



Jan Gaebler

ALIA president

My greatest pride in being a librarian comes from our characteristic 'live and let live' philosophy that abhors any form of censorship or discrimination; affirming our belief that individuals have a democratic right to be treated equally under the law and have access to a free-flow of information and ideas.

But I'm beginning to think, as a profession, we merely give lip service to those ideals and in practice, there's a tendency for us to 'take the line of least resistance'.

Three recent cases in point:

- An influential director of one of our major libraries was quoted in a newspaper article as saying her library did not purchase material which it felt might pose a 'security' risk to the library and was considering options for how it could control access to *offensive* material now available on the Internet. So much for democratic access to a free-flow of information and ideas.
- The ALIA General Council is considering a policy statement on library services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders that advocates reverse discrimination to 'correct' the perceived imbalance that now exists in providing library service to the Aboriginal Community and in encouraging Aboriginal participation in our profession. Are we going to follow this with an individual policy for the Greek, Muslim, and Sikh communities, who depend on our libraries, too?
- Australian protest against the resumption of French nuclear testing was an interesting test of the proposed *Racial hatred bill*, currently before our Parliament. *The Weekend Australian* (24/6/95 p6) put a sample of media commentary printed on the issue to lawyers and human rights activists for their opinions on how it would fare under the proposed Bill, if passed. Most felt none of the material would attract criminal sanctions, but equally most felt media columns would breach civil provisions of the proposed law. In essence, the Bill as stands would halt the publication of thought-provoking and opinionated columns, that is, a free-flow of information and ideas, once it becomes law.

These three examples undermine the very principles of our profession. Surely, we should be championing the individual's right to equal treatment and to freedom of choice.

However, our colleagues taking an active stance on these issues are few and far between.

And perhaps of more concern, there is an ambivalent profession which has lost the fire which gives rise to heated debate on these and other fundamental issues of our profession. Do we really think factors of perceived *risk* should over-ride freedom of access? Do we advocate the legislating for 'politically correct ideas and ideals?' And who decides what's risky and what's correct?

Thank you, Peter Biskup

It is in that context that I think Dr Peter Biskup, author of *Libraries in Australia* (ISBN 0-949060-25-9) deserves a big thank you.

If libraries are in your heart and soul you won't be able to pick up this book and skim one chapter without impulsively going on to another. Biskup unfolds a treasure trove

Clearly it's time to re-affirm our opposition to censorship and to have a role in shaping Government-policy concerning the Internet. We can't achieve this with an ambivalent profession.

of people, events, philosophies and debates that have culminated in where we are today. He also gives a comprehensive picture that demonstrates how the diverse parts are integral to the whole picture of librarianship.

This book recounts library history in a way that serves to enrich the librarians that read it, giving us all a strong sense of place and fostering a greater understanding between us. It has been written as part of Charles Sturt University's *Topics in Australian library and information studies* series (ISSN 1030-5009) for a primarily student audience, but it will add professional insight for any librarian who reads it.

In context of earlier comments, the sections relating to censorship are particularly interesting. For example on page 214 you'll find a sentence that begins, 'Although censorship ceased to be an issue at least two decades ago, as Australia rid itself of the philistinism of the inter-war era and the immediate post-war years...' The chapter concludes on a dismal note that the profession in general and library associations, including ALIA, are good at making grand policy statements but are reluctant to show their teeth by implementing a formal mechanism for monitoring censorship.

Make your voice be heard

Clearly it's time to re-affirm our opposition to censorship and to have a role in shaping Government-policy concerning the Internet. We can't achieve this with an ambivalent profession. It is important to discuss these issues with your colleagues, with your Branches and make sure your views reach General Council; either through your General Councillor or contacting me direct. It is this sort of participation which enables a strong stance to be taken and which, more importantly, ensures your commitment to that stance. What is the point of ALIA having a policy if the members, themselves influential in their respective communities, do not follow through with a strong commitment to the ideals of that policy?

Like all histories, Biskup's *Libraries in Australia* is out of date before the ink is dry, due to the on-going nature of history. It was no doubt a mammoth task to cover the ground as comprehensively as this book achieves. Biskup could have been served with better editing of his manuscript to catch glaring inconsistencies, but that is a minor criticism in light of the wealth of information the book contains.

A wonderful aspect of the book is the contemporary nature of much of the history it covers. We read about people who are still very active in the profession, and a quick run through the index gives one a sense of how much some of our key colleagues have contributed to our profession. It's nice that we have such a publication that gives credit to colleagues at a time when such acknowledgement will be most meaningful to them.

In between the angst of censorship, racism, and next year's budget came the library's equivalent to 'laughter is the best medicine' in *Liblaf two*, (ISBN 086803 124 0), edited by former ALIA President and non-stop ideas man, Alan Bundy. There's lots of 'internal jogging' exercise in these pages of library specific cartoons... my favourite was the library graffiti *Free the bound periodicals!* ■