Library 451[1]:

Fit the First[2]: Looking for 'books'

This saga started quite innocently and very uncontroversially. I wanted to donate some expensive, slightly out-of-date technical books to Newham library. This, on the basis of new skills and hobbies in a borough that always needs them. All donations were refused.

I was told that the selection of books and management of them was via a third party and that I couldn't donate. I thought that's 'interesting' and left the whole subject for a while, concentrating on other things. Also, I'd scoured (on the basis of several years earlier, in Tower Hamlets) the shelves for IT books of 'substance' Code Complete[3], Applied Crytography[4], and Software Engineering[5], say. Or something on Linux, open source tools and other (my phrase, pace Illich[6]) 'technologies of liberation'. After all, in principle, Newham is a Labour borough and 'therefore' a socialist borough. What I actually found on the shelves was Mac for Dummies, Excel for Dummies etc. etc. nothing challenging or educative. I'm not against these particular books but not as a exclusive diet.

Next, I broadened my investigation to fiction and other categories. I couldn't find any Dostoevsky, Faulkner, Hesse or

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1   I can't find *this*, either, another reason for title.
2   I can't find *this*, either.
3   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Code_Complete
4   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruce_Schneier#Publications
5   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_Sommerville_(software_engineer)
6   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan_Illich

Kafka for example, searching through fiction alphabetically as a sad person might do. Incidentally, I'm not a reading snob and read an enormous quantity of detective fiction especially during the winter months. In politics, I could find only a few books and some mis-shelved, since this is a 'socialist' borough, I'd expect In Place of Fear[7], for example and, at least some kind of Marx introductory reader, Marx for Beginners (Rius, this is pretty good, actually), even.

What I did find here was best sellers (AKA high-promoted by publishers), (YA) young adult, and chick lit. All of these on the 'promotional' new books tables. I have nothing against any of these but they are not a complete diet. Broccoli as well as chocolate biscuits.

Some Twitter exchanges followed, patronising on their side, that they were happy for members of the public to make 'suggestions' (that presumably they would studiously ignore, I didn't try, see Fit the Second).

Fit the Second: Interrogating the 'library'

Now it was time to a) get an overview of the complete Newham stock and b) find out about the third party. With regard to stock, I'm maintaining a distinction between a) stock in the murky multi-borough system b) shelved permanently in Newham c) promoted on tables etc.

In (fairly) good faith, I thought about the idea of 'suggestions', however, before making any I wanted an overview of the catalogue and what's already regularly available in the

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7   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aneurin_Bevan

borough, so that I was not duplicating existing stock. Some curiosity, as well, that thing about the cat is *fake news*.

So here's the FOI request[8] for the catalogue. Here are some extracts from the reply. I've amended the status to refused, since effectively they're doing that by prevaricating:

It is not possible to recover a CSV file of the complete book catalogue from our library management system. In an attempt to comply with your request, contact has been made with the suppliers of this system to enquire as to whether conversion to a CSV file may be possible. As you noted in your request, the numbers of entries run into the hundreds of thousands, to be extracted from the full multi-borough catalogue of eight million titles across London.

Incidentally, I've redone my calculation for 8 million records this is about 500Mb for the extract. It'll fit on a small USB stick. And then:

Despite a number of attempts, the suppliers have confirmed it is not possible to complete this exercise without further extensive work on the conversion of the data, to include each of the four headings of information per title entry requested, to a server and then compilation of multiple reports

8   https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/
     request_for_library_catalogue#incoming-1672858

I actually have some sympathy with this, it's probably a problem created by Marc[9], an ancient standard, developed in the USA. TL:DR

The future of the MARC formats is a matter of some debate among libraries. On the one hand, the storage formats are quite complex and are based on outdated technology. On the other, there is no alternative bibliographic format with an equivalent degree of granularity. The billions of MARC records in tens of thousands of individual libraries (including over 50,000,000 records belonging to the OCLC consortium alone) create inertia.

However, my sympathy is limited by this[10], for example. There are almost certainly other programming libraries too. They probably didn't try *very hard*, after all, I am just a *member of the public* and a *resident*. I didn't send this to the Information Commissioner *yet*.

But the upshot is, apparently, according to Newham Libraries, no-one has a decent overview of the complete catalogue. Probably, I didn't try this, no-one has an overview of section, politics or philosophy, let's say?

Next, the inaccessible catalogue is being managed (and run?) for multiple boroughs using (in my opinion) clunky, closed source American software[11]. Incidentally, SirsiDynix is now owned by ICV Partners, an American private equity company, so I doubt there will be much innovation, since private equity is usually and essentially extractive.

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9   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MARC_standards
10   https://metacpan.org/pod/MARC::Record
11   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SirsiDynix

SirsiDynix, apparently, isn't a big open source fan either:

On October 29, 2009, the WikiLeaks Project obtained a document from SirsiDynix taking a negative view of open source projects as compared to proprietary products, including risks of instability and insecurity.

Why would they, private equity doesn't have a notion of public good, does it? Can't make high returns from it either.

Next, since the shelved, promoted and 'visible' part of the library is full of unchallenging *mush* (I'm exaggerating slightly), who or what is choosing these books?

The answer is, drum roll, Collection HQ[12][13], *the world's leading collection performance improvement solution.* They use Evidence Based Stock Management[14], in a (several) words, *never mind the quality, feel the width*. This is essentially, I believe, algorithmic, based on checkouts, sales popularity and other indicators. However, since the algorithm(s?) are hidden in proprietary closed source software, this is informed speculation on the matter.

This is the Newham FOI[15] on the actually selection procedure, which doesn't reveal very much, except a great many meetings.

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12 https://www.collectionhq.com/
13 On April 18, 2016 Follett Corporation announced their acquisition of Baker & Taylor (owners of CollectionHQ). Follett is a top provider of technology, services and print and digital content to PreK-12 libraries, schools and higher education institutions.
14 The methodology comprises of a framework that guides practitioners through a phased journey towards collection performance excellence. *What does that even mean*?
15 https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/673683/response/1617707/attach/html/4/817230%20FOI%20RESPONSE.pdf.pdf.html

It is also (apparently) is mainly concentrated on new publications, rather than the ambition to have a well balanced catalogue with shelved books from a selection of non-YA, non-chicklit, non-Dummies. This list[16], for example, might be a 'start', lots more work to do here though.

I've also made a distinction between 'held', 'shelved' (but where?) and 'promoted', since the library has used a certain amount of sophistry around 'held' (somewhere in the system in some participating borough, not good enough). Most of what is promoted is, in fact, *mush*.

Fit the Third: Where We Are Now

Meanwhile, in summary:

- We have a closed source, US based and private equity owned library management system that apparently we are locked in to.

- We are unable to take an overview of the whole catalogue, somewhat essential for making balanced decisions and adding and completing the stock

- To some extent, at least, new additions are suggested by a closed algorithmic process owned by a US based digital company with its focus mainly based in the USA

The result is abysmal for broad culture but especially civics and political theory in the borough. We already have high apathy and abstention, we're clearly working on abolishing reasoned choice too. That's apart from the hole where good

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16   https://markmanson.net/best-books/nonfiction

literature might be, partially controlled and burnt by America's Library 451[17].

17 Fahrenheit 451. You guessed it though, didn't you? In later years, he described the book as a commentary on how mass media reduces interest in reading literature.[7]