

Separate versus integrated collections for GLBT fiction in the public library service: a literature review

Introduction

Little has been written addressing this topic, and within the literature, scholarly writing is outweighed by statements of professional practice or personal opinion. It could be argued that the lack of academic material is not a significant problem, as the question presupposes a desire to meet library users' needs; hence, the opinion of any GLBT library professional or user could be seen as valid. However, as the community is not a homogeneous mass, it is difficult to infer general principles from individual opinions.

Writing on GLBT issues still constitutes a relatively small proportion of library literature, and within this area, writers and academics focus on topics other than separate versus integrated collections. Where access is discussed, the focus is on strategies such as booklists, bibliographies, spine labelling or special displays, and on cataloguing issues (e.g. Gough and Greenblatt, 1990). The researcher therefore initiated a discussion on the topic via the US 'GAY-LIBN' mailing list in addition to carrying out a literature review.

The term 'GLBT' (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender / transsexual) has been used throughout, except where the authors themselves use different terminology.

1. Ease of use

One of the key arguments in favour of separate collections is that GLBT-related materials are easier to find if they are all in one place. Norman's survey of users of Brighton and Hove Libraries' GLBT collections found that 90.7% of respondents held this opinion (1998, 1999). However, the survey was restricted to current users, who might be expected to be happy with the existing system. Moreover, the survey question on separate/integrated collections related only to ease of use and thus did not address all the issues. Norman's argument is however supported by other academic studies (Brett, 1992; Currant, 2002; O'Leary, 2005), professional articles (Fairbrother, 1998) and GAY-LIBN mailing list respondents (2007). CILIP's official statement also recognises that integrated collections can hide stock (2004).

In contrast, respondents on the mailing list pointed out that genre collections can lead to increased difficulty in finding materials due to the subjective nature of genre classification decisions, particularly if a work/author falls into more than one category (e.g. gay sci-fi). This problem was addressed by Schimel (2001) with relation to bookshops. He highlighted some issues not addressed elsewhere in the literature, e.g. whether gay and lesbian fiction should be separated from one another, and whether classification of a work as 'GLBT fiction' should be based on the author's sexuality or that of the characters.

One GAY-LIBN respondent said that integrated collections were more appropriate in libraries than bookshops as users could find items via the catalogue; however, other mailing list respondents felt catalogues were difficult to use, particularly as they may lack subject headings for GLBT fiction (GAY-LIBN, 2007).

2. Positive statement / identity affirmation

Separate collections are also considered important for sending a positive, anti-censorship message highlighting the importance of GLBT literature and its place in

the library. This came through strongly in the surveys of library professionals and GLBT individuals carried out by Brett (1992), Carrant (2002) and O’Leary (2005), and in the GLBT community’s response to the Loud and Proud initiative (Train and Elkin, 2002/03, cited in Goldthorp, 2006).

3. Desire for anonymity / risk of ghettoisation

One frequently-cited argument in favour of integrated collections is that some GLBT users may be anxious about being seen viewing separate collections (Brett, 1992; Fairbrother, 1998; Healy, 1998; Norman, 1998; CILIP, 2004; O’Leary, 2005; GAY-LIBN, 2007). One librarian interviewed by O’Leary commented that issues for a GLBT-themed display in Highfield Library, Sheffield, had risen once the display was moved to a less prominent location. Vincent (1986) recommends temporary displays for this reason.

Moreover, separating out GLBT materials may be perceived as a form of ghettoisation (Brett, 1992; Fairbrother, 1998; Norman (1998 version only); Carrant, 2002; O’Leary, 2005; The Network, 2006; GAY-LIBN 2007). Many of the Denver GLBT respondents to O’Leary’s 2005 survey favoured integration, commenting that the GLBT population should not be segregated “any more than society already has” and that there was no need to “specify the sexuality” of a book (79). However, Brett (1992) found that librarians were more concerned about this than ‘other professionals’, a category which included members of GLBT community groups.

If separate collections are not provided for other minority groups, highlighting GLBT stock could be misconstrued as discrimination (Healy, 1998). In fact, Brett’s survey of three London boroughs (1992) found that separate collections did exist for women’s fiction and black authors, yet 73% of librarian respondents remained opposed to separate GLBT collections.

A number of authors point out that ghettoisation could work both ways – in addition to potentially marginalizing GLBT materials/users, separate collections could result in heterosexual users feeling the materials are ‘not for them’. Integrating materials into the rest of the fiction stock could mean that users who have not yet become aware of their sexuality and neutral or even anti-gay heterosexual users would find and enjoy materials which they might otherwise have overlooked or avoided (Brett, 1992; Schimel, 2001; Carrant, 2002; O’Leary, 2005; GAY-LIBN, 2007). Norman suggests “placing copies of popular titles in the main collection” (1998: 43) in order to facilitate discoveries by heterosexual or closeted users.

4. Risk of vandalism

The risk to GLBT materials of protest, damage, hiding or theft has been used to argue in favour of both separate and integrated collections. One GAY-LIBN respondent argued that the risk was greater for separate collections (2007); this concurs with the opinions of Healy (1998) and the Denver librarians surveyed by O’Leary (2005). However, Fairbrother (1998) and one of the Denver GLBT respondents to O’Leary’s survey suggest that materials in integrated collections are easier to vandalise as they are not under the librarian’s eye.

5. Professional practice

The literature depicts a range of professional practices, reflecting the lack of consensus in opinion. Even within the San Francisco Public Library service, one of the first US public library services to introduce a separate GLBT collection, practice varies between branches (GAY-LIBN, 2007). Additional strategies used by mailing list respondents include labelling with rainbow stickers, bibliographies in print and online, virtual collections and GLBT reading groups. The responses from lis-pub-lis collated for The Network’s ‘Good Practice’ section (2006) cover a similar range of

practices, with additional mentions of travelling collections, special displays and duplicate copies of stock.

The Denver and Sheffield library services investigated by O’Leary (2005) used different strategies: in Denver materials were integrated, although some staff tried to display GLBT materials prominently, whereas Sheffield had separate GLBT fiction collections. O’Leary discovered that respondents “lean[t] towards approval of whichever system was used in their particular city” (98), although further research would be required to discover whether this generally holds true.

6. Consultation with the GLBT community

Consultation with local GLBT community groups is another significant theme in the literature. Norman (1998, 1999) and Goldthorp (2006) carried out GLBT user research and found that the opinion was strongly in favour of separate collections. However, other researchers (Brett, 1992; O’Leary, 2005) found that the issue was less clear-cut, while many of the GAY-LIBN respondents (2007) could also see both sides of the debate. It is difficult to determine at present whether there are any factors which collocate with a preference for separate or integrated collections.

Conclusion

It is evident from the literature that there is no ‘correct’ strategy (Social Exclusion Action Planning Network, 2006): both opinions and practices are divided, with many authors and survey respondents recognising the pros and cons of both approaches. The official line highlights the importance of consultation (CILIP, 2004). A variety of additional strategies are recommended in order to improve access to GLBT materials.

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