Professional Library & Information Associations Should Rise to the Challenge of Promoting Open Access and Lead by Example

It is only natural that librarians have led the way in identifying the crisis in scholarly communications and developing potential solutions. One example of this leadership is the Association of Research Library's Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) [1] initiative. After all, providing users with access to the information they need is one of the most core of librarianship's values. There is currently substantial consensus that open access to scholarly information is the ideal, not only for the public good, but also as the most effective means of advancing scholarly research. An opportunity exists for library associations to lead by example in the open access arena, by making our own publications as openly accessible as possible. This article will address some of the reasons for opening up access to library literature, issues and challenges, and some examples of library associations that are already providing open access to their publications.

The benefits of open access to library literature

When library associations publish journals for distribution to members and/or subscribers only, potential readership and impact is primarily limited to these groups.

Library staff in smaller, rural, or poorer areas, are less likely to enjoy the advantages of institutional membership. They also often have a lower salary, which makes it more difficult to purchase individual memberships or subscriptions. People in countries where libraries are less common are very unlikely to be members of library associations, or subscribe to library journals.

Even in larger, more affluent libraries, the library or individual staff probably have access to, at most, only a few journals through memberships, subscriptions, or journal database packages. Only the very largest research libraries have the means to subscribe to a large percentage of the world's library literature.

Therefore, if the aim of library professional publishing is library practice enlightened by theory, research, and experience, then open access is the most effective means to this goal.

When journals are openly accessible, there are advantages for readers, authors, and the profession as a whole. Picture what might happen if library literature were freely available to all:

A staff or board member at a smaller library would be more likely to find just the information they need to create a new program, solve a problem, or even advocate effectively for funding. Maybe they would be so successful that they could afford to join their local library association – and send someone to the annual conference!

A person in one of the world's many countries without public libraries trying to establish that very first library would have access to a wealth of knowledge about library programs, services, and management.

We could direct our key stakeholders – whether politicians, board members, academic or other administrators – to key research supporting our viewpoints by simply pointing to a URL.

When searching the internet, people would find articles written by librarians. A user might find an article on the key information resources in their area. An educator, student or parent might come across an article about information literacy. A legislator might happen upon a librarian's view on copyright or any other of the many issues of importance to libraries. How many people might find one of the many articles explaining why not everything can be found through Google?

Library staff members in one region would have ready access to the recorded experiences of library staff in other regions. Good ideas could spread more quickly, resulting in better library

service everywhere.

Examples of Library Associations Practicing Open Access

For some scholarly and professional societies, journal subscriptions and advertising is a source of revenue, used to support other association activities. This is the case for some of the members of the The Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP), which has issued a statement in favour of maximizing access to research literature, and is encouraging members to experiment with different economic models for achieving this end [2].

Moving to open access is at its most challenging in this situation. Yet the Medical Library Association has made the switch to open access with its premier, peer-reviewed Journal of the Medical Library Association (JMLA). All volumes, from the first issue of the Bulletin of the Medical Library Association published in July 1911 to the current issue, are available from the Pubmed Central Archives [3].

According to editor T. Scott Plutchak, there has been a drop in the subscriptions and advertising revenue associated with JMLA. While it is still too early to draw any conclusions, there is a possibility that JMLA could become a cost to the association rather than a revenue generator. If the association continues to believe that JMLA is a valuable resource to the profession, there may need to be some cost shifts within the association.

The author payment model, used by open access journals in areas where substantial research funding is common, is not viable in the JMLA context. Much of the work JMLA supports receives no funding support, and individual authors are not in a position to pay processing fees.

Support for open access is substantial in the medical community. With open access to the medical literature, health care professionals outside the major urban centres and research hospitals will have the information they need to keep up to date, as well as to readily locate information to help individual patients. This is why it makes sense for JMLA to lead by example, in spite of the challenges.

For many library associations, journals have traditionally been published primarily for the benefit of members. Subscription and advertising revenue is not a factor. In this situation, the issues are the potential impact of open access on membership, workflow and cost.

In 1997, the Oregon Library Associations made a bold decision to make the OLA Quarterly [4], freely available online, at a time when no other library association was doing this. Then-editor Colleen Bell reports that this move was made as part of an overall redesign of the OLA web site. OLA wanted a robust web site that would provide as much information about the organization to its members as possible. A 6-month lag developed between the print and online publications, for workflow rather than philosophical reasons (the print version is PDF, while the online is HTML).

Initially, there was some (but not much) concern about potential loss of membership. There has been no drop in membership. In fact, OLA membership has increased substantially in recent years. The benefits of open access for authors and the association are illustrated by the e-mail about OLAQ, much of which is from people in other regions in the U.S. and other countries wanting to use OLA articles for research, as noted by OLA website specialist Rachel Mendez. Fred Reenstjerna, current editor of OLAQ, points out that librarians were THE leaders in information technology in the 19th century, and hopes that others will rise to the challenge of leadership as Oregonian librarians have done, in spite of considerable local budget challenges over the past few years.

Also in 1997, the Washington Library Association (WLA) decided to place their journal *Alki* [5] on their website as a recruiting tool. *Alki* editor Cameron A. Johnson and former editor Carolynne Myall describe WLA as very proud of *Alki*, an unusually ambitious publication for a small (under

1,000 members) association: three 32-page, slick-paper, illustrated issues per year. *Alki* issues are freely available in fulltext after a 12-month embargo period; The Table of Contents is available for more recent issues. The embargo period developed for technical rather than philosophical reasons, having to do with the final version being developed by the printer rather than OLA staff. This is no longer an issue, since the current editor is able to create the final PDFs using Adobe InDesign.

The spirit of generosity is ongoing at WLA. In 2003, the WLA editorial board put forward a proposal to distribute *Alki* free of charge to every library in Washington State. This plan was put on hold for financial reasons. Membership does not appear to have been affected by the free availability of *Alki.* Like many membership-based organizations, WLA has been experiencing a slow erosion of membership since the early 1990's.

PNLA Quarterly [6] has made its Table of Contents available on the web for some time. Recently, PDFs of older issues were posted to the website as well, in order to add substance to the PNLA website, and encourage people to join PNLA or contribute to the Quarterly. According to PNLA Quarterly editor Mary Bolin, little effort is involved in adding PDFs to the website.

The author coordinates production of ELN Connect [7] on behalf of the BC Electronic Library Network (ELN). Although ELN is not a library association, the issues are the same with regards to production, and the focus on the needs of partner library staff is similar to the membership-based focus of associations. ELN Connect production is very basic; it is produced in Word and converted to PDF. Posting the final PDFs to the web is a very simple process.

At ELN, there was never any question about open access to ELN Connect. Almost all information about ELN services, with the exception of sensitive information and some technical information useful for ELN staff only, are freely available from the ELN web site.

Any approach other than open access would only increase the costs and workload of ELN Connect production. For example, adding an authentication mechanism, maintaining lists of institutions or persons eligible for access, and/'or troubleshooting authentication issues would add to the workload.

ELN Connect illustrates how a publication can add value to an organization in the eyes of key stakeholders, whether partners or members, while at the same time being totally accessible to all. Articles in ELN Connect focus on services available to partner libraries, highlights local successes, and recognizes local volunteer efforts. None of these benefits is in any way diminished by open access, which allows anyone to learn from some of the ELN Connect articles of broader appeal, such as the series on authentication by John Durno that begins in the first volume.

Aside from publishing journals for free, open access on the web, there is another main road to open access: self-archiving. Library associations can facilitate open access through an enlightened copyright policy. One example of such a policy is the Emerald Author's Charter [8] (which covers Library Hi Tech News articles). With the Author's Charter, Emerald retains copyright, but allows authors to re-use their own work, whether to post to their own web site, or in a book etc., without asking for permission first.

This option may already be available to your library association's members for articles already published. Making open access a reality for a large percentage of information is as simple as educating ourselves, a task that fits well with the ongoing educational activities that form a central role for most library associations. Authors can post their own articles to personal or institutional websites. One excellent example of personal self-archiving is the web site of Ann Okerson [9], moderator of the Liblicense listserv. Liblicense recently featured a discussion on library associations and open access, which inspired the writing of this article.

On behalf of the British Columbia Library Association's (BCLA) Information Policy Committee, the author is preparing to draft a resolution in support of open access for consideration by both BCLA and the Canadian Library Association. To facilitate global cooperation, the resolution will call for support for the The International Federation of Library Association's (IFLA) Statement on Open Access to Scholarly Literature and Research Documentation, approved in December 2003 [10]. The IFLA Statement recognizes the importance of a number of elements besides access per se, such as the moral rights of authors, freedom from censorship, preservation and perpetual availability. The draft resolution will also address local issues, including a call to investigate making as many of each association's publications openly accessible as possible.

Summary

Librarians and library associations have an opportunity to be leaders in the open access movement, thus championing one of the most core of librarianship's values, access to information, Taking action is as simple as asking our library associations to make as many of our own publications openly accessible as possible. Opening up access to our literature is the most effective means of advancing the practice of librarianship. There are benefits for library staff and key stakeholders everywhere, the library association, and individual authors. A number of library associations have already made the switch to open access, including the Medical Library Association, the Oregon Library Association, the Washington Library Association, and PNLA, to name a few.

Library associations that have traditionally published journals or newsletters as a benefit for members will find this relatively easy. Associations that have already made their publications open access are reporting either no change in membership or increased membership. There will be more challenges where associations rely on subscription and advertising revenue from journals to support association activities. Even in this situation, the importance of an accessible scholarly literature is such that it is worth the effort to find the means to support open access. To facilitate global cooperation, librarians can ask their associations to support the IFLA Statement on Open Access to Scholarly Literature and Research Documentation. Library associations can educate members about the possibilities for opening up access to articles already published, through self-archiving.

Notes

1.   Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resource Coalition (SPARC)
http://www.arl.org/sparc/home/index.asp?page=0

2.   ALPSP Open Access Position Statement http://www.alpsp.org/news.htm

3.   Journal of the Medical Library Association
Bulletin of the Medical Library Association Vol. 1 – 89
http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/tocrender.fcgi?action=archive&journal=72
Journal of the Medical Library Association Vol. 90 -
http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/tocrender.fcgi?journal=93&action=archive

4.   Oregon Library Association Quarterly (OLAQ) http://www.olaweb.org/quarterly/index.shtml

5.   Alki http://www.wla.org/alki/index.html

6.   PNLA Quarterly http://www.pnla.org/quarterly/index.htm

7.   ELN Connect http://www.eln.bc.ca/view.php?id=75

8.   Emerald Author's Charter
http://www.emeraldinsight.com/vl=780549/cl=55/nw=1/rpsv/charter/index.htm

9.	Ann Okerson's web site http://www.library.yale.edu/~okerson/alo.html
10.	IFLA Statement on Open Access to Scholarly Literature and Research Documentation
http://www.ifla.org/V/cdoc/open-access04.html

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