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From the President

Intellectual Freedom: Liberties and Liabilities

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Librarians in Oregon have had numerous opportunities over the years to immerse themselves in intellectual freedom issues. We have experienced the common challenges to individual titles and the general complaints that our library collections lack balance and a spiritual perspective. In addition to these typical situations, Oregon librarians have been thrust into the political arena on issues that affect the public's freedom to read and the library's role to provide access to information. In the past two general elections, we have been faced with ballot measures that would have shackled our role as information providers. During the last few legislative sessions, we have witnessed the introduction of several bills and resolutions clouding the principles of intellectual freedom and first amendment rights. To make matters more complex, new concerns surrounding easy access to Internet resources have escalated the debate over censorship and obscenity. It should be no surprise that our own profession, a long-time champion of intellectual freedom principles, is showing signs of stress and confusion.

Given this set of conditions, it seemed logical to focus on intellectual freedom as this year's presidential theme. As an organization, we have advanced our level of interest, commitment, and understanding of the issues. But the dialog needs to continue. As professionals in the field of information, we must be prepared to fulfill our responsibilities as information providers and to cope with the inevitable conflicts.

Several steps can be taken to make ourselves and our organization stronger and better prepared. First, intellectual freedom issues are everyone's concern. Academic librarians, long sheltered from the usual complaints from parents, must get educated and involved. In the past few years, higher education has become more vulnerable to public scrutiny. Increased accountability is a good thing, but excessive oversight can have its costs. Academic librarians can learn a great deal from their public library colleagues, and greater support from all sectors of the library community will only strengthen our position on intellectual freedom principles.

Second, reacquaint yourself with the *Library Bill of Rights* and its interpretations. Know what "free access to libraries for minors" means. Read the corollary on access to electronic information, and familiarize yourself on the debatable points within that recent document. The policies of ALA are based on, and consistent with, federal and state constitutional protections as interpreted by the judiciary. And while that fact should provide us with a high comfort level when we refuse to limit access based on age, it will not necessarily help us reach a better understanding with concerned parents who expect us to act *in loco parentis*.

Third, understand the implications of the new telecommunications act and its controversial Exon amendment. Make an attempt to understand the terminology. What do people mean when they use the terms "indecenty," "harmful to minors," "obscenity," and "pornography." There is currently a great deal of fear and uncertainty about the new law and some of the other pieces of legislation that would bear down on Internet providers. Spokespersons for the ACLU have stated that these legislative efforts put "people like teachers and librarians in a situation where they may have to choose not to use the Web at all or to face criminal prosecution." We must understand the potential liabilities, investigate acceptable use policies, talk to our legal advisors, read the cases involving sexual harassment and the Internet, and sponsor workshops to help educate our staffs.

Finally, we need to listen to the opposition. We will never have a full understanding of our own position until we hear the opposing point of view. This is why intellectual freedom is so important to everyone. What happened at the Family Friendly conference in Cincinnati? What are the points of contention within our own ranks? Are there groups in your community or on your college campus that feel disenfranchised by your library's collection? Can their appreciation be raised by building the collection in new areas, rather than limiting access to materials that are of interest to others?

By focusing on intellectual freedom this year, I hope OIA will be better prepared to face the future challenges. One aspect of this issue is certain: The conflict will always be with us. It is not a crusade that will be won and put to rest.

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"The layman's constitutional view is that what he likes is constitutional and that which he doesn't like is unconstitutional."

—Hugo L. Black