Problem Patrons or Problem Libraries?

A hundred and twenty pages into *Ada*, a nonagenarian couple, Van Veen and Ada Veen, are writing their memoirs. Fondly, they remember their first session of lovemaking, which occurred when Van was fourteen and Ada eleven (Nabokov, 1969, p.120). The description is vivid. Over the years, the Veens have shed any sense of guilt they might once have felt at the fact that they are siblings (rather than an old married pair). And yet Ada objects when Van writes something shocking:

"I want to ask you," she said quite distinctly, but also quite beside herself because his ramping palm had now worked its way through at the armpit, and his thumb on a nipplet made her palate tingle: ringing for the maid in Georgian novels—inconceivable without the presence of elettricità


It is not the sexual imagery Ada is protesting, but the word "elettricità, which has become so obscene a concept that even Van cannot bring himself to use the English word. Their diffidence is the result of some horrible and never described disaster in the alternative universe of Antiterra in which the novel takes place. (After the "electrocalamity," the people of Antiterra turn to water power; the ringing of the "dorophone" is always preceded by the sound of gurgling water.)

In the same way that "electricity" as an obscenity seems bizarre, so do some of the concerns of librarians regarding difficult patrons during the years between 1850 and 1919. While
sexually aggressive male patrons were at times during this period perceived as a threat to women, so much so that separate entrances, reading rooms, and check-out counters were maintained (Peatling, 2002), it is betting that seems to have angered and frustrated librarians most among their libraries' problem behavior. Not even betting on library premises (which could obviously raise noise levels) but even reading "betting intelligence" in newspapers was considered a misuse of library resources (Peatling, 2002).

Proposed solutions to the problem of library patrons reading gambling-related information included the removal of comfortable seating from periodical reading rooms and even the elimination of reading rooms altogether. Most commonly, librarians chose to black out betting sections of the newspapers (Peatling, 2002). Some of these same solutions, of course, have been suggested and even implemented by librarians today to discourage patrons with an interest in Internet pornography.

The definition of "problem patron" is at the heart of many questions regarding the library's responsibility to its most disruptive or eccentric patrons, as well as to its non-disruptive patrons, who resent begin distracted or harassed. Shuman defines a problem patron as "anyone who is doing anything illegal, immoral, annoying, or upsetting to anyone else" (as cited in Chattoo, 2002). The definition is broad, and it seems possible that the upsettee could easily be as much of a problem as the upsettor. Brashear, Maloney, and Thorton-Darringe divide the problem patron into three categories: harmless nuisances, disruptive or threatening patrons, and violent patrons (as cited in Chattoo, 2002). Brashear, Maloney, and Thorton-Darringe's categories are fluid: clients may move from one to another quickly. Fortunately, most situations diffuse; most patrons like coming to the library and fear banishment very much. Sable describes problem patrons as:
Peace disturbers: canvassers of political, religious, social or social service causes; coughers and laughers; violent criminals; loafers; drunkards and drug-intoxicated ones. Among them are eaters and drinkers; the emotionally and psychologically disturbed; fighters; gamblers and game players; loud mouths; inconsistent users of AV materials and equipment; hostile persons; pet owners (not the seeing-eye dog); self-talkers; sleepers; hyperactives; verbal abusers; whispers who never cease.

Sexually oriented: casual daters; child molesters; homosexuals; prostitutes; sexually active couples; exhibitionists and voyeurs.

Specific categories: those emitting body and manmade odors which may be irritating to others and cause allergic reactions; demanders of special attention and services based upon their status; drug dealers; and monopolizers of librarian's time. … patrons who use library facilities for unauthorized purposes; monopolize library materials and equipment; manipulate and violate rules and borrowing privileges. Thieves, pickpockets, extortionists, arsonists, mutilators, and vandals” (as cited in Chattoo, 2002).

Perhaps a different phrase than "problem patrons," chosen for its alliterative appeal, is in order—and certainly "smelly patron" should not become a Library of Congress heading. Just as some telemarketing firms have forbidden employees from using the derogatory term "irate customer," so must librarians perhaps begin to regard patrons who do not fit the norm, whether because of age, mental-health status, or economic status as patrons with special needs rather than as problems to be solved efficiently. It is clear that a librarian's official neutrality and nonjudgmentality can be carried far beyond the range of common sense. On the other hand, it is also far too easy to err on the other side, to find reason for alarm where none really exists.
A reader of popular psychology in 1934 with a concern about his own or someone else's mental health would not find much in the way of guidance. Books of the era focus on organic problems such as cretinism, epilepsy, the measurement of intelligence, and physical differences such as dwarfism thought to affect mental state. A single chapter in such a book might delve into "dementia praecox," a term encompassing schizophrenia and other diseases (BehaveNet, n.d.). Photographs in these works abound, gratuitously showing naked victims of mental illnesses and other conditions. To care for an institutionalized man whose iodine deficiency has caused him to develop a goiter, psychiatric nurses are advised:

Any stimulus may become a new source of worry, anxiety, and apprehension. For this reason the day of such patients should be a regular routine, run like "clock work," and as free from unusual stimuli as possible. In a severe case, letters, exciting books, visits from indiscreet friends will through the patient into a state of excitement which makes the pulse and temperature soar (Muse, 1934, p.137).

For such a patient, as well as for many others, Muse recommends "work in a small flower or vegetable garden," specifying, reassuringly, that such work be "voluntary" (1934, p.137).

Reading such documents, one has little confidence in the likely patience of librarians with the severely mentally ill patrons in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, even in the 1880s, there were many librarians who did not black out the betting news, either because they found the idea of any censorship distasteful, because they did not see such blacking out as a solution to the betting problem, or because they did not see the practice of reading the betting news as a problem. Actually, there was a great deal of dissension among librarians relating to how, or if, librarians should deal with disruptive patrons (Peatling, 2002). Articles in library journals of the day have titles like "The Extinction of the Betting Evil in Public News
Rooms" (from The Library, 1893) and "Obliteration of Betting News" (from Library Association Record, 1907)—but also "The People's Palace Library" (from The Library, 1890), suggesting that a public library should be a palace for all kinds of readers. (Peatling, 2002). Indeed, some librarians felt a particular mandate to welcome "loafers," believing the atmosphere of the library more likely to be a wholesome influence than any other where they were likely to be welcomed (Peatling, 2002).

Surprisingly, some librarians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries strived to make comfortable patrons whose behavior was not exactly desirable. Librarians at Clerkenwell Public Library in England considered inserting bookmarks into each circulating book rather than chastising or discouraging working-class patrons for fingering books with their dirty hands (Peatling, 2002). Interestingly, children's sections in libraries were created not necessarily to develop programs with specific relation to children's needs, but to keep "unruly boys" out of the adult reading areas (Peatling, 2002). Peatling makes it clear that there is no real way for readers of the twenty-first century to know whether or not patrons of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were any more or less likely to be troubled or troublesome than they are today.

Many disruptive library patrons today have obvious mental illnesses, and it does sometimes seem that the population of mentally ill library patrons is increasing. Certainly the mentally ill population within hospitals is smaller than it once was. In 1955, there were at any given time around 560,000 hospitalized mental patients in the United States. In 1998 there were only 266,729 total available mental-health beds (Manderschied & Henderson, 2001). Anecdotal evidence suggests that this deinstitutionalization of people with serious mental illness has been a huge problem in the United States; however, over twenty studies indicate: People with disabilities, including people with severe multiple disabilities, show increases in independence,
fewer problem behaviors, increases in choice making, increases in relationships with people without disabilities, and increases in employment and earnings (The ArcLink, 2002).

Additionally, studies suggest that within one to two years, community and family members, like the patients, also express pleasure at the new situations in which disabled family members find themselves after deinstitutionalization (The ArcLink, 2002). No one is seriously advocating the idea of a large increase in the number of mental health beds in the United States.

It is possible, however, that deinstitutionalization is the reason that many people with serious mental illness can be found in libraries, which are clean, pleasant places with bathrooms, security, and entertainment possibilities. It is also likely, as Peatling suggests, that disruptive patrons in libraries are hardly a new problem. It is also possible that the number of mentally ill people in libraries has not changed significantly, but that the rest of society has. People may have become less tolerant of eccentrics than they were in the past. Television humor about alcohol abusers, one type of disruptive library patron, is no longer in fashion. The personas of Dean Martin, Dan Rowan and Dick Martin of Laugh-In, and even Otis, the Andy Griffith drunk, are not likely to be repeated in 2002: alcoholism, like mental illness, seems more a personal tragedy than something at which to have a few laughs. In addition, the Civil Rights movement has made people more aware of offenses: patrons are more apt than fifty years ago to become angry by racist remarks or unwelcome flirtation from fellow library users.

Certainly, some kinds of deviant behavior are more likely to pass muster with patrons and librarians than others. Richer patrons have more options in a library than poorer ones do. As Jacob Horner points out in The End of the Road:

If you look like a vagrant it is difficult to occupy a train-station bench all night long, even in a busy terminal, but if you are reasonably well dressed, have a suitcase at your side,
and sit erect, policemen and railroad employees will not disturb you” (Barth, 1958/1972, p.74).

Different types of out-of-the-ordinary behavior are likely to receive different amounts of censure, due to the prejudices of society as a whole and of individual librarians. Thistlethwaite points out that Shuman, in 1999, cognizant of the threat of lawsuits, warns library workers of the risks of accusing patrons of inappropriate behavior: "Even if a security guard sees a man looking up the girl's skirts, he is taking a considerable risk should he detain him and accuse him of it" (as cited in Thistlethwaite, 2002). At the same time, Shuman suggests that immediate intervention is appropriate by a guard or other library worker who observes an adult male patron attempting a flirtation with another adult male patron or "attempt to conduct his erotic business in public restrooms" (Thistlethwaite, 2002).

Librarians must be mindful of "witch-hunt" scenarios that stereotype and villainize any sector of society. Salter and Salter (1988) describe a male patron wearing a dress in a public library:

The subject … was turned away by the guard, because of his obvious intoxication. Because the man was holding a hammer, the guard called police. When they arrived, they warned the guard not to touch the subject because they believed he might have AIDS. … The subject told police he had entered the library to escape some kids who were chasing and taunting him. The police took him to the station for psychiatric evaluation and medical examination for possible AIDS (p.62).

Clearly, the fact that the man was holding a hammer was a legitimate warning sign to the security guard who called the police. But the AIDS test seems homophobic and inappropriate.
However, the threat of AIDS seemed a legitimate reason for strong action when *On the Front Lines: Coping with the Library's Problem Patrons* was published in 1988.

In 2002, there are new demons, as this excerpt from the *Naples Daily News* shows:

The hard drives were taken from the ECC campus library in East Naples on Wednesday night after someone called authorities about three men who appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent whispering together and using the Internet. Officials said they were accessing Islamic newspapers and other Islamic sites.

The person who called in said it appeared the men were using an instant messaging service and having online conversations in what appeared to be a foreign language, sheriff's officials say (O'Malley, 2002).

Finally, nothing related to any terrorist activities was found on the hard drives, which were returned to the library (O'Malley, 2002).

Another patron group frequently considered a problem is teenagers. Adolescents, for example, are often discouraged from working or talking in groups, from accessing chat rooms and instant messaging on the Internet (Chelton, 2002). While forbidding certain kinds of behavior might seem like a way of enforcing equitable access to library computers for other patrons, it may not be taking into consideration the real needs of the adolescent, a client group with which some librarians have little empathy. Librarians must always be alert to the fact that not every patron is a quiet, middle-class adult with a clear goal and a desire to pursue research independently.

Currie (2002) asks a reasonable question:
How well do we design library services and implement systems based on a sound understanding of what our patrons need or are prepared to use? There are those (Lewis, 1990, Cargill, 1992) who have urged librarians to watch and listen to patrons and try to understand what their words and actions say about how libraries work and what they feel is important. This is necessary if we are to organize services to meet the actual information needs, habits, and preferences of patrons—not what librarians think is wanted.

Of course there are times when intervention by security guards is necessary. And there are times when, as in the situation above relating to the man looking up the dresses of schoolgirls, failure to react will not seem wise in hindsight. There are also situations where it is simply easier to expect the victim of harassment to change her behavior than the harasser. An email from the security department at the University of Cincinnati to staff and students describes an incident involving a female student startled by a male exhibitionist on Langsam Library's sixth floor this November. The man escaped, and the woman, described as "studying alone in a secluded section of the library" where she "had fallen asleep" received counseling. The email admonishes library patrons to "please sit in areas that are frequented by others and try to sit so that you can be seen by others."

Even different libraries have different policies in regard to the proper way to work with patrons. The Fairfax, Virginia, public library's page devoted to "smelly patrons" says only: This is not considered to be a problem behavior. According to the County Attorney's Office, smelling bad is not against the law. Patrons on staff complaining about this need to be tactfully informed by the Person-In-Charge about the policy and that action will not be taken (Library Administration, 1990, p.32).
On the other hand, the Morristown, New Jersey, public library, where as many as thirty-six homeless people assembled daily in the late 1980s, attempted to enforce rules banning disruptive patrons. When Richard Kreimer, a homeless man who was ejected because of "bodily odors" sued the library in 1991 for denying him access, he won, losing only on appeal to the Federal District Court in 1992 (Silver, 1996).

Shuman describes steps librarians can take to deal with difficult patron. All are risky, he says, and could easily result in lawsuits or worse.

The patron can be banned from the library, for example. Carefully delineated guidelines can be posted forbidding "smelling bad" or "staring." Librarians with training in social work can try to convince the patron that he does, in fact, have a problem. Guards can let the patron know he is being watched. Or, of course, the patron can simply be ignored as much as possible (Shuman, 2002).

It is also possible to try to convince disruptive patrons to leave the library willingly. One method is for libraries to bring their services to homeless shelters. Reid (1992) describes several successful programs related to libraries and the very poor or homeless:

In Portland and Milwaukee, libraries received federal grants for reading rooms in homeless centers. A new library in Massachusetts will include a community room for the homeless, with easy chairs, coffee maker, TV, paperbacks, magazines, newspapers, and information on local homelessness organizations … [The San Francisco Public Library] and the Philadelphia public library provide children at shelters with story hours and films. The New York Public Library operates five projects for the homeless. (Reid, 1992, p. 389)
Certainly, these libraries are to be commended for devoting parts of their budgets to meeting the needs of the homeless, but their apparent segregation of the homeless, to different rooms and even different buildings, is disturbing. If Peatling (2002) is correct, the segregation of children into their own part of the library at the end of the nineteenth century was effected not to enhance the reading experience of young children, but to keep them from annoying adults. Similarly, a decision to keep annoying patrons away from less disruptive patrons can be said to have been made for the benefit of the non-disruptive patrons at least as much as for the disruptive patrons. Whether segregating the mentally ill or eccentric from those deemed less mentally ill or eccentric will have the same benefits as segregating children and adults remains to be seen.

No one agrees when disruptive patrons began frequenting the library and why. Most people do agree on a few tenets, however. Every library, for example, should have written guidelines describing policies for dealing with disruptive or mentally ill patrons, although as Shuman (1992) points out, "writing the language of such rules is going to be tricky at best." Everyone agrees that patrons should be given clear warnings before being permanently barred, that all patrons should be treated with respect and consideration, and that, unfortunately, no written policies, however well-defined, will actually work, because catastrophes, when they happen, will by definition be unexpected.

The Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County experienced just such a catastrophe this fall, when an employee—not a patron—climbed over a three-and-a-half-foot barrier on the top floor of the library and jumped to her death in the lobby forty feet below. A middle-school student wrote in his school newspaper, "As I rode home on the bus that rainy day, I could hear the loud, jarring slam in my mind, replaying over and over again" (Faux, 2002, p.1).
It is not comforting to think of the American Library Association's laissez-faire response to the mentally ill patron. Librarians may well be among the only people who can see certain mentally ill people on a near daily basis; being sensitive to disturbing or dramatic changes in their behavior should be a real responsibility. As members of a service profession, it is only natural that we should be required to devote much of our attention to those members of the public who are most vulnerable. The neutrality of the American Library Association can be seen as an evasion of responsibility. It is even less comforting to associate the ALA's attitude of neutrality with Leo Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych, the judge who lived a life "most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible" (Tolstoy, 2002/1886, p.310). Here, Tolstoy describes Ivan Ilych's workplace demeanor, which he perceives not as professionally neutral but as personally heartless:

A man would come, for instance, wanting some information. Ivan Ilych, as one in whose sphere the matter did not lie, would have nothing to do with him: but if the man had some business with him in his official capacity, something that could be expressed on officially stamped paper, he would do everything, positively everything he could within the limits of such relations, and in doing so would maintain the semblance of friendly human relations, that is, would observe the courtesies of life. As soon as the official relations ended, so did everything else. Ivan Ilych possessed this capacity to separate his real life from the official side of affairs and not mix the two, in the highest degree, and by long practice and natural aptitude had brought it to such a pitch that sometimes, in the manner of a virtuoso, he would even allow himself to let the human and official relations mingle. He let himself do this just because he felt that he could at any time he chose resume the strictly official attitude again and drop the human relation (Tolstoy, 1886/2002, p.319).
We have a difficult task in dealing with a sometimes difficult public. When do we have the responsibility to interfere with the rights of difficult patrons? At what point does a patron become a real rather than perceived threat? And at what point does tolerance of the difficult patron begin to trample the rights of the non-disruptive patron? There are no actual answers to these questions. Letting individual circumstances, human decency, and common sense—rather than blanket policy—be our guides may be the best way we have of reaching acceptable solutions.
References


