OCLC and the Ethics of Librarianship: Using a Critical Lens to Recast a Key Resource

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Introduction

Since its founding in 1967, OCLC has been a catalyst for dramatic change in the way that libraries organize and share resources. The organization’s structure has been self-described as a cooperative throughout its history, but its governance has never strictly fit that model. There have always been librarians involved, and it has remained a non-profit organization, but its business model is strongly influenced by the corporate world, and many in the upper echelon of its leadership have come from that realm. As a result, many librarians have questioned OCLC’s role as a partner with libraries in providing access to information. There has been an undercurrent of belief that the organization does not really share the values of the profession, and does not necessarily ascribe to its ethics.

This paper will explore the role the ethics of the profession of librarianship have, or should have, in both the governance of OCLC as an organization, and the use of its services by the library community. Using the framework of critical librarianship, it will attempt to answer the following questions: 1) What obligation does OCLC have to observe the ethics of librarianship?; 2) Do OCLC’s current practices fit within the guidelines established by the accepted ethics of the profession?; and 3) What are the responsibilities of the library community in observing the ethics of the profession in relation to the services provided by OCLC?

OCLC was founded with a mission of service to academic libraries, seeking to save library staff time and money while facilitating cooperative borrowing. Its mission has grown over the years to offer similar service to the worldwide library community, and its flagship product, the WorldCat union catalog, has become essential to interlibrary loan (ILL) operations. Even as the use of print materials declines, the database is still an essential tool for enabling access to materials of all types to users around the globe. With the introduction of the WorldShare Management System (WMS), allowing localized use of the entire union catalog in place of a standalone system, OCLC has made the long hoped-for knocking down of library data silos a distinct possibility. That dream of a globally shared catalog is only possible if membership in the organization is available to all libraries, though, and OCLC’s business model creates some barriers to that sort of universal participation. Not all libraries can afford membership, and some more prosperous libraries are lured away from the use of WorldCat by the promise of cheaper cataloging services from commercial providers like Innovative Interfaces’ SkyRiver.

In this paper, I will attempt to contribute to the conference theme of “Recasting the Narrative” by first analyzing the development of OCLC to its current state, and then applying a critical lens to its current role in libraries. I hope also to offer some suggestions for bringing libraries into a more equal and robust partnership with OCLC, eventually making it into something more truly cooperative and fulfilling to the needs of all of our users.

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Critical Librarianship
Although the work of librarians has long been informed by theory of one sort or another, there has not always been a conscious application of theory to practice. In an oft-cited article in 2006, James Elmborg called for librarians to develop “a critical practice of librarianship—a theoretically informed praxis.” Even though Elmborg was writing specifically about the role of librarians as educators, regularly teaching courses in “information literacy,” his concerns struck a chord with librarians working in all areas of the profession, and inspired a renewed interest in finding meaningful theoretical bases for the way we do things on a day-to-day basis. The pursuit of such a focus has come to be called “critical librarianship,” or “critlib” for short. In their recently published book, Karen Nicholson and Maura Seale define the term as “variously used to refer to a growing body of Library and Information (LIS) scholarship that draws on critical theory, progressive movements within librarianship, an online “community” that occasionally organizes in-person meetings, and an informal Twitter discussion space active since 2014 and identified by the #critlib hashtag.”

Critical theory itself grew out of Marxist and progressive movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It can be seen as a movement away from the “positivism and pragmatism” of the time, which were seen by some as stifling creativity and intellectual growth, and as supporting the existing power and class structures keeping societies from making opportunity and personal success available to all members. In terms of literacy specifically, scholars such as Paolo Friere and Henry Giroux encouraged educators to teach critical thinking rather than rote memorization. Critical information literacy, as suggested by Elmborg, shifts emphasis away from the mechanics of how to find information, and toward assisting students in discovering how to evaluate information and situate it within the culture from which it comes.

Practicing critical librarianship can facilitate moves away from the status quo and toward professional practices that more fully meet user needs. Examining our profession’s relationship with an institution such as OCLC from a critical perspective may help us to become partners for good with that institution rather than mere clients. The process may help to make both the profession and the institution more fully capable of fulfilling their stated roles and missions.

OCLC
The non-profit organization officially known today as OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc., was incorporated in 1967 by the Ohio College Association (OCA), a group of Ohio institutions of higher educations, as the Ohio College Library Center, or OCLC. The group hired Frederick G. Kilgour, a former naval intelligence officer and associate director of the library at Yale, to develop a system for sharing bibliographic data between member libraries, and to serve as the organization’s first president. The system described in the Articles of Incorporation was meant to eventually be part of any national bibliographic network that might develop, although no such network existed at the time. Computerization of bibliographic data was still mostly just an idea, the MARC pilot project of the Library of Congress having just been launched the year before.

The OCA had been discussing the idea of a regional union catalog as early as 1961, and had reached out to several commercial firms for bids on the project, but the costs were prohibitive, so the group eventually decided that the establishment of OCLC would allow them to create the system they needed for themselves. The system was designed initially as a shared cataloging system, the eventual goal of that system being to facilitate the building of the regional union catalog needed for the resource sharing envisioned by the OCA. Once the database had been established, Kilgour planned that the system could be expanded to include circulation functions and serials control capabilities, and may even one day be able to “furnish management information” for the libraries in the network.
Kilgour believed strongly in the importance of resource-sharing, and the development of union catalogs to support it, and has been quoted as saying “the national library is the nation’s libraries.” OCLC’s focus in its first decade of service was on building the union catalog and providing shared cataloging and printed cards to member libraries. The growth of regional networks providing technical and service connections to OCLC grew rapidly, quickly covering the country with MARC data, even though most of that data was still only used internally. As the Online Public Access Catalog developed in the 1980’s, OCLC’s role evolved some, as access to data online started to look like the real future for library users of all types. The organization began to branch out into the provision of online reference databases and resource-sharing facilitation.

While the resource-sharing side of OCLC’s service did fall in line with Kilgour’s original plans for the organization, the move into reference database services did not, strictly speaking. By the late 1990’s, there was some sense in the library community that OCLC might have stretched itself too thin, working in areas better suited to other providers, neglecting the core bibliographic services for which the organization was founded, and pricing many of its services out of reach of smaller and poorer communities and institutions. This shift in direction following Kilgour’s retirement in 1980 may actually reflect the biographies of the presidents that succeeded him. Kilgour was a librarian by training and vocation, but the presidents since have been primarily from the world of business. The one exception, Dr. K. Wayne Smith, president from 1989 to 1998, was a scholar and former publisher of the World Book Encyclopedia. That the FirstSearch reference service was introduced during Dr. Smith’s tenure is not surprising.

Although OCLC has never been described as a “cooperative” in legal terms, it was explicitly designed to facilitate cooperative acquisitions, lending, and storage. It is today still described as a “corporation” in legal documents, albeit a non-profit one, but as a “cooperative” in public statements of mission such as that on its “About” webpage. This is somewhat misleading, since a cooperative is defined as “an organization or enterprise … owned by those who use its services.” OCLC’s non-profit status, too, has been called into question, both at the state and federal level, the latter being mentioned in an antitrust lawsuit filed in 2010 by Innovative Interfaces and its sister company, SkyRiver Technologies. The focus of that lawsuit was apparently not OCLC’s tax status, though, and the suit was dropped when Innovative absorbed SkyRiver.

OCLC’s choice of its latest president, Skip Prichard, did little to satisfy librarians hoping for a return to leadership by one of their own. Prichard went to work on the corporate side of the information industry following his graduation from law school, working his way up to Vice President at Lexis-Nexis, and President and CEO at both ProQuest and Ingram. He speaks widely on the topic of “servant leadership,” and has recently become a best-selling author of a business-oriented self-help book on learning from mistakes. In his book, Prichard attributes his professed servant posture somewhat indirectly to his parent’s “mission” to bring people of all sorts, and in all sorts of need, into the family home, allowing them to stay indefinitely and become part of the family for as long as necessary. His attitude toward service may indeed be genuine, even if his experience prior to OCLC was strictly profit-making.

Despite the reservations of some in the library world, Prichard’s tenure at OCLC has shown some signs of increased focus on member participation in the direction of the corporation. From his very first presentations and interviews as President, Prichard has emphasized the importance of “listening to members” and being “inclusive” in his leadership. In his first Annual Report, Prichard took pains to explain that OCLC operates on a “cost-sharing philosophy with a business-like orientation,” and that some of those costs hadn’t been being covered. He assured readers, though, that OCLC was “exploring new and improved ways to ensure that our communication and structure make it easier for you to engage with our staff, provide feedback on services and plan for your future.”
Even when the President is saying the things librarians want to hear, though, there is still skepticism in the community regarding OCLC's motives. Some of that skepticism is well-founded, but there is still some cause for hope in the organization of the corporation. When I first began researching this topic for a class in 2011, the corporation's Code of Regulations had specified that the Board of Trustees, the body primarily responsible for the direction of the organization, including such functions as hiring the President, had to be made up of no fewer than thirteen members, only six of whom were elected by the Global Council of OCLC users. It concerned me that this structure made it impossible for user-selected representatives to comprise the majority of the Board. By 2016, the required number of members had been reduced to twelve by virtue of the removal of the President as a voting member. User-selected members of the Board will never be a majority with this structure, but at least they are no longer forever in a forced minority. In practice, they usually are, since the Board can still add additional members, including the President, but there is at least some structural improvement.

Arguably in part as a result of Prichard's leadership, the Global Council has expanded its activities in recent years, regularly holding open meetings, conducting surveys of members, and actively engaging in the selection of Board members, both via vote for its six elected members, and presumably by recommendation for the Board's own appointments. As of 2017, there were “nine librarians from six countries serving on the 14-member OCLC Board of Trustees.” The representation by participants from around the world has increased under Prichard's watch, as well, making the council truly "global."

The Ethics of Librarianship

Before any discussion of questions regarding OCLC and the "ethics of librarianship," I must first explain what I mean by that phrase. To some, the ethics of the profession in the United States are concisely and completely expressed in the Code of Ethics of the American Library Association (ALA). The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) adopted a similar document in 2012, but the ALA's version is very similar, and is directly applicable to the work of American academic librarians. It is thus the only one considered here.

ALA's short document, first adopted by the organization in 1939, and most recently amended in 2008, is made up of eight "broad statements to guide ethical decision making." The Code has grown with the profession, becoming more self-assured and ambitious as the profession did the same. The earliest version reflected the time in which it was written, referring to the duties of "loyalty" on the part of the librarian to the "governing authority" of the library. Service was emphasized from the beginning, but it was only in later versions of the Code that librarians gave themselves the autonomy to determine the nature of that service, and the charge to uphold the central value of intellectual freedom for all people.

The first statement of the Code is perhaps the most relevant to this discussion, and to any discussion involving access to metadata, "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." If we are to truly live up to this statement, we have an obligation to organize our resources in whatever way is most helpful to our users. It is my contention that a worldwide union catalog that eliminates data "silos" and is available worldwide and to all is an important and essential service for research at all levels. If our bibliographic information is located in multiple databases that are not searchable as a unit, we are not providing that "highest level of service" required by our ethical standards.

OCLC and Our Ethics

OCLC's oldest and most central service is the maintenance of the largest database of bibliographic information in the world, WorldCat. With the introduction of OCLC's own library management system (LMS), WMS, using
the data of WorldCat for local purposes as well as global, WorldCat has the potential to break down silos of bibliographic information. Since I believe that eliminating these self-contained data stores in favor of cooperative ones is the only way to provide complete access to bibliographic information to all users, I believe we have an ethical obligation to add our holdings to WorldCat. To do so ethically, through the lens of critical librarianship, we must question the relationship we as a community have with this corporate entity. We must ask the hard question, “What obligation does OCLC have to observe the ethics of librarianship?”

In truth, I do not believe that I can answer that question definitively. OCLC is an independent corporation. It works directly with ALA in a number of capacities, but primarily as a vendor. Its staff and leadership includes a large number of librarians, but it is not exclusively a group of librarians. It serves libraries, and their users, but it is not a library. It may be unreasonable to expect it to observe the ethics of our profession if it is not really part of it.

On the other hand, OCLC does promote itself as a “member-driven library community.” The current and immediate past chairs of the Board of Trustees are both librarians, as are nine of the current eighteen members of the Board. Because of the extent to which OCLC partners with ALA and the rest of the library community, and because of its continued nonprofit status, expecting it to at least come closer to meeting our ethical standards than other vendors may not be too much to ask.

This leads to my second question, “Do OCLC’s current practices fit within the guidelines established by the accepted ethics of the profession?” In terms of “equitable service policies” and “equitable access,” there may be work to do. Although OCLC’s fees are justified for libraries with sufficient budgets, they put participation in the building and use of WorldCat out of reach of many libraries. If OCLC was to truly serve libraries and the communities they serve as a service organization, the most ethical posture would be one that finds a way to make participation in that core function possible for everyone. OCLC already allows searching of the database publicly via worldcat.org. The next step might be to find perpetual funding of some sort, perhaps an endowment, that would allow libraries to participate in cooperative cataloging and resource sharing at no cost, or at a cost commiserate with that library’s ability to pay. Allowing all libraries to participate in the growth of the database will benefit all its users, provided quality control and continued advancement of technology are maintained.

The onus for ethical practice regarding WorldCat, though, is not solely on OCLC. The development of tools that meet users’ needs is primarily our responsibility as librarians, and WorldCat is perhaps one of the most useful of the tools we could create, especially in terms of meeting the needs of scholars and students in academic libraries. My final question is principally for us as academic librarians: “What are the responsibilities of the library community in observing the ethics of the profession in relation to the services provided by OCLC?”

This question is what brought me to this topic. When Innovative Interfaces founder Jerry Kline introduced SkyRiver in 2009, I was dismayed. I had celebrated the merger of RLG and OCLC in 2006, and the subsequent merging of the RLIN database with WorldCat, as a coup for researchers and librarians alike. There would no longer be two competing sources for academic bibliographic data. There would be one place to send researchers, and one database with which to manage cataloging and ILL. The addition of a new bibliographic utility seemed like a step backward. Even though Hillsdale College had been a happy customer of Innovative Interfaces for more than a decade, we decided early on that our participation in the ongoing growth of WorldCat, and our use of it for ILL, was far more important than the potential savings of a few dollars by switching to SkyRiver as a source for cataloging copy. Even now, when the use of SkyRiver records might greatly simplify the processes by which we display access to electronic resources, we have remained steadfast supporters of WorldCat as a cooperative catalog of serious worth to the academic community as a whole, as well as to the library community.
It is my hope that in an environment of critical rather than strictly pragmatic thinking in libraries, we can see beyond the immediate efficiency and cost-savings of treating a resource such as WorldCat as just a product, or just a bibliographic utility, or just a resource-sharing database. Even though it is sold in many ways as a commercial product, it is of significant importance to scholars seeking the whole of a body of knowledge, and its continued growth can only help to advance research and scholarship. Because of its importance to the mission of most academic libraries, academic librarians have a responsibility to ensure its continued growth and relevance, and its availability to all of the academic world at every level.

The practice of critical librarianship demands that we participate as members of OCLC to every extent possible, and that we do not allow anyone’s profit motive to lessen the value of WorldCat as a worldwide union catalog. The sixth statement of the ALA Code of Ethics comes into play here: “We do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions.” If we decide as a community that OCLC is bound by the ALA Code of Ethics, we have a responsibility to make sure that its nonprofit status is sincerely maintained. Even if we decide that only librarians are bound by these statements, we have a responsibility to maintain WorldCat and further its reach in providing access to bibliographic metadata.

**Conclusion**

By maintaining the status quo in library systems and creating our own individual stores of data long past the point when it is technologically necessary to do so, we have done our users a great disservice. Especially in the age of the semantic web, when unified systems can have a truly global impact, the continued development and management of independent library systems, the dreaded silos of data, does not meet our own standards for ethical practice. If we are to recast the narrative of how we share and use cataloging, we must cast a critical eye on our largest catalog, and our use, and lack of use, of it. It is time for libraries to take OCLC seriously again, and to turn it into the cooperative it has cleverly, if not entirely honestly, been marketed to be. We owe our users an honest reassessment of our relationship with OCLC. We must embrace the ways in which it can meet our users’ needs more fully than we are currently able, and we must resist allowing it to be run in any way as a commodity. If WMS is the solution we have been waiting for all along in the world of library catalogs, we must seize it and make it ours. It may already be.
Endnotes


8. Kilgour, "Initial system design for the Ohio College Library Center: A Case History," 86.


17. Carl Grant, "A new CEO for OCLC. Or is it really more of the same?" *Thoughts from Carl Grant*, May 17, 2013, http://thoughts.car-affiliates.com/2013/05/a-new-ceo-for-oclc-or-is-it-really-more.html.


Bibliography