

Everyday Ethics for Libraries*

Part 5: Access to Information for All

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There are four library ethical standards to consider, and the fourth one I'd like to talk about is access of information to all. This is an issue that touches almost every aspect of a library. It can touch maintenance of a library. If you've got broken steps in the back where the parking lot is and the lights over the back doorway aren't lit, guess what, there may be a lot older people who aren't coming to the library in the evening because you haven't put in the time and the energy to make them feel secure. If over a certain percentage of people who live and work in your town are folks who do not speak English as their first language, do you have signs throughout the library that are bilingual? Or maybe just in that little section of bilingual books – and by the way, I'm getting a little tired of visiting libraries where that one little, tiny section of books that are supposed to serve 20% of your population are stuck on a shelf in your basement in an area that you need bloodhounds to find. At some libraries I visit, information signs are placed in such a way that everybody can see them, everyone can read them, regardless of what their first language is.

And, coming from an immigrant family, I'll tell you that the bilingual issues we all struggle with are not as simple as people think they are. I was in a library conference in Florida a few years ago, and coming from an Eastern European family, my ear was tuned to certain accents, and I heard a lady talking at the coffee cart. And I went over to her to chat, and it turned out she was from Russia. She was operating the coffee cart. And in Russia she had been a doctor. Then she and her family had come to this country. Well, her husband was doing fine, and her children were doing great. But she didn't have very good language skills. And despite the classes that she had gone to, her English was poor enough that she couldn't even get a job as a lab technician. The only job that she could get was working the coffee cart. And she cried

and she said, "You know, in Russia I had prestige as a doctor. Here, I'm a waitress. And that's the best I can do."

When people get concerned about access to language and the fact that anyone coming to this country ought to speak English, I would love to just dump them in the middle of Estonia or Finland or some part of Africa and say, "Here, you don't have any money. You don't have any status. You don't speak the local language. Now, for the next year, try to make a living and tell me how easy it is if there're no signs in English around or no one to help you." So, my view is a little different than some folks who get a little upset about this.

Access for information for all means that we understand that not everybody is created equal. Not everyone can read small type. Not everyone is able to get up a flight of stairs without some help. Not everyone is able to get around without the use of a wheelchair or a cane. So access to information for all really gets us thinking about are we really considering everybody in our community?

I visited one community -- and this was in rural Iowa -- where the library director swore to me up and down that the seniors in her town had no interest in the library. And I said, "That's pretty interesting, because 60% of the people in your county, according to the last census, are over the age of 70. You would think that there were some people in town who would be interested in your library." And she said, "No, no, I've tried. Nobody's interested." Well, I checked around town, and this is what people told me: "Oh, people love the library in town. Of course, the local library doesn't cater to seniors, but we all get in our cars and drive the 15 miles to the next town where they have wonderful services for seniors, and we're also treated so well."

So, access to information for all is not just about putting books on the shelves and advertising them. It's also about the environment you create. So, what does this mean? First of all that your library is safe for people with all kinds of disabilities. That you don't have loose rugs on the floors. That the floors aren't shiny -- that makes it more likely for people to slip. That you really understand the spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act. And really think about the people who are homebound who maybe would like to get out and be able to come into the building.

Many years ago in Wisconsin, I worked for an agency that worked with home health care issues. This was about 1971. They had a conference there in downtown Milwaukee. And the man who ran the conference whose name is John Teevan did something nobody had done before to our knowledge. He went to the nursing homes he worked with and rounded up a couple hundred wheelchairs. And all these important officials who were at this conference having to do with helping people in nursing homes -- all them were required to spend half a day in a wheelchair.

Now remember, this was 1971, folks. There were no handicap-accessible bathrooms. There were no curb cuts or ramps to help people could get in buildings. And this changed the industry in two days, because most of those people who were telling other people how to live their lives even though they themselves had never been in a wheelchair before. So access to information means that you really think about how we are serving the people who might have some sort of physical disability.

Do we keep the library well-lit and clean? I think it's a false economy – even in this difficult economy – for people to be worried about light bulbs. In fact, I have an architect friend who told me that if she could just get libraries to put in new bulbs at a higher wattage, they'd be amazed at the response of the people in their community. One of the libraries in Englewood, Colorado, was near a large shopping

center that went out of business called "Cinderella City." So, one of the things the director, Hank Long, did was he went to the people at the shopping center and was able to get them to donate a lot of the beautiful lighting that had been in the department stores to the library. And he was able to replace the lighting and to put new lighting between the stacks.

Well, you wouldn't believe the response of the people in the community. All he did was to put in new lighting and people said, "Oh, you redecorated the place!" "Oh, I love it! You expanded the collection." "Oh, all these new books that you bought!" "Oh, the paint job looks so good!" "Wow, when did you clean the carpets?" All he did was put in bright lights so that people could see what was on the shelves for the first time. So, trying to save money by cutting down the wattage of bulbs or putting in old bulbs that aren't very well lit -- that's what we call a "false economy."

The third thing is outreach initiatives. That when we say access to information for all, we don't just sit around in our libraries and wait for people to find us. Outreach means going out to all kinds of communities -- to the institutionally-bound in hospitals and nursing homes, to people who are homebound, to people who might not have the money and resources to come to the library.

I know a library in Texas where the new director realized that many of the daycare providers in town did not have the insurance or the money for vehicles to bring the kids to the library. Well, you know what they did? They worked with the children's department of the library to develop a training program. Now the children's librarians spend a good amount of their work week going out and visiting daycare providers and teaching them how to do reading programs, how to do story hour, and how to do reading readiness. And they've developed packets so that the daycare providers can, in effect, offer at their sites some of the resources that would only be available to people who could afford the time and money to

come to the library.

And finally, a big part of access to information for all, well, it's about computer classes folks. It's about the fact that this is the 21st century, and, still according to even the latest polls, for most of the people who work and live in rural America the main way they're going to have access to computers and the Internet is through the local library. We cannot deny our friends and neighbors, particularly the ones maybe who came to their workplaces before computers were a part of high school and college life, they deserve a chance to learn about computers and have access to that information as well. So, access to information is not just about having a library with regular hours and open doors. Access to information also means going above and beyond.

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