”

In June 2005, the ALA reinforced its commitment to diversity in collection development by specifically including GLBT material in its document called *Resolution on Threats to Library Materials Related to Sex, Gender Identity, or Sexual Orientation*. The sources of the threats are made clear in the first statement of the resolution: “WHEREAS, some elected officials of federal, state, and local governments have proposed to restrict or prohibit access to materials related to sexual orientation within their publicly funded libraries...” The resolution continues with strong statements on the ALA’s positions on serving the public and explicitly clarifying that materials related to sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation also serve the public’s interests. There should be no doubt in any librarian’s mind that GLBT materials must be included representatively in a public library collection, and be accessible, to properly serve the public. The resolution states:

RESOLVED, that the American Library Association affirms the inclusion in library collections of materials that reflect the diversity of our society, including those related to sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation; and be it further

RESOLVED, that the American Library Association encourages all American Library Association chapters to take active stands against all legislative or other government attempts to proscribe materials related to sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation; and be it further

RESOLVED, that the American Library Association encourages all libraries to acquire and make available materials representative of all the people in our society.

Public library collections need examination and demographics must be studied to determine if their collections’ GLBT material is sufficiently representative of the potential users and adequate to satisfy their needs. Not only should the professional integrity of library service be a motivation to collect GLBT material representatively, but also compassion for the needs of a generally oppressed sub-segment of society. Ultimately, librarianship is a service profession.

Many librarians might not know how important it can be to a person who is afraid to talk or ask about sexual feelings, which manifest differently for the majority population, to have access to information about their brand of sexuality. The collection of these materials is important, not only to the GLBT population. "... [D]o you think that there are no children in your child's classroom or library with lesbian or gay parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, neighbors and friends? What messages are you giving to all children, when you pretend there is only one type of family, and render the rest invisible..." (Howard 1). Non-GLBT people will also use the material. To have an under-representative collection marginalizes the needs of those who want to better understand GLBT friends and relatives.

Young adults are particularly in need of good GLBT library materials. As Downey writes,

Adolescence is tough, and this is especially true for GLBT young adults. GLBT youth experience frequent isolation, which places them at risk for violence, homelessness, substance abuse, and suicide (Hughes-Hassell & Hinckley, 2001), as well as academic failure and dropping out of school (Jenkins, 1990). Librarians are in the powerful and important position of being able to help reduce these risks by providing access to quality GLBT-themed young adult (YA) materials, and by helping direct young adults to GLBT-centered organizations and agencies. Jenkins (1990) states: "Young people often gain their first information about homosexuality from books." Considering the many risks GLBT adolescents face, the importance of providing adequate GLBT-related YA resources cannot be overestimated. *It is no exaggeration to say that the right resources could save a life.* (Downey 86-95) (emphasis added)

It is really that important!

Availability of good GLBT materials in the public libraries is important, but librarians must also be approachable when asked to help locate such material. If a person cannot get to the material needed it is, in effect, not there at all. Librarians need to keep in mind that a patron who asks for GLBT materials may be taking a huge risk of rejection by doing so, particularly if it is a young person. Dr. Ann Curry conducted a research project to investigate "the level of reference service provided by public librarians for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered (GLBT) or questioning [(Q)] youth in the Greater Vancouver area." (Curry 1) A young woman was sent into public libraries in the Vancouver, BC area to ask for GLBT material to help her start a high school Gay Straight Alliance Club, and to record the

reactions and professional responses of the librarians. “The theme of young adults searching for information about their awakening yet puzzling sexual identity appears repeatedly in gay and lesbian autobiographies. Often the school library, a potentially threatening environment, fails to provide any clues, so the public library is the next stop.” (Curry 1)

This study was important, because “research on GLBT youth... reveals the gravity of their ‘at risk’ status and the fear that pervades their search for information...” (Curry 3) Disturbingly, “according to a study by the organization Advocates for Youth, one-third of gay/lesbian youth say they have attempted suicide at least once, about 30% have dropped out of school, and as many as 40% of homeless youth are gay.” (Curry 3) Dr. Curry’s researcher, Angela, approached twenty librarians in various Vancouver libraries and reported “the worst response was silence. No words – just a blank stare. As the silence continued, Angela noted – ‘I was tempted to run away!’ Only when she repeated the question did the librarian haltingly begin to help.” (Curry 8) Angela found

one librarian [who] conducted a partial interview and started to search for sources when he suddenly became agitated, mumbled “So, if you, you know, need...yeah,” turned around, and walked away. Angela waited for several minutes for him to re-appear, but he had indeed done a disappearing act, and was nowhere to be found. In all her encounters, Angela noted that this interaction was perhaps the lowest point, as she waited, hopeful but uncomfortable and unwanted. (Curry 11)

During nineteen-year-old Angela’s search for GLBT information, she found that about half of the librarians she approached were as helpful as they could be, even though in some cases there was no relevant material to be found. In many cases, she was not able to find material without the librarian’s help. Clearly, an adequate collection must be accompanied by excellent and poised reference service. Angela was an adult when she pretended to be a high school student for the Curry research project. This author wonders how many teenagers would have simply left the library after having been treated with silence or left alone with no help to find what they needed.

To have the best collection possible can be extremely important to people. In particular, we have seen that it is very important to have a representative GLBT collection, especially for youth. Librarians are professionally bound to ensure that users of the public library are served equitably. This does not appear to be what is happening for the GLBT patrons in many public libraries. Therefore, public librarians need to take a proactive approach.

They must examine the public collections, gather GLBT demographic information and assess local communities' needs. Public librarians need to make certain GLBT collections are adequate and be sensitive to all patrons' information needs. It is not only professional service to select a comprehensive, representative public library collection – it is truly a service to humanity.

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