Virtual Book Discussion: AJL READS
Heidi Rabinowiz and Debbie Feder

Description: This session will encompass a presentation on the AJL Reads virtual book discussion group and a live discussion of *Biblio Tech: Why Libraries Matter More Than Ever in the Age of Google* by John Palfrey - AJL's community-wide read for June 2016. The presenters will explain the purpose and technical aspects of running a virtual book club and will discuss *Biblio Tech*. Attendees are encouraged to participate in this live discussion (whether or not they've read the book) and join AJL Reads for future virtual discussions.

Heidi Rabinowitz has served AJL as chair of the Sydney Taylor Book Award committee, the PR committee, and as President of the organization. She directs the Feldman Children's Library at Congregation B'nai Israel of Boca Raton, FL, a large Reform synagogue. Heidi hosts The Book of Life podcast, an online show about Jewish books, music, film and web at bookoflifepodcast.com.

Debbie Feder is currently the Director of the Learning Commons at Ida Crown Jewish Academy in Chicago and the Member Relations Chair for AJL. She has her Masters in Library and Information Science from Dominican University. She has spent more than ten years introducing children and young adults to literature and information literacy at schools and public libraries. She is the author of *Jelly Bean's Art Museum Adventure* and is honored to be a member of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee.

Why

In 2014, AJL created the position of Member Relations Chair. This person's job is to build community by finding ways to help members feel connected to AJL and to eachother outside of our ultimate bonding event, conference time. One idea for how to do that was to host a virtual book club. Book discussion is a natural activity for librarians, and a good way to get to know eachother and learn something about the literature in the process. We hoped that a book club for librarians would both create the connections we were looking for, and perhaps serve as takeaways for book discussions that could be reproduced in the participants' own libraries.

Possibilities

We looked at several models for virtual book clubs.

New York Public Library uses Google+ Hangout. They ask readers to leave questions in the comments section of their blog ahead of time, then librarian hosts use those questions in their Google Hangout discussion, which is live streaming video. Those whose questions get picked also have the opportunity to use their own webcam to join the livestream. Others can simply watch.

A Jewish group, Art & Writings of Destruction and Repair Project, used Facebook Events to host a book discussion. They started the group a month ahead of the discussion, and posted excerpts each week for people to comment on. This was a time shifted solution. Their culminating discussion took place on a specific date across three continents and eleven time zones, so the hosting author made herself available online for 12 hours, posting topics for discussion and responding to participants who could "stop by" during that timeslot whenever they liked.

The Jewish Women's Archive uses Disqus, a free application that embeds on your website and allows people to type in their comments live during the discussion, although they also invite questions to be submitted for the authors ahead of time. They also used Google Hangout streaming video for the actual discussion with the author.

Challenges

One of our biggest challenges in selecting a method was that we wanted to keep it as low tech as possible. We didn't want to make people join anything or log into anything, or need to be tech savvy in order to follow the conversation. We also felt that the conversations that take place through typing in comments tend to be pretty disjointed. Finally, we wanted those who missed the book club meeting to be able to access the conversation afterwards.

What we chose

Ultimately, we chose to do the book discussion as a call-in show. This allowed participants to avoid computers completely and just use their phones, and the format is familiar to everyone who has listened to Car Talk or any radio call-in show over the years. You do have to enter a code, but it's the same for everyone, you don't have to create an account or log into anything. It's basically an open conference call, and it's recorded so that those who missed it can listen to it afterwards. We use a service called TalkShoe to host these conference calls.

How it's going

We kicked off the book club with a live discussion during last year's conference in DC of The Betrayers by David Bezmogis, and then followed that up throughout the year with call-in discussions. In October we discussed The Wayward Moon by Janice Weizman, In January we discussed My Russian Grandmother and Her American Vacuum Cleaner by Meir Shalev. While the number of participants has been small, the discussions have been lively. As with any conference call, sound quality varies, but we find that a phone call feels fairly natural as a way to have a discussion.

However, when we got to The English Spy by Daniel Silva in March, things didn't work out so well. Only one person called in, and both Debbie and I forgot to show up! For me, it was because I disliked the book, so I think I blocked it out! So my question for you now is whether a book discussion group is something that AJL members want. Do we want to discuss librarianship books instead of fiction? Do we want asynchronous discussions instead of live? Something using video?

Have any of you participated in the book club before? If so, what did you think? Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

<u>Today's discussion: Biblio Tech</u>

Today we are moving away from fiction to discuss a book on librarianship itself, and we'd like your feedback about whether that would be a good way to go for the coming year's discussions. The book is Biblio Tech: Why Libraries Matter More Than Ever in the Age of Google by John Palfrey.

<u>DISCUSS</u>

 The discussion was audio recorded and will be available.