

Normative behavior and information: The social aspects of information access

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Abstract

Information access is central to library and information science, yet explorations of its conceptual nature have been limited. Given the importance of information access to the discipline, there is a need for research to create a better understanding of the concept and its many roles in all activities and behaviors related to information. Drawing on the theoretical work of Elfreda Chatman, this article proposes that the study of information access can be facilitated through the recognition and examination of the physical, intellectual, and social aspects of information access. These types of access are examined through three case studies in terms of different information behaviors and contexts, with a particular focus on the importance of social access. The article also discusses the future roles that considerations of social access can play in research and theory.

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1. Introduction: physical, intellectual, and social access

Access to information can be conceptualized in many ways. Different academic disciplines—library and information studies (LIS), communication, media studies, and economics—view access in alternate ways: in terms of knowledge, technology, communication, control, commodities, and participation. Influences on access include physical, cognitive, affective, economic, social, and political issues (Dervin, 1973; McCreddie & Rice, 1999a,b). Researchers in LIS have primarily conceived of and studied information access in terms of its physical and intellectual aspects. This includes the ways in which accessibility is linked to personal, professional, and perceptual factors (Fidel & Green, 2004), as well as the ways in which it is a multi-faceted concept (Dervin, 1973; McCreddie & Rice, 1999a,b). However, a range of social factors can profoundly influence information access. Their influence has not been adequately acknowledged or examined.

Information access can be understood as “the presence of a robust system through which information is made available” (Jaeger & Burnett, 2005, p. 465). Within this context, information access has physical, intellectual, and social aspects. Each of these

can be affected by real external and internal factors, as well as by the knowledge, skills, and perceptions of individuals seeking information. An increased understanding of these different modes of information access will facilitate efforts to provide information to those who seek it. Thus far, however, LIS has largely constrained the study of access to the physical and the intellectual. If the study of information access is to provide realistic and inclusive perspectives, it must account for the array of social issues that significantly influence access.

This article aims to provide a starting point for further understanding the role of social aspects in information access. Specifically, it argues that Elfreda Chatman’s (1999, 2000) theory of normative behavior and her concept of “small worlds” provide a framework for analyzing how the norms and attitudes of specific communities influence—or even determine—the ways in which members of those communities access information. It can also affect the ways in which they understand the social place of information differently than members of other small worlds. By exploring social access to information and the potential of Chatman’s theories to help understand the impact of social access, this article expands the discourse on access, a concept interwoven with many major research problems in LIS.

The article first discusses the relationship between small worlds and information access in order to provide a framework for what follows. Next, it explores the meaning and implications

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of the two aspects of information access—physical and intellectual—that are acknowledged in LIS research. It then introduces and explains the importance of researching the social aspect of information access, which enhances what can be learned from studying physical and intellectual access. Then three case studies are examined using the tools of conceptual and policy analysis. The examinations display the various roles of the social aspects of information and the ways it is prominent in issues within LIS. Finally, the article offers considerations and implications for the study of social access as a key part of research in the discipline.

2. Small worlds and information access

This article examines information access through the concept of small worlds. Small worlds are social environments where individuals live and work, bound together by shared interests and expectations, information needs and behaviors, and often economic status and geographic proximity as well (Burnett, Besant, & Chatman, 2001). The small world is a social group in which “mutual opinions and concerns are reflected by its members” (Chatman, 1999, p. 213). Within each small world, everyday activities are considered to be “the way things are” and are frequently taken as being standard to all small worlds, even when they are not. Although Chatman’s work does not address information access directly, its focus on the localized context in which information is used offers a robust tool for analyzing the ways in which information is understood and valued within particular communities. Thus, her theories support a close analysis of situations—such as those in the following three case studies—in which different small worlds intersect, leading to conflicts and misunderstandings between groups. By conceptualizing information in relation to a specific community’s social norms, Chatman’s work can be particularly useful for understanding such conflicts. As the case studies suggest, when “information” means different things to different groups who interact with each other, social aspects may be just as important as either physical or intellectual aspects of information access.

According to the theory, members of a small world often engage in similar information behaviors, sharing an understanding of how and where information is best accessed and exchanged. Such attitudes shape “the learning of perception in concert with others that alerts members to be conscious of those things that they ought to know” (Chatman, 2000, p. 11). Ultimately, these attitudes affect the information behavior of individuals, including their action or inaction with regard to accessing information (Burnett et al., 2001; Chatman, 1999) through official access points or through interpersonal connections (Case, 2002; Williamson, 1998). Thus, information access plays a key part in the social structure of each small world. Ultimately, “the pattern of one’s information behavior is based upon what is typical in the small world in which one lives” (Jaeger & Thompson, 2004, p. 100). Further, society as a whole is composed of countless small worlds constantly interacting with one another at various levels. The differing and intersecting norms of these multiple small worlds heavily affect information access (Jaeger & Burnett, 2005).

Attitudes toward information access in a particular small world, including notions of “proper” information and information sources and correct ways to access information, can lead to positive interaction or to conflict with other small worlds. When attitudes align, information access is facilitated across small worlds. In such cases, members of multiple small worlds access and exchange information freely between their worlds. However, when the attitudes do not align, information exchange can be hampered or reduced. Many of these differences involve conflicting social notions of information access, which can lead to many different efforts to limit or censor it.

3. Three aspects of information access

3.1. Physical access

Physical access is generally viewed as “access to the documents” embodying information—literally the process of getting to the desired document (Svenonius, 2000, p. 122). The vast majority of discourse on information access tends to focus on physical issues, such as the physical structures that contain information, the electronic structures that contain information, and the paths that are traveled to get to information (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005).

Issues of physical access relate to the document’s location and format and the conditions, technologies, or abilities required to reach that document. Such issues are often readily identifiable and revolve around the questions of whether people can get into the location that houses the documents and then reach the specific documents that they seek. Physical access to information is primarily an institutional issue, depending on formalized structures to ensure the information is located somewhere and is theoretically available. This location can be physical or virtual, and the availability does not have to be wide or egalitarian. The effectiveness of structures in facilitating the storage and retrieval of information is shaped by how well they function as intended, how easy they are to use, and how accessible they are for users with different physical abilities.

Physical access, however, also depends on knowing that the information is stored and retrievable. To achieve physical access, the individual user has to know that the information exists, where it can be found, and how to navigate the institutional structures to reach it. Individual factors that can affect physical access include technology, economics, geography, and disability. Lack of necessary funds, substantial distance from or inability to use an information source, or inability to enter a location housing an information source can all create barriers to physical access. Physical access is of utmost importance; without it, no other type of access is possible (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005).

However, while physical access is a necessary prerequisite, it is not sufficient for full access. For instance, “it is a common, but mistaken, assumption that access to technology equals access to information” (McCreadie & Rice, 1999a, p. 51). The user’s ability to get to information and the user’s ability to employ information to accomplish particular goals are very different (Culnan, 1983, 1984, 1985). As a result, the physical

aspects of information access cannot be considered without also considering the intellectual aspects.

3.2. Intellectual access

Intellectual access can be defined as access to information contained in a document (Svenonius, 2000, p. 122). It revolves around the ability to understand how to get to and, in particular, how to understand the information itself once it has been physically obtained. Much less research has examined issues of intellectual access than of physical access. Issues of intellectual access involve understanding how the information is presented to people seeking information, as well as the impact of such presentation on the information-seeking process:

Intellectual access to information includes how the information is categorized, organized, displayed, and represented. Studying intellectual access can reveal the best ways to make information accessible when people act to retrieve the information and to bring the information seeker and the information together in the most efficient manner possible through representation of the available information sources. (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005, p. 67)

Intellectual access can only occur when an individual has sufficient information to engage in critical thinking and has been exposed to multiple viewpoints (Pitts & Stripling, 1990). It has been discussed in terms of many specific forms of information, including images, classification, catalogs and archives, government materials, periodicals, software, digital documents, and library services (Aschmann, 2002; Bednarek, 1993; Cary & Ogburn, 2000; Chen & Rasmussen, 1999; Comaromi, 1990; Deines-Jones, 1996; Dilevko & Dali, 2003; Gilliland, 1988; Intner, 1991; Mandel & Wolven, 1996; Neville & Dattray, 1993; Rankin, 1992).

At a more conceptual level, intellectual access to information “entails equal opportunity to understand intellectual content and pathways to that content” (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005, p. 68). As a result, for an item to provide information equally to all, it must be able to produce similar outcomes or results for any user, regardless of any disadvantages that the user might have. Equal intellectual access to a particular item of information, however, is often not available.

The user’s unique personal issues influence intellectual access since access hinges on the user’s understanding the information after having physically accessed it. Factors that can affect intellectual access can include information-seeking behaviors, language, dialect, education, literacy, technological literacy, cognitive ability, vocabulary, and subjective views. Each of these factors has the potential to influence whether an information seeker can access the information contained in a source. Intellectual access requires the ability to understand the information in a source. This, in turn, requires the cognitive ability to understand the source, to read the language and dialect in which the source is written, and to know the specific vocabulary that is used. Intellectual access also requires knowing how to use any necessary technology to access a source, such as computers, electronic databases, or the Internet.

3.3. Social access

The analysis of the social aspects of information access here is based on the theory of normative behavior (see Burnett et al., 2001). This theory posits that, within specific social contexts, information behaviors – like other day-to-day activities – must be seen as normative. The theory further suggests that the value of information is not universal; it is rooted within the norms and the attitudes of a particular social world:

Within a small world, most of the information deriving from the larger outside world has little *lasting* value. While one might, for instance, make use of some tidbit of information from the larger world for casual conversation with a neighbor or friend, the purpose might simply be to measure the overall soundness of the world “out there,” to maintain a connection, or to engage in “small-talk”. (Burnett et al., 2001, p. 537)

While much of Chatman’s earlier work focused on small worlds that were defined by economic poverty and limited access to information, the theory articulated in Burnett, Besant, and Chatman’s (2001) study expands that focus out from such tightly constrained settings as prisons (Chatman, 1999) into an application of the small world concept to also include such information-rich environments as virtual communities and feminist booksellers. Because this article expands the scope of the small world concept even further, applying it to library settings and even to federal information policy, it draws its discussion of Chatman’s work primarily from the 2001 article.

Although it does not address information access directly, the theory of normative behavior has important implications for information access. The social—or “small world”—contexts of information interact with the physical and intellectual aspects of information access and must be taken into account in any full discussion of access. All four of the theory’s fundamental concepts (social norms, worldview, social typing, and information behavior) have important implications for information access. What follows both defines the four concepts and teases out some of these implications.

Social norms allow “for standards of ‘rightness’ and ‘wrongness’ in social appearances,” (Burnett et al., 2001, p. 537; see also Chatman, 1999) and work to establish a sense of the boundaries between a small world and the outside world around it. The theory suggests that information coming into a small world from beyond its borders that conflicts with such normative standards of propriety will seem “wrong” to the members of that world. It will tend to be ignored—or dismissed outright—as fundamentally at odds with the values and mores of that world. Thus, social norms may actively impact or limit information access within a small world by defining certain types of information as problematic or even dangerous.

Similarly, worldview, “a collective perception held in common by members of a social world regarding those things that are deemed important or trivial,” constrains what small world members are interested in or willing to pay attention to (Burnett et al., 2001, p. 537; see also Chatman, 1999). Members of a small world will tend to view information that does not mesh with their community’s worldview as lacking, trivial, or as something they can safely ignore. To put it in terms of social access, worldview

can lead a community to limit access to some information simply because it defines that information as having little importance.

The concept of social types pertains to the classification of a person or persons within a small world. As the theory suggests,

if a specific individual's type is viewed as desirable within their small world, resources (including information) offered by that individual to that world would be readily accepted and disseminated. However, if the individual is an undesirable type, he or she will have difficulties in overcoming this classification, and information coming from this person may not be easily accepted or believed by others. (Burnett et al., 2001, p. 537)

Access to important information—even information that is a matter of life and death—will tend to be limited if it comes from somebody perceived by members of a small world as an outsider, an unreliable source, or somebody in conflict with the norms or worldview of their world. This happens regardless of the content or significance of the information in the broader world (Chatman, 1999).

Information behavior “can be defined as a state in which one may or may not act on available or offered information” (Burnett et al., 2001, p. 537). In other words, this concept speaks to the uses to which information is or is not put within a small world. Information coming into a small world from the outside may—if it is at odds with the community's norms and worldview or if it comes from a source who is not trusted—be dismissed as worthless, inaccurate, or even dangerous and thus ignored or resisted. Conversely, members of the small world tend to accept and integrate information that meshes with the norms, worldview, and accepted types of the community, regardless of its accuracy and value in the outside world.

This framework has significant implications for understanding social access to information in two regards. First, social norms, worldview, and social types influence what information is seen as permissible for members of a small world to access and what kinds of information from the outside world is acceptable within a specific small world. Second, normative information behaviors define the appropriate mechanisms and activities involved in information access, within the constraints prescribed by the worldview and social norms of the small world. The theory of normative behavior does not address questions of information access directly. However, its four concepts—social norms, worldview, social types, and information behavior—define a set of social factors that directly influence individuals' approach to, understanding of, and use of information. Thus, the normative aspects of a small world function as socially defined influences on information access.

4. Three case studies of social access

This article uses the theory of normative behavior to investigate three instances in which different small worlds come into conflict. The theory helps to illuminate these situations and illustrates some of the ways in which social access interacts with—and sometimes even trumps—physical and intellectual access. These three instances range from the very local to the

nearly global. In combination, they neatly show the importance of thinking about information access in terms of social access.

The three cases are as follows:

1. The redesign of the San Francisco Public Library. The building of the new San Francisco Public Library in 1996—particularly issues surrounding weeding books from the collection, devoting space in the new building to computers, and removing card catalogs—pitted two small worlds with very different ideas about the value and norms of library service and design against each other. The battle between these worlds has great significance for understanding the current state of information services in the United States, and in particular for revealing the roles of social access in information services.
2. Book banning. Efforts to ban specific books from the stacks of public or school libraries provide particularly graphic examples of conflicts between different small worlds. They can best be seen as instances in which members of small worlds perceive information to be sufficiently dangerous (or at odds with their norms and worldview) that it should be made inaccessible to all members of society. This article examines efforts to ban books that ended in the firing of librarian Ruth Brown from the Bartlesville, Oklahoma public library in 1951.
3. Information policy. Recent Bush administration changes in policies regarding the availability of information, including the reclassification of previously unclassified information and the removal of previously available information from federal Web sites, can be understood in terms of the theory of normative behavior. In this case, a distinct view about social access to information can be found in the worldview of a small world with a particularly significant level of power over information access for all small worlds.

Each of these cases displays different implications of social access to information within LIS.

4.1. Library design and social access

On April 18, 1996, the San Francisco Public Library opened its new central library to a mix of acclaim and controversy: acclaim for its “deeply delicious” architecture (poet Robert Haas, cited by Baker, 1996), and controversy, primarily fueled by an article by novelist Nicholson Baker in *The New Yorker*. The article condemned the weeding of books out of the collection during the move, the lack of traditional card catalogs in the new building, and the amount of space devoted to computers rather than books.

Baker's critiques largely became moot when the New Main library became a huge popular success in San Francisco. However, the defenders of the library's transformations also lost some credibility when library director Ken Dowlin—who had overseen the changes—was forced to resign as a result of budgetary and political problems less than a year after the library's opening (Holt, 1997). Still, the case—and, in particular, the rhetoric of those involved—remains an interesting instance of conflict between small worlds.

The concept of social norms applies to a sense of “rightness” and “wrongness” in social appearances—in how things “look” within that world. While many instances in the San Francisco Public Library could be examined through such a lens, this analysis will comment on only one: the treatment of books stored in Brooks Hall, which Baker (1996) called “a vast, dusty space under the street” (p. 58).

At issue here is not simply Brooks Hall’s role as a space for library overflow—a storage area for books for which there was no room at New Main—but, more importantly, what that space implied about a change in the library’s mission. For Baker (1996), the change reflected in the appearance of Brooks Hall left the library’s traditional mission literally in the dust in favor of a new mission promulgated by a new breed of pseudo-librarian:

Brooks Hall holds what it holds partly because there is not enough room in the New Main. But partly, too, its contents simply do not accord with the altered conception—fashionable now among some circulation-sensitive library managers—of the public library’s true mission. In August of 1992, Dowlin introduced the concept of “leveled access” in the humanities to the San Francisco Public Planning Commission. (Baker, 1996, p. 58)

Baker ultimately criticized Dowlin for applying this new concept of access retroactively: “in other words, [it] ... would involve downsizing what had already been achieved, at considerable expense, by his predecessors” (p. 58). However, he framed his criticism almost entirely by reference to the room’s appearance – an appearance that was, for him, a sign of the sheer “wrongness” of the new library and an example of the ways in which the library had abandoned its previous—and “right”—norms in favor of something else: “This is a book dealer’s paradise, sitting unprotected in the squalor of a storage area, near carpet remnants and construction debris” (Baker, 1996, p. 58).

Baker’s rhetoric is full here of examples of social typing (“circulation-sensitive library managers” instead of old-fashioned “librarians,” and “book dealers,” who presumably care less for the sanctity of books than profit). It is also—as a matter of social norms—couched in clearly moral terms, drawing on strong descriptions of the room in order to elicit a sense of outrage at the sheer wrongness of the situation, which he believes violates the social norms that must be the basis of any library’s mission.

Worldview is often not a matter of specifics or stated beliefs but rather an implicit set of assumptions about what is or is not important (Burnett et al., 2001). The present analysis relies primarily on the filter provided by Baker’s account. Thus, however articulately Baker expressed the position of a particular small world, it is only possible to infer some of the elements of its worldview. The worldview of the small world against which he railed can likewise be pieced together only from his partisan representations of it. The severity of this clash of worldviews can be gleaned from the sheer anger of Baker’s reporting and from Ken Dowlin’s blunt characterization of Baker’s charges. As reported in *American Libraries*, “Dowlin called the idea ‘bullshit, and you can quote me on that’” (Kniffel, 1996, p. 13).

At the core of this controversy were two distinctive worldviews regarding the role of the library, particularly regarding

what kinds of information it should provide to its community and how it should manage access to that information. The distinction between these two worldviews is quite stark, pitting what Baker (1996) called “the old-fashioned public library of knowledge” (p. 57) against a market-driven, technologically mediated culture with “a contempt for, or at least an indifference to, literary culture and its requirements” (p. 59). Further, Baker articulated a worldview that strongly values the palpability of the traditional library—containing old books and print-on-paper cards housed in “ornately carved” (p. 50) wooden card catalogs. This worldview holds continued access to such relics of the past as the highest virtue, interpreting attempts to “weed” the collection as direct affronts to the world of knowledge represented by traditional librarianship. By contrast, information access through channels other than the traditional library, as well as access to less palpable sources of information—connectivity to the bits and bytes of online information—was inherently suspect within Baker’s worldview. The following dismissive account makes this clear:

Kenneth Dowlin, the City Librarian – hired away from Colorado Springs, where, as the head of the Pikes Peak Library District, he developed an early dial-up-access catalogue called Maggie’s Place – also wants the S.F.P.L. to become a sort of telecommunications utility: he told members of the American Library Association in 1992 that he envisions the library offering “electronic access to each home, school, and office by the year 2000”. (Baker, 1996, p. 51)

From the vantage point of 2008, Baker’s alarm at such online access seems particularly striking in the context of worldview.

Interestingly, while Baker presented himself as a spokesman for the worldview of traditional librarianship, he also found himself at odds with at least part of the librarian community. An editorial on the controversy appearing in *Library Journal* called both Baker and his opponents on the carpet for their extremes. While Berry (1996) warned librarians “on various Internet listservs” that their “professional defensiveness” was “unbecoming,” he also directly criticized Baker for his “wrong” description of the library’s move to online access as a for-profit “pipeline” (p. 6). Baker articulated a worldview based in a very particular vision of the library’s role of providing access to information and excoriated those whose worldview included information access through digitized mediation. In contrast, Berry laid out a kind of middle-ground worldview of the library as neither a beleaguered relic of a lost past nor a technological wonderland, but as “one stop on a *public way*” (p. 6), where both tradition and technology have roles to play.

Baker (1996) overtly engaged in social typing in his efforts to portray those with whom he disagreed as types who were motivated by something other than altruistic goals. He suggested that those behind the changes to the library wished to make it over into “a sort of telecommunications utility” (p. 51) that was fundamentally at odds with the normative goals of libraries and librarianship. Indeed, he noted that much of the money to fund the new building came from specific types of people: “private donors and ‘affinity groups,’ representing gays and lesbians, several ethnic communities, and environmentalists” (p. 51). While Baker

appeared to be sincere in his concern that such funding sources threatened to have “Balkanizing effects on the collection” (p. 61), it is remarkable that he clearly relied on social typing to make the point. Further, it does not seem surprising that those he had so baldly cast as suspicious characters at odds with true access to information objected strenuously. In return, they did a bit of typecasting of their own, labeling him as “intellectually dishonest” and “disrespectful” (p. 61).

Baker subsequently portrayed his own side according to a much more benign bit of typecasting, claiming that he spoke “on behalf of a significant number of librarians” (Oder, 1996). According to the set of beliefs he espoused, these librarians were much more desirable than the suspicious “affinity groups” or “telecommunications enthusiasts” he derided (p. 13). Interestingly, Baker pushed his social typing even further, anthropomorphizing an object that clearly held special significance for him: “In the words of one librarian, ‘The card catalog is the mute witness to all of this destruction’” (p. 62).

Weeding, the primary activity Baker (1996) addressed, is routinely undertaken by librarians as part of their normal practice and is closely associated with information access. As Berry (1996) put it,

The criteria and practices for dumping the public’s books are still a mystery to most citizens. That fact alone gives weeding an undesired sinister image. Even Baker agrees that weeding is necessary, but he found the version of the practice he saw at SFPL both secretive and suspect. We have to find better, more open ways to weed, to communicate about weeding, and to get rid of the results. If Baker is only partly correct, SFPL should review how it handles this delicate work. (p. 6)

The fear articulated by Baker (1996) is that weeding—the active removal of books from a library’s collection—is tantamount to denying access to these books and to the information contained within them. Within the context of this analysis, however, it seems clear that weeding is a choice made by librarians as part of an ongoing effort to maintain and enhance access, to remove some information from access in order to make other information more effectively accessible. In other words, while weeding is, from the point of view of one small world (Baker’s) a questionable activity designed to limit access to information, from the point of view of another small world (that of the librarians), it is an entirely reasonable activity, indivisible from broader behaviors intended to maintain access. Clearly, both views define access as a positive value. However, they each define it (and the information behaviors appropriate to it) quite differently.

4.2. *Book banning in libraries and social access*

Another example of clashes between small worlds related to social access in American libraries is the 1951 firing of a Midwest public librarian of 30 years, Ruth Brown. Brown espoused the worldview and social norms formally promulgated by the American Library Association. While not uncommon in the United States at the time, these beliefs were alien to city leaders

in the small Oklahoma town of Bartlesville. Her beliefs overtly clashed with the information behaviors valued within the small world of the town’s leaders. This eventually resulted in a perception that Brown did not fit the social type of “librarian” desired by the town’s city counsel—ending in Brown’s dismissal.

Located in northeastern Oklahoma, the Bartlesville of 1950 retained many of the social norms of the American South. Although the Supreme Court had been finding Jim Crow laws unconstitutional since the early 1900s, segregation was still in force. Though it was fading as the legal norm, it was still a strongly held social norm in Bartlesville and throughout the South. Similarly, the end of World War II and the emergence of the Soviet Union’s “program of expansion” (Leahy Papers, cited in McCullough, 1992, p. 486) had created a fear in the United States of an uncontrollable spread of Soviet power. A reaction to this apparent communist threat emerged in the shape of popularized contempt for communism and the Communist Party, instigated by members of the U.S. Senate such as Joseph R. McCarthy, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and the FBI, directed by J. Edgar Hoover.

Many in Congress thought President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “big government” policies had “coddled” communists or were sympathetic to communism” (Theoharis, 1975, p. 89). The Republican Senate put pressure on Democratic President Harry S. Truman to ensure no communists held government positions. The resulting 1947 loyalty program subjected all government employees to background screenings and required them to sign a Loyalty Oath (McCullough, 1992). While this Loyalty Oath appeased many, others still thought government policies and officials were “soft on Communism” (Halberstam, 1993, p. 57), sometimes to the extent of being “disloyal” themselves (McCullough, 1992, p. 552). In terms of social norms, it was clearly “wrong” in the United States to be “un-American” at this time.

Not long after the Loyalty Oath was instituted in federal employment in 1947, the Los Angeles County Public Library instituted a loyalty oath requirement for its staff members (Robbins, 1994). The 1948 Council of the American Library Association (ALA) responded by adopting a Bill of Rights, a list of five policies espousing the basic tenets of a distinct library worldview that placed importance on libraries’ role in society as informer, regardless of the subject of information (Dix & Bixler, 1954). The first two policies read:

1. As a responsibility of library service, books and other reading matter selected should be chosen for values of interest, information, and enlightenment of all the people of the community. In no case should any book be excluded because of the race or nationality or the political or religious views of the writer.
2. There should be the fullest practicable provision of material presenting all points of view concerning the problems and issues of our times, international, national, and local; and books or other reading matter of sound factual authority should not be proscribed or removed from library shelves because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval (Dix & Bixler, 1954, Appendix A).

The remaining three policies reinforced the notion that information should never be suppressed or censored, particularly not by “organizations that would establish a coercive concept of Americanism” (Dix & Bixler, 1954, Appendix A). They stated that the public, regardless of belief or affiliation, should have equitable access to library space and materials. Such values were further underscored by a variety of other *American Library Association* (1939) policies, including a Code of Ethics adopted in 1939 that remained unchanged until 1975. The policies codified a democratic American worldview that promoted freedom of opinion and expression.

The degree to which such values were at odds with other, more widely held values can be seen in the fact that states, one by one, adopted “antisubversion laws.” By 1955, 4 of the then-48 states had such laws (Robbins, 1994, p. 369). These laws tended to require state employees, including educators and librarians, to take loyalty oaths of some sort as requisite for employment.

Within this historical context, Bartlesville’s public librarian, Ruth Brown, was summoned to a hearing on July 24, 1950. The mayor, the city commission, and other members of the city executive council questioned her regarding her library collection. They also asked Brown about her loyalty to the Constitution. She replied that, although she had never been asked to sign a loyalty oath, she would agree to sign one if asked (Robbins, 2000). When questioned about her subscriptions to *The Nation* and *New Republic*, two liberal publications that had been challenged in libraries across the United States at the time, Brown noted that the library had subscribed to these serials for “fifteen or twenty years” already and that these were but two of 75 magazines to which the library subscribed (Robbins, 2000, p. 72). Brown also volunteered that *Soviet Russia Today* had been offered free of charge, although she noted that she “found it boring” and did not care for it herself (Robbins, 2000, p. 72).

Even when recounted in such a broad outline, it is clear that the librarian and the city leaders had very different social norms in terms of access to information. Brown favored social access to non-mainstream information sources (even those she personally found “boring”). The city leaders—reflecting broader social norms—sought to prevent access to information outside the mainstream. The city commission decided Brown’s collection practices were “not according to the majority [opinion] in Bartlesville” and, according to the mayor, as Brown left the hearing “she hadn’t reached the bottom of the stairs before she was out of a job” (Robbins, 2000, pp. 73–74).

The conflict of worldviews found in the Ruth Brown case reflects not only a local collision between two small worlds in a single small town, but also a wider conflict between broader worldviews and ideologies. While her drama played out on a local stage as a confrontation between an individual librarian and a group of small-town administrators, the values of both sides can be seen as instances of broader small-world values beyond the local boundaries of Bartlesville. Locally, Brown’s worldview was reflected in her membership and activism in a number of local social advocacy groups. She was a member of Bartlesville’s chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality

(CORE), collaborated with the interracial Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), and helped found the Committee on the Practice of Democracy (COPD), a group created by individuals from all communities of Bartlesville “in an effort to improve ‘relations among people of all races; more particularly, to foster improvement of conditions arising out of discrimination based on race, creed, or color’” (Robbins, 2000, p. 35).

Unfortunately for race activists of that era, the Communist Party tried to exaggerate its influence by presenting itself as “the only true spokesmen for the Negro people” (Record, 1964, p. 3). White segregationists simultaneously tried to emphasize the relationship between desegregation, equality for African Americans, and basic communist ideology in order to hamper the effectiveness of organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Negro Congress (McCullough, 1992; Record, 1964).

In Bartlesville, this worldview had a direct impact. Only a few weeks before Brown’s dismissal, the civil rights groups in Bartlesville had been denied meeting spaces, and the jobs of white COPD members were threatened as attention to social activism increased (Robbins, 2000, p. 52). In light of the causes Brown advocated, the worldview she and a minority of other Bartlesville citizens shared in relation to social activism can be described accurately, as the city commission stated, as “not according to the majority [opinion] in Bartlesville” (Robbins, 2000, p. 73).

The commission questioned Brown about the communist publications in the public library collection, asking, “And you did not read all of them? Wasn’t it your duty?” Brown’s response, “I did not so consider it but considered my public capable of deciding what they wanted to read” (Robbins, 2000, p. 72), plainly reflected the ALA worldview that a librarian is to be a neutral facilitator of social access to information. In this case, Brown’s small world values could not prevail, as they were at odds with the very different small world values of those in a position of authority over her.

The transcript of Brown’s conversation with the city commission provided testimony of a difference between the commission’s social typing of Brown as a librarian and Brown’s own perception of her role:

City commissioner: Did you ever have a picture of Paul Robeson hanging in your library?

Brown: Not to my knowledge.

City commissioner: Would you be willing to put that in writing?

Brown: ...I would for I am not lying.

City commissioner: Don’t you know Paul Robeson is a Communist?

Brown: I do not.

City commissioner: You, a librarian, and do not know that?... Don’t you ever listen to the radio?

Brown: Not often, for I prefer to read (Robbins, 2000, pp. 72–73).

In this dialogue, city commission representatives questioned Brown on her role as a librarian. To their surprise, she did not abide by their typecasting of a “real” librarian, did not read everything

that the library held, and did not necessarily pay great attention to popular culture. Brown, on the other hand, continued to reflect the ALA worldview, which promoted a social type of the librarian as officious provider of access to information, not as information screener.

As noted in Burnett et al. (2001), “if the individual is an undesirable type ... information coming from this person may not be easily accepted or believed by others” (p. 537). According to members of the city commission, Brown—clearly an “undesirable type”—had done the city “great harm” (Robbins, 2000, p. 73). Her dismissal is evidence of the commission’s decision that the library under Brown’s leadership facilitated access to information that was socially unacceptable for the Bartlesville public.

The commission’s sense of information behavior clearly enforced behaviors they believed to be “appropriate ... to support a normative way of life” (Burnett et al., 2001, p. 538). This reflected a decision not only designed to keep them free of information deemed to be dangerous, but also intended to enforce limits on access for all citizens of the town, whatever small-world norms those citizens may have held. Because of growing anti-communist social pressures, even insinuated connection with the Communist Party or other “suspect” information sources could halt a career, alienate one socially, and ruin one’s future. In this case, avoiding the appearance of disloyalty in Bartlesville meant that the public library collection should not subscribe to communist publications, even when offered free subscriptions. Opposite the ALA worldview of preferring to err on the side of open and unfettered access to information, the Bartlesville city commission felt that access to the information contained in the public library was harmful to the patrons who might consume the information, precisely because it did not fit the normative behaviors of this small Oklahoma town. Thus, in Bartlesville in 1951, concerns related to social access trumped both physical and intellectual access.

4.3. Information policy, politics, and social access

The importance of social access to information can be particularly acute when it involves political information. This has been made clear by recent policy changes by the Bush administration, such as reclassifying previously unclassified information, removing information from federal Web sites, and influencing scientific research. Such changes may best be understood in terms of the theory of normative behavior—they are particularly significant instances of information coming into conflict with the norms and worldview of a distinct small world. In this case, a small world with an especially significant level of power controls information access for many other small worlds.

The executive branch of the federal government is directed by a relatively small number of individuals—the president and his staff, the vice president and his staff, Cabinet members, policy advisors, and the directors of executive branch departments and agencies. None of these officials, other than the president himself, are elected: They are all political appointees, selected primarily because their views match those of the president. This relatively small but incredibly influential group of people forms

a small world with its own social norms, shared worldview, social types, and information behaviors. The views of this small world’s members predominate the policies generated and the actions taken by the entirety of the federal executive branch agencies, which employ much of the federal government workforce and implement most of the policies of the federal government. While this small world in any presidential administration could serve as an important case for the study of social access to information, the aggressive information access policies of the Bush administration make it particularly apt for this discussion.

The social norms of the administration were quickly apparent after it took office, focusing on establishing clear boundaries between those who had access to information and those who did not. The administration has tried to keep as much information related to their activities as possible away from anyone not in their small world. They have frequently ignored requests for information made under the Freedom of Information Act (Freedom of Information Act, 2002), oftentimes not even acknowledging the requests (Committee on Government Reform, 2004). In the first few months of the first term of the administration, the Vice President became embroiled in a fight with the Government Accountability Office (GAO)—a legislative branch agency serving as the government’s internal watchdog—over access to records from a hearing held by an energy task force (Relyea & Halchin, 2003). The executive branch went to federal court to fight against the GAO’s request for information about the hearing.

Other information requests by the GAO or Congress that have been rejected by the administration include information about communications between the Vice President and the Department of Defense about contracts to Halliburton, documents about prisoner abuse in Iraq, cost estimates for the Medicare prescription drug plan, air pollution data, records from presidential advisor Karl Rove’s meetings with executives of companies in which he owned stock, and information requested by the Congressional Committee investigating the 9/11 attacks (Committee on Government Reform, 2004). In the case of the Medicare information, the Actuary of the Department of Health and Human Services was told by the administration that he would be fired for giving the requested information to Congress (Committee on Government Reform, 2004). This pattern quickly extended into the administration’s public comments: Members of the Cabinet began to take the unusual step of routinely refusing to testify before Congressional Committees (Relyea & Halchin, 2003). This made it clear that the boundaries of this small world did not include governmental representatives outside of the President’s close circle.

The worldview of the administration has similarly been narrowly defined—information related to national security or intelligence has a higher value than other forms of information and is carefully controlled. The Bush administration has extended the classification of documents, given more executive agency directors the authority to classify documents, encouraged reclassification and retroactive classification of unclassified documents, lengthened classification periods for up to 25 extra years, and created a presumption of secrecy with government information (Barker, 2005; Feinberg, 2004). These policies

were accomplished through executive orders and through far-reaching legislation, such as the [Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism \(USA PATRIOT\) Act \(2001\)](#) and the [Homeland Security Act \(2002\)](#), which the administration heavily lobbied Congress to pass (Jaeger & Burnett, 2005). The administration also used regulations to make specific types of information unavailable, such as information from commercial satellites and vehicle safety information ([Committee on Government Reform, 2004](#)).

The orders and memoranda by members of the President's small world are particularly revealing about their worldview regarding the importance of tightly constrained information access. An October 2001 order from the Department of Justice explicitly instructed federal agencies to release as little information as possible and assured federal agencies that the Department of Justice would defend them from legal action whenever they withheld information ([Office of the Attorney General, 2001](#)). A March 2002 memo from the White House instructed agencies to withhold any information that would be sensitive but could not fit the legal definition of information that could be classified ([White House Office, 2002](#)). In May 2003, the President issued an executive order that limited access to information from the current or previous administrations, postponed the automatic declassification of documents, protected any government information related to a foreign power from release, encouraged extensive reclassification of publicly available information, and eliminated the presumption of disclosure for requests for government information ([White House Office, 2003](#)).

The social types of the administration have relied on collecting information about citizens in order to classify them. The laws that facilitated the administration's limitations on the release of government information have greatly increased the ability of executive agencies to gather information about citizens and resident aliens (Jaeger, Bertot, & McClure, 2003; Jaeger & Burnett, 2003, 2005; Jaeger, McClure, Bertot, & Snead, 2004). Further, the federal government has turned to external data aggregators to gather more information about citizens (Jaeger, 2007). Federal law bars government employees from creating databases like those of data aggregators. However, government employees frequently search such databases as part of their jobs, and many government agencies have contracts for access to the databases of commercial data brokers (Roberts, 2006). As a result, social typing activities have become part and parcel of federal information policy.

Not surprisingly, these beliefs have led to information behaviors that strongly limit access to information for the public and others who are not trusted members of the administrative small world. The most striking example of such information behavior may be found in the administration's significant efforts to assert control over scientific and research information. This included preventing the publication of research findings, centralizing peer review of applications for government funding, pushing for self-censorship among scientists and academic publishers, requiring all funded researchers to get agency approval to publish findings from any unclassified military-funded

research, and preventing scholars and researchers from several countries from entering the United States (Jaeger & Burnett, 2003; Knezo, 2003; Simoncelli & Stanley, 2005).

The Bush administration has also sought to fill scientific advisory committees with persons who share the worldview and social norms of its own executive small world ([Committee on Government Reform, 2004](#); Simoncelli & Stanley, 2005). They tried to influence scientific studies by using government agencies to conform to its worldview. This has included tampering with EPA reports on global warming and climate change, ordering the CDC to remove information about condom effectiveness rates from its Web site and replace it with a list of condom failure rates and the effectiveness of abstinence, instructing Department of the Interior scientists to disregard alternatives to administration policies related to mining, and preventing the Federal Drug Administration from approving the over-the-counter sale of an emergency contraceptive (Simoncelli & Stanley, 2005). Simultaneously, a number of scientists being evaluated for non-partisan government posts have been questioned about their political beliefs and whether they voted for President Bush (Simoncelli & Stanley, 2005).

Based on the policies and behaviors detailed above, the small world of the Bush administration that dictates the actions of the executive branch of the government has clear social norms and a well-defined worldview about information access. Their attitudes reveal specific intentions about social access. First, this small world's view of information is based on a belief that social access to information should be very limited. This belief lies at the heart of many of the policies designed to limit information access for all other members of society. Second, the worldview also dictates the information behaviors that result from the social access to information by members of the small world itself. These information behaviors are displayed in the attempts to influence scientific and other research studies and reports. By setting new parameters for scientific research and by filling scientific committees with people who share their worldview, the administration is trying to make research fit its own social norms.

5. Conclusion: The implications of social access for LIS research

The cases examined here occurred in very different settings: relatively localized areas like San Francisco and Bartlesville and a setting with immediate national and international import: the executive branch of the U.S. federal government. In all the cases, different understandings of social attitudes, expectations, and norms directly influenced how—and whether—certain types of information were made available or were perceived as valuable. This influence manifested itself in ways not easily conceptualized in terms of either physical or intellectual access. Rather, it played out in specifically social ways, through collisions between different small-world beliefs—different understandings of social norms, worldviews, the role of social types, and appropriate information behavior in social settings.

Such social forces clearly influence not only how individuals in specific social settings conceive of and use information.

They also strongly influence how decision makers and information professionals conceptualize information and access. The four concepts making up the theory of normative behavior—social norms, worldview, social types, and information behavior—provide LIS researchers with a set of tools for understanding how people in different social environments might approach information services and even information itself with widely divergent assumptions and beliefs. To put it simply, the essential information of one small world may be perceived as suspect or even dangerous to another. In such situations, the mediating role of LIS practitioners needs to be rooted in an understanding of the role of social access. As the preceding analysis of three cases suggests, because different social groups—or different small worlds—understand information and access differently, they may act at cross-purposes when they come into contact. In such cases, LIS practitioners might, by following some of the implications of Chatman's theory, be able to better mediate between groups with conflicting conceptions and norms related to information access.

LIS research needs to more closely observe and analyze the different ways that small worlds—both independently and in contact with one another—understand and value information and access. The concept of social access presented here, drawing on the theoretical work of Elfreda Chatman, is robust enough to be applied both on a micro level (where, for instance, colliding social norms and worldviews can impact the practices of a single public library) and on a macro level (where decisions about a nation's information policy, based in the values of a specific—if powerful—small world, can determine an entire population's ability to gain access to information).

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