Library Access for the LGBT Community:

From Local to Global Outreach

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A current initiative of the American Libraries Association is the Libraries Transform campaign, which has multifaceted goals including increasing awareness of library services, elevating the status of the public library in the eyes of community members, and demonstrating the critical role that libraries have embraced in the digital age (ALA, 2016). The role of the public library as a transformational force in the community is felt perhaps the most strongly by marginalized groups, who rely on libraries as safe spaces where their information needs are met without judgment or discrimination. One historically marginalized group in the United States and around the globe is the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer community, and public libraries have risen to the challenge of breaking down the barriers to access for this particular segment of society.
LGBT-identifying people are at risk for diminished access to information and services for a number of reasons. While marriage equality is now the law of the land in the U.S., that is not the case in many countries around the world, where the LGBTQ community still faces dangerous persecution by governments and religious bodies. LGBTQ individuals can face stigma and disapproval from their families and peer groups, and LGBTQ youth are an especially high-risk group, as they are frequent victims of bullying, are at increased risk for suicidal thoughts and self-injuring behaviors, and are more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide as their heterosexual peers (CDC, 2016). This can have a dramatic effect on the education of LGBT teens, as they are more likely than their peers to miss school days because of feelings of discomfort and danger (CDC, 2016). Furthermore, LGBTQ teens represent as much as 40 percent of all homeless youth, and they are at major educational risk: 75 percent perform below grade level in reading, and 75 percent will drop out of high school as a result of their housing status (Hill, 2016). This leaves an information gap that libraries can fill. Through dedicated outreach programs, efforts at connecting people with the services they need, when and where they need them, and the application of digital inclusion principles, today’s public libraries are working harder than ever to ensure safe and equitable access for the LGBTQ community.
Efforts of California Libraries

The San Francisco Public Library is one of the most supportive libraries to the LGBT community. Home to the James C. Hormel LGBTQIA Center, the Main Library hosts a large collection documenting the history and culture of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersex individuals and their allies, with a special emphasis on the San Francisco Bay Area. There is a separate reading room, and events are scheduled with other community groups.

The SFPL website has a LGBTQIA reading list chosen by librarians, as well as a blog entitled Queerest.Library.Ever which highlights the gay community, often spotlighting teen events in the area. The Library has a subject guide aimed at teens entitled The LGBT Experience - An SFPL LGBT Resource Guide for Teens. The materials chosen, both fiction and nonfiction, “explore the
range of LGBTQ life as experienced by young people, as well as provide an introduction to
LGBT history” (San Francisco Public Library, 2016).

With its proximity to the Castro gay district, the Eureka Valley/Harvey Milk Memorial
Branch of the San Francisco Public Library honors its close ties to the LGBT community. The
branch has a LGBT special interest collection including materials regarding the culture, history
and life experience of the LGBT community.
This branch also has services planned specifically for the LGBT community including giving people, such as vulnerable LGBT teens, access to neighborhood resources. Local resources include locations to find free and quick HIV testing, the San Francisco LGBT Center, The Bay Area Bisexual Network, and the LGBT Chamber of Commerce. By providing access to these resources, the library shows they care and they understand the needs of the community (San Francisco Public Library, 2016).

The Los Angeles Public Library is also very supportive of the LGBT community. The library has a website dedicated to their LGBT resources, programs, and services (Los Angeles Public Library, 2016). Resources include links directly to databases and magazines of interest, and as well as relevant programs and discussions. For teens and children, the library provides books that are vetted by librarians. There are links to different age-appropriate libguides of interest to children. One is Children’s Books Focused on LGBT Issues; others focus on teens and new adults, including Young Adult Books with Lesbian Characters, Young Adult Books with Transgender Characters, and Young Adult Books with Crossdressing, Genderqueer, and Intersex
Characters. Teens are questioning and frequently wonder if they are alone in their personal journey, so providing libguides full of books with characters that closely resemble them shows LGBT teens that they have a safe place in the library, and that the library recognizes their unique needs and legitimizes their perspectives (Los Angeles Public Library, 2016).

Legislation in California has also moved toward being more inclusive of LGBT individuals in recent years. In September 2016, Governor Jerry Brown signed into law a bill that requires all single-stall public toilets to be converted to gender-neutral restrooms by March 1, 2017. This law was created, in part, to support transgender and gender-nonconforming people. Public libraries have proven themselves to be early adopters of this legislation, as they continually work to improve access for all groups. The University Heights branch of the San Diego Public Library became the first public facility in the state to open new restrooms with gender-neutral facilities and signage. The library moved quickly on the project to support its local LGBTQIA community (Burns & Richards, 2016).
Gender-neutral restrooms allow people to feel safe, and having a library as the first facility in the state to follow the new law is very symbolic of the library’s desire to provide sanctuary for all.

**Efforts of United States Libraries**

On a national level, public libraries are a leading force regarding the acceptance and understanding of the LGBT community. Public libraries, through the implementation of various programs and services, have prompted a change of perception of the LGBT community by transforming how it is understood in everyday culture and local communities. A big step in this acceptance and transformation was the implementation of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Pride Month to be held every June, which was issued by President Barack Obama as a Presidential Proclamation in May 2016 (Obama, 2016). In turn, the ALA announced that public libraries would utilize the month of June to highlight the literature, programs, people, and services that promote LGBT acceptance, calling it [GLBT Book Month](#) (ALA, 2016, “Book month”).
This represents a shift in seeing people belonging to the LGBT community not as outsiders or different, but as regular people who also have ways of inspiring others with their culture and history.

As more communities across the country sponsor Pride month events, public libraries are presented with additional opportunities to meet LGBT individuals where they are and provide relevant programming and services. In 2015, the Portland Public Library (Maine) partnered with Portland Pride to host a panel discussion and showcase a display on the LGBT history in the 1970s when the movement began in force.
They also host a weekly LGBT movie night every Thursday (Caswell, 2015). The Oak Park (Illinois) Public Library offers a comprehensive Transgender Resource Collection, and were awarded the 2010 Gordon M. Conable Award from the Public Library Association (Caswell, 2015). This award recognizes institutions that have committed themselves to intellectual freedom and representation of diverse viewpoints. Also in 2015, the Cherry Hill Public Library (New Jersey) launched a month long series of events to education, support, and celebrate the LGBT community in honor of Pride. Movies were screened, a display to highlight honorees of the Stonewall Book Awards was presented in the reading room, panel presentations were scheduled and members of the LGBT community were invited to speak (2015).
This year, the DC Public Library contributed to local Pride celebrations in a number of ways. At the library, teen craft days were scheduled, which encouraged LGBT teens and allies to stop by after school to make rainbow pins, keychains, and bracelets to wear to show their support and/or identification during Pride month.

The library also participated in the Outwrite LGBT Book Festival. They set up an exhibit table where people could come and learn about the DC Public Library's LGBTQI+ literary resources and the programs and services that they offer at their library (DC Public Library, 2016).
As part of Pride, DC Public Library staff hosted pop-up reference desk events at LGBTQ+ happy hours and club nights around the District, where they answered questions about library services and offered on-the-spot library card registration. This is an example of hands-on outreach where a public library struck out into the world to bring their services to the community, rather than making community members come to the library itself (DC Public Library, 2016).

LGBT adults and their teen counterparts are able to find public libraries as a safe haven, as libraries embrace certain ideals that greatly benefit them. Two of the most popular concepts are allowing and promoting access to information, and publicizing services and programs that build a sense of community, which library programs can then further foster and promote (Vaillancourt, 2012). This dedication to increasing support of LGBT programs and services at public libraries demonstrates that libraries aim to ensure that not only do LGBT people feel included within the library community, but also that those around them feel the same sense of inclusion without thinking of differences.

Another way public libraries in the U.S. function as safe spaces for the LGBT community is by providing in an open and easily accessible way for them to access information and services through their websites. An example of this is the Piscataway Public Library in Township, New Jersey. On their site, they have a special page where information is sorted by helplines, local community groups, and additional resources with links, phone numbers, and addresses. On the same page on the right hand side, they share positive news stories specific to the LGBT community (Piscataway Public Library, 2016). This shows how the library has taken steps to make sure that LGBT individuals have an easy way to find resources and programs, which is what a public library wants to do for all their customers. This allows them to feel more included and not different from any other group.
Another example of how accepted the LGBT community is by public libraries is the New York Public Library. On their website, smartly named LGBT@NYPL, they promote their services that enhance the public image of the LGBT community by highlighting different books, images, people, events, and programs which promote unity and understanding (New York Public Library, 2016). This promotion is important, as libraries hold the idea that knowledge is the key to acceptance and understanding. By exposing the public to knowledge about the LGBT community, they bridge the gap between different people leading to empathy and acceptance.

The NYPL also hosts an extensive digital collection of their LGBT materials, including photography and historical archives.

![Gay and lesbian activism photography digital collection at the NYPL, via NYPL](image)

The San Antonio Public Library (Texas) is another institution that is currently working to increase information access and community acceptance for LGBT individuals. A libguide on the SAPL website explains that:

“the library’s mission states, ‘The San Antonio Public Library changes lives through the transformative power of information, imagination and ideas’. Part of that transformative power is embracing the city’s diversity and including other points of view. The diversity of San Antonio goes beyond ethnic and racial lines, and twenty-first century libraries plan programs that appeal to a variety of people. Because of the variety, there is something for everyone. The Pride events planned
in June are a part of the Library’s initiative to be relevant to a dynamic community and appeal to the many segments of a diverse city.”

The Pride **libguide** on their website is completely full of information about the LGBT community, resources for all ages, links to support groups and organizations, and interesting facts about the LGBT community in the area (San Antonio Public Library, 2016). It is clear that they value this community and try to offer as much support to them as they can.

![An infographic on gender identity shared on the San Antonio Public Library Pride Libguide, via SAPL](image)

In addition to the services and collections found at libraries across the United States, national library associations have also made clear their stance on supporting the LGBT community. The American Library Association has important policies in place to ensure that the LGBT community is being served and offered support in libraries. In addition, ALA hosts a gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender round table and also offers a huge selection of resources for this group on their website. The resources on the round table website are an invaluable source of
information, teaching tools, and support. The ALA website itself has links to resources for all ages of the LGBT community, book lists, and links to LGBT book awards. Resources for public librarians include a pathfinder for evaluating the treatment of LGBT themes in materials for teens, and examples of classification schemes for LGBT materials (ALA, 2016).

The Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), made national headlines this year as a champion for LGBT rights. When the state of North Carolina passed the controversial HB 2 law (“North Carolina’s Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act”), which repealed LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination ordinances across the state, the ALSC decided to cancel their 2016 National Institute, which would have been held in Charlotte, North Carolina. (“ALSC board votes”, 2016). This sent a clear message that public libraries will not stand for laws or acts that exclude or demean any group of people; regarding HB 2, the ALSC stated that “the law contradicts the core values, purpose, and diversity work of ALSC and undermines civil rights and the fundamental principles upon which libraries are founded” (“ALSC board votes”, 2016). This clear, aggressive stance is important, as it demonstrates how public libraries are at the forefront on a national level of both creating a safe harbor for the LGBT community, and speaking out against the injustices suffered by this group.

**Digital Inclusion and Global Perspective on LGBT Outreach and Access**

As we move forward in the digital age, it is imperative that libraries consider the principles of digital inclusion when mapping ways to serve the LGBT community. A 2015 study by the Pew Research Center found that 78% of Americans think that libraries should “definitely” offer programs that teach people to use technology tools (Pew, 2015), because digital literacy is now an essential part of productive citizenship. Furthermore, technology tools can benefit LGBT
individuals in a number of ways: social media can provide a support group for LGBT youth who lack in-person support, individuals can access information remotely and anonymously, and activists can use digital media for improved community organizing. From LGBT teens whose unaccepting parents ban them from internet access (Hunter, 2010), to adults who are afraid to publicly access information about the LGBT community, multiple segments of this group can benefit from improved digital inclusion.

Mehra and Braquet postulate that in order for libraries to effectively serve LGBT youth, services will need to be specifically tailored to their life experiences, and in addition to traditional services, digital literacy should be among the services explored (2006). While libraries have been exceptionally better about including minority views such as LGBT literature, there are can be a divide when it comes to trans and gender topics (Beiriger and Jackson 2007). Collection development efforts are leading the way and library services should follow along, with close attention paid to digital literacy for LGBT youth. A major issue among youth in
general, and often LGBT youth, is that they place value on information found readily on the internet and not necessarily in a library (Beiriger and Jackson 2007). Libraries have an opportunity to meet the needs of this population, if only to curate and deliver relevant, credible information. Simple information literacy would benefit LGBT youth, and digital literacy will follow as a default, because as staff teach youth how to seek information they will automatically learn the technology needed to find the information.

Public libraries are in a special position to serve as a universal access point, because other libraries and information centers may narrow their own focus to meet the specific needs of their users. Countries that are committed to the The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) principles are signatories of the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, which is a “statement of principles which explicitly prohibits discrimination and which promotes inclusive services for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality language or social status. The Manifesto asserts that the public library is the local centre of information, making all kinds of knowledge and information readily available to its users” (Hart and Mfazo 2010). While information may be readily available using library technology, “web resources in public libraries are essential to the self discovery of LGBTQ and gender variant youth, but they are only tools; librarians need to put them to work” (Robinson, 2016). Teens may not necessarily feel like they can research safely at home, and so public libraries are in a unique position to provide anonymity, taking into account that physical materials may ultimately be tracked as well (Robinson, 2016). Digital communication technologies, especially social media networks, have made it possible to for queer communities to feel safe in digital spaces (McLean and Mugo 2015).

As our world becomes increasingly globalized due to the proliferation of technology and exponentially-increasing internet access, we are also able to witness information access
challenges for the LGBT community around the world. Queer women in South Africa have been able to find community while gaining differing perspectives through an online portal (McLean and Mugo 2015). Public libraries are a major access point for the technologies that minority classes seek out, especially in an ever growing digital landscape; therefore, libraries on a global scale can provide a service that few other organizations can (easily) provide. In South Africa, a country that has determined that LGBT rights are a human right, librarians still report that they are not serving the LGBT community as much as they should (Hart and Mfazo 2010).

Many of the underserved are impoverished and may find it hard to make it to a library in a meaningful way, or they are obligated to leave before their information needs are met (Hart and Mfazo 2010). For this reason, Hart and Mfazo emphasize that libraries should act as referral organizations in order to connect LGBT to the correct agencies that can assist further in addressing their needs (2010). Sometimes individuals only have the tools that are available in their local community and libraries can often be that place where they get all the information that starts them on a path of discovery, so it is vitally important that libraries approach the matter correctly and completely.

Surveying librarians in British Columbia and Scotland, researchers found that a barrier of social constraints and judgemental practices hindered the provision of services to the queer
communities they served (Hart and Mfazo 2010). Yılmaz proposed that providing open access to
print material and welcoming spaces provided by staff would be beneficial for LGBT-identifying
individuals in the long term (2014):

Public libraries are the most important information sources for GLB
individuals who seek information about understanding their GLB identities
(Alexander and Miselis 2007, 45; Ritchie and McNeill 2011, 69). Especially for
GLB youths, public libraries are seen as refuges and places for self-discovery
through books (Curry 2005, 65; Jennings 2006, 22; Hart and Mfazo 2010, 99). So,
public librarians have the opportunity to play an important role in the lives of
GLB individuals through their professional capacity of supporting activities
concerning information creation, organization, and dissemination processes
(Mehra and Braquet 2006, 3). (Yilmaz, 2014).

While the needs of the LGBT community differ somewhat from country to country, it is clear
that there are a number of barriers and challenges that confront librarians who wish to reach out
to this at-risk group. By improving digital literacy and ensuring access to both safe physical
spaces, and reliable online information sources, public libraries around the globe can meet the
information needs of LGBT individuals while promoting acceptance of this group within their
local communities.

Conclusion

Many LGBTQ-identifying people are experiencing the transformational power of the
modern public library. Librarians are actively seeking ways to remove barriers to information for
this group, and are fighting challenges to equitable access with inclusive programs and strong
public stances of acceptance and anti-discrimination. Libraries in the United States are
purposefully increasing their visible presence at LGBTQ community events -- from marching in
Pride parades, to building LGBTQ centers and reading rooms, to offering relevant digital
collections, librarians are engaging with LGBTQ people where they are, and connecting them
with the services and information that they need. The library is a safe haven for marginalized
groups, and the major professional associations in the field have adopted bold anti-discrimination
policies that name the LGBTQ community as a protected group. As growing digital access allows more people to take advantage of the opportunities that are afforded by technological access, libraries will continue to be at the forefront of protecting equitable access for the LGBTQ community.

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