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# International approaches to library user fees and fee-based services: An evaluation of three recent studies

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Cloutier, C. (2005). Setting up a fee-based information service in an academic library. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 31(4), 332-338.

Johanssen, C.G. (2004). "Money makes the world go around" – Fee-based services in Danish public libraries 2000-2003. *New Library World*, 105(1/2), 21-32.

Mahmood, K., Hameed, A., & Haider, S.J. (2005). Free vs. fee based library services: Survey of library leaders in Pakistan. *Malaysian Journal of Library & Information Science*, 10(2), 105-115.

In the public mind, and in popular consciousness, the major difference between the bookstore and the library is that one imposes charges on a per-service or per-item basis, and the other does not. The fees that subsidize library services are indirect: taxes and tuitions. The idea of a library charging for its services and products sounds almost counterintuitive. And yet, as with many other topics related to library administration and management, the reality is that for decades, if not for the entire history of libraries in America, fees for certain library services have been imposed on users (Giacoma, 1989). Public libraries, of course, charge late fees, but other kinds of charges that have been imposed on – and accepted – by user populations have covered videotape collections, access to dictionaries, other highly-used reference materials, and duplicate copies of popular books, as well as online research. (Drake, 1981). In academic libraries, the model of the fee-based specialized research and document retrieval center has been proposed (Ward, 1997) – although even an institution as venerable as the New York Public Library operates its NYPL Express fee-based service (Coffman, 1999). In fact, a 1993 survey (Association of College & Research Libraries) identified over 450

organizations throughout the U.S. that provide some sort of fee-based reference service to the broad unaffiliated public.

It is clear that fee-based library services are a topic that is to this day very much relevant to library science and library management. Lying at the intersections of two key concerns to librarians, economics and values (Systems and Procedures Research Center, 1981), it has particular implications both for the more philosophical understanding of the roles of librarians vis-à-vis information, especially in regard to the ongoing debate (for example, Allen and Corley, 1990) about the “information broker” concept, and the very practical matters of library operation.

A comprehensive literature review is outside the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, the literature of library and information science has definitely paid attention to this issue. A significant percentage of the debate on fee-based library services, for example, the essays in Watson (1978) and the 1981 volume edited by Drake, was concentrated in the mid-1970’s to the mid-1980’s, as public and academic libraries began to wrestle with issues like sharply declining budgets and the effects of computerization on information search and retrieval. At the same time, the first specific evaluations of fee-based library services (Beaubien, 1983; Carter and Pagel, 1984) began appearing as well. Since then, however, while the debate about the ethics of fee-based services has certainly not gone away, an additional emphasis has been placed on the “why” of the question, and from then, on the “how.”

Jaeger (1999) provides a solid overview of how the morals and economics of fee-based library services have been discussed throughout the 1980's and 1990's, noting, interestingly, that "arguments for both sides have remained fairly constant, so that one could read a position paper in 1997 and see significant similarities to one written in 1977." In addition, though, he raised the issue that in at least some cases, the potential or expected promise of fee-based library services has not been met by their actual implementation. Charlotte Egholm and Henrik Jochumsen trace (2001) the evolution of the concept in European libraries. Their major contribution to the debate on fee-based library services is an appeal to consider how actual library users perceive and utilize them. They also introduce a way of thinking about fees in libraries from the viewpoint of the distinction between core and peripheral library services. In terms of specific guides for thinking about and actually charging user fees, Webb (1994) presents a broad manual for implementing and operating a fee-based service, while Prentice (1996) talks about fee-based services within the context of identifying and pursuing new sources of income for libraries. Ward's book, already mentioned above, draws on her own experience as the head of Purdue University's Technical Information Service to advise other academic libraries looking to replicate it.

Of course, theoretical works and manuals offer only type of approach to this topic. And it would be the more thorough, rigorous evaluations of the effectiveness of fee-based library services that would be truly useful both to those libraries that already operate these services, and to those that are considering launching them. Over the last fifteen or so years, while there has not been an overwhelming number of such studies, there certainly have been a few, which have differed significantly both in their scope and in

the methodologies they have used. Shoham's (1998) paper was one of the first to directly survey library patrons regarding their opinion on usage fees. Its focus was on Israeli users, and other recent papers that have looked specifically at attitudes towards library fees both in the U.S. and in other countries using a survey questionnaire instrument have included another look by Ward (2000) at the Purdue University experience, and a paper by Percy (2001) on user fee trends in law libraries. Case studies continue to be a popular tool, with notable examples being Smith (1999), Luzius and King (2006), and Hammond (2007). To gauge the general level of effectiveness of these kinds of studies, this paper will evaluate three recent articles on fee-based library services, two of which (Cloutier, 2005; Mahmood, Hameed, and Haider, 2005) use the methodologies mentioned. The third (Johanssen, 2004) utilizes the survey interview approach – and is largely unique among recent papers on the topic in doing so. This is actually somewhat surprising, in light of the findings of McKechnie, et al. (discussed in Hildreth and Aytac, 2007), that interviews are the preferred methodology used in human information interaction studies.

As Lorenzetti (2007) notes, the case study is a particularly popular evaluation tool in library science research, since they are easy to undertake and do not require particularly advanced research and data analysis skills. Their particular strength is as an easy to understand reporting tool and as a first step in further research. A case study inherently is only able to describe how things are, not why; because they are tied inherently to local factors and characteristics, they are not likely to be reproduced easily in other settings. It is precisely because of the tendency to use case studies uncritically, and because of the trend to only report successes, that Losee and Worley

(1993) take LIS scholars to task for over-relying on what they call the “‘how I done it good’ genre” of scholarly writing. Nonetheless, if constructed and presented well, a case study can be an effective evaluation tool, especially in dealing with contemporary or ongoing situations and experiences.

Surveys are a tool that is used as frequently in library and information science as it is in many other social science fields and disciplines. Their strengths are obvious: access to relatively large sample sizes and data that are immediately quantifiable and available for analysis and probability sampling, the possibility of identifying various personal factors, and the ability to establish correlations and determine causations (Fowler, 2001). Of course, the flip side, as mentioned by, among others, Booth (2005) and Bertot and Jaeger (2008) is that to be effective, surveys must be designed properly, avoiding errors in sampling and issues of differences in how survey questions are actually understood by respondents, aggregation, and compounding. A more broad shortcoming of the surveys, as discussed by Powell and Connaway (2004) is the method’s inherent weakness from the standpoint of internal control and validity.

The interview, as a particular type of survey study, brings its own challenges and opportunities (Hannabus, 1996). It is one of the best methods for, as Hildreth and Aytac put it, “seeing reality through their (interviewees’) eyes, seeking meaning as understood by the subjects of the investigation.” An interesting finding of their paper is that while questionnaire-driven surveys are the preferred research method used by practitioners writing in the LIS field, academic authors prioritized the use of survey-based and semi-structured interviews. One possible reason, implied by Kuruppu (2007), is that by their

nature, interviews are very time-demanding and costly to conduct. In his highly critical paper on research methods in LIS in general, Sturges (2008) also readily acknowledges what interviews are not good at achieving. But in his view, this method is important precisely because of its limitations – because it humanizes both the respondent and the interviewer. Interviews, he argues, also work very well for studying “small but interesting” topics, where data are simply non-existent in amounts large enough to justify typical quantitative research. More significantly, use of the interview method allows library science to effectively ask the kinds of kinds of questions that demand qualitative, not quantitative, analysis; Given (2007) describes it thus:

“Where quantitative approaches are best for addressing *what* has occurred or *how many* events (e.g., counting the number of times a patron used the library’s website), these approaches cannot explain *why* these behaviours happen. Qualitative approaches do just that; they are used to describe things about which little is known...They capture meaning (in the form of individuals’ thoughts, feelings, behaviours, etc.) instead of numbers, and describe processes rather than outcomes.”

In any case, what must be kept in mind is that surveys, interviews, case studies, and all of the other methods of evaluating library resources and services are only tools, not the evaluations themselves. They can be applied appropriately or inappropriately, and used correctly or incorrectly. The analysis must focus not on the tools, but on the underlying studies themselves. In conducting such an analysis, this paper will draw on the criteria proposed by Glynn (2006) and Hildreth and Aytac (2007) to evaluate how rigorous the three studies were, how well their authors explained the process and

limitations, and of course, most importantly, how the authors actually presented their findings.

Claudette Cloutier's (2004) paper on the establishment of the University of Calgary Library Corporate Research Service is a fairly typical example of the use of a case study in library science research, written by one of the direct stakeholders in the service it evaluates. It reviews a specific, highly unique site within a university library. The case study does do a good job of explaining the reasons that led to the establishment of this particular fee-based service, both financial and 'environmental' (the library noticed a marked increase in the number of research requests from patrons not affiliated with the university.) The basic research approach used is descriptive, with a component that evaluates the success of the service while being clear-minded about the unexpected difficulties it faced. The author does take care to explain the particular steps the service undertook, such as marketing, fees, and staff allocation. Her data analysis is very basic, limited to a mention of the overall client base, total volume of requests, extremely broad breakdown of item requests by type, and a general overview of the revenues the service generates, and this is presented entirely in the text, not visually. There is no attempt to engage in any kind of statistical analysis, although it is clear that an opportunity for such analysis is available.

In terms of a critical evaluation, the paper does set out its aim of showing how the fee-based library service established at the University of Calgary has followed the recommendations outlined for such a move in two examples of recent writing on the topic. There was no more extensive literature review per se, however. Both the process



of setting up the service and the reasoning behind the decisions made were explained well; on the other hand, the extremely limited amount of data collected and presented was unfortunate. Likewise, the limitations discussed had to do with the service itself, not with the data collection, so no issues of validity or reliability were specifically addressed. In fact, even given that some data was made available, extrapolating from it to any other case or situation would require significant collection of other statistics that may be relevant to any practitioner looking to replicate this case study in another setting, or even to see if it can be replicated. Future directions in research are also covered only specifically with reference to the University of Calgary case, not to implications the success of the Corporate Research Service may have for other academic libraries. Trying to apply the Glynn criteria to what is essentially a narrative is also difficult – for example, asking about the “population” of a case study is basically a nonsense question. The collection process of even the very limited data provided in the study was not described. One interesting feature of Cloutier’s paper, however, was the inclusion of the Corporate Research Service’s standard user agreement, outlining its policies and fees. The most likely reader of a case study will be interested not only in how effective a particular service or process is, but in the very specific details of its operation, and attaching a primary material of this type to the published case study greatly increases its overall value.

The study (2004) by Khalid Mahmood, Abdul Hameed, and Syed Jalaluddin Haider on attitudes towards fee-based library services in Pakistan – and published in a Malaysian journal - is important in of itself as a good example of the international nature of library and information science. Within the broad country-level limit, it is explicitly site and

context-independent. The research approach used is essentially exploratory; the goal is to get a sense of opinions of potential decision-makers before any policy recommendations are (or can be) made. Because of the stated goal of the study (“to find out and analyze the opinions of library leaders about various arguments in favour of and against fee-based library services”, and to compare those opinions in the Pakistani case specifically to the debate on the same issue elsewhere in the world), the purposive sampling method used to initiate a survey is entirely appropriate. The data collected were primarily quantitative (Likert Scale-ranked responses to a set of positive and negative statements about fees for library services), although the survey instrument included an option for additional self-generated responses. The statistical section was robust, including both descriptive and correlational analyses.

The organization of the paper is quite strong. While the specific research question is not presented until a full five pages into the text, this is more than off-set by an excellent literature review of the debate on fee-based library services in the general LIS literature, and on the specific relevance of this topic to Pakistan. The way the data were collected was described as well, and the data presented did appear to support the researchers’ claimed results. A more visual presentation than a table would have added to the paper, but it is certainly not hurt by the absence of graphs or charts. At the same time, it does not deviate from the tendency that Hildreth and Aytac identify of avoiding raising issues of validity and reliability, even as these kinds of issues are of course present in a purposive survey. Nor does it address the possible limitations of either the sample selection, or the survey instrument. One recommendation for further

research is included, but the conclusion section of the paper is actually more focused on making a policy recommendation.

In comparison to Cloutier's, this type of article yields itself well to an evaluation using Glynn's critical appraisal tool. Section validity scores under the tool are, respectively, 0.5., 0.8., 0.8, and 0.83, for an overall validity of 0.75, exactly at her recommended validity point. Clearly, the score on the population section is significantly below the point, and this bears some additional discussion. The study's authors operationalize "library leaders" in a particular way, and identify survey participants based on a set of subjective criteria that include both actual leadership of a library, but also education, participation in professional activities, contribution to scholarship in the field, and other factors. This clearly has bias, and raises significant questions of exactly how representative the sample is even of the population of Pakistani library leaders – the overall size of which is also not stated. Other issues that the tool brings up are that it is not clear how the debate on fee-based library services is actually playing out in Pakistan and whether this is affecting the responses, and the overall effect of other variables, such as more precise demographic details of the participants.

Thinking about this study critically is complicated. As the first published paper on the topic (at least in the English-language literature), and freely accessible to Western researchers, its inherent importance is undeniable. Likewise, the specific questions asked can be replicated easily in other settings. On the other hand, the issues raised by how the survey population was selected have a significant effect on how the results of the study as a whole are to be perceived. In fact, one may be tempted to argue that,

while anonymity is considered key to survey-based social science research (Barnett, 1998), this is exactly the kind of case where identifying the respondents, or at least listing the overall respondent pool, would add greatly to its external validity.

The final study this paper evaluates, Carl Gustav Johannsen's (2004), follows the passing of a 2000 Danish law that both required the nation's libraries to provide certain services free of charge, and authorized them to seek income-creating opportunities to fund these required services. In the spring of 2003, the author conducted a set of "in-depth interviews" with stakeholders at ten libraries throughout the country, for a total of thirty-eight individual sessions. The topic was to identify and log librarians' attitudes towards the overall concept of fee-based services, and the appropriateness and effectiveness of specific types of services. The study location was site-independent/multi-site, and as per the title of the paper, limited to the public libraries that are covered by the Act on Library Services. The research approach was broadly exploratory, interested in self-reporting and perception, rather than identification of relationships or testing of hypotheses. There was, however, an evaluative aspect, since the author used the results of the interviews to generate a matrix that can be used to conceptualize when a library is considering the launch of income-generating activities. For this kind of approach, the interview, like in the previous paper, aimed at a specifically selected sample, is an appropriate method of research. Whatever data were generated from the interviews were qualitative, and not formatted for statistical analysis of any sort.

The five broad questions the interviews attempted to collect reactions on and thoughts to are mentioned immediately. The literature review is integrated with a discussion on

the justification for the study, and a backgrounder on the evolution of the issues and discourse related to fee-based services in public libraries in Denmark. The interview process was described to some degree, but in a narrative format that did not make it clear whether the interviews were structured, semi-structured, or free-flow/in-depth. The lack of any quantifiable data makes the last the most likely. Accordingly, not only were the study's results not presented visually, there was not even solid indication that they did support the conclusions that Johannsen arrives at. Perhaps most disconcerting was his admission that the interviewees he spoke with were in fact not representative of "either the majority or the typical Danish library leader."

With a purely qualitative study, application of a critical appraisal tool is difficult, verging on impossible. The critical evaluation of the study, then, has to take it as a package. It is best thought of as a preliminary method to generate specific research questions to be tested, rather than as a formal research inquiry in of itself. Its "results" are clearly not generalizable; they represent particular thoughts and experiences of particular respondents, at a particular point in time. These cannot be manipulated, but even tabulating them to generate simply a list of the kinds of income-generating services that Danish libraries do provide to customers is useful. Johannsen does not mention specific directions for future research, but just the fact that his interviews identify a number of these services can then be used to explore particular services in more detail. In addition, among the "results" of the study, he lists a total of eight mini-case studies of actual fee-based services. These are not anonymous – and actually avoid being universally positive. Each presents an opportunity for further exploration as well. Overall, Johannsen's paper is itself more of a critical exploration than an empirical study. Taken

as such, it does make a contribution to the literature on fee-based library services, but its contribution puts it a lot closer to the papers that address the moral and conceptual themes of the issue than to any thorough analysis.

Taken in aggregate, the three papers cover a range of topics relevant to how the debate on what libraries should charge for, why they should (or should not), and how these processes should actually take place. Between Cloutier's paper and Johanssen, the reader can walk away with a fairly good idea about what exactly is meant by "fee-based library service", in different settings, and how libraries have gone about justifying, launching, and operating these services, but not with any firm recommendations.

Johanssen, and Mahmood, et al. both present a spectrum of opinions about fee-based services. These two papers also do a good job of putting the debate into a regional and national context. All three studies paint a fairly positive picture; at least some segment of the library profession in all three countries studied has clearly embraced internal generation of income. Unfortunately, none of the three studies generate results that could be applied in other settings – though neither, with the possible exception of the model in Johanssen, also claims that it should be.

Clearly, as demonstrated both by these articles, and by the dozens of others that have been published on the topic over the last twenty-five or so years, this is an area that yields itself well to analysis of different types. The case study is an intuitive method of looking at how libraries actually go about charging fees for their services. Surveys and interviews give access to how these activities are perceived by stakeholders. However, it seems that after the theoretical discussions on the topic played themselves out, and

the question of why libraries should charge patrons for at least some services was answered to satisfaction, practitioners have been busy establishing and running them, while academic studies have focused largely on both internal and external perceptions of these services. The hard, critical questions – how effective is a fee-based service, does it, in fact, justify its own existence – have largely gone unasked. This is troubling – but also, fairly in line with the findings of Hildreth and Aytac that evaluative research accounts for only some 18% of the recent studies published in major LIS journals. It also brings to mind such recent writing as Ward's (2007) paper on outsourcing/externalization of public library management. Critically evaluating a number of case studies, he finds, raising significant issues for library management in general, that failure to achieve whatever expected goals were presented when these were initialized is actually more or less the typical outcome.

It is not likely that many people go into librarianship with the dream of becoming effective library managers. Yet, library services of all kinds must be evaluated critically, keeping in mind specific goals and relevant benchmarks. The three papers in this study all address interesting aspects of the same issue, but all three largely bypass what is arguably most important aspect. Determining whether fee-based library services actually do what they claim to would have to be based not around case studies or surveys or interviews, but audits, program evaluations, and analyses aimed at identifying "meaningful patterns and trends" (Eldredge, 2004). The results of these, then, could be interpreted and ideally, would be used as the basis of actual policy decisions.

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