Helping the Difficult Library Patron: New Approaches to Examining and Resolving a Long-Standing and Ongoing Problem

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Every type of library will inevitably have problem patrons, but this article focuses mainly on public and academic libraries. As the times have changed, so has the magnitude of the problem patrons. Problems of the past seem irrelevant compared to some of the problems we are currently facing. Discussed in this article are particular types of problem behavior, including, but not limited to anger, harassment of staff, and homelessness. The types of each category include examples to illustrate each concern, and possible remedies.

KEYWORDS. Problem patrons, anger, harassment, crime, damage, property, homelessness, children, public libraries, academic libraries

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Library staff and other patrons encounter patrons who are one or a combination of the following: mentally ill/disturbed, homeless, street persons, angry, aggressive, unreasonable, rude. Commonly referred to as “problem patrons,” they appear in any type of library: public, academic, institutional, corporate and special. Most of them behave poorly because of their own troubles. The history of “problem pa-
Irons,” various types of problem patrons and their identifying behaviors are discussed in this paper. In attempting to define “problem patrons” the information provides a framework for understanding the problems of challenging patrons and for learning to discriminate between problem patrons and patrons who have problems.

KEYWORDS. Difficult patron, challenging patron, problem behavior, street people, problem patron, homeless patron, angry patron

The “Problem Patron” Public Libraries Created 23
Mary K. Chelton

Normal adolescents are generally suspect within public and retail settings in the U.S., thanks in part to relentless negative media coverage of the age group, and to adult fear and misreading of their appearance. These suspicions also occur in public libraries, with occasional justification, but an argument can be made that public libraries have created this problem for themselves through a set of often taken-for-granted service assumptions. This article addresses these assumptions, pointing out how they contribute to the creation of a “problem” class of users, and how they might be changed or adjusted to change the situation.

KEYWORDS. Adolescents, young adults, service assumptions, problem users, public libraries

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Gary Kenneth Peatling

Failure to engage an historical perspective can lead to exaggeration of the novelty of the “problem patron” phenomenon in libraries. In fact, from the institutions’ earliest years, there were significant levels of fear that British public libraries would be abused by their intended users. This paper examines the experience of the problem patron in British public libraries in the years 1850-1919, and the definitions and solutions suggested by supporters and staff of these libraries. Contemporary sources are used to suggest that some observations about this period may have continued relevance for present discussions of the “problem patron.”

KEYWORDS. United Kingdom, public libraries, history, problem patron, order, crime, class

Difficult Library Patrons in Academe: It’s All in the Eye of the Beholder 45
C. Lyn Currie

Difficult patrons have been considered primarily from the perspective of the problem behaviours they present in libraries. Many have attempted to define the problem patron and to provide advice and develop guidelines for frontline public service staff. To understand the difficult patron in academic libraries we need to answer three questions—How well do we know our patrons? Do we unwittingly create difficult patrons through our failure to appreciate their needs? Do we re-
gard patrons as difficult because the way they use libraries and conduct their in-
formation research does not match our idea of how it should be done? The answers
to these questions suggest that we need to reconceptualize both our patrons and
the services we provide. Library staff need to see difficult patrons not as problems
but as challenges to the service ideas and standards we hold. A paradigm shift is
necessary if we are to reconstruct our beliefs about our patrons, their information
seeking behaviours, and the services we provide to meet their needs. Some strate-
gies for developing the skills of library staff to work effectively with difficult pa-
trons are presented.

KEYWORDS. Library patrons, library staff—training and development, library
services, library instruction, technology and libraries, problem patron

The Difficult Patron in the Academic Library: Problem
Issues or Problem Patrons?

Patience L. Simmonds
Jane L. Ingold

Faculty members depend on the resources and services provided by the libraries to
teach, satisfy the curricular needs of the students, and conduct their research. Stu-
dents need the library for many reasons, among which are to complete their as-
signments and to expand on what faculty covers in class. The patron/librarian
relationship in the academic library is not always perfect. Issues which students
and faculty face in the academic library environment are completely different from
those in the public library. Identifying the characteristics of the difficult or pro-
blem patron in academia is a little more difficult than in the public library. Are what
librarians face when dealing with faculty and students more issue-related than just
dealing with problem patrons? The authors will identify, from the librarians’ per-
spectives, some of these often called difficult patron issues and offer solutions to
try and preempt these issues before they become problems.

KEYWORDS. Academic libraries, faculty, students, library staff relations, prob-
lem patrons, difficult patrons, patron characteristics

Personal Safety in Library Buildings: Levels, Problems,
and Solutions

Bruce A. Shuman

Libraries, whatever they may represent to the public, are also workplaces for their
employees, and—given human nature—can become dangerous places to visit or in
which to work. A recent study of violence in the workplace conducted by the Na-
tional Institute for Occupational Safety and Health reveals that “workers most at
risk to workplace violence are those who deal with the public, exchange money and
deliver goods and services.” Naturally, library staff are included in this at-risk
category. When people do not feel safe in public buildings, they tend to avoid them
(or working in them) for fear of danger, assault, injury, or worse. Other types of
workplaces often have levels of security, commensurate with their functions, fea-
tures and design, but most libraries—public places, with intentionally easy (or
non-existent) admission requirements—place both employees and visitors at risk of
violence.
Demonstrable, there is a need for security in library buildings, but how much and what kinds of security are desirable, feasible, and affordable are subjects open to debate. As a general rule for public buildings, more is better, but such is not necessarily the case in library buildings, where a high level of physical security is exchanged for reasonably barrier-free access. This paper discusses seven levels of security in workplaces, ranging in description from "perfect" to "rotten," with library buildings placing low along the continuum. Because it is in the nature of public institutions to necessitate public exposure, staff and the general public are vulnerable to occasional unpleasant surprises. Library staff, however, are not helpless just because all are free to enter their institutions. A reasoned and coherent security policy consisting of preparations and countermeasures to enhance building security is essential. Forewarned is forearmed, and preparation of staff for violent incidents in the workplace and rapid response and reaction to such incidents are extremely important, and should be included in a comprehensive security plan that provides remedies to problems of personal vulnerability while maximizing security for all building occupants.

KEYWORDS. Personal safety, library security, crime and libraries

Old Problem for New Reasons: Overcoming the Challenge
Presented by Mentally Ill Library Users
Stephanie Ford

Evening staff members of the Research and Information Services Department (RISD) at the North Carolina State University (NCSU) Libraries have recently noticed an apparent increase in the use of the library by people perceived to be mentally ill. RISD staff members have found themselves in some ways unprepared to respond comfortably to this change. This paper, a case study, proposes reasons for this increased visibility of mentally ill people, and describes the challenges the staff members faced and how they overcame them. The RISD staff members acquired the knowledge and confidence they need to work with mentally ill people through communication among colleagues, review of the literature, and staff training.

KEYWORDS. Mentally ill, problem patrons, problem situations, extended hours, evening staff members, public Internet access

“The Homosexual” as Problem Patron
Polly Thistlethwaite

Libraries host a range of human activity, some of which is overtly and unabashedly sexual. What’s a librarian to do about public displays of affection? Cruising? Public sex? First, naturally, we read up on the issue. Unfortunately, problem patron library literature is spotted with vivid illustrations of irrational bias against gay men, male-to-female transgender women, and men-cruising-men. It also discounts the private nature of most consensual sex in public places. This article discusses sex and gender biases in library literature, arguing that gender equitable, privacy-respecting practices will better serve librarians administering public space.

KEYWORDS. Sex, sexual activity, homosexuality, same sex, gay, transgender, public sex, cruising, privacy
The Difficult Library Patron: A Selective Survey
of the Current Literature
Bernice Redfern

The issue of the difficult library patron has been of growing concern to the library community in the last decade. A number of monographs and journal articles have been published on this topic in recent years. This article surveys the literature concerning the problem library user including the homeless, the de-institutionalized, the mentally ill, and angry/frustrated patrons. It includes literature which discusses techniques for empowering front-line employees in handling various user behaviors and responding to patron problems.

KEYWORDS. Difficult patrons, homeless, angry patrons

THE PROBLEM PATRON IN THE ELECTRONIC AGE

Do We Really Have an Internet Problem? Statistics, Credibility and Issues Concerning Public Internet Access in Academic Libraries
Charlotte Cubbage

Due to the nature of the Internet, a disconnect exists between observed and actual usage in libraries. A variety of problems may arise surrounding Internet access in academic settings. However, the speed with which transactions occur, the privacy issues involved, and the vast amounts of information and services available make it impossible to assess the extent of any problem. With Internet tracking software, librarians may acquire data that will assist them in tracking problems, and in assessing user Internet behavior. This article reports on a study conducted with LittleBrother software at Northwestern University Main Library's General Information Center.

KEYWORDS. Academic libraries, Internet access, Internet tracking software, LittleBrother software, problem patrons

Problem or Challenge? Serving Library Customers That Technology Left Behind
Sara Baron

Every day at reference desks, public service points, and in library instruction, librarians assist people who are apprehensive about technology. There are assumptions in academe, held by librarians, faculty and administration, regarding students' technology savvy. Many of these assumptions are unfounded and incorrect. Librarians are challenged to serve those individuals technology has left behind with the same respect as those technologically up-to-speed. This paper is a discussion about technology anxiety, technophobia myths, and a theory of technophobic learning.

KEYWORDS. Technophobia, computer anxiety, learning theories, library instruction, information literacy
E-Problems, E-Solutions: Electronic Reference and the Problem Patron in the Academic Library

Jacqueline Borin

Problem patrons are not a phenomenon exclusive to the public library arena. Academic libraries have throughout time had their own share of difficult patrons. This article focuses on problem patrons and reference staff in the academic library with a particular focus on electronic equipment and resources, particularly the Internet. Issues include viewing of pornographic images by patrons, plagiarism and the librarian's role, use of e-mail and chat, and cell phone use in the reference area.

KEYWORDS. Libraries and readers—United States, academic libraries—security measures, academic libraries—public relations

The Problem Patron and the Academic Library Web Site as Virtual Reference Desk

Daniel Taylor
George S. Porter

Emerging technologies continue to offer librarians new opportunities to improve user services. Comment and query links on some library web pages are absorbing a significant share of the customer service workload previously handled by traditional reference desks. Familiar types of patron problems of course continue to crop up at the "virtual reference desk." New and different aspects of patron problems also appear. Originating with the experiences of a research university library's web group in dealing with incoming user messages, this study examines the challenges as well as advantages of dealing with "problem patron" phenomena in a virtual environment.

KEYWORDS. Email, problem patrons, reference services, virtual library, World Wide Web

Managing the Use of Cellular Phones in a Small College Learning Resource Centre

Christopher M. Hall

Seventy-five per cent of young people in Britain own a cell phone. In a survey of sixth form college (small college) Learning Resource Centres (LRCs), cell phone usage occurred regularly and was occasionally a serious problem. LRC Managers need to decide whether to ban cell phone usage or not. Disruptive behaviour in libraries is defined as any behaviour that disturbs other users. Using this criterion, cell phone use should be banned in the LRC. Policies on cell phone use need to be clearly displayed and enforced tactfully and consistently. College management support will increase the effectiveness of any ban.

KEYWORDS. Problem patron, cell phones, learning resource centres, sixth form colleges, colleges, England, disruptive behaviour, young people, rules and regulations
How Psychotherapists Handle Difficult Clients:  
Lessons for Librarians  
Brian Quinn

Although librarians occasionally encounter difficult patrons in the course of their work, psychologists work with difficult clients much more frequently. This raises an interesting question—how is it that psychologists are able to manage these trying individuals, and in some instances even help them improve? This study attempts to answer that question by investigating how psychotherapists define, cope with, and treat difficult patients. It explains the psychology of difficult clients, techniques psychologists use in working with them, and how these might be utilized by librarians. The importance of seeing difficult clients as a means of personal growth is also emphasized.

KEYWORDS. Difficult patrons, psychology, coping, definition, techniques, personal growth

The Common Sense of Customer Service: Employing Advice from the Trade and Popular Literature of Business to Interactions with Irate Patrons in Libraries  
Glenn S. McGuigan

The trade and popular literature of business provides a rich source of commentary upon interactions with difficult people. Examining information from the literature concerning this topic and applying it to the library setting, the reference librarian or public services staff member may acquire techniques for use in confronting a patron who, for one reason or another, is angry or hostile. The activities suggested here—clarifying a misunderstanding, insulating oneself from negativity, showing empathy, and listening—are common sense elements of successful customer service and coping techniques.

KEYWORDS. Problem patrons, library service, public relations

The Customer Is Always Right: What the Business World Can Teach Us About Problem Patrons  
Rebecca Jackson

Dealing with difficult patrons can be stressful. However, if we look at business literature and practice, we can learn much about how to deal with these difficulties. This paper focuses specifically on customer complaints. The business world regards complaints as valuable opportunities to improve customer service and satisfaction. Libraries should provide channels for their patrons to make complaints,
follow up on those complaints, and train staff to deal with user dissatisfaction. Otherwise, our users may decide the library is not valuable to them, and we could lose valuable support.

KEYWORDS. Complaints, user satisfaction, customer service

Zen and the Art of Dealing with the Difficult Patron
Louisa Toot

Half the battle of dealing with a difficult patron is changing one’s own perspective. This paper uses core Zen Buddhist ideas and viewpoints to discuss ways of dealing with difficult patrons. The basics of Zen Buddhism are explained and Zen concepts such as Openness, Mindfulness, Compassion and Beginner’s Mind are applied to problem solving within the context of library public service. The paper also explores the difference between “difficult” and “problem” patrons in order to help readers determine when a Zen perspective is useful.

KEYWORDS. Zen, Buddhism, difficult patrons, problem patrons, conflict, problem solving, library public service

Healing After the Unpleasant Outburst: Recovering from Incidents with Angry Library Users
Kathy Fescemyer

Library personnel encounter angry library users regularly at various service points. Unpleasant incidents are detrimental to library staff attitudes and morale, and may have a lasting effect on the library staff member. This article describes techniques to lessen the impact of an emotional outburst of a library user and decrease the library staff member’s recovery time from the incident.

KEYWORDS. Anger, recovery, coping

Gypsies, Tramps and Rage: Coping with Difficult Patrons
Sharon W. Bullard

This paper proposes that encounters with problem patrons and reader rage will continue to increase. In order for the library and its staff to survive they must adhere to some basic ideas including acknowledging that a problem exists, creating a code of conduct, hiring and training staff for the task, and providing them ways to deal with the problems and the stress.

KEYWORDS. Difficult, problem patrons, clientele conduct, staff communication, empowerment, flexibility, authorities

Help Yourself: Front-Line Defense in an Academic Library
Diane J. Turner
Marilyn Grotzky

One of the biggest challenges in libraries today is how to empower front-line employees to be able to deal with the unique problems and people that society unloads
on us daily. Some of these problems, like staff morale, are with us all the time. Others, such as developing workable policies and procedures and dealing with problem patrons, are like housework, done for the moment but never complete. A third category consists of the rare event that threatens the lives or wellbeing of library employees and users—issues of personal safety in the workplace.

This article will discuss, from the perspective of two veteran staff of the Auraria Library, the need for clear communication, up-to-date policies and procedures, and effective training. Although every problem cannot be solved or every situation diffused, it is best to empower employees to know what to do for all the "what ifs" that may arise.

KEYWORDS. Libraries, common problems, policies and procedures, training, communication, empowerment

The Difficult Patron Situation: Competency-Based Training to Empower Frontline Staff
Justina O. Osa

Problem/difficult patron incidents that occur in libraries are on the rise. Library administrators and library employees have attempted to decrease the number of incidents by providing staff training and formulating policies and rules to control the situation. The purpose of this article is to share the proactive steps that the Education and Behavioral Sciences Library, Penn State University Libraries, took to prevent or decrease the incidences of difficult patrons as the library prepares to relocate. The focus was on assisting the frontline staff members, who work on the reference desk, to acquire the competencies they need to provide consistent quality reference services to patrons, and to reduce incidences of unsatisfied, difficult, and problem patrons.

KEYWORDS. Problem patrons, competencies, empowering frontline staff, training

Core Competencies of Front-Line Employees: The German Contribution to a New Service Culture
Wolfgang Ratzek

The last decade of the 20th century and the beginning of the new millennium have seen unexpected changes. In Europe, especially in Germany, we are undergoing revolutionary changes in almost all domains of entrepreneurial, cultural and societal activities. These changes affect libraries too. Due to Electronic Data Processing, governmental regulations, and cultural changes, the workload for librarians has become more and more demanding. Traditional library education does not meet the needs of the 21st century. Customer service means more than doing a good job. This paper deals with some of these phenomena, focusing on libraries in Germany.

KEYWORDS. Personnel development, hard skills, soft skills, Germany, new steering model, political correctness, key qualifications
Partnership with Community Resources–Campus Police: Revisiting Policies to Reflect the 21st Century
Joyce C. Wright

It is the policy of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to maintain a quiet and otherwise appropriate environment to assure an atmosphere conducive to study in all units of the University Library System. It is incumbent upon library users to conduct themselves in accordance with the rules of the University Library. It is expected that those who use the University Library System will do so responsibly and appropriately without harassing other users or library staff and without damaging the Library’s facilities or its collections.

At Illinois, partnerships have been organized with the campus police to make the library a safe place for all users. With the assistance of our library security staff we have an excellent working relationship with the University Police Department. These partnerships promote initiative for learning and build a desire to pursue a deeper sense of being.

This paper will examine the partnerships that are available in the Champaign-Urbana academic community.

KEYWORDS. Library security, campus collaboration, collaboration with police

SPECIAL REPORTS

Student Responses to Using a Computerized Database
Sandra DeMinco

An overwhelming majority (94%) of surveyed students rely on assistance from librarians (80%), professors (9%), and friends (5%) when using ERIC-on-CDROM, even when they are not first-time users. Almost three-quarters of the students report that ERIC-on-CDROM improves research quality (74%) and learning (70%) and evokes feelings of motivation and accomplishment (72%). All students indicate that they will return to use ERIC-on-CDROM but only 39% feel capable of transferring their skills to similar databases. Responses indicate that ERIC-on-CDROM contributes to highly individualized learning situations in which students successfully find information through assistance from both humans and computers.

KEYWORDS. College and university libraries reference services, end user searching, college and university students, reference services, automation, teaching, bibliographic instruction

E-struction: An Electronic Instruction Program at Louisiana State University and the University of New Orleans
Sigrid Kelsey
Deborah Lenares

During the fall of 1999, the libraries at the University of New Orleans (UNO) and Louisiana State University (LSU) embarked on a collaborative effort to instruct