

8.

Paradigmatic shifts in the fields of knowledge and information have left us with little to call our own. We are seduced and abandoned in a sea of data with no shore.

9.

The media image of the librarian is a travesty. The real situation is ten times worse. We must exorcise those who wish to see more of the shame as we leave the 20th century.

10.

We must recruit those who have no investment in things as they are, the future will be for those who will create change without loving it; those who perceive the joy of creation behind every destruction.

11.

In the field of the cultural we live in a lie of autonomy. Publishing is an area as sullied as any other in a world dictated by the commodity and exchange-value. The file of information is a commodity like anything else, a can of beans on the supermarket/library shelf. The library is now a shopping mall full of boring, aimless academics.

12.

We must determine new relationships for ourselves in order to give the greatest gift of all, the gift of liberation from the past for a new situation really worth living.

Movement for an Avant-garde Librarianship, London, 23/1/93

READER'S FORUM

THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION NEEDS A PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

by David Williams

Library Cutbacks

How effectively does ALA represent the interests of libraries, librarians, and the publics we are supposed to serve? As state and local governments are wracked by fiscal crises, essential library services — whether public, school-related, or research — continue to be slashed across the U.S., along with other vital human services. Aside from engaging in some polite forms of "pin-stripe lobbying", where is our professional association when local librarians and communities attempt to mobilize against catastrophic budget cuts? When the Chicago Public Library Advocates — a broad coalition of citizens groups and community-based organizations — began to mobilize against severe city library budget cuts early in 1993, ALA's Executive Director didn't even bother to acknowledge an appeal by this coalition for ALA support in the city of our professional association's headquarters! Is ALA's failure to effectively fight such cuts that surprising in a professional association dominated by the same kind of administrative elites which govern other American institutions — especially the kind who take their cues from the big corporate interests responsible for dismantling human services and social programs? Is it also not surprising, therefore, that there is no serious ALA effort to position the library as a key institution within a broader progressive economic and political agenda at the local, state, and national level, through grassroots coalition-building *against the elites*? Instead, beneath a lot of ALA "feel-good" sloganeering about libraries, do we not find a tacit complicity with the fiscal constraints and institutional agendas of the dominant corporate-political elites, and hence an inability to effectively mobilize either librarians or publics at the grassroots?

New Information Technologies and Privatization

There is much hoopla, too, about the new information technologies — such as the emerging “information superhighway” — but little critical discussion about possible negative implications of corporate and private control over the origination, selection, formatting, and dissemination of vast amounts of information concerning all aspects of our lives as workers, consumers, and citizens. Are librarians to become mere appendages to corporate-controlled databases that automatically dispense pre-packaged “data” within an increasingly privatized information network — in a society where a critically informed citizenry becomes a fading democratic ideal? While conference after conference pays lip service to these issues, *the real ALA agenda* is being carried out in the huge exhibit halls and corporate hospitality suites where the big equipment vendors, software peddlers and publishing conglomerates are taking maximum advantage of ALA willingness to serve as a corporate sales promotion agency! Simultaneously, many ALA members find their committee time used up in an incredible labyrinth of organizational protocol and/or “information science” minutiae, while the truly urgent issues confronting “the profession” are glossed over or given a Pollyannish spin by our leadership. Librarians need to formulate a critical approach to the new information technologies which enhance our role as facilitators of public access to a wide range of information resources and different points of view on all issues.

ALA Structure and Governance

Many librarians feel alienated by the bureaucratism, pomposity and cliquishness of ALA. However, the problems of ALA are not a consequence of its size along, but of the fact that ALA's politics are a reflection of corporate and political agendas which do not have the welfare of libraries, library-users, or most librarians at heart! In essence, ALA as it is now constituted represents the narrow interests of big corporations feeding off the library and information field, and of library administrators and academics who are allied with them. Despite the formality of elections, leadership in the ALA is mostly from the top-down, with Association notables elected and re-elected by virtue of “name-recognition,” the length of their resumes, and— most importantly — their willingness to be pliant “team-players” within the pro-

fessional pecking-order. Control over ALA finances, publishing, and other organizational levers enable the reigning cliques to promote their particular candidates and agendas. Likewise, control over power of appointment to numerous committees enable them to co-opt preferred candidates to positions of responsibility and to punish dissenters. While ALA presidents and committee chairs come and go with ritual monotony, the professional power elite of the ALA goes on doing *business as usual* while libraries are being chopped to pieces and otherwise degraded at every level of this society!

Freedom of Information and Expression

While the ALA professes support for freedom of information and expression, claims to oppose censorship, and even maintains an Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF), its actual practice falls far short of its rhetoric. OIF will participate in the usual sorts of censorship cases where books are removed from local library shelves, etc., but is unwilling to move beyond an extremely narrow interpretation of freedom of information and expression in many other instances. For example, the current Daley administration in Chicago recently dismantled the Municipal Reference Library (MRL) at City Hall — which had served as a vital resource for urban researchers, community organizations and others seeking information on how their city government operates — for a mere saving of \$450,000 out of a city budget of hundreds of millions. Recognizing that the motive for eliminating the MRL was political and not fiscal, many of these community organizations subsequently mobilized through the Chicago Public Library Advocates and raised the dismantling of the MRL as an *important freedom of information issue*. The coalition held a rally at City Hall on ALA's National Freedom of Information Day (March 16) and asked OIF's (and ALA's) support in their fight to restore MRL — only to receive no ALA response whatsoever! In another recent example, when documentation was provided to OIF and the Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC) on the way in which steep room rental fees at Chicago's new Harold Washington Library discriminate against community organizations which can't pay a lot for public meeting space, neither OIF or IFC deemed such restrictions on freedom of access worth any consideration. Nor do they find it dis-

turbing that ALA lacks any clear guidelines in support of the right of librarians to speak out on the job, or to use meeting space for professional discussions within the very institutions where we work!

ALA had adopted Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as its standard for supporting freedom of information and expression worldwide, and has passed numerous resolutions directed at regimes which engage in censorship and other human rights violations. Yet the ALA leadership has fought hard against any efforts to criticize stringent censorship and other human rights violations practiced by the State of Israel both within the Occupied West Bank and Gaza and in pre-1967 Israel itself. When the Social Responsibilities Round Table's International Human Rights Task Force presented this issue to the ALA beginning in 1990, OIF/IFC refused to even discuss the matter, although OIF's Director had been instrumental in bringing pressure to rescind a very mild ALA resolution on this issue in 1984-85, and was undoubtedly involved in the recent effort which resulted in the revocation of a much stronger resolution passed on Israeli censorship at the 1992 ALA convention. Such actions of the OIF/IFC on crucial issues of freedom of information and expression demand a major reshaping of ALA's policies in these areas and a drastic restructuring of the OIF/IFC.

What Kind of a Professional Association Do We Need?

It's time to send a message — for a change in the ALA — for a professional association which:

- energetically fights to defend libraries against ravaging cut-backs and trends toward privatization of information services,
- consistently defends intellectual freedom and democratic rights inside and outside the library and in the ALA
- critically examines the implications of new information technologies and strives for the democratization of and broad public access to such information
- represents the interests of the majority of working librarians and support staffs, rather than administrative elites

- formulates a professional agenda which recognizes our role within the larger concerns of the nation and communities we serve, and is part of a progressive political and economic agenda at local, state, and national levels.

The editors of PL encourage readers to respond to the issues raised in this discussion piece. Send replies to: Editors, Progressive Librarian, c/o Empire State College, School of Labor Studies Library, 330 W. 42nd St., NY NY 10036.