

# Access for All

Building bridges to information through services

by Jim Rettig

**A**ccess to information. How often have you used that phrase? What does it mean when you say it? The phrase resembles a Rorschach inkblot test, capable of many different meanings. During recent international conference visits, I have learned how its meaning varies in important ways.

In Mexico, it means radically improving the educational preparation of library staff in the country's public libraries. Federico Hernández Pacheco, general manager of public libraries, reports that only 1% of those employed as librarians in Mexico's 10,485 public libraries hold a certificate in library science and that only two librarians hold an MLS. A collection of books does not a library make. It takes professionally trained staff to animate that collection and develop services that make it accessible.

## Who's in control?

In its 15 years, the annual Crimea Conference, organized by Yakov Shrayberg, director general of the Russian National Public Library for Science and Technology in Moscow, has become an important event for librarians in many of the countries once part of the Soviet Union. During a frank discussion, a Canadian asked a senior librarian in the Russian State Library to assess current access to government information in Russia. We heard that it improved after the collapse of the Soviet Union but in recent years has reverted. It is amazing to think about

the changes middle-aged librarians in Russia have experienced in their careers.

ALA's Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA) and academic libraries of Yunnan Province cosponsored a conference in Kunming, China. After a presentation by CALA's Haiwang Yuan on the ways American academic libraries use 2.0 technologies, one librarian asked, "Who controls the content of the blogs?" The question's assumption implies unmitigated acceptance of government control of information.

This aspect of contemporary Chinese culture was again illustrated dramatically during my visit to Tiananmen Square in Beijing, where a young man quietly told me, "Most Westerners know about Tiananmen Square from the student movement, but most Chinese don't know about that." Not bravery comparable to the anonymous young man who stood before a column of tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989, but nonetheless bravery to say this in Beijing in 2008. Most Chinese don't know about those events because the government has suppressed that information within China.

These examples show that access to information—a simple, yet familiar phrase—can mean appropriate staffing for libraries, consistent availability of government informa-



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tion, or sharing information free of government interference. Most of us take these meanings for granted.

It can take on many other meanings, such as unfiltered internet access, public avail-

ability of government-funded research reports, adequate operating hours, database subscriptions, assistive technologies for the physically challenged, robust interlibrary loan service, English as a second language and adult literacy programs, reference service through multiple communication technologies, collections representing varied points of view, and news media free of government control.

We remove barriers to access to information. We build bridges to information. We help people connect to information that matters in their lives. We develop programs and policies to assure access to information, tailoring them to the needs and cultures of the communities we serve. Through our services we create the meanings, infinite in variety, of access to information. That variety demonstrates the strength of our guiding principles and values. Because we create access for all, we create opportunity for all—opportunity to learn, to grow, and to know. ■

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