Librarians as Information Intermediaries: Navigating Tensions Between Being Helpful and Being Liable

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Abstract. Librarians face numerous challenges when helping patrons—particularly those with low socioeconomic status (SES)—meet information needs. They are often expected to have knowledge about many different technologies, web services, and online forms. They must also navigate how to best help patrons while ensuring that personally identifying information (PII) is kept private and that their help will not hold them or their library system liable. In this paper, we explore data collected in eleven focus groups with 36 public librarians from across the U.S. to understand the information challenges librarians encounter when working with patrons who have low digital literacy skills but must increasingly use the internet to request government assistance, apply for jobs, and pay their bills. Findings highlight the thin line librarians must walk to balance issues around privacy, trust, and liability. We conclude the paper with recommendations for libraries to provide additional training to librarians and patrons on privacy and information technology, and we suggest ways for librarians to fulfill their roles as information intermediaries while minimizing legal, ethical, and privacy concerns.

Keywords: Libraries, Technology, Digital Literacy, Privacy, Trust, Liability

1 Introduction

Librarians are at the forefront of responding to the changing landscape of technological innovations that affect how we conduct daily activities, from paying bills to filling out job applications. Librarians are no longer limited to helping patrons locate physical resources at the library; they also regularly help patrons navigate websites and use digital tools to accomplish tasks that previously were conducted offline. Many of these tasks involve patrons disclosing personally identifying information (PII)—ranging from passwords to social security numbers to financial information—through online portals. Research has highlighted the implicit sense of trust patrons feel toward librarians [9, 13, 14], which may explain why patrons freely share this information with librarians. In addition, for many patrons with low digital literacy skills, librarians may represent the only source of knowledge to help them evaluate information credibility, avoid online scams, and accomplish practical tasks, such as creating accounts, downloading documents, and submitting forms online.

Yet, librarians are not trained to be legal, medical, or financial experts, nor are they

trained to assist patrons with specific tools like government forms for Medicaid or other types of support. While librarians want to help patrons resolve their information needs and can facilitate digital literacy through one-on-one or group-based technology training, they must also ensure their assistance does not lead to undesired outcomes—especially those that could create financial or legal problems to their library system.

In this paper, we explore how public librarians in the U.S. navigate tensions between reducing the liability associated with helping patrons resolve their sensitive information needs and still serving their community. The following two research questions guide our evaluation of libraries, PII, and liability concerns:

> **RQ1:** What are librarians' primary liability concerns when assisting patrons with low levels of digital literacy?
>
> **RQ2:** What guidelines or policies do libraries use to reduce liability concerns when dealing with patrons' sensitive information?

In the following sections, we provide an overview of literature on the unique, trust-based relationship between librarians and patrons, the challenges information technologies raise for librarians, and the legal constraints librarians face when helping patrons resolve information needs. We then present findings from an analysis of 11 focus groups with U.S.-based public librarians to unpack the liabilities they face as they assist their patrons. We also explore the guidelines and policies librarians use to balance issues around privacy, trust, and liability. We conclude with recommendations for policies and other resources to help librarians address these challenges.

2 Related Work

2.1 Challenges Faced by Those Without Sufficient Digital Literacy Skills

Technological proficiency is increasingly essential, not only to obtain a high-paying job, but also to access government resources, apply for non-technical jobs (which often require Web-based application submission), and comply with financial and legal requirements. Individuals with low socioeconomic status (SES) face compounding problems: they must use the Web or other communication technologies to access important resources, but they often lack both direct access to these technologies and the requisite knowledge and skills to successfully navigate them [4, 23, 27, 28].

Americans making less than $30,000 per year have lagged far behind other income groups in broadband internet adoption, only crossing the 50% adoption rate at the start of 2017 [22]. Because of this, low-SES individuals are much more likely to rely on public computers—such as those in public libraries—than those with greater financial means [11]. This too, raises a tension for low-SES patrons; at least one study has highlighted that people may be reluctant to use library computers for financial matters due to privacy and security concerns [3]. When they do use public devices, these patrons may unknowingly share sensitive information with others through simple errors like not logging out of an account, saving a file to the desktop, or submitting information to an insecure website.

2.2 Interpersonal and Institutional Trust

Trust is a central component of human interactions; to trust a person or institution requires one to make themselves vulnerable by disclosing PII and relying on another's goodwill to not misuse that information [2, 25]. Therefore, trust can be viewed as a decision-making process whereby an individual uses available information to determine another person's or institution's reliability to hold to a contract or agreement [6]. Individuals rely on a number of cues when deciding whether to trust an *unknown* other, such as asking a stranger for help or sharing sensitive information with a business. In cases where risks and/or uncertainties are high—for example, when prompted to enter one's social security number into a web form—one may consciously or subconsciously assess the trustworthiness of that source and base a decision to disclose information on how trustworthy they *perceive* that source to be [9, 24].

2.3 Patron Trust in Librarians

As information intermediaries, librarians help patrons exchange and disseminate PII, translate technical information, and make information easier to use [27, 30]. Around the world, libraries are viewed as having high credibility, which plays an important role in developing trust [9]. Libraries also have some of the highest institutional reputations, especially in regards to providing access to education and information [26].

Several researchers have approached the question of trust in librarians through a social capital framework, focusing on the resources exchanged between librarians and their patrons. The highly interpersonal nature of librarians' interactions with patrons, including one-on-one assistance and providing both informational and social support, helps foster a deep trust in librarians [14]. For marginalized groups, including immigrants and low-SES individuals, libraries may be one of the only trusted resources in their local community, and libraries often cater services to local demographics, such as offering free English classes in communities with a large proportion of non-English-speaking patrons [29].

2.4 PII Privacy Challenges, and Liability Concerns

In the digital age, librarians' jobs are no longer limited to finding information; rather, librarians are increasingly approached to solve information needs or technological challenges that patrons face. Because of this, librarians work with patrons on a variety of internet-based tasks that involve PII, ranging from setting up email or social media accounts to submitting tax documents, job applications, and health forms. Patrons are often quick to trust librarians, a unique characteristic of this relationship. This may stem in part from the fact that patrons expect their library records—including the questions they ask librarians, the books they read and check out, and the information they enter on library computers—to be confidential [5].

However, library-related laws and regulations do not sufficiently address patrons' privacy [21]. Kang [15] revealed that, while most librarians recognize the importance of protecting patrons' PII, few libraries have regulations or policies for doing so. Ad-

ditionally, librarians are not formally trained in dealing with private and sensitive information [9, 20].

High trust in librarians does not mitigate libraries' concerns about their liability related to protecting patrons' sensitive information. Healey [10] argues that if librarians adhere to the scope of their duties and the standards of their fields, they can be exempt from personal liability. Yet librarian liability may still emerge due to the lack of clear guidelines regarding patron privacy [14, 15, 21]. To minimize liability concerns, libraries may seek to limit services for patrons [12]. However, Healey [10] notes that "erring excessively on the side of avoiding liability can cause services to be limited, information to be withheld, and users to go unserved."

In the following sections, we probe librarians' dilemma between being helpful and being liable by asking them about the challenges they face when helping patrons to complete tasks that involve private and sensitive information.

3 Method

Between January and September 2017, the research team held 11 focus groups with 36 public librarians at local and national library conferences, as well as virtually using the WebEx conference call tool. Two of the planned focus groups became interviews when additional participants did not attend; the other nine focus groups ranged in size from 2-11 people and lasted between 60-90 minutes each. Moderators took detailed notes during each focus group, and the sessions were audio recorded and transcribed.

In total, 36 librarians throughout the U.S. participated (34 female, two male). Of those, 25 completed an online short form providing demographic and branch-specific data. Many had worked in libraries for several years (M=10 years, median=7.5, range: 1-30). They varied in location, with 40% working at libraries in rural areas, 40% in suburban areas, and 20% in urban libraries. Half of participants identified as reference librarians, 30% as branch managers or directors, and 20% as technical services librarians or staff.

For all focus groups (in person and virtual), participants reviewed and signed a consent form (approved by our university's Institutional Review Board). After introducing the study, the moderator posed a series of questions to the group to understand the information challenges librarians faced and especially how they handled information requests that involved sensitive information. The session ended with a discussion of the types of resources and training participants wanted to enhance their and their library's ability to handle the information requests they regularly received.

We uploaded transcripts of the focus groups to the qualitative analysis program Dedoose to enable an iterative coding process across multiple authors. One author created a draft codebook, and each author used it to independently code one of the transcripts. The full team then iteratively revised the codebook. The same transcript was then recoded with the updated codebook to ensure the list captured all desired themes. Next, each transcript in the corpus went through two rounds of coding. In the first round, an author applied codes using the codebook. In the second round, a different author reviewed the coding to ensure reliability. Finally, codes relevant to our research questions were exported from Dedoose and used to generate meta-matrices

[18] to explore patterns in themes across sessions and to synthesize individuals' experiences regarding our research questions.

4   Findings

4.1   What are librarians' primary liability concerns when assisting patrons?

When evaluating our first research question, we identified three emergent themes related to how liability concerns manifest as librarians serve patrons in their role as information intermediaries. We discuss each theme in detail below.

Speed and immediate needs matter more than learning. In our focus groups, librarians described regularly providing support for patrons who have little to no knowledge of how to use the internet to complete important life tasks—such as applying for subsidized housing and health insurance or completing tax forms—that require submitting PII online. Librarians mentioned being bombarded with requests from patrons, including filling out tax forms, setting up bank and email accounts, and logging into existing accounts. Librarians consistently shared scenarios where patrons asked librarians to complete online transactions for them, rather than asking the librarians to *teach* them to complete these transactions on their own.

Librarians highlighted how patrons are driven by immediate needs rather than developing long-term skills that librarians could teach them. For example, a branch manager from a rural North Carolina library said, "*There are the people who just try to give you all of their information and they're handing you their credit card and they don't even stop to think that there might be an issue with that.*" A librarian from a rural Maryland library shared her experience helping a patron who "*was trying to sell property online, and he's sitting there telling me his whole password naming scheme.*" Likewise, a librarian from an urban North Carolina library, said, "*...you can't help but see people's private information, either because you're helping or because they're simply careless. It happens all the time. They leave their social security card on the copy machine, they're shoving their tax forms in your face.*"

These anecdotes highlight how patrons who lack skills to complete internet-related tasks on their own place significant trust in librarians to help complete tasks, often without stopping to consider how their PII is protected or expressing concerns about the vulnerability of that information. Some librarians framed these scenarios in terms of patrons' *desperation* to get things done, and they worried about who patrons would turn to if librarians could not (or would not) help them complete these forms. In these cases, librarians were likely seen as a trustworthy party that had the technical skills to help when the individual (and likely their family members) lacked those digital skills.

It's the librarian's fault. Due to patrons' lack of digital skills—which was evident in librarians' descriptions of patrons' inability to complete basic tasks such as clicking on pull-down menus or positioning their mouse on the screen—librarians said they often had to sit next to patrons and guide them through each step of an online transaction. To librarians' frustration, library-offered classes that teach basic digital literacy skills often have poor to no attendance. Many librarians also expressed concern about

being accused of making errors while helping a patron complete online transactions that involve PII. As the technical services supervisor from a suburban Illinois library described, *"...I had a patron call who claims that one of my staff members signed her up for online social security and now she's not getting her paper checks anymore… She feels that her benefits were taken away because of her working with a librarian. I think that that's where the liability issues come in."* A librarian from a suburban New York library shared a similar example of a patron who blamed her for not getting a job and implying she should have assisted more with preparing the patron's résumé.

These interactions place librarians in a precarious position where they may be faulted for simply fulfilling their role as an information intermediary. If librarians choose not to help a patron because a task deals with PII, they may be labeled as not being helpful and/or not doing their job (which creates additional challenges).

In librarians we trust. As seen in prior research [9, 13, 14], patrons appear to inherently trust librarians when it comes to handling PII. Librarians in our focus groups described how patrons saw them as neutral entities and shared everything from family stories to financial information with them. One librarian from a rural Maryland library described how she thinks patrons view her: *"'This is actually really personal information but, it's my librarian, I know her. I see her all the time.' Sometimes I think that filter disappears…"* Likewise, a branch manager from an urban North Carolina library described the level of trust her patrons have in her, saying:

> *I have not had the experience of [patrons] ever pausing to consider the privacy issues or later coming up and asking, concerned about their privacy. It does seem often like it never crosses their minds, which I'm not sure how much of that is not being educated enough with technological problems that can happen. Or whether it's a case of because we're in a trusted position.*

To summarize, librarians in our focus groups felt uncomfortable viewing PII but said they feel obligated to help patrons complete tasks that involved sensitive information, even in cases when it raised liability concerns.

4.2   What guidelines or policies do libraries use to reduce liability concerns?

In addressing our second research question, participants described a range of library policies for handling sensitive patron information. Some libraries have detailed policies that try to capture all possible patron scenarios; however, most lack any policy, and librarians handle each patron on a case-by-case basis. For example, the branch manager from an urban North Carolina library said her library has very detailed policies and procedures that explain what staff can and cannot do for patrons. Her library has posted signs near computer labs to tell patrons what librarians cannot do. Librarians at this library cannot handle patrons' passwords and credit card information or complete online transactions that require submitting PII.

Some library policies are designed to address liability concerns by preventing librarians from handling devices or entering information for patrons. For example, a librarian from an urban New York library shared that her librarians tell patrons *"...we can help you as much as we can, but we can't do it for you, and we can't touch your devices."* A librarian from a suburban Maryland library described a similar policy at

her library, where librarians will not enter information on the computer or another device, but they will tell the patron exactly how to do it. On the other hand, some librarians said they are willing to bend the rules to help a patron in need. For example, a technical services librarian in rural Tennessee said he's willing to loosely interpret his library's policy when needed: "*You may have to fudge the rules a little bit, just so they can get unemployment [benefits]. You don't want people to starve or anything like that.*" Likewise, a librarian from a urban California library said that many children come to her library without their parents, and librarians will maintain login credentials for regular patrons so they can get onto the sites they access at the library.

The majority of librarians in our focus groups affirmed that their branches do not have explicit policies in place regarding how to handle sensitive information when helping patrons complete online transactions. While some felt that implementing such policies could reduce liability concerns or would be helpful in conveying their stance to patrons, not all librarians felt the need for policies. For example, a branch manager in rural New York said, "*It would be awkward to have a policy. If we had a policy, we'd probably end up turning people away and saying, 'I'm sorry, we can't help you because this is outside what were allowed to do,' and that would be a shame.*" This sentiment reflects the challenges librarians may face in crafting a policy that enables them to accomplish their mission.

Overall, these situations highlight the tensions librarians face between helping patrons, who rely heavily on them to complete important tasks, and protecting themselves and their libraries from potential legal issues. In many cases, librarians were willing to put themselves at risk rather than turn away a patron in need.

5   Discussion

In this study, we talked with 36 public librarians from around the U.S. to understand the challenges they experience when serving their patrons in their role as information intermediaries. Librarians' jobs are becoming increasingly technical as patrons turn to them for assistance with requests that involve different devices, tools, and services. Furthermore, patrons who may not own personal computers or have reliable internet access at home increasingly come to libraries to submit sensitive information ranging from job applications to forms for government assistance. And when patrons lack basic digital literacy skills to complete these tasks, librarians are often the trusted source to whom patrons turn for assistance.

Findings from our analysis highlight an important tension that librarians struggle with when assisting patrons with these requests. On one hand, librarians recognize and embrace their trusted position and know they may be the only people who can help patrons. On the other hand, librarians have valid concerns about how their help could turn into a liability for their library and themselves. These concerns were reflected in some of our participants' anecdotes of patrons "blaming" them for not getting a job or things not working out how they wanted.

Drawing on these findings, we offer the following four recommendations to help public libraries reduce liability concerns without placing too many limitations on the

information assistance librarians provide. First, we recommend that librarian preparation programs and in-service professional development for practicing librarians increase their focus on facilitation strategies for working with patrons on public computers. Many librarians described being pressured to break the rules and not knowing how to respond (e.g., "*How do we tell them we can't do this for them politely, without the patron becoming frustrated or angry at us?*"). Training sessions that involve walking through a range of scenarios can help prepare librarians to facilitate the range of information technology requests they receive.

Second, we believe librarians need clearly articulated guidelines that describe what they can and cannot do when assisting patrons with information requests that include PII. While policies exist in some libraries, most participants in this study described having little to no guidelines to deal with such situations, which potentially increases libraries' liability. We believe the safest guidelines would state that librarians should never enter PII into a form for patrons. Clearer policies would also help librarians respond to patrons who express frustration or anger when librarians refuse a request.

Third, we recommend that local, state, and federal agencies make a more coherent effort to provide libraries with assistance to serve patrons who lack digital literacy. Our participants repeatedly said that government agencies direct patrons to the local library to get help with the online transactions; however, librarians rarely received any training to help patrons with those transactions. Some agencies, such as U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services,[1] have started programs whereby libraries and other organizations can become "authorized providers" of information services; however, this is far from standard practice. If librarians received training on navigating popular services, they could better serve their patrons without increasing liability concerns.

Finally, our focus groups revealed that while there are serious privacy concerns to be addressed, the majority of patrons who use public computers need basic digital skills. Lacking those, patrons often feel completely helpless, and just completing their transaction supersedes concerns about who sees their PII. Many libraries already offer classes and other training resources to patrons on the basics of using computers and the internet. As highlighted in some participants' comments, however, the biggest challenge is getting patrons to *attend* these classes. To increase attendance, libraries can partner with community organizations as well as agencies that require people to complete transactions online (government agencies, financial institutions) to hold joint digital literacy programs. These programs can also be held in places where people already gather (e.g., community centers, churches). In addition, libraries should consider ways to partner with these patrons' children—who are often more literate digitally or keen toward developing digital literacy—and provide them with training opportunities that children could then pass along to other family members [16, 19].

6   Future Research, Limitations, and Conclusion

While the American Library Association (ALA) continues to fight to protect pa-

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[1] See https://www.uscis.gov/avoid-scams/become-authorized-provider for more information.

trons' privacy through various initiatives and key communications to government and private agencies [1], librarians themselves often walk a tightrope that pits refusing to help a patron with information requests against providing services that could expose libraries to liability. This paper is one of the first attempts to systematically tackle this tension by talking to librarians from around the U.S. about these challenges and how libraries address them.

We found that while librarians recognize the concerns that stem from handling patrons' PII, they feel an obligation to help patrons complete online transactions. This tension is further exacerbated by patrons' resistance to *learning* the digital skills that could help them complete these tasks on their own; rather, they often come to librarians on a deadline and seeking a quick solution. Furthermore, many of the librarians we talked to said their branches have no formal policies regarding how to respond to the many potential scenarios they encounter involving PII.

The study is somewhat limited by its recruitment strategy, which focused on using mainstream library organizations like ALA to advertise sessions and relied on librarians to volunteer to participate; furthermore, we did not attempt to obscure the focus of this research, so our participants may be more privacy conscious than the average librarian. Future research should examine these questions with more diverse populations, as well as in non-U.S. contexts to shed light on whether this tension exists in communities with different library and legal cultures.

We believe that academics, libraries, and community organizations need to work together to identify the best ways to help low-SES patrons obtain the necessary digital literacy skills to navigate the internet and to complete online tasks. In addition, these stakeholders should provide needed resources to librarians to help them better assist patrons with information needs while minimizing liability to the library.

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