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## Practioners of Panic and the Culture of Fear

Fearmongering, or, more accurately, the culture of fear, is pervasive in our society today. It's used by politicians to justify everything from increased military spending to crackdowns on civil liberties. Closer to home, it's used by some in the library profession to justify limiting services to specific demographics. And it's being used by many, many people simply to line their own pockets because, as we all know, fear sells.

Fear, in the world of libraries, usually comes in the form of homeless, teens, and gangs (the latter two often being confused as one group). As we open our doors to more and more people, as we try to expand our service offerings to a wider audience, we inevitably cause some people to worry about certain new "elements" being invited into the library. Teens, in this instance, are usually the primary target of such fearmongering. Teens are seen as unruly, unworthy, and downright dangerous.

Often times this fear of teens is accompanied by a fear of computers. Computers breed problems, many say. The more computers you have, the more problems you'll have. This is a popular mantra among the fearmongers. They see MySpace and think child predators. They see YouTube and think porn. Social networking, to them, is simply another tool for sexual deviants and child molesters.

Lock your doors to everyone but your traditional users, they cry. Make them read books, they say. If someone simply comes into your library to sit then kick them out for loitering, they say. And if they dare come in to play a game or have a conversation or, worst of all, use your library as a commons area, well, then these people must be tossed as soon as possible, preferably with a police escort.

Why, you ask, am I so upset about these fearmongerers, these purveyors of the culture of fear? Because they have the ability to scare our staff, scare our customers, and scare the politicians that fund our libraries.

In this post 9/11 world the number of snake oil salesmen selling their elixirs to fear and insecurity has grown exponentially, yet the wares they peddle, the solutions they offer, hold almost as much promise as that which was sold by the alchemists Sundaesan and Bockris when, in 1994, they tried to sell the world on cold fusion.

When libraries face growing numbers of teens, increased computer usage, and nontraditional usage of their space, we should not respond with the draconian crack-down often called for by those practitioners of panic, those dealers of dread. Closing our doors, locking down our computers, and reserving our spaces only for "true users" of libraries will do nothing but seal our fate in the coming years and doom us to ultimate failure.

Now please do not misunderstand. I know that there are many urban (URBAN) libraries that face serious issues relating to crime, and those issues must be dealt with. But for the vast majority of libraries the problems they face do not rise to the level of action being called for these hucksters.

We should not respond to teens by making them hate our libraries. We cannot tell our users that they must "turn off" their cell phone when we know (we KNOW) that cell phones are far more than simply telephones – they are text messagers, they are emailers, they are mini-computers that our users have come to rely upon far more than we seem to realize.

And we cannot look at every customer as an enemy, as a potential criminal, because, as soon as we do this, we are no better than the shop owner who follows every customer around, distrusting their every move. We still trust those people who come into our buildings. We are prepared and trained to deal with problems, yes, but we see our users as good, as worthy of our trust and effort. If we give in to the paranoia, to this culture of fear, then we lose.

## → Comments

If people really are saying "lock out the teens" or "follow each of them around," I agree that they're irrational fearmongers.

I'd be interested in seeing some examples of such fearmongering. I admit that I haven't seen any such talk.

I have seen suggestions that it's possible to go overboard in courting some groups of new users such that it alienates strong library supporters--that some balance may be worth seeking. That's quite different than ignoring badly-served groups or "looking at every customer as an enemy."

Examples? I'm sure this isn't a strawman, but it's a level of absolutism I just haven't encountered.

Posted by: [Walt Crawford](#) | [June 6, 2007 07:03 PM](#)

I recognize fear mongering and believe that it is epidemic. However, the fear does not start with us being fearful of patrons, it starts with administration that does not share its vision, its library stats, its plan or information with those who deal with the patrons. That is where the library truly breaks down.

Posted by: Cindy | [June 11, 2007 02:43 PM](#)

Thank you for writing this Michael. I would question what Cindy is saying though: I don't believe that fear starts with a closed-door administration. Some fear does. But not all. Not most, even. Most starts on the front lines, with people who are stressed, overloaded, and wanting to avoid any point of contact that will involve anything negative. That results in avoidance, fear, and anger. And Walt--many libraries are saying "lock out the teens" and "let's not have teen programs--that would bring teens in and we don't want that." Give me five public libraries and I'll point out three with policies or practices to that effect. It's sad, but it's true. Oh, and Michael: it's "Practitioners" not "Practitioner." I almost missed it myself until spell check caught it on my own post linking to yours :)

Posted by: [Sarah Houghton-Jan \(Librarian in Black\)](#) | [June 15, 2007 08:35 PM](#)

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