

Special Forum: An Ethical Imperative of Open Access

Information Hospitality, Academic Libraries, and Open Access

by Joshua M. Avery

In an address to celebrate the dedication of the Biblioteca Comunale di Milano, the semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco notes that libraries are organized to reveal where a book may be found, but they also “hide” or “conceal” the book (*di nascondere, di celare il libro*¹ (1983, 239). Eco, a bibliophile and frequent library visitor recognizes that the interlaced goals of access and preservation - each with different, even competing, values - are the fabric of libraries. Historically, access and preservation in the library have existed on a spectrum; maximum access means minimum preservation, and vice versa.

For centuries, libraries were constrained in their ability to balance preservation and access by, among other things, the inherent limits of physical information resources. Print books are, in economic terms, rivalrous as they can only be used by one consumer at a time. The development of the Internet and, later, the World Wide Web proved revolutionary in that electronic texts could be accessed by unlimited readers while simultaneously being digitally preserved. The previous reality of one book for one reader was upended, and the tension between access and preservation was, to some degree, circumvented. The ability to digitize texts, while a needful step forward in expanding access, did not provide an adequate structure for addressing all limitations to access. The missing piece of the puzzle was the development of a philosophical and legal structure that provided a path for libraries to take full advantage of the technological revolution. That structure is open access (OA).

As useful as OA may be in expanding access, this reality is not in and of itself satisfactory to assume an ethical imperative to motivate libraries and librarians to actively promote and disseminate open scholarly communication. Like many of the earlier conversations and developments around access in libraries, those around OA scholarship are informed by Enlightenment ideas and ethical values around the universality of the library (Israel, 2001) and its role in facilitating freedom of thought and speech, increasing equality, and fostering the primacy of reason among the citizens of a republic (Bivens-Tatum, 2012). While the conversation around expanding access to resources in libraries certainly owes a debt to the ethical values of the Enlightenment, libraries also have a debt to more ancient, even biblical, ideas around hospitality. Hospitality should be a key driver for those librarians and libraries who would seek an ethical imperative for promoting and facilitating open scholarship and resources.

There is a robust, if small, conversation around “academic hospitality” and “intellectual hospitality” that stems from seminal work done by John Bennet (2000), Alison Phipps and Ronald Barnett (2007), and Aurelie Hagstrom (2013). Scholars like Richard Haswell and Janice Haswell (2015) and Alison Caviness Gibson (2022) have also explored the potential for hospitality and pedagogy in the writing classroom. These examples of the robust potential for hospitality in the academy are to be encouraged, but they do not provide a framework from which libraries can draw. The current scholarly conversation around hospitality in the library focuses largely on customer service models with an eye toward user satisfaction, particularly as related to library spaces. Examples of this can be seen in the work of Bodaghi et al., 2017), Seeman and Marini (2012), and Powell and

Joshua M. Avery is an Assistant Professor of Library Science at Wheaton College.

Weisses (2021). While inspired by ancient Near Eastern and biblical notions, this hospitality model is better understood through the framework of the ‘hospitality’ industry. This approach was best summed up by Eric Johnson and Michelle Kazmer (2011) when they wrote that the literature is “rich with studies of the various factors that . . . make up a hospitable library . . . but there has been . . . little synthesis of the notion of the library as a place of hospitality.” Johnson and Kazmer observe that libraries “have heretofore not used this term to describe what they do” leaving them to “turn elsewhere” for definitions of ‘hospitality’” (383). More recently, Juliana Mestre (2022) argues that theorist Jacques Derrida offers a vision of hospitality that can serve “as a heuristic through which to examine hospitality in relationship with digital libraries.” While Derrida may prove useful, I would like to point further into the past to gain a more elemental understanding of the virtue of hospitality. As Henri Nouwen, the catholic priest and theologian, so beautifully said:

[I]f there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality. It is one of the richest biblical terms that can deepen and broaden our insight in our relationship to our fellow human beings . . . ‘hospitality,’ therefore, should not be limited to its literal sense of receiving a stranger into our house . . . but as a fundamental attitude toward our fellow human beings which can be expressed in a variety of ways (1998, 44-45).

This essay argues that the concept of *information hospitality* offers an ethical imperative that should drive librarians and libraries to promote the production and dissemination of open resources. I define *information hospitality* as meeting the information needs of neighbors and strangers by granting them access to the scholarly conversation.²

The Ancient Near East, as well as the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, offer a variety of contours and practices around hospitality, but four critical features run through ancient practice, scripture, and Christian tradition that can provide a framework for how hospitality may be understood and applied to information seeking communities. The four features are:

- 1) Welcoming the stranger and neighbor. Hospitality is extended to neighbors and friends but also strangers and others outside the host’s own community or culture.
- 2) Basic needs are met. Hospitality often meant providing food, shelter, and even protection, even when the expense of doing so required personal or corporate sacrifice on the part of the host.
- 3) Freely given. Ancient and biblical hospitality both require the free giving of resources to strangers and neighbors in need without expecting payment or obligation.
- 4) Individual and institutional. Hospitality is required of both individual believers as well as Christian institutions. As human society has grown and developed, certain acts of hospitality have evolved beyond the capability of individuals and require institutions to accomplish.

While *information hospitality* can and should be practiced by individual librarians, only institutions possess the resources of scale to fulfill this sort of hospitality in any meaningful way. While facilitating open access scholarship is not the only way institutions can practice *information hospitality*, it is one of the most well-suited vehicles. If librarians and libraries seek to practice *information hospitality*, they must be involved in producing and disseminating open resources.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 “to hide, to conceal the book” (authors translation) from Eco, Umberto. 1983. *Sette anni di desiderio*, 1a ed. Bompiani. Milano: Bompiani.
- 2 The term *information hospitality* should not be confused with “intellectual” or “virtual” hospitality.