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## **Alive and Well: Revisiting Sable's "Death of Book Selection"**

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### **Introduction**

In his paper, "The Dogma of Book-Selection in University Libraries" Thompson (1960) argued that book selection is "a basic and abiding aspect of the administration of all types of Libraries". For academic Libraries particularly he specified some basic facts which include:

- That no one person is competent to select individual titles on a broad general basis;
- The volume of publication to handle is so much that there has to be some selection.
- There is no library that has all the funds, personnel, and space to be able to acquire every publication.
- It is difficult to predict what may be significant in future research in the deluge of preserved information

He continued:

To defy the volume and to say nothing of the doubtful quality of all the world's duplicated records is ridiculous. Even if selection is not general, there must be a method to separate the more urgently needed from the less urgently needed

Eight years later, in 1968, Arnold P. Sable wrote his radical article "The Death of Book Selection". Sable stated that book selection was a product of limited funds. He agreed that selection also gives librarians a measure of job satisfaction and also observed that there was a problem of what is meant by "librarian," which led to some librarians using other terms, such as information scientist, documentalist, library coordinator, or consultant, all describing the same profession. To him these terms described technological advances in librarianship and did not focus on book selection.

According to him some of the factors responsible for this trend included:

- Increased budgets due to expanding gross national product (GNP)
- Public libraries acquire nearly any book that is requested as long as it is not rare or obviously inappropriate
- Book selection is only concerned with material for adults
- Book selection is not the selection of basic or standard titles
- Standardization and fast communication make regional differences in libraries nearly non-existent.
- Books listed in standards lists should be acquired and the use of such lists does not constitute book-selection

Sable was categorically against acquiring bestsellers and similar popular material. His reasons included limited funds and lack of significance and value. While arguing that certain books appearing on specialized list be acquired by public libraries he totally rejected publications with extreme political or religious views. He concluded that the traditional book selection process has gradually vanished and that the best can be provided without much effort, a situation that he saw as democratic. More than forty years after Sable published his controversial paper, it is an opportune time to reexamine that treatise. Who was correct, Sable or Thompson? Is book selection really dead?

## **What is Book Selection?**

Book selection has been defined as “the process of choosing books for inclusion in a library with a view to providing a balanced increase to the stock” (Harrod's Glossary.) Obiagwu (1986) sees book selection as “a decision-making process that seeks to implement library goals and policies in collection development plans,” adding that “selection implies choice; choice dictated by limited book vote, inadequate storage facility, lack of space, and other problems.” Looking at publishing globally today can anyone really claim that book selection is dead? If book selection is dead, when did it die? Did it die as result of the reasons advanced by Arnold in 1968?

Let us examine Sable's arguments:

### **Increased budget**

Sable argued that there would be increased budgets for libraries due to expanding GNPs. The experience of librarians globally and especially among the developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America indicate that although there may be expanding GNPs, library funds do not increase correspondingly. Added to this is the fact that the cost of books and other reading materials has been increasing. Sable may not have considered the impact of inflation or economic recession. Not only that, there are other demands on the expanding GNP so that allocation to libraries have suffered neglect. Copeland and Mundee (2002) report on the assessment of academic library collection allocations, meant to ensure that the collection was consistent with the university's academic priorities. They discovered that their allocation for library resources was not enough to support the university's teaching and research. The university had also faced journal cuts and disagreements over the role of faculty and librarians in using allocations. Those things imply selection.

Rosenberg (2002) laments the state of libraries in Africa, saying that shelves are either empty or full of out-of-date and irrelevant materials due to inadequate funding and neglect. She refers to a survey of 18 university libraries in 11 countries between 1995/96 which revealed a bleak situation getting worse, where student numbers had overtaken the provision of textbooks. She states that “the most immediate cause of this decline is that libraries are no longer being adequately financed by their parent bodies or institutions. Institutional budget often covers only the cost of staff salaries, that libraries have continued to exist at all over the past decades is due to the funding and support received from donor agencies.” In such an adverse situation the librarian must of necessity do his book selection with utmost care to maximize the use of the meager funds available. In Ghana the story is no different. Alemna (2002) describes the poor public services in Ghana that have resulted from poor funding, saying that, “ironically, while library funding is being reduced, book prices are rising.”

The situation in Nigeria is similar, as described by Nwoga (2002), who observes that “most of the national, state, and university libraries are grossly underfunded to the extent that publications from six years ago are yet to be acquired.” Omorege (1998) states that library funding is at the crossroads because of financial stress in universities. Lawal (1986) shares this view when in obvious reference to the economic crunch with special reference to the University of Ibadan he notes that the recession nearly caused “major casualties in the library world” and concluded that “the financial situation was so bad that

the continued existence of the library was even beset with uncertainty.” How can any person amidst such severe economic crisis suggest that book selection is dead?

The tables below speak for themselves:

Year	University	Library	%
1983	65,145,011	1,794,874	2.76
1984	61,303,341	1,084,992	1.77
1985	64,481,980	1,286,834	2.00
1986	60,293,242	1,230,699	2.04
1987	73,399,401	1,421,421	1.94
1988	75,232,858	1,528,807	2.03
1989	91,248,495	1,304,186	1.43
1990	105,587,503	1,426,203	1.35
1991	94,228,254	2,237,431	2.37
1992	131,928,302	2,537,489	1.92

Source: Audited accounts of ABU for 1983-1992

Table 2: Comparative Table of Recruitment Grants and Enrollment Figures in Federal Universities and Their Libraries 1981/82-1990/91

Year	Total Recurrent Grants to All Federal Universities 1981/82-1990/91 (N)	Total Recurrent Grants to Federal University Libraries 1981/82-1990/91(N)	Percentage of Recurrent Budget to Federal University Libraries 1981/82-1990/91 (N)	Total Enrollment in Federal Universities 1981/82-1990/91(N)
1981/82	321,810,935	11,263,383.22	3.5	82,751
1982/83	234,618,156	6,803,926.5	2.9	93,774
1983/84	371,468,623	11,886,995.74	3.2	106,822
1984/85	428,392,425	16,278,911.95	3.8	116,285
1985/86	421,683,000	15,180,588	3.6	125,783
1986/87	415,917,521	12,893,443.95	3.1	136,967
1987/88	296,465,312	6,522,236.86	2.2	148,767
1988/89	513,155,901	28,682,419.05	5.4	159,120
1989/90	582,907,572	33,808,639.18	5.8	169,174
1990/91	606,444,223	29,715,767.13	4.9	180,871

Source: Ifidon (1998)

Table 3 Comparative table of recurrent grants and enrolment figures in state universities and their libraries 1981/82-1990/91

Year	Total Recurrent Grants to All State Universities 1981/82-1990/91(N)	Total Recurrent Grants to State University Libraries 1981/82-1990/91(N)	Percentage of Recurrent Budget to State University Libraries 1981/82-1990/91 (N)	Total Enrollment in State Universities 1981/82-1990/91
1981/82	69,724,658	1,324,768.5	1.9	7,005
1982/83	83,669,589	1,757,051.37	2.1	11,863
1983/84	92,036,547	1,656,657.85	1.8	15,604
1984/85	105,740,201	3,277,946.23	3.1	18,992
1985/86	116,314,221	3,373,112.41	2.9	24,304
1986/87	127,945,643	4,862,934.43	3.8	24,304
1987/88	139,745,633	3,493,640.83	2.5	36,090
1988/89	153,720,196	6,609,968.43	4.3	48,165
1989/90	169,620,195	7,632,908.78	4.5	60,171
1990/91	186,582,214	8,209,617.12	4.4	72,013
Grand Total	1.245,099,097	42,197,606.25	3.38	

Source: Ifidon (1998)

With the overwhelming evidence of poor funding and/or neglect of libraries with the ever increasing cost of reading materials, the disproportionate increase in library clientele, especially students, vis-a-vis available funds and reading materials, it is clear that the library has limited access to funds to provide adequate material. Care must be taken to maximize the use of what is available. Materials must be selected not only to avoid acquiring trash but to prioritize the selection process so as to meet the varying needs of library users. Even the allocation of a 10 percent university recurrent fund to the library had not brought the desired relief. GNP does not necessarily correlate with book funds. Expanding GDP may even be leading to higher inflation and resulting higher book prices.

### Space

The problem of space for libraries is a challenge akin to that of funding. The ability to acquire the right amount of relevant material at the appropriate time enhances the advancement or otherwise of nations through educational attainments. This cannot be achieved by acquiring trash. The volume of publications that floods the market is staggering and no library can afford to buy every publication and find the space to preserve them.

Librarians in the developed world are already finding their collections unwieldy and are weeding to save space. Space remains a major limiting factor in book selection.

### Literacy Rate and Languages

Books without readers are wasted. Literacy rate of the library clientele and the language of the materials and the clientele must be taken into consideration in selection. In 1960, usually regarded as Africa's year of independence, only nine percent of the population was literate. What sense would it have made to acquiring books written in the Queen's English, German, Greek, or French for an essentially

illiterate population? Between 1965 and 1995, secondary enrolment rose from 15 to 84 percent in South Africa, 5 to 32 percent in Nigeria, 8 to 66 percent in Swaziland, 3 to 64 percent in Botswana (World Bank 2000). This change shows that librarians must not only be conversant with these development trends but must carefully develop the collection to meet the needs of every category of users.

### **Controversial Material**

Sable regarded some publications as harmful to readers or even society, including pornographic or controversial material. He was not comfortable with publications from an extreme political or religious point-of-view and popular material such as bestsellers. The reasons which he advances for not acquiring these publications contradicts his argument that book selection is dead. His reasons included limited funds, social harm, and lack of value, which are some of the reasons that book selection is imperative.

### **Book Lists**

Sable's argument that books listed in publications from organizations such as ALA should be acquired is of limited value. Of all the millions of publications rolled out each day, how many of them are listed in "best books" lists? Should the librarian also acquire every title that appears in *Books in Print* and similar compilations? These are tools that librarians use for selection, and best books lists from ALA and elsewhere are selection tools like all the others. Sable's approach limits itself to publications recommended by ALA and perhaps a few others, as if those lists were the beginning and end of all published standard materials. At the same time, his recommendation that books appearing on lists be acquired is too broad, and would lead to an avalanche of published materials. Books on book lists and in finding tools have met certain international standards, but how many of them any library acquire, given the limits on funds and space? Sable seemed to be advocating independent and self-sufficient libraries, which runs counter to the principle of library practice: the interdependence and cooperation among libraries.

To this generation of librarians, Sable's treatise may be like Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations". Useful points may have been made, but his views are too radical and cannot be supported by the situation in libraries today. Information technology has had an impact on every area of library services, but by and large book selection is still alive and well.

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