

**An Observation and Comparison of
Indian Valley Public Library
And
Borders Books, Music, and Movies**

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Abstract

Two weekday observations were made at a small town public library and a Borders book store. Comparisons are made about the environments of the two entities and its contribution towards making a relaxed informational setting, the technology made available at each setting, and finally the financial picture of each entity in the current economic downturn. The study considers discussions of public versus plural funding of libraries and their relevance to the observations, and the contrast of a commercial enterprise's options in hard times.

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Introduction

In preparing for this paper, I chose to observe a regular public library and a commercial, nation-wide chain book store. The objective was to find evidence of whether or not the economic downturn suffered in the past two years has affected the performances of the two entities towards the goals of their respective mission statements, and if it has affected that performance, how and to what degree this has occurred in each case.

To keep the comparisons as equal as possible, I spent the same amount of time at each place, at about the same time of day, on the same weekday of two different weeks devoid of holidays or anything that might disrupt the regular schedules of the patrons. My goal was to observe each place at a state of equilibrium, so I avoided the weekends that might favor the commercial enterprise over the library, and the after-school hours which may favor the library as it is used for schoolwork during the week. However, in order to get a sample of any possible difference, I returned to each place on the same day in the early evening to observe what I could.

I chose the Indian Valley Public Library (IVPL) in Telford, Pennsylvania for my first observation. I went at 10:30 AM on Monday, October 5, 2009, and again at 4:30 PM that day. I stayed for ninety minutes during the morning and a half-hour in the evening. The mission statement of the library states: "The library offers accessible resources in order to inform, enrich, and entertain persons of all ages" (<http://ivpl.org/Joomla/index.php/about-us>, 2008). Furthermore, an uncredited pamphlet available at the circulation desk entitled "Welcome to the Indian Valley Public Library"

states, "The Indian Valley Public Library provides materials and services in an efficient and helpful manner to residents of Franconia, Lower Salford, Salford, Souderton, Telford, and Upper Salford."

My second choice was the "Border's Books, Music, and Movies" store in Montgomeryville, PA. This is a typical national chain store that sprang up in the 1990's, encouraging browsing and providing a coffee shop and other amenities. I went on October 12, 2009 at 11:30 AM, staying for ninety minutes, and then returning at 6:30 PM the same evening for a half-hour. The mission statement of Border's, a long document available on its official website, contains the following:

"Our Vision: To create richer, more satisfying lives through knowledge and entertainment.

Our Values: Individuality. Borders understands that books, music and movies help shape and define us all, making us individuals—original and unique. What people read and listen to is an integral part of who they are and who they aspire to be.

Community: Borders embraces its role as a vital, contributing member of the community that reaches out to connect with people. We offer knowledge and entertainment, but also a commitment to act as a responsible neighbor and partner in the towns where we live, work and do business..."

(http://www.borders.com/online/store/BGIView_bgiaboutmission, 2009).

At the risk of sounding churlish, it must be added that this is a commercial entity and has the extra, unstated mission of financial profit for its owners, a fact that is omitted in

the above lengthy promotional statement but that remains a defining trait of any business.

Community Profiles

Our two information entities are located in the eastern part of Montgomeryville County, Pennsylvania, straddling the border with Bucks County. This is an area considered part of the suburban Philadelphia region, changing from a rural setting to a more developed area in the past twenty years, but still very homogenous in its demographic makeup.

According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau from 2000, the last census, the combined population of the six areas officially serviced by the IVPL is 41,231 people. In reality, the library covers some areas that have no official coverage in Montgomery County's library system, so regular patrons may come from a pool including another 15,000 – 20,000 residents. The Borders book store has competition from a nearby Barnes and Noble store and small independent book stores. The population of Montgomeryville itself is 12,031 people, but the area which is covered by possible customers that would consider this store "their" Borders store includes the towns of Lansdale (16,071) and Doylestown Township (17,619), as well as other suburban sprawl areas. It's pretty fair to assume that these two entities serve a similar patron pool of between 60,000 to 70,000 people. The Census Bureau's racial breakdown of every one of the identified districts is constant across the board: 75.1% white, 12.3% black, 3.6% Asian, and 9% other ethnic backgrounds (<http://factfinder.census.gov/>, 2009).

At the Indian Valley Public Library, I obtained a lot of information concerning its size and scope from the Head Librarian in a personal interview for another assignment this

past July. The IVPL is a very well-used non-profit public library with about 155,000 titles available (including over 10,000 instructional and popular video titles) along with four databases (POWER library hosted by Ebsco, New York Times, Proquest medical reference, and the Philadelphia Inquirer databases) and microfilm editions of two local newspapers dating back to 1881. Last year 532,689 items were checked out and 21,384 reference questions were answered, making this the second-busiest library in the county.

The Borders staff refused to discuss anything to do with company policies or finances whatsoever. It is known that “the publicly-traded book company received a letter on Dec. 31, 2008 that said if Borders cannot get its stock price above \$1 in six months, the company will be delisted [from the New York Stock Exchange],” an event that did not occur after a judgment on March 25, 2009 (Yen, 2009). This is indicative of the entire national chain, of course, but I witnessed evidence of troubled economics and a decreased scope in its operations upon my observations of the Montgomeryville store.

My observations of the patrons and the collections, in this assignment and in the previous thirteen years I’ve used these two entities, bear out the demographics described above. If anything, I’d have to say that the racial demographic has gone completely over to the majority white patrons as I saw no obviously non-white individuals at all at either place in my observations for this paper.

Scenes and Interviews

The IVPL was a grade school originally, built in the 1950’s. Its layout contains large rooms originally meant to be classrooms for twenty to thirty students; on every outside wall large windows let it lots of sunlight, and the place has enough of the old walls to provide nooks and crannies in which to curl up with something to read. Please refer to

the floor plan and you'll note many chairs, desks, and tables, all arranged so that no one is crowded and everything is accessible. The library is welcoming and provides a great magazine-lined reading room with a coffee station in which I settled down to watch. Over the course of 45 minutes more than a dozen people came and went in the reading room, some checking the morning papers and some settling in for longer reading. It looked like the crowd was older pensioners, pre-schoolers with their mothers, and, on the computer stations in the center of the library, about five young people surfing the Internet, looking at health sites, job searching, and looking for entertainment.

I asked a few questions of the tech services librarian. She told me that with the recent Pennsylvania budget crisis the library had been dealing with the question of how to handle a slashed budget if it would occur. The state Access PA program provides as much as a third of their operating expenses, the rest handled by taxes on the six communities served and by some modest fund raising programs including Friends of the Library, a wine-tasting event, book sales, and donations (which are prominently solicited in the literature and website). If money became a critical problem, she told me they would cut hours rather than services. The worst-case scenario would be the county library system cutting services. If their databases go down, Access PA would be depended upon. If Access PA would be cut, manual service from the staff would try to compensate. Interlibrary loan would go to physical mail as long as the expense could be met. And finally, there's a gentleman's agreement with the Bucks County Library to share resources in the case of an emergency like this. The result of this forethought is that the library is well defended for in the case of financial emergency and has procedures and plans in place to deal with it.

I also spoke with the research librarian, asking if this was a normal Monday morning crowd, which she said it was. Overall, the staff was accommodating, welcoming, and knowledgeable. In terms of meeting their stated mission, they do an excellent job of providing resources to patrons of a wide age range, and provide a welcoming environment to stay and enjoy those resources.

I returned to the library at 4:30 PM and found many more junior- and senior-high school students working mostly online. The demographic mean age of the room had dropped about thirty or forty years but the same serene and efficient atmosphere reigned.

A week later, I went to the nearby Borders. I was greeted at the door by a young man who muttered in a perfunctory way, "Hello, welcome to Borders," as I entered, and went back to his book he was reading. As soon as I was in I noticed a lot less merchandise displayed than I had ever seen in the thirteen years I've lived in the area. I found out the new policy was to only handle the top-selling 10,000 CDs in Borders and the top 5,000 DVDs. The store carried far fewer than that, showing that most of the choices would have to be ordered if one wanted them. There were fewer bargain books and about half of the magazines that had been kept in years past. This is significant because in past years, chairs were scattered about the premises and had many people reading magazines and not buying them.

The gaping empty spots had been consolidated as best they could. Twenty worn leather chairs and a couple of low tables were gathered where the CD section had once stood. It was the only public seating outside of the coffee shop. I sat down and observed for some time. It was mostly middle-aged female customers that wandered the aisles, a

total of about fifteen to twenty people besides the staff of eight. A few 20-something people read Manga in the coffee shop, sipping lattes and hanging out. There were no inviting nooks here, just open spaces.

I spoke with the greeter, who seemed annoyed at the intrusion on his reading. He told me he couldn't discuss company policy with customers and pointedly told me to check the website. I looked around and found a male staff member who looked about forty, an assistant manager. Upon questioning, he was more helpful and said that they no longer had live music concerts like before, they no longer had a lot of book release parties, just a knitting club meeting once a week and an occasional children's reading.

Is Borders achieving their stated mission in this economic downturn? The mission was "to create richer, more satisfying lives through knowledge and entertainment" (http://www.borders.com/online/store/BGIView_bgiaboutmission, 2009). The goods are there, but it's not a free library. If you're willing to pay, you can create a richer life here at Borders, but you'll have leaner menu of choices with which to do it these days.

Supporting Research

After my observations, I felt that three things had caught my interest and made me think: what technology was provided at each location; what was the environment like for relaxing, browsing, and absorbing information; and how the economic crisis was affecting the mission of each location.

Technology was offered to the public at the IVPL by means of Internet access computers, two "kid learning" modules, eight catalog search computers and a vision-impaired patron reader, along with the usual copiers, scanners, and cataloging tools.

Borders had four search computers for their own catalog, and provided free wireless Internet connection in the coffee shop. There was no comparison of quality in providing technology to patrons at all, the library was the only place to go.

As to the environment for relaxing, the library is by far the more genial place. The Borders seemed not to be encouraging patrons to sit and read as they have in the past. One felt the gathered section of chairs was there more to fill up the space the CDs had taken up, and less for the customer's comfort. Harsh overhead lighting, the arrangement of chairs putting you face to face in close quarters with strangers, and the scattered look of the tables completed the picture.

With the library having the edge on two counts, the most interesting aspect raised is the financial one. Libraries have suffered from budget crunches for many years, but recently have reached emergency status. This is occurring at a time when people have less discretionary income to spend and utilize the libraries' free resources rather than purchasing media items of their own, so libraries have an even greater need to have more money to expand their resources. IVPL states its sources of income on its website: "The Library is funded by several sources: state aid from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and tax revenues from the Souderton Area School District and the six municipalities of the Souderton Area School District. Joining the Friends of the Library offers you an opportunity to contribute your time or your financial gifts to the library. Forms are available at the Circulation Desk. Contributions are always welcome" (<http://ivpl.org/Joomla/index.php/funding>, 2008). So IVPL is mostly tax-supported, but welcomes other sources of income.

The balance between these two sources is a hot topic for libraries these days with the argument coming down to whether libraries should be fully funded by taxes or use plural funding with other income streams. When tax income is threatened, the problem is exacerbated. “Hard times bring out the ambiguity in politics. Except for fiscal extremists, most politicians in North America want to support their libraries... Just weeks ago, the budget for the State of Pennsylvania was trapped in an impasse at the legislature. Despite proposed cuts in library programs ranging from 14.3 percent (the House plan) to 15.9 percent (Gov. Ed Rendell's plan) to 55.3 percent (the Senate plan), library advocates hope that the state budget—which must respond to a ten percent decline in state revenues—will maintain level funding for library programs. The House is controlled by Democrats, while the Senate is run by Republicans. Governor Rendell is a Democrat, and apparently library leaders are reluctant to label him either the villain or hero of the situation. Still, the fear persists that the final budget will impose painful, potentially enormous lacerations in library service (Berry, 2009).”

If not from taxes, where does a public library go for funds? Fees for services are one answer, but one fraught with discord: “After a patron complained about the [Internet access] fee to the American Library Association, Judith F. Krug, executive director of ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, urged BPL trustees... to reconsider the fee, contending that ‘those hurt most by public library fees are persons with low or no income, who cannot buy books, rent videos, or proffer a credit card for Internet access.’ Krug went on to emphasize that despite the Association’s belief in local decision-making, ‘fundamental principles of public librarianship should not be compromised [including] free, open, and equal access to information resources’ (Goldberg, 2004).”

Another library an hour's drive distant in Pennsylvania from IVPL has faced the same problem and has moved into non-tax solutions: "The West Chester Public Library's alternative funding efforts can be divided into four categories: fines and fees, individual donations, corporate sponsorships, and grants" (Agosto, 2008). So libraries make up the difference in their bottom line, but at what price?

Thoughts and Interpretations

There is great debate going on in the field about the benefits of public funding versus plural funding. Advocates for multiple sources of funding for libraries claim they're being pragmatic and recognizing that one does what one must do to make library services available despite the difficulties: "Libraries... should consider plural funding strategies. Rather than wasting energies on ill-conceived Campaigns to Save America's Libraries and similar efforts that try to convince governments to give us tax monies they do not have, we should focus on developing new funding models and strategies to help save ourselves (Coffman, 2004, P. 38)." This opinion is met with outrage in some quarters: "We have weathered the Great Depression and World War II; we can get through this recession without radically changing the game plan (Hennen, 2004, p. 44)." Goldberg quotes librarian Sanford Berman as saying when asked if it crosses the line when a company puts its logo or name on library materials: "It is troubling when public libraries become the locales for continuous daily advertising. That is exactly what happens, for instance, when a whole area inside a library is prominently and permanently named, say the Chevron Center, as one was in San Francisco Public Library" (Goldberg, 1998). Agosto also points out that corporations always want something in return for their largesse. She lists the arguments against plural funding as sustainability, reduced tax

support, loss of objectivity, and commercialization of public spaces; her arguments for plural funding include program diversification, community involvement, and increased visibility (Agosto, 2008, pp. 133-137).

With the lines drawn on this issue, what is the reasonable solution? A question dealt with in literature for centuries asks if a man steals a loaf of bread to feed a starving family, is it as great a crime as a regular thief's crime? If taxes don't provide for the public need of a library, should they take extraordinary measures to ensure the support of their services? Libraries are not like bookstores. Their assets are on free loan, while a bookstore must sell their products since there is no state support for places like Borders. "Libraries further distinguish themselves from bookstores, to which they are often compared, by providing quality works that are out of print or no longer economically feasible for bookstores to retain" (Condon, 2005, p. 24). And from what I saw at Borders, economic downturn makes even the in-print books harder to stock and obtain easily.

Weighing the evidence, I feel that a hard-line stance on the public versus plural funding issue isn't appropriate. I see good service and attainment of the stated mission occurring at IVPL. They have a large tax base, but they are open to other streams of income to meet their needs. Nowhere in evidence are any corporate logos or compromising agendas. A little plural funding may be what is needed for continued survival in hard times, but it should be used in moderation and not used to the point of becoming economically dependent on its continuation.

Recommendations and Conclusions

I've always been rather amiable to the presence of Borders in my area; their coffee shop atmosphere, free internet access in a public setting, their selection (high-priced but

extensive in variety), and their cutout section always made it a congenial stopover on a light weekend. If what I read in the papers was true, it was a shame to see the small independent bookstore in crisis and threatened by large chain stores like Borders, but I figured Darwinism would weed out the weak ones and leave a smaller number of great little bookstores emphasizing used and out-of- print books instead of what Borders offered, and serving as much more welcoming community-centered stores in order to survive, something IVPL seems to do well.

After years of concern for the little booksellers, it's strange to contemplate a future without the big chains like Borders. But it seems that the library is adapting and providing what their statement said is important to them. Borders, however, is having difficulties in keeping up the level of service they gave in the past. Their mission statement is rather short on detail and long on general feel-good goals, but it's obvious that as they fall short of their unstated mission of necessary profit, it affects their stated missions of service and availability of materials.

With the current (or hopefully just recent) economic climate, I'm grateful that government and bureaucracies move at a snail's pace. A good public library that is mostly tax-funded has a kind of immunity against the ravages of temporary financial duress. The wheels of democracy and its law-making move very slowly, and by the time anyone is ready to take on the politically damaging act of slashing a library's services the financial danger may have abated, and the library goes on to live another day. Borders, on the other hand, has chapter 11.

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Appendices

Rough notes on IVPL observations (3 pages)

Floor plan of IVPL (1 page)

Rough notes on Borders (3 pages)