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Who's an Info Activist?

What if everyone had access to the sum of human knowledge?

by Anthony Molaro

On a recent Sunday evening I found myself flipping through the cable channels. As I surfed, I landed on the USA Network, which happened to be running a brief blip on its Character Approved Awards, bestowed on characters that "are changing the face of American Culture" and who "surprise and inspire us with fresh ideas."

The focus of this particular message was on Jimmy Wales, cofounder of Wikipedia. I leave the debate over the merits or lack thereof of Wikipedia to others. However, Wales's goal of creating a system that gives access to "the sum of human knowledge" is a noble one that few librarians would dispute.

Activist is defined as "an especially active, vigorous advocate of a cause."

I was surprised to see the cable network describe Wales as an information activist, a person who is "giving the power of knowledge back to the people." Librarians have been doing this for centuries, and few would debate the old adage that Knowledge Is Power.

"Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge," Wales said. He added that he wants Wikipedia to be a "sledgehammer to break down the barriers of censorship, of ignorance, of apathy about the state of the world."

Are we librarians information activists? Just what is an information activist? The *Random House Dictionary* defines information as the "knowledge gained through study, communication, research, instruction, etc." It defines activist as "an especially active, vigorous advocate of a cause." Thus an information activist is a vigorous advocate of knowledge gained through study, communication, research, or instruction.

Another cable network recognized the type of information activist just described above, but that time it was a bona fide librarian. CNN's Heroes for 2008 included a librarian, Ethiopian native Yohannes Gebregeorgis (*AL*, Apr., p. 23). Gebregeorgis, who was working for an American library, was charged with the acquisition of children's literature in foreign languages. He found that no books were written in Amharic, and that no books represented the people or places of Ethiopia, prompting him to write the bilingual children's book *Silly Mammo*. The proceeds from the book were used to fund and create a library in Ethiopia. He also started the Ethiopia Reads program and even opened a library in an extremely poor area in Ethiopia, which provided children with their first safe place for both reading and fun. Gebregeorgis is truly an information activist.

While the USA Network's notion of an information activist as a "fresh idea" is not entirely true, it an inspiring idea. Librarians and the libraries they work in have always valued access to information. We have strived to remove barriers between users and information. But maybe we have let that message, that grand and noble truth, take a back seat. I don't know if we are all information activists or not, but I believe that we should be.

Vigorous advocates

What would the world, and Libraryland, look like if we pursued vigorous advocacy of knowledge gained through study, communication, research, or instruction? How would the world view us differently if we hold this truth to be self-evident, that all persons are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these is free access to the sum of human knowledge so that we may attain Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness? What would the world look like if we succeed in giving every single person access to the sum of human knowledge? How many of the world's problems would be solved by such a movement? How much faster would knowledge grow? How much would poverty and starvation decrease? How many new technological and medical breakthroughs would occur? ▮

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