

InfoTech Column

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Books! Are they still important in special libraries?

OK, the question sounds slightly silly to a special librarian. But think about it. How many questions do we really answer with a hard copy book nowadays? How many needs do we fulfill with books? Often we satisfy simple needs with websites and webpages or content accessed electronically though the web. In many respects, many special libraries are part of the 'article economy'. I suspect that, if we did a census, we would discover that we find and retrieve far more articles than books. In the world of reference books, many (maybe most) are now often better (more up-to-date or complete) online. Directories alone are generally better online as they so easily integrate with the workflow of sales contacts and mailing lists. Indeed, in some parts of the digital non-fiction book world we can use or purchase just the chapter we need. And the days when millions of rentable, current books will be easily accessible through the major search providers are nigh. Successful models of e-books where we can download a copy of a book to our reader or PC or access content in a book database like Knovel or Books24X7 add new means of book discovery, to say nothing of audio-book collections like Overdrive and Audible.com.

So back to my original question, what is the role of the hard copy book in a special library? In a specific sector, where do we stand on books? Are they now really less important in law? STM? Consulting? Finance? Hmmmm. We know that books are a very persistent format in the entertainment sector. Have we fallen into the article or web trap? Fiction is flourishing. Bookstores and publishers of books are not dying as quickly as predicted. Reading is up in almost all categories. So what gives?

The Role of the Book in Special Libraries

The episodic mode of learning is great, especially for adult learners who have a basic foundation of knowledge on which to build further depth. Therefore, providing a few on point articles to a marketing expert can support them excelling in the workplace. Updating teams with daily RSS feeds of industry news or weekly e-mails of tables of content for the major magazines in your sector also works pretty well. However, trying to learn a complex topic or new professional competency, doesn't lend itself to this serendipitous mode of learning. For that, we provide classrooms, textbooks, manuals, guides, workbooks – formats which support a guided and more comprehensive mode of learning. There are times when we need to learn things in order. So, when one of our clients needs to

approach a topic from scratch – we start to think in terms of a format that guides and selects the content in a rational order – a book.

However, the world of the book has changed. The nature of authors and experts has changed. Chris Anderson's new bestseller *The Long Tail* explores the mutation we are seeing now for the concept of bestsellers and classics. James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds* also explores the role played by groups in selecting the best, the popular and the basics. Can we use these theories, the major theories that underscore the strength of the social web and social networking to the advantage of the special library's information professional's work and our host organizations? I believe so. We can create the great webliographies, pathfinders, reading lists and bibliographies using these tools.

New Modes of Recommendation

What we need to explore in depth is the thinking behind and implementations of *recommender engines*. Simply put there are three different kinds of recommenders (it can get a lot more complex):

1. Metadata driven recommenders
Finding books from similar authors, genres, subjects and domains, etc. based on metadata (cataloging, classification systems, indexing) stored with the records.
2. Socially driven recommenders
Finding books based on information and data stored from previous users behaviors (searching, buying, borrowing, viewing) that may or may not find relationships among the reading habits of a cohort of users.
3. Expert or personal recommenders (lists)
These are reading lists developed by an expert such as a leading writer, teacher or researcher in a field. Recently we have seen the emergence of lists developed by readers who have developed their own following (think Oprah). Many libraries have created their own library celebrity-driven reading lists. Some of these services use enhanced feeds of reviews and rating systems to populate the lists.

I keep a list of book recommendation engines that are publicly available on the web as real or beta services. You may have tried many or all of them. You may have used them personally but maybe not explored their use professionally. The one's that are sort of Web 2.0 or socially driven interest me the most, but despite reading the *Wisdom of Crowds*, I also still like a list that's been created by an expert or specialist librarian. I think that we can all agree that OPAC style metadata driven lists are more a census or inventory result than one which uses the filter of an expert reader or selector. Sometimes we get 'recommendation lite' just because a library selector's macro-filter allowed that book into a major or special collection but that's usually not enough to decide to personally invest in the book or the time to read it. And adding reviews (personal, end-user,

professional or editorial, is great, but uses time too) makes a difference but it's still just a step into true recommendation and advice.

Here are a few that are worth spending a few minutes to playing with. Some may be a little off the beaten track for 'serious' special librarians (like the teen sites) but there's always something to be learned from everything. Besides, true change comes from the fringes (and a few of my clients were more teens than adults anyway!).

Amazon

<http://www.amazon.com>

and

Listmania

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/My-personal-top-ten-book-recommendations/lm/31OQ0CR8R42VR>

This is the granddaddy of the lot. I find it very useful to look at the books that people who also bought the book I am reading. Invariably, I discover the reading circle that I can expect and a few click later I have a list of the most recent and leading books on the topic, along with professional and user reviews. It's not just about fiction, try topics like knowledge management, web design, communities of practice or social networking. Do you have an internal course that uses a textbook? If you do, try entering the title and create a further reading lists for assignments or the eager beavers. The emergence of reader driven lists through Listmania adds a patina of expert lists.

Other book buyer sites that offer similar services include:

Barnes & Noble

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/>

and

Barnes and Noble Bookbrowser

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/bookbrowser/Welcome.asp>

Borders

<http://www.bordersstores.com/index.jsp>

Chapters/Indigo (Canada)

<http://www.chapters.ca>

Suggestica

<http://www.suggestica.com/>

Suggestica is a recommender service based on the lists of "trusted authorities" and "featured experts". At this writing the celebrity list maker is Bill Gates.

Squidoo

<http://www.squidoo.com>

Squidoo, from the esteemed marketing guru, Seth Godin, offers 'lenses' from self-proclaimed and sometimes renowned experts. You can find lens on so

much now but these aggregate all formats and content types from video, through websites and articles and books. You can create your own lens too.

Inside a Dog

<http://www.insideadog.com.au/>

This one is interesting even though it's aimed at Millennials. You can do the usual stuff like reading and writing reviews, meeting authors online, and talking about books in addition to getting recommendations from your personal cohort.

MySpace Books

<http://collect.myspace.com/index.cfm?>

Like Inside a Dog, MySpace Books lets you find other readers and book groups and share. Again, this is aimed at Millennials. If you're an information professional who serves teens, students, or publishers who serve this market, then you're likely already watching this trend.

Books We Like

<http://www.bookswelike.net/>

Books We Like is activist e-commerce and collective intelligence. It's a non-profit service for book (and music and film) lovers, for promoting and discovering content and for supporting social-change non-profits through online purchases. It offers independent e-commerce functionality to Amazon and eBay.

OCLC's FictionFinder beta

<http://fictionfinder.oclc.org>

This beta experiment based on the OCLC OpenWorldCat content uses the advanced MARC metadata (such as genre coding, and author and series relationships) to advise searchers and readers what books might interest them. While it is currently limited to fiction content, you can see the potential for non-fiction use.

EBSCO's NoveList

(Possibly at your local public library...)

NoveList is a guide to fiction. Ever wonder what to read next? Need to know the next book in a series? What would be a good book for my 4th Grader? Here is your source. As the name implies, it's a set of good lists developed by pros.

Library Thing

<http://www.librarything.com/>

LibraryThing is an online service to help people catalog their own books easily. You can access your catalog from anywhere—even on your mobile phone. Because everyone catalogs together, LibraryThing also connects people with the same books, comes up with suggestions for what to read next, and so forth. This service, near its first birthday, is the 'catalog your home collections' granddaddy and now includes many social features and groups. It is already one

of the 50 largest libraries in the U.S. so it can't be counted out as a new force for reading.

All Consuming

<http://allconsuming.net/>

Similar to LibraryThing, you can catalog your books and see other's catalogs here. Again, what people choose to buy for their reading interests tells us a lot. Finding like readers is powerful. When we are making our best non-fiction or business books of the year for 2006, I think the home collections will be an interesting and enlightening comparison.

Next Favorite

<http://www.nextfavorite.com/>

"Tired of wasting time and money on books because of the critics' reviews on the back cover? Can't agree on the next selection for your book club? Discover good books to read with book recommendations from real people who like the same things as you."

StoryCode

<http://www.storycode.com/>

From the site: "StoryCode.com is a unique source of inspiring book recommendations and a great way to find the next book to read. And its power comes from the collaborative passion of readers."

Rating Zone

<http://www.ratingzone.com/>

Rate anything from DVD's, music and books to wine, travel and restaurants. The emergence of rating and ranking as a major feature and function of recommender websites is a trend not to be ignored. Explore this site to learn more about ranking in action. Check out more about the ranking trend in MySpace.

Hypatia and AlexLit

<http://www.alexlit.com/recommender/NewPatrons.taf?hallpass=N7NoPnQA>

From the site: "You're getting ready to experience one of the most useful tools for readers on the web, our literature recommending system, Hypatia. If you enter ratings for stories you've read, Hypatia will recommend other stories that you will like. The more ratings you enter, the better the recommendations. Not surprisingly, Hypatia is constantly growing in knowledge and accuracy, with more than 85,000 titles from which to recommend, and over 2 million ratings from about 15,000 people so far to help her make those recommendations. Our visitors tell us Hypatia gives the most accurate recommendations on the planet. And, each recommendation comes with a confidence level so you know if Hypatia's quite sure, or if she's making an educated guess."

WhichBook

<http://www.whichbook.net/>

This is a very different search experience. It's quite exciting really. Check out the elevator bars to describe what you want to read – happy/sad, funny/serious, safe/disturbing, etc. Then press search and you get a recommendation. It is UK based at this point. Imagine eventually seeing this kind of bar search for authoritativeness, reading level, audience, etc. Searching this way on articles? Hmmmm. It's on the horizon.

Here a few more metadata-based search engines for books, new and used:

AllReaders

<http://allreaders.com/>

Reader's Robot

<http://tnrdlib.bc.ca/rr.html>

Gnooks

<http://gnooks.com/>

Bookmooch

<http://www.bookmooch.com>

Many of these services also search and offer recommendations for films, games, software, music CDs and DVDs. There are some recommenders which specialize in these formats but that will be a column for another issue of *Information Outlook*. If you're interested in more, you can find some links in Google using the phrase "recommender engines", "Book recommendations" or "Book recommenders". You'll find some deep research and some heroic library examples too.

However, maybe a first step could be just offering a short list of book recommenders on your intranet to stifle that narrow Amazon addiction of your well educated clients. It's worth a try. . .

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