

Open Information and Libraries

Angela J.A. Kent, MLIS, MA (Security Studies)¹
Reference Librarian, The Texas State Library and Archives Commission

I. Introduction

Open source is the sharing of or making publicly available online code, programs, and applications. Within libraries, the use of open source code is most clearly illustrated through the Integrated Library System. However, the concept of open source extends beyond open code and includes free or non-proprietary software (e.g., freeware); online programs and applications; and social media tools—all at minimal or no cost to the user. This paper will consider not only the discrete role of open source code but also what I have termed the wider “open information” universe and how it is applied within libraries.

With respect to open source, the current challenge for libraries is two-fold. At the micro-level, librarians must learn how to use and assess open source. This requires an understanding of information-technology concepts and practices, as well as strong strategic planning capabilities. At the macro-level, librarians working on open source issues must contend with information policies that (1) run counter to flattening access to information and knowledge and (2) protect user privacy.

This paper proposes two visualizations of open information: the spectrum of open information and the open information web. The open information spectrum begins with open source code that can be used by developers to build programs and tools which are then used by

¹Angela J.A. Kent has written and organized panels on Open Access, Grey Literature, Open Data, and Open Government, among other information policy-related topics. She holds a Masters degree from Georgetown University and an MLIS from The Catholic University of America. Angela is a past President of SLA’s Catholic University of America chapter and has also served on DC/SLA’s Program Planning and Strategic Planning Committees. Angela currently serves as a Reference Librarian at the Texas State Library and Archives Commission in Austin, Texas. She is also the President-Elect of SLA’s Texas chapter (2016), a SLA First Five Years’ Advisory Board Council Member (2015-2016), and a SLA Government Information Division elected Executive Board Member. Angela is a 2014 SLA Rising Star and 2015 ALA Emerging Leader. She can be reached at ajakent.wordpress.com.

libraries, including integrated library systems, content management systems, information retrieval systems, and discovery layers. In addition to developing programs via open source code, libraries also have applied “pre-fabricated” online applications and tools that are not-for-profit, non-proprietary, or free to use. These include free citation managers and instant messaging services.

Programs can be open source code—i.e., developers may use the code but build programs using their own ingenuity—or freely and readily available software in which users download a program and rely on technical support either from the source community or from a third-party proprietor. These programs are online applications readily-available for users to download, install, and use without cost. Alternatively, they may be accessed online via a cloud system, also without cost to users. Facebook, Pidgin, Skype, and Twitter are examples of “free to the user” technologies. In addition to code, programs, and tools, open information as a philosophy advances a non-commercial and non-proprietary vision, *viz.*, a vision of no-cost and of openness. Information movements espousing such a philosophy include Open Access and Fair Use. These movements are discussed below in Section IV.

As open source nicely illustrates the broader concept of open information, this paper begins with an open source literature review and three related case studies. Taken together, Sections II and III suggest that Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals may benefit in product and service decision-making through increased familiarity with open source resources. Further, these sections also are meant to stimulate a broader discussion concerning open information and how it is an emerging and growing theme within the LIS profession. To that end, this paper concludes with a proposal for how open information and libraries (as both profession and concept) are integrally linked.

II. Open Source: Literature Review

The intersection of libraries and open source is a growing area of academic study and publication. Further, it is a cross-referenced topic within library and information sciences, information technology, and social and informational law and policy. This brief literature review provides a sample of emerging topics related to open source and library systems.

While the subject of open source is well documented, this literature review focuses on open source as it relates to library applications. Examples include Nicole C. Engard’s *Practical Open Source Software for Libraries*; Karen A. Coombs and Amanda J. Hollister’s *Open Source Web Applications for Libraries*; and Art Rhyno’s *Using Open Source Systems for Digital Libraries*.¹ While arguably dated, Rachel S. Gordon’s *The Accidental Systems Librarian* remains a helpful reference for setting open source tools in context.² It is complemented by the