

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 (unpublished letters to the editor, *New York Times*, January 1997)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

say that "information wants to be free". Countries which enjoy such freedoms are exceptions, not the rule: Internet developers should remember this, and they usually forget it. Freedom has to be purchased and maintained, sometimes at a high price, and it seems that the price may be climbing now in France.

Note that the signatures appear at the beginning – they want you to know – signing things can be a dangerous practice in politics in Europe, and in most countries outside North America and one or two other places.

And that phrase, "une ville du Front National"... one tries to imagine this sort of language said of a "Labour" city by a "Tory", in the UK, or of a Republican town by a "Democrat", in the US. Even making liberal allowance for Gallic emotion and over-statement – and remember that these appear to be responsible professional librarians of a respected institution speaking here, and not some wild-eyed political crazies – things seem to be getting bad in France.

Is there any reason to think – to assume – that the same might not happen elsewhere? It seems myopic, self-delusional, even arrogant, simply to assume that library freedoms or any other sort of information - related liberties somehow mystically will be guaranteed anywhere, and yet much of what the Internet so far is about blandly makes this assumption.

The next time someone tells me that "information wants to be free", I will have them read this.

Jack Kessler, kessler@well.sf.ca.us

"On the occasion of a meeting of the Front National held at Strasbourg at the end of March, 1997..."

"We ask that you take the time to read the text which follows. It describes not a fantasy but something which actually takes place when the City Halls of the Front National put their mark on the Bibliothe`ques Municipales.

It presents one of the reasons why we feel we must express publicly, notably to the users of our libraries, our irreducible opposition to all that the Front National represents, to its ideas and to its political practices, and our solidarity with our colleagues of the bibliotheques municipales of Marignane, Orange, Toulon and Vitrolles.

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— members of the staff of the Bibliothe`que Municipale de Strasbourg, acting in their personal capacities.

First question:

What to do when certain elected officials put pressure on the library, intruding

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First question:

What to do when certain elected officials put pressure on the library, intruding

on its normal activities? This is the same question posed as when we ask:

What to do when certain elected officials of the Front National put pressure on the library, intruding on its normal activities?

But this little nuance makes a difference.

Pressures, interference, resorts to force, distractions, orders, obligations and responsibilities: we, as librarians, know that these things exist – we all have dealt with them in our professional lives.

The difference is the work of the Front National.

Since June 1995, over the course of months, of weeks, of days (when the interference became daily), the situation deteriorated so badly at the Bibliotheque d'Orange, with so much implied violence, contempt and ignorance, that it would be best to admit that the basic principles of operation – good sense, experience, know-how – professionalism, in short – could not continue to function.

With these politicians, there is no dialog. It is neither possible, nor desirable. There is no dialog, no exchange, no listening, no respect. Their attitude, their managerial approach, administratively and personally provoke a gradual degradation, a fatigue caused by incessant irritation...

To be a librarian in a city of the Front National is impossible; for – simply – libraries, as we all know, are tools of pluralism, of toleration, places for the exchange of ideas, basically open, providing free access, and multi-cultural.

All of these terms: pluralism, toleration, exchange of ideas, openness, liberty, accessibility, and diversity of cultures, have been defined away or denied by these politicians.

It is enough to examine the lists of authors and titles with which the personnel of the Front National have tried to "regulate" the Bibliotheques municipales of numerous towns... It is evident that for them the library is essentially political, a means of distributing ideology.

In such a situation, it is useless to hope to resist, to continue the job, to create a sort of enclave of liberty at the heart of the FN operation. The experience of our

colleagues in Orange proves this: the sole solution is departure, to be labeled "on probation", or "resigned".

One must leave "in order to leave" and to create a vacancy. This choice, these decisions, are dramatic to consider, and to take: they signify the loss of reason of the library, its closing (under consideration at Orange), a considerable setback, and – for a number of years – the removal of an essential public service (by those who appreciate this well). But I say again, very clearly: it is impossible to exercise the profession of librarian in a city of the Front National.

Very many of our distant colleagues, living in regions less affected by all this politically, have had, and still have, difficulties in understanding the gravity of the situation and its oppressive nature – in taking this type of discussion seriously. The experience of Orange, a laboratory – city for the FN, demonstrates the seriousness. To think that the situation might evolve differently is an illusion.

And moreover the unrest grows, as the cities of the south have been picked off: Orange, Toulon, Marignane, but also Nice, almost... and the Front National is advancing and taking over territory, more and more often "in disguise", insidiously, sneaking in at times.

The most terrible thing is to hear the politicians of other parties taking on their positions: certain words, certain phrases... Recently the mayor of a commune of the Bouches - du - Rhone, a mayor who is not Front National, demanded that his librarian cancel the library's subscriptions to "Le Point" and "Le Nouvel Observateur" because, from reading those periodicals, people might change their political views.

It is evident that if we do not make some response all together to these excesses, we as professionals, like all of those involved in Culture and Communication – I think particularly of journalists, of the popular press – will not be able any longer to express ourselves, to exercise our functions.

It is evident that we have an essential role, and that our libraries are alarmed, troubled, unable to bear this further: they are too strong, too forward-looking, too effective, for those who represent reaction, mistrust, who practice insult and contempt.

