BEYOND FICTION:
HOW CONNECTICUT PUBLIC LIBRARIES ARE USING THEIR WEBSITES TO PRESENT WHOLE COLLECTION READERS’ ADVISORY

BY

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Introduction and Overview

Public libraries today contain a wide variety of materials that librarians must become familiar with. This knowledge is critical for the population that depends on the library for reading material and the library’s Readers’ Advisory service to identify appropriate titles and formats. Readers’ Advisory services can also play a key role in ensuring that all parts of the collection are being utilized by promoting nonfiction, audio-visual, and electronic resources, as well as fiction, a practice known as Whole Collection Readers’ Advisory (Wyatt, 2006).

Readers’ Advisory services have traditionally been available to patrons who come in to the library but can be less effective when patrons lack time for a personal discussion or are reluctant to ask for assistance (Wyatt, 2008). This in-person service also excludes users who do not visit the library regularly but are using the Internet to access library services. Online Whole Collection Readers’ Advisory can allow the expertise of librarians to reach a wider group of users by presenting visually exciting material about interesting topics that are available in the library’s collection (Saricks, 2013a).

There are varying levels of online Readers’ Advisory present on the websites of public libraries in Connecticut. Of particular interest is the format the service takes and whether it promotes a “whole collection” approach. Library websites will be examined and an analysis will be done which will include the types of information presented on the websites, the percentage of libraries using each type and how this information compares to the best practices outlined in existing literature. The analysis will also include a sample electronic guide that shows how a popular fiction book can be linked with other library materials. Given the changing economic base and the associated need for citizens to extend their knowledge and skill base into new areas, it is of interest that libraries explore new ways to offer their entire collections to readers.
SIGNIFICANCE AND RELEVANCE

Building a Readers’ Advisory service that uses the staff’s knowledge of the collection to recommend the best materials to suit patrons’ needs benefits both library employees and the community. For the staff, efforts to learn about and market the collection will improve their personal knowledge and increase the relevance and use of the library through effective communication about materials and formats with patrons. Consequently, the community gains added knowledge and enrichment through these materials and interactions with staff. Librarians can encourage these interactions by building resources that are easily consulted by both staff and patrons. Employing a “whole collection” approach by including nonfiction, audio-visual, and electronic formats in these resources will help libraries expand circulation by highlighting the connections between materials and the availability of lesser-used formats. To use this theory in library practice, Wyatt (2007b) suggests pairing fiction with a related nonfiction title. For instance, a reader can be referred to a nonfiction book about the wives of Henry VIII as a supplement to a novel set in Tudor England. In addition, a CD featuring music from the era and a movie set in the same time period could also be recommended. Demonstrating the relationships between the different media will change how patrons think about the library and its services (Wyatt, 2007b), allowing them to see that there are other materials and formats in addition to popular fiction that can match their interests.

Given that the majority of American adults report using the Internet (Pew, 2014) and that over 70% of holds on library materials are placed remotely (Tarulli, 2011), offering Readers’ Advisory service online is one way that library service can be expanded to better match the habits of patrons. The patrons who visit the library’s website to place holds may be inclined to look for other library services online and can be attracted to interesting recommendations for
library materials. Unlike face-to-face Readers’ Advisory, which depends on an immediate response, these online resources, in the form of reading lists, staff recommendations, and guides that connect fiction to related nonfiction and audiovisual material, can be carefully thought out, and these efforts will encourage patrons to explore unfamiliar formats (Wyatt, 2008).

Past studies have shown that only a small percentage of libraries offer this type of librarian-created Readers’ Advisory online (Hoffert, 2003). Analysis of the strengths and gaps in the information collected during the study, combined with the best practices detailed in existing literature, will help guide libraries in the creation of their own online Whole Collection Readers’ Advisory.

**Literature Review**

Over time, the role of many public libraries has transformed from a purely educational one to a provider of entertainment and community services. Similarly, the function of Readers’ Advisory services has also changed. In his essay on the history of Readers’ Advisory, Crowley (2005) explains that while no one can pinpoint the exact date of the implementation of Readers’ Advisory services, much of the work of libraries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries focused on a need to improve individuals, and the nation as a whole, through reading. This focus persisted into the post-WWII era when recreational reading was considered incompatible with the library’s role of educating the public. After several decades using this model, the attitudes of librarians and the public began to change and by the 1980’s there was a renewed interest in using the library as a source of leisure reading based on the fiction collection (Crowley, 2005). In today’s libraries, Readers’ Advisory services have continued to evolve and can now link readers to information in many different formats (Okobi, 2013, p. 101), including electronic and audiovisual.
In spite of the existence of these formats, a library industry study cited by Smith (2011), showed that 75% of respondents think of “books” when they think of the word “library.” While users make this connection, it is up to librarians to help patrons see that the library is more than a simple warehouse (Trott, 2012), containing only popular fiction. Readers’ Advisory services can accomplish this by encouraging staff to become more familiar with library materials and to interact frequently with patrons, sharing information with them and creating relationships (Tarulli & Welch, 2013). Trott (2012) also recommends forming these relationships, contending that they will lead to a greater use of the collection, with staff being able to promote overlooked older materials as alternatives for the hard to find bestsellers. Librarians have also begun to recognize that inquiries for the purpose of leisure reading can be filled with recommendations from both the fiction and nonfiction collections (Van Fleet, 2008).

There are obstacles, however, to making sure users can access all forms of library materials. The many topics present in nonfiction can make exploration difficult and patrons can assume that nonfiction books are only for research. In addition, the collections in many libraries are physically divided (Wyatt, 2007c, p. 27) and patrons may not realize there are other materials that can enhance their enjoyment of fiction. Librarians need to think beyond these divisions in order to help readers make connections among the entire collection (Wyatt, 2007b). By pulling together diverse works and formats, Whole Collection Readers’ Advisory services allow users to create their own paths through the collection, making them aware of how the materials are related. These paths are already partly informed by popular culture with television shows and movies not only based on books, but also featuring them as part of the plot (Williamson, 2011). Movies also have soundtracks, audiobooks are read by actors or authors, and all types of materials can be illustrated with artwork or quote poetry. Promoting materials from these
different collections can be an effective way for libraries to encourage readers to expand their interests and increase usage of the library (Wyatt, 2006).

Library websites are a valuable tool for introducing readers to these connections between materials and formats. A recent Pew (2013) Internet survey shows that 44% of respondents ages 16 and over have visited a public library website and these visits provide libraries the opportunity to expand services outside of their physical walls and reach users who may not find it convenient to come to the library in person (Trott, 2008). Tarulli (2011) agrees that these online services can expand the use of the library and implies that the same trust established during face-to-face interaction can be furthered with online Readers’ Advisory. Part of building this trust can involve the use of online tools that allow for reader responses to the material, enabling community collaboration to increase conversation about library materials (Wyatt, 2007a). Access to bestseller lists, databases, and links to readers’ advisory information will also enhance user experience (Okobi, 2013, p. 111). Most importantly, online content should be inviting and easy for readers to use, featuring artwork, links to the catalog, and annotations (Saricks, 2013a). Reading Maps are one way to deliver this content. Developed by Wyatt (2006), Reading Maps help readers explore the world of a book by making connections with other material and formats from a library’s collection. These materials can include fiction and nonfiction books, audio, and video that share the same time period, geographic location, or types of characters. Highlighting artwork and music featured in the book and links to websites that provide supporting material can inspire further interests. By presenting these Reading Maps online, libraries will provide readers the tools to enrich their reading experience and to make the most of the library collection.
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Using these strategies, today’s librarians have become guides, “who can help patrons discover everything the library has to offer” (Saricks, 2013b). This includes the nonfiction, audiovisual, and electronic formats that may be overlooked by patrons. Promoting these formats online will ensure that collections are being fully utilized and user needs met whether the patron comes to the library building or not. Whole Collection Readers’ Advisory should be presented on library websites in an easy to use format that is accessible to both staff and patrons. By recognizing that many users prefer to search for information online, and providing them with content and easily accessible links, libraries will encourage greater use of collections and gain renewed community relevancy.

Methodology

Subjects

Connecticut public library websites will be examined to evaluate the content of current online Readers’ Advisory. The Connecticut State Library’s 2013 Statistical Profile of Public Libraries (Connecticut, 2014) is the source for the library names and locations. One hundred and sixty five main branch libraries will be used as the study subjects.

Instrument

The website information will be collected on an Excel spreadsheet. The categories examined are: Readers’ Advisory on the library’s home page and the form it takes (information for readers, a subscription database, book discussion information, lists of new items, a link to digital downloads, and a link to the online catalog), Readers’ Advisory anywhere on the site, how it is labeled, and how many clicks it takes to reach, material prepared by outside sources (links to websites that offer Readers’ Advisory, bestseller and award winning material, reviews or summaries of titles), material prepared by library staff (new item lists, book group news, staff
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favorites, staff or user reviews), and Whole Collection Readers’ Advisory (nonfiction books, multi-media and digital download information.)

**Procedure**

The websites will be searched for the items included in the study instrument. The form will be filled in with a “yes” or a “no” for each category, except for the number of clicks it takes to find the Readers’ Advisory and the label names that must be clicked through. The results will be complied into a report showing the current state of online Readers’ Advisory in Connecticut and how it compares with the best practices outlined in the literature. The report will include a sample of how a popular work of fiction can be connected to other library materials and formats from across the collection.

**Results**

The knowledge gained by the study will enable the creation of guidelines and resources for promoting all formats of library media. Library users will benefit from having new ways to explore and access library collections that may have been unknown or underutilized by the public. For libraries, this can lead to increased interest in and use of collections.

**Conclusions**

The study will access online readers’ advisory in the same way potential library users would. By searching websites for this information, the author will be able to experience the discoveries and frustrations of the typical user and use this information to recommend the most effective ways to present online content. Conclusions will be formed after the study as to which readers’ advisory resources have the most visual impact, lead to the largest variety of materials, and are easiest to use.
References


## APPENDIX: Research Instrument

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<tr>
<th>Library Name</th>
<th>Library URL</th>
<th>RA visible on library home page</th>
<th>tabs or links to readers' information on home page</th>
<th>subscription database link on home page</th>
<th>book group information on home page</th>
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<td>lists of new items provided by Wowbrary or BookNews on home page</td>
<td>digital download link on home page</td>
<td>link to catalog on home page</td>
<td>Lists, summaries or reviews provided in the catalog</td>
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