

Leading and Transforming LGBTQ Library Services

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Abstract

This paper discusses the informational needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) library users. It considers current challenges facing these communities and offers some examples of effective library and information services from around the world. It argues that greater attention and action are needed by International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) members and other library leaders to address the diverse informational needs of LGBTQ people. A summary of the emergence of the IFLA LGBTQ Users Special Interest Group (SIG) is also included.

Keywords: bisexual, community, diversity, gay, lesbian, queer, transgender

DIVERSE COMMUNITY NEEDS

In June 2014, I had the opportunity to co-lead a discussion on the role of libraries in facilitating community engagement as part of the World Pride Human Rights Conference in Toronto, Canada – a gathering of activists, artists, educators, journalists, policymakers, students, and others engaged in human rights work (wphrc14.com). My part of the session emphasized collaboration and community-based programs situated in American libraries - community, public, school, and special. The other presenters on the panel, from Indonesia and Taiwan, discussed their approaches to building understanding of LGBTQ issues and some challenges they faced in creating services. Our dialogue led to increased understanding of these issues across institutions and borders.

Following the session, I attended another panel, *We Are Here: LGBTI Resilience and Resistance in Uganda*, led by Richard Lucimbo, Frank Mugisha, Junic Wambya, and Brian Nkoyooyo. The situation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people in Uganda is very difficult because of anti-LGBTQ legislation and widespread homophobia and

transphobia. People are punished for being LGBTQ, for being accused of being LGBTQ, and for socializing with people who are or are suspected of being LGBTQ. In response, LGBTQ people and representative organizations work diligently and often covertly to counter violence, provide support to those affected, and educate others. As the presenters noted during their World Pride session, Ugandans, who understand their community and culture, must lead these efforts. Recognizing the importance of a community-led process (i.e., needs assessment, goal setting, program development, etc.) is essential to providing socially just information services. In the LIS context, “marginalized users” are actually “experts in their own ontologies, situations, circumstances, knowledge bases, and awareness of realities” (Mehra, Albright, and Rioux 6). The question then becomes, how can we as library leaders support this process?

The current situation in Uganda is deeply troubling, but as a recent United Nations’ report reminds us, “homophobic and transphobic violence has been recorded in every region of the world” (8). It is essential for librarians to work with community members against homophobia and other forms of systemic violence – such as racism and misogyny.

In situations where draconian laws deny basic human rights, it is not surprising that libraries and other public organizations are not able to openly meet the needs of their constituents. (For information on laws affecting LGBTQ people around the world, see ILGA, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association - ilga.org.) Under these circumstances, innovative approaches are needed. For example, some the informational needs of LGBTQ Ugandan people are being supported by efforts such as *Kuchu Times*, media produced to exchange news on Africa’s diverse cultures based on the lived realities of community members (kuchutimes.com). Librarians can and do use professional skills to support these efforts.

As our colleagues at the Helem Community Center in Lebanon describe, knowledge is the key to openness, tolerance and acceptance (helem.net). There is a great need to counter the lack of information and the pervasive misinformation about LGBTQ issues by “providing objective, factual information, initiating dialogue, and refuting common misconceptions.” There is much work to do.

LEADING EFFECTIVE LIS SERVICES

In his best selling book, *Leadership is an Art*, Max De Pree states, “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant.” As librarians develop increased awareness of the informational needs of the LGBTQ community, we are better able to implement and improve services to meet them. As greater understanding emerges, librarians may take the lead in augmenting services across a number of areas such as legal information, medical information, travel/immigration, relationships, family/youth/elder needs, intersections, community resources, representation in literature/media, historical understanding, educational opportunities, and activism.

Librarians, archivists, and other information professionals have been involved in leading initiatives to meet the information needs of minority populations in situations that demand innovative approaches for many years (Rivera, 2013). For example, Queer Zine Archive Project (QZAP) features a diverse range of publications created by and of interest to LGBTQ people (qzap.org).

In some contexts, where laws permit, library services of importance to LGBTQ patrons are formally considered in professional realms. For example, the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Round Table (GLBTRT) of the American Library Association (ALA), formerly the Task Force on Gay Liberation, was formed in 1970 (ala.org/glbtrt). GLBTRT is committed to serving the information needs of the professional library community and individuals at large.

Since 1971, GLBTRT has sponsored the Stonewall Book Award, celebrating exceptional literary merit relating to the LGBTQ experience. GLBTRT also sponsors the Rainbow Book List, an annual bibliography of quality books with significant LGBTQ content, which are recommended for people from birth to eighteen years. Over the Rainbow is a complementary annual core list for adults. In building collections, librarians also consider award-winning literature, such as texts recognized by Lambda Literary (lambdaliterary.org), as well as professional publications (e.g., Jenkins, Naidoo).

GLBTRT work is grounded in supporting open access to all information. As an interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights* states, “ALA stringently and unequivocally maintains that libraries and librarians have an obligation to resist efforts that systematically exclude materials dealing with any subject matter, including sex, gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation” (ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/accesslibrary). This statement was developed in response to controversies that sometimes arise when librarians make efforts to serve LGBTQ patrons. In addition to understanding information needs, it is essential for librarians to know how to overcome censorship.

Librarians are charged to provide appropriate (e.g., current, informative, relevant, etc.) resources for their patrons. As Lupien describes, from a user perspective, LGBTQ community members may feel that libraries are an appropriate place to find information, but the materials that exist may be insufficient, outdated or difficult to find, and that people may not always be comfortable asking for research help in a library setting (115). All of these issues warrant serious examination and response. As we move forward in providing effective library services for more LGBTQ community members, thoughtful conversations, analysis, and action across libraries are essential. See, for example, Greenblatt.

EXEMPLARY INITIATIVES

Around the world, there are library and information science (LIS) organizations encouraging consideration of these issues across borders. IHLIA LGBT Heritage (ihlia.nl), formerly known as International Homo/Lesbian Information Centre and Archive, curates the largest LGBT collection in Europe with over 100,000 titles. It was formed in 1999 by merging earlier establishments – the Documentation Centre of Gay Studies (Homodok) and the Lesbian Archive of Amsterdam and Leeuwarden. Since 2007, it is located at the Amsterdam Public Library. IHLIA has organized conferences in collaboration with local and national institutions to promote discussion and encourage the collecting, preservation and recording of individual and community histories.

Earlier this year, the Latin American and Caribbean Cultural Heritage Archives roundtable (LACCHA) of the Society of American Archivists (SAA), in partnership with the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) and the Association of Caribbean University, Research and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL), organized a series of online events, *Desmantelando Fronteras/Breaking Down Borders*, showcasing archival projects of Latin America and the

Caribbean. This series provides an open collaborative space for archivists to share their projects, experiences, and takeaways. On March 5, 2015, Vidyaratha Kissoon discussed LGBTQ history featured in the Digital Library of the Caribbean for this series. A recording of the presentation is available online at youtube.com/watch?v=8KLgmHqVhAI.

Special libraries and archives play an important role in providing access to LGBTQ materials and preserving our history, which has been threatened to a greater extent than most. Here are a few examples of libraries and archives providing exemplary services:

- Starting nearby, the Cooper Sparks Queer Community Library and Resource Centre in Johannesburg, South Africa is a membership-based organization with over 4000 books that began over 25 years ago as a special library hidden in someone's closet.
- The Leather Archives & Museum in Chicago is dedicated to the compilation and maintenance of leather, kink, and fetish lifestyles. The reading library and archive support researches and community members in accessing documentation relevant to the history and culture of leather.
- The Lesbian and Gay Newsmedia Archive (LAGNA) is based at Bishopgate Institute in London, England. It features over 200,000 cuttings from the non-gay press on all LGBTQ matters since the late nineteenth century as well as badges, photographs, t-shirts, and a small reference collection.
- The Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York is the world's largest collection of materials by and about lesbians and their communities.
- The Transgender Archives, located at the University of Victoria Library in Canada, is committed to the preservation of the history of pioneering activists, community leaders, and researchers who have contributed to the betterment of transgender people. Materials are accessible to the public.

Additional organizations are included in an "Incomplete list of LGBTQ Archives/Libraries/Special Collections" available in Wikipedia. If you know of others, please add them.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

As described above in the discussion of World Pride, sometimes conversations of interest to librarians who serve LGBTQ patrons take place at events sponsored by other (non-library) organizations that share similar interests. Collaborations enable organizations to pool resources to work toward shared goals.

The Thai Rainbow Archive is a digitized collection of academically significant gay, lesbian, and transgender materials from the last three decades of the twentieth century developed through collaboration between the Australia National University, the National Library of Australia, and Thai gay and lesbian community organizations (thairainbowarchive.anu.edu.au). It grew out of recognition that Thailand's extensive history of vernacular LGBTQ publishing had not been collected by any research library or archive. This collaboration was especially critical because of government policies condoning the destruction of many publications, which, like the communities that produced them, were socially marginalized and culturally stigmatized.

The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) in New York, the first university-based LGBT research center in the United States, recently hosted the *Queers and Comics*

Conference, a space to explore, analyse and document the history and significance of queer cartoons developed around the world. Several sessions of interest to librarians were broadcast live and archived (<http://www.clags.org/queers-comics>).

While there are many outstanding initiatives to support LGBTQ informational needs, there are still significant gaps in our professional understanding and practice. There are many critical issues to consider. Librarians have an important role both in combating ignorance that leads to violence against LGBTQ people as well as supporting a broad range of community information needs via outreach, providing safe and welcoming space, developing collections and services of interest, preserving materials, etc.

The following section reviews recent work taking place and considers new possibilities for engaging with these issues — via IFLA.

IFLA SIG EMERGENCE

As part of the 79th IFLA Congress, *Infinite Possibilities*, a small group of librarians gathered at the Suntec Convention Center in Singapore to discuss services for LGBTQ library users. The 2013 Congress included two presentations emphasizing service to these sometimes invisible and often underserved populations. Ragnhild K. Brandstedt's "Identifying and implementing diversity: Collaborative action-based research at Mariestad's Public Library on LGBTQ issues," was contributed as part of the Library Theory and Research Section. Jennifer Weil Arns and Karen Miller's "Dear Repose and Absent Solace: A Classroom Exploration of U.S. Public Library LGBT Collecting Behavior," was included as part of a joint session sponsored by the Statistics and Evaluation and Education and Training Sections.

Prior to these presentations, there had been no content focused specifically on LGBTQ users shared at IFLA conferences since Laurel A. Clyde's 2003 paper, "School libraries and social responsibility: support for special groups and issues — the case of homosexuality," a brief overview of available books and resources with positive LGBTQ content, as well as best practices for providing them to students in the face of widespread resistance offered as part of a School Libraries and Resource Centres session. Before this, James V. Carmichael's 1998 paper, "Homosexuality and United States libraries: Land of the free, but not home to the gay," shared via the former Library History Section, offered a review of contemporary movements. Carmichael pointed to increased public dialogue representing some progress — beyond silence, but also warned that "until research conventions and library school curricula are modified to accommodate gay concerns, it is likely that the growth in gay research will occur in spite of rather than because of the library profession."

According to the website, "IFLA is the leading international body representing the interests of library and information services and their users. It is the global voice of the library and information profession," yet only two conference papers emphasized LGBTQ user needs during a fifteen-year span. As noted above, much good work has been happening in recent years — yet important content and conversations emphasizing the interests of LGBTQ library users was alarmingly absent at IFLA. In light of this, colleagues gathered in Singapore decided to take steps to try to address this gap in professional understanding by launching a SIG focused on LGBTQ library users. There was some discussion of possible section sponsors with shared interests including collection development, education, management, and multicultural populations. There was also discussion of the importance of having the SIG guided by LGBTQ-identified leaders, so as to foster authentic understanding. Consensus was

reached and over 40 attendees signed a petition to request the formation of the SIG via the Acquisition and Collection Development Section with the author of this paper serving as convener along with Lucas McKeever, former administrator of the Gerber/Hart Library and Archives.

In late December 2013, the IFLA Professional Committee approved our request. The LGBTQ Users SIG was formally launched in January 2014 with this description:

As part of our professional commitment to provide access to information, librarians are charged to support the full range of users' informational needs including those of LGBTQ people. That said, substantial discussions of issues related to library services for LGBTQ community members have not taken place at IFLA. The LGBTQ Users SIG will address this gap in professional knowledge by offering opportunities to engage in discussions about this often-invisible user group. This SIG will enable librarians to consider topics including professional attitudes, outreach, privacy, programming, and effective practice in acquiring and collecting materials of importance to LGBTQ people and allies. This includes literature, academic texts, materials for LGBTQ youth and families, and other works that encourage thinking critically about issues of sexuality and gender identity. Dialogue to support librarians in addressing concerns raised about LGBTQ library services will also be encouraged within the SIG.

In order to plan for the first official meeting and conference session and to facilitate ongoing information exchange amongst distributed colleagues, an email list-serve and social media channels via Facebook ([facebook.com/iflalgbtq](https://www.facebook.com/iflalgbtq)) and Twitter ([@ifla_lgbtq](https://twitter.com/ifla_lgbtq)) were established along with a wiki and official space on the IFLA site (ifla.org/lgbtq).

SIG CONFERENCE DEBUT

The first business meeting of the IFLA LGBTQ Users SIG was held on Monday August 18, 2014, as part of the 80th Congress at the Lyon Convention Center. Twenty-four people attended the meeting. See Figure 1. Topics included the role of SIGs at IFLA; intersections – particularly considering how our SIG goals align with other IFLA groups and initiatives, such as the Women, Information and Libraries Special Interest Group (sponsored by the Management of Library Associations Section) and the emergent Lyon Declaration – a document calling on Member States of the United Nations to acknowledge that access to information, and the skills to use it effectively, are essential for sustainable development (lyondeclaration.org); current and future session topics of interest; and local activities, such as those sponsored by *Légothèque* (legothequeabf.wordpress.com/texte-fondateur).

Thomas Chaimbault, one of *Légothèque's* founders, introduced this dynamic group of the *Association des Bibliothécaires Français*, the French Association of Librarians, which was formed in 2012 to promote reflection on the issues surrounding construction of self and struggle against stereotypes. Chaimbault described *Légothèque's* recent work including the development of information packets for distribution at resource centers throughout France and invited SIG members to attend *Légothèque* sessions including an onsite session on video gaming and another on gender and sexuality resources hosted by *Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon*, Lyon Public Library. At the onsite session, librarians were invited to try a coming out simulator – to promote greater understanding of the complexity of this experience (ncase.itch.io/coming-out-simulator-2014).

Figure 1: Sketch of the First IFLA LGBTQ Users SIG Business Meeting by Frédéric Malenfer (via flickr.com/photos/ifla/14772799717/in/set-72157646581468321)



On Tuesday August 19, approximately 200 conference attendees gathered for the first SIG conference session, *Addressing the Silence: How Libraries can Serve Their LGBTQ Users*. The Call for Papers (CFP) for this session invited professionals to share details of effective practice in providing access and fulfilling information needs of LGBTQ library users. Several possible subthemes were also suggested to help guide potential authors including: library as safe space, partnerships with community organizations, and promoting inclusion.

Submissions were reviewed early in 2014. We were pleasantly surprised by the large volume and scope of responses. This likely was due to a backlog of interest/need. Fourteen scholars from six countries were invited to develop papers and share presentations across a wide range of topics at the session. See details in Table 1.

Table 1: IFLA LGBTQ Users SIG 2014 Conference Presentations

Author(s)	Title
Elizabeth L. Chapman (University of Sheffield, UK)	“I’ve never really thought about it”: librarians’ attitudes to the provision of LGBT-related fiction to children and young people in English public libraries
José Augusto Chaves Guimarães, Fabio Assis Pinho, Gilberto Gomes Cândido, & Bruna Gisele Motta (São Paulo State University and Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil)	Gay Marriage and Homoaffection Union: a terminological analysis of the social values of libraries as a source for an ethical subject representation and dissemination in Brazil
Eduardo da Silva Alentejo (Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)	Power and community: organizational and cultural LGBT responses against homophobia and promotion of inclusion values
Christer Edeholt & Maria Lingren (Umeå City Library, Sweden)	The rainbow library at Umeå city library and the Swedish network for LGBTQ issues at libraries
Bharat Mehra, & Laverne Gray (University of Tennessee, United States)	“Don’t say gay” in the state of Tennessee: libraries as virtual spaces of resistance and protectors of human rights of LGBTQ people
Martin Morris & K.R. Roberto (McGill University, Canada and University of Illinois, United States)	Information-seeking behaviour of LGBTQ health professional: new data to inform inclusive practice
Noémi Somorjai (Semmelweis University, Hungary)	Reducing suicide risks of LGBTQ library users
Julie Ann Winkelstein (University of Tennessee, United States)	Public libraries: creating safe spaces for homeless LGBTQ youth

More details, including presentations, links to summaries and/or full text documents and translations are available at conference.ifla.org/past-wlic/2014//ifla80/node/367.html.

The two-hour session energized participants and provided much food for thought. Some key ideas were also shared to a wider audience via social media. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Screenshot of Tweet from First IFLA LGBTQ Users SIG Conference Session



In addition to sharing ideas to better understand needs and develop effective practice, attendees were again reminded of the importance of doing more and better work. As Chapman’s paper, “I’ve never really thought about it...” describes attitudes toward the provision of LGBTQ-based services are often not well developed. That is, while most librarians express positive attitudes, a majority also reveal they have not previously thoughtfully considered LGBTQ services – and have little knowledge of current needs, materials, and/or program possibilities.

Although not part of the formal program, LGBTQ Users SIG organizers, participants, and guests gathered for a social event organized on Wednesday, August 20 at LivestationDIY, a local pub. This sort of collegial gathering to promote extended conversations in an informal space has been a welcome aspect of IFLA and other library conferences for many years.

TOWARD EQUITABLE ACCESS FOR LGBTQ LIBRARY USERS

The second SIG session took place in Cape Town, South Africa, on August 18, 2015. The CFP was crafted to align with issues presented in the Lyon Declaration – intending to explore questions such as: How do librarians enable equitable access to information of interest and importance to LGBTQ individuals and groups? How is freedom of expression represented in library services and collections? Also, based on the conference location, the subtheme, Library service to LGBTQ patrons in Africa, was added. Three papers were shared: this one, Naidoo’s “Access to a World of Rainbow Family Children’s Books via Partnerships and Programs” and Kamwina’s “*Quand l’arc-en-ciel pénètre dans nos bibliothèques*”/When the rainbow enters our libraries – exploring access in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In addition to sponsoring the 2015 conference session, the SIG has begun planning a satellite session in conjunction with the 2016 Conference in Columbus, Ohio, USA. The preconference, scheduled for August 10-11, will be held in Chicago. Participants will be able to visit various collections and explore services to LGBTQ library users.

As part of other efforts to bolster queer understanding in LIS, the SIG co-conveners are involved in editing an anthology to explore *Global Reflections and Imaginings*, considering topics such as professional attitudes, library as welcoming space, challenges to providing services and innovative programming, effective practice in acquiring, collecting, and preserving materials including literature and academic works, intersections, outreach, and partnerships with community organizations (libraryjuicepress.com/queer-library-alliance.php). This volume will be part of a series developed by Litwin Books on gender and sexuality in information studies, which includes practical and theoretical perspectives that critically engage issues in the LIS field related to gender and sexual difference. In conjunction with this effort, Litwin has partnered with universities to sponsor Gender and Sexuality in Information Studies colloquia to further explore issues. The next session is planned for April 2016 at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Additionally, the fifth Archives, Libraries, Museums, and Special Collections (ALMS) Conference is being planned for June 2016 in London, UK. *Without Borders* will focus on public, private, academic, and grassroots archives collecting and preserving materials of all types from LGBTQ+ communities to ensure our history survives unchanged.

It is fabulous to see three international LIS gatherings focusing on LGBTQ interests being planned for 2016. This sort of thoughtful consideration and further action are essential and overdue. Thank you for your interest and attention to these important matters.

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