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# Battered Books and Shredded Serials:

*Thoughts on Combating Vandalism to Material in an Academic Library*

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*"Under the hive-like dome the stooping readers go up and down the alleys, tap the cells of knowledge - Honey and wax, the accumulation of years"* (The British Museum Reading Room: Louis MacNeice 1907-1963)

## Introduction

Librarians have always been anxious to maintain the integrity and durability of their collections, though many natural and man-made hazards have impeded this objective. Damage to, and loss of, library materials are not just troublesome irritants to the librarian but are frequently costly disasters for present and future scholarship.

Libraries have been the butt of vandalism and theft in one form or another since time immemorial. The history books abound with stories which demonstrate that libraries took their place alongside palaces, castles, and cathedrals in the catalogue of sackings and pillages. It is also salutary to remember that some of the great collections that we enjoy today have been aggregated, not only by gift, purchase and copying, but as a result of spoils to victors of war and conquest. Still other treasures have been lost to civilisation for ever through the exigencies of conflict.

It is important to retain a sense of perspective about mishaps to items in a working collection. Not all of us are custodians of a Bodleian or John Rylands, but almost every library, however modest, has its own local bibliographic treasure. The need in the majority of libraries is to maintain a collection in a sound state for use; if that use results in some wear and tear it is relatively unimportant, provided that someone, somewhere is collecting the same material to meet the longer time-horizon. It does not make economic or scholarly sense for us all to attempt to preserve the same material for

future generations. However, even a working collection needs to be maintained in as good and complete a state as possible. Positive effort should be directed at combating hazards that can be minimised or avoided. It may sometimes be argued that libraries are often more preoccupied with preservation than exploitation of material, though the new 'enlightenment' may have restored the delicate balance between custody and use. It is, however, a truism that you cannot exploit what you no longer have!

## Hazards facing the library

Mention was made earlier of the range of hazards which may befall library collections. Anyone wishing to frighten themselves, can peruse the extensive list of hazards and disasters in Ian Tregarthen Jenkin's Report sponsored by the British Library Research and Development Department (1). Better still, read the whole report for it highlights the general lack of preparedness of librarians in the U.K. to the mayhem that may befall collections and buildings. A select list of the more familiar environmental hazards may include the following, either alone or in combinations: fire, heat, dirt and dust, water (flood, damp, humidity) and atmospheric pollution.

Although modern technology gives us the ability to engineer the environment to make our collections more durable (air conditioning is a case in point) the adverse conditions of the past and the intrinsic limitations of some materials, have taken their toll. As noted earlier, another factor influencing the durability of material is the everyday use which it gets. Inevitably even in the best cared for collections, wear and tear take their toll.

### **Misuse- A special kind of hazard**

We now move on to the misuse of material which can take a number of forms. It may be opportunist misuse where something and someone are juxtaposed at a critical time, or systematic, premeditated misuse when an individual or group sets out deliberately to steal or damage material. A whole panoply of electronic systems has been developed in recent times to combat the thief. Most rely on electronic triggering of risk material and a detection system placed near exits.

A more difficult phenomenon to combat is damage to material where pages are wilfully removed or stolen. In academic libraries, serials seem to be the most affected items; popular journals "disappear" from our collections and articles cited on reading lists are removed (sometimes very neatly!) from bound and unbound journals. From the librarian's point of view it is an annoying, time consuming and expensive task to replace such items. Back issues are often unavailable and, even if in print, are difficult and expensive to purchase; even a photocopy replacement with all its inherent storage problems, can only be made available with written consent from the publisher. Most importantly it creates considerable inconvenience and even frustration for library users.

### **Combating misuse**

Part of the strategy of combating such behaviour lies in understanding why people do it. Some likely reasons are:

1. The item contains text, diagrams, charts, photographs wanted for study and the user cannot/will not photocopy.
2. The item has been misused for 'strategic' reasons, to deny others access to material, thereby giving the wrongdoer a perceived 'edge'.
3. The item has been misused because the user objects to it on religious, political or moral grounds.
4. The item has been misused by someone who is disturbed in some way or another. This is most likely to manifest itself in the theft or mutilation of illustrations.

In a modern open access academic library, embodying a positive philosophy of user relations and service, together with a commitment to information accessibility with minimal restrictions, it is very difficult to combat such misdemeanours. British academic librarians generally regard widespread closed access as being too labour-intensive and restrictive for the user. A variety of measures to minimise the incidence of vandalism and theft are however worth contemplating, although it has to be faced that they will not be entirely effective in all circumstances and will themselves be resource intensive. One answer, at least in an ideal world, is to provide more material to ease the pressure of demand, especially at peak times of use. Either a wider range of material to facilitate greater choice, or more extensive multiple copy provision (including multiples of serials) can be offered. Another approach may entail the provision of more and cheaper photocopying facilities, which will encourage photocopying for study, rather than mutilation or theft of originals. Here one may well come up against the limitations (rightly) imposed on copying by copyright legislation. Moreover, in a world of finite resources there are practical limits to such strategies. Better vigilance by library staff and users can also minimise the incidence of theft and damage. It is important to ensure that those who are caught do get dealt with sufficiently severely and the consequences and penalties sufficiently publicised, to deter others. In an academic institution with its own disciplinary mechanisms and publicity dissemination this is not too difficult. But actually catching the culprit or culprits remains the problem. A further measure involves the energetic dissemination of publicity to stress the anti-social nature and inconvenience to the majority of library users of such activities. At Loughborough, for example, few have been more vocal about such behaviour than the users (notably the students) themselves. These attitudes and concerns need to be harnessed to tackle the problems so that they become allies in any campaign. It was with this in mind that, after considering several alternatives, management at Loughborough decided to mount a special publicity campaign to highlight the problem and especially its effect on users.

### **Loughborough's "evangelical" exercise**

At Loughborough we had been keeping a record for some years of all reported vandalised books and serials, and it became clear that not only were such incidences becoming more commonplace, but that serials were more vulnerable than books to such attack. In the light of this information, some aspects of the service were reviewed. We considered whether it would be feasible to loan bound journals to undergraduates and course postgraduates (a facility already offered to staff and research postgraduates).

It was decided however that this would lead to even greater problems of access to recommended journals articles, which form the core of undergraduate requirements. Provision of photocopiers is already reasonably generous, and the cost per page is a modest 5p. Even the possibility of placing security devices (at Loughborough 3M tattle tape) in all unbound issues and all reading list articles was considered, but rejected as impractical and in reality too obvious a deterrent to the determined thief.

It was therefore decided to attempt an education campaign to alert all library users to the problem. All academic departments were circularised and the Students Union Newspaper ran a front page feature on the topic. In the library an exhibition was proposed to further heighten awareness of the problem. The form of the exhibition was debated at some length and some of the not too plentiful literature on the subject studied (2)(3)(4)(5). Further inspiration came, from of all places, the Laurie Taylor column in the *THES* (6). From the outset, it was unanimously agreed that it would be counter-productive simply to display a mass of mutilated books and journals. The message we wished to convey, needed to emphasize the inconvenience and the cost of such behaviour. To this end the 'fate' of just two vandalised items was traced.

The display was mounted on free standing display boards in the library's exhibition area, which is situated by the main issue desk. At the entrance to the display area a notice was placed (see *illus.1* overleaf).

The sequence began with a damaged bound journal being reported and traced the steps taken by the library to replace the missing information. All the various library activities were followed through, including the search for a back issue, the interlibrary loan request, the process of rebinding. Real invoices were displayed and at each stage the viewer was given a cost summary of the activity. The financial cost, the length of time taken and the inconvenience to the user were heavily stressed, as can be seen from the illustrations overleaf.

A similar annotated sequence, on adjacent display boards, followed the progress of a damaged book through bibliographic checking, out of print searches, ordering of replacement copy and reprocessing. For good measure, a smaller section of the display highlighted examples of careless handling of material, such as spine damage to books and journals and rips and tears to microform formats.

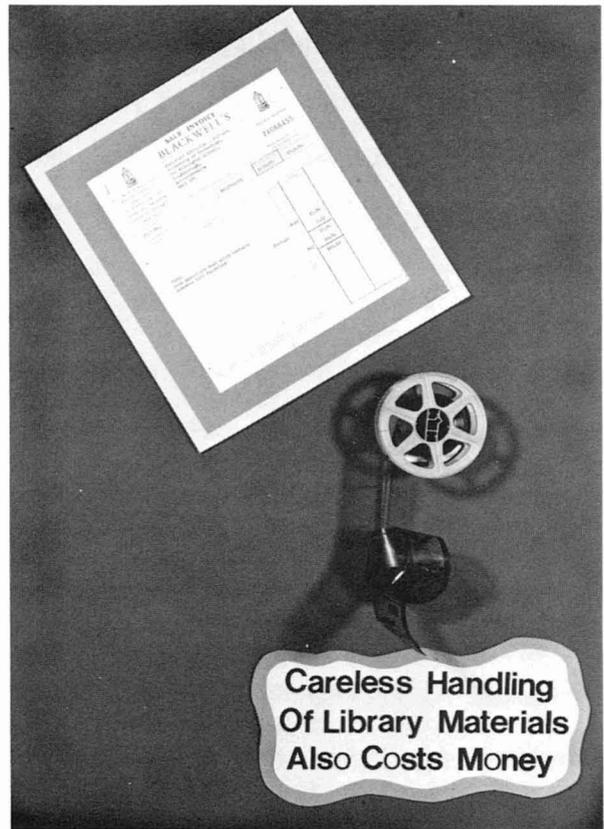
Great care was taken to give the exhibition a tidy and professional appearance. Invoices were neatly mounted on card and all text was produced with the use of Letraset. Red card arrows pointed the way through the sequences. The material remained on display for the best part of the Spring term.

### **Was it worth it? A backwards look**

This initiative was costly to plan and execute in terms of staff time and material and the question must be asked - did the publicity campaign do any good? Specifically, did it stop anyone stealing or damaging material or even cause them to hesitate? The truthful answer must be that we shall never know. On a subjective basis, in the twelve months following the campaign there is a perceived reduction in the incidence of damage and theft of material, especially in the serials collection. This reduction may be entirely attributable to other factors. Our user population, for example, is a dynamic one, of which a significant proportion renews itself annually. Changes in service and collection strength (generally for the better) have taken place despite resource scarcity.

EVERY YEAR WE DISCOVER MANY EXAMPLES OF WILFUL MUTILATION OF SERIALS AND BOOKS. THIS SERIES OF PANELS TRACES THE STEPS WE TAKE TO RECTIFY THE SITUATION TO ENSURE THAT YOU, THE USER CAN STILL GET AT THE MATERIAL YOU NEED. THESE SHOW DIRECT COSTS, THERE ARE OTHER HIDDEN COSTS SUCH AS STAFF TIME IN LOCATING AND PROCESSING MATERIAL. ALSO THERE IS THE CONSIDERABLE INCONVENIENCE TO YOU THE USERS.

HELP US TO HELP YOU, BY STOPPING THIS ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR!



Rebinding Whole Volume To Include Replaced Pages

Rebinding Costs = £9 + Staff Costs

Invoice From The Binders

Total Cost For Library = £12.50 + Staff & Administrative Costs

Inconvenience To User = ?

Certainly the display and associated publicity attracted favourable comment, both inside the University and elsewhere. A neighbouring academic library, for example, borrowed some of the graphic material in order to conduct a similar exercise; thus additional value was obtained from the creation of good display work. Favourable comment appeared in our library suggestion/comments book:

"... Congratulations on your imaginative and informative display on the costs and consequences of mutilation of literature. I hope that this is as effective at changing people's actions as it deserves to be."

Undoubtedly the exercise created interest inside the Library, particularly amongst the 'front line' staff, many of whom had shared the frustration of users unable to get material they wanted because of vandalism and theft. Those directly involved in planning and creating the display were inevitably prompted to think more deeply about the whole problem, its magnitude and consequent costs and inconveniences. At the very least it might be said that the whole exercise had a cathartic quality ... it made us feel better.

One is left with a lingering anxiety however. There is a school of thought which holds that publicity about crime and misbehaviour - whether it be rape, murder, robbery or just book vandalism - itself suggests ways and means to potential

miscreants. In our detailed description of vandalism and its consequences at Loughborough were we just showing them how to do it after all? We wonder ...!

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