

# At the intersection of freedom of information legislation and 21st century libraries: A webinar report

By Justin Unrau.

Freedom of Information legislation is an important tool for 21st century citizens and in his hour-long webinar on September 28, 2012, Mark Weiler, said librarians are extremely well-suited to helping citizens make the best use of these tools if we use our skills correctly.

Weiler, PhD and MLIS candidate at the University of Western Ontario, put together this session to highlight essential features of Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation, challenge popular myths about how citizens can use these laws, and show the attendees how librarians can put their skills to work in this area. Weiler's talk, co-sponsored by BCLA's Information Policy Committee and Simon Fraser University's School of Communication, was punctuated with concrete examples from actual FOI cases in Canada and the United States.

Some of the myths Weiler challenged were that Access to Information requests take a long time, or that these methods should be a last resort. He noted that while 120 days to retrieve information from the federal government is slower than obtaining a bestseller from Amazon, this is much better than having to wait a year, or not getting the information at all. There is also nothing in the legislation that forces people to exhaust other avenues of inquiry first.

Where librarians can help with this process takes many forms, which Weiler explored. The key issue boiled down to helping users craft more precise queries. To help citizens, he said, we can think of each government department as a database and word our formal request like a search string. Since

there are actual humans on the other ends of these requests we need to work on precision searches rather than searches with huge recall. Asking for "any and all information on X" is a recipe for a ton of work (and possibly huge fees). Librarians are well-poised to help with these requests by identifying the specific institution with the information, determining what kinds of documents are needed, and setting strict time limits for the query, just like we've been trained to do.

Weiler also encouraged librarians to work on identifying the information needed by their communities that might be made more open without needing FOI requests, a directive being pushed in BC. We could be creating institutional repositories for this kind of essential information instead of leaving it on a government website.

One of the issues that came up in the questions after the formal talk was about the motivation for FOI requests. Weiler argued against a myth that "FOI use is always adversarial." In the questioner's experience, "FOI requests are NEVER benign and almost always motivated by burning need." Weiler responded that curiosity can also drive requests and the most important thing to keep in mind as information professionals is that this is information we have permission to access.

The webinar was recorded and can be accessed at <http://goo.gl/EzKhx>.

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