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## "Afterword" in Library Information and Resource Sharing: Transforming Services and Collections

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# Afterword

Beth Posner

Information sharing is a hot topic today, and not just among librarians. Authors and readers, publishers and publicists, teachers and students, governments and citizens, and scholars and researchers—to say nothing of many in the worlds of business, security, technology, law, and medicine—are aware of, and concerned about, the uses and abuses of sharing information in the digital age. Librarians, however, have a valuable and unique point of view, positioned as they are between information providers and information consumers. Librarians care about protecting the privacy of readers and researchers, and the rights of authors and publishers, but they also care about sharing information so that it can be read or viewed by as many people as possible.

The internet revolution is providing more people with the ability to access more information than ever before in human history. This is not, of course, a panacea. Much of this information is designed to tempt and excite, rather than educate or inform. Moreover, immediate access to unreliable and unfiltered information—for example, getting news or medical advice via social media—can be even more limiting or misleading than the results of a search engine that uses undisclosed and quite possibly biased search algorithms. Librarians value questions as much as they do answers because questions are always enlightening, whereas even when we think we have answers, they can turn out to be misleading, wrong, incomplete, or out-of-date. Situated between questions and answers, librarians are in a position to see that, all too often, it is not our verities that are eternal but, rather, the queries that precipitated them.

Nonetheless, the volume of reliable information available online—be it scientific, philosophical, cultural, literary, artistic, or journalistic—has the

potential to awaken the consciousness of people and engage them in the world in ways that were never before possible. Imagine how much closer to answers we might be if more information is shared, more informed conversations encouraged, more reliable data analyzed, and more wisdom received from more varied sources. What we do not know *can* hurt us; and as citizens of the world there is a lot that we need to know more about. If we are ever to find solutions to the shared problems of our globalized world, then we need to share more information about that world. If people are ever to truly understand each other, then we need to have access to the same information. In order to survive and succeed, as individuals and as a society, people need access to accurate, timely information. We need to share information about why we believe what we believe, as well as information that supports different views and makes us consider other positions.

As hard as it often is for people to agree on basic facts, it is even less likely if they do not have access to the same information. In order to have any hope of real progress or solutions, we need to start on the same page, agree on the facts and on reliable information sources, and not just make decisions based on propaganda, personality, prejudice, or perceived self-interest. While information access alone is not a sufficient condition for productive debates, it is necessary that everyone understand what information sources others are consulting. In addition, it is only fair to give everyone access to the same information so that all can equally participate in our shared world with informed voices. It is when we feel uninformed, and as a result powerless, that many choose to disengage and reject any possibility of positive change.

Like libraries themselves, interlibrary loan (ILL) services are democratic, at least theoretically allowing even the most remote library user, regardless of financial means, to be connected to the wider world and access needed information. Indeed, librarians help people access information that is online or in print even if they do not own a computer or mobile device. Of course, the costs of ILL do mean that this access is more hypothetical than actual for many information seekers, but when librarians and the communities they serve support ILL services as much as possible, then the aspirational value of ILL can be actualized.

Librarians have an essential role in helping people to find, evaluate, and use a nearly infinite supply of information, whether it is found on library shelves, in carefully curated digital libraries, or on the open inter-net. As we face the future, the question is: how can we help leverage this knowledge to help people make positive contributions to their/our communities (e.g., familial, local, national, global)? The future of the world, and all our lives, is being shaped by ordinary people, librarians among them, who are searching for, discovering, and creating answers to our shared challenges; and, they are doing so, to a very large extent, by

sharing information, which is what librarians do—and do best. Of course, even if we did solve all of our current social, political, economic, and environmental problems—which is impossible—we would doubtlessly find new ones. Even if trouble does not come looking for us, it is human nature to go looking for trouble. Nonetheless, history teaches us that positive progress is possible. It is our attitude toward information that determines how much use we will make of it to create, learn, solve problems, answer questions, communicate, and connect. This, not surprisingly, brings us back to the topic of this book: library resource and information sharing.

## ILL ... AND BEYOND

Librarians know as well as anyone, and better than most, that information is not the same as facts or knowledge, much less wisdom. They also understand that many sources of information are not trustworthy and that few can make any plausible claim of complete neutrality. Information can be incorrect, distracting, distorting, incomplete, confusing and even dangerous. While information is essential for communication, just having access to it is not enough; people also need to be able to analyze it and such evaluation requires that librarians continue to teach information literacy skills. Information literacy itself is a moving target. As the information landscape evolves, so too do the skills needed to navigate it. Librarians no longer teach information seekers about the classification schemes of medieval libraries, how to look up subjects in card catalogs, or how to find articles in printed periodical literature guides. Today, they teach online keyword searching skills and critical evaluation of information; and they teach about, or should teach about, the importance of information sharing and the value of ILL.

Traditional library support services, such as ILL, may not seem as exciting or fundable to administrators and decision-makers who, quite understandably, are always looking for the latest, big thing to get people excited about supporting and using their libraries. Nonetheless, ILL remains useful and ILL specialists remain enthusiastic about what they do every day to help their library users and library colleagues. They also want to get librarians and staff in other library departments excited to work with ILL and to encourage our communities to use ILL services. This is why ILL specialists are sharing information and serving user needs in traditional and innovative ways. Perhaps the strengths and successes that are making ILL shine so brightly are even signaling that it will soon burn out and no longer be needed. However, that time has not yet arrived.

For now, information sharing through ILL services, alone and in concert with other library services and staff, continues to do a great deal to help people access information. While it is entirely possible that interlibrary loan as we know it today will no longer be necessary in libraries of

the future, the idea that *information sharing* is the answer to the challenges facing all of us is well worth considering and supporting because access to information can make such a positive difference in people's individual and collective lives.

Moving forward, all librarians, including ILL specialists, must continue to evaluate and adapt to using the latest technology in order to provide access to information in the most efficient ways. The more workflows that can be automated, the more that librarians cooperate with each other, and the more that user needs for information are served, the more people will learn and create and the more librarians will contribute to the world. Whatever the future looks like, the future of information sharing must involve librarians. Again, despite how connected the world is, and how much information there is, information access comes with costs and complexities. As long as there is still information that exists in libraries and online that people need but cannot access because of costs, or copyright laws, or fears of loss or damage, librarians must make access to information as affordable and convenient as possible.

Perhaps the future of library information and resource sharing will not look so unlike the current situation in which publishers produce information that libraries purchase or license. If so, easier payment to publishers would be welcome, as would more reasonable pricing models. Perhaps more national libraries that already collect, or should collect, all published material in their countries could also offer ILL (as many but not all already do). This would require staff and come with costs, but by doing so national networks could also save many other libraries money and time. Perhaps systems such as OCLC's WSILL could facilitate payments to publishers so that ILL workflows remain the same but there would be quicker access to more information.

As the largest network of libraries and the largest database of library holdings, OCLC resource sharing products and services remain invaluable for ILL. The more libraries that join OCLC and become suppliers and the more ILL librarians who participate in its governance, the more it will be able to develop and offer effective technical solutions, services, and products that support the information sharing needs of the entire library community. Of course, libraries and the communities they serve are diverse and have differing needs. Librarians must participate in realizing, and remain open to, any and all potential solutions. Other resource sharing systems, technologies and consortia exist and will continue to evolve. Both vendors and the resource sharing community will continue to develop information sharing solutions that serve the varied and mutual needs of information seekers.

Alternatively, it is also possible that if publishers or other commercial information suppliers make information access easy and affordable enough, other competing information providers may succeed instead of

libraries. However, this remains unacceptable to librarians because so many cannot afford any such fees. Even if commercial information access were to become more affordable, there is a public interest in sharing as much free information as possible, if nothing else as a hedge against some future market uncertainties. Instead, as librarians encounter expectations created by commercial competitors, they must borrow what works and distinguish themselves regarding what they can do better. Librarians can use technology to give themselves more time to help and support people individually, locally and personally, which is rare on the internet. Slow reading is desirable, but slow ILL is not. Simple search boxes are desirable, but library databases can offer more. Commercial document suppliers that provide speedy, but expensive delivery are not affordable for many and librarians need to let people know that they can help. Illegal sharing sites now also provide immediate and free service but they are morally ambiguous, potentially unsafe and may not survive open access initiatives and legal pressures.

If the costs of published information continue to grow higher, then they will drive open access initiatives to greater successes. Librarians who want to share more information should take a major role in maintaining open access publishing for scholarly information in the future by joining consortia and working more closely with other libraries, supporting non-profit organizations like the Center for Research Libraries or the Internet Archive or HathiTrust and by hosting institutional repositories or open access sites. In service of the future of information sharing, librarians should also work to keep the internet decentralized and neutral. They should continue to collect print if people continue to use and prefer it. They should educate and advocate for information sharing. Copyright legislation, around the world, should be passed that enables more digitization of print material in libraries, which, once digitized, could be available freely and directly online thereafter. In addition, more cost-effective 3-D digitization technologies should be developed to replace the need for loans of special collections material. There are new types of information that librarians need to help people access and share, such as data sets. The sort of information sharing that librarians facilitate today, through hosting community events or makerspaces, may be supplemented by sharing other services and resources in the future. Libraries and ILL already support lifelong individual learning, and group learning through distance education, including MOOCs. They might also become community centers for news and local discussion of current events, issues and ideas.

The future of library information and resource sharing is not just about rebranding ILL or rethinking what is done in ILL departments. It is about supporting what works until something better is possible, while also rethinking what can be done to ensure that people have access to the

relevant, accurate information they need to learn, create, grow, participate fully in life, and contribute positively to the world. Should there be less, or no, need for ILL in the future, then the time, skills, staff, and budgets now devoted to ILL services could be reallocated to other related services, such as cooperative efforts in collection development, institutional repositories, open educational resources, shared reference and circulation services, or shared print repositories. The role of librarians in information literacy and teaching people to find, evaluate, and use information will always remain necessary and valuable. Although librarians are no longer gatekeepers, they can still be guides and curators whose job is to help people sift through the masses of information, find relevant and accurate sources and learn to evaluate and use it. This sort of information sharing involves access to content but also sharing knowledge about how to use information. Sharing expertise, sharing knowledge, sharing inspiration, sharing the past, and sharing the present are what will shape the place of libraries and librarians in the future.

## CONCLUSION

If librarians from 100 years ago were to look at library information and resource sharing today, they might marvel at some of our services, but they would also recognize and applaud our adoption of technology, be impressed by how much information we share, and could not deny how much our services help people. Librarians 100 years from now will still be facilitating information sharing, even if their technologies, services, collections, and spaces are unrecognizable to us. However, I have every reason to believe and hope that they will also recognize our values and ethos as their own. This brings me to some final truisms—and a final word on behalf of library resource and information sharing. If, as they say, information is power and sharing is caring, then we can see that librarians share information because we care about empowerment. This is why, rather than hoarding, hiding, or discounting any information that can help people learn, think, strive, and search for answers, it is the ongoing and eternal mission of librarians to connect people with information by sharing it.

What is being done in libraries and in ILL departments to facilitate information sharing has ramifications for all information seekers, the cultural and scholarly record, and thus for all of society. Of course librarians, understandably, cannot imagine a world without libraries or without a role for librarians; ILL specialists similarly come at library information sharing from an ILL-centric perspective. However, unless we rethink what libraries and ILL offer their communities and what the costs are for doing so, they may not serve their users well enough to be adequately supported by them. In rethinking our services and collections, all library

functions must be reconsidered, as well as all policies and procedures. Everything must be evaluated in terms of how it contributes to the ultimate library mission of connecting people with information. This mission remains valuable, but it does need to be actively promulgated and reaffirmed regularly to remind everyone why libraries and librarians exist and how they can help serve real needs. The bottom line is that if librarians offer efficient, effective, and valuable services, then they will be used; and if they are not used, then they will not be supported well enough to provide good services. Their aspirations and values may always remain laudable and powerful, but aspirations and values alone will not be enough to sustain them.

As for ILL work today, it represents a microcosm of the kind of world many people want to live in; one where we share as much as we can, support each other, and empower everyone to learn and grow; one in which people appreciate and experience the value of community and sharing and dreaming. It seems that people's lives are most successful, and we are at our best, when we feel connected to more people and when we can find meaning in what we are doing. No matter how libraries, ILL, and library information sharing evolve, they are still all about connecting people and information, libraries around the world, and library staff within and among these libraries. Despite the limitations posed by budgetary constraints, and mindful of the library closings that are happening in many communities, librarians continue to develop and support libraries because they remain beacons of light, metaphors for knowledge, answers and hope, places for communication, community and connection, and safe zones for learning and creating. ILL and libraries are often beloved by authors, teachers, parents, and children (society's engines of hope, who will also become the caregivers, authors, scientists, scholars, and leaders of the future). Individual human life is relatively fleeting, but libraries, be they physical or digital, are created to be responsive to current needs for information while simultaneously serving as both physical and symbolic monuments to the past and bequests to the future.