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Mary Wilkins-Jordan

Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science, mwilkinsjordan@gmail.com

Lisa Hussey

Simmons College, isa.hussey2@simmons.edu

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Looking at the Socialization of LIS students through a Pop Culture Lens

Mary Wilkins Jordan, Assistant Professor

Lisa Hussey, Assistant Professor

Simmons College

Graduate School of Library and Information Science

300 The Fenway

Boston, MA 02115

mary.wilkinsjordan@simmons.edu

Abstract

The LIS field is filled with pop culture images, seen and learned by our students. Learning about these images relevant to our students is indeed a task worthy of our time. We are preparing student to enter a profession with their own identity as a professional; pop culture may provide a useful tool in equipping them to do this successfully. We surveyed library students across the country to discover the LIS images they knew before starting their LIS studies and those they know now. Then we looked at sources, to discover what images they are drawing from their student life, and specific lessons they learned. Instead of turning our backs on this imagery form popular culture, we can focus more deliberately on shaping it to meet the needs of the profession and the students, to help this process of entry to the profession.

Introduction

Popular culture is everywhere around us, evolving and changing as it both leads and reflects important cultural images and values. We are inundated with images on every potential topic,

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uding bratty misbehavior of both Jersey Shore kids and Beverly Hills housewives, the need to argue about tiny issues in big dramatic ways in a kitchen, a design studio, a house, a rehab center, or a desert island. We also see images of the happiness and sense of belonging we can have if we use Apple products, drink Starbucks coffee, or eat Dunkin Doughnuts – fitting the image they project.

Being fluent in pop culture means we are able to participate in a wider range of riffs and parodies of the very cultural images we see. The in-jokes and references we knowingly laugh at while watching *The Simpsons* make us feel like we understand the behind-the-scenes or secret information as we recognize references to hundreds of movies, TV shows, and other popular images. The fun of watching the US Olympic Swim team lip-synching video of “Call Me Maybe” on YouTube is only surpassed by the humor of then watching dozens of others groups doing the same thing and sharing the same experience, including the Harvard Basketball team, the Australian cycling team Orica-GreenEDGE, the Miami Dolphins cheerleaders, US Army Infantry Soldiers in Afghanistan, and even a painstakingly word-by-word dubbed together version of President Obama “singing” along. Chronological age is transcended in popular culture appreciation while watching *Sesame Street* where we can learn to count, hone our skill at color recognition, and pick up some important words in Spanish – all from pop culture Muppet stars like Ernie, Big Bird, and Grover, along with pop culture human stars like Katy Perry, David Beckham, Alton Brown, Sally Ride, Jim Parsons, Peggy Fleming, B. B. King, and hundreds more.

Dismissing popular culture as irrelevant misses the point entirely; by its nature it is prevalent in the lives of people, including our students and all members of the LIS profession. The LIS field is

filled with pop culture images, seen and learned by our students. Learning about these images relevant to our students is indeed a task worthy of our time. We are preparing student to

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er a profession with their own identity as a professional; pop culture may provide a useful tool in equipping them to do this successfully.

In this study, we wanted to learn about the LIS images our students know. We surveyed library students across the country to discover the LIS images they knew before starting their LIS studies and those they know now. Then we look at sources, to discover what images they are drawing from their student life. As educators, we can take this information and use it to help students build their own vision of themselves as professionals. Instead of turning our backs on this imagery from popular culture, we can focus more deliberately on shaping it to meet the needs of the profession and the students, to help this process of entry to the profession.

Literature Review

An increasing number of students, particularly younger students, are very familiar with a variety of pop culture images learned from a variety of different media formats, particularly digital. “The digital world in which young people have immersed themselves is endlessly varied, constantly changing, user-centered, and never, ever boring” (Ronayne, Shayne, and Nguyen, 2012, p. 23). Using that world, with all the accompanying pop culture symbolism and imagery will help students to connect their interests with the classroom work, resulting in a more positive learning experience for everyone. We want to help our students build a professional identify for themselves; providing information is the best tool we have – but it must be relevant and useful to the student. Integrating an understanding of pop culture can be a useful tool.

Librarians Using Pop Culture

The job of a librarian is to convey information. To effectively do this, we need to be able to connect with the patrons, understanding some of their interests, the way they think, and some of their references. Additionally, librarians need to be sensitive to the idea community members can go many places for information; a library is merely one of their choices, so the environment needs to be welcoming on a level they will appreciate.

Librarians across the country are using pop culture images to connect with patrons who might otherwise be uninterested in the library. As with technology, it is important to stay ahead of the curve, not merely following along after it happens. Before Psy's Gangnam Style video hit the American popular culture, Dora Ho was telling librarians about K-pop, a blending of South Korean music and drama (2012, p.11). Librarian Annie Keller and her teen anime group created a library anime prom, blending and twisting the pop culture images of a regular high school prom with the anime. "[T]eens were encouraged to dress up as their favorite characters from Japanese animated films ("cosplay"); compete in a video game tournament playing Halo 1, Halo 2, and One Piece Grand Battle; dance to popular J-Pop music spun by a deejay; purchase raffle tickets to win an anime prize basket; and vote for the King and Queen of the Prom" (2006, p 304).

Librarians are using pop culture images to provide instruction to patrons. Springer and Yelinek have used the pop culture reality show Jersey Shore as a tool to engage students in that traditionally deadly dull library instruction session college students may be required to take. "Regardless of the popular culture topic, being willing to try different teaching methods is crucial for using popular culture in information literacy instruction (2011, p.85) Librarians at University of Florida developed a program to teach incoming freshmen about the library, using the Alternate

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lity Game (ARG) *Zombies vs. Humans* (Johnson, Buhler, and Hillman, 2010). In previous years, the librarians have put together other outreach programs with pop culture themes: *Library Survivor*, *Pirates in the Library*, *Murder in the Stacks*, and *Capture the Info Flag*. School librarians are providing pop culture materials to students for a variety of reasons, including helping them feel like they have a place in the library that speaks to them, and to help them build critical media skills (Friese, 2008). Students can converse much more easily about things they are already familiar with, and can use that knowledge to build on as a foundation for other learning.

Pop culture goes beyond appealing to children and young adults (not that they are unimportant groups); reader's advisory has always necessitated looking beyond one's own reading habits and favorites and searching out materials of interest to a variety of potential readers. Recommending books, videos, websites – all of these can be part of a reader's advisory job, and all are important to be patron, even if they are new or unusual to the librarian (Saricks, 2012). Librarians who are condescending to potential readers based on choices of reading material is a complaint heard too frequently from genre readers. Vassiliki Veros discusses the institutionalized prejudice against romance readers, despite skyrocketing sales of these books in both paper and e-reader formats (2012). Librarians need to move beyond judging aspects of pop culture they like and do not like for inclusion in a collection or programming in the library. A wider familiarity with pop culture images can help expose them to new ideas and help them incorporate these images into their daily practice. They can start this learning in LIS programs.

Pop Culture and Identity

Different types of popular culture have been used as tools in building an identity for individuals. Dan Fisher's dissertation "Music and identity: Escape, engagement, and the quest for

authenticity in a commodity culture” details the ways music is used to build not only to discover who a person is, but to explore and preserve their authenticity in personality. Leadership is always a difficult thing to teach, but using pop culture images can give the students something to use as a bar to measure themselves and as an example of their own success. “PCA [Pop Culture Artifacts] are ideal for teaching leadership because they allow learners to both identify with current trends and process concepts by using tools that capture their interest (Callahan, Whitener, and Sandlin, 2007, p.147). Pop culture has been used to help build a professional identity for accountants based on images seen in movies (Beard, 1994). Music teachers look at their images in film and theater, and other pop culture images, to help them learn what they should look and act like in their professional capacity (Doloff, 1999). Lawyers have a multiplicity of images of their professional lives to use as a foundation for building a professional image (Scherr,& Farber, 2003-2004). Using these images (or artifacts) help learners to build their knowledge in a way that makes sense to them personally.

Methodology and Results

We began this study with a presentation at a Popular Culture Association annual conference, discussing a small study looking at the pop culture images of librarians from across different media formats. As LIS educators we spend time talking with our students about pop culture and in and out of class and wanted to know more about the LIS pop culture images our students were absorbing. This study is an attempt to discover whether there are pop culture LIS images students have in common, what they learn in school, and any ideas they learned about the LIS profession from pop culture.

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We developed a survey and distributed it to LIS students across the country, using the American Library Association Student Chapter listserv, asking students in the organization to pass it on to their schools. We chose to go through student groups to encourage the idea that this survey was about them – not about their professors or anything they were supposed to learn or know or think about LIS. A total of 759 people agreed to the consent form and entered into the survey.

Demographic questions were designed to get some perspective on the LIS students responding to the survey. Looking across the age ranges of students, the largest was people 25 – 30 years old (42.3% of the respondents), with 22.1% under 25 and 22.0% between 31 – 40 years old. 9.4% were between 41 and 50 years; 3.6% were 51 – 60 years; and .6% were 61 – 70 years old. With 86% of the respondents younger than 40 years of age, this group skews younger than the LIS profession in general – not surprising for students. According to the March 2012 report from ALA Demographic Studies, 42.2% of members are 44 years or younger; with the largest number of people between the ages of 55 – 64.

<http://www.ala.org/research/sites/ala.org.research/files/content/March%202012%20report.pdf>

As is typical of the LIS profession 87.1% of the respondents were female. This compares with the March 2012 ALA report showing 80.7% of members as female.

<http://www.ala.org/research/sites/ala.org.research/files/content/March%202012%20report.pdf>

Discrepancies between these numbers could be explained by either a slightly larger number of females in LIS programs right now, or by a lack of interest in the male participants in a pop culture study. There was an even split between full and part time students: 49.6% were part time and 50.4% full time. There was a fairly even distribution among respondents in the length of time they have been in an LIS program:

- First semester: 27.5%

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- Second semester: 11.5%
- In the second year: 38.6%
- Beyond the second year: 22.4%

The majority of respondents were in the Eastern time zone (62.6%), with 18.3% in the Midwest, 2.2% in the Mountain, 15.4% in the Pacific, and .8% in another time zone.

We did not ask whether students considered themselves online vs. in-person, nor self-identification as GLBT/straight. After looking at the responses given, these issues were mentioned by students and were important to them in the context of pop culture, so might have provided more insight into the pop culture interests of the students. They should be considered in future studies of this topic.

LIS Pop Culture Images

Our first set of questions asked students to identify LIS related pop culture images. In the first question, they were given a list of 21 different images and asked to select those they were familiar with before starting their LIS program. The most frequently selected were:

- Librarian at NYPL in Ghostbusters: 60.6%
- Rupert Giles, in Buffy the Vampire Slayer: 54.04%
- Evie Carnahan, in The Mummy: 46.9%
- Brooks Hatlen, in Shawshank Redemption: 41.5%

The next question was open-ended and asked the respondents to write in any other LIS-related pop culture images they were familiar with prior to starting library school. 332 people answered this question. There were a huge range of answers here. People remembered an amazing array of library and archive related images from ads, bumper stickers songs, manga, and you tube videos, along with the traditional pop culture media of books, TV, and movies. The most frequently mentioned were:

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- Madam Pince, from Harry Potter: 35 people
- Mary Hatch Bailey, from It's a Wonderful Life (alternate future): 22 people
- Nancy Pearl (person and figurine): 15
- The library in Beauty and the Beast Disney cartoon: 18
- The Pagemaster: 11
- Henry DeTamble, from The Time Traveler's Wife: 10.

332 people responded to this question, 429 skipped it. In all there were 159 different responses to this question, indicating at least some vision of librarians and what we do is widely portrayed in pop culture. However, 75 people said they had no additional answers. Some of these comments seemed indigent at the thought of pop culture librarians, stressing that they were influenced only by “real” librarians. While there is no requirement to understand popular culture to be a good student or to graduate, LIS professionals need to be able to relate to their communities. Understanding the images others have of our profession can be helpful in creating those ties, working either with the image or struggling to distance ourselves from it. The vision of librarians as “punk-ass book jockeys” from Parks and Recreation was quoted several times in this answer – often with a note about the importance of overcoming this image of the profession.

The they were given the same list from the first question, and asked about images they were familiar with now that they are in the LIS program. 553 answered this question. Those most frequently selected were:

- Rupert Giles, in Buffy the Vampire Slayer: 56.6%
- Librarian at NYPL in Ghostbusters: 52.9%
- Evie Carnahan, in The Mummy: 47.8%

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Marian the Librarian, in *The Music Man*; 46.1%
- Dewey (and others) in *Unshelved*: 39.4%

Students in different age groupings identified different pop culture images as familiar while in their LIS programs:

- Under 25 years
 - Rupert Giles, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: 76 people
 - Evie Carnahan, in *The Mummy*: 74 people
- 25 to 30 years
 - Rupert Giles, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: 149 people
 - Librarian at the New York Public Library, in *Ghostbusters*: 123 people
- 31 to 40 years
 - Librarian at the New York Public Library, in *Ghostbusters*: 70 people
 - Rupert Giles, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: 57 people
- 41 to 50 years
 - Librarian at the New York Public Library, in *Ghostbusters*: 28 people
 - Rupert Giles, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: 24 people
- 51 to 60 years
 - Marian the Librarian, in *Music Man*: 12 people
 - Librarian at the New York Public Library, in *Ghostbusters*: 10 people
- 61 to 70 years
 - Marian the Librarian, in *Music Man*: 2 people
 - Brooks Hatlen, in *Shawshank Redemption*: 2 people

The responses most frequently identified by females were:

- Rupert Giles, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: 273 people
- Librarian at the New York Public Library, in *Ghostbusters*: 247 people
- Marian the Librarian, in *Music Man*: 237 people
- Dewey (and others), in *Unshelved*: 200 people.

Responses most frequently identified by males were:

- Librarian at the New York Public Library, in *Ghostbusters*: 45 people
- Rupert Giles, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: 39 people
- Brooks Hatlen, in *Shawshank Redemption*: 38 people
- Evie Carnahan, in *The Mummy*: 24 people
- Barbara Gordon, in *Batgirl/Oracle*: 22 people

We then asked them to list any other LIS images they have learned about while they are in school. There was a much smaller response – 193 people left a comment, with 568 skipping it. There were 87 different answers shared here; some of the most popular were:

- Nancy Pearl: 19 people (Nancy is a clear LIS pop culture rock star! Many people mentioned meeting her, receiving the figurine as a gift, reading her books, etc.)
- Tammy, from *Parks and Recreation*: 6 people
- Mary Hatch Bailey, from *It's a Wonderful Life*: 5 people
- Several characters in *Questionable Content* (web comic): 5

There was a lot of diversity seen in these responses as well, with many new pop culture images added from their initial list. There were also many different formats here, including more web comics, more discussion of blogs, twitter accounts, etsy stores, pinterest and tumblr feed. The Ryan Gosling “hey girl..” librarian-themed Tumblr was specifically mentioned here:

<http://librarianheygirl.tumblr.com>, as was the librarian-themed meme account Librarians Problems: <http://librarianproblems.com/>. It appears that LIS students are discovering many new ways to find LIS images, beyond just the traditional ones. Their exploration, and the content available to them in so many different formats, also speaks to the diversity of our profession and the flexibility necessary to both distribute and collect information.

Sources of Learning

Our next set of questions asked students where they get pop culture ideas in their LIS environment. We first asked about pop culture they have discussed with or learned about from classmates. 390 people answered this question; 92 said they had learned nothing from classmates. From the remaining 298 people emerged 174 different responses. The most frequently mentioned were:

- Doctor Who: 80 people (some of these were complaints that classmates talked about Dr. Who too much)
- Buffy the Vampire Slayer: 35 people
- Downton Abbey: 31 people
- Sherlock (these seemed to be the BBC show, not Sherlock Holmes in general, but that was not always clear): 23 people
- The Hunger Games: 20 people
- Harry Potter: 18 people.

The large number of people talking about Dr. Who was interesting. At the time this survey was distributed new episodes were not available in the US, although there were episodes constantly shown on BBCAmerica and available through other sources. From the range of answers provided here, it appears the LIS field is very interested in science fiction, fantasy, manga, and web materials.

Eight people mentioned interest in memes, and five separate people said they tracked Ryan Gosling memes. Several people expressed irritation with the topics discussed by classmates, saying they had no interest in sci-fi or fantasy and were bored by the topics. However, many more were apparently excited to share their interests with classmates and seemed pleased by the pop culture sharing among students.

The overall variety of responses is striking, showing a range of interests across LIS students. While not a complete picture of the interests our students have and will bring to the profession, this look at some of the different things students are interested can be helpful in building bridges between the information they need in class in ways they relate to and can understand. At the very least, an interest in or knowledge of the same things our students enjoy can lead to better interactions in and out of class. Students are only students for a short time; they will spend many more years as our professional colleagues, so developing positive relationships now can be beneficial for everyone.

Several students who had no information to provide here said they were online students, and did not have an opportunity to interact with their classmates on an informal basis. This might be an issue to consider in building online programs; ideally students are able to form relationships while in school. Professors on online classes may want to consider strategies for helping students to connect with each other over common interests, and pop culture may be one tool to do this. Building these relationships in school can be good for our students over a long time in their professional work lives.

We then asked students about the pop culture images they have discussed or learned about from their professors. This was another open-ended question, with a variety of responses. 364

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people gave some answer and 397 skipped it. Of these, 137 said there is no pop culture discussed in class. The most frequently mentioned images were:

- Buffy the Vampire Slayer/Giles: 33 people
- Unshelved (cartoon): 27 people
- Dr. Who: 18 people
- Dilbert: 17 people
- Party Girl/Mary: 18 people
- Downton Abbey: 12 people

Interestingly, these two lists do not have a good overlap of images with those discussed between classmates. There were 113 different responses here, many fewer than from other categories. While this is an imperfect reflection of the actual knowledge of professors or their pop culture interests, it is clear that professors and students have some of the same reference points but the information students share among themselves is much broader and more varied than the pop culture images they receive from professors.

To round out our understanding of the source of pop culture images we then asked about images learned from student groups or other organized groups on campus. 277 people gave some answer, 484 skipped it. Of the 277, 223 of them said they have learned no pop culture from these sources, and most said they had not participated in any student groups. There were 41 different answers here, similar to the responses given to other open-ended questions:

- Dr. Who: 7 people
- Buffy the Vampire Slayer: 6 people
- Downton Abbey: 5 people

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Gangnam Style video: 4 people.

While this may not be an indication of any specific problem, the large number of people who are not participating in student life on campus, either because they are online students other reasons, is troubling. Future studies may want to explore reasons why students are not connected with the life of their schools, whether it is really a deliberate choice (and why that is) or whether they do not feel welcome or included. People entering the LIS profession may be better able to network, find jobs, and make connections with current and future colleagues by working with student and campus organizations. It may also lead to alums who feel more connected back to their schools.

Lessons of Pop Culture

As educators, we are always interested in the sources of our students' learning. We gave them the same list of 21 LIS pop culture ideas from the first question and asked them if any of these had helped them to learn about library science. 207 people responded to this question, and the most frequently checked items were:

- Rupert Giles in Buffy the Vampire Slayer: 30.4%
- Dewey (and others) in Unshelved: 29.5%
- Evie Carnahan, in The Mummy: 24.2%
- Mary, in Party Girl: 18.4%
- Marian the Librarian, in The Music Man: 13.5%.

Then we asked about any other pop culture images that may have helped the students to learn about the LIS profession. 229 people gave an answer here, with 532 skipping it. 151 said there were no pop culture images of LIS that taught them anything about the profession. Of the 78 respondents, 63 different answers were given here, with much equivocation as to their relevance and

a broad spread of answers. Nancy Pearl, again the person and the figurine, both received the most positive comments from the five people who listed her as the most frequent answer here.

Several people were quite indignant at the thought they might be learning things from pop culture – which seems like an odd contrast to the apparent joy people had in sharing all the pop culture ideas they liked in prior questions. This could be partly due to question fatigue – people getting tired of answering questions on this topic may make them irritable. But it also may be due partly to the prejudice against pop culture as a legitimate source of knowledge by a group of people whose lives have led them in a scholarly direction and are learning to judge information as “good” and “not good” as part of their education. And, of course, it could be that there truly are not lessons about LIS to be learned from the pop culture images of our profession. This seems unlikely, in part based on the response to the next question. This may be a teachable opportunity, to let students know that learning can be a good experience, can be enjoyable, and take place in other settings than a traditional classroom. It was positive that many respondents mentioned they learn from librarians they have observed and worked with over the years. Expanding that view may provide more opportunities for our students – and may help them to provide learning opportunities from a variety of sources when they are instructing patrons.

The final question on this survey was to ask students to share any specific information they may have learned from LIS pop culture images – specific professional tasks, roles they might pay in the profession, potential types of employers, etc. 212 people provided some response to their questions, with 549 skipping it. In contrast to the previous question, where there seemed to be little to no learning, when asked about specifics they responded with a diversity of ideas. Many people talked about library users and the need to provide good service to patrons. Several discussed the ability of librarians to uncover information people need but don't know how to find. There

were also several people who talked about the power librarians can have when they get involved in the community and bring their special skills outside the walls of the library. Others mentioned the stereotypes of librarians, either in the context of enjoying busting the image or feeling an angry need to overcome the negative images. There were a few people who expressed a scoffing incredulity that anyone could earn things of value from pop culture images, and a few who “learned” about the potential dangers of demons in scanned books from Buffy. But the majority of the responses were thoughtful about the items people may have learned, even apparently without thinking of pop culture as a learning tool.

It was gratifying to see the number of students who talked about the importance and value of working with people in the profession. They talked about customer services, patrons good and bad, and about networking with co-workers. Some mentioned technology as important or as difficult. As educators of librarians, who hope to send them into a positive professional life, we were particularly pleased to see the number of people who talked about the wider role of LIS skills in the world. Several mentioned working in different field with their skills, they talked about the need for a diversity of skills, and they were passionate about the need to move outside the traditional roles of an LIS professional.

Conclusion

The image of librarians in popular culture has evolved from the shushing, angry, spinster librarian as seen in the alternate future in *It's a Wonderful Life* and in *The Philadelphia Story*, to the secret lives of Rupert Giles as Watcher to Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Barbara Gordon as Batgirl, to the adventures of librarians as librarians shown by Evie in *The Mummy* and Flynn Carsen in *The Librarians* series. Librarians are alternately beloved and wise, as in Mrs. Phelps from *Matilda*, or overly rule-bound and petty, as in the librarians who chased Jerry Seinfeld and Al Bundy decades

after graduation for library fines, or even scary, as in *The Library Policeman* novella by Stephen King. Whether or not members of the LIS profession believe in the stereotypes they see, our community and patrons see these same things. We want to ensure we have an idea of what they expect, and are ready to be as successful as possible as professionals.

Learning using pop culture is not the right approach for everyone – nothing is. But for those who see images of the possibilities in an image and can connect their own dreams, plans, goals, and professional image to that learned from pop culture, it can be useful and inspiring. If we can use popular culture images of LIS professionals to help our students develop their own perspective on membership in the profession, it can be a valuable and useful tool.

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