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Rhode Island Library Association Bulletin

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September 1992

Access to Government Information and the Right to Know

BY RACHEL H. CARPENTER

The American Library Association's past president, Patricia Glass Schuman, chose "the right to know" as her presidential theme for 1992. In her inaugural address she spoke of the special role libraries and librarians have safeguarding the right to know by providing access to information. Schuman called information "a critical resource, a public good, essential for a human and just society."¹ This is especially true, I feel, for government, or rather, "public" information.

It is hard to conceive of any government/public information that would not be relevant and critical to the concerns and interests of citizens and taxpayers. Of course, we must be mindful of the sensitivity of information related to national security or to diplomatic or other negotiations at the time such proceedings are in action. Also, information related to pending legislation must for a time be restricted. Still, for all the data the government gathers and produces, there is relatively little that should not be made public. It is, after all, **public information**, paid for by public money. I think it is important for us constantly to remind ourselves, our legislators, and all citizens that the information our government manages (facts and figures, research and reports, Congressional discourse, committee reports and hearings, revenue and budget data, etc.) is public information, as in belonging to the public, and not government information, as in belonging to the government.

The government, our servant, or perhaps better stated, our employee, does not or should

not collect information for information's sake. Instead, information is or should be gathered, organized, and disseminated as, to quote Herbert Schiller, "a central element in the development and creation of a democratic society."²

The idea of "government by the people" has been stated in various ways: "the public as sovereign," "a people who mean to be their own governors," "the consent of the governed." We have all heard this idea many times since childhood. We know, of course, that 250+ million people cannot run or direct this nation. We understand the political and democratic process which elects representatives to run the nation for us. But we must not allow ourselves to wander too far from the idea of "the public as sovereign." The ultimate responsibility for running this nation falls on our shoulders, and that kind of responsibility demands that we be an informed people. In a 1974 Supreme Court case which tested the right of journalists to interview prison inmates, Justice Powell wrote, in a dissenting opinion, "First Amendment concerns encompass the receipt of information and ideas as well as the right of free expression....The underlying right is the right of the people to the information needed to assert ultimate control over the political process."³ James Madison wrote in 1822: "A popular government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."⁴

In the past ten years, we have, unfortunately, become more ignorant. The information which the U.S. government gathers, or at least disseminates, has decreased. "Since 1982, 1 out of 4 of the government's 16,000 publications have been eliminated."⁵ There has been in that time a concerted effort on the government's part to transfer information collection, organization, and dissemination activities to the private sector. The Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 established the Office of Management and Budget as the focal point for information management. In 1985 the OMB issued its controversial Circular A-130 entitled *Management of Federal Information Resources*, which requires "cost benefit analysis of government information activities, maximum reliance on the private sector for the dissemination of government information, and cost-recovery through user charges."⁶

"Maximum reliance on the private sector for the dissemination of government information." What if I use my term for government information? "Maximum reliance on the private sector for the dissemination of [public] information." How do you feel about this approach by public officials to the handling of public information?

And then there is "cost-recovery through user charges." The high cost of machinery, supplies, subscriptions, documentation, training, etc., means that many libraries are unable to afford the new technologies and are unable to provide online searching, collect software, and provide high-quality photocopies and facsimile transmission without cost recovery. Many users understand and appreciate this and believe that the advantages (such as speed, access, and good quality) provided by new technologies are worth the recovery costs. Many users, however, are unable to pay even recovery costs.

If we are to have an increase in and maximum reliance on the private sector to provide access to public information, then we are not going to get charged cost-recovery prices. "Maximum reliance on the private sector" cannot go hand-in-hand with "cost-recovery through user charges." Business is not in business to recover costs; business is in business to make a profit, and rightly so. I do not have a problem with businesses utilizing public information, creating a usable product, and selling it. What they are selling is their creativity and research and development. It is wrong, however, for that information, that public

information, to be made available **only** through the private sector. Information is necessary to sustain intellectual life, and, in this nation, to sustain the democratic process.

We need to continue to receive information. The government needs to continue to supply information in the most egalitarian fashion possible. Until we can provide improved, high-tech storage and retrieval for everybody, we need to continue to provide it in the manner we have been doing already. Libraries need to continue to receive microform and/or printed copies of the laws, the Census, the *Code of Federal Regulations*, Senate and House hearings, and all the many useful and important documents prepared and produced by federal and state governments. We cannot allow a lapse in information dissemination to take place because a transition in technology is going on. We cannot allow technology to become an obstacle to information access.

Two Congressmen have introduced legislation in the past year which calls for improved access to public information. Rep. Major Owens will be reintroducing the *Improvement of Information Access Act* (HR3459), which is designed "to assure that decisions by the Federal Government about the vast store of information it collects, maintains and disseminates are fully accountable and responsive to the people who paid for that information in the first place... [This bill] encourages the use of modern information technologies, prevents agencies from using high prices to limit access to public information, emphasizes the importance of standards in making government information easier to obtain and use, and requires Federal agencies to open dialogues with citizens about information dissemination policies and procedures."⁷ The thrust of HR3459 is to "establish a framework for making policy on access to information resources which assures continuing public participation in these critical decisions."⁸

Another piece of legislation related to public information access and introduced in the past year is the *GPO Wide Information Network Data Online Act* (HR2772), or WINDO Act, introduced by Rep. Charles Rose. This legislation would establish online access to public government information through the Government Printing Office, in a "one-stop shopping way to access and query federal databases." The program would start with core databases providing

access to high-interest services such as the *Federal Register*, *Congressional Record*, press releases, FEC campaign contribution information, U.S. Supreme Court decisions, etc. "The long term goal is to provide online access to as many federal databases as possible and to make it more convenient for the public to obtain low-cost access to government [public] information. The legislation calls for the information available through the GPO WINDO to be priced for most subscribers at approximately the incremental cost of dissemination, and priced without charge through the Depository Library program."⁹

These bills need our support and that of our Congressional delegation. Let Rose and Owens and Rhode Island's Congressional delegates know you support this legislation. Let them know you believe government information is public information. Let them know you believe improved access to public and all information is necessary to being an informed citizen. Let them know you support your own and everybody's right to know.

Notes

1. Patricia Glass Schuman, "Your Right to Know: Librarians Make it Happen," *Library Journal*, August 1991, p. 51.
2. Herbert I. Schiller, "Public Information Goes Corporate," *Library Journal*, 1 October 1991, p. 42.
3. Thomas I. Emerson, "Legal Foundations of the Right to Know," *Washington University Law Quarterly*, 1976, no. 1, p. 15.
4. James Madison, letter to W.T. Barry, Aug. 4, 1822, in *The Complete Madison* (New York: Harper, 1953), p. 337.
5. "Less Access to Less Information by and About the U.S. Government," *Documents to the People*, no. 15 (1987), p.76
6. *Ibid.*
7. "Government Information Belongs to the People," *Information Hotline*, 24, no. 2 (1992): 9.
8. *Ibid.*
9. "Government Printing Office Wide Information Network Data Online Act," *ALA Washington Office Fact Sheet: GPO WINDO Act*, 13 January 1992.

Rachel Carpenter is Reference Librarian at James P. Adams Library, Rhode Island College. She also chairs RILA's Intellectual Freedom Committee.

Preservation Conference Report

BY WILLIAM KEACH

The statewide conference to review "Planning a Statewide Preservation Program for Rhode Island" was held at the Ray Conference Center, Butler Hospital on May 19th. Librarians and archivists from a wide variety of Rhode Island institutions came together to discuss "Bricks and Mortar for the Mind," final

report of the Rhode Island Council for the Preservation of Research Resources. The council has been working since 1989 to create a plan for library and archival preservation in Rhode Island.

Presently in Rhode Island, preservation of historical books, records and documents is in the hands of individual institutions. "Bricks and Mortar for the Mind" is a plan to centralize their preservation efforts. The plan consists of a long list of things to do to make custodians of the state's historical material aware of the value of the material they have, to educate them in conservation methods, and to set up a system to facilitate cooperation and communications between institutions. The plan would create a central agency, jointly sponsored by the Department of State Library Services and the State Archives, for preservation and resource sharing. It provides a thorough, sound and detailed outline for practical implementation of preservation goals in Rhode Island, and should be studied closely by those of us concerned with saving Rhode Island's written history. Centralization can never replace individual and institutional responsibility and effort, but it can help provide the means for fulfilling preservation responsibilities: "Bricks and Mortar for the Mind" has the potential of being a valuable tool, if we work with it.

Optimistic as the conference was, of course, lurking not far beneath the surface was the fear that funding will not be available to go forward with the plan, no matter how good it is. Even if that should turn out to be the case, "Bricks and Mortar for the Mind" still contains a great deal of inspiration and practical advice librarians and archivists can act on individually as resources permit. It brought many of us concerned with preservation together and is standing by for the time when it will be economically feasible to enact its recommendations. Perhaps just having this plan available will in some way help create the means for its fulfillment. Let us hope.

Highlights of the conference included a dramatic, moving presentation by Ruth Herndon of the harsh facts in the life of a poor eighteenth century Rhode Island woman, culled from Newport and South County public documents, and a lively panel discussion by several successful preservationists from other states. Particularly fruitful were small group discussions in which conferees were able to ask questions of and make comments to council members.

State Archivist Tim Slavin's good-humored summary speech was especially appreciated at the end of a long day of serious work, searching for ways to make improvements in conservation efforts in our state, Rhode Island.

Bill Keach is a Reference Librarian at the Providence Public Library.

Librarian's Report

BY ANNE B. TOLL

Editor's Note: Seldom has the library story been told more eloquently than in the following excerpt from the annual report of the Newport Public Library. We hope you agree.

In Chaos Theory, the Butterfly Effect¹ is defined as "sensitive dependence on initial conditions." The usual example comes from weather forecasting and states that if a butterfly flaps its wings in Peking, this can change the weather in New York. This is an old concept stated in a new way. The example we are more familiar with is the nursery rhyme:

For want of a nail, the shoe was lost;
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost;
For want of a horse, the rider was lost;
For want of a rider, the battle was lost;
For want of a battle, the kingdom was lost;
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

Libraries often provide the "initial conditions" that make a big difference in people's lives and the library staff hear of the many ways our library has changed the lives of people in our community. I would like to give you a few examples:

A woman on welfare found a book on crafts in the library, started a successful home-based business and is now putting herself through college. She no longer needs welfare.

A man with an idea for an invention researched the subject at the library, developed his idea, researched patenting requirements, patented his idea and sold it to a manufacturer.

A woman on chemotherapy comes in regularly for escapist reading to help her through a tough time in her life. The staff suffers and rejoices with her through all the ups and downs of her treatment.

A professor from South Africa on a ferry going from Helsinki to St. Petersburg remembered Newport, not for the America's Cup, its music festivals or its mansions, but for its library and reference staff.

A preschooler who did not speak very much was enrolled by his mother in the library's preschool story hour. A few weeks later, he started to talk about the stories he had heard.

Many local social service agencies who provide services for children participated in the library's Summer Reading Program last year. Two children with learning disabilities were identified and referred for treatment; a group of reluctant readers developed an enthusiasm for reading and ended the summer by opting to hear a story over any other activity – when a field trip was scheduled, their first question was "Will we have a makeup if we miss our story-time?"

A successful local artist started her career when she found a book in the library. The author became her instructor and helped her develop a successful personal style.

A young man with Down's Syndrome is a consistent library user. He is now working towards his GED.

The bookmobile visited Headstart's literacy program. Half of the mothers in the program are now regular library or bookmobile patrons.

STRETCH Your Education Dollar



Seven NELA Conference Scholarships are awarded annually to first-time attendees who are NELA members. For information, contact Pamela Stoddard, Educational Assistance Chairperson, at University Library, Government Publications, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI 02881, 401-792-2606, FAX 401-792-4608.

NELA can help you pay for graduate school, continuing education courses, and NELA conferences.

Two scholarships are awarded each year to qualified students pursuing Master's Degrees in Library and Information Science.

Continuing Education Grants subsidize up to 50 percent of educational opportunities *not leading to a degree*. The grants are open to NELA personal members working in or involved with a New England library or library association (including trustees, volunteers, and Friends).

A child decided to publish her own magazine "Let's Read" and gave a copy of the first issue to the library.

A teacher who has spent his summers in Newport since 1989 writing a science textbook came into the library with the completed manuscript – a paper copy as well as computer disks. He donated a copy in both formats to the library and included permission for teachers in the Newport school system to copy the manuscript for classroom use. The library was where his book started and he was grateful for the help he had received here.

Dissertations and books have been written that have included thanks to library staff for help and encouragement.

Staff often hear from patrons who receive college degrees. They come back to thank the staff for the help they got at the library.

Every time a child is turned on to reading for enjoyment and becomes a lifelong reader and learner, the butterfly's wings flap again and a storm in later life is averted; every time an adult rediscovers the information and pleasure available in the library, another horseshoe nail is saved, another battle won. We would, therefore, like to thank the Mayor, City Council, City Manager and Finance Director for their support of the library in these difficult economic times. They are helping Newporters prepare to help themselves.

¹Gleick, James. *Chaos: Making a New Science*, Viking, 1987.

Anne Toll is the Director of the Newport Public Library.

Rhode Island Festival of Children's Books and Authors

The fourth annual Rhode Island Festival of Children's Books and Authors presented by WJAR-Channel 10 will be held Saturday, October 24 from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday, October 25 from 12:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. at the Lincoln School, 301 Butler Avenue, Providence, RI. There will be books for sale, autographing sessions, presentations by the authors and illustrators and activities for children. Featured authors and illustrators include David Wiesner, Trina Schart Hyman, Chris Van Allsburg, Robert Kimel Smith, Ashley Bryan, Jerry Spinelli, Barbara Cooney, Maryjane Begin, Jon Scieszka, and Lane Smith.

Admission is \$3.00 per day. Proceeds will benefit Women & Infants Hospital. For advance tickets, send a self-addressed stamped envelope with your check payable to Women and Infants Hospital to:

Women and Infants Hospital
Book Festival
P.O. Box 9696
Providence, Rhode Island 02940-9696

For more information, call (401) 739-5440 or (401) 277-2726.

BULLETIN BOARD

The South Kingstown Recreation Commission is proud to announce the 4th Annual Award Winning Jonnycake Storytelling Festival which will take place on September 18,19,20 on the Village Green in historic Peace Dale, RI. The Festival received the 1991 National Recreation and Park Association's Dorothy Mullin Arts and Humanities Award. It was deemed the outstanding local recreation sponsored event in the nation for communities under 25,000. This year's festival is sure to be another award winner with performances to excite young and old. Featured in this year's Jonnycake Storytelling Festival are nationally known tellers Ed Stivender and Jim May, and regional tellers Tom Callinan and Ann Shapiro, Jamal Karam, Elisa Pearmain, Don Kirk, Joan Bailey, as well as Rhode Island's own renowned storytelling collective, The Spellbinders. The talented Spellbinders include Ramona Bass, Sparky Davis, Marilyn Meardon, Diane Postoian, Valerie Tutson, Len Cabral, Marc Joel Levitt, and Bill Harley.

The Jonnycake Storytelling Festival is sponsored in part by Fleet Bank, The Providence Journal, and The South Kingstown Recreation Commission. Partial funding for this program was provided by The Rhode Island State Council on the Arts. For advance reservations, and information contact the neighborhood Guild, 325 Columbia Street, Peace Dale, Rhode Island, 02883, (401)-789-9301.



"Censorship: Old Sins in New Worlds" is the theme of Banned Books Week 1992, September 25 - October 3. Now in its eleventh year, Banned Books Week commemorates the freedom to read and the First Amendment, which specifies

that "Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press."

"The concepts of freedom of speech and freedom of the press are continually challenged by groups and individuals attempting to restrict what others can read or see," said Judith F. Krug, director of the American Library Association (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF). "Imposing restraints on the availability of information on a free people is far more dangerous than any ideas that may be expressed in the information they seek."

"More than 500 incidents of attempted censorship were reported to ALA this year," said Krug. "But, only 20 percent of censorship attempts ever see the light of day."

Many libraries, bookstores and writers' organizations around the nation will counter these challenges during Banned Books Week by sponsoring readings, discussion groups or community forums; by showing educational films and videos; by holding contests; providing buttons and t-shirts declaring "I Read Banned Books"; displaying petitions, posters, bumper stickers or books that are frequent targets of censorship; and producing lists of suggested readings about the issue.

Banned Books Week 1992 is cosponsored by ALA, the American Booksellers Association, the American Society of Journalists and Authors, the Association of American Publishers and the National Association of College Stores. It is endorsed by the Center for the Book of the Library of Congress.



The Third Annual Walk for Literacy will be held on Saturday, October 3, 1992. Presented by a number of literacy agencies and organizations in the area and underwritten by The Providence Journal Company, the 10 kilometer (6.2 mile) walk will start from the South Lawn of the Rhode Island State House at 9 a.m.

The walk has the dual purpose of generating awareness of the problem of illiteracy and raising funds for the agencies involved. Each literacy agency recruits its own walkers and receives the funds pledged to those walkers.

Among the agencies participating in this year's walk are: Providence Public Library, the Rhode Island Coalition of Library Advocates, the Adult Academy, and LVA-RI, Inc. Contact the agency of your choice for information and pledge sheets.



The Moosup Valley Road Race sponsored by the Tyler Free Library in Foster will take place on Saturday, October 17th. A walk and bike ride are also scheduled, as well as a mini-festival of music, food, and children's activities. Call the library at 397-7930 for more information.



The Rhode Island Mothers of Twins Club, Midland Chapter, meets every second Wednesday of the month, September through May, at the Shawomet Baptist Church, 1642 West Shore Road, Warwick. All moms of twins and those expecting twins are invited to attend. For more information contact Debra Tirrell, membership, 433-5106; Debra Beattie, Outreach, 941-3319; Linda Petrarca, President, 828-4961.

PEOPLE

MIA BRAZILL, recently was appointed Librarian of the Kingston Free Library.

MARGOT McLAREN, formerly Cataloger and State Publications Clearinghouse Director at the Rhode Island State Library, is now Reference Archivist at Rhode Island State Archives.

SUSAN MILLARD, who recently completed her assignment at DSLS as Project Director for the state preservation planning grant, is now Records Analyst for the National Historic Preservation and Records Commission Local Government Records Program headquartered at R.I. State Archives.

CALENDAR

SEPTEMBER 18-20: 4th Annual Jonnycake Storytelling Festival, Peace Dale, Rhode Island.

SEPTEMBER 25-OCTOBER 3: Banned Books Week.

OCTOBER 3: Third Annual Walk for Literacy, Rhode Island State House, South Lawn, 9 a.m.

OCTOBER 4-6: New England Library Association Annual Conference, Sturbridge, MA.

OCTOBER 21-25: American Association of School Librarians Sixth National Conference, Baltimore, MD.

NOVEMBER 9: RILA Fall Conference.

NOVEMBER 16-22: National Children's Book Week.

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RILA Is For You

BY WENDY KNICKERBOCKER

Why do we belong to professional associations? In a time of shrinking personal as well as institutional budgets, that question deserves some honest reflection.

Most of us probably joined associations initially because at some point in library school we learned that we ought to. That was not an inappropriate lesson, since membership in professional associations is part of continuing professional development. But just as a membership card is not a certificate of continuing education, professional development through association membership is not automatic.

The benefits of association membership include conferences, publications, and committee work. Conferences offer educational opportunities, refresher courses, and new ideas and viewpoints. Publications provide news of the profession and articles and research of interest. Committee work allows us to forge professional alliances and to effect change. Are you taking advantage of these benefits of your RILA membership?

If you would like a particular topic covered at a conference, let a member of the RILA Conference Committee know. If the program would relate to the work of another committee (such as Government Relations, Trustee Affairs, or Intellectual Freedom), ask that committee to sponsor it. The conferences are for you; ask for programs of interest.

Let the *Bulletin* staff know what articles you would like to see in future issues. If you would like to write an article, please contact an editor. The *Bulletin* is for you; share your ideas and your news.

Most RILA committees want new members. Are you interested in RILA's finances? Are you concerned about personnel matters? Volunteer for a committee. (Committee work actually takes less time than you think.) The committees work for you; lend them, if not your time, at least your attention.

We all need each other, we can all help each other, and we should all learn from each other. Ideally, that is why we belong to professional associations. RILA is for you; get the most out of your membership.

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