

Fearing the library dragon: Why librarians should approach users instead of waiting for them

Angst vor dem Bibliotheksdrachen: Wieso BibliothekarInnen auf BenutzerInnen zugehen sollten statt auf sie zu warten

Abstract

The image of libraries and librarians in popular culture, press coverage and the public often does not live up to our expectations. Systematic management of public relations is expected to put things right. This article focuses on an important basis of reputation improvement: the interaction between academic librarians and students. It shows how the psychological phenomenon of library anxiety and the library profession's image are interconnected and includes recommendations for approaching patrons and public instead of waiting for them. The paper expresses personal views.

Keywords: academic library, public relations, profession, image, library anxiety

Zusammenfassung

Bibliotheken und BibliothekarInnen spielen eine Rolle in der Populärkultur, in den Medien und im Bewusstsein der Öffentlichkeit, bei der unsere Profession häufig in einer Weise dargestellt wird, mit der wir nicht zufrieden sein können. Gezielte Öffentlichkeitsarbeit für Bibliotheken soll hier Abhilfe leisten. Der Beitrag legt den Schwerpunkt auf die wichtige Basis für eine Verbesserung unseres Rufes: den Umgang mit den BenutzerInnen in wissenschaftlichen Bibliotheken. Zusammenhänge zwischen dem psychologischen Phänomen der „library anxiety“ (Bibliotheksangst) und dem Image des bibliothekarischen Berufsstandes werden aufgezeigt, außerdem werden Vorschläge für die aktive Ansprache von BenutzerInnen gemacht. Der Text drückt eine persönliche Sichtweise aus.

Schlüsselwörter: wissenschaftliche Bibliothek, Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, Berufsbild, Image, Bibliotheksangst

Preliminary remarks

As “the importance of the college or university library is clearly evident to its staff, but administrators, faculty, other staff, and students may need some persuading to share this belief” [19] and “the faculty and the student bodies are no longer necessarily captive audiences, and must therefore be convinced of the value of the library’s ‘product’ to their work” [22], it is widely agreed upon that professional management of public relations is necessary for libraries – and librarians: “It is becoming increasingly clear that library staff need to add the skills of self-publishing and political astuteness to their professional expertise and dedication” [28].

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For this paper, I understand public relations as a set of measures approaching the patrons and public instead of waiting for them to come and/or show interest, thus “maintaining and enhancing the reputation of the organization among key publics” [14]. This article focuses on the interaction between academic librarians and students and does not deal with media communication, marketing, fundraising or employee relations. Especially two interconnected factors emphasising the importance of public relations are dealt with: the image of the library profession and library anxiety. This paper expresses personal views.

Image

Libraries and librarians play a certainly not insignificant role in popular culture (also in the German-speaking countries, albeit to a much lesser extent than in the Anglo-American areas), accordingly resulting in books, films, characters in sitcoms, cups, T-shirts, baseball caps, posters, post cards, collections, stamps, coins created by librarians and non-librarians – and these items do not always show our profession in a way we like. The image and clichés widely connected with librarians often show a lack of understanding for what our profession is really about: Who has never been confronted with comments such as “you are a librarian? That’s great, you can read all day” or “you really need to study for shelving books?” Steve Morgan identified a “hard core of perceptions which include lack of confidence, modesty, resistance to change, inferiority and introversion” [21]. This applies to students, faculty, “the public” as such as well as media coverage. A remarkable approach undertaken in Germany in 1995 provided interesting results. In a workshop, librarians, users, professors from library school, and representatives of the chamber of commerce and the job centre discussed the image of librarians in the public. The non-librarians ascribed “bureaucratic mentality”, standing on the outside of technology developments, and characteristic traits such as “shy” and “introverted” to librarians. Common opinion of the participants: Librarians are not able to get the profession’s manifoldness across. Conclusion of the organisers: Passive behaviour must give way to actively approaching the customers, routine work must be reduced in favour of reference and user-support services [3].

Fictional librarians

Over the years, I have collected a considerable amount of books and films featuring female and male librarian characters [2]. I have gained a lot of ambivalent experience with descriptions like “mousy bookworm“, „ice queen“, “staid, practical librarian“, „quiet, demure woman“, “plain, boring and on skillish terms with their own shadow“. Meanwhile, I have developed the following tongue-in-cheek classification for books with fictional librarians:

- books depicting librarians as child-hating, patron-de-testing, shushing spinsters without a sense of humour, or simply monsters
- books stressing that the characters are not bugbears, spinsters, or monsters although they are librarians - maybe well-intentioned but thus rather reinforcing the stereotypes
- sub-group: books where the characters’ profession has nothing at all to do with the plot and where it is obvious that the – mostly female – characters are only designed as librarians because the author wanted to

create an image of conservative, timid, un-experienced, shy, conventional, nit-picking persons without hard work

- for the sake of completeness, books where the librarians and the profession are described in a fair, well-balanced, appropriate way (yes, they exist)

You think I am exaggerating? To support my arguments, I will name only a few examples from science fiction/fantasy and children’s books:

You are wrong if you assume that a time travel to the 24th century will save you from a grim look, buns and raised fingers indicating “be silent”: The librarian on board of the USS Enterprise admonishes Commander William Riker and Lt. Commander Deanna Troi for causing noise and disturbance in the ship’s library although there are no other users in the library at that time (scene shot for the film “Star Trek IX: Insurrection”, but cut from the final version) [31].

Even in the famous Harry Potter books, where learning and reading are definitely positively connoted, the school librarian Madam Pince is described as a “thin, irritable woman who looked like an underfed vulture” and whose life’s work seems to be shushing pupils and to keeping them off the really interesting books (out of fairness, it should be mentioned that Joanne K. Rowling has apologised for Madam Pince in an interview, explaining that this portrayal was necessary for the plot) [24].

Even worse with library-related children’s books that seem to have something in common: children hearing terrifying tales of a library and its librarian(s). School librarian Mrs Beamster laminates pupils when talking and recites the Dewey decimal classification in story time [27]; library dragon Miss Lotti smelts the shelves and sets the schoolmaster on fire [1]; public librarian Mrs Murphy shoots children using a rifle loaded with potatoes [5]; Miss Chinca is friendly, but still a crocodile with very sharp teeth [25]; school librarian Mrs Roopy is said to be loopy, as the book title already reveals [8]. After twenty pages, the readers (and the characters) discover that this was based on a dream or on a vivid fantasy. The “real” librarian is always helpful, friendly, knowledgeable, sometimes young, now and then even attractive – but obviously only worth the books’ two final pages. This reminds me a bit of the famous request “do NOT think of a white elephant”, whose librarian-related counterpart would be “librarians are NOT always mentally or socially disturbed, unfriendly, fussy, inhibited, and living alone”.

What, do you think, is it that readers will remember – twenty pages of drastic depictions of a monster librarian or two pages of “don’t worry, it was not true anyway“?

When reading those children’s books, I admit I smiled, but I was also quite annoyed about the image they transported. Only recently, when writing this article, I realised that these books are merely artistic interpretations of a disagreeable emotion experienced in real life by such an amount of students that there is a notion for it: I speak of library anxiety.

Library anxiety

The term was coined by Constance A. Mellon in 1986. Mellon [20] conducted a two-year survey among 6000 undergraduate college students to find out about their emotions connected with their first visits to the library. They described their feelings in terms of phobia – using words like “scary”, “helpless”, “fear of the unknown”, and “overpowering”. Jiao and Onwuegbuzie define library anxiety as “an uncomfortable feeling or emotional disposition, experienced in a library setting, which has cognitive, affective, physiological, and behavioural ramifications. It is characterized by ruminations, tension, fear, feelings of uncertainty and helplessness, negative self-defeating thoughts, and mental disorganization” [11].

According to Mellon’s study, this fear showed in three ways: First, students receive the impression that their own library skills are inadequate whereas other students seem adept; second, students think their lack of familiarity with libraries is embarrassing; and finally, they avoid asking questions because that would mean to admit their incompetence, and this would be distressing [20]. One of the students taking part in the survey wrote: “When I first entered the library, I was terrified. I didn’t know where anything was located or even who to ask to get some help. It was like being in a foreign country and unable to speak the language” [20].

Based on Mellon’s research, Bostick [4] developed a library anxiety scale with five dimensions:

- barriers with staff (students perceive librarians as unapproachable or too occupied to help them)
- affective barriers (students do not feel adequately able to use the library effectively)
- comfort with the library (students may sense the library area as unwelcoming or even threatening)
- knowledge of the library (students feel unfamiliar with the library)
- mechanical barriers (students are unfamiliar with library equipment such as self-checks, copying machines, scanners) (see also [29]).

An example for the connection of image and anxiety: If you have internalised the picture of a librarian pressing “her lips together. It was a librarian’s look, no doubt reserved for pesky patrons who dared speak above a whisper in her hallowed halls” [16] and you feel uncomfortable in the library anyway - would you dare and ask someone for help? It is easily understandable that a negative image of the profession, sometimes – we must admit – also confirmed by negative library experiences, can intensify library anxiety and vice versa.

I cannot expand in detail on press releases or marketing measures as I am not an expert for that - you could look that up (I am sure you can) in [15], [18], or [30]. You can take one thing for granted, though: The best public image obtained by PR professionals’ efforts can be easily destroyed by a negative library experience. An arbitrary ex-

ample: Over the last few years, the Austrian national library can refer to an extensive, mainly positive media coverage thus gaining reputation as an important and modern guard of our cultural heritage in the public. But if a user is e.g. treated in a patronizing, unfriendly way by library staff, s/he will receive a negative impression, and your reputation is – at least in his/her opinion – down the drain. Sometimes dissatisfied patrons even start an own weblog about your library, like the “Stabi Blues” weblog which records mainly negative (and sometimes positive) experiences at the Berlin State Library [26]. That word-of-mouth is an important factor won’t be new to you.

Recommendations for improving librarian-user interaction

Just a few thoughts on the connection between librarian-user interaction and image:

- don’t underestimate the circulation desk: In general, the circulation desk is the first library service students ever use as they get their library cards there. For a considerable amount, it may be the only personal contact with library staff they ever have – not every student uses reference or interlibrary loan. Yet I have gained the impression (please apologise if this is different in your library) that the importance of the circulation desk is often underestimated. Circulation staff is usually low-paid, often stuck in their careers without a chance of promotion, and rarely thanked for the job they do. Certainly a high amount of social skills is necessary to deal with always-the-same library card applications, overdue fines, excuses, loans and returns year in, year out – and still be friendly and radiate a positive attitude:
- ensure diversity: Librarianship is still a women’s profession (except at the managerial level). Try to staff circulation and reference desks in consideration of diversity (e.g. age, gender, subject knowledge). Sometimes, it is easier for students to approach other students, so employing student assistants at the circulation desk might be an option.
- help people where they need it: leave your desk and start a tour of roving reference. Actively approach patrons that seem confused or stuck – users with library anxiety will probably hesitate to ask you questions, whereas “roving enables users to receive assistance at the time of greatest need and helps them to feel more comfortable in asking for assistance in the future” [6]. Or even try to start library sessions outside the library’s boundaries – the University of Calgary reports encouraging experiences with a “librarian in residence” offering consultation hours directly in academic departments. One student commented: “I wouldn’t have asked for help if I had to go to the library” [17]. “The library/librarian is there when I need them” is the message.

- use language that non-librarians understand: library staff tend to use lingo they are used to but users are not. Mind your language in personal communication, on the website as well as in printed information brochures, explain or replace technical terms wherever possible. Difficult? You bet. Nonetheless necessary.

I consider a post by Hans Hrusa to the mailing list Inetbib Jan 2003 to be an excellent summary of the message I want to put across:

„Bibliotheksbesuchern sollte vielmehr persönlich geholfen werden, bereits bestehende Möglichkeiten besser zu nutzen, sie sollten freundlich behandelt werden, man sollte mit ihnen in einer Sprache reden, die jeder versteht. Man sollte sich bemühen, Bibliotheken so zu gestalten, dass die wichtigsten Informationen auch ohne aufwändige Benutzerschulung erreichbar sind“ [Librarians should help patrons personally with using existing services, they should be treated friendly and addressed in a language everyone can understand. Librarians should make a genuine effort to design libraries in a way that the most important information can be accessed even without extensive training] [9].

The appropriate basis for a better public image.

To consider

Finally, some food for thought before you plunge into improving your public relations – more questions than answers, as the shaping of my personal opinion has not been finalised yet:

- As Steve Morgan points out, “the library profession has an obsession with its own image, which is partly self-generated but also fuelled by the mass media” [21]. Should we stop flogging a dead horse and simply accept our fate? After all, the portrayal of lawyers and teachers in films and television series is - more often than not - not favourable either. “In our society it seems that the way to confirm a nasty rumour is to deny it publicly. Because of this I would oppose the suggestion that we mount an advertising campaign that specifically tries to dispel the stereotype on the ground that it would probably inadvertently contribute to the stereotype. The more you shout that there is no problem, the more you plant the idea that there is a problem” [7]. Tricky.

- Of course, there are shy, introverted, single librarians in real life, and yes, some wear spectacles (this seems to be a stereotype based on empirical studies) and buns, and yes, some of us prefer books to life (isn't that in fact the same?) – gosh, that is all right! I enjoy browsing websites of belly-dancing, tattooed, lip-stick librarians trying hard to dispel the stereotypes that our profession suffers from, but I do not consider the promotion of a “hyper-cool” image a viable solution – do not promise anything you cannot realise. The key concept for me is diversity again.

- There is a certain trend to eliminate the “I-word”, but is renaming users to customers, librarians to information managers, libraries to idea stores or knowledge centres,

library schools to i-schools and finally toilets to “digestion points” [23] really necessary and/or enough? If this really helps to improve our reputation, our image within our institutions and the public, and finally our budgets and salaries (I am still sceptic), fine! But do not believe this will change everything all of a sudden. Personally, I have given up introducing myself as information manager and taken up the “librarian” again, because people may have an old-fashioned idea of what a library is, but at least they have an idea. Besides, as Rachel Weisz says in her role as Evelyn Carnahan in the motion picture “The mummy”: “I am proud of what I am. (...) I am a librarian” (yes, she is inebriated in this scene, but undoubtedly, she is convincing).

- “There is a limit to everything” is a popular phrase with a certain truth. Worrying about bad reputation does not mean librarians must tolerate inappropriate user behaviour. Katzmayr postulates, and justifiably so, a search partnership: “Das Diktum ‘Der Kunde ist König’ schießt über das legitime und notwendige Ziel der Berücksichtigung von Interessen der BenutzerInnen weit hinaus. (...) Wieso sollte sich eine Bibliotheksangestellte in der Informationsvermittlungsstelle einem König gegenübersehen? Eine diskursive partnerschaftliche Verständigung (und eine solche ist bei komplexen Problemlagen angebracht) ist mit KönigInnen eher unüblich“ [The dictum ‘The customer is king’ overshoots the mark of a legitimate and necessary consideration of users’ interests. (...) Why should a library employee consider her vis-à-vis to be a king? A discursive partnership ... with kings and queens is rather unusual”] [13].

Concluding, it is your turn to decide: Should your library be “considered solely a storage facility associated primarily with study hall drudgery, or an exciting, dynamic, service-oriented institution vital to the existence and development of the scholarly community of which it is a part”? [12].

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