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Random Ramblings: The Myth of the Unique User

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"The library changed its eBook platform to improve the reading experience for the user." "With the new arrangement of the reference collection, the user will better be able to find pertinent materials." I'm willing to wager that readers of this column have seen or read many such similar statements. Who is this user? Is there some library patron out there that goes from library to library to serve as the test case for whatever changes the library is contemplating making? Does a library exist that so well matches the demographics of the average library that it can be used as the test bed for new ideas? Let me examine what I think libraries mean when they talk about "the user" and discuss some of the fallacies connected with the concept. I'll be speaking about academic libraries since I know them best.

Usually, "the user" is shorthand for the majority or perhaps in some cases the plurality of users or for the statistical average of the library's multiple patrons. From my own experience, the first fallacy in such statements is that the library often doesn't really know what its users think about any change or whether they will find the new version better than the old version. While the vendor may have done usability testing, the users that the vendor chose for the testing may not match the users in the library implementing the change. Quite often, the library decided to make the change because the decision makers thought that the change would be an improvement. Most of the time, these decision makers are right; but exceptions have occurred and have lead to large numbers of dissatisfied users.

The second fallacy revolves around defining the users in the user community and deciding if some user groups are more important than others. Do the faculty users in the Humanities who spend hours in the stacks and special collections looking for research materials count more than undergraduate users who visit the library once a year because they can't find the wanted information with **Google**? Does the powerful faculty member who never uses the library but is vocal about the change have more importance than the lowly graduate student who lives in the library but doesn't have much influence? If librarians do ask users, they may select their friends who might not be totally honest about flaws in the proposed change. If the library surveys its users about this change or the library in general, does the survey include both a chance to rate satisfaction with a survey item and to indicate how important that survey item is to the rater?

To continue with the positive assumption that "the user" is a term that does represent a valid majority of library users, multiple questions still remain. How large is the majority? By definition, a majority is 50% plus one; but a change considered advantageous by 51% of the library users is very different from one favored by 90%. To give an example from the advertising world, the television ad that said that a majority of users favored [automobile model] over its major competitor lost some credibility when someone disclosed that the difference was 52% to 48%.

The second issue with a valid majority is the need for the library to maintain positive relations with the minority of users, however small, that don't like the change. Some may not like the change precisely because they don't want to learn a new system, even if the new system promises great rewards for the effort put into learning it. A second case may occur when the change offers small rewards for the majority of users but large disincentives for some who have invested heavily in some features of the old system that go away or that need the service slated for elimination. If the library proposes eliminating its computer lab because 83% of its students have laptops, what about the 17% who don't and who will no longer have computer access in the library? One category of change frequent in the library world is offering ease of use and quick training in return for less power and functionality. I still occasionally miss NOTIS and DOS for their command line interfaces that offered great power to accomplish tasks compared with today's GUI interfaces. As a former cataloger, I remember executing some extremely powerful searches in NOTIS by designating the MARC fields to search. I'm less sympathetic for the occasional library user who wishes that the card catalog would come back though I'm sure that this medium is better at some specific tasks than our current ILS'.

What should libraries do about "the user?" I'll repeat that the term is useful shorthand to say that the library knows or believes that the change, whatever it may be, is intended to benefit the majority of the library's patron community. The term has the added benefit of indicating that the library didn't make the change to make life easier for library staff, to save money, or to reach some other institutional goal. I've been around long enough to know that this statement is sometimes a lie and that the change may have little to do with providing better service.

The library should be ever mindful that it serves a broad spectrum of users who have different needs, use different services, and may regard any change differently. To give an example, whatever classification scheme the library uses will reward some users and penalize others no matter what the library does as long as the users need to find the materials in the open shelves. For my favorite example using the *Library of Congress Classification*, the researcher with an interest in the history of Native Americans will find most of this material nicely clumped together at the beginning of the E section. On the other hand, a researcher on the history of an individual state will find most materials in F but will need to move to the E section for the history of Native Americans in that state. The interdisciplinary scholar or the scholar in a discipline that became important after the creation of *LCC*, such as gerontology or Women's Studies, will get their daily exercise in retrieving materials from multiple areas or multiple buildings since these materials aren't shelved together.

In any discussion of "the user," my key recommendation is to not overlook the users that any change might harm. At a recent **Charleston Conference**, one of the brightest rising stars in the profession gave a presentation on a change designed to help "the user." Having become a bit of a curmudgeon in my advanced years, I was able easily to think of a group of valid and relatively numerous users who might not like this change and asked the speaker about this group during the question period. The speaker seemed surprised and admitted to not having thought about this group but was quickly able to come up with an easy way to modify slightly the change to better meet their needs. Even if such modifications weren't possible, knowing about the potential problems would let the library prepare for any complaints and perhaps even speak to members of the disadvantaged group ahead of time. If this group is politically or economically powerful, rethinking making the change might be in order.

The library can't provide services that perfectly match the wants of all users. I'm not suggesting that the library continue to buy **Betamax** tapes and audio cassettes just because a few users still own the equipment to use these obsolete formats. I do suggest that the library define "the user" to include as high a proportion of users as possible. For key services, even a small number of users can justify special efforts if otherwise these users can't use basic library resources. Examples include providing assistive technology and computer labs for students without laptops. While the concept of "the user" is an appealing concept for making decisions, "everyman" doesn't exist. The library should remember that each user has unique needs. Keeping this principle in mind can lead to providing the best for the most while not totally frustrating the minority. 🌳