

Circ Shift

by Barbara Hoffert
Mar 14, 2019 | Filed in [News](#)

As subjects realign and circulation slips for the first time since 1999, librarians find ways to forge ahead.

Since its inception in 1998, *LJ*'s annual materials survey has tracked budget and circulation statistics in public libraries nationwide. This year, owing to the increasing complexity of the materials libraries collect, we've moved the focus to circulation alone, leaving financial matters to the annual budget survey (see "More Service than Circ"). It proved a particularly timely decision. In 2018, for the first time since 1999, circulation stumbled.

In the intervening years, crowned by 2009's impressive seven percent increase overall, circulation has headed upward, though sometimes meagerly: last year's increase was only 0.9 percent, and percentage increases have been trending downward since 2013. But in 2018, circulation fell by 0.5 percent overall and sometimes by as much as ten percent. Fully 40 percent of respondents saw circulation decrease.

According to the budget survey, last year's materials budget bloomed by a healthy 2.4 percent, so a lack of materials can't explain circulation's poor showing. Reasons given for the downturn range from bad weather to a good economy to introducing more accurate counting methods. But looming above them all is the problem posed by media, a big source of circulation energy that last year blew a fuse.

TRENDING OF CIRCULATION SOURCES								
MATERIALS	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Books	67	63	63	58	60	57	55	57
Ebooks	2	3	4	5	5	8	7	9
Media Netted	29	32	31	34	32	31	35	31
Audiobooks				6	6	5	6	5
Downloadable audio				2	2	3	4	4
DVD/Blu-ray				23	21	19	19	18
Streaming media							2	1
Music CDs/music				3	3	3	4	2
Other electronic products					1	2	2	2
Other	2	2	2	3	3	2	1	2

SOURCE: *LJ*/MATERIALS SURVEY 2019

Since 2009, when this survey began tracking media circulation, its contribution to the mix has risen, if bumpily; in 2017, media constituted 35 percent of total circulation. But in 2018 (see "Trending of Circulation Sources," below) that figure stepped back significantly to 31 percent as the circulation of DVD/Blu-rays and physical audiobooks fell by 2.3 percent and four percent, respectively. (Borrowing of these materials has been decelerating for several years.)

Though the circulation of downloadable audios pepped up by nearly ten percent and that of streaming media by over seven percent, these gains did not offset the losses. One reason: streaming media, offered by under half of respondents, makes up only one percent of total circulation overall.

NEW EXPECTATIONS

Kathryn King, Fort Worth Public Library, TX, neatly sums it up. "We are seeing a significant shift from physical to digital," she explains. "We have increases for our digital materials in the range of 25–27 percent. Unfortunately, it isn't enough to make up for the drops in the physical materials, particularly our DVDs and Blu-rays."

RELATED →

INFODOCKET

Beth McNeil Appointed New Dean For Libraries And School Of Information Studies At Purdue University

by [Gary Price](#)

INFODOCKET

National Science Foundation Releases 2019 "Women, Minorities, And Persons With Disabilities In Science And Engineering"

by [Gary Price](#)

INFODOCKET

National Endowment For The Humanities (NEH) Announces \$28.6 Million In New Grants, 233 Projects Awarded Funding

by [Gary Price](#)

INFODOCKET

Librarian Of Congress Testifies Before U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee Re: LC FY 2020 Funding Request

by [Gary Price](#)

INFODOCKET

New Report From Tow Center For Digital Journalism: "A Public Record At Risk: The Dire State Of News Archiving In The Digital Age"

by [Gary Price](#)

INFODOCKET

Cambridge University Library And Heidelberg University Library Announce Major Project To Digitise More Than 800 Treasured Medieval Manuscripts

by [Gary Price](#)

[More →](#)

TOP STORIES

BUDGETS & FUNDING

More Service Than Circ

[LISA PEET](#)

BUDGETS & FUNDING

King goes on to explain how current cultural assumptions are impacting circulation and not just of media: "I think our entire customer base is undergoing a change in their expectations, and waiting weeks or months for a new book or DVD just isn't considered okay anymore.... If I have the money I can just order it off of Amazon and not have to wait my turn in a hold queue."

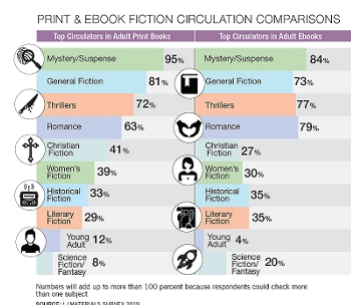
From 2011 to 2018, print circulation fell steadily from 67 percent of total circulation to 57 percent, with an uptick in 2018, while ebooks marched from two percent of total circulation to nine percent. The ebook success story would seem like a circulation booster, but while three quarters of *LJ*'s respondents did report increases in ebook borrowings, the rate of increase has slowed consistently in the last few years, from 18.4 percent in 2014 to 8.2 percent in 2018.

Still, downloadable content is clearly the wave of the future, and librarians everywhere are considering better ways to deliver it as a key to upping circulation. Notes one West Coast librarian, "Devoting more resources to e-content would boost circulation, particularly working to lower holds ratios for popular content and developing a broader collection."

Adds an East Coast colleague, "For ebooks, changing the purchase of new content from two times a week to every weekday has resulted in increased checkouts. When customers realize new content is being added more frequently, they come back more frequently and checkout/place holds on additional titles."

SUBJECT SHIFTS

In 2018, fiction outcircled nonfiction by a margin of 64 to 36 percent, as it has with barely a variation for eight years. After a surprise spike in 2017, YA circulation settled back down to eight percent of total circulation in 2018. (Adult books and children's books clock in at 51 percent and 41 percent, respectively.) Individual subjects, though, showed some eye-catching ups and downs.



Asked to cite their top five fiction print circulators in 2018, respondents started with mystery, general fiction, thrillers, and romance—the same order as in 2017, though that year saw thrillers moving past romance to claim third place for the first time. The percentage endorsements ranged from 95 percent for

mystery to 63 percent for romance, putting these four genres well ahead of the pack. Then things changed.

Christian fiction, which placed seventh in 2017 with a 27 percent endorsement, used its 14-point increase in 2018 to reach fifth place. The anomalous 2017 showing for this genre, which had scored well since 2012, may have resulted from major disruptions in the Christian publishing industry.

Meanwhile, historical fiction, which jumped past women's fiction and Christian fiction in 2017, plummeted 15 points last year to seventh place. The reasons? Possibly fewer big titles, the absence of something new on the order of *Hamilton* to spike interest, or a retreat from 2017's hunger for fiction that echoed the year's political chaos—but from a distance.

Amid this tumult, literary fiction proved the surprise winner. Cited as a contender by only five percent of respondents in 2012, it has advanced to a 29 percent rating in 2018. One reason may be the increase in literary titles written with pop fiction's ease and propulsion and promoted as hitting that sweet spot between the two genres.

Notes Sally Bissell, who served on *LJ*'s 2018 Best Literary Fiction committee, "Literary fiction has become so much more accessible through social media recommendations and the emergence of celebrity book clubs and imprints like Sarah Jessica Parker's. And more adaptations are based on literary books; look at Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Elsa Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*."

In addition, fellow committee member Joshua Finnell cites the benefits of increased diversity. "So many of literary fiction's big titles last year came from authors—Tommy Orange, R.O. Kwon, Tayari Jones, Aja Gabel—who weren't white men," he says, "and the genre is finally expanding beyond the 'Great American Novels' of Jonathan Franzen and Jonathan Lethem to include a much wider range of what literary fiction means."

What's Hot Now? |
Materials Survey 2018

BARBARA HOFFERT

BUDGETS & FUNDING

Federal Library
Authorization Act Signed
Into Law

LISA PEET

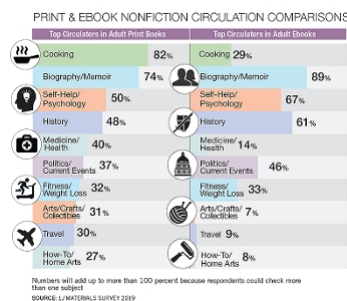
As often happens, nonfiction proved even shiffter than fiction in its rankings. In 2017, biography/memoir knocked cooking from the top spot, where it had reigned for a decade. But this year cooking is back on top, with 82 percent of respondents citing it among their top print nonfiction circulators. Taking second place with a 74 percent shout-out, biography/memoir is still far ahead of third-place self-help/psychology, which claimed 50 percent.

Still, self-help/psychology isn't languishing. While it slipped in 2017, perhaps because the field was saturated, it bounced back by a full 17 points in 2018 and has nearly tripled its 19 percent showing in 2011. Religion/philosophy/spirituality also bounded upward, rising to 24 percent from 2017's 16 percent and 2011's nine percent.

Together, the strong showing of these two areas suggests an urgency on the part of readers to take control of their lives. Says Anitra Gates, Erie County Public Library, PA, of religion/spirituality, "People seem to need this topic more during times of political turmoil." But they don't stop reading political books. After sinking in 2011–16, these books headed back upward to a 35 percent rating in 2017 and a 37 percent rating in 2018—hardly surprising, given the current climate. It's still a sixth-place finish, but in ebook format this subject achieves fourth place.

PRINT VS. EBOOK

Such contrasts in print and ebook circulation show that people read differently in different formats. In ebook format, politics does especially well because of immediate interest, while self-help/psychology moves up to second place with a 67 percent rating because of immediate need. Having doubled its popularity in print over a decade, biography/memoir again takes the top spot in ebook nonfiction, while print-favorite cooking—not so practical in digital format—falls to seventh place.



In ebook fiction, mystery still triumphs, but with fewer endorsements, while longtime tech-savvy romance readers pushed their favorite subject past general fiction and thrillers for the second-place ribbon. Historical fiction ranks fifth, as does literary fiction, by far its best showing in this format. Opines Finnell, "Studies show that college graduates are more likely to read an ebook, and I suspect that is the demographic of literary fiction readers." Readers of women's and Christian fiction prefer print. But only eight percent of respondents cited sf/fantasy as a big print circulator vs. 20 percent for ebook format—about where that figure has been since 2013.

CIRC BOOSTERS

In the media shift from physical to digital format, circulation may wobble until librarians find the best way to acquire and promote the latter. Clarifies Fort Worth's King, "In FY17, we struggled to get DVDs and Blu-rays on order in time to generate holds and interest. [In FY18], we moved to a standing-order program from our vendor. Trying to make sure that we have the right number of copies at the right time is...becoming even more of a factor." That applies to print, too, so King's library changed to a standing-order program for several key collections (e.g., adult fiction, graphic novels), ensuring that in-demand books land expeditiously while freeing selectors to focus on topics requiring deeper attention.

Respondents had numerous tips for plumping up circulation, from increasing the number of cardholders through promotion, automatic renewal, and mobile sign-up to adding that personal touch with staff-pick stickers and flyers and tossing out old materials and giving prominence to the new. But perhaps one Virginia-based respondent said it best: "There are two essential (and time-honored) keys to boosting circulation: one is marketing (in-library displays, push emails, etc.), and the other is relating all library programs to the collection."

Of course, circulation truly soars when librarians succeed at the crystal ball-gazing task of determining what people want, and our respondents have advice there, too. In fiction, diversity isn't just for literati; Erie County's Gates argues that readers of all stripes will seek out diverse titles given their ongoing publication and promotion and interest in "understand[ing] the experiences of others." Similarly, Philip Jones,

Central Arkansas Library System, highlights Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* read-alikes and African American superhero graphic novels because of reader and media attention (see "Space Is the Place," p. 45–47, for recommended titles).

Not surprisingly, half the respondents who shared their thoughts on the most-anticipated nonfiction subjects cited politics, and several respondents advocate for continued interest in the self-help/religion area; King's library keeps adding copies of Rachel Hollis's *Girl Wash Your Face* owing to "massive demand."

Cooking will stay strong with a continuing flow of fresh titles, particularly regarding ethnic cuisine, and librarians should also consider books on health insurance and investment for retirees. But who knows what will really be hot in 2019? Look for next year's survey to find out.



Barbara Hoffert

Barbara Hoffert (bhoffert@mediasourceinc.com, @BarbaraHoffert on Twitter) is Editor, LJ Book Review; past chair of the Materials Selection Committee of the RUSA (Reference and User Services Assn.) division of the American Library Association; and past president of the National Book Critics Circle, to which she has just been reelected.

[2019 Materials Survey](#)
[Budgets & Funding](#)

SUBSCRIBE TODAY



Libraries are always evolving.

So are we.

[SUBSCRIBE TO LJ](#)

BOOKPulse

Keep Informed: Subscribe to LJ Newsletters

[SIGN UP](#)

RECOMMENDED

DGE BUDGETS & FUNDING
UND More Service Than Circ

Lisa Peet

LJ's 2019 Budgets and Funding survey shows less lending but more programming, patron amenities, and outreach.

BUDGETS & FUNDING

What's Hot Now? | Materials Survey 2018

Barbara Hoffert

What's hot, what's not, and how much does it cost? That's what LJ first asked two decades ago when it launched its annual book-buying survey of U.S. public libraries. With today's media mostly on the horizon, the survey initially dwelled on print, and library purchasing power was the main thrust. Now the survey takes in ever-shifting funding and borrowing data for an ever-growing range of materials, with a greater focus on what circulates.

BUDGETS & FUNDING



Federal Library Authorization Act Signed Into Law

Lisa Peet

On December 19, the House of Representatives passed the Museum and Library Services Act (MLSA) by a margin of 331–28, and it was signed into law on December 31. The bill, also known as S. 3530, reauthorizes the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) through 2025.



BUDGETS & FUNDING

Mixed Success, but No Library Wave in Midterms 2018

Lisa Peet

Voters turned out at the polls in record numbers on Tuesday, November 6, for the 2018 midterm elections. But strong voter turnout did not necessarily drive support for libraries at the voting booth.