Introduction

Angela Maycock

Abstract

This chapter of Privacy and Freedom of Information in 21st-Century Libraries *provides a backdrop for the entire issue. As libraries increasingly move beyond the provision of print material and into their expanding roles as providers of digital resources and services, intellectual freedom concerns have been magnified as they apply to a range of complex new issues.*

This issue of *Library Technology Reports,* conceived and coordinated by the American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom, focuses on current topics and concerns around the intersections of technology, security, and intellectual freedom in libraries. This territory offers a wide range of opportunities for insight and commentary, as these issues encompass some of the most pressing, and sometimes distressing, challenges facing libraries today. A group of thoughtful and articulate library leaders have contributed chapters to this publication, bringing diverse perspectives to both technology's applications in libraries and librarians' professional values and ethics. Our goals with this publication are to bring together current research, thought, and experience around the issues at hand; to stimulate discussion and the development of new ideas; and to share a range of both theoretical and practical approaches to our shared dilemmas.

Librarians, in some cases, may intuitively consider intellectual freedom principles in a context of print-based technologies. For example, libraries' observance of Banned Books Week—celebrating the freedom to read

and drawing attention to the harms of censorship by highlighting actual or attempted removals of books across the United States—extends back to 1982. However, just as our users' reading and intellectual pursuits have extended into new media, our intellectual freedom concerns as librarians have long ago expanded well beyond the realm of book censorship alone. As libraries increasingly move beyond provision of print material and into their expanding roles as providers of digital resources and services, intellectual freedom concerns have been magnified as they apply to a range of complex new issues.

Yet the foundation for our professional values and concerns remains the same, even as specific technologies and the challenges they pose to libraries have changed and will continue to evolve. The *Library Bill of Rights,* first adopted in 1939, identifies libraries as "forums for information and ideas" and serves as the American Library Association's foundational statement on intellectual freedom in libraries.[1] The basic formula for intellectual freedom requires only two essential conditions: freedom of expression and access to information. Libraries fulfill a unique role in this equation through their mission of providing access to all points of view on the issues of our times and through their commitment to making those ideas and opinions available to anyone who needs or wants them.

The *Library Bill of Rights* serves as an aspirational document, stating libraries' basic values to guide the provision of services and development of policy. In order to meet the need for more practical advice, the ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee has developed numerous Interpretations to the *Library Bill of Rights,* which concern themselves with the application of its principles to

specific library situations. Readers of *Library Technology Reports* may be particularly interested in new and recently revised Interpretations on topics such as "Minors and Internet Interactivity" and "Access to Digital Information, Services, and Networks" that provide policy frameworks for decisions related to digital resources in libraries. All Interpretations and many other resources from ALA's *Intellectual Freedom Manual* are now organized and available online.

Intellectual Freedom Manual
www.ifmanual.org

Internet access has established itself as by far the most significant and transformative digital service in a majority of American libraries today. The ALA Office for Library Advocacy notes that public libraries have become "the number one point of online access for people without Internet connections at home, school, or work" and that an overwhelming 98.7 percent of public libraries provide public access to the Internet.[2] In addition, as of 2009, "almost 73 percent of libraries report they are the only source of free access to computers and the Internet in their communities."[3] Libraries of all types are now focusing more and more of their efforts and expenditures on the provision of adequate Internet access to meet patrons' growing needs.

Over the past several years, as the economic environment has grown more difficult and disheartening, our country's libraries—always accustomed to doing more with less—have found their budgets slashed as usage has simultaneously soared. People today are flocking to libraries as sources of information and entertainment in record numbers, and one of the greatest strains on libraries' stretched resources has been in the area of Internet access. The economic downturn has caused patrons to demand increased access to online content in order to apply for jobs, access e-government tools, take advantage of continuing education opportunities, and more.

In addition, the Internet's role as a vehicle for ideas, entertainment, collaboration, and dialogue is itself expanding rapidly. Internet users are no longer simply passive recipients of information, but active creators as well, interacting with the content they encounter online and adding their own content in response. This astounding proliferation of user-generated material takes the form of text, images, videos, podcasts, and much more. Libraries, by providing Internet access to users, can now extend the richness and depth of existing resources by connecting users with this wealth of content alongside our own array of traditional collections and services. Articles by Jason Griffey and Eli Neiburger in this publication consider the specific implications of user-generated content and social networking tools

in the library and the vital questions of access, ownership, privacy, and policies that such usage entails.

At the same time that school, public, academic, and other libraries are encountering such unprecedented new opportunities for providing access to ideas, a multitude of concerns have arisen around the Internet's much-touted potential. Some individuals and groups strongly believe that the Internet simply provides too much access—especially for young people, but often for adults as well—to potentially offensive, inappropriate, or even dangerous material online. What many see as enhanced capabilities for sharing and communication on the Internet are viewed by others as endangering child safety by opening the door to increased or unmonitored interactions with strangers. Others, including many librarians, are also concerned about issues such as the Internet's vast swaths of unreliable or inaccurate information and the many ways in which personal privacy can be compromised when taking advantage of ever-expanding resources online.

In the library context, all of these concerns must be balanced with equally compelling concerns about free and open access to ideas. Our shared values and ethics provide our profession with a basic framework, but in addition, all publicly funded libraries have a legal obligation to provide access to constitutionally protected information. Internet filters and other barriers to access present a number of complex legal, technical, and ethical issues. Sarah Houghton-Jan's article addresses such issues, ranging from laws and court cases to intellectual freedom and accuracy, in grappling with libraries' difficult filtering decisions. The article's emphasis on the library's role in educating the community on both technology and intellectual freedom concerns is a theme that echoes throughout this issue.

Another theme to be found throughout the articles in this issue is the importance of strong library policy in meeting the challenges posed by technology and intellectual freedom head on. "Written policies can emphasize the library's support for the principles of intellectual freedom and its respect for the diversity of its community while at the same time establishing that the library does not condone the use of its computers to access materials that are obscene or otherwise illegal."[4] Policies should address reasonable time, place, or manner restrictions in determining the use of digital services and resources. Clear, written policies, based on institutional objectives and combined with strong support for intellectual freedom principles, form a solid foundation for the library's decision making around specific technologies and their applications.

As libraries of all types find themselves treading this difficult ground, our decision making should also be informed by active discussion, deliberation, and collaboration with our colleagues and peers. Yet barriers may exist to this level of engaged and informed dialogue even within our own profession. A dual focus on intellectual freedom issues and technology issues alongside

one another is surprisingly rare in the professional literature today. Too often, intellectual freedom is given only short shrift in critical commentary on libraries' choices and uses of technology. Similarly, in-depth consideration of specific technologies and their applications may tend to fall by the wayside when library authors focus on vital issues around our core value of intellectual freedom. Some of librarianship's best and brightest thinkers focus their research and writing on either technology or intellectual freedom issues. Yet why do we see so little inquiry that bridges the divide between the two?

When forward-thinking, tech-oriented librarians write about evaluating emerging technologies, the focus often tends to be on practical issues like pricing, implementation, and sustainability. These crucial concerns should be paired with serious consideration of how such technologies impact users' rights and how they may or may not line up with our professional values. When intellectual freedom advocates write about our professional values in practice, the conclusions often tend toward the abstract or overbroad. Librarians on the front lines need thoughtful consideration of specific technologies, their practical applications, and viable solutions to the choices and trade-offs we confront. Libraries' use of radio frequency identification (RFID) technology, addressed here in an article by Deborah Caldwell-Stone, is one example of an issue where tech librarians and intellectual freedom fighters have each been examining the questions and concerns at hand but, for too long, have been speaking on different channels from one another.

Part of our aim with this issue of *Library Technology Reports* is to begin to remedy this situation. By presenting analysis from intellectual freedom leaders alongside that from some of our most active and thoughtful technology advocates, we hope to open up lines of communication, to invite one another into our separate spheres, and to ensure that our thinking and our conclusions are better informed by the insights of one other. More involved and ongoing dialogue is needed, and the articles in this publication should help to lead the way.

Intellectual freedom, in order to remain a vibrant and central aspect of not only the theory but the practice of librarianship, must be infused in all that we do. This extends naturally to libraries' use of technology, which, in order to truly fulfill the goals and missions of our institutions, must be informed by all of our most basic and central professional values. As we navigate user wants and needs, libraries must keep one eye on useful, creative technological solutions while focusing the other on upholding intellectual freedom. We want to take advantage of opportunities to engage our library users and allow them to connect with the library while also protecting their rights. We ought to embrace our role in educating patrons, not only in traditional areas like search strategies and basic technology skills, but also on topics more broadly related to library values like safe and responsible Internet use or protecting their privacy online.

At the same time, during an economic downturn, libraries recognize that sacrifices are necessary. In determining what technology we are able offer to our users and how, trade-offs are inevitable. Libraries today serve increasingly diverse populations, and we also face challenges around the global nature of information, a topic that Barbara Jones considers in depth in her contribution to this publication. "As the free flow of information transcends national boundaries, it becomes increasingly clear that prohibitions on freedom of expression in one country will inhibit the freedom of those in many other countries around the world."[5] While libraries continue to struggle to fulfill their missions and meet user needs under ever more difficult conditions, we must remain mindful of our responsibility to serve our patrons with integrity and good faith.

In the face of vexing technological concerns, librarians also have a responsibility to be critical. As a profession, we are well served by both our skepticism and our ability to stay informed on topics of vital concern to libraries and patrons alike. Librarians must remain alert to the dilemmas that face us in reconciling our uses of technology with our professional integrity. The changes that have brought us to this point are substantial but have not shaken, and will not diminish, our commitment to librarianship's core values. As new technologies continue their inexorable advance, "libraries are changing not what we do, but how we do it. . . . The principles, however, remain the same. Our role, then, is to navigate these changes, protect our principles and values and continue to make sure that our users have the ideas and the information that they need when they need them."[6]

Notes

1. American Library Association, *Library Bill of Rights*, adopted June 19, 1939; amended Oct. 14, 1944; June 18, 1948; Feb. 2, 1961; June 27, 1967; and Jan. 23, 1980; www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/intfreedom/library bill/index.cfm (accessed Aug. 9, 2010).
2. ALA Office for Library Advocacy, *Quotable Facts about America's Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2010).
3. Larra Clark and Denise Davis, "The State of Funding for Library Technology in Today's Economy," *Library Technology Reports* 45, no. 1 (Jan. 2009): 6.
4. ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, *Intellectual Freedom Manual*. 8th ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 2010), 40.
5. Ibid., xviii.
6. Judith Krug, "Introduction," in Barbara M. Jones *Libraries, Access, and Intellectual Freedom: Developing Policies for Public and Academic Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1999), xviii.