

BUILDING A MULTICULTURAL MEDIA COLLECTION

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INTRODUCTION

Audiovisuals are excellent vehicles for conveying information about cultural groups. In addition to providing factual information, an exploration of the films and audio resources by and about a particular group can teach about experiences in ways that are different than what can be gleaned from books and articles. A library media collection can be an important resource for people from cultures that highly value oral and visual traditions and learning methods. (Massman, 209) Hence, the audiovisual resources need to be identified and carefully evaluated and selected to ensure that they accurately portray the racial/ethnic background being studied. This paper will present a philosophical framework for diversity in media collections in academic and public libraries. It will examine collection development issues such as the identification and evaluation of resources that accurately portray people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Finally, a Web site that has Internet links to relevant selection sources is explored.

A MULTICULTURAL PHILOSOPHY

Developing and maintaining a relevant multicultural collection requires openness to the perspectives of different cultures. Librarians who are successful at this take the initiative to become culturally competent persons and to address this trait in the staff. Acquiring cultural competence is an ongoing process that reduces ethnocentrism. It is fully realized when we recognize the uniqueness of each culture and act respectfully towards all people. (Weaver, 66) A librarian can break down stereotypes and broad generalizations by promoting culturally sensitive services, by seeing behaviors within a cultural context, and by being aware of potential cultural barriers to existing services.

Cultural competence is “the ability to move beyond mere awareness or sensitivity to actively apply skills which are culturally congruent with a client/patron/colleague.” (Weaver, 66) It requires self-assessment, skill development, and fluency with cultural norms and expectations. Self-assessment can help in the process of understanding one’s own culture or ethnic background and family structure and in identifying individual biases. Cultural awareness questionnaires such as Spector’s “Cultural Heritage Assessment Tool” (Spector, 4-6) or McPhatter’s “Level of Functioning with Culturally Different Others Questionnaire” (McPhatter, 278) can assist in this process. Some cultural awareness questions relevant to library services are: What is the preferred learning style of your primary clientele? How do they gather information when they need it? What do they use as their primary information sources? What type of physical environment is likely to make them most comfortable?

A culturally balanced media collection enriches an academic institution since it provides

valuable tools for reconstructing a historical or literary reality. Resources in the collection can help overcome prevalent myths and stereotypes; increase a sense of identity and pride; and cultivate deeper understanding between cultures. (Vogelsong, 171)

The visual format can be used with discussion and other active teaching as an instructional tool since level of literacy is not a barrier. It can document a culture by giving a realistic portrayal of individuals in their everyday life. It can illustrate complex issues and multiple viewpoints. (Massmann, p. 207) The literature reports that audiovisuals are a significant format in African American and Native American cultures. Paula Murphy noted that African American people come from a culture that is rooted in a visual and aural tradition. They tend to be visually oriented so they can be reached most effectively through use of audio or visual media. (Murphy, 183) Similarly, “those who serve American Indian libraries must recognize the importance of the oral and visual tradition, as opposed to the traditional white orientation to the printed word.” (Rockefeller-MacArthur, 130)

Massmann notes that there is a new emphasis in historical research on “bottom-up” public history. It is becoming important to document the stories of everyday people and ordinary events. This shift in historical methodology necessitates an expansion of documentary resources. Traditionally, written primary sources have been the authoritative materials from which history was documented. Information about most people’s lives, especially people from oral traditions, lower socioeconomic groups, and marginalized cultures, is not commonly found in written documents and papers kept in libraries or archives. Oral interviews, community-based forms of information, taped performances, and lectures have become valuable resources to those working to document and preserve their communities. (Massmann, 211) Within this framework, media clearly assumes an important role in a library collection.

COLLECTION ASSESSMENT

What determines whether a media collection is successful in representing different cultures? To assess a collection, it is first necessary to define its purpose and scope. A collection development policy states the library’s mission, defines the clientele and its demographic characteristics, the purpose of the collection, and its subject boundaries. (ALA, 65) The policy should state whether guidelines for selection of media are integrated with those for selection of print or whether print and non-print each have separate policies. Integrating media with print eliminates the possibility of isolating it by treating it as unusual instead of as a mainstream library resource. But the unique features of media can justify a separate policy. The following questions are important to consider in developing a media collection development policy:

- Who selects the resources and how are purchase decisions made?
- What cooperative collection-building relationships exist?
- What significant regional or national collections exist?
- What programs and local needs are supported by the collection?
- How is funding allocated?
- What external sources of funding are used?
- What is the replacement policy?

- What is the weeding policy?
- What priority do patron requests receive?
- What formats will be included?
- Will materials with subtitles or in foreign languages be included?
- Will materials released within a certain time frame have priority for purchase?
- How will country of origin be considered?
- What subjects will be included?
- What genre will be included? (i.e., classic works, documentary, dance, drama, feature films, experimental films, video art, music performances, television programs, lectures, performances, books-on-tape, digital, games) (Jolivet, 188; Massmann, 215)

Some methods of assessing a collection are: to compare it with core lists; to determine the percentage of the library budget that is used for audiovisuals and compare the allocation with that of similar institutions; and to conduct a needs assessment survey of the clientele; and to collect data that can indicate the extent to which the primary clientele uses the collection.

Studies that have been conducted on information needs of public library clientele from different cultural groups can provide some guidance on subjects that might be covered. In 1992, consumer health information requests represented about 25% of the total reference inquiries received at the Washington, D.C. Public Library. (Owens, 292) The top information needs of non-English speaking users of U.S. public libraries are: health, self-help, auto repair, fiction in native language, and English-language fiction translations. (Figueredo, 14) Davis recommends that subject areas for a Native American collection include art, religion, folklore, biography, music, dance, literature, and federal Indian policy. (Davis, 36-37) A study conducted in 1971-72 indicated that information needs of Native Americans fall into the categories of resources that provide problem-solving knowledge and resources about cultural heritage, including employment, vocational training, legal and civil rights, health, Native history and languages, and video or audiotapes of traditional storytellers. (Patterson, 39) Jolivet has found that areas that are usually not well represented in media collections are documentaries highlighting African American scientists and visual artists; African American history; and historical figures and leaders who are not widely known but who nevertheless made substantial contributions to American history. (Jolivet, 190)

An “excellent” multicultural collection in one library can contain resources that are very different from those in another, because collections are unique and based on the clientele, mission, budget, and programs served. Depending on the individual user groups, a collection can reflect the diversity of general categories of cultural groups as well as the diversity within each cultural/racial group. Ideally, it should provide a complete historical perspective. For example, a collection that includes resources about Native people should reflect different tribes, urban and rural residents, traditional and non-traditional perspectives, and contemporary as well as historical issues. A representative collection includes materials that examine preconceived ideas about a particular culture but does not perpetuate myths and stereotypes. “Every ethnic group deserves the right to define, defend and develop itself as opposed to always being defined, defended and developed by others.” (Johnson-Cooper, 159)

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

The process of identifying quality resources can be lengthy. There are some ways to facilitate this process. Patron requests can motivate selection decisions. Metoyer-Duran suggests finding the gatekeepers in the cultural communities served by the media collection: the information intermediaries who move between cultures since they have “significant community status due to their ability to interpret community information needs and to broker information to their constituencies.” (Metoyer-Duran, 321, 325) A survey of patrons can be conducted to determine categories of resources they need and want. When asked, tribal people knew exactly what they wanted in their libraries and they knew the value of having information resources available. (Patterson, 40)

The paucity of reviews of ethnic works in the major journals bears consideration. Restricting selection to works reviewed in major journals could result in a biased collection. Other resources that can provide valid information about potential purchases are newspapers, magazines, museum catalogs, professional newsletters, bookstores operated by and for people of color, and electronic discussion lists. Ethnic Newswatch is a full-text electronic collection of newspapers, magazines and journals of the ethnic, minority, and Native press and it does index reviews. Small independent filmmakers produce some of the most incisive and challenging work. Media librarians can share information through discussion lists and professional journals. They can network with bibliographers who have subject expertise and join relevant professional organizations.

The Internet resource “Multicultural Audiovisual Resources” (<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/hsl/ref/av.html>) has an extensive list of links to sites that will facilitate library media selection. Links to commercial film companies and compilations of distributors include the small, independent companies as well as those that are larger and better known. The electronic publications, mediographies, and bibliographies lead to information about media librarianship, resources that can be purchased, and supplementary reading. The links to reviews will help with evaluation of resources. The extensive list of media libraries and archives can be consulted for additional resources as well as to identify professional colleagues with an interest in multicultural collections. There is a list of film festivals and relevant organizations.

Once a resource is identified for possible purchase, it needs to be evaluated for technical quality as well as for its appropriateness for the intended audience, factual errors, evidence of stereotyping, artificial or stereotypical dialects or idioms, derogatory words or phrases, and condescending attitude. It is important to note that the educational value of media that have these characteristics may justify their inclusion in an academic institution’s media collection. The librarian’s knowledge of cultures, languages, the non-neutrality of multimedia materials, and visual content can help in determining the quality of multicultural content. (Chu, 264) It may be necessary to purchase supplemental print resources to provide a political or social context for the audiovisual resource, to explain the background of traditions, the relationship of the audiovisual within its genre, or the traditions on which a story is built.

CONCLUSION

This has been an examination of issues related to assessing and building a culturally balanced media collection. There is a rich reward for this often difficult and challenging process. By facilitating the advancement of understanding among cultural groups, librarians can play an important role in bringing individuals closer to the ideal of reconciliation and harmony. "A well-chosen collection can help provide the means towards reconciliation if it is properly chosen and integrated into the larger collection." (Martin, 1996) This critical change can only be accomplished by a firm commitment to adopt an inclusive, global view in one's collection.

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