

POLITICS & PUBLIC LIBRARY COLLECTIONS

by John M. Budd

The collections of public libraries are sometimes used as evidence for the political stances of the librarians who select materials for the collections. Nicholas Jackson, in an online magazine, *The Conservative Voice*, took aim at public libraries that are, according to him, corrupting children. The corruption comes in the forms of: gay-oriented magazines, such as *The Advocate*; gay-themed books, such as *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy's Roommate*; and unfiltered Internet access. These features of Jackson's hometown public library prompt him to accuse libraries, as liberal institutions, of indoctrinating children. Academic and school libraries are also criticized, primarily in Web-based sources. An article at WorldNetDaily (2006) takes academic librarians to task for perceived anti-conservatism because they have tended not to select *The Marketing of Evil*, by David Kupelian for their collections. Kupelian (who is a managing editor of WorldNetDaily) condemns homosexuality in his book and the article chastises libraries for not owning the book. As *Columbus Dispatch* columnist Joe Blundo points out, the book contains numerous factual and logical errors. Its notoriety stems from a controversy at Ohio State University-Mansfield, where librarian Scott Savage recommended it as required reading for incoming freshmen. The PABBIS (Parents Against Bad Books in Schools) website (n.d.) lists a number of book titles that they claim some may find objectionable. A statement at the site reads, "Bad is not for us to determine. Bad is what you determine is bad. Bad is what you think is bad for your child. What each parent considers bad varies and depends on their unique situation, family and values. The main purpose of this webpage is to identify some books that might be considered bad and why someone might consider them bad. Another purpose of this webpage is to provide information related to bad books in schools." Some of the titles listed are: Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*, Richard Peck's *Are You Home Alone*, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Librarians sometimes address the criticism of collections. For example, Edwin S. Clay III (2001) mentions a newspaper report that libraries are left-leaning. He writes, "Watchdog groups (and in this case, media) who attempt to criticize library collection policies by pointing out what is not on the shelves are, indeed, missing the point" (265). His observation has considerable merit; exclusion cannot be assessed unless accompanied by

inclusion. In our own professional discourse, however, there are some seeming contradictions. The official rhetoric of openness, as exemplified in documents such as the Library Bill of Rights, is sometimes offset by actual speech acts. For example, Whitney Davison-Turley (2004) reports on her experience at a membership meeting during an American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference. She spoke against ALA adopting resolutions opposing torture and the U.S. presence in Iraq. She says, "I was not opposing the resolution, but only pointing out that a large number of our membership probably would do so if given the chance" (33). According to her, a respondent said that if she questioned the resolutions then she must be in favor of torture. Davison-Turley does not claim to be politically conservative, but she expresses concern over what freedom of expression is. The political tension that is present in public library collections is evident in a piece by Susan Hill (2005). Without irony she states within her brief article that rural communities tend to be conservative, but her library is passionate about offering a balanced collection, and then concludes by saying that majority rules (46). Tocqueville's warning of the potential tyranny of the majority is nowhere to be found. A more strident internal criticism is offered by David Durant. He states that ALA is supposed to be nonpolitical (although he presents no rationale for that claim). He follows that with other dicta, making statements bereft of evidence or logical examination. His complaint about the profession centers on perceived partisan political bias that permeates the entirety of librarianship and that left-wing politics is pervasive in all aspects of the profession.

The state of public library collections cries for some empirical analysis. Juris Dilevko and Lisa Gottlieb (2003) focus on the Public Library Catalog and conclude that the tool, if overused, can lead to homogenized collections. The recommended works in the Public Library Catalog may be inadequate in their theoretical and epistemological balance. Kirsti Nelson and Lynne (E. F.) McKechnie (2002) examine library users' awareness of how items are selected for public library collections and find that 60% do not know about librarians' responsibilities. They state that, "we have identified collection development, acquisitions, and cataloging as the 'hidden intellectual work' of librarianship. This work is intellectually interesting and challenging, but because it is conducted behind closed doors the public is unaware that it goes on" (296). Other work addresses the management of the physical space of the library. Tony Greiner (2005) advocates using circulation data to reallocate shelf space as a means of meeting patron needs.

Some of the background literature points to some stark challenges inherent in our professional discourse on public library collections. Clay (2001), for example, says, "While representing multiple viewpoints is key to collection development policy in most public library systems in the United States, libraries are also in the business of responding to demand and making tough decisions on what to buy and what not to buy, often based on the question of use" (265). He equates the wise expenditure of funds with circulation. Greiner (2005), in a similar vein, observes, "Libraries with this user-centered philosophy (best summarized as "Give 'em what they

want”) recognize that library acquisitions need to change to reflect changes in patron demand” (347). He adds, “Concerns might be raised that using shelf allocation as a tool will lead to an imbalanced collection. Actually, it is such collections as the one in our example that are out of balance” (349). Circulation, then, may be reified, in the sense Georg Lukacs (1971) means in his critique of capitalism. What is missing from the opinions of Clay and Greiner is an understanding of the complex human dynamic of selection and acquisition on the one hand, reading and circulation on the other, and the relationship between the two.

Some Numbers

All of the foregoing raises questions about the manifestation of political balance/bias in public library collections. For example, if Davison-Turley’s experience were to be translated into selection, one might expect to see a particular tendency among libraries to own some titles, and not others. Further, if Durant is correct, then the political leanings of librarians might result in a one-sided collection. These kinds of extensions of criticisms form the basis of the present examination. The question of the political state of public library collections certainly can’t be answered definitively with numbers alone. On the other hand, examination of some empirical data can undoubtedly enhance critical evaluation. Fortunately, a quite large data set is available and can be employed as part of the evaluation. Users of the SirsiDynix system collect holdings and circulation data, and the data are cumulated in aggregate form by SirsiDynix. The aggregate information is accessible by ALA-accredited library and information science programs. The data include the years 2003 through 2005. The data of a total of 416 libraries are represented in the accessible database. Given the statements made about left-leaning collections in public libraries, the area of political science is the focus of examination here. The SirsiDynix database can generate reports on the titles with the highest circulation; this list can be compared with the titles in a report on those that are led by the most libraries. Table 1 presents the top titles by circulation (the titles included circulated at least 900 times during the time period).

Table 1
Works with the Highest Circulation

	Title	Author	Circulation
1	Slander: Liberal Lies about the American Right	Coulter, Ann H.	7,132
2	Martin Luther King, Jr.	Fairclough, Adam	5,350
3	Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terror	Coulter, Ann H.	4,491

4	How to Talk to a Liberal if You Must	Coulter, Ann H.	4,260
5	Rosa Parks	Brinkley, Douglas	3,467
6	America, the Book	Stewart, John	3,301
7	Deliver Us from Evil	Hannity, Sean	3,089
8	Dude, Where's My Country	Moore, Michael	2,918
9	The Enemy Within	Savage, Michael	2,607
10	Spy	Platt, Richard	2,285
11	Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them	Franken, Al	2,082
12	The Future of Freedom	Zakaria, Fareed	2,066
13	Homegrown Democrat	Keillor, Garrison	1,793
14	House of Bush, House of Saud	Unger, Craig	1,761
15	National Party No More	Miller, Zell	1,743
16	Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr.	Adler, David A.	1,512
17	The Truth about Hillary	Klein, Edward	1,510
18	Ellis Island	Perec, Georges	1,472
19T	Had Enough	Carville, James	1,472
19T	The Civil Rights Movement	Winters, Paul A.	1,420
20	Sleeping with the Devil	Baer, Paul	1,346
21	Rewriting History	Morris, Dick	1,234
22	Vote	Christelow, Eileen	1,137
23	See No Evil	Baer, Robert	1,136
24	How to Prepare for the US Citizenship Test	Alesi, Gladys E.	1,120
25	Martin Luther King, Jr. Day	Foran, Jill	1,092
26	Winning the Future	Gingrich, Newt	1,090
27	Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging War Against Christianity	Limbaugh, David	1,062

28	Citizenship	Schleifer, Jay	987
29	The Rise of the Vulcans	Mann, Jim	917
30	Ultimate Spy	Melton, H. Keith	902

As is apparent, the titles represent a number of points on the political spectrum — from Michael Savage and Ann Coulter on the right to Al Franken and Michael Moore on the left. Some of the works represented are less polemical than the aforementioned. For example, James Mann’s *The Rise of the Vulcans* and Craig Unger’s *House of Bush, House of Saud* appear on the list. The latter work has drawn praise from a variety of commentators, including both Maureen Dowd and George Will. A closer examination of the titles will follow, but first a listing of titles by numbers of holding libraries is also instructive. Table 2 presents this list.

Table 2
Works Ranked by Number of Holding Libraries

Rank	Title	Author	Holding Libraries
1	Martin Luther King, Jr.	Fairclough, Adam	293
2	Rosa Parks	Brinkley, Douglas	248
3	Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terror	Coulter, Ann H.	236
4	The Civil Rights Movement	Winters, Paul A.	235
5	Slander: Liberal Lies about the American Right	Coulter, Ann H.	215
6	Deliver Us from Evil	Hannity, Sean	213
7	How to Talk to a Liberal if You Must	Coulter, Ann H.	185
8	Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr.	Adler, David A.	177
9	How to Prepare for the U.S. Citizenship Test	Alesi, Gladys E.	173
10	See No Evil	Baer, Robert	171
11	National Party No More	Miller, Zell	170

12	Martin Luther King, Jr. Day	Foran, Jill	169
13	Homegrown Democrat	Keillor, Garrison	151
14	Spy	Platt, Richard	149
15	Ellis Island	Perec, Georges	141
16	Vote	Christelow, Eileen	138
17	Had Enough	Carville, James	135
18	Winning the Future	Gingrich, Newt	131
19	America, the Book	Stewart, John	130
20	The Enemy Within	Savage, Michael	128
21	House of Bush, House of Saud	Unger, Craig	126
22	The Truth about Hillary	Klein, Edward	125
23	Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging War Against Christianity	Limbaugh, David	124
24	The Rise of the Vulcans	Mann, Jim	122
25	Rewriting History	Morris, Dick	117
26	The Future of Freedom How to Prepare for the US Citizenship Test	Zakaria, Fareed Alesi, Gladys E.	116
27	Ultimate Spy	Melton, H. Keith	103
28	Sleeping with the Devil	Baer, Robert	88
29	Dude, Where's My Country	Moore, Michael	75
30	Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them	Franken, Al	69
31	Citizenship	Schleifer, Jay	63

A striking element of a comparison of the two tables is the disparity between rankings. We should not overstate the fine points of the rankings; the examination should be taken as little more than indications of the political state of public library collections. Five titles that are clearly right-leaning are among the top half in holdings. Only two left-leaning works are in the top half. We can ask whether this disparity is meaningful beyond an initial perception, and rank-order correlation provides one mechanism to suggest meaningfulness. Applying Spearman's rank-order correlation can offer a description of the differences. When the ranked lists are compared the

correlation coefficient (rs) is .44. This is not a strong correlation; in fact, it is possible to translate the rs score into an approximation of Student's t. The resulting t score is 2.63, indicating that there is a significant difference between the two ranked lists ($p \leq 0.01$). In other words, the disparity between the two lists is not merely perceptual; there is a real difference between the rankings. Given that the right-leaning titles tend to be more widely held, one possible conclusion is that public libraries are actually more likely to tend towards the conservative side, at least in their holdings on politics.

The dynamics of holdings and circulation (and we must acknowledge that the relationship is dynamic) can be illuminated by some additional numerical analyses. The top ranked title in circulation is Ann Coulter's *Slander*. A total of 215 libraries own the title, so the ratio of holding libraries to circulation is 33.17. To extend this examination a bit, we can see that the 215 libraries own 426 copies of the book, resulting in a ratio between copies and circulation of 16.74. By comparison, a left-leaning polemical work—Michael Moore's *Dude, Where's My Country*—is owned by only 75 libraries. The holdings-circulation ratio is 39.91. The 75 libraries own 175 copies, so the resulting ratio is 16.67. The similarity of the ratios for the two titles is open to interpretation, but the data strongly suggest that demand for both right-leaning and left-leaning titles is high. The dynamic of (somewhat) less polemical works mirrors the foregoing similarities. Zell Miller's *National Party No More* is owned by 170 libraries; the holdings-circulation ratio is 10.25. The libraries own 249 copies; that ratio is 7.00. Unger's *House of Bush, House of Saud* is held by 126 libraries, resulting in a ratio of 13.98. The libraries own 208 copies, so that ratio is 8.47. Again, public demand does not appear to be dominated by the political right, even though public library holdings tend to represent right-leaning titles more heavily.

Where Do We Stand

In trying to locate meaning in the phenomena of holdings and circulation in public libraries we can return to some of the remarks that introduced this examination. The holdings of public libraries are products of intentional actions by people. It is the intentionality, though, that may be most elusive. However, the statements of some librarians provide clues as to intentionality. For example, Greiner says, "Use statistics (circulation, in-house use, and interlibrary loan) are an essential tool in determining how well a library is meeting patron demand" (p. 350). The statement can be critiqued two ways: (1) use data indicate which items that a library owns are meeting the demands of some users, and (2) there are, as is evident from the numerical data presented here, items that are being demanded but that are underrepresented in public library collections. The two critiques, taken together, point to problems with libraries' holdings. The first is a systemic misunderstanding of the meaning of circulation data. The data cannot be interpreted in isolation; what is held is a determinant

of what circulates. It may also be the case that the complete character of the collection influences circulation. That is, if the collection has been developed according to what has been in some demand in the past, those patterns of both demand and circulation are likely to be perpetuated into the future. If a library were to find that military history and biography circulated heavily and so that library adjusts its selection and acquisition to weight the collection more heavily in that direction, circulation in those subject areas may increase. Also, circulation in other subjects areas may decrease because of the adjustment. This critique reveals that circulation is not a “natural” event; it is a complex human action that is influenced by the prior actions of other humans. The simplistic analysis of circulation data is itself an intentionality that may or may not be political.

Further, what is not owned cannot be checked out. The holdings and circulations of *Slander* and *Dude, Where's My Country* are indicative of this problem. While it is impossible to say that, were Moore's book to be owned by as many libraries as Coulter's, it would rank higher in total circulations, it is safe to say that its total number of circulations would be considerably higher. The libraries that do not own Moore's book can, of course, point to an absence of circulation data, but that absence is not meaningful. The intentionality of this action is open to speculation; if, however, selection is based on “majority rule,” a minority (which may constitute just under half of a community's population) is disadvantaged. This intentionality begs the question what is public about public libraries. There are both negative and favorable reviews of the controversial titles considered here. The existence of favorable reviews does not indicate ownership by a large number of libraries. Likewise, the existence of negative reviews does not necessarily indicate that libraries are averse to owning some titles. To turn Greiner's assertion on its head, use data are potentially misleading tools in determining community demands that are not being met.

The titles included in the present study represent a somewhat skewed political perspective. Ten of the titles are right-leaning; only seven are left-leaning. Three might be considered right of center (based on content and reviews). The remaining titles have less partisan political points of view. The combination of the skewed perspective and the difference between the two ranked lists suggest some potentially troubling conclusions about public libraries. Complaints about “liberal” bias, if we limit our examination to the data available, are misplaced. In order to take the investigation further into the matter of bias and balance, a more complete analysis of intentionality is needed. Statistical analysis alone cannot provide clear understanding of intentionality. Politics, perhaps especially democracy, is maintained by continuous intentional acts. Public libraries can only accomplish their missions by conscious, deliberate, and intentional acts. An examination of those acts can point out how Durant's plaintive cry rings hollow. The library is inevitably an undeniably political institution. The politics in which libraries operate does not mean that the correct response is mindless pandering to what might be seen as demand. Durant, Hill, and others may take respite in the state of public library collections, but that state may be

representative of a non-reflective and narrowly technical practice. A full understanding of conscious, deliberate, and intentional acts will require the kind of praxis that John Doherty (2005/2006) calls for: "it is only in a self-reflective praxis that librarians could critically engage with current theory. I would further add that practitioners could also actively begin to develop or transform that theory through critical reflection of their practice" (16).

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