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Curmudgeons and Feather Rufflers

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Abstract

Charles Curran, Lewis Miller, and Elise Lewis share stories of several librarians who have influenced the LIS profession by confronting conventional practices.

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By Charles Curran, Lewis Miller, and Elise Lewis

"Mr. Robinson [is] iconoclastic. He prods other people to question their thinking about what a library system should be. Even those who don't follow what he says, listen to him and question their own procedures. . . . " (van den Beemt,1990)

That quote captures exactly the message of this article: We should listen to opinions which appear to challenge conventional wisdom or the status quo. Sometimes we reject messages because we do not care for the messengers, some of whom may have earned the label curmudgeon because we found them cantankerous. There are consequences, intended and unintended, attached to accepting or rejecting ideas. This article considers the influence of some heck-raisers who confronted our practices. Another purpose of this piece is to elicit a chuckle or two. If as a result of a chuckle, a reader gains an insight, well, speaking of intended consequences, there's one. In the mood to smile? Read on.

 We begin with an example of risk taking at a micro level. Taking a stand against authority takes courage. Taking a stand against an authority who bears the same name as the institution one serves takes courage *plus*. At a ceremony celebrating a new wing at the Bob Jones University Library, a junior Jones told this story: A senior Bob Jones visited the library, spotted books which contained messages counter to the teachings of Bob Jones, and ordered the librarian to remove the heretical volumes. Give that librarian points for feather ruffling. He told the senior Jones that the library had to have these materials so that students and faculty could be informed about what their adversaries were advocating. Not knowing opposing points of view would place them at a serious disadvantage. Impressed by this logic, the senior Jones relented, but he

added this: From now on the library must place in its books a label which stated that the views expressed herein do not necessarily conform to the teachings of Bob Jones University. Get ready to award the risk-taking librarian bonus points. He told the senior Jones, "Okay, but do you realize that we now have to place the disclaimers in the Holy Bible and in your biography when you write it and we acquire it?" Feather ruffling is not without risk.

Herb White

Herb White was right about a lot of things. He brought a business background to his librarianship, deanship, and writings. Sometimes his business acumen rubbed *uberservice-minded* librarians the wrong way.

One of his major positions was especially troubling to librarians from the "*be all things to all people all the time"* school. White believed that when funders decided to underfund libraries, library management should decide to *underprovide* popular services. But the instinct of many librarians was to tighten belts and deliver anyhow; do more with less. White believed this sent a dangerous message to the funders, who would observe this behavior and conclude that the library did not need any more money.

He brilliantly explains the folly of the more-with-less philosophy in his "Doing More with Less? If We Can Do It Now, Why Were We Goofing Off Before?" essay (White 2000). He writes that "the suggestion that [in the face of budget cuts] we do more, try harder, or just do

the best we can really has no substance, [and] the presumption that we can decrease library funding without negatively impacting the quality of library service cannot be allowed to stand..." (White, 2000, p. 222). He argues persuasively that if managers take up the slack when they are underfunded, they let the funders off the hook.

His "do less with less--not more" message disturbed the plumage of many librarians. History teaches that sometimes when in response to tough budget times libraries cut back, an apathetic populace appears not to notice. Sometimes a supportive public clamors for restoration and puts pressure on funders. Supporters and voters in Connecticut and California have successfully applied such pressure (Legislature 2016; McDonald 2012).

College and university librarians will enjoy White's idea for a screenplay in "Blaming the Victim—The Academic Library Version" (p. 127-30). In it:

...the university president apologizes abjectly to the library director for lack of vision, lack of trust, and interferences, [and promises] that henceforth the professionals in the library will be accorded the same courtesy and freedom in establishing priorities already in place for any of the academic disciplines, (p. 130).

Academic librarians who have dealt with administrators who agree that the institution must have a library but tend not to agree that the institution must fund it adequately would love to cast that movie and add some choice dialogue.

Roger Greer

Irishman Roger Greer was charming, handsome, and blessed with what the Blarney Stone delivers. Driven rather than cantankerous, he was more like a husky leprechaun than your standard

curmudgeon. Critics referred to him as a dangerous tinkerer with library curricula, but advocates swore by his teachings--and at his detractors. Greer's influence transformed the curricula at several LIS programs. His big thing was *Information Transfer*. He claimed that information transfer was the chief business of the library and the key to its survival as an institution. His message that the future of the library was out there in the community--not in the library--attracted many to his Community Analysis Research Institute workshops, where participants learned how to infer needs from identified community characteristics. His pejorative use of the term *archival* inflamed archivists. Greer taught that there were three kinds of library service: Aggressive, Reactive, and Passive (Archival). *Aggressive* described librarians who went into the community to be observed in the process of finding out what is going on, and who then offered materials and services in direct response to expressed need. *Reactive* described librarians who merely waited for demands to be placed to the system, and then they responded. *Passive* and *archival* were synonymous. Passive librarians merely collected things. Greer preached aggressive procedures. His and Martha Hale's community analysis teachings are available in Jane Robbins-Carter's excellent *Reader* (1982).

Current interest in the community archive movement and especially in service-learning projects has archivists and LIS faculty focusing upon community—the *out there not just in here.* Service-learning, by definition, acknowledges the mutually beneficial actions between an organization and the community (Furco 1996; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). The idea of community partnerships and information transfer as drivers of LIS curricula aligns perfectly with Greer's aggressive library service concept.

But Roger Greer did not ignore the *in here*. He was not an either/or guy. One of his most challenging questions to librarians was: "What is seductive about your library?" What is it about the library that would convince users to trade their most precious commodity—their time—to sample library offerings? He also taught the notion of the hard core non-user, the person who may be a voracious consumer of information but simply not a user of libraries. This was a bitter pill for librarians from the "all things to all people—every book its reader, every reader his book" school.

The *out there* school of thought has proven wise and validated much of Greer's teachings. No less an authority than the Library of Congress reports: "...America's public libraries—about 17,000 nationwide—are thriving" (Dooley 15). The article cites meeting community needs and joining the digital age as chiefly responsible. That is a heavy dose of *out there* and *in here*. It's Greer stuff and Charlie Robinson, too.

Charlie Robinson

Should libraries be supply driven or demand driven? This is a trick question. Supply driven instincts prompt librarians to acquire materials they think clients will want and then offer them to said clients. Demand driven instincts prompt librarians to base acquisitions upon demand. In other words, acquire what is in demand, rather than acquire what might be in demand, or ought to be in demand if they knew what is good for them. What is so tricky about this?

For one thing, the orchestration of demand is a mighty task and it is fraught with opportunities to make mistakes. Two, demand instincts could and have led to concern that public libraries would become warehouses of best sellers, and therefore unsupportable. This was more likely in an era when books and print sources consumed the major part of a library's materials budget, and online capabilities were

as yet undiscovered. Third, do not librarians have the responsibility to elevate the reading tastes of their clients? Oops, there is another trick question. Fourth, supply and demand are not antithetical concepts; they can co-exist if managed artfully.

Charlie Robinson directed the Baltimore County Public Library system. He was a demand driven guy, a "give 'em what they want" librarian. As critical as many were of his demand driven instincts, the system thrived. It grew in branch locations, staff, collections, and circulation. If those factors describe success, and many hold that they do, Charlie Robinson's instincts paid off.

Mr. Robinson's detractors charged that his methods would leave libraries bare of the classics. Clearly, Robinson emphasized the demand aspects of acquisitions, but just as clearly his was not an either/or approach. His was a *both* approach.

A lot of people think that because your circulation is high, you must be circulating best sellers and trash, but that's not true. We buy 8,000 titles a year and less than 200 of them are best sellers. The last time I checked, we had 63 copies of 'The Odyssey' in 13 translations (van den Beemt, 1990).

Charlie Robinson deliberately chose to espouse controversial points of view, not to merely ruffle feathers but to get librarians to engage, to think, to examine issues from a variety of viewpoints. Some librarians demanded his head when he championed the virtual library. Others paid attention to what was *in* his head. Charlie involved the crowd in acquisitions. Now the crowd is involved in cataloging! The crowd is tagging messages in our files. The Digital Public Library of America! Wow! The massive resources of libraries, museums and archives becoming available virtually! Charlie has to be smiling.

Blaise Cronin

An admiring profession has bestowed numerous awards and titles upon Blaise Cronin. He probably would agree with the attention. Blaise has led an LIS program at a Big Ten university, written a boat load of articles and books, edited a premier IS journal, coined words, and addressed LIS audiences all over the world. Among the characteristics that distinguish him are three biggies. One, he speaks with an impressive Irish/English-sounding accent, so whatever he says sounds intelligent. Two, his determined devotion to scholarly attribution, though bordering on fussiness, captures the interest of scholars. Three, wow, can he piss people off!

Speaking of scholarly attribution, it is unavailable for the following quote, but the quote is too precious not to deliver. After Blaise had succeeded in inflaming an LIS audience some years ago, an attendee wondered aloud, "Is it okay to yell 'Blaise!' in a crowded theatre full of librarians?"

It is not just Cronin's first name that is inflammatory. His inventively titled book, *Pulp Friction*, fans many flames, particularly those arising from feminist scholarship, a product of which he is highly critical, and from arguments for accreditation, a process he views as stupid and arcane. Currently, ALA accreditation standards for LIS programs, perhaps in response to his criticisms, are much less focused upon bean counting and more focused upon establishing and achieving stated educational goals and outcomes. His interest in scholarly attribution is focused not so much on where to place the comma, but on what to make of citation patterns and whether claims supported by citation counts are valid. His conclusions in his "Shibboleth and Substance" article in *Libri* (Cronin 1995) could be considered unfriendly to some citation-counting scholars.

Cronin may have ruffled feathers close to home, Indiana University's SLIS, when he described his own faculty's research production as insular. He commented that, "there is little evidence that SLIS faculty have broken through the membranes of their microspecialties to reach scholars in other disciplines, with the possible exception of D [one faculty member]" (Cronin, 1994, p. 68). Could Blaise's intention have been to light a fire under his own faculty?

Unfriendly is a term some library science educators might apply to Cronin's statement that: "... not a single pure-blooded library science program would survive for long without its IS partner in any of the leading research universities." (1995. p. 56) Writing about Cronin's treatment of the work of others, Chris Atton has observed, "Perhaps he prefers to deliberately ignore their achievements in order to demonise those with an agenda different from his own." Anton adds another comment that is hardly a compliment: "...his language is full of bluster and disinformation." (1997, p.101).

Blaise Cronin is many things. Important is one of them. Influential is another. His editorial stamp powered the prestigious *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*. His attention to cross-disciplinary impact now influences the way in which scholarly attribution is examined and evaluated. He pushed the buttons of accreditors and got them focusing upon outcomes. He may have angered female opponents if he called them "shrill" or "irrational," but he deserves credit for movement of many women into the IS side of LIS, especially on LIS faculties. One can visit Youtube and observe Blaise Cronin's brilliance and that he appears to enjoy being so.

Mike Harris

Mike Harris! Wow! Hockey player turned library professor. Could he ever liven up a conversation! He did not even have to be there. Read his scorching article in *LJ,* "The Purpose of the American Public Library" (Harris 2509-14). In it he argued that the romantic notion that the public library was primarily a people's university invention, a place where the ambitious inquirer could find the necessary intellectual tools to affix to bootstraps and lift oneself from poverty and ignorance, was indeed a fairy tale. Instead the public library was an instrument of control supported by industrialists who wanted libraries chock full of materials that would keep the work force docile and subservient to the will of the Carnegie-types. But Mike, Andrew only funded buildings, not materials!

Mike often took his show on the road. He would appear with Suzanne Hildebrand and present/argue/ debate. Mike's pronouncements were memorable because of their inflammatory nature; Hildebrand's were especially notable because she was an accomplished scholar and editor. She was an authority in matters of gender equity and gender imbalance. She was also the first woman we ever heard deliver an f-bomb from a convention podium. (You may want to send the children out of the room now. They have left? Okay. Read on.)

Imagine a room full of mostly women librarians and library educators, and imagine a former hockey player arguing a "women are their own worst enemy" point of view. Mike's claim was that librarians who provided romance novels for women readers helped keep them in conditions of *unpower*. Escapist bodice busters were inappropriate reading materials for women seeking power in the workplace, pronounced Mike, because women who read romance novels miss out on the opportunity to

achieve power. Ms. Hildebrand, a keen observer of gender equity issues, was having none of that. To her, the Harris view of power acquisition was naive and disrespectful. An equally keen observer and critic of patriarchal domination, she also pointed out that when women soldiers are commanded by the male general to march to the left, "They have to march to the f*cking left!" She made a good point, and a memorable one. (The children may come back now.)

The Harris interpretation of American public library history presents today's information professionals with a splendid opportunity to examine their obligations to social justice and to speculate about how the profession has come to view itself as being so obligated.

Chuck Curran

Curran hardly achieved the status of opinion leader. His placement in this company of serious thinkers is attributable to his ability to ruffle feathers, not to his intellect. Ruffle he could. His "Wimp" article in *American Libraries* (Curran 1987) infuriated many, some of whom wrote angry letters to the editor and one of whom offered to beat him up at ALA New Orleans. In fact, Chuck advanced several unpopular notions in that periodical: It is more preferable to properly edge books on shelves than to merely place them in order (Curran 1988); once a librarian takes a cataloging course, he or she is forever and systematically prevented from conceptualizing about information the way clients do (Curran 1995); and librarians should not attempt to display a sense of humor because the things they choose to laugh at, like faulty citations, really are not all that funny (Curran 1989a). But when he claimed that stamping the secret page is wasteful and ineffective, several libraries abandoned the useless habit (Curran 1989b). People did laugh at his piece in *Library Research*, wherein he explained the

methodology for observing whether the people who enter the library ever come out (Curran 1990). And while his "Roof Leaks" articles (Curran & Kelley, 1996; Curran & Davidson, 1999) might have bugged some LIS educators, they pleased academic and public librarians who shared the opinion that graduate school did not teach all the things students need to know.

We conclude our tribute to the feather rufflers and cage rattlers by acknowledging that their substantial contributions were and are products of keen insight and courage. White, Greer, Robinson, Cronin, Harris, and Hildebrand placed their reputations on the line and took some heat, and we owe them so much. We also observe that this brief list of movers and shakers mentions only one woman. There are and have been legions of women who have contributed mightily to the cause. Golda Meir, Laura Bush, Nancy Pearl, and Jessamyn West are examples, but that they fit the curmudgeon label is debatable. Our continuing interest in expanding the roster of cranky and courageous risk takers will include the Clara Bartons, Betty Friedans, and Gloria Steinems of LIS, and we invite readers to suggest additional names to us at chuckc@sc.edu.

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