On peril and privilege and why we all need copyright literacy

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'Copyright is a topic librarians ignore at their peril' was the headline from the December 2016 issue of *CILIP Update* as part of a review of two recent books on copyright for librarians by copyright greats in the library world and fellow colleagues on the [Libraries and Archives Copyright Alliance (LACA)](#) committee Paul Pedley and Tim Padfield. Don't get me wrong, these are incredibly important books, but 'peril' I found myself wondering, what sort of peril? I think copyright is important, it is after all what I spend half my job working on, but I wish headlines like this were not common in library literature. Of course copyright matters, but the idea that ignoring it will bring about peril is part of the problem with librarians' love / hate relationship with copyright. We need to stop viewing it as something to be feared or that might get us into trouble.

[Seth Godin](#) was clear that librarians are no longer gatekeepers of knowledge. They are also not there to sanction other people's behaviour when it comes to copyright or any other legal matters. So why do some of us feel this way? I think it's all tied up with privilege, status and the mistaken belief that unless you have a law degree you'll never be able to help people understand their rights and responsibilities. For me that is misunderstanding of the role of a copyright expert, who is usually not a lawyer, but offers practical advice and support, just as librarians do in a wealth of other areas.

Copyright is a subject that has fascinated me for most of my professional career. It would be fair to say that I fell into copyright work, but it's become a deep relationship that for me lies at the heart of what librarians and information professionals stand for. I would be lying if I said I spent my time at library school reading up on copyright laws and studying it endlessly. Librarianship appealed to me because of the idea that I could help people get access to knowledge and information. This is still what still excites me about the profession; information and knowledge gives people choices, it empowers them, but it's not just about information in a vacuum, it's the ability to know how to use, analyse and make sense of information, but also to question what else is out there, what information hasn't been found? Knowing how researchers engage with information and use it to underpin their work is really important. And when some information is behind a pay wall or collections are not online, copyright issues can potentially limit how people can use information. This for me is why information literacy is my real passion but, also why copyright issues and specifically copyright literacy, matters as much.

My first professional post was a project which aimed to rationalise the British Library's collection of natural history journals, working in partnership with the Natural History Museum. I interviewed

scientists about what they needed and the impact that reducing the availability of physical collections might have on their work. It followed on well from my doctoral research where I explored how historians used newspaper collections and the impact of digitisation on their work. However when I worked at UCL, on the Access to Core Course Materials project it was the first time I had to consider copyright issues in my professional career. I admitted when I was recruited that I knew little about the topic. However, for me learning about copyright never held any fear, I wanted to work out what was possible. I learnt through this project that getting permission to use materials from rightsholders wasn't as difficult as I first thought, particularly if you were willing to pay. I also learnt there was a lot of material that was already in the public domain so it could be digitised without permission. And then I started to learn about copyright exceptions and licences. For me, learning about copyright was all tied up with learning to be a librarian and developing expertise in an area where I felt I could help others understand their rights.

So copyright is not a topic that you ignore at your peril, it's a really important part of the knowledge you need as a librarian. And I've always strived to make it as accessible and intelligible to others, which is what motivated me to write *Copyright and E-learning: a guide for practitioners* in 2009. Over the years of working in this field I realised there is a lot of fear and uncertainty about copyright and a sense that 'getting it wrong' in the online environment is dangerous and risky. When Chris Morrison and I updated this book last year, it was part of our ongoing mission to spread knowledge about copyright to empower teachers, librarians and learning technologists. Through learning about copyright you realise what is possible.

However, I became curious about why others seemed to avoid copyright. This led me and Chris to first survey and then carry out interviews with librarians to find out more about their professional experiences of copyright. The idea that many colleagues shy away from this topic and are fearful of it was worthy of investigation. We are finding out some pretty interesting things, that go beyond the simple idea that copyright is the law, and getting it wrong might land you in trouble. There seems to be something inherent in copyright that leads many librarians to be ideologically opposed to it. Is this because copyright laws are seen as restrictive, all powerful and largely about protecting the rights of big business, rather than the ordinary library user? We don't know yet, however, I think the view that copyright restricts what you can do with information is why librarians need copyright literacy. In particular they need to be clear about copyright exceptions, as there are a whole series of them that relate specifically to activities librarians are permitted to do, from copying for preservation purposes and making accessible copies, to operating inter-lending services. We have a lot of privileges, and rather like librarians who champion for freedom of speech or who are anti-censorship, librarians need to be interested in copyright for political reasons. We need to ensure we understand and use educational exceptions such as those that allow people to copy for private study and research or to text and data mine. We need to care about copyright if we believe in helping our users get access to information, becoming information literate and helping people to achieve their personal and professional goals is our role.

I recognise that copyright issues can be difficult and librarians sometimes feel personally responsible, however we need shift our focus back onto our underlying mission. It's not us that matter! It's about the communities and the people that we support and how they learn and develop. They need our help navigating the increasingly complex digital information environment. They need to understand the licence agreements they have signed, they need to know when they can copy material from the internet and when it might lead to legal action or negative consequences. Librarians have an important role as copyright educators and champions of freedom, but they do not need to fear copyright, they need to embrace it as part of the wider information literacy initiatives they offer, to support and empower others.

You can find out more about the work Chris and I have been doing from the Copyright Literacy website or follow @UKCopyrightLit on twitter.