

## The Popularity of Picture Books with Television Tie-in Contents in the Public Library

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### ABSTRACT

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This study analyzes circulation statistics of television tie-in picture books from the Wake County Public Library System in North Carolina to determine their popularity among patrons. Caldecott winning picture books were used as a point of comparison. This study also examined OPAC holdings from North Carolina public libraries to determine television tie-in picture book popularity among collection builders. The findings of the study show that television tie-in picture books are found to some degree in the vast majority of North Carolina public libraries, and are more popular than award winners in the Wake County system.

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## 1. Introduction

Most if not all children's librarians would readily agree that one of the key purposes of their job is to provide children and their families with appropriate, quality literature. "Quality" can mean different things to different people, but the adult definitions that librarians, teachers, and parents use when selecting books for children is often at odds with the reading interests of the children themselves. This dichotomy of "good" literature versus "popular" literature has been debated by children's librarians since the beginning of children's libraries, but seems especially relevant today when popular children's television characters such as Dora the Explorer and Scooby Doo are being branded and marketed to children in every conceivable format from movies to clothes to picture books. Many see these mass marketed picture book series, often adapted straight from television episodes, as being literary trash and nothing more than an extended commercial, often refusing even to collect them. Other librarians argue that, though they are often not of high literary quality, they serve as a useful hook, their potential popularity among children enticing them into the library and into reading.

The quality or lack of it in these television tie-in picture book series seems to matter less to children than to adults. Children simply enjoy seeing popular characters from television programs they enjoy in another format. Libraries so far seem to have an uneasy relationship with these mass-pro-

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duced, heavily commercialized book series; even some who advocate the above “bait and switch” children's reading technique seem vaguely uncomfortable with stocking their shelves with what many view as commercials.

This study aims to examine how popular these television tie-in picture book series have become, both among libraries and among library patrons. This study further hopes to prove the hypothesis that picture books that rely heavily on televised marketing will circulate more from the public library than award-winning picture books will, providing valuable user-behavior statistics for both improving collection development and potentially increasing circulation.

## 2. Related Studies

Since everything from bed sheets to breakfast cereal is marketed to children using their favorite television characters, it is unsurprising that both chapter and picture books of almost any children's television program currently broadcast can also be found on bookstore shelves. Despite the rise of the Internet and new media forms, television continues to have the largest market share with the youngest media users (Mjoes, 2010). In the current media environment commercial media conglomerates like Disney and Nickelodeon, and even public television networks like PBS and the BBC, are competing not just for viewers, but for customers of media-related consumer products (Mjoes, 2010).

The deregulation of advertising in children's programming in 1983 spawned an increasing rise of program-length commercials, programs that either were solely designed to market existing toys or were conceived of and released simultaneously with a toy line (Kunkel, 1988). Children are also now more exposed to television than ever, with multiple channels available just for their entertainment and entire blocks of time designated for specific age groups. Some studies, including Walsh's 2002 research, put the amount of television some children watch at almost forty hours a week (30), equivalent to a full time job! While logging this much television time, it is only natural that television and the characters they see there should hold prominent places in children's minds, and that children should be drawn to other products like books that further foster these strong connections.

There is as yet no agreed upon definition of “television tie-in”, although it is most often understood to be an offshoot of the above trend in television program merchandising. In Hamilton's work, he defines the term as “a paperback book with a story line adapted from an original commercial television program, usually a series” (Hamilton, 1975, p. 67). Many authors speculate that television shows or movies based on existent books will increase children's interest in the book, in large part due to the publicity and marketing (Maughan, 2004; Beers & Kyle, 1996). Hendershot studied this exact phenomenon in 2007 using library circulation data from school libraries, and found that circulation of books increased steadily in the months prior to an adapted film's release, presumably due to commercials, trailers, and merchandise, and dramatically increased in the month after the release, possibly because readers had seen the movie (Hendershot, 2007).

Most authors view this film-inspired reading as a positive phenomenon, even beyond the welcome increase in circulation statistics. Beers & Kyle (1996) posited that children who normally do not enjoy reading will like comparing the movie they enjoyed to the original book, and Israel

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(2004) claimed that the process was especially useful for children struggling in reading, since viewing the movie would give them the basic outline of the plot. Wigfield (2004) postulated that this motivation to read a single book after viewing a film could easily lead to reading other books by the same author or in the same genre, eventually, over time, creating a child who enjoys reading. Many of these aspects of the interplay between books and movies within the same franchise are true of the alternate definition of the television tie-in, works in which the film or television media came first. The appeal of both sets of books is virtually identical, but few if any researchers have made similar arguments about television-based books leading to lifelong reading.

Despite less attention in scholarly library journals, the popularity of television and film inspired books cannot be denied. Coil found in 1978 that thirty-six of the fifty most popular books among sampled teens had some form of television or film tie in. Hay-Gibson in 2009 found that the two primary purposes of television tie-ins seem to be promoting the television program itself and capitalizing off of consumer interest in it.

Hay-Gibson interviewed four librarians about their feelings towards television tie-ins in 2006 and found that most thought they were unchallenging reads, but benefited from the instant recognition factor (Hay-Gibson, 2009). Most librarians used them to draw potential readers into the library, and Hay-Gibson points out that these types of books do inspire children to read even when they are not forced to by teachers or parents. However, Hay-Gibson also cautions in the same article that, given the plethora of channels and programs available to modern viewers, it may not be cost effective for the library to purchase books associated with a single television program whose audience base may be small. This conclusion implies that an association with a television program is the primary and maybe only reason a library patron might pick up a television tie-in book.

After surveying librarians and the relevant literature, Hay-Gibson (2009) has created a bulleted definition of television tie-ins encapsulating her findings:

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|---|
| <p><b>The Television Tie-in. . .</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• as a term embraces a range of publications, each of which enjoys some kind of association with a television program;</li><li>• has been in existence since at least as far back as the 1950s;</li><li>• is aimed at readers from the youngest children upwards;</li><li>• may be either fiction or non-fiction;</li><li>• may, in the former case, take the form of either an original story or be based on events seen on television;</li><li>• is not confined to a single genre;</li><li>• can be seen and used as educational, as well as recreational, material;</li><li>• may be regarded as a form of merchandising;</li><li>• is closely connected with the concepts of "franchising" and "branding";</li><li>• typically employs graphics, typefaces or images to demonstrate an association with a franchise;</li><li>• may be ghost-written and attributed to an author whose name is synonymous with the program involved;</li><li>• is often associated with long-running programs, although this is not necessarily the case;</li><li>• may be represented under another term, such as "novelization", by publishers or libraries.</li></ul> |
|---|

(Hay-Gibson, 2009, 36)

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Jordan's 2005 research revealed the increased prevalence of television tie-ins being read aloud to children at home and indicates a growing picture book base of television tie-ins, used by parents in exactly the same way they might use traditional picture books with their children.

Whether or not these television tie-ins can ever be considered quality picture books is, of course, a matter of some debate, but Kyle attempts to answer it in her 2008 article. Kyle defines a "quality" picture book as having evocative narration, well-developed and believable characters and theme, and effective plot and read-aloud quality. The books made as part of a continuation of a television or movie brand, she notes, usually have none of these (Kyle, 2008). But these books often do not need such nuances, because children will pick them up and demand them from parents anyway, simply because the characters are familiar from a television show.

The question of whether libraries should concern themselves with these books of questionable literary value but certain appeal is difficult to answer. Kyle suggests that the majority of them should be considered "bad" literature because they ultimately disappoint the child and often have reading levels far above the intended audience or the audience of the television program (Kyle, 2008). Austin points out that these books do serve to get people who would not normally read to pick up a book or read them to their children (Austin, 2003). Austin also notes that taste is acquired, not inborn in children, and wonders if they will ever make the transition from these branded television tie-in books to "good" literature (Austin, 2003). Indeed, given that similar titles, albeit usually about different television shows, can be found all the way up to the adult fiction section, they would never need to.

"Good" literature is often defined, for the sake of these studies, as books which have won one of the many prestigious literary awards. The Caldecott and Newberry awards, given by an American Library Association-formed committee every year to picture books and chapter books respectively, are most often used (ALSC website, retrieved 2/2011). The Caldecott medal is awarded annually to the illustrator of the "most distinguished" American picture book for children published in that year by a committee formed by the Association of Library Services to Children, a division of the ALA (ALSC website, 2/2011). The committee goes on to define the term distinguished further as "noted for significant achievement", "marked by excellence in quality" and "marked by conspicuous excellence or eminence" (ALSC website, 2/2011).

Ujiiie and Krashen studied circulation rates of award-winners like the Caldecott and Newberry as compared to children's bestseller lists in Los Angeles area libraries in 2006. They found that two hundred copies of best-selling children's chapter and picture books are checked out for every thirty-five of the award-winning books. The libraries in their study also purchased more copies of best-selling books than award-winners, with a mean of four hundred copies of the former with only one hundred and forty of the latter (Ujiiie & Krashen, 2006). They concluded that books chosen for awards do not do enough to stimulate a child's interest and that perhaps the awards' committees have different criteria than children do.

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### 3. Research Design and Methodology

This study seeks to ascertain 1) whether or not television tie-in books can be found in most libraries, and 2) how popular they are among readers at the libraries that do provide them. For purposes of this study, television tie-in books refer to picture books whose characters and/or plots are already a part of a television brand. Picture books were chosen instead of chapter books for older readers because the research indicates that younger children are more susceptible to television marketing and the effects of heavily branded television series (Kunkel, 1988). Much like Ujiie and Krashen's 2006 work, the study will examine circulation records to compare the popularity of award-winning picture books to the television tie-in picture books. The researcher has chosen titles that have won the Caldecott award within the past ten years to represent "award-winning picture books" since the Caldecott is one of the most well-known and prestigious awards, not just among library professionals, but to parents and educators as well. The award is also very visible on the cover of the book, which might influence casual browsers of the library shelves. These titles, as taken from the Caldecott section of the Association of Library Services to Children's website, can be found in Table 1:

**Table 1.** Caldecott Winning Picture Books 2000-2010

| Book Title                            | Book Author         | Year Won |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|----------|
| The Lion & the Mouse                  | Jerry Pinkney       | 2010     |
| The House in the Night                | Susan Marie Swanson | 2009     |
| The Invention of Hugo Cabret          | Brian Selznick      | 2008     |
| Flotsam                               | David Wiesner       | 2007     |
| The Hello, Goodbye Window             | Norton Juster       | 2006     |
| Kitten's First Full Moon              | Kevin Henkes        | 2005     |
| The Man Who Walked Between the Towers | Mordecai Gerstein   | 2004     |
| My Friend Rabbit                      | Eric Rohmann        | 2003     |
| The Three Pigs                        | David Wiesner       | 2002     |
| So You Want to be President?          | Judith St. George   | 2001     |
| Joseph Had a Little Overcoat          | Simms Taback        | 2000     |

The television tie-in picture book series were determined by consulting the websites of popular children's programming networks such as Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network as well as Amazon.com to determine which television shows have also produced picture books. The list of series will be checked against the holdings of the Wake County Public Library system to assure that the system carries that series to allow for the comparison. A list of the available television tie-in picture book series are included in Table 2 on the following page:

**Table 2.** Television Tie-in Picture Book Series held by Wake County Public Libraries

| Television Show              | Network                                   |
|------------------------------|---|
| Backyardigans                | Nickelodeon                               |
| Blue's Clues                 | Nickelodeon                               |
| Bob the Builder              | Nickelodeon, PBS                          |
| Dora the Explorer            | Nickelodeon                               |
| Go, Diego, Go!               | Nickelodeon                               |
| Scooby Doo                   | CBS, ABC, the WB, the CW, Cartoon Network |
| Sesame Street                | PBS                                       |
| SpongeBob SquarePants        | Nickelodeon                               |
| Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles | Fox, the CW, Nickelodeon                  |

Readability analysis was conducted using the Flesch-Kincaid readability calculations on all of the Caldecott winner picture book titles and select titles in the series of television tie-ins. The Flesch-Kincaid readability test measures sentence length and word length to determine the readability of a passage or book. It was assumed that the readability of all the titles in a series are the same or close to the same level, so one title from each series was sufficient to determine its average reading level and ease of reading. Because there are more television tie-in picture book series than Caldecott winners, only those series with a similar readability score to the Caldecott winners were studied. After performing these calculations, it was discovered that the Caldecott winners were, on average, in the fifth or sixth grade reading level. Therefore, the series averaging a fifth or sixth grade reading level were selected for the comparison. These series are: Dora the Explorer, Go, Diego, Go!, Scooby Doo, and SpongeBob SquarePants.

Once the television tie-in series were selected, the researcher searched for picture books from the series in the catalogs of every North Carolina public library with an accessible online catalog. This list of public libraries was taken from the State Library of North Carolina's listing of North Carolina Public Libraries on the Web on their own website. The only library from the list excluded from the search was the Farmville Public Library, which has a website but no online catalog available through it. A library was considered to carry a certain series if it had three or more titles from the series listed in its catalog. Since all the series chosen are composed of at least fifteen separate titles, a library that owned less than three of them cannot be said to be actively collecting that series.

Library circulation data was captured for all series titles and all Caldecott winning titles from only the Wake County public library system. The Wake County public library system has a shared, floating collection with twenty libraries. Therefore, data was captured from the entire collection, regardless of the library within the system where the titles were physically located at that time. Information recorded from the circulation records include: how many copies of each title the library system owns, the copyright date of the title, and how many times each copy of each title has been checked out since that date.

With this data, a mean number of check-outs per title was determined, as well as a mean number of copies per title per series. The mean number of check-outs per copy per year for each of the

series titles and for each of the Caldecott-winning titles was also determined. For even further comparison, a mean number of check-outs per year per copy per series was also determined. In this way, the age of a book or series will have no bearing upon the outcome, since books that have been sitting on the shelf longer naturally have had more time to be checked out from the library. This method will also take into account that, the more copies of a title the library owns, the more chances the title has to be checked out of the library.

#### 4. Results

Of the North Carolina library holdings consulted, only 10% of public libraries carried none of the four television tie-in picture book series searched for. Thirteen percent carried one of the picture book series, 17% of library systems carried two, and 22% contained three of the four picture book series. The remaining 38% of libraries carried all four television tie-in picture book series. As to the particular series themselves, *Dora the Explorer* was the most popular with 86% of libraries holding titles in this series, followed by *Scooby Doo* and *SpongeBob SquarePants*, tied with 62.5%, and *Go, Diego, Go!* in 54%.

Upon examining the circulation records of one of these library systems, Wake County Public Libraries, it is clear that this system owns far more *Dora the Explorer* books than any of the other series studied, and not simply because *Dora the Explorer* is the largest series. The library owned a mean of 105 copies of each title in the *Dora the Explorer* series compared with 66 copies of each title in *Go, Diego, Go!*, 39 copies of each title in *Scooby Doo*, 32 copies in *SpongeBob SquarePants* and about 50 copies of each Caldecott winner.

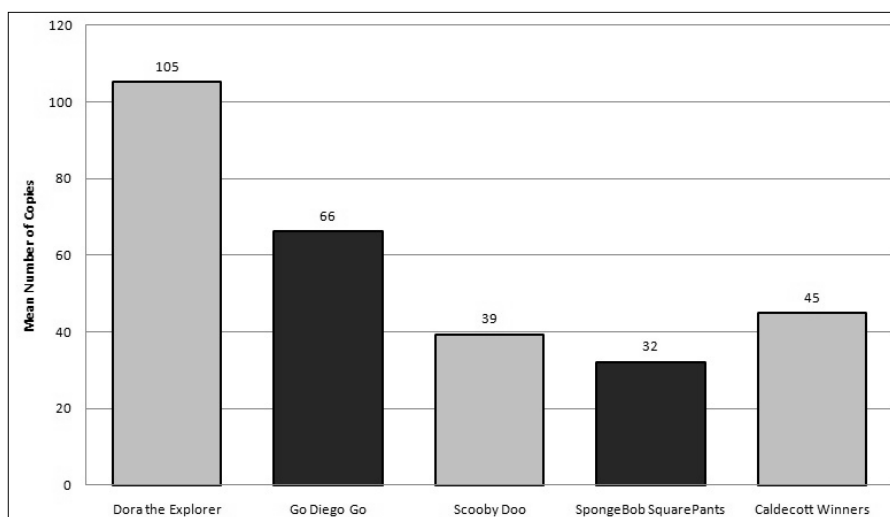


Fig. 1. Wake County -- Mean Number of Copies Per Title By Series

Obviously having a greater number of copies available has given the *Dora the Explorer* series

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an advantage as far as mean number of check-outs per title, with over 3000 to the Caldecott winners' 1465. For a more fair comparison these numbers must be adjusted for number of copies owned by the library and number of years on the shelf. The following chart depicts the mean number of check-outs per copy in each series:

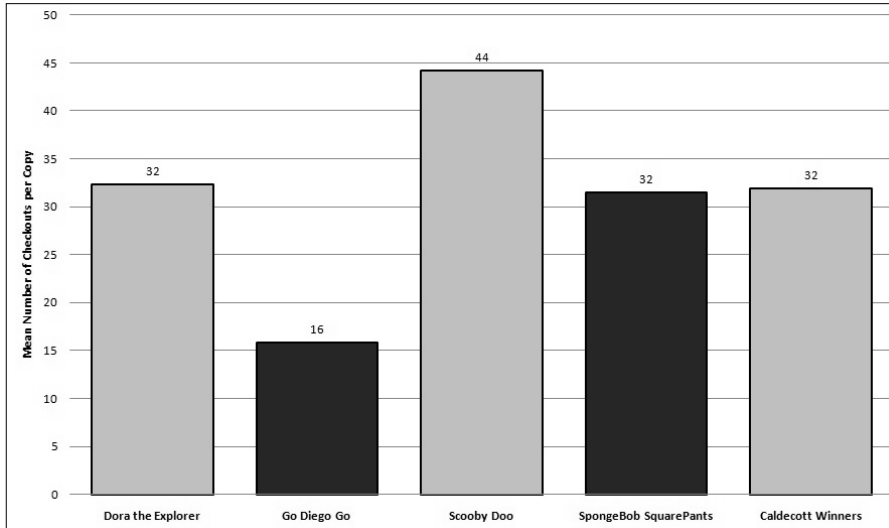


Fig. 2. Wake County -- Mean Number of Check-outs Per Copy by Series

In mean number of check-outs per year per copy, the *SpongeBob SquarePants* series is ahead by a slight margin with a mean of 8 check-outs per copy per year to *Dora the Explorer*, *Go, Diego, Go!*, and *Scooby Doo's* 7. Caldecott winners were checked-out about 5 times per copy per year.

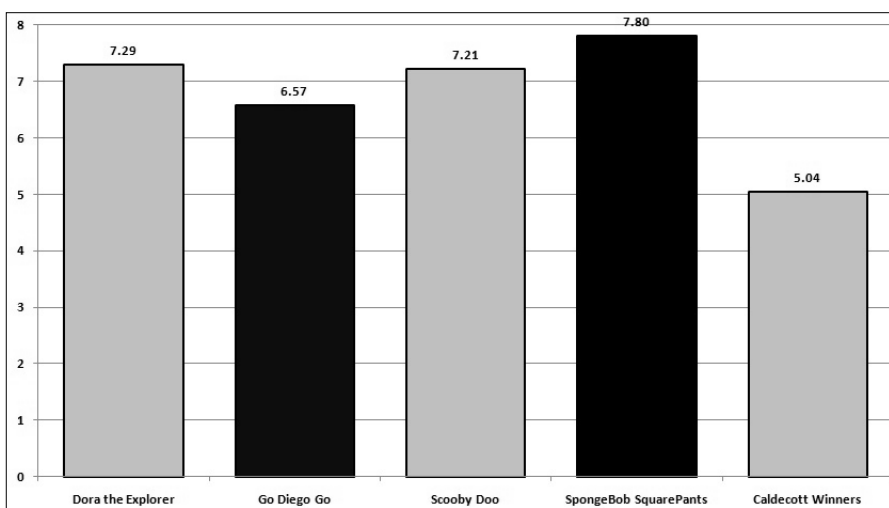


Fig. 3. Wake County -- Check-Outs Per Copy Per Year by Series

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## 5. Discussion

The data discussed above should perhaps be adjusted further when taking into consideration particulars of the library system which holds these books. Three of the Caldecott winning titles are not shelved in the picture book section with the rest; *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* can be found in the juvenile fiction section instead, as it is a novel, and *So You Want To Be President?* and *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* are both in juvenile non-fiction. Someone browsing for picture books would, therefore, be unable to find them, or even a patron seeking Caldecott winners by searching for the medal on the covers in that section. Anyone searching the catalog for Caldecott winners would still be able to find them, but they arguably offer an entirely different reading experience than the more traditional picture books that have won the award, perhaps making for an unfair comparison.

Certain titles within each of the television tie-in picture book series have also been placed in separate “holiday” sections in libraries amongst other holiday-themed picture books where, arguably, they are checked out less except in anticipation of the holiday to which they pertain.

Means were retaken with the holiday and non-picture book Caldecott winner data removed to determine if these titles had affected the outcome in some way. One of the variables most greatly affected by this change was the mean number of copies per title in each series. The newly adjusted data is as follows:

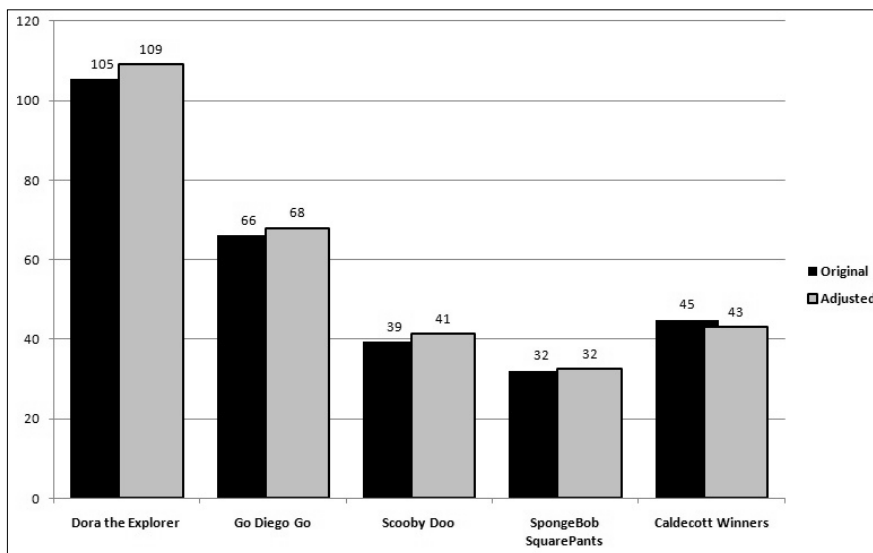


Fig. 4. Wake County -- Adjusted Mean Number of Copies Per Title by Series

When the mean check-outs per copy per year of the series was then compared again, the researcher found that all values had increased slightly, except that of the Caldecott winners, which decreased slightly.

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**Table 3.** Adjusted Check-Outs per Copy per Year in Wake County

| Series                | Original | Adjusted | Change |
|-----------------------|----------|----------|--------|
| Dora the Explorer     | 7.287    | 7.430    | +0.143 |
| Go, Diego, Go!        | 6.569    | 7.278    | +7.090 |
| Scooby Doo            | 7.214    | 7.638    | +0.424 |
| SpongeBob SquarePants | 7.802    | 8.294    | +0.492 |
| Caldecott Winners     | 5.038    | 5.013    | -0.025 |

The original value represents the mean check-outs per copy per year of the series before the holiday and non-picture book titles were removed. The adjusted number represents the new mean check-outs per copy per year of the series after the titles' removal. In all cases the change was relatively minor, but the direction of the change seems most important. The television tie-in holiday books, despite the popularity of the series overall, do not circulate as well as the normal titles in the series, whether because they are more difficult to find or because they are not deemed relevant for most of the year. Therefore their removal pushed the overall series means upward for the television tie-in books.

The removed Caldecott winning titles, however, included *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* by Brian Selznick, which, at sixty-four copies in the library system, is the most widely owned of any of the Caldecott winners studied. This title also has the largest mean number of check-outs per year per copy of any other Caldecott winner at 8.73. The removal of this, the most popular Caldecott winner, caused the overall Caldecott means to drop. It is perhaps noteworthy that the most popular Caldecott winning title is the one title that certainly does not fit traditional definitions of a picture book, and is therefore written for and presumably checked out by an entirely different group of library patrons.

Whether or not one adjusts for these holiday and non-picture book titles or not, the results of this study clearly show that the television tie-in picture book series are checked out more often than Caldecott winning picture books, most likely because the television programs in question and all of their accompanying merchandise are heavily marketed at the picture book age group. Children who cannot yet read on their own can still recognize Dora the Explorer on the cover of a book, and reach for that book because it represents something familiar, something they already know from watching her perhaps daily on television. The library system itself also seems to place equal importance on these television tie-in series by supplying its libraries with, at least in the case of *Dora the Explorer*, more than twice as many copies per title, no doubt anticipating the series' popularity with children.

Other libraries in North Carolina, it seems, either do not anticipate a similar popularity or have chosen to not collect these television tie-in series for other reasons such as budget or a policy against television tie-in merchandise. The majority of North Carolina libraries, however, carry at least one television tie-in title (most likely *Dora the Explorer*), and 38% carry all four of the television tie-in series studied. These libraries most likely acknowledge the influence of television and television characters in children's lives and see an opportunity to use that influence to get kids into the library and reading.

## 6. Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that it uses circulation statistics to gauge popularity. Though generally patrons check out books because they want to read them, there are conceivably many other reasons for checking out a picture book nor do they prove that every book checked out of the library is then read, though we generally assume this to be the case. These statistics also do not take in-library use of books into account. These statistics also existed prior to and independent of this study, which weakens its validity (Babbie, 2004, p. 327). Because these records do not reflect copies of the titles that may have been removed from the library system for damages or other reasons, this data cannot be included in the study.

## 7. Implication

This research shows that television tie-in picture books are incredibly popular with public library patrons. Most public libraries carry at least one television tie-in series, an important fact for other public libraries to consider for benchmarking purposes. These picture books are undeniably popular, even more so than the Caldecott winners which are supposedly in the highest echelons of literary and artistic quality. If librarians, authors, and publishers want these award-winning books to reach children with the same appeal, they should begin to market them similarly to the television tie-in.

## 8. Conclusion

Children watch as much as 40 hours of television a week (Walsh, 2002, p. 30), so it should come as no surprise when they form close connections and strong associations with the characters they see there. With more advertising being aimed at younger and younger kids, television programs like *Dora the Explorer* represent, not just an educational television show for preschoolers, but vast media empires spawning myriad consumer products. These products hardly need be advertised on their own, for children will instantly recognize the faces of their beloved television characters, whether Dora or SpongeBob SquarePants, just as they might recognize the faces of their family. The literary world is no different, where children and adults often gravitate towards what is familiar, like a somewhat repetitive, but much loved genre. Picture books are the same; why take a chance on a new book, which could disappoint? Why pick up a book which can hardly tempt a roving child's eye when it has fastened upon a familiar face? With television tie-in picture books, children already know what to expect. They know the characters. They know the familiar pacing of an episode, rendered before them in paper and still illustrations. They can follow along easily with the parent reading aloud because the episodes and books both contain so much repetition of dialog.

The Caldecott winners, however, benefit from no such widespread advertising. Though they are recognized by parents and teachers, on numerous booklists, and in library displays, they represent something unfamiliar to the child reader. The worth of their illustrations, their plots, and their

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characters is nothing compared to the instant recognition factor that allows the television tie-in books to be chosen again and again, accessible to any child who watches television, while the Caldecott winners languish on the shelf.

Some concerned parents and librarians might view this as an outrage, a sad state of literature when children are more often reading books written by television advertisers than books written by award-winning authors and illustrators. Parents, librarians, and publishers, however, should be *learning* from these television tie-in books. Children aren't turning to them because they are somehow better quality than those books committees of adults at ALSC have deemed medal worthy. They choose them because they are familiar. If parents, librarians, and the ALSC want children to be reading "distinctive" picture books such as the ones chosen for the Caldecott Medal, they should find ways to advertise these books to children, to make them familiar and recognizable in the same way that Dora the Explorer is instantly recognizable. Granted, the corporation that owns Dora the Explorer has a great deal of money to throw at advertising and creating tie-in products, but the literary world can clearly not remain separate from commercialist practices any longer. Children's picture book publishers should advertise, not just to librarians and parents, but to the children themselves.

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