

Notes from the Front Line at San Francisco Public Library — Melissa Reilly

The following 4 items are excerpts from memos, letters, and e-mails from Melissa Riley, a librarian at San Francisco Public Library and a PLG activist, during the Dowlin-induced crisis there. See American Libraries August 1996 and Library Journal August 1, 1996 for "neutral" stories on SFPL. For better coverage, see the San Francisco Bay Guardian issues on January 29, 1997, January 23, 1997, August 28, 1996, July 6, 1996, and, of course, Nicholson Baker's October 14, 1996 New Yorker article. Ken Dowlin has resigned as City Librarian — Eds.

I. Libraries serve long term individual and collective needs and create equality by enabling us to share knowledge as a public good, essential to our democracy in redressing the inequities of the information marketplace. [K]nowledge — including old books — is available for those willing to share. The pay-per-view mode — impossible for libraries to keep up with — obliterates that kind of sharing and tends to narrow access to current popular information. We need large and vibrant public spaces for free access to knowledge just as much as we need national wilderness [areas] and parks.... The urgent question is not just the social change we might gain from providing free access to the Internet for schools and libraries, but the existing equality we will definitely lose if we don't. We need not only to forge ahead into a new information wilderness, we need also to protect our commons of knowledge: public libraries. (from an unpublished letter to the editor, *New York Times*, October 1996)

II. We tend to think that since electrons are free the electronic library will be cheap to run. What the electronic library does is not cheap. It can do much more of some functions...more quickly than older methods, but it requires more back room staff, more frontline help, and more hidden overhead than SFPL has calculated. We cannot abandon most of our old services. New forms of access merely supplement and do not supplant most of the new ones.

If nearly half the amount of your book budget is dedicated to telecom costs, not to mention the cost of the databases or computer staff to support them, ... it can become a case of high-tech versus books. Something has got to give, and it did. We have not bought new books for months now. What many of us are trying to

say is that there should be no dichotomy between the books and computers. New technologies should overlap the old and they should be mutually enhancing. It is only when you don't really examine the long term costs that the technology and other unexamined expenses will squeeze out the book budget, as is apparently happening now.

Comparing the costs and benefits of forms of access and the actual content which patrons are able to get...requires a complex analysis of a shifting system. Suffice it to say that the vast majority of people, kids included, will not get exactly what they need without the help of a well-trained librarian, whether it's in a book or cyberspace....Let's give up the defense that the library is popular [T]here are...deeper measures of the worth of a library than how many people walk through the door. There is also, so far as I have heard, no reason to think that we are serving more working class children, adults, or teenagers than before, and some reason to think we are serving fewer kids from the neighborhood of the Main [SFPL Library] than before. (from a January 28, 1997 memo to the SFPL Library Commissioners)

III. I think, from reading some of Mr. Dowlin's early writings, that the theory the library has been operating under was half predicated on the idea that tax money would dry up and that the library would have to find other funding sources - including fees for service to businesses and the public, donations from the Foundation, and also upfront payments from other city agencies and non-profits....Fees for library service do not accord with our professional ethics, and Intellectual Freedom advocates actively oppose them. Foundation funding is problematic when it may appear to be influencing the direction of the library.... In the face of numerous new and expanded roles, we have to make sure that the important functions ONLY the Library can perform...do not continue to be shunted aside because we are doing too many new things....(from a January 25, 1997 memo to Margie O'Driscoll, Executive Director of Friends of the Library)

IV. The story about San Francisco Public Library (January 26, 1997, *New York Times*) buys into the dichotomy the resigning City Librarian promotes between books and computers, traditionalists and technologists, elite and mainstream. This polarization misrepresents library progressives, who are more interested in integrating new and old than with discarding either. [S]ince when is it undemocratic to oppose the unconsidered trashing of hundreds of thousands of books? For years the City Librarian envisioned closing a large number of SFPL's well-loved 26 branches. The people fought like hell to keep them all open....

For a while it was fashionable even among academic libraries to imagine we would ultimately have to weed most older books simply to make room for the new....It is often "old" and currently "unpopular" books that the public particularly relies on large, regional, publicly-supported libraries to keep. No one else does it for them. "Just in time" delivery of such books may require them to sit quietly on shelves, without a date for many years. Otherwise, there may be no copies extant in the commons of knowledge when the desirous patron suddenly comes to call....[T]he top leaders [of SFPL] did not recognize the collection to be a whole — and did not focus on making room for existing collections, the consequence of a vision which explicitly states that supplying "information" is now a more important role for the library than supplying books or even being a regular old library: the people's university....

Blinded by visions of techno-rapture, leaders from Clinton and Gore on down encourage the dwindling of our common heritage by holding out wires to the Net as a cheap educational and economic panacea. Library progressives know what it takes to acquire the many forms of truth. We can see that electronically-induced blindness to knowledge is a form of censorship, a suppression of the body of knowledge a real library constitutes.

Electronic access to text, plus librarians and books, can make small branches very cost effective. Most people won't use libraries unless, like parks, they are in easy reach. [B]ringing cyberspace to libraries near people...could turn have-nots into the info rich. But failing to reserve enough money, space, and staff to buy, house, preserve, catalog, shelve, and find books while the phone bill runs up toward \$1 million attacks the heart of the library....With such imbalances ...and other practices like the institution of fees-for-service, [we are] neglect[ing] the SFPL mission "Free and Equal Access." [This is what] brought library workers to a recent vote of no confidence in Mr. Dowlin. Eighty eight percent of the 600 voters indicated their disappointment with a library that's deemed "attractive" but can't deliver. We now seek a great librarian to help us restore a great library. (unpublished letters to the editor, *New York Times*, January 1997)

Libraries Losing Their Reason: Statement from French librarians, translated and introduced by Jack Kessler, editor of FYI France

FYI France: If you think "information wants to be free"... by Jack Kessler

The Front National — a right-wing extremist party which advocates anti-immigration policies, among other disturbing things — recently won mayoral races in four southern towns in France: Marignane, Orange, Toulon and Vitrolles. Shortly thereafter, left-wing publications, such as *Libération*, began disappearing from those towns' library shelves.

There has been a national outcry in France. A national "loi des bibliotheques" is under consideration — central government versus local, Paris versus the provinces, "Paris et le désert..." — and the debates online and off have been protracted and bitter. But the problem seems only to be growing worse.

What follows is an open letter, just published online (April 10, to the French librarians' BIBLIO-FR conference) apparently by a group of librarians at the Bibliothèque Municipale de Strasbourg — a famous library in France, with a magnificent collection and a long and distinguished history of coping with political threats and chaos — protesting against these Front National developments.

France is in some danger nowadays: persistent 12+% unemployment, major national strikes in all sectors — hospital interns, bus services, public employees, airline personnel (no this is not "the usual", it is worse) — the European Unity that isn't, the Russians, Algeria and Bosnia, and now this growing Front National cancer. Your average French citizen is like any other — basically wants a quiet life, but also has a temper — and France is beginning to rock back and forth politically, from reaction to reaction between the various extremes. Those who have said "it couldn't ever happen in France" have been wrong before.

Everyone ought to read what these Strasbourg librarians have to say here — brave, in their context as public employees and individuals and French and European citizens — and consider how much we all take for granted when we