An Imperative for Libraries

How Well Do We Know Our Users?

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I n a recent essay in the blog *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* entitled "Libraries: The Next Hundred Years," Brett Bonfield put forth many ideas about library activities a hundred years from now, including such themes as interaction, intellectual freedom, organizing the cultural record, and mitigating inequality. One of the most important of the concepts he discussed was the idea that libraries will focus much more on human interaction and, thus, on library programming.[1] Library staff cannot focus on either human interaction or on forms of programming, however, until we have a sense of our audience.

I often hark back to the laws of Ranganathan, laws he first wrote in 1931 and updated in 1957. I first learned about these laws in library school in the early 1970s, long ago now, but there is no question that the laws are still alive and vital. Although they could be updated to apply to the information age, Ranganathan's laws are still a good beginning place for us as we create plans based on data for library resources and services in the twenty-first century. Ranganathan described the five laws in a book, *The Five Laws of Library Science*, written in 1957 and amended and reprinted in 1963:

1. Books are for use.[2]
2. Every person his or her book.[3]
3. Every book its reader.[4]
4. Save the time of the reader.[5]
5. A library is a growing organism.[6]

DATA-DRIVEN INFORMATION ABOUT ADULTS AND TEENS—WHERE DO WE START?

Looking into the related concepts of providing a book (or information) for every reader and of saving readers' time in providing library services, we see the importance of identifying the needs of users. As I participate in work on our library's new catalog and collaborate with my colleagues to plan our new website, I have been thinking about a number of questions: Who are our users? What do we know about them? How do they use information? What will cause them to lose patience? What will cause them to persevere? The literature includes many data sources we can use to answer such questions. I cannot claim to list here all of the resources that can help with this process, but let me suggest a few.

OCLC started a trend when it surveyed people in six English-speaking countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, India, and Singapore in 2005.[7] The most recent OCLC study was completed in 2010 and

looked specifically at the impact of the recession on patrons' use of libraries.[8]

The researchers at the Pew Internet & American Life Project have developed a number of helpful resources. Although the major focus of their most recent research is on public libraries, the results contain information that will apply to school, academic, and special libraries as well. For a complete list (and to keep up with new research reports), I highly recommend watching the project's website at www.pewinternet.org. The library-related reports are gathered together at www.pewinternet.org/topics/Libraries.aspx?typeFilter=5, but there are many other reports found on the website on such areas as social media, media use, and e-commerce that will provide insights about library users.

Library Services in the Digital Age, released on January 22, 2013, describes the results of Pew's Gates Foundation–funded national survey of adults sixteen years of age and older in fall 2012. The survey, and some attendant librarian focus groups, found that American adults highly value borrowing books, the services of reference librarians to help them find the information they need, and free access to computers and the Internet in their public libraries. Demand for classes on use of e-book readers, classes on e-book borrowing, and online "ask a librarian" services is growing.[9] The way adults use libraries is changing, and the report identifies reasons adult respondents currently use libraries. The most frequently cited services used were browsing books and media, borrowing books, looking for information, getting help from a reference librarian, and just sitting and reading or listening, but respondents frequently cited use of research databases, attendance at events or bringing children to events designed for children or teens, and borrowing video materials as well.[10]

An earlier report from the same series of research projects about libraries and users provided additional information about teens and young adults. The study, entitled *How Teens Do Research in the Digital World* and released in Fall 2012, surveyed teachers and conducted focus groups of teachers and some of their students. These teachers found that the Internet has changed the way young people do research, often positively, but that the research practices of students are only moderately successful. The teachers also found students more distracted and relying on search engines too heavily. They noted that young people need additional training in evaluating results found in Internet searches.[11]

In looking at the needs and behavior of college students, work by OCLC led the way in the middle 2000s.[12] Later work was completed by the librarians at the University of Rochester who worked with their library staff anthropologist to complete a series of ethnographic studies of students and their work.[13] The anthropologist and librarians at Rochester are currently at work on a new book that will discuss their most recent findings about student work practices.[14] More recently, a group of Illinois librarians working on the ERIAL project also created a series of ethnographic studies.[15] Additional information about the ERIAL project can be found at their website at www.erialproject.org/publications/ala-project.

Each year ECAR, the Educause Center for Applied Research, surveys undergraduate students about their technology preferences for learning. Among the findings of this year's study are two that are important to libraries:

- Students want to access academic resources using a variety of devices. Academic resources need to be device neutral.
- Students use social networks to interact with friends but email, the local course management system, and in-person visits for academic purposes.[16]

British researchers working under the auspices of the Joint Information Systems Committee of the Higher Education Funding Council (JISC) and the British Library conducted a longitudinal study of generation Y doctoral students and their research habits. The researchers found that the majority of doctoral students relied on published literature rather than primary resources for their research, particularly on electronic journals.[17] The students also preferred one-on-one and face-to-face training tailored to their unique needs.[18]

Information about the needs of faculty members in colleges and universities has come from the work of Ithaka. In 2009, Ithaka's research showed that faculty members continued to increase their reliance on network level electronic resources, but they were using local finding and discovery tools less and less. Rather, they valued the library for the materials it purchased, not for the services it provided. A more recent study, released on April 8, 2013, notes that results of the 2012 survey continued to support the role of the library as buyer of resources, but also showed some increase in the share of faculty who value the library's gateway role in finding useful resources.[19] These views vary by discipline. Currently, the Ithaka researchers are involved in discipline-focused research and those results will be published on their website.

Information about senior citizens has also been collected by the Pew Internet Project. In their June 2012 report, *Older Adults and Internet Use*, Kathryn Zickuhr and Mary Madden talked about older adults (those over age sixty-five) and their use of the Internet. For the first time, the study found more than 50 percent of older adults used the Internet or email, although such use falls off after age seventy-five. The survey also found that 70 percent of Internet users aged sixty-five or older used the Internet daily, and one in three seniors used a social networking site such as Facebook or LinkedIn.[20] One can speculate that Internet use will continue to grow as more members of the baby boomer generation reach age sixty-five and that there will be both more demand for online library services and more interest in online resources from this group in the future.

In short, there is a considerable amount of research available about our users, who they are, what they know and what they want. We can (and must) use this information

to begin dialogues with our own users to learn more about their specific ideas, desires, and needs.

USER RESEARCH AT THE 2013 ANNUAL CONFERENCE—LEE RAINIE SPEAKS AT RUSA PRESIDENT'S PROGRAM

Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet and American Life Project, will present information at the RUSA President's Program during the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago about how people use information and libraries, based on Pew's recent research. Join us for Mr. Rainie's presentation, entitled *The Myth and the Reality of the Evolving Patron: The RUSA President's Program*, tentatively scheduled for 4:00 p.m. on Saturday, June 29. He will focus on the questions librarians in all types of libraries should be asking themselves and provide some ideas on ways to build on the results of the Pew research. Be sure to also attend a separate discussion forum the next morning (Sunday, June 30) at 10:30 a.m. where Emily Ford, David Lankes, and Marie Radford will interact with Mr. Rainie and the participants in the forum to delve further into the characteristics of library users and the implications for library service. We hope to have a video copy with slides from Mr. Rainie's presentation available from the RUSA website later in the summer of 2013.

A LAST WORD—THANKS!

This is my last column as president of RUSA. It has been a marvelous experience. I have been able to move forward a few strategic areas pertaining to planning and professional development.

There are always jokes about how it takes a "village" to accomplish something. As I prepare to leave the RUSA presidency, I want to take time to thank the village that supported me at every step.

Special thanks go to the RUSA office staff, who were always kind and never laughed at me, including our executive director, Susan Hornung, and Andrea Hill, Liz Markel, and Leighann Wood. The executive committee members gave wonderful advice and also deserve thanks and high praise—Gary White, past president; Kathleen Kern, vice-president/president-elect; Carolyn Larson, secretary; and Jennifer Boettcher, RUSA councilor. The members of the RUSA board gave of their time and their ideas time and again. The cochairs of the RUSA President's Program, Mary Mintz and Joseph Thompson, planned a wonderful set of programs for Chicago, along with the hard-working members of the committee, Emily Kornak, Dianna McKellar, Sherri Michaels, and Matt Neer, and I am very grateful. All the committee members, both of RUSA standing committees and RUSA sections, served everyone in RUSA very well. To all of the members of RUSA who share your ideas and your joys and frustrations with us, a big "thank you"!

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