

Support Local: Public Libraries and Local Authors

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Abstract

In 2020 we have experienced movements to support local creators, restaurants, and businesses; how can the library community support local authors? This extended abstract discusses research about how public libraries support local authors, with a focus on how these works are included in library collections and made findable to community members. Twelve public libraries from British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan were selected for analysis of collection policies and item metadata. Qualitative content analysis is used to code collection policies, and systemic analysis of item metadata is used to understand methods of identifying locally-authored items. The results of this research indicate that collection policies provide both opportunities and barriers for including locally-authored items and there is a lack of consistent methods for identifying items as locally-authored within item metadata. Some of these barriers can be attributed to the challenge of identifying and defining “local authorship”. This extended abstract concludes with recommendations for how libraries can modify collection policies and methods of identifying items as locally-authored in order to support local authors and make these items more accessible to the community.

Keywords: public libraries; local authors; collection policies; metadata;

Public libraries serve their communities. By supporting local authors, public libraries demonstrate a commitment to the community and the perspectives and concerns of library users. Public libraries can support local authors in various ways including author talks and book signings, creating library displays of locally-authored items, and hosting writing and publishing workshops. This extended abstract discusses the results of a research project that focused on how libraries can support local authors

through including these items in library collections and making them available and findable for community members.

Benefits of Supporting Local Authors

Including locally-authored items in public library collections provides benefits for the library, the community, and the authors. Books created by local authors are likely relevant to local issues and perspectives, the community and its history (Bijali & Kahn, 2018), contributing to a sense of community identity and a culture of reading. Local authors benefit from sharing their stories with the community. This is important; a survey of self-publishing authors at Woodneath Library found that 80% of authors write because they have a story they believe “deserves to be told” (Sandy, 2016, p. 901). Including locally-authored items in libraries also provides authors with opportunities to gain exposure and growth as an author (DeWild & Jarema, 2015).

Literature Review

Research on the relationship between local authors and public libraries is scarce. One reason for this could be, as England (1948) discussed, defining “local” and “local authors” is difficult. Some libraries focus on birthplace or where an author lived or was educated, others focus on the subject of the work, and others interpret this as local history collections. It is also important to consider that many local authors may choose to self-publish, which presents additional challenges for including these items in library collections. Conventional publishing conglomerates prioritize profits and seek only what they believe to be guaranteed bestsellers (Dilevko & Dali, 2006). This often prevents new authors or authors whose stories may resonate with niche audiences from publishing through conventional methods. Unfortunately, self-published books are often associated with lower quality (DeWild & Jarema, 2015; Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Mullock, 2019). These authors do not have access to the teams of editors, proofreaders, publishers, and marketers that ensure a level of quality in conventional publishing.

There are also various challenges when it comes to acquiring self-published books and cataloguing them, because self-published books are often not included in vendor lists or review journals (DeWild & Jarema, 2015; Holley, 2015). This means that librarians are less likely to be aware of these items. It also means that librarians must do original cataloguing, requiring additional library time and resources to complete (Tuncer

& David, 2019). The lack of publishing information available to cataloguers results in a lack of bibliographic control of self-published items (Bradley et al., 2012; Holley, 2015), and libraries may be reluctant to add these to their collections. Because many local authors choose to self-publish, these concerns are relevant to this research; however, there remains a lack of research about locally-authored items specifically, which this research aims to address.

Methods

This research included both qualitative analysis of collection policies and systematic analysis of metadata content to determine how locally-authored items are included in library collections and how these items are identified. Twelve urban public libraries were included in this research, four each from British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. Three provinces were selected for research based on the author's location and the limited scope and timeline for the project. Each library's collection policy was analyzed using open coding to identify themes present in selection criteria. Local authors were selected using a Google search based on a broad definition of "local" that includes the author's birthplace or having lived or worked in the city. If authors from outside of the city were identified as "local" on community websites, they were also included. Each author was searched for in the corresponding library catalogue. Up to three items from each author were selected for systematic analysis, resulting in a total of seventy-eight locally-authored items.

Collection Policies

The analysis of collection policies demonstrated seven major themes relating to selecting items by local authors. The first three, *community-oriented collections*, *collection diversity*, and *local interest*, present opportunities for including these items in public library collections. *Community-oriented collections* was a theme present in all twelve policies. Libraries describe their collections as meeting the needs and interests of their community, including information, recreation, education, culture, artistic, and leisure needs. This is closely connected to *collection diversity*. All twelve libraries describe the importance of developing diverse collections that meet diverse community needs. This was described within the policies as including various views and subjects, balanced collections, and including items that share all sides of an issue. Only six

policies identified *local interest* in their collection policies. This theme is categorized using a broad definition of “local”, as it includes policies that reference items from the region, province, or even Canadian authors and content.

These themes present opportunities for libraries to include locally-authored items. Locally-authored books are written by community members and are likely to represent the perspectives and experiences of their community. They are also likely to contribute to the diversity of the collection and add unique points of view, especially if the items are self-published. *Local interest* also provides clear opportunities for including locally-authored content; however, it is important to recognize that only half of the policies include this consideration and the definition of “local” is either broad or not clearly defined.

The analysis of collection policies also demonstrates that these policies may prevent the inclusion of locally-authored items. Eight policies include *quality* of the physical format and writing as important when considering items for acquisition, and seven policies select items based on the *value* of the item. Additionally, nine collection policies select items based on *reviews*. This often refers to reviews in publications, though some policies also include the professional judgement of the librarian or even public opinion. Similarly, the *reputation of the creator* is a factor for consideration in half of the policies.

When libraries depend on this selection criteria, it poses barriers for including locally-authored and self-published items. As discussed above, authors who choose to self-publish do not have the same resources that ensure quality, and their works often have a reputation for lower quality. It is also rare that self-published books will have unpaid reviews in publications, and if the local author is new they may not have established a reputation for themselves as an author. These books are unlikely to meet this selection criteria and may be excluded from library collections.

Metadata

When locally-authored items are included in library collections, it is important that metadata is used to enable library users to find and access these items. Using the sample of seventy-eight locally-authored items, thirty-eight items contained metadata that identified the item as locally-authored, some using multiple methods. Nineteen

items used Subject Headings, Genre/Form, or Local Subject Headings fields (MARC 650, 655, 690) to identify the items as locally-authored. This includes reference to either the city, region, or province where the author or genre is from (e.g. “Saskatchewan author” or “Saskatchewan fiction”). MARC Notes are also used in six items. These notes either use the phrase “local author” or state the location where the author is from. Additionally, twenty-one items are either located in local collections identified by the call number, or included in online lists identifying the city, region, or province. Clearly, the methods differ among items. Even within libraries, locally-authored items are identified in various ways. This lack of uniform methods makes it difficult for community members to find and access these local works.

Recommendations

The lack of cohesive methods for including and identifying locally-authored items in urban public libraries indicates that there is work to be done around supporting local authors. There are numerous challenges to doing this, including defining “local”. Even when this is defined, authors are not static entities that easily fit into MARC fields. It is unrealistic for MARC records to reflect this changing status. Additionally, many libraries are part of consortiums that share online catalogues so the term “local” loses its meaning when an item is accessed by various communities. To address this challenge, further research can be done into cataloguing standards for identifying local and self-published authors in item metadata, and developing best practices for using online lists that can be updated frequently and labelled for easy accessibility.

Libraries must also address the barriers in collection policies. Instead of relying on unpaid reviews, libraries can expand their sources for selecting items for acquisition to include social media tools (Pacer, 2013) or develop a volunteer review board (Mullock, 2019). Additionally, libraries can modify their policies to include local interest or make exceptions for locally-authored items.

Conclusion

The lack of cohesive methods for including and identifying locally-authored items in urban public libraries indicates that there is work to be done around supporting local authors. Modifying collection policies and developing best practices for including and

identifying items by local authors will provide libraries with methods for continuing to support their communities.

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