

PLG EXCHANGE

“Is that a poll in your inbox or are you just glad to see me?”

(Editor's note: This e-mail thread responds to the methodology, timing, and subjects of the new "AL Direct" online "polls." The thread has been edited for grammar and syntax and extraneous content concerning other issues or aspects have been edited out. Compiled and edited by John Buschman)

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Subject: On AL Direct and “polling”
Date: Sat, 04 Feb 2006
From: Mark Rosenzweig, ALA Councilor at large
To: alacoun@ala.org
CC: srrtac-l@ala.org, PLGNET-L@listproc.sjsu.edu

I don't know who has empowered Leonard Kniffel and American Libraries, through “AL Direct” or any other instrumentality, to intervene in the business of the Association and influence its direction rather than just reporting on it. I am talking here of the fake, faulty, framed-up “polling” that took place in the first issue of “AL Direct” on the question of whether ALA should change its policy re Cuba, which was a direct and unethical intervention into the politics of the Association.

It is no secret that Kniffel disagrees with ALA Council's position on Cuba, but to use his editorial position to pursue his opposition to that policy by staging a pseudo-poll of the most transparently fraudulent variety and promising to continue this manipulative practice as a regular “feature” is unacceptable. Fake polling frames questions in a manner meant to influence policy in already-decided direction and it challenges the governance of the Association and it is an endorsement of pseudo-scientific polling techniques which undermine our democratic practices.

I would ask for clarification on what the proper role of American Libraries and “AL Direct” is in relation to policy. If Council wished to poll the members and voted for that, it would be one thing. For one person, not elected or directly responsible to the membership, to do so is quite another.

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Date: Mon, 06 Feb 2006
From: John Buschman
To: PLGNet-L@listproc.sjsu.edu
CC: alacoun@ala.org, srrtac-l@ala.org

Mark & Colleagues,

This is especially galling in light of how officious American Libraries gets when others push them to act on and/or cover those acting on Association policy or intramural debate. The answer frequently comes back that “this would make AL too political” and “we don’t make policy, we only report on the work and actions of the Association.” The current classic in this genre was the give-and-take over Laura Bush’s award/citation. AL’s coverage was insulting, patronizing, and a blatant attempt to put the final stamp on the issue as “settled” with the grown ups smiling benevolently upon those raising questions and patting us on the head while they did the “responsible” thing. Now we have slanted fake “polls.” I am, frankly, tired of having to keep an eye out for these kinds of shenanigans. Perhaps it is time for a change.

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Date: Thurs, 09 Feb 2006
From: Mark C Rosenzweig, Councilor at large
To: alacoun@ala.org, srrtac-l@ala.org
CC: PLGNet-L@listproc.sjsu.edu

Having received the new “AL Direct” and seen yet another poll, I have to ask whether it is still brazenly being done without any attempt whatsoever at the very least to make sure a) only members can vote and b) nobody can vote multiple times. I suspect nothing whatever was done to address this concern which would hardly mitigate the more fundamental problems with this kind of polling having to do with self-selection of participants.

The blatant anti-intellectualism of this kind of tabloid practice makes me wonder if the Mr. Kniffel has been listening to this discussion. I suppose it would be beneath him to even respond with some editorial justification for this. Here’s the latest bit of arrant infotainment (below) which seems to be one of the few distinctive features of this “service.”

Attached text:

“What do YOU think?

Should public libraries auction naming rights to their library on Ebay?

Click here to < > VOTE!

This is an unscientific poll that reflects the opinions of only those AL Direct readers who have chosen to participate.”

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Date: Thurs, 09 Feb 2006
From: Veronica Calderhead, Rutgers -Newark
To: PLGNet-L@listproc.sjsu.edu

Mark has nailed it. There are several serious problems with this kind of poll, but the main problem (and most serious) is the lack of context. No single issue is simple. Typically an issue is layered and requires the individual to read different perspectives. To simply place a stark question alongside a yes/no ‘submit’ button is to invite meaningless results. Why do it? Why encourage results that are useless both in short and long term? The data (I even hate to call it data) collected won’t enable policy makers because of the methodology (i.e. the lack thereof). Researchers who’d like to include the data for related studies are bound to reject them on the same basis. It can’t even be used by American Libraries, ALA, or library directors who might simply looking to see which way the wind is blowing. The results of these polls would be absolutely null, so why is anybody even considering them?

Mark states that the poll is unscientific and that it will only reflect the opinions of “AL Direct” readers. I’m not even sure these polls can reflect an opinion; certainly not an informed opinion.

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Date: Thurs, 09 Feb 2006
From: John Buschman
To: PLGNet-L@listproc.sjsu.edu
CC: michaelg@CSUFRESNO.EDU, kfiels@ala.org,
mghikas@ala.org, aldirect@ala.org, lkiffel@ala.org, srrtac-l@ala.org
Veronica, Mark, et. al.:

While I couldn't agree more, I think you're going about this the wrong way. You're both trying to reason with a free-floating practice widely adopted by the forms of media "AL Direct" seeks to imitate. Perhaps we should suggest that, rather than take on a "professional" issue unprofessionally, why can't "AL Direct" simply ask the kinds of questions such methods/methodologies deserve:

Would Dale Earnhardt have won the Daytona 500 again if he hadn't killed himself with that reckless driving move? Do you remember who shot JR? Should Britney Spears try and break into the country-and-western market? Does W really look like a monkey?

What do YOU think? - then structure the answers and discuss it like the pabulum it really is.

Now, wasn't that simple? Now this will get some attention! (Really, this is where Kniffel & Co. are headed.)

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Subject: Fake news flash!
Date: Thurs, 16 Feb 2006
From: John Buschman
To: plgnet-l@listproc.sjsu.edu

Results of the February 8 poll:
Should public libraries auction naming rights to their library on Ebay?

YES.....45%
NO.....55%
(250 responses)

So in other words, 112 people who self chose to respond agreed that library names should be sold on Ebay, and 138 said no. Thus Kniffel's moronic poll translates 112 people into 45% of the profession saying we should sell libraries like any other commodity.

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Date: Fri, 3 Mar 2006
From: Isabel Espinal, Amherst MA
To: plgnet-1@listproc.sjsu.edu

I'm glad that librarians are speaking out. It was pretty clear from the first one I saw on Cuba that someone was trying to prove something big with this little, unscientific poll. The last one about whether libraries should give a platform for an "opposing" viewpoint when it does a "controversial" program also bothered me. I have done programs in libraries over the years and something that is non-controversial to me -- say a poetry reading in Spanish -- might seem controversial to some racist person or faction in the community. Those people do exist because I've had to deal with their opposition! I shudder to think that a library would have a policy that would mandate a platform for racism -- but that's what could happen with this idea of an "opposing" viewpoint.

These polls not only oversimplify but also distort situations - a practice very much used by the racist right wing of this country. For example, the issue of bilingual education was framed here in Massachusetts in the election of 2002 by the right wing - giving a false impression to voters who seemed to think that they were voting about whether non-English speaking children should be taught English (or not). They even called their campaign "English for the Children." Who's against children learning English? What they were really doing was knocking down bilingual education, effectively outlawing the use of other languages in the classroom. Our current governor was campaigning and used this issue in his ads saying he wanted all children to learn English, which sounded very generous. Of course the word bilingual means two languages English and another language. Duh. But, this informed view did not get the airtime that his distortion did, and bilingual education was eventually outlawed in an official election by a huge majority. Gay marriage is an issue that also has been oversimplified in polls and such: "do you believe the sanctity of marriage should be preserved legally? yes or no." Well, this could be used to limit and

exclude gay people from marriage, just as the language of the “AL Direct” polls could lead to a reduction in social justice and freedom for our real communities, as opposed to an expansion of rights.

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Date: Fri, 03 Mar 2006
From: Kathleen de la Peña McCook
To: Isabel Espinal, plgnet-l@listproc.sjsu.edu

We are so late to this game (online polls) and we are so pitiful. I wouldn't mind if they were insipid---do you like cats or dogs, for instance....but out of the box the poll gave ammunition to the right wing on Cuba, and I see them citing it everywhere. Also as you point out so well the need to balance everything turns it all into trash. The intelligent design discussion is an example. I am sure for every sane balanced idea there is a small group that might--under the poll's results--call to be heard. The worst case/best example of this was when the head of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, N.Y. refused to allow a celebration of social security because it was political.