



67th IFLA Council and General Conference

August 16-25, 2001

Code Number: 166-204-E
Division Number: VI
Professional Group: Management of Library Associations - **Workshop**
Joint Meeting with: Library and Information Science Journals
Meeting Number: 204
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

The Free Press: Editorial Independence in Association Magazines

Leonard Kniffel

Editor & Publisher, *American Libraries*
American Library Association

Let me begin by assuring you that my experience as editor of *American Libraries* tells me that what people say they want our association magazines to *publish* and what they actually want to *read* in our magazines are two different things entirely.

Let me also emphasize that *American Libraries* is not a scholarly journal; it is a magazine of news and features. It is also the official organ of the American Library Association. So, the extent to which any magazine can function as part of the “free press” will depend how the magazine is defined at its beginning.

The apparent contradiction between editorial independence and functioning as an official organ is part of what guides our selection of material for publication in *American Libraries*.

Active members of the American Library Association say they want us to publish committee news and press releases that portray librarians and the Association in the best possible light.

What they want to *read*, however, is something quite different. Reader surveys show they like to read letters to the editor that criticize the Association, or news reports about personnel crises and censorship, or articles and opinions that challenge some of the basic assumptions of our profession.

The famous American newspaper man H.L. Mencken once defined news in this way: “News is what somebody does not want to see in print. The rest is public relations.” *American Libraries* is a magazine of news and features, and we the editors are charged with creating a readable publication. The time-honored separation between editorial and advertising, between content and finances is one we take very seriously, and pressure to publish or not publish is something we confront regularly.

Our policies manifested themselves in an interesting way again just a couple months ago, this time in a story about the executive director of ALA, which we were trying to get into the April issue at the very

last minute. I had interviewed the executive director, and even showed him, which I am usually reluctant to do, the story we were planning to run concerning the renewal of his employment contract, just to make sure the story was accurate, since the negotiations for an extension of his contract had just concluded. Over the weekend, however, he called me to warn me that he had made a few more requests for changes in the contract and that the story I had shown him might no longer be accurate.

On Monday morning, I called the president of the Association to get a quote. “Oh no, we are still negotiating,” she said, “and we would prefer that you don’t publish anything in *American Libraries* about contract negotiations that are still in progress.”

If I pulled the story, I had a five-inch hole to fill, and I would fear that once again we would get scooped by our competition—namely *Library Journal*--on a story about our own organization. It was clear to me, if not to the president, that readers had a right to know what the status of the executive director was. Those who were watching would know that his contract had expired in February, and we needed to tell them what was going on, and in the April issue not in the May issue.

You also have to understand the point of view of the president. Given that the American Library Association’s recent history with regard to executive directors looks like a revolving door, the executive board, which hires and evaluates the executive director doesn’t want its deliberations, which, after all, are confidential personnel matters, to be made public.

But the executive director’s contract was up. *American Libraries* had reported nothing. I told the president that we are *going* to publish a story, so let’s establish what information is public and what isn’t, assuring her that I did not intend to publish anything confidential or foolish. We settled on the details that the board could reveal and the story went to press.

The second time it happened recently was in connection with the ALA Committee on Minority Concerns and Cultural Diversity. The group decided that *American Libraries* was not paying enough attention to diversity issues. Their solution, unfortunately, was to request that we install a diversity column. Now, if the magazine installed a subject-based column every time a unit of ALA asked for one, we would have a terminal case of what some journalists call “columnitis”—a magazine full of formulaic columns that satisfy some political need but simply don’t get read. Similar to tonsils or an appendix, a useless organ that is never missed once it is removed.

I disagreed with the committee, but rather than simply tell them no, I suggested that there were dozens of spots in *American Libraries* for diversity issues. I made up a question-and-answer sheet designed to encourage people to submit press releases and other materials about their activities. After all, we cannot publish what we don’t receive.

When anyone in the Association tells us we must publish something, or worse yet that we cannot publish something, the editors’ ears perk up. We know that we are obligated to listen and consider, but then to make our own decision. The single thing that permits us to have this power and responsibility is ALA Policy 10.2, passed years ago by ALA’s governing council. When I became editor, I installed the policy on the masthead so that it appears in every issue of the magazine.

The policy guarantees editorial independence in gathering, reporting, and publishing news according to the principles of ALA’s policies on intellectual freedom. It calls for the magazine to be a platform for the expression of diverse views that is kept scrupulously and faithfully open to the expression of all viewpoints of interest and concern to the library profession. It calls for us to convey full and accurate information about the activities, purposes, and goals of the Association, but with due regard to the editor’s prerogatives in producing a balanced and readable publication. It’s a good policy.

Often the dilemmas presented by the apparent conflict between editorial independence and an obligation to protect the best interests of the association can be resolved with a little common sense and fairness and balance.

At other times, a choice had to be made. In 1992, the relationship between the executive director of ALA and the executive board reached an all-time low. Quite unexpectedly, the staff arrived at work one day to find that the executive director's office had been vacated. A cryptic note had been posted by the elevator doors indicating simply that she was gone and that was that—no explanation—and that she would not be permitted to reenter the building. Insiders knew that tension had been developing, but few were prepared for this abrupt severance. The staff was told to assemble in the staff room. The president and vice-president of the Association flew in to explain the situation.

I shall never forget that staff meeting. The then-editor of *American Libraries* felt compelled to ask questions. Why was she gone? Was she fired? Why? When had all this transpired? Who made the decision? The executive director had resigned, we were told. It was a personnel matter and the members of the executive board were permitted to discuss it no further. If we wanted information we should talk to the now former executive director.

What followed that meeting was a series of interviews, leading to a story, leading to accusations, threats of lawsuits, and a call for the firing of the editor on the floor of ALA's council. It was a terrible time, with mistakes made on all sides.

I ended up writing the news story that appeared in *American Libraries* about the executive director's abrupt resignation. When I look back at it, I am a little surprised that it is as fair and balanced as it was, considering how little anyone would tell us.

A few years later, I had an opportunity to repeat the exercise, when the executive director again resigned abruptly and mysteriously amid anger and innuendo. I asked the questions, and *American Libraries* again reported the facts to the membership, presenting the reasons given by both the executive director and the executive board.

Despite our reports on personnel conflicts and censorship battles across the country and the world, none have tested the real meaning of editorial freedom more than reporting on the personnel conflicts within our own organization. This becomes, after all, a matter of employees reporting on their employer.

But the editors of *American Libraries* are the ears of the membership, the readership, and it is to them that our ultimate answerability lies. We cannot permit the membership of the Association to get its news from some other publication. We cannot be silent when turmoil is the fact. It is our obligation to bring them the facts, to the extent those facts are knowable.

There is also a trust established in ALA policy that says the editor shall have access to privileged information. It is a very difficult trust to establish with the executive director if confidential information is revealed inappropriately. "Off the record" means off the record. Information revealed can inform our coverage, but it cannot be betrayed. This applies to any news story. Confidential sources cannot be revealed.

I have been at *American Libraries* for almost 13 years now, over five years as editor. I have seen us go from rubber cement, hot wax, and an Exact-O knife to PageMaker software and online news.

We are all experiencing changes in the way we do our work, but the one change that I'd like to emphasize is the change that's happening to the way people read. The competition for reading time has never been more desperate, and much of what guides our decisions is the question: Will anyone read it?

One of the things that magazines do periodically is conduct a readers' survey. A while back, a research firm conducted one of *American Libraries* readers.

Our response rate was 69%, higher than average and high enough to more than validate the survey results. The questionnaire asked readers to rank their interest in various parts of the magazine, from "no interest" to "little" to "moderate" to "strong." I'd like to share with you some of the things that readers say they want in or like about *American Libraries*. This, in turn, will demonstrate to you, I hope, what editors must look for as we prepare material for publication.

Most sections of the magazine were rated to be of moderate interest, with only five areas moving toward strong interest. The highest rated part of the magazine was feature articles. Our “Internet Librarian” column and the “Censorship Watch” section of news came in next highest, followed by “Currents” with its news about people, and “News Fronts USA,” the hard-news section of the magazine. In the next layer were “Reader Forum” (which is Letters to the Editor), “Technically Speaking” a technology product review column, and “Will’s World,” a humor column.

American Libraries publishes a lot of information about ALA conferences, including a preliminary program in April, which was listed as the most popular of our conference-related content. Post-conference reports and coverage ranked slightly below the previews, with only moderate interest. Although their popularity did not exactly skyrocket since the last survey in 1993, our reports on ALA council and executive board actions still garnered “moderate interest” rankings. International news traditionally ranks low in our reader surveys, and this time around readers indicated that the amount that *American Libraries* currently publishes is just about the right amount.

Asked to indicate whether they wanted more or less coverage of 22 given topics, readers made the solid winner “professional development,” with 58% of respondents “wanting more.” In the next tier were: the Internet, technology, and management. Salaries, funding, reference services, marketing and public relations, censorship and intellectual freedom, library education, and literacy followed, all of these subjects with between 24% and 34% readers wanting more.

On the subjects of outreach, programming, preservation, youth services, social issues, equity of access, diversity, legislation, buildings and furnishings, trustees and boards, in addition to international relations, the majority of readers seem to be getting about all they want.

It is gratifying to know that 66% of our subscribers read at least part of every issue they receive. (Of course I worry about the 3% who said they had read none of their last four issues.) It is also instructive to note that only 22% of members (one in five) had visited *American Libraries* online in the preceding year. Of those, 62% went for job ads; only 43% to read the weekly news.

For most magazines, a reader survey is largely a marketing tool. It establishes a readership count and ranks sections of the magazine to establish the most desirable positions for advertisers. But for the editors, it is also a useful indication that what we are doing seems to be satisfying most readers.

The desire for more on professional development was perplexing to me at first. I tend to think that reading *is* professional development. But included in this survey was a section asking for general opinions about ALA itself. Professional development also topped the list of things respondents think the Association should do more of.

I suspect that there is a correlation between wanting to read more about the Internet, technology, and management and wanting ALA to do more for professional development. With so many of us being made to feel inadequate to the demands of new technology and rising user expectations, it is logical to think that one’s professional association and its magazine ought to be doing something about it. Still, it was a surprise to many that respondents ranked “ALA meets a substantial portion of my educational needs” dead last in a list of 11 association activities. “ALA publishes useful and timely books” rated much higher. Our readers are not making the correlation that reading *is* continuing education.

Perhaps the most surprising survey result of all was this: Asked to indicate what ALA needs to do most, the statement receiving the strongest rating was: “ALA needs to do more to educate the public about the value of libraries.” That response confirms a direction the ALA Communications Department has taken in recent months with a new @ Your Library publicity campaign for America’s libraries, which was presented at this conference as an expanded campaign for the world’s libraries.

This is what readers said they want from us, and what they like about what we produce for them every month, and this is what we publish. They have told us what is news to them and what isn’t.

If you were to ask me why you should write for *American Libraries*, I would give you this short answer: Because you have something to say, and because, of any library publication, *American Libraries* is the place it will be seen, if not read, by more readers than anywhere else. I'd like very much to hear what your questions are about how we do what we do, and perhaps we can get into more details, but before we go on to discussion, I'd like to offer you some things to think about it comes to the journalistic ethics. If we are to be journalists in library publications, to publish hard news and critical commentary, we also have an obligation to write and publish ethically and responsibly.

Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know. In that freedom, they must also:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Remain free of activities and obligations that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel, and special treatment designed to gain favor.
- Shun secondary employment, political involvement, or office that compromises journalistic integrity.
- Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money and avoid paying for news.
- Just as importantly journalists must also minimize harm. Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects, and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect. Journalists should:
- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage and use sensitivity when dealing with inexperienced sources.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort and remember that the pursuit of news is not a license for arrogance.
- Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials or others who seek power, influence, or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusions into anyone's privacy.
- Show good taste and avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Be cautious about identifying anyone as a criminal before due legal process has occurred. Balance a suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.
- Journalists must also be accountable. We must be accountable to readers, listeners, viewers, and each other. Journalists should always:
- Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with readers over journalistic conduct.
- Encourage readers to voice grievances against the news media.
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.
- Expose unethical practices of other journalists and news media.
- Abide by the same high standards to which we hold others.

Freedom of the press is to be guarded as an inalienable right of people in a free society. It carries with it the freedom and the responsibility to discuss, question, and challenge actions and utterances of our governing bodies and of our institutions. Journalists uphold both the right to speak unpopular opinions and the privilege to agree with the majority.

Over the years, we have published stories that have been difficult: a story about a former president of the association who was charged with misappropriating funds in the library where he was the director, a story about a children's librarian in a major urban library charged with molesting the youngsters in his care, a state librarian successfully prosecuted for sexual harassment, stories about librarians murdered on their jobs, stories about the massacre that occurred in a Colorado high school library. Stories like these appear in *American Libraries* every month. In the most recent issue, there is a news article about the firing of the editor of a rival magazine. I talked to the editor and to the publisher who fired her. I asked all the questions, and I can assure you many of the answers were off the record. But we told the story as plainly and honestly as we could. In another news story in this current issue, the director of a major city library was questioned about allegations of the mishandling of an estimated \$4.2 million in grants, endowments, and gifts to the library. I have known about these allegations for a long time. We held off on the story until his accusers went public; we then felt it was our obligation to ask the questions.

We make the calls. We talk to the principle parties involved in any given case, and often to their attorneys. We conduct the interviews, we write the news, and we don't call anybody to ask for permission. This is our job. In many cases, we work hard to maintain probably the most supportive and sympathetic environment in which librarians can tell their side of a story. Still, the questions must be asked. No one is so powerful and so above reproach that the questions shouldn't be asked. We record the answers we are given.

In the USA we are very fond of top-ten lists, so in closing I'd like to offer you my own top ten list.

Here the top ten things that threaten journalistic freedom in Association publications:

10. The convergence of media, specifically the Internet, wherein anyone can be a publisher, with no quality or accuracy control.

9. The homogenization of news, wherein the media sources grow fewer and the viewpoints more and more uniform.

8. The movement of journalists into public relations for—understandably—better salaries.

7. A lack of understanding on the part of some librarians of the fundamental value of freedom of the press and its application within the profession.

6. A lack of organizational editorial policies that support the profession's basic tenets of intellectual freedom and freedom of the press.

5. The reluctance of professionals to write about controversial topics.

4. The tendency of many to want to "kill the messenger" for simply delivering the facts. Blaming the media for one's own failures is all too common among library leaders.

3. The reluctance of library associations and institutions to establish publications that truly are editorially independent news and opinion vehicles.

2. The acceptance of e-mail--with its barrage of irrelevant, sloppy, ill-conceived, time-consuming so-called messages that too often deliver nothing at all of substance but are becoming a substitute for journalism.

1. The lack of time available for reading and the lack of understanding that reading is still the librarian's best method of continuous education and professional development.

Perhaps you could help me add to the list, or perhaps you have other ideas about freedom of the press in library. I would be happy to hear from you now, or to answer any questions you might have about how *American Libraries* works.