Using the Internet to Report Rare Book and Manuscript Thefts

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The Book of St. Mary and St. Nicholas in Arrinstein. If anyone pilfers it, may he die the death, be boiled in a cauldron, may epilepsy and fever overtake him, may he be broken on the wheel and hanged. Amen.

Formal and informal means now exist for networking nationally to inform libraries, archives, booksellers, and law enforcement personnel regarding rare book and manuscript theft. Networking has been effective in solving a number of cases and recovering stolen material.

The Internet and the many listservs and bulletin boards on it have become especially effective networking tools. For example, EXLIBRIS, a bulletin board with more than 1,000 participating rare books and special collections librarians, has been effective in spreading the word about recent thefts and arrests.

Yet to date, little research has been carried out to understand the user behavior of those who employ the Internet, and only one study (Ladner and Tillman) has focused specifically on academic librarians and their use of the Internet. No study has focused on librarians who might use the Internet to solve cases of rare book and manuscript theft. As the Internet grows and develops and becomes an increasingly important part of the more broadly conceived National Information Infrastructure, there is a need for research to give guidance to this growth and development. McClure, et al. attest to this in The National Research and Education Network (NREN): Research and Policy Perspectives:

The review of this literature [key writings related to the design and implementation of the NREN] indicates that there is a pressing need for empirically based information about the ways in which existing electronic networks are currently used by scientists, engineers, and educators.

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To work towards this need, this article will examine the literature, and it will report findings and conclusions from a study which involved the administration of two surveys that I conducted on use of the Internet by librarians concerned with security of rare materials.

This brief review of a select group of articles and documents on the security of rare books and manuscripts as it pertains to communication in recent years about thefts is not intended to be an exhaustive study of all the literature on library security.

This paper also reports on my research which examines Internet user behavior—particularly the use of e-mail and listservs—by 139 Library Security Officers (henceforth LSOs) in as many academic and independent research libraries in order to obtain opinions and perceptions about using a listserv to report security or theft incidents. By definition, an LSO is a professional librarian appointed by her or his library director to have some responsibility for communicating with the world outside the library about matters of theft and security. I define “use of the Internet” as having access to an Internet account and using it at least once a week for some activity.

The results do not get at the issue of LSO user satisfaction with the Internet, but they do reveal the opinions of LSOs about whether existing listservs and bulletin boards are adequate for reporting incidents of theft, or whether a separate listserv for theft reports should be established on the Internet by the American Library Association (ALA)/Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)/Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) Security Committee (henceforth the RBMS Security Committee).

The broad research questions in this study of LSO Internet user behavior are 1) to what extent do LSOs use the Internet in their work?; if they do, 2) how do LSOs actually use the Internet?; and 3) in what ways could the Internet provide for communicating about rare book and manuscript theft?

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND
Librarians responsible for rare books and manuscripts have had to be concerned with theft ever since there were libraries. The medieval chains dangling from manuscripts and incunabula at the Bodleian Library at Oxford University and elsewhere, while keeping these rare books on their shelves, attest to this simple truth. Where there have been collections of important books, there have also been thieves. Theft occurred in spite of the fact that “excommunication, curses and other pains and penalties were threatened or imposed upon tardy book-borrowers and embezzlers in those olden days” (Jackson, vol. 2, p. 47).

Unfortunately, the late twentieth century has seen its share of book thieves. In fact, as prices for rare books and manuscripts have skyrocketed, so incidents of theft of this sort of material have increased.
Between 1979 and 1986, American libraries reported thefts and missing materials, including: rare books valued at $500,000 from Harvard's zoological library; 400 books worth $6,000 from the University of New Hampshire; $20,000 in rare science books from the DeGolyer collection at the University of Oklahoma; $1.1 million in plates, engravings, maps, books and manuscripts from the University of Georgia Library in two separate cases; $130,000 in rare books and manuscripts from George Washington University; more than $100,000 in incunabula from Boston College; $200,000 in rare documents from the Thomas A. Edison National Historic Site; $25,000 in books from the general collections at Berkeley; $50,000 in rare numismatic books from UCLA—to name the widely reported examples. During these years, the Crerar Library thefts were also discovered, and James Shinn was “flourishing” at most of the major research libraries in the country (the theft at UCLA was attributed to him, for example).³

Since this was written, perhaps the most active single book thief in the twentieth century, Stephen Blumberg, has been arrested, tried, and convicted for federal crimes relating to the theft of nearly 25,000 titles over a twenty-year period from more than 300 U.S. libraries from coast to coast. But unfortunately, the Blumberg case is not an isolated example. Since the arrest of Shinn in the early 1980s, a number of other professional book thieves have come to light. Often they have lived the life of the transient, living out of vehicles, and breaking into libraries and bookstores after hours as they wend their way across the country. There is even some concern among law enforcement agents that several of them know one another and sometimes cooperate and/or exchange favors and spoils.

These distressing facts and developments have not gone unnoticed in the library world. In the early 1980s, RBMS upgraded its Security Committee from ad hoc to standing

with the charge to develop and disseminate appropriate guidelines to secure library collections to serve as a resource for libraries who have experienced a theft, to serve as a liaison with other organizations (especially the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America) whose interests were deterring the theft of library materials and vigorously promoting the proper prosecution of library thieves. (Zeidberg, p. 21)

By 1982, this committee published “Guidelines Regarding Thefts in Libraries,” which called for the appointment of Library Security Officers. The committee's 1988 revision of this document reaffirmed the recommendation. In recent years the RBMS Security Committee has continued its effort to lobby library directors of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), Oberlin Group (private liberal arts
colleges) libraries, and the Independent Research Libraries Association to appoint LSOs. At the time of this study, these groups reported a total of 139 officially appointed LSOs, which represents a substantial increase from the 37 reported ten years ago.

During this same period, Daniel and Katharine Leab developed a database for reporting missing and stolen books called Bookline Alert: Missing Books and Manuscripts (BAM-BAM). This was the first attempt to automate the process of reporting the bibliographic records of missing and stolen rare books and manuscripts. Unfortunately, the database proved cumbersome to use since the Leabs functioned as intermediaries, and the system could not be accessed by others directly. Since its aim was to record the bibliographic records of stolen or lost materials for purposes of identification, it has functioning more as an archive of what disappeared in the 1980s than as a communication tool for the dissemination of warnings and alerts regarding incidents of theft and thieves who might be traveling from one library to another. In fact, presently it exists only in paper format.

As use of the Internet by librarians has expanded in the 1990s, a number of curators and special collections librarians have found it more convenient to post warnings informally on various listservs as incidents of theft have occurred. Generally they describe the crime rather than merely listing materials which have been stolen.

As a consequence of this activity, it occurred to RBMS Security Committee members that the Internet might prove to be an invaluable way for LSOs to communicate with one another. Therefore, in order to have more information about the Internet user behavior of LSOs, I did two surveys in 1993 to assess the feasibility of this notion. These surveys are reported below.

LITERATURE REVIEW—A CALL FOR LIBRARY SECURITY OFFICERS, COMMUNICATION, AND THE REPORTING OF INCIDENTS OF THEFT
The first formal statements for communication to libraries, booksellers, and law enforcement agencies about thefts came in the early 1980s. “Historically libraries and archives tried to ‘hush up’ thefts, or they would simply ignore them for fear of being shunned by donors if the thefts came to light.”

Library directors may have been fearful of reprisals—or worse—from their college or university presidents or governing boards. In 1979 the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America (ABAA) announced to librarians in its “Ethics and Security Resolution” that it would no longer be business as usual:

The Association voices its concern that libraries and others have not consistently been forthcoming in promptly identifying to ABAA and booksellers in general materials missing from collections. . . . It is inequitable for libraries . . . to
expect ABAA members to cooperate fully in apprehending thieves and in returning stolen items to their owners if those libraries . . . take less than all affirmative steps to assist in the apprehending of thieves . . . 

David S. Zeidberg chronicled that event and the subsequent response of the bookselling community and RBMS. John H. Jenkins (who was involved in the ABAA’s Security Committee) and Terry Belanger (with the assistance of William A. Moffett for RBMS; see bibliography under Jenkins) laid out for the first time the measures libraries ought to take to inform booksellers and law enforcement officials of rare book and manuscript theft. It was at this time that BAM-BAM was established.

At about the same time, RBMS established a standing Security Committee, which published the first edition (1982) of “Guidelines for the Security of Rare Book, Manuscript, and Other Special Collections.” This document called for more responsible behavior on the part of librarians and suggested appropriate and ethical methods for responding to a theft.

These early efforts to provide principles or guidelines for dealing with theft were an important focus of the Oberlin Conference on Theft which took place in September 1983. This conference was convened by then Oberlin College director of libraries, William A. Moffett, and Elizabeth Woodburn, president of the ABAA. Sixty participants and observers heard papers on the issues of theft prevention, institutional response, laws and enforcement procedures, ownership, model legislation, and means of communication about theft. While the papers from this conference were never published, they were reported in American Libraries (vol. 14, no. 10, November 1983, pp. 648–50) and College & Research Libraries News (vol. 44, no. 9, October 1983, pp. 362–63).

It was, however, the RBMS Security Committee guidelines published in 1982 which first called for the appointment of security officers in libraries to respond to theft more effectively and expeditiously. The most current revision (1990) calls for a greatly expanded planning role for the LSO.

Later, when the RBMS Security Committee promulgated the more general document entitled “Guidelines Regarding Thefts in Libraries” (1988; revised, 1994), the necessity of appointing an LSO was reaffirmed. Under the heading “Guidelines for what to do before a library theft occurs,” the first point is: “Appoint a senior library staff member as Security Officer who has delegated authority for the library and the institution to act on their behalf, working with the institution’s legal counsel and security force.” This author acknowledged that some institutions may have security officers and stressed the importance of notification when a theft is discovered. I named a number of constituencies which must be informed of the theft: administrators, trustees, staff of the institution, institutional insurers, law enforcement personnel, booksellers and auction houses, BAM-BAM, and
other libraries. And in my article "The Blumberg Case: A Costly Lesson for Librarians," I described an actual case and the positive contribution the communication and notification process played in recovering rare books and manuscripts which, for the Claremont Colleges alone, were valued at more than half a million dollars.\(^7\)

Since 1987, the RBMS Security Committee has maintained a list entitled "Incidents of Book Theft" in order to have some documentation of the amount of theft that continues to occur. This list, currently running to more than twenty pages, is compiled from journal, listserv, and newspaper reports of rare book and manuscript thefts and related crimes. It is revised every six months and is available by inquiry to the committee chair or compiler.

**A STUDY OF LSO INTERNET USER BEHAVIOR**

**Goal.** The goal of this study was to gather enough data about LSO Internet user behavior to make a knowledgeable policy recommendation regarding the establishment of a listserv dedicated to the reporting of incidents of theft.

**Objectives.** To achieve this goal, the following objectives were met: it was determined whether 1) LSOs have access to the Internet, 2) they currently participate in listservs, and 3) they are favorably disposed to the establishment of a security listserv. A comparison and analysis were made of how this disposition related to the librarians' titles or positions and use of e-mail on the Internet, descriptive factors which distinguish subgroups of LSOs. Gathering this kind of descriptive and analytical data is essential to provide the insight required for forming a policy recommendation as stated in the goal.

**Research Questions.** Four important research questions were asked:

1. To what extent do LSOs have access to the Internet?
2. To what extent do LSOs use the Internet to access listservs?
3. To what extent do LSOs have an interest in subscribing to a security listserv?
4. If LSOs have access to the Internet, what is their e-mail user behavior?

**Survey Methodology.** This study conducted in 1993 was based on the collection of data and their analysis from two separate surveys of LSOs.

The first survey (see Appendix A) consisted of administering an instrument of eleven questions that asked specifics regarding title and affiliation; contact addresses and telephone numbers, including e-mail address, if applicable; and brief queries regarding Internet access, listserv use, and disposition toward a listserv devoted to reporting library materials theft. This instrument was mailed in March 1993 to 139 LSOs whose names and addresses had been reported by library directors whose institutions were members of the Association of Research Libraries, Oberlin Group libraries, and the Association of Independent Research Libraries. The instrument was returned to the chair of the RBMS Security Committee. A follow-up to nonrespondent LSOs was mailed in September 1993. LSOs surveyed
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were invited to return their questionnaires by the U.S. Postal Service, fax, or the Internet. A weakness in the methodology may be that some portion of the initial LSO population self-selected out of the survey when faced with responding negatively to the first question of the survey instrument which asked about the use of the Internet. If a negative response was elicited, the respondent was instructed to “stop here.” Some may have taken that quite literally and never returned the questionnaire. This flaw in the design also had the effect of removing the opinions of those without access to the Internet from the pool of respondents.

Most respondents used the U.S. Postal Service to return their questionnaires. After the follow-up, 104 or 74.8% of the LSOs had responded by December 1993. Six weeks after the first survey was mailed, a second was sent by e-mail to a distribution list made up of the 55 LSOs who had responded to the first survey at that point in time, and who had given their e-mail addresses as a part of their response. This second survey instrument (see Appendix B) consisted of twenty multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions inquiring about e-mail user behavior on the Internet. These questions examined only e-mail use and subscription to listservs. They did not examine behavior in relation to FTP or Telneting. The two surveys drew a remarkably good response, and thus seem to represent quite fairly the views of the larger pool of LSOs.

*Findings, First Survey.* The findings are based on responses amounting to 74.8% of the original sample received after one follow-up.

Of the 104 LSOs who responded to the first survey, 89.4% indicated that they used the Internet. The 10.6% who did not were instructed not to answer any further questions. Therefore, of the Internet user respondents, 78.5% indicated that they currently read at least one listserv or electronic bulletin board, and they named a total of 55 different listservs. There was, of course, some overlap: 75.3% of the respondents who read listservs subscribe to at least one of these six: EXLIBRIS (41%); LIBADMIN (16.4%); ARCHIVES (15.1%); COLLDEV and PACSL (12.3%); and CONSDIST LIST (8.2%) (see table 1).

When LSOs were asked if they would subscribe to a listserv devoted to reporting library materials theft, 64.4% said “Yes”; 25.4% said “Maybe”; 6.8% said “No”; and 3.4% said “Don’t know.” When asked for comments regarding their response to the question asking about interest in subscription to a library materials theft listserv, a number stressed the need for a well-defined and focused list. Only one respondent was concerned about confidentiality, and only one was concerned about already spending too much time on one listserv.

*Findings, Second Survey.* These findings are based on responses amounting to 63.3% of the original sample who were sent the second survey.

It was verified that all the respondents to the second survey use the Internet since the survey was administered over the Internet and could be responded to only by receiving it in that manner. Fifty-six people were sent the questionnaire in this
manner, but seven messages bounced back to the sender and were never delivered. Therefore, there were 49 participants in the sample who received the second survey. The overall view of these respondents was that there were great advantages to using e-mail as a vehicle for disseminating information. The most often cited advantages were its timeliness, ease of use, low cost, and efficiency. The disadvantages they identified were that there was too much “junk mail” out there, reading all one’s e-mail was time-consuming, and (according to one respondent) there was a lack of human contact.
Findings, Analysis. A chi square analysis of the data from the two surveys reveals the following: A cross-tabulation in a contingency table format of LSOs' types of library positions (of which 13.7% were directors/deans, 20% were assistant/associate directors or assistant/associate university librarians, 26.3% were department heads, and 40% held professional library positions) with disposition toward a theft listserv shows LSOs in positions of assistant/associate director or assistant/associate university librarian wished to have a theft listserv the most (73.7% of the time). However, not a single department head wished not to have a listserv, and "No's" in the other categories were lower than 13.2% (see table 2). Cross-tabulation of time spent using e-mail each day with disposition toward a theft listserv shows that 75% of LSOs who use e-mail more than one hour per day wish to have a theft listserv. Those who use e-mail between 30–60 minutes per day responded "Yes" to a theft listserv 46.7% of the time, and those who use e-mail less than 30 minutes a day responded "Yes" 45.5% of the time.

Conclusions. The rate of use of the Internet by LSOs is high. There are a few who do not have access to the Internet now, but that figure is likely to decline over time as an increasing number of libraries connect to local area networks with access to the Internet.

LSOs use listservs on the Internet at almost as high a rate as they use the Internet. One may conclude that if an LSO is using the Internet, she or he usually subscribes to at least one listserv. However, among LSOs there is no consensus as to which listserv one should subscribe to. LSOs hold a wide variety of positions in university, college, and independent research libraries. They are library directors,

| TABLE 2 |
|------------------|----------|----------|-------------------|----------|
|                  | Prof. Lib. | Dept. head | Asst./Assoc. Dir. | Director/|
| Position/Title   | Position  | N=25      | Asst./Assoc. UL  | Dean/UL |
| N=38             |           |           |                   |         |
| Yes              | 55.2%     | 60.0%     | 73.7%             | 53.8%    |
| Maybe/Don’t know | 31.6%     | 40.0%     | 15.8%             | 38.5%    |
| No               | 13.2%     | 0.0%      | 10.5%             | 7.7%     |
|                  | 100.0%    | 100.0%    | 100.0%            | 100.0%   |
administrators, managers, and professional librarians with specializations. As a group they subscribe to a large number and wide range of special interest library listservs. Unfortunately, for those who would prefer an existing listserv for the report of incidents of theft, there is little overlap in their subscriptions. At most, only about 40% of all LSOs currently subscribe to a single listserv, EXLIBRIS, a list that is of interest primarily to rare books and manuscripts librarians, curators, heads of special collections, booksellers, and some scholars. Currently, in order to reach at least three quarters of the LSOs using listservs, postings would have to be placed on at least six listservs.

A solid majority of LSOs (54.8%) would like to see established a listserv specializing in reporting incidents of theft. When those who are not sure are added to the majority, the group reached more than 90%. This holds true for LSOs at all positions/levels in their library organizations. Fewer than 10% of the LSOs who responded to the first survey did not want to see a theft listserv established.

Examination of the Internet user behavior of those LSOs who currently use the Internet reveals that a listserv would be a good way to circulate information and to network about incidents of theft. LSOs read their e-mail daily, usually doing so when they first arrive at work. This behavior would facilitate getting the word out about a theft immediately. Since LSOs are accustomed to checking their e-mail regularly, announcements would be more likely to be read. The Internet is reliable in the experience of LSOs, and it would provide a fast, efficient, and economical means of communication. Institutions would save time and money if LSOs reported incidents of theft to the library community on an LSO listserv.

Policy Recommendations. On the basis of the research findings presented here, I would like to make the following recommendations:

1. A listserv to report incidents of theft ought to be established for LSOs.
2. This listserv must be focused. It ought to carry postings only about thefts or incidents of vandalism; it should not be a missing-books database or a general discussion group about library security.
3. The RBMS Security Committee, as the only ALA committee charged "to serve as a liaison between RBMS and the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America (ABAA), the Society of American Archivists (SAA) (working as appropriate through the SAA/ALA Joint Committee), and with related organizations with a concern for the theft of books and manuscripts,"8 ought to facilitate the establishment of just such a listserv for the reporting of incidents of theft.9
4. Since the use of e-mail saves time and money and reduces the use of U.S. mail and telephoning, it behooves academic administrators of university, college, and research libraries to support with significant resources the use of e-mail and the Internet by their library staffs.

In light of the perpetual problem of theft in libraries and the concomitant desire of victims to retrieve their stolen property, a listserv dedicated to reporting these
losses is logical and practicable. The technology represented by the Internet offers remarkably quick, inexpensive, and widespread reporting. And this technology is available to most involved in these losses: the libraries, booksellers, collectors, law enforcement agencies, and the general public—as my surveys have suggested. We hope to neutralize the sophistication and ruthlessness of criminals by the increasing use of sophisticated technologies. The Internet is one of our solutions.

APPENDIX A: LIBRARY SECURITY OFFICER LISTSERV QUESTIONNAIRE

Name:
Title:
Institution:
Address:
Telephone:
Fax:
E-mail:

1. Do you use the Internet?
   Yes     No
   If “No” stop here.

2. Do you currently read a listserv(s) or electronic bulletin board(s)?
   Yes     No

3. If you answered “Yes” to question two, please list the listservs or electronic bulletin boards you currently read regularly:

4. Would you subscribe to a listserv devoted to reporting library materials theft?
   Yes     No     Don’t know     Maybe
   If your answer is “No,” “Don’t know,” or “Maybe,” please explain:

APPENDIX B: LIBRARY SECURITY OFFICER E-MAIL USE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you check your e-mail messages as soon as you come into the library?
   rarely/never    sometimes    about 50% of time    usually
   always or almost always

2. On the average, how often do you personally use e-mail each day?
   (Record approximate number of times.)

3. Approximately how much time do you spend using e-mail each day?
   (Record approximate amount of time.)

4. Of your total, work-related communication, approximately what percentage is external? (Record percentage.)
5. Indicate what percentage of your external, work-related communication is by
   a. writing?
   b. phone?
   c. e-mail?

6. Do you send e-mail to people whom you did not telephone or write to before e-mail?
   Yes  No  Not sure

7. Do you get e-mail from people who did not telephone or write to you before e-mail?
   Yes  No  Not sure

8. Do you get too many unnecessary messages (junk mail)?
   Yes  No  Not sure

9. Do you get too many messages in general (overload)?
   Yes  No  Not sure

10. Have you changed your working habits since starting to use e-mail?
    Yes  No  Not sure
    If so, in what ways? (Describe below.)

11. What have been the effects of e-mail on the following:
    | Significantly reduced | Somewhat reduced | No change | Increased reduced |
    |-----------------------|------------------|-----------|-------------------|
    Number of phone calls you make?
    Number of phone calls you receive?
    Amount of paper you produce?
    Amount of paper you receive?

12. Do you think e-mail is appropriate for messages longer than two screens?
    Yes  No  Not sure  Sometimes

13. Approximately what percentage of e-mail do you print?

14. Do you file the copies you print?
    Always  Almost always  Sometimes  Never/Rarely
15. Which one of the following tasks do you do most often on e-mail?
Send messages  Read messages  Reply to messages

16. How reliable does the Internet seem to you?
Very unreliable  Unreliable  Reliable  Very reliable  Not sure

17. At this point in time, how difficult would it be for you to do without e-mail?
Very difficult  Difficult  Easy  Very easy  Not sure

18. How do you feel about the time/effort involved vs. benefits to you of using e-mail?
Time/effort exceed benefits  Time/effort equal to benefits
Benefits exceed time/effort  Not certain

19. What are the advantages/disadvantages (if any) of e-mail for you?

20. Do you have any further comments? (Please record below.)

NOTES
9. During the summer and fall of 1994, the RBMS Security Committee tested and established LSOList, a listserv for LSOs. This listserv is to report incidents of theft and is open only to LSOs appointed officially by academic and research library directors.

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