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The Balance Point

Local to Global: The Importance of State-Level Journals to Library Literature

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Abstract

While the publishing needs of many state library associations are comfortably served by newsletters and Web sites, a number of state library associations produce major library journals that serve readers beyond their state membership. The author interviewed the editors of five state association journals: Alki: The Washington Library Association Journal, Colorado Libraries, North Carolina Libraries, Texas Library Journal, and Virginia Libraries. The editors were asked to comment on the role, challenges, and future of state-level library journals.

Introduction

State-library associations have produced publications for decades in the United States. Traditionally, one of the main benefits of membership of a state library association was a subscription to the association's publication. It was a means for members to be informed about association events, local library issues of common concern, and books published in the state or of interest to local readers. Over the past fifteen years, the function and readership of these journals have dramatically evolved. As abstracting and indexing services added indexing for most and the full text for some state and regional library journals to their online databases and as more content of state-level library journals was available open access, these journals became players in the broader library literature. Moreover, the content of these journals added a needed dimension to the available online library literature by providing numerous empirical examples of library practice and a variety of local context to national and international library issues. State-level library journals have, thus, over time become an important part of the core library literature.

As editor of a column that—among other things—considers shifts in the balance of serial issues, and as a librarian who frequently discovers state-level journal articles among the results of my library literature searches, I was interested in exploring the implications of

this often underestimated facet of library serial literature. I wanted to know more about how regional library journals are continuing to serve their immediate constituency, what challenges they face as scholarly communication rapidly changes, and how their service to the library profession and scholarship is evolving. I decided to talk with the editors of a number of library journals published by state library associations to get their perspectives on these questions.

My first step was to select a number of editors to interview. I wanted them to represent journals from across the United States. I also was interested in state library publications that functioned more as journals than newsletters—publications that seek to publish in-depth, even scholarly, articles that may appeal to readers outside their state of origin.

I selected my editors to be interviewed by carefully examining the pages of Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, first making a list of library publications described as both sponsored by a state association and as a journal.¹ I wanted to be sure the indexes to the journals chosen for interview were broadly accessible. So I cross-checked my Ulrich's list against the journal titles indexed in H.W. Wilson's Library Literature and Information Science Full Text (LibraryLit) (which I suspect is the most commonly used subscription index for library literature)² and EBSCO's Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA)³ (which is currently accessible for free on the Web). I passed on publications that Ulrich's classified (correctly or incorrectly) as newsletters.

I was surprised by how few state-level library publications Ulrich's described as more than a newsletter. According to Ulrich's, it appeared that less than half of the state associations in the United States produced a journal-like publication. Investigating the quality and service of all potential state-level library publications or even documenting a complete list of state-level journals was not within the practical limits of this column. Those projects I happily relinquish to someone's follow-up study.

Five state journals were selected to represent diverse geographical areas of the United States. The five editors interviewed and their respective journals were Margaret Thomas of Alki: The Washington Library Association Journal (Fig. 1),⁴ Jim Agee of Colorado Libraries,⁵ Ralph Scott of North Carolina Libraries,⁶ Gloria Meraz of Texas Library Journal,⁷ and Cy Dillon, coeditor of Virginia Libraries.⁸ Each was contacted by e-mail and sent a list of questions in advance of scheduling a phone interview. The questions addressed three major areas: (1) the current role or purpose of state-level journals and how they serve the profession outside the region; (2) the challenges faced by state-level library journals and measures taken in response to those challenges; and (3) their vision of the evolving future of state-level library journals.

Alki The Washington Library Association Journal 4016 First Avenue N.E. Seattle, WA 98105-6502 Email: washla@wla.org Web: www.wla.org Alki Editorial Committee Erica Delavan, Intern Nancy Huling Theresa Kappus Lynne King Erin Krake Brian Soneda Rayette Sterling Konny Thompson Mary Wise, Chair Margaret Thomas, Alki Editor		Table of Contents	
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Figure 1. Alki: The Washington Library Association Journal v. 22, n. 4, March 2007
<http://www.wla.org/publications/alki/TOC%20March%202007.pdf>.

The Role of State-Level Journals within the State

Interviews with the five editors of state association journals revealed an interesting list of functions these journals serve both locally and for the profession at large. Some of the traditional functions, such as informing state association membership, are part of the essential reasons many of these journals were founded. As state-level journals matured, new functions, such as reviewing regional books, were added.

State Library Association Communication and Local Networking

The editors of state-level journals were in consensus that the traditional role of informing members about the association is still central to their publications. Common functions in this area include documenting the state library conferences, informing members about newly elected officials, and as a vehicle for those officials to communicate with the membership. "It's a really important piece of the membership. It is one of the things that bind us together," said Margaret Thomas of Alki: The Washington Library Association Journal.

Gloria Meraz, editor of Texas Library Journal, noted that it is important for a state journal to keep its local constituents in mind. "Since there is no other coverage of these [state-level library] issues we very much have to do that," Meraz said. She emphasized the many state and some municipal library issues in her state that are of critical importance to the membership of the state association, saying "Texas Library Journal is the primary source for this information."

An important aspect of state-level journals in terms of membership communication is networking and sharing best local practice. "We offer information for networking in the region," said Ralph Scott of North Carolina Libraries. And in Washington State, Alki's thematic issues often bring together library professionals around the state who are interested in topics of mutual concern.

A value shared by a number of state-level library journal editors is the importance of publishing first-time authors and librarians and paraprofessionals who might not otherwise submit a more formal paper to a national library journal. Jim Agee of Colorado Libraries remembered, "One of the things I encouraged and solicited was first-time authors. They would like to publish an article but are kind of afraid. Bring your ideas to me. This is a good starting place." Likewise, Alki attempts to remain relevant to its membership by providing a place "where members of our association can get published ... we wind up with a pretty good mix of some things that are really professionally written and others that are first attempts at publications."

State-Level Advocacy of the Library Profession

Another traditional role of the state library association and – in turn – its publications is political and social advocacy for the profession. Gloria Meraz of Texas Library Journal explained how important her publication was for informing state association members about issues facing the state legislature that can impact libraries. "We do a lot of articles on policy matters but also how members can get involved and so on, though we have a whole set of other publications that deal specifically with action-oriented items like advocacy and lobbying and so on." Ralph Scott, editor of North Carolina Libraries, described this fundamental role from his perspective:

Essentially, the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA) serves as an advocate or lobbying agency for the librarians of North Carolina and essentially, that's why we exist. And that's part of what the journal does-it shows the citizens of North Carolina what librarians do and what we can do for them.

This social and political function was echoed in the theme of the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA) 2007 state conference entitled "Telling Our Story." Scott noted that "besides sharing our successes with each other, we tell our story to the state, nation and world-what librarians and what librarianship are doing in North Carolina. We want people to know what librarians are and what they do for the world, what they do for education, and what they do for literacy."

Historical Documentation

Another local role of the state-level journal is to document the history of the state library association and librarianship within the state. Again, Ralph Scott of North Carolina Libraries explained, "We serve as the official historical record of what the Association did. We publish the minutes of the Executive Board. We have a biannual conference issue where the sections give reports that tell what they've been doing for the last two years. So it is a historical record that goes back to 1942 of what has been going on in the Association." He went on to describe how North Carolina Libraries recently published a series of articles on North Carolina library history.

Columns

Columns are an important part of the state-level journals I investigated. All the editors interviewed spoke enthusiastically about the columns of their respective publications. Cy Dillon noted the success of Virginia Libraries' three columns and how they were

considering the inauguration of a fourth. Margaret Thomas of Alki emphasized the popularity of columns among her readers, especially a column which is humorous. Ralph Scott spoke at length about the success of North Carolina Libraries' column, Lagniappe, which is a miscellaneous column that recently has featured historical special collections around the state, such as the Quakers Collection and the Moravian Collection.

Reviews of Books about or from the Region

All the editors interviewed stressed the importance of their book reviews for librarians within the state and beyond. "The reviews in North Carolina Libraries serve as a selection tool," Ralph Scott said. Cy Dillon speculated that people Googling for a review of a book related to Virginia might find it in Virginia Libraries archived at Virginia Tech. Jim Agee of Colorado Libraries (Fig. 2) noted that book reviews were a popular part of the journal for many years but the number of reviews being published became unwieldy after a while. He was happy with the solution of moving book reviews from the journal proper to an open access space on the Colorado Association of Libraries Web site. Online, the reviews could more immediately be posted and readers could more easily access them. Such innovations help to foster the use of these resources beyond state association subscribers.

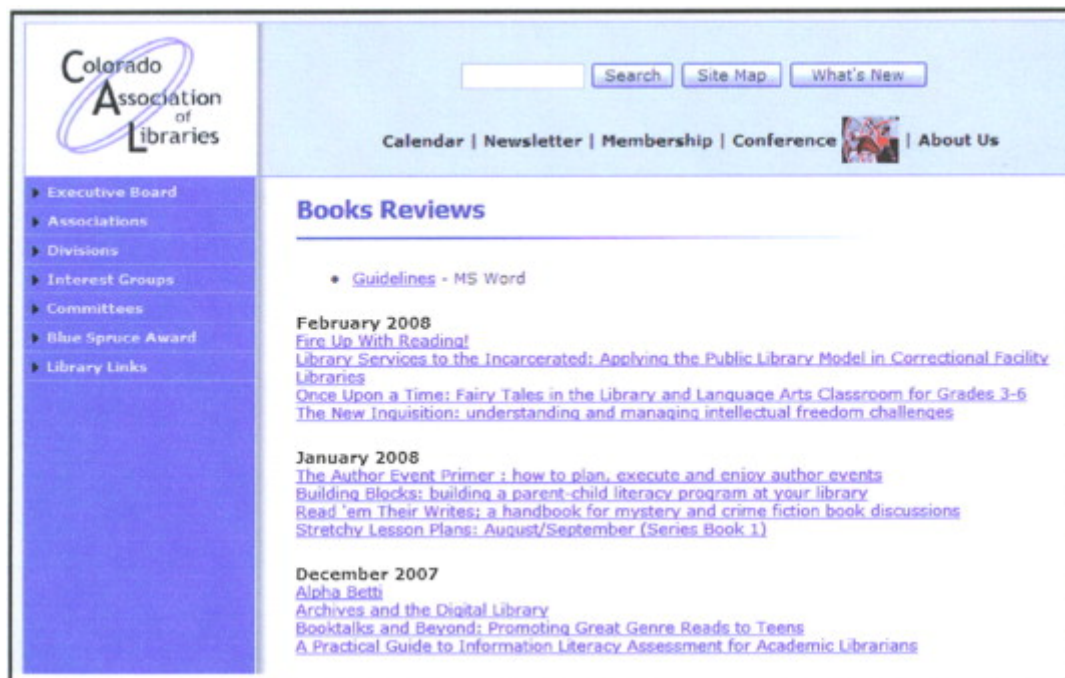


Figure 2. Colorado Libraries book reviews on the Colorado Association of Libraries Web site <http://www.cat-webs.org/reviews/html>.

The Role of State-Level Journals outside the Region

A number of technological innovations are bringing state-level library journals into greater visibility and, consequently, I suggest, into greater general use because of (1) online abstracting and indexing services providing table of contents indexing; (2) online subscription databases providing full-text access to subscribers; and (3) associations themselves providing open access to their content.

Visibility of Regional Journals through Online Indexes and Full-Text Databases

It is reasonable to assume that library journals published at the state level have been of interest to library students and scholars of the profession outside the journals' regions for as long as access to the tables of content have been available through indexing and abstracting services. But until recent years, access to the content beyond association members and the few outside libraries that subscribed was a major obstacle. Few academic libraries could be expected to subscribe to all the state association journals. Previous to online access, if a reader wanted access to an article published by a distant state journal—unless their library had a very complete run of state-level journals—they would have to request the article via interlibrary loan or directly from the publisher. These challenges to library research have changed since the advent of online indexes and the availability of full text online.

A perusal of the journal title lists of LibraryLit and LISTA will reveal that many state-level library journal titles are indexed, many of which also can be accessed full-text through one or both databases. LISTA (the index minus full-text is currently available for free) indexes such state-level publications as Alabama Librarian, Alki, Arkansas Libraries, Florida Libraries, Georgia Library Quarterly, Illinois Libraries, Indiana Libraries, Kentucky Libraries, Louisiana Libraries, Mississippi Libraries, Nebraska Library Association Quarterly, North Carolina Libraries, Ohio Libraries, Southeastern Librarian, Tennessee Libraries, Texas Library Journal, and Virginia Libraries. LibraryLit contains indexing for these titles as well as Idaho Librarian, Minnesota Libraries, Missouri Library World, New Jersey Libraries, West Virginia Libraries, and Wyoming Library Roundup.

Alki recently signed an agreement with EBSCO to make Alki's content available through the EBSCO database (at the time of the interview the previous year's content was available). Margaret Thomas said that there is already “one indication that people are reading Alki through EBSCO—in the form of a royalty check for downloads. It wasn't a lot but it indicated that people were downloading.” Other editors also were pleasantly surprised (by the signal that royalty checks and acknowledgments from online database vendors such as EBSCO and H.W. Wilson sent) that their content was being accessed through their databases. Scott of North Carolina Libraries summarized the importance of inclusion of state-level journals in major databases: “I get inquiries internationally about articles. And the key there is to get indexed in the library literature indexing services.”

Other Indications of Readers outside the Region

Editors of regional journals are not only seeing signs of database searching of their titles but encounter other indications that their journals are of interest outside their region. “We get articles linked by ALA and other major sites,” Cy Dillon of Virginia Libraries said. “And we’ve had articles cited and placed on the reading lists for graduate courses in other states.” Jim Agee gave an example of international interest in his journal: “A librarian in Germany was trying to find out about volunteerism because their library doesn’t use volunteers and were trying to implement some kind of program. We sent her some copies of Colorado Libraries that had articles about volunteers—the nuts and bolts about how community libraries do it—and she was grateful.” Gloria Meraz noted that Texas Library Journal has between forty and fifty subscriptions outside the United States. Ralph Scott also noted that North Carolina Libraries, even though it is available open access, has some foreign library subscriptions.

Global Interest in Journals

The possibilities for sharing practice, opinions, and innovation across the profession and internationally will expand as library literature indexes include more full text of regional titles and as more regional library publications become open access. Gloria Meraz argued that state-level journals are already having an important impact on the broader library scene:

Texas Library Journal brings a balance in library information not just to people in Texas but beyond our own borders. If you pick up a Texas Library Journal, you’ll get the state information but you’ll also get some very good material on general themes of importance to all librarians. We often get calls from people outside Texas who want particular articles. And Texas is such a large state and we have such a large number of libraries that I think a lot of what happens here is of interest to others.

Jim Agee of Colorado Libraries pointed out that his journal provides “a regional perspective on national and global topics. Often the topics are the same whether the publisher is IFLA [International Federation of Library Associations] or CAL [Colorado Association of Libraries]. It brings issues to a grass level. The small public library, that’s rural or in the mountains, can have a voice. Even people who are external library students might find a Colorado Libraries article in LibraryLit and use it as a case study or something because of the regional or local perspective that you might not get in a big national or global journal.”

Case studies and descriptions of local practice are some of the most important contributions of state-level library journals. Ralph Scott, in addressing this contribution, said,

Some of our articles are best practices type articles—what’s the best way to do something. And librarians outside the region are interested in these. The whole profession was largely invented in the United States and we have exported it to the world. So if you go to other countries some of the notions we have and things we do in North Carolina are

pioneering worldwide. So people all over the world are interested in reading about what we are doing and trying to apply them to their country and their region.

We can assume that library science students, librarians, and others interested in local application of library practices, case studies, and local trends in librarianship will be interested to read and cite regional library articles encountered through a database or Web search. Additionally, the increased availability of local, state, and regional library publications will provide scholars, as well as practitioners, with a rich resource of case studies, reports, and documentation of real-life applications of library practices to access for study. Drawing upon a number of locally published case studies or narratives about practice to synthesize into a comprehensive or systematic review has been shown to be beneficial in other disciplines.⁹ Nasseem Taleb believes that “empirical researchers have found evidence that scientists too are vulnerable to ... “sexy” attention-grabbing punch lines over more substantive matters.... The way to remedy this is through meta-analyses of scientific studies, in which an uberresearcher peruses the entire literature, which includes the less-advertised articles, and produces a synthesis.”¹⁰ Library science should likewise benefit from systematic examination of published local narratives and documentation.

Submitting to a Regional Journal with a Broader Audience in Mind

Authors seeking publication of their library-related manuscripts would do well not to dismiss the option of publishing in a state-level journal. They must now consider regional journals in their larger context and realize that they will potentially be read by anyone with access to a library database or a Web search engine. Choosing to publish in a regional journal with open access or one that at least is available full text in a database could have merits over a “major” journal. A personal example comes to mind: I was interested in writing an article on the importance for smaller universities to consider archiving their scholarship in institutional repositories (IR)—that IRs should not be exclusive to large research institutions. I had intended to submit the advocacy paper, originally titled “Institutional Repositories, a Good Idea for Small Institutions,” to a major journal but then realized it would be more effective if focused regionally and published within my own state association journal. The title was changed to “Institutional Repositories, a Good Idea for North Carolina,” and it drew data about scholarship from the second-tier institutions of my state. When a friend asked why I submitted it to a state journal instead of a major publication that would presumably reach a wider audience, I explained that I felt that publishing in a peer-reviewed state journal, especially one that was open access, might have a double effect. First, it might start an immediate call for discussion on this topic within my state. Second, it might be discovered in Google or LibraryLit by librarians interested in developing IRs for smaller institutions within their state (Fig. 3).¹¹

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Figure 3. North Carolina Libraries <http://0-www.nclaonline.org.wncln.wncln.org/NCL/>.

The Value of Open Access

Expanding electronic access to scholarly communication is a shared goal across disciplines and especially among librarians. One of the most promising ways of maximizing access to library literature is to provide it open access, freely available to readers on the Web. During my interviews with the editors, I discovered that they had either already made all or some of their content open access or saw opening access as a major issue to be faced in the near future. They all recognized the spirit of open access—that providing the content of a journal freely to the world increases the visibility of the journal's content and provides that content to a wider audience who can benefit from it. Studies have shown that journal articles provided through open access are rewarded with a greater impact (more citations) than articles from the same journals that are not open access.¹² And with access freely available through Web search engines, it is now generally agreed that open access articles will more likely be downloaded and read than those requiring a fee or subscription. Therefore, increased access to state-level library journals beyond what subscription databases can provide will certainly translate into the increased possibility that librarians and library students around the world will find important articles about local application to profession-wide issues.

Two of the journals focused upon for this column are available open access, North Carolina Libraries and Virginia Libraries, the former via a Web site and the latter through the Virginia Tech Digital Library and Archive. Like North Carolina Libraries, Virginia Libraries is accessible through the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).¹³ Virginia Libraries provides links to their content in both HTML and PDF while North Carolina Libraries currently provides only PDF content.

Cy Dillon of Virginia Libraries is pleased by the apparent success of making Virginia Libraries open access. Besides the downloads from users who access the journal through various subscription databases, the open access archive of Virginia Libraries receives over 200,000 hits a year. “We don't know what that means in terms of readers—how many of those are people actually reading the articles and how many are other things such as the result of search engine crawls.” But indicators such as this large number of hits on the archive lead him to conclude that readers outside Virginia are interested in the publication's content. In contrast to other state-level association journal editors who are concerned that open access may be a detriment to the association (i.e., diminishing a membership benefit), Cy Dillon argues that Virginia Libraries is “fulfilling our mission better with open access than we would be otherwise because anyone anywhere who has an interest in the accomplishments of libraries in Virginia can look at the journal anytime.”

Other state-level journals are considering modified open access. Alki is in the process of preparing an open access archive of past issues on their Web site which they hope to make public in the near future. They still feel it is important to embargo the journal for a year as a benefit to membership in the state association—the rationale being that members might not pay for membership if they could access the state journal for free. This argument can be found commonly expressed among association publishers across disciplines, perhaps a remnant from a time when membership was the only means of gaining access to an association's journal. Margaret Thomas said that the people in her association, like others throughout the profession, are rethinking this conventional wisdom: “I'm not sure it makes sense anymore that we don't provide it full-text while you can get it full-text through EBSCO.”

Jim Agee, who has recently passed the baton of editing Colorado Libraries in order to take a library position in the Bahamas, said he expects to see his former journal move toward more open access in the future. The journal has begun indexing past issues, which he sees as a first step to putting back issues online. The journal has already moved the book reviews to the Colorado Library Association Web site. “That has made for more immediacy both for authors wanting to see their published reviews and for people looking for current titles. And it basically made the reviews open access so anyone looking for those reviews can find them through Google.”

Gloria Meraz of Texas Library Journal (Fig. 4) also recognizes the importance of improving electronic access to the journal though she is more cautious about moving to full open access. Though the journal is subscription based, the journal began providing

online access to subscribers (and through LibraryLit). Meraz clarified that she and others within the Texas Library Association, as library professionals, are in tune with the value of open access but still face the membership benefit dilemma:

If we made the journal open access when it has been a benefit of membership, there may be concern about the loss of this benefit. We have to weigh that against the value of public access. But we have a very open policy. Anyone who ever wants a PDF of an article—it is available on demand.

But even with those membership concerns, she speculated that open access may not be far off: “Clearly, there is going to be a lot more electronic access whether we’re ready or not. Everyone else is ready for it. The call for current access to our publications online will continue to knock on our door as it has for a while.”



Figure 4. Texas Library Journal <http://www.txla.org/pubs/tlj81/fall05.html>.

Challenges Faced by State-Level Journals

A discussion of the evolving role and growing importance of state-level library journals to the general library literature would not be complete without mentioning the challenges faced by these smaller publishing operations. State-level journals are generally managed, according the editors interviewed, by few staff on a limited budget. Often the editor carries much of the workload. In the case of some journals, such as North Carolina Libraries, while peer reviewers volunteer to provide blind feedback to authors and a layout person is hired to format issues, the editor handles pretty much everything else.

Some publications, such as Virginia Libraries, have lightened the editorial burden by having coeditors share in the duties. All the editors interviewed acknowledged that they have ties in various degrees to their respective association hierarchy. This can occasionally lead to political challenges. For example, one editor interviewed discovered the importance of posting a policy statement on the Web concerning editorial freedom of control after the content of the journal was challenged within the state association.

The difficulties of operating state- or regional-level library journals would be a suitable topic itself for an entire article. Suffice it to say that the editors interviewed articulated many challenges ranging from rising printing costs to notifying readers about the release of a new issue. Some of the more significant challenges they voiced included (1) finding good editors to take over the next term; (2) soliciting quality writing and providing a balance and diversity of content; (3) presenting appealing graphic art; (4) producing a well-designed product; (5) selling advertising and other revenue-related problems; and (6) providing quality electronic access and innovative technologies. On this final challenge, all the editors interviewed were actively involved in or seriously considering such innovations as incorporating RSS feeds, audio/video elements, and/or blogs into their publications. Needless to say, these kinds of innovations can potentially expand and diversify a journal's audience (Fig. 5).

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Figure 5. Virginia Libraries <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/VALib/>.

The Future of State-Level Journals

The literature of the library profession and library studies, like that of other disciplines, is evolving such that we can no longer talk in general terms about a finite list of core journals. Electronic innovations have permitted old journals previously limited to few subscribers to reach new audiences and spawned a variety of new journals to serve the worldwide readers of library studies. Electronic indexing, full-text delivery through subscription databases, and open access have been major vehicles for expansion of library literature resources, including state-level library journals, to the world.

Access to state and regional publications by a wider audience is beneficial in a number of ways. Readers worldwide will discover more diversity among the authors and content of the library literature they encounter. Voices from the library profession who may not have contributed to national or international journals but who have important contributions to make can be heard. Local case studies and the documentation of local library practice and successes can be examined by librarians around the world. And finally, global access to local sources of library practice and local perspectives on national and global library issues will benefit our profession in two ways: it will improve the quality of our library research and that, in turn, will improve the quality of library practice.

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