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Evangelists of culture: One Book programs and the agents who define literature, shape tastes, and reproduce regionalism



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ABSTRACT

The evangelists of culture are mid-level professionals who engage directly with the public. Sociological theories of cultural authority or popular demand fail to explain decisions made at this juncture. An analysis of 3110 selections made by 567 One Book programs, together with interviews with One Book program leaders from all 50 states, reveals that while those people working on the front line of culture both share the literary tastes of cultural authorities and recognize contemporary reader preferences, their choices do not reflect either. Instead, their selections are creative, the product of institutional needs, professional agendas, and a persistent tropism toward regional authors and themes. One Book programs perpetuate a culture of place – literary regionalism – that resists both elite tastes and market forces.

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1. Introduction

The reading class is that portion of the public who does some considerable amount of reading in their leisure time, reading that is not necessary for work, studies, or daily life.² Members of the reading class are self-aware, they see reading as almost sacred, and they encourage other people to read more. In this, they are cultural evangelists.

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¹ The authors' names are in alphabetical order; they worked equally on this research.

² For a review of the reading class, see [Griswold \(2008\)](#).

Many images can represent the outreach efforts of the reading class – educators, health workers, gift givers, the marketing wing of some literary-industrial complex – and this paper offers a religious metaphor: professional members of the reading class are evangelists, fighting at the front line of culture to convert people to reading. Examples include teachers, professors, writers, editors, publishers, journalists, and – the subject of the present research – librarians.³ While they offer pastoral care to non-professional members of the reading class, they direct their outreach to non-readers (the reading class in general tends to associate the failure to read with ignorance, inequality, narrowness, and/or intolerance). Non-readers have endless sources of easy entertainments and gadgets, so evangelists believe they must be zealous, fighting such distractions and proselytizing to win over new readers.

We are particularly interested in the reading-class professionals who operate at the front line, dealing directly with the public. Behind them are the upper levels of an organizational hierarchy, managers who handle administration, logistics, and the flow of information. We might think of publishers, Library of Congress staff, university administrators, *New York Review of Books* editors, and directors of public library systems all as such.⁴ In contrast, teachers, booksellers, lecturers, and librarians have direct engagement with the public, and they energetically try to influence its reading habits and tastes. This paper investigates their choices and the resulting cultural consequences.

2. The front line of culture

Sociologists tend to envision the direction of cultural influence as proceeding from either the top or the bottom of some socio-cultural hierarchy. The image of top-down control comes in two versions: the stratification version whereby elites mandate and control cultural productions and tastes, generally in support of the status quo and their own positions on top of it, or the culture industry version whereby gatekeepers channel cultural flows, here motivated by profit-seeking although the effect also supports the status quo. The bottom-up image sees cultural products and choices as forms of popular expression, and it too comes in two versions: one emphasizes markets wherein consumers vote with their wallets and the other emphasizes popular culture, often resisting elite domination, whereby the people's tastes and preferences just keep bubbling up.

These are ideal types, of course, and most theories are dialectical, but the point for the present analysis is that the flow of influence is seen as initiating at one extreme or the other of some hierarchy of social and/or cultural advantage. As suggested previously, one can envision this as a battle for hearts and minds, where the forces of enlightenment are indoctrinating the masses or, conversely, where people are occupying and defending their space of cultural freedom. Educational institutions look rather precisely like the former, while Internet hackers, leaders, and bloggers look like the latter.⁵ The outcome of the struggle for cultural influence is determined either by the strategies of the generals or by the resistance of those the generals seek to overcome.

On the front lines are professionals, who are philosophically aligned with the enlightenment mission and who are in direct contact with the public that the mission seeks to influence. Teachers would be a familiar example, ministers and rabbis another, and librarians – the objects of the present research – yet another. While such people work to carry out the organizational mission, they have some room for maneuver, as when a priest looks the other way at parishioners using birth control or

³ Non-professionals, especially parents, can be evangelists for reading as well, though they focus on small and typically intimate pools of potential converts rather than on the public at large. For the contradictory position of book industry professionals, see Miller (2006) and Thompson (2013).

⁴ In our evangelist metaphor, these folks are roughly comparable to the bishops of many Christian denominations, people whose dealings are primarily with other members of the organizational staff rather than with congregants or potential converts. Sociologists (e.g., Abbott, 1988) have shown that in professions and organizations, the most prestigious positions are those at furthest remove from the people outside the organization, from the actual patients, clientele, public, congregants, students, or – in the case at hand – general readers. Universities encourage their faculty to engage in public service and community outreach, for example, but professional prestige does not accrue to these activities; instead it goes to research addressed to a small niche of other academics, far away from the public.

⁵ The top-down view, essentially Marx's idea of the ruling class using culture to legitimate its dominance, is associated with the work of Bourdieu (1984) and his followers. The bottom-up view, which emphasizes people's capacity for resistance and agency, is associated with members of the Birmingham School (e.g., Willis, 1977; Hebdige, 1979) and with popular cultures studies (Fiske, 1987), Radway's (1984) study of the romance novel offering an exemplary case.

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