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September 11th and Academic Libraries

Mary Reichel

I am writing this editorial only a month after the devastating terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Although I had no desire to write on such a horrifying topic, I could not forego this opportunity to share my pride in our library profession and in our role in American democracy, as so ably articulated by ALA Past President Nancy Kranich with her theme "Libraries: the Cornerstone of American Democracy."

About a week after the terrorist attack, the question of antiwar protests on campus came up in a library staff meeting and what we should do if we find antigovernment information. Should we report it to campus security immediately? I found myself stating that my responsibility as the university librarian was to help the university promote intellectual freedom, freedom of expression and freedom of reading, for individuals acting within legal boundaries and university procedures. That conversation, in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, was just the beginning of my understanding of how drastically that day has changed our sense of safety and security. The aftermath of September 11th would also call upon all librarians, including academic librarians, to assert our fundamental values that might appear to be in conflict with the larger nationalistic attitude.

In a political system grounded in an informed citizenry, we are members of a profession explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information. We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations.
(Introduction to The Code of Ethics of the American Library Association Council, June 28, 1995.)(FN1)

As shown in the above quotation from The Code of Ethics, our profession through ALA has done a powerful job of writing and adopting documents that serve as the basis for providing access to unpopular ideas even in times of conflict. Values, such as intellectual freedom, are not hard to believe in during times of peace or when they are accepted by the majority, but when our values place us at odds with society, and with personal and deeply held individual values, our role is much more difficult. ALA's Code of Ethics, Library Bill of Rights, Intellectual Freedom Principles, and Freedom to Read Statement give sound support for how we will need to operate in the days and months ahead.

The Freedom to Read Statement, a joint ALA and Association of American Publishers statement, is particularly relevant in this time of crisis. It reads that "we believe that free communication is essential to the preservation of a free society and a creative culture." This clearly written document was originally adopted in 1953 at another time in U.S. history when it was not popular or even safe to take a pro-information viewpoint. The Freedom to Read Statement also includes this passage:

Totalitarian systems attempt to maintain themselves in power by the ruthless suppression of any concept that challenges the established orthodoxy. The power of a democratic system to adapt to change is vastly strengthened by the freedom of its citizens to choose widely from among conflicting opinions offered freely to them.(FN2)

This quotation is an accurate description of the worst abuses of the Taliban and a compelling description of the strength of democracy.

Our society is now also wrestling with the issue of safety versus the protection of civil liberties of all U.S. residents. As I noted with anger and sadness the death of thousands of individuals on September 11th, I feared the backlash that individuals who appear to be of the Muslim faith or from other countries might face. Sadness for the victims and their families was tinged with fear for friends and loved ones who might in turn become victims of outrage and violence.

In this area also, librarians have developed fundamental positions as described in the Library Bill of Rights and the 1999 ACRL document Intellectual Freedom Principles for Academic Libraries. Principle ten of the ACRL document reads:

A service philosophy should be promoted that affords equal access to information for all in the academic community with no discrimination on the basis of race, values, gender, sexual orientation, cultural or ethnic background, physical or learning disability, economic status, religious beliefs, or views.(FN3)

Librarians, like others in the United States, will have to be vigilant that we do not in this difficult time fall back on stereotyping patrons based on appearances.

In a sad way, September 11, 2001, reminds us of the importance of our work as librarians and the power of our community. Librarians will have to deal with choices about tolerance and respect for all users(FN4); unauthorized requests for circulation and other user data(FN5); and a climate where national security concerns will compete with freedom of information issues. I find strength in the profession's basic documents and in our strength as a community. When I talked with a colleague from Manhattan shortly after the attack, I began to realize just what a significant impact the attacks had had on people all over New York City in addition to those near the World Trade Center. That example is only a small one of how ACRL helps the academic library community forge bonds that sustain us as librarians and as informed individuals.

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FOOTNOTES

1. "Code of Ethics of the American Library Association." Available online from <http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/ethics.html>.
2. "The Road to Freedom Statement." Available online from <http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/freeread.html>.
3. "Intellectual Freedom Principles for Academic Libraries." Available online from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/principles.html>.
4. "Statement" by Florida Gulf Coast University Library Services Director Kathy Hoeth. Available online from <http://www.fgcu.edu/PressReleases/09-19-01statement.html>.

5. For a recent example, see John Holland, Jennifer Peltz, and Robin Benedick, "Investigators Look into How Library Computers May Have Linked Terrorists," Sun-Sentinel.com News. Available online from <http://www.sun-sentinel.com>. Also see ALA's helpful "Questions and Answers." Available online from <http://www.ala.org/pio/crisis/qa.html>.