Foreword

When I was hired for the position of county law library director, the one question I could not find a detailed answer for in the law library literature was “how do I manage a public law library?” After ten years of working in large law firms and another ten years working in academic law libraries, I knew that public law libraries generally and county law libraries specifically were substantially different than my past professional experience. The defining characteristic of county law libraries, indeed, of all public law libraries, is their individuality. Perhaps that was why I was unable to find what I was looking for in the professional literature. Until now, that is.

Laurie Selwyn and Virginia Eldridge’s new book is an important and timely work. It is important because their monograph fills a gap in the professional literature by offering a comprehensive analysis of public law libraries. Timely because public law librarians are engaged in developing innovative ways to provide legal information to the public under institutional circumstances that ultimately may be transformative.

Regardless of their diverse characteristics, public law libraries all were born out of necessity and will continue to exist because they remain necessary. Central to this underlying theme of Public Law Librarianship: Objectives, Challenges, & Solutions, public law libraries are the solution to the abundance of primary and secondary legal resources and research tools that cost more than members of the bench, bar, and interested public can afford to purchase on their own. That was the case during the institutional birthing process in the late-19th and early-20th centuries that evolved into public law libraries as we know them. The same economics exist today.

The acceptance of the modern commercial legal publishing industry as an efficient, albeit expensive distribution channel for reliable legal resources by the legal profession is the basis for the collective response we know as the public law library. The authors provide a succinct review of challenges faced and solutions provided for every operational facet of public law library administration. They do so with a purpose – to provide a much needed historical context for their analysis of the challenges being addressed now by public law librarians.

One objective shared by all public law librarians is providing patrons with access to licensed electronic legal resources. After reviewing the actions of the public law library community to obtain industry acceptance of a licensing model different from the private sector model because public access is fundamental, the authors provide an excellent analysis of matters public law librarians must address in licensing commercial legal search services. Today, electronic legal resources extend beyond database services; law eBooks have arrived. Selwyn and Eldridge offer the first review of law eBook challenges from a public law library perspective that takes into account a commercial business model which may be unsuitable for public law library patrons. To gain industry acceptance of a more appropriate business model, the public law library community may have to proceed in the same manner it did to achieve the progress ultimately obtained for public access to commercial legal search services.
How will we manage public law libraries in the future? As an important contribution to the professional literature, this book is an excellent place to start looking for answers. It demystifies the public law library without neglecting this institution’s most defining characteristic, the many varieties of public law libraries that exist today. Being unique in the law library literature, today’s practitioners and future practitioners will find *Public Law Librarianship: Objectives, Challenges & Solutions* to be indispensable. I just wish the book had been available when I was first hired to serve as a county law library director.

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*Joseph A. Hodnicki* began working in libraries in 1975 as a Library Technical Assistant and started practicing law librarianship in 1980 after attending The University of Chicago Graduate Library School. He has been employed in large law firm libraries, medium size academic law libraries, and is currently the director of the Butler County Law Library, a relatively small public law library located in Hamilton, Ohio. In the early 1990s, he took a hiatus from law librarianship to acquire some first-hand experience in the publishing industry. He served as an index editor for a major legal publisher and worked on repurposing content for distribution to database vendors for a large circulation daily newspaper. In 2004, Mr. Hodnicki co-founded the Law Professor Blogs Network which currently publishes over 30 topical law blogs. Since 2005, he has been an Editor of the Law Librarian Blog, contributing analysis and commentary on law librarianship and the legal publishing industry in the context of individual and institutional consumers. In 2011, Mr. Hodnicki was recognized in the inaugural Fastcase 50 list, “the fifty most interesting, provocative, and courageous leaders in the world of law, scholarship, and legal technology,” for his contributions to the law blogosphere. An occasional speaker at in-house legal publisher meetings and public forums, Mr. Hodnicki’s most recent public speaking event was the 2011 “The Future of Law Libraries: The Future Is Now?” conference hosted by the Harvard Law School Library.