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## The Significance of Access to Information—and the Challenges it Faces in Librarianship

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## **The significance of access to information—and the challenges it faces in librarianship**

### **Abstract:**

Access to information is a fundamental value of professional librarianship and library and information science more generally; however, providing such access can be impeded by certain practices of librarianship, as this article describes. We focus on obtaining a better understanding of the extent of censorship practices within information institutions and the effects of restricted access to information on both individuals and communities. This article draws on several theoretical frameworks including regulative and constitutive censorship, information poverty, access as a human right, and the importance of individual autonomy. This research provides a more solid foundation for librarians and other information professionals to apply the value of intellectual freedom to professional practice.

### **Introduction**

Censorship is the restriction of access to information (Doyle, 2001; Mathiesen, 2008; Oltmann, 2016; Oppenheim & Smith, 2004). As the American Library Association (ALA) says, “Censorship is the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous” (2007, para. 4). Thus, censorship from any source should be a central concern of library and information science (LIS), because access is at the core of this discipline. Michael Buckland (1991) noted that access is “a recurrent theme” of information science (p. 77). Jaeger (2007) argued, “without access to information, there can be no exchange, use, collection, or management of information” (p. 843). Furthermore, Preer (2008) noted that “providing access is what library service is all about” (p. 12). In addition, access is central to U.S. librarian ethics, as reflected in the American Library Association (ALA) code of ethics:

1. We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.
2. We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources [ALA. 2017, principles 1-2].

Likewise, Kay Mathiesen (2004) suggested that information ethics is “fundamentally about who ought to have access to information and under what conditions” (para. 2).

Indeed, the value of information access is broadly accepted as a fundamental norm of professional librarianship (Burnett, Jaeger, & Thompson, 2008; Mathiesen & Fallis, 2008). Sturges (2006) summarized the centrality of information access by noting “the commitment of the profession to freedom of expression, [and]... the global role of libraries in contributing to providing access to the widest possible range of information and ideas for communities” (p. 181). Foster and McMenemy (2012) analyzed ethical codes from national library associations across the world, and they found that equity of access and intellectual freedom were among the most-frequently represented core values. In addition, the International Federation of Library Association’s Statement on Intellectual Freedom, approved in 1999, states that the Association “asserts that a commitment to intellectual freedom is a core responsibility for the library and

information profession” (International Federation of Library Associations, 1999). Thus, the significance of access to the LIS discipline extends beyond the U.S. and should be seen as an internationally important core principle.

Access is important beyond our discipline as well. Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states “everyone has the right...to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (1948). Here, the verbs “seek” and “receive” are equivalent to “access” (see Oltmann, 2016, for further explication of these synonyms from a legal perspective), and access to information should be seen as a basic human right. Likewise, in the U.S., the Supreme Court has held that the right to receive information is “necessarily correlative” to the freedom of speech (*Thomas v. Collins*, 1945, p. 515) and “a necessary predicate to the recipient’s meaningful exercise of his [sic] own rights of speech, press, and political freedom” (*Board of Education v. Pico*, 1982, p. 867). Mart (2003) noted that “by 1969, the right to receive information had become a fundamental right” in the U.S. (pp. 178-179).

### **Restricted Access to Information in Librarianship**

Despite the importance of access to information, it is often curtailed in a number of ways. Any restriction of information can be seen as a form of censorship; this would include any practice that removes, restricts, relocates, or redacts information (Knox, 2014). Censorship is not (only) something that is mandated and enforced from federal government decisions. Private actors and local actors can also act in censorious ways (see Jansen, 1998, for a discussion of this).

Perhaps the quintessential form of restricted access in libraries is book censorship: this occurs when books are removed, relocated, or restricted in libraries (Knox, 2014). Censorship can happen in all types of libraries, though data collected by ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) indicates that these acts most often take place in school libraries (serving K-12) and public libraries (serving the general public) (ALA, 2013a). Each year, OIF collects reports of challenges—attempts by library patrons to limit access to library materials. The Office reported 377 challenges in 2019, though it estimates that this number may represent less than a fifth of all challenges in libraries in any given year (ALA, 2013b). Book challenges can be considered a form of censorship because the intent is to impede access to information.

Challengers’ requests usually fall into three different categories. First, challengers request that a book be relocated from one area of the library to another. This might mean, for example, moving a book from the young adult section to the adult section of the library even though the book is intended for young adults. Restriction involves adding a barrier to access such as, for example, a permission slip from a parent or guardian that allows students to access a book in a middle school library. Removal is what is most commonly thought of as “censorship” since it means that a book is eliminated from a library’s collection.

Another area where access to information might be curtailed is in meeting room policies. This was the subject of some controversy at the ALA Annual Conference in 2018. During the conference, the term “hate groups” was added to the list of groups that might be permitted to use a public library’s meeting room (American Library Association. Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2018). The term was eventually removed after escalating concern and disagreement arose. Well-developed meeting room policies are especially important for public libraries since they are

publicly supported entities and, in the U.S., subject to laws concerning limited public forums. Meeting room policies must also be carefully considered as libraries are often the only place in some communities that provide free or low-cost space for debates or presentations. This type of programming can be instrumental in providing access to information to patrons. For example, in the U.S., the League of Women Voters is a non-governmental organization that provides non-partisan information on electoral candidates and also organizes local debates. These events are often held at local public libraries since the buildings are readily accessible to community members. Without these types of forums, information on important issues and topics is restricted to those who are able to pay for it or is influenced by advertising and other financial interests.

Finally, along with book banning and meeting room policies, no discussion of restricted access to information in libraries would be complete without mention of internet filtering. The use of internet filters is mandated in U.S. public schools and libraries that receive e-rate funding from the federal government (Children's Internet Protection Act, 2000). In these institutions, internet filters must prevent access to information that is child pornography, obscenity (both of which have been previously ruled illegal), and harmful to minors; it is this latter category which is seen as problematic.

While there is little extant research on internet filtering, a previous project has demonstrated two important findings: first, that many institutions block far more categories than is necessary to fulfill legal obligations; second, the configuration of filtering may vary significantly from locale to locale, based solely on the whims and decisions of individual administrators (Peterson, Oltmann, & Knox, 2017). This research found, for example, that public schools and libraries were blocking categories such as "alcohol," "alternative lifestyles" and "society," none of which seem inherently harmful to minors—and might, in fact, contain valuable information, such as how to avoid temptation to drink underage or how to navigate one's sexuality. In addition to these concerns, internet filters are well-known to underblock (that is, allow websites that should be blocked) and overblock (disallow websites that should be allowed). Finally, internet filtering companies are nearly all privately run, which means that the algorithms used to manage the filtering processes are considered proprietary trade secrets; librarians, technologists, and administrators thus are not allowed to know how decisions about allowing or disallowing websites are made.

## **Theoretical Background**

Restricted access to information touches on a number of theoretical frameworks used by LIS scholars, including regulative and constitutive censorship, information poverty, access as a human right, and the importance of individual autonomy. This section addresses each of these in turn.

Sue Curry Jansen (1988) articulated the distinction between constituent and regulative censorship to differentiate between the power that fuels censorious stances (constituent) and the simple acts of restricting access (regulative). She noted that it is the combination of power and knowledge that facilitates the ability to censor. Jansen argued that there are four concepts that are critical to understanding censorship. First is *power-knowledge*, wherein knowledge is a necessary aspect of power. This conceptualization is most easily framed by the statement "knowledge is power" (p. 6). Indeed, one researcher suggests that, at least in the context of South Africa, "power *is* access to information" (Dick, 2005, p. 1, emphasis added). Next, *constituent*

*copyright* is power over classification. Constitutive *copyright* is the subtle process by which “the powerful invoke *copyright* to create, secure, and maintain their control over the power to name” (Jansen, 1988, pp. 7-8); this level of *copyright* can be hidden and implicit, motivating the various rules about which content is allowed or prohibited. Third, *regulative copyright* concerns the rules of restriction. Regulative *copyright* includes laws, conventions, and rules that prohibit or govern the material that can be published, owned, shared, sold, or displayed (Jansen, pp. 7-8). This regulative element is the predominant understanding of *copyright* and examples are relatively easy to find. For example, the scores of challenges noted in the ALA’s *Intellectual Freedom Newsletter* and the subsequent *Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy* are all regulatory battles over which materials should be part of a library’s collection. Furthermore, when *copyright* is defined as the purposeful restriction of particular content, it is clearly applicable to contexts beyond libraries. Finally, *reflexive power-talk* is “a method for identifying and criticizing the socially structured silences which make arbitrary forms of *copyright* possible” (Jansen, p. 9).

A second theoretical framework focuses on information poverty; while long a concern of LIS scholars, it was first articulated into a research framework by Elfreda Chatman (1996), which was intended to be descriptive (not necessarily pejorative). Chatman stated that “an impoverished information world” was associated with the following characteristics: being devoid of sources, associated with social class, use of self-protective behaviors such as secrecy and deception, and negative consequences outweighing benefits. These occur in “situations in which people are unwilling to approach others in their usual social environments for much-needed information” (Hasler, Ruthven, & Buchanan, 2014, p. 25). Similar to Chatman, much subsequent research on information poverty tended to focus on individual characteristics that led to or perpetuated information poverty. Thus, Britz and Blihnaut (2001), for example, defined information poverty as a condition where individuals “do not possess the skills and abilities to access, interpret and use information effectively for development” which is worsened with a “lack of effective ‘information infrastructure’” (para. 17). While acknowledging the importance of information infrastructure, the authors’ emphasis is on individuals’ skills and abilities or lack thereof. Britz (2004) later added that this included “cultural and language diversity, levels of education and the ability/ inability to access and benefit from information” (p. 192). Likewise, Shen (2013) identified information poverty as “groups and individuals who do not have adequate and equal access to quality and quantity information” (para. 1). It is worth noting that the emphasis is on the individuals, here, rather than on the systemic shortcomings that create gaps in access (a problem in the literature that is rectified in more recent years and that is described in this research agenda; see below).

In the following years, Chatman’s (1996) theory has been used to research such issues as the digital divide and information deserts. Information poverty research often focuses on simple access questions, such as whether a household has access to broadband or whether a library provides public access terminals. However, our article takes a more nuanced position that holds that information access is often circumscribed by those in (relative) power, even when the means to access information is provided.

That is, information poverty is exacerbated by *copyright*. When one must use public institutions to gain access to information, that access is determined by those who run the institution. In the U.S., for example, millions of individuals rely upon their public libraries for access to information through libraries’ collections of books, magazines, journals, audiovisual resources, newspapers, and technology, including reliable computing equipment and internet

access. Any restrictions to this information result in an impoverished information world for those who are reliant upon it. Reddick (2004) notes that access inequalities “reflect the longstanding inequality of access to power and resources, as well as to social participation” (p. 13).

As described above, the United Nations has held that access to information (the ability to seek and receive information) is a fundamental human right (see also Britz, 2004). This is connected to the idea that information access is a human right that aids people in exercising their linchpin right to communicate. Mathiesen (2008) argued that we have an interest in access to expression because:

by promoting access to information, we are enabling the success of such acts by connecting, for instance, the writer and the reader. Second to engage in acts of expression, people need a rich information culture that will allow them to develop their ideas and learn how to communicate them effectively (p. 574).

Lor and Britz (2007) extended the importance of information access, noting that the denial of access is “no longer merely a denial of access to the ideas held by others or suppression of freedom of expression,” but also “marginalizes people’s participation in the various economic, political and socio-cultural activities” of modern life (p. 392).

Finally, another important thread in the information access research is consideration of individual autonomy. Barbakoff (2010) argued that access to information is both instrumentally valuable and a primary competency for autonomy. Here, autonomy means the “moral capacity to make one’s own choices” (Verkerk, quoted in Barbakoff, p. 291). However, Barbakoff went on to state that it is the intrinsic value of autonomy that provides the true purpose for providing access to information, and that libraries, which have the mission of providing access to information, therefore play a fundamental role in supporting the development of human autonomy for its own sake. Indeed, one of Barbakoff’s critiques of the mission of libraries was that they often state that they “support democracy” or “provide access to information” but these are all instrumental values and do not address the core necessity of having institutions that aid in the growth of autonomy. Unfortunately, the persistence of the digital divide and the ubiquity of filters means that some individuals are not given the same access to information as others. Murdock and Golding (1989) similarly linked access to three dimensions of citizenship: civic, political, and social. The first two aspects of citizenship deal with essential freedoms (such as freedom of religion) and the right to participate politically (such as voting for representatives). The third dimension “centers on the struggle to secure a basic standard of life and well-being for all” (Murdock & Golding, p. 182). Without access to pertinent, useful, accurate information, individuals are unable to activate all three dimensions of citizenship.

## **Current Research on Information Access and Censorship**

Currently, research on access to information has three main thrusts. One examines the physical, intellectual, and social components of information access (i.e., (Burnett, Jaeger, & Thompson, 2008). The second is a reconceptualization of information poverty that focuses on systemic inequalities. In the third stream, researchers try to concretize the details of censorship and restricted access within libraries.

First, we consider the three interconnected components of information access which provide theoretical depth to this concept. Jaeger, Burnett, and colleagues began by defining

information access as “the presence of a robust system through which information is made available to citizens and others” (Jaeger & Burnett, 2005, p. 465). From the context of the article and subsequent publications, it is clear that “system” encompasses more than technology; rather, system entails the socially- and politically-contextualized complex means by which individuals obtain information.

Burnett, Jaeger, and Thompson (2008) suggested that access has three components: physical, intellectual, and social. Physical aspects include physical and electronic structures, pathways, geography, and technology. The intellectual component of information access includes cognitive (dis)abilities, literacies, and language competence—primarily internal characteristics. Finally, the social aspects include “elements of one’s social world, including social norms and worldviews, [that] influence which information one accesses, and how and why particular information is sought (Oltmann, 2009, p. 6; see also Jaeger, & Thompson, 2004). This line of work has been utilized to study information access for people with disabilities, digital inclusion, e-government, and diversity issues, by Jaeger and colleagues.

In addition to considering the physical, intellectual, and social components of information access, current research has also turned a fresh eye toward the lens of information poverty. Strand and Britz (2018) defined information poverty as “that situation in which people, within a specific context, do not have the required skills, abilities, and/or material means to access and use information in a meaningful way to address their needs” (p. 364). Here, the authors mention the “specific context,” but do not explicitly address the ways that contextual components can systemically disadvantage or marginalize those who are informationally impoverished (Gibson & Martin, 2019). Marcella and Chowdhury’s (2020) research agenda addressed information poverty as “denied access to the information necessary for survival, self-sufficiency, sustainability or development” (p. 2). This definition seems to shift the agency of the denial at least partially away from the individual, as the authors then address numerous causal factors that contribute to information poverty: human and behavioral factors; social and cultural factors; trust factors relating to politics and propaganda; information creation, distribution and management practices; ICT, infrastructure and systems; national and international information regulations and policies; economic factors as in having the resources and capacity; and perpetual environmental disasters and calamities (Marcella & Chowdhury, p. 12). Yet, many of these causal factors still seem rooted in individual characteristics.

Throughout many of these scholars’ work, post-Chatman, the causation of information poverty remains cloudy. For example, Lingel and boyd (2013) argued, “when researching information practices of marginalized communities, considering social context reveals how different kinds of privilege shape access to and use of information” (p. 982). But it is unclear how they conceive of marginalization, social context, or privilege within their study (or more broadly), or how these concepts might affect information poverty. While their conclusion notes that “in most studies of information poverty, the groups being studied are systematically marginalized in ways that shape access to information” (p. 989), the authors do not delve into the systematic (or systemic) marginalization in depth. As Gibson and Martin (2019) explained, “much of the theory around information poverty focuses on the behavior of the individual (experiencing ‘poverty’) rather than the institution (creating ‘poverty’)” (p. 476).

Gibson and Martin (2019) introduced the concept of *information marginalization* to “describe the institutional and or community-level mechanisms by which information poverty is created” and recommended using a critical approach, which will uncover “the development of systemic, contextual barriers to information access” (p. 477). While acknowledging that

individuals may have characteristics and habits that contribute to information deficits, the authors argued that “in blaming individuals and communities for their own information poverty, this approach stymies our ability to understand the underlying structural inequalities that deny them agency” (478). Indeed, these authors suggested viewing “information poverty-related behaviors” as “red flags” that information systems are exposing systemic inequalities and structural marginalization (p. 485). With this turn to systemic marginalization and inequality, the relevance of information poverty to internet filtering is heightened. Many scholars have noted that there is a correlation between information poverty and economic poverty. Information marginalization or “structural information poverty” are ways to conceptualize the systemic barriers to information access.

Finally, in the third research stream, researchers study the ways that censorship is enacted in libraries. For example, Louise Cooke, Adrienne Muir, Rachel Spacey and Claire Creaser (2014) found that, even though librarians are ambivalent about it, internet filtering is generally accepted practice in UK public libraries. A few years after the study by Cooke et al, we conducted a pilot study in Alabama (Peterson, Oltmann, & Knox, 2017; Oltmann, Peterson, & Knox, 2017) to test our methodological and analytical assumptions. Alabama was selected because it is the first state alphabetically. We sent Freedom of Information (FOI) requests via USPS to every public library and public school district in the state. The letter asked for complaints, requests, and/or challenges for removal, reclassification, and/or reconsideration of publications since January 1, 2003; current collection or curriculum development policies; and any records related to internet filtering. Each request referenced the relevant Alabama Public Records law. Out of 351 requests, and with nine months of follow-up communication, we received 222 full or partial responses—84 from public schools and 138 from public libraries, for an overall response rate of 63.1%.

Regarding internet filtering, we found significant configuration inconsistencies and “black boxes” (Peterson, Oltmann, & Knox, 2017). For example, one of the filtering solutions used by seventeen of our respondents in Alabama, K9 Web Protection, has five preconfigured classification schemes, none of which match the framework given in the CIPA legislation. K9’s “commonly blocked categories” include abortion, alternative sexuality/lifestyle, sex education, and tobacco. In general, we found that filters act as a form of social control, and many institutions filter beyond what is needed to conform to CIPA.

## **Gaps in Knowledge**

Despite these fruitful research areas, significant gaps remain in our understanding of restricted access and intellectual freedom. In fact, we know relatively little about challenges experienced by libraries—or about censorship cases, writ more broadly. The problem with access and censorship, as a research domain, is twofold: we do not know the *extent* of censorship, and we do not fully comprehend the *effects* of restricted access to information, across a range of impacted areas. Over a decade ago, we suggested:

Information access can be portrayed as the proverbial elephant investigated in the dark: though many research areas touch upon some aspect of information access, relatively few LIS scholars have focused solely and explicitly on “information access” as a stand-alone

research area. Thus, our understanding of information access remains fragmented and incomplete (Oltmann, 2009, p. 2).

This lack of knowledge leaves our discipline ill-equipped to challenge restrictions to information access, to refute those who would argue that censorship is beneficial in some cases, and to effectively increase access to information. Given that access to information is an important human right, and a foundational principle of library and information science, these are essential areas of research to be expanded.

## Conclusion

Although many information professionals would agree with Mathiesen (2018) that information access is a human right, this right is often circumscribed—even in libraries. In this article, we explored the importance of intellectual freedom and the forms that censorship can take. We discussed the main theoretical bases of research studying restricted access to information, some current trends in that research, and areas that future research can address. As this article demonstrated, much work remains to be done to fully understand and combat censorship.

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