

Crossroads of a profession

Reflections of a yearlong discussion about electronic information

by W. Lee Hisle

It has been my honor and privilege to represent the ACRL this year as president. I traveled to seven states and talked about the values of librarianship in the electronic information age: what our values are, how they are being challenged, and how we librarians must defend them.

The values of service, promotion of education, fair-use, preservation of the cultural record, literacy, and reading are critical to the profession as it continues its historical mission to support our democratic society. As I developed my talk, and as I thought about the topic through the year, I was struck by a paradox—that the arguably most democratic form of information access (the Internet and its Web) is in conflict with essential values of an institution (the library), which derives much of its meaning and power from the support of democratic society.

The bedrock of our profession is intellectual freedom. That value, coupled with those supporting librarian neutrality and diversity of opinion (expressed through collection development policies), form the core of the profession. These historic values are in conflict today as the Web challenges the traditional conception of a “collection.” Furthermore, by opening the library doors to any and all materials available on the Web, traditional notions of librarian neutrality and even of intellectual freedom must be reevaluated.

Show some responsibility

The late John Swan once wrote that librarians are committed to access, but not to truth. We don't take responsibility for content or we'd like not to. Our profession as embodied by the ALA, is considering adopting a statement, prepared by the 21st Century Intellectual Freedom Statement Committee, “Libraries: An American Value,” that says, “We support the rights of all individuals, including children and young adults, [emphasis added] to determine which resources are appropriate and necessary for themselves.”¹

As if that dodge from responsibility weren't enough, we follow with: “We respect the responsibility of all parents to guide their own children's use of the library and its resources and services.” It's as if our profession were living in an idealized world where pornography and violent materials didn't exist and, moreover, where parents actually have the time, and then use that time to guide their children's use of libraries.

What is most disconcerting about these statements, and other ALA-adopted positions, is their proposed lack of librarian responsibility for what is appropriate for children. It's curious that we've always limited our collections, or filtered them if you will, through an active “non-selection” process. If we didn't buy an item, or accept it as a gift, the material didn't become part of the collection. We took responsibility for our patrons through

About the author

W. Lee Hisle is the immediate past-president of ACRL and the associate vice president for Learning Resource Services at Austin Community College; e-mail: hisle@austin.cc.tx.us

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collection development—though we defended our intellectual freedom principles saying we presented information on all sides of an issue. Now, if we follow our association's edicts, providing the Web and access to its information, we are acting contrary to our history and, I fear, in a manner untenable in our society.

Since we don't "collect" the Web, we don't have the opportunity to select only those materials in support of our population and institutions. Our collection development policies become moot in the face of universal access to Web information: if information is on the Web, we're expected to provide access to it in our libraries, regardless of appropriateness to our collection. Ordinarily, we wouldn't buy, or even accept as gifts, the advertising, the self-promoting, the vanity press, the sex and violence, and the games that constitute a healthy portion of the Web. (Unless, of course, our collection development policy supported the acquisition of such materials.)

As Carla Stoffle and Ann Symons wrote in a recent *American Libraries* article, the Web "makes the world available with no need to make selections, no traditional means for evaluating quality, veracity, or applicability. . . ."2 We are avoiding the information mediation duty historic to our profession, avoiding the difficult (and perhaps impossible) job of actually limiting access only to those materials on the Web that are in support of our institutions. Why should we be surprised when politicians (e.g., Sen. John McCain's [R-Arizona] filtering bill) attempt to legislate us into action?

Children must be protected

For adults, the Web is great. It's wild and woolly and unfettered by conventional information publishing restrictions. Why? Because adults can be taught, or they have learned, the critical thinking skills necessary to divide the trash from the treasure. Adults have the ability, or at least they should have, to distinguish quality information. And trash is okay for adults, too. The American experience has always in-

cluded sex and violence and rampant commercialism, and the Web is no exception. In most academic libraries, I think completely open access to the Web is required.

But for children, we should have a different standard. The American experience has long included protections for children, e.g., movie and TV ratings, zoning restrictions for adult-oriented businesses (including liquor stores), display prohibitions for skin magazines, etc. As the eminent child psychiatrist Robert Coles wrote in the *New York Times* last fall, "We as a society must continue to make distinctions between what is and is not appropriate for children, and we must keep putting up barriers in the way of the inappropriate on the Internet as well as on television and in the movies."³

We librarians will eventually pay a price for abdicating responsibility for the impact of content on our patrons, specifically our children. We, I fear, will be seen as ever more libertarian and elitist and will be marginalized by politicians. Our positions on other topics important to the profession—the critical fight over fair-use in electronic information, for example—may be disregarded due to our unreasonable position on Web access.

It's curious to be called a "conservative" librarian in Illinois and a libertine by my own staff. But it points out the gray area in which we are operating, the fine lines we are negotiating. I hope my theme this year, the speeches, and the guest editorials have challenged you to think about the values of librarianship in your personal context.

I never expected answers this year; I hoped for discourse and debate and reasoned, if impassioned, analysis. Librarians in this electronic age must question and resolve their personal beliefs to be effective leaders of an institution critical to democracy—libraries.

Notes

1. "Libraries: An American Value," prepared by the 21st Century Intellectual Freedom Statement Committee and available at <http://www.ala.org/alaorg/pe/statement.html>.

2. Carla J. Stoffle and Ann K. Symons, "When Values Conflict." *American Libraries* 29:5 (May 1998): 56–58.

3. Robert Coles, "Safety Lessons for the Internet," *New York Times*, 11 October 1997, sec. A. ■

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