

Libraries and the Information Commons

A Discussion Paper

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Information commons ensure open access to ideas and the opportunity to use them. These commons are characterized by values and laws, organizations, physical and communication infrastructures, resources, and social practices that promote sharing, community, and freedom of information. They encourage people to learn, think, and participate in democratic discourse, fundamental to ensuring an informed and active citizenry. In short, information commons are essential to democracy.

Libraries are quintessential information commons. They embrace, embody and practice the democratic values that characterize commons. The library's mission is to provide communities with open, equitable, sustained access to ideas. They offer individuals the essential tools, skills, and spaces necessary to participate in democratic discourse.

Libraries reflect their communities. From building collections to outreach, they respond to the diverse needs of their constituents. Libraries fortify relationships with their communities by serving as stewards of *resources held in common*—resources that are held in trust for current and future generations.

Communities benefit from *open access* to information guaranteed by libraries. Open access advances knowledge, nurtures creativity, fosters civic engagement and promotes the public interest. Commons also promote *equity of access* to information, bridging gaps in opportunities to participate in the digital age, ensuring that no one is left behind. Libraries ensure a fair and just environment for learning and disseminating ideas. No one is excluded; all ideas are welcome.

Information commons offer free or low cost access to resources and services, no matter what their cost or value. All members of the community are offered a level playing field for exercising their information rights and responsibilities.

Like any commons, libraries are managed according to rules and norms. These rules meet the needs of the library's community, ensuring that shared assets are not depleted. Participants willingly abide by the collective rules of the library commons as well as accept responsibility for protecting and promoting the rights of individual users.

Beyond rules and norms, the library commons is populated by distinctive physical and

technological features, content, and staff that help community members live, learn, work, and govern. The physical and virtual spaces of libraries offer opportunities for private contemplation as well as public deliberation.

Local libraries rely on networks of libraries to share resources and ideas, thus strengthening the library commons. They also rely on other institutions like government agencies, museums, public broadcasting stations, and schools, as well as civil society groups to contribute to the commons.

Like other commons, libraries serve as a bridge between private and public, between the market and the government. They depend upon a vibrant information marketplace and network of public, non-profit and private producers and creators to provide much of their resources. They also rely on government to regulate the marketplace and ensure a fair and just information economy. Likewise, they depend upon legal principles such as the first-sale doctrine, fair use, and the First Amendment to ensure their viability.

Just as the information marketplace enriches the library commons, so do libraries benefit the producers and consumers of information goods and services. Libraries nourish creators, who turnaround and replenish the marketplace. Since all creativity is derivative, libraries play a key role in fueling this iterative process.

New technology promises abundant open access to an infinite array of information that can enrich people's lives. Ironically, the same technology that enables unfettered access is just as capable of restricting personal information choices and the free flow of ideas. The dream of a high-tech society is now threatened by the perils of a highly controlled society.

Various public policies and market forces have enclosed rather than expanded the commons, prompting librarians to lead the charge to stop the loss of public access to our collective information assets. Over the past few years, measures that encourage deregulation and privatization have limited the public's information rights for the digital age, diminishing fair use, the first sale doctrine, the public domain, free expression, and equitable access.

To protect our most precious right in a democratic society – the right of free speech and inquiry – we must develop a more balanced public policy. The information commons is a crucial part of this quest to preserve free expression in the digital age. Applying the familiar model of libraries as commons, librarians can help shape a new world of information resources that better reflects public interest values and benefits everyone in their communities.

Policy Issues for the Information Commons

Libraries and librarians play an important role as stewards of the information commons. They can apply their extensive experience in managing and disseminating information to communities as well as their principled positions of intellectual freedom, equitable access, diversity, and democratic participation to forge policies and practices that serve the common good. Librarians

can use their knowledge of technology and content to influence the development of information resources and services that ensures the free and open flow of ideas. They can bring their experience building communities to engage individuals and respond to everyone's needs and interests.

Librarians can guide future development by spelling out what is needed for a free and open information commons. This means detailing alternatives to many of the market structures and public policies currently in place, thereby tilting the balance of information power back to community members. Librarians now need to assess their role in developing information commons and take action to promote the public interest in the information age.

The following represents a sample list of ways librarians can foster the development of information commons:

- involve communities of stakeholders in the design, creation, and management of information resources.
- spell out common property resource economic models that elevate the value of shared access over individual consumption.
- publicize and promote the value and benefits of access as well as the perils of enclosure.
- promote legislation that ensures public ownership of public research.
- oppose new copyright laws and regulations that limit the public's access rights.
- support policies that ensure fair and equitable access to information for everyone.
- sign licenses and contracts that ensure open access and existing intellectual property rights
- encourage peer production of information.
- publish in and purchase open access journals.
- promote open access licenses.
- purchase materials from a diverse array of information providers.
- resist attempts to filter and otherwise control access to ideas.
- protect against the invasion of privacy through the use of technological surveillance measures.
- develop digital repositories to facilitate open access to the information assets of individuals and communities.

Questions for Consideration by the Library Community

What role are you and your fellow librarians playing in your institution to encourage people to value and share information resources that promote opportunities for participation?

What role should libraries play in promoting the information commons?

How could the metaphor of the commons promote the role of libraries?
What is the role of librarians in shaping the discourse?

What other stakeholders should contribute to the dialogue?

What organizational systems and organizational structures are needed?

What role should libraries take in promoting more open access structures?

What do self-managed publishing processes mean for libraries?

What kind of relationships do libraries need to develop with emerging systems such as the Creative Commons, Linux, and GNU?

Why does all this matter?

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