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Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library

Media Room Analysis

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Abstract

Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library (TSCPL), located in Topeka, Kansas, has historically been known as a forward-thinking library. In observing the media room at TSCPL, it has become apparent that the library has steadily become important in the promotion of media in libraries by providing a specific room for electronic media, in addition to the standard items found in libraries. In this analysis of the media room workflow for librarians, it was necessary to discover how the workflow could be improved, and what trends TSCPL were employing to accommodate the needs in media information for all types of patrons. Using the analysis will help to understand not only the library usages of the patrons in the media room, but also the professional librarian community that helps to shape TSCPL.

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A Brief History

TSCPL is located in Topeka, Kansas. It began as the Ladies Library Association in 1870 and was located in downtown Topeka. The website containing TSCPL's history, *Setting the Scene* (2008) reports, "Following four months spent in recruiting members who were assessed \$3.00 a year, and pouring over catalogues in view of selecting an initial stock of 150 volumes, "suitable for a ladies' library," the fifty members of the association were notified that their very own library would be opened on Saturday afternoon, March 11, 1871, for three hours, and on Saturday afternoons thereafter, from 3 to 6 p.m." (n.p.). In 1883, the library was dedicated as the Topeka Library Association, occupying a building that was built specifically for the library on the state capitol grounds. In 1953, the Topeka Public Library was moved to its present location at 10th and Washburn and the original library building on the capitol grounds was demolished in 1961. In 1976, the first expansion plan was completed, with its second remodeling and expansion plan of an additional 100,000 square feet of space completed in 2002.

Historically, as *Setting the Scene* (2008) tells us, TSCPL has always had the public in mind with thoughts regarding what can make the patron's lives easier, in addition to making them interested in the library. In 1943, the library created the first bookmobile for Topeka and created a very successful travelling branch. It held about 1200 books and had room for a librarian. The tradition continues into present with TSCPL having three bookmobiles on routes around the county. In 1946, the library welcomed changes for the modern age while allowing dogs, typewriters and telephoning renewals in to librarians. The library also offered a children's branch for busy mothers. In 1954, the library started offering book mailings and in 1956, they

began Sunday hours (n.p.). This commitment to the community continues today, with offering teenagers a game room in keeping with the modern times, to a fully functioning media room. There are meeting rooms and an art museum, study rooms and a quiet area just to name a few items of interest for the Topeka community to take advantage of.

With TSCPL located in the center of Topeka, it is apparent the library has played an important role throughout the development of the city, from 1870, when the library was founded, to the present. TSCPL presence in the center of Topeka is important because it enables all class distinctions to benefit from the programs, books, art, and enrichment activities, and is an example of Topeka's commitment to culture.

Needs Assessment

TSCPL has been serving the communities of Topeka and Shawnee County for 140 years now. While TSCPL continues to have a large impact on the community, it is important to look at the needs of both the public and the library staff. The reputation of being a front-runner in technology has been strengthened in the last 10 years, especially with the new addition where a media room was made a possibility, with a library also known for its helpful librarians and relaxed atmosphere. Therefore, an evaluation of the media room workflow is needed to ensure the commitment to the library's reputation.

Assessing the TSCPL media room workflow needs for the librarians is important because it does directly impact two distinct groups in both the library staff and the patrons. How the media room librarians interact with the patrons, whether it is the person who drives 20 miles to get to the library, or the person who lives down the street, is paramount because of the impact the library will lend to an information search. The major points of this assessment are:

1. To evaluate the needs of staff by exploring the following options:

- a. incorporating the roving reference model, or
 - b. the alternative of having more reference librarians staffing the media room's help desk
2. To explore the relationship between the media room help desk and the reference room desk, in order to help facilitate better communication and workflow processes, making inquiries easier for both staff and patrons.
 3. To produce workflow designs for possible implementation ideas.
 4. To investigate ideas for signage that would improve facility navigation for patrons, therefore benefiting staff by providing opportunities for other duties.

Analysis

First Point

Upon completing a period of observation at TSCPL, it became apparent that the idea of incorporating a roving reference model would not work, for the simple reason that the librarians need access to a computer at all times to answer questions presented by the patrons. If the librarian was not attached to a station, but rather mobile in the media room, the access to the library side of the catalog would be limited. While this model has been incorporated into some libraries, the roving librarian works best in libraries where the reference questions are infrequent. As busy as the media room desk is at TSCPL, the roving model will not help in the redesign of the workflow patterns.

Upon further observation, the alternative of having more staff in the media room does appear to be a viable option. It would, however, require some relocation of staff members, or possibly the hiring of more support staff. One idea is creating an area specifically for support staff, producing space for shelving and also for answering directional questions, including questions from patrons requiring help with the printers, copiers, and the machines used to add money to their library cards.

If this plan of creating an area is not an option for the library, it would still be beneficial to have additional support staff to look for items that are not in the media room. Examples of this would be going across to the bookmobile building, downstairs to the circulation room to search for items, or even across to the children's movie area to look for titles shelved there. This would free up valuable time for librarians to answer the next person in line, and also keep the media room desk staffed at all times. It is true that during the observation period, there were times of idleness, in which the support staff would do other duties as assigned.

One other idea, which has been implemented by the Libraries of Claremont Colleges, is to redesign the media desk to create an attached desk for support staff. As reported by Gunter and Snyder (2007), "Three individual service desks (reference, information, and search center assistance) were merged into one location" (p. 26). Their desk is staffed by reference librarians, in addition to a support staff member, and possibly a computer technician. This model would benefit TSCPL also in that it would separate the questions from patrons into appropriate lines and might lessen the amount of time spent on one patron. The desk is already situated in such a way that the transformation to this model would not be a drastic change. However, proper signage would have to be utilized for patrons to discern which part of the desk they need to approach in order to get the appropriate assistance.

Adapting a system of wireless headsets has also been discussed by other libraries and could possibly be used to create communication between the media room librarians and circulation staff, enabling librarians to stay at the desk while items are being located down in circulation. As mentioned by Martin and Kenny (2004), "Reference staff would be equipped with wireless communicators to seek assistance from colleagues" (p. 71). Currently, TSCPL has walkie-talkies, but these seem to be used mainly by the supervisors, which tend to be observing

the different points of the library. The librarians staffing the media room desk do not use them, whereas if they had a simple way to communicate with the circulation employees, it would help them to keep the media room desk staffed.

Second Point

The second point of assessment was also observed and the outcome was not a communication problem between the adult services librarians on both the media room and reference desks, but rather a break-down of communication between the adult services librarians and the library staff of other departments. One librarian stated in the questionnaire that “Communication between our department and other departments is...a significant problem” (personal communication). In fact, beneficial communication was observed between the two desks on numerous occasions, relating to one librarian referring to another, whose expertise in business reference is known, to transferring patrons to the main reference desk for book related questions. The cross-over between the two rooms does create instances of turmoil, especially when there is a line at the reference desks; however, once the patron is transferred to the other department and helped, everyone returns to business as usual.

As a result of the observed assessment, further attempts at communication between the circulation area and the adult services librarians would strengthen both departments. The media room librarians would benefit the most, because it could possibly begin discussions on ideas to create a better shelving plan and eliminate the backflow issue downstairs in the circulation area. Another area that increased communication would benefit is in the children’s/young adult section. The media room librarians are often asked to find movies that might be over in this room, and have to physically walk the patron over to find the requested title. Perhaps some plan of action could be established regarding procedures for when this example occurs.

Third Point

Regarding the third point of assessment, observation and research were important to ascertain what workflow requirements would be for a redesign to help the librarians. Upon discussing the problem with the media room librarians, the most conversation generated was the backlog issues in the circulation department and having to search for items downstairs, thus taking them away from the desk.

Upon visiting two library branches of the Kansas City Kansas Public Library (KCKPL) system, the Main Library and the East Wyandotte Library, both of which had similar media rooms designs, what Anderson (2006) said made sense, “Storage spaces behind or adjacent to the desk are still preferred” (p.36). Both KCKPL branches visited for observation have backflow rooms available to the media room. Furthermore, both libraries created these rooms directly behind the reference desk, creating a working space for librarians and solving the backlog issue of the high turnaround volume of the compact discs (CDs) and digital versatile discs (DVDs). While TSCPL just recently created the holds room in the front of the media room, a space similar to that would be useful for a backlog room, and the media accumulating in the circulation department would be easier to access and shelve.

Another issue that has generated much discussion is the DVD dispenser. There have been several discussions in recent literature with ideas about this subject also. Since TSCPL already has a DVD dispenser, the issue is not with buying this technology, but rather improving it. Currently, TSCPL has a DVD dispenser that allows for one person at a time to pick up or return their DVDs. At Libramation, Inc., (n.d.) there is an example of a machine that has three windows and one slot (image submitted on next page), designed for one person to retrieve their item(s) and two other patrons to create the order for delivery through the slot (n.p.). During the

observation period, it was not discussed how many DVDs the current dispenser accommodated, but this model holds 3078 DVDs and would assist an additional two patrons at a time, lessening the amount of time a patron would stand in line.



Photo courtesy of www.libramation.com

Another possibility regarding DVDs in general is to adopt the Netflix® model at TSCPL. One library, Hayward Public Library in California, has done this, with the basic concept of the patron paying a set fee every month, being allowed to check out a set number of movies, but not have a due date or a late fee for the titles they have checked out. As Oder (2009) states, “the fines-free library loan program...aims to lure back library users who find their accounts blocked...and give up on the library”(n.p.). While this might have some patrons concerned at first, it is an entirely optional plan, with those not interested still allowed to check out a set number of DVDs which have a due date and late fees associated with non-returned movies. It would be interesting to see if that is a viable option to create income for the library, or if there would be more profits in late fees, and to discover how many of TSCPL’s patron population would utilize this model.

A different approach to this model is that some public libraries are beginning to offer movies as digital downloads, much like ebooks and music are available for download to patrons. As Netherby (2007) discusses, more libraries are “signed on to deliver more downloads”, for DVDs as a way for libraries to keep themselves relevant to the public (n.p.). TSCPL is part of the State Library of Kansas’ Overdrive system that supplies audio books, ebooks, music and videos to patrons. However, while some videos are offered for download, the selection constitutes older movies, not the new releases that most patrons are asking for. The Denver Public Library offers “eflicks” for patrons and while browsing through the available options, the choices did appear to be somewhat old-fashioned also. Perhaps the cost of the ownership for these new release titles has been the factor in libraries being dissuaded from purchasing the titles that are bringing the patrons into the media room.

Examining the two public libraries in the KCKPL system resulted in an idea for the DVD section of the media room. The Main Library had their movie titles in shelves that lined the outside walls of the room. It was similar to a regular movie rental business, like Blockbuster®, in that the movies were in alphabetical order, and in certain genres, much like how the DVDs are shelved in TSCPL, but they lined the wall instead of being in a section in the middle of the room. This layout seemed to spread the patrons out so that they were not bumping into each other, enabling their DVD browsing to be more relaxed.

It is possible this has been attempted before at TSCPL. However, it might be interesting to see how this layout would affect the browsing patterns of the TSCPL patrons. A new layout would create more room to browse, and it would seem familiar to the patrons who have rented from Blockbuster®, or other movie rental businesses. Currently, the computers line the walls of the media room at TSCPL, but with a new layout, the computers could be put into groups,

creating a space that would cause less confusion for both the librarians and patrons. This layout would also allow for higher DVD shelving without closing the room off and making it feel cramped. It would also allow for more shelving to be added to the room, lessening the backlog in the circulation area.

Another comment from observing the Main Library is about the CD units in the media room. The units at the Main Library were approximately five feet tall and had three drawers per unit, all which pulled out, much like a dresser drawer. These drawers had built-in compartments where CDs were shelved standing upright with the spine easily noticeable with the title. The Main Library had their CDs in alphabetical order by genre in the drawers, with the genre printed on the outside making it easy for patrons to go directly to the bin they wanted. They have three of these racks, double sided in the middle of the room. The racks TSCPL currently have do store the CDs; however there are only two of them, which do not have the capacity to store all of the CDs the library has, creating a backlog problem down in circulation. New racks would create the space for the backlogged CDs and also serve to help the librarians from having to go downstairs to look for titles a patron might want.

During the observation period, there were numerous instances of computer problems occurring, with the librarians helping as much as they could. Most times it was human error; not being able to find the print button, or not finding the right drive for the document the patron needed. However, some problems needed an actual computer technician. The problems that could have benefited from some expertise ranged from the drive ports not working correctly on the computer, to having problems connecting to the internet. It would seem that with as many public computers the media room has, there should be a staffed computer help desk for problems

the patrons are experiencing. This computer help desk would also create some relief for the librarians as they could focus more on reference questions and have the desk fully operational.

During the time of observing the TSCPL media room, it seemed that many patrons were viewing the librarians with a vending machine mentality. The patron would ask a question, get the answer they needed, and then walk away. In many cases, it is information on whether there is a certain movie available, and if not, can it be put on hold. Some patrons were repeat customers to the vending machine, always asking the same questions of different titles, rather than looking it up themselves. While the goal is to provide great customer service, it seems there could be more catalog instruction in the reference interview, resulting in less patrons standing in line. The media room does have two computers in the very back that are strictly for catalog use, but they are not accessible for patrons entering the media room. Also, there are public computers that have the catalog available, but patrons have to log on, and often they are all filled. Catalog computers positioned at the entrance to the media room could free up the librarians from repeated unnecessary questions and create an access point for the patrons that would use it to find the information they need.

Lastly, a possible redesign of the circulation area in both staffing and shelving techniques would benefit the media room greatly. During the observation period, the backlog of items waiting to be shelved was three to four days. While the economy is in a slump and the library needs funding to hire more employees, more shelvers would help the backlog issues and create a smoother working environment for the librarians. Hiring a consulting firm to come in and give ideas for redesigns and strategic planning would increase the efficiency of the library, and enable it to compete for the public's use. One such company called R2 (2010) says this, "...libraries need to reinvent their operations, organizations, and services to demonstrate their value to their

users and their host institutions and to compete effectively with Google and other Channels for the discovery and delivery of information” (n.p.). It is important to reinvent the way the library operates, if need be, to provide services that work in conjunction with both the librarians and the patrons it serves.

Fourth Point

Upon interviewing some patrons that utilize the media room, it became apparent the signage for the room was deficient. One individual was not sure what the room was until it was explained to them the layout and items located in the room. The sign on the outside of the room is not very strategically placed. Once in the room, there is directional signage and also some identification signage, but they tend to blend in with the walls and shelves, making them non-functional. At Cornell University, Agarwal et al, (2004) says, “there should be no obstructions between the signs and the user’s point of view” (p. 14). While this is not a problem in the media room, the types of signs it does has do not typically grab the patron’s attention upon entering. Agarwal et al, (2004) does say the signs should be “blue or green, and square or rectangle, have good distance legibility, have an eggshell finish, good contrast between the background color and word color, and be the correct font size” (p. 23).

With a redesign of the signage, patrons will hopefully pay attention to how many movies they can check out at a time, where the printing station is, and what the fines are for late return on movies. Also, the CD call numbering sometimes presents problems to patrons, and the chart explaining the call numbers is not noticeable, but with a different color, it might stand out enough for patrons to see and read. This redesign of signage would help the librarians at the desk by providing answers to patrons without them coming to the desk to ask them, thus shortening the line at the desk.

Conclusion

This analysis observed at the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library could be put into action starting with the small, easily changed suggestions. Library staff could put a suggestion box at the media room desk and see what other needs the community is interested achieving. Moving on to the bigger, more intensive projects might take some initiative of the staff to talk with the library board. This can be done, however, if TSCPL realizes the needs of the patrons come before money issues.

In preparing this analysis, it is evident that TSCPL is still a library geared toward the community. However, there has been an increase of electronic format information and entertainment, and with that come changes in the needs of the librarians and patrons. TSCPL must incorporate these needs into the current environment of the library to ensure the usage of the community and to thrive as a place of knowledge for the Topeka area.

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