

Guest Editorial

Facing the New Millennium: Values for the Electronic Information Age



Somewhere in the dim recesses of my memory, addled by technology and travel, I remember the call asking if I would consider allowing my name to be placed in nomination for president of ACRL. Knowing that a representative from a community college had not served in this role for some thirty years, I was honored to be asked. However, it was not until sometime later, after the election, that the amount of work involved became apparent. One particular task challenged me, indeed worried me, more than the others: choosing a theme for the president's year.

The theme I chose is: "Facing the Millennium: Values for the Electronic Information Age." I considered several themes dealing with the demands of technology on service, with the need for library instruction in an electronic environment, with legislative advocacy, or with the changing roles of librarians. Any of these would have been adequate, but as I worked through the options, I realized that some of the traditional values of librarianship are being challenged and, perhaps, are changing as a result of the advancing electronic age. In librarianship, I see a profession seeking reaffirmation of traditional values even as it questions them. Because of this, I wanted a theme that allowed ACRL members an opportunity to explore their own personal values in relation to those of our profession.

We librarians face a future in which rapid change is expected. Although some level of change may have been always a

part of our professional lives, the advent of digital technology and its host of ancillary and complementary products and services, from PCs to shared electronic resources to OC-12 networks, have accelerated the changes in our profession and challenged us as never before. Challenges to our values surround us, as indicated by the debates over the appropriate use of filtering software and the seemingly cavalier abrogation of "fair-use" tenets in the licensing agreements we sign. In times of change, people and institutions seek stability. I believe that stability can come from our values: not from the way we do things but, rather, by the beliefs we hold as immutable. By understanding, reaffirming, or changing as necessary those values most critical to us and to our profession, we can move forward into the future with confidence. They become our bedrock; they become the fixed star from which to navigate the choppy water of our future.

What are these values? Without attempting a complete catalog here, among the most important to librarianship is an altruistic sense of service. In fact, many of us come to the profession with a missionary zeal for service: we believe we can make a difference in people's lives and in the quality of our society. Consequently, librarianship is characterized by the service orientation of its practitioners. It is an orientation marked by equal service to all, in a manner which does not seek to profit, financially or otherwise, from the relationship between librarian and pa-

tron. It is no surprise that the findings of our user surveys regularly hail our service orientation. Certainly this value will endure, although there will continue to be pressure to provide services for cost or profit.

Intellectual freedom is a clear bedrock of our value system. Librarians traditionally have been open to all ideas and have provided materials to support divergent viewpoints to all users. Our collection policies and standards for reference service reflect the value of open access in all academic libraries. The prevailing view in the profession is, as John Swan once observed, that librarians have a commitment to access, not to truth. However, the value reflected by this commitment to access, without consideration of the impact of content now pits many rank-and-file librarians, along with a significant number of scholars from other fields, against the stated ALA position on intellectual freedom. I personally find it troubling: Allowing children or young adults free access to the Web, with its violence and pornography sites, seems counter to simple common sense. I have difficulty leaving content decisions to parents when so many children are without parental guidance, especially in a society marked by two-income families and single-parent households. Should librarians not take a more active role in deciding what is available to minors on the Internet? If so, does that lessen the importance of our long-held value for intellectual freedom? (Is this an issue for academic librarians? I believe it is. Are we librarians first, and academic librarians second?) We have always limited access to traditional materials through the use of selection policies, children's collections, and special collections. For some, however, a similar policy related to materials available online is seen as the antithesis of intellectual freedom. As difficult as it may be, we as a profession will need to define what intellectual freedom means in an electronic age.

The value of reading as a way of understanding and investigating our world certainly ranks high among those values we hold sacred. The value of reading would seem unchallenged, and bookstore sales certainly indicate that Americans are not abandoning books or reading (even allowing for the fact that, according to Barnes and Noble research, one in five books purchased is not read). Yet the act of reading is challenged, not necessarily because it is devalued but simply due to increased competition from other media (100-channel television, of course, but also interactive video games, chat rooms, and Web-browsing). Perhaps we are moving to a new literacy in which reading will decrease in importance and will be increasingly complemented by information acquisition via other mediums. If that is true, what does it mean to our value system: What shall our response be as librarians who value reading? How will that response play out in policy and action? Again, as with the value of intellectual freedom, easy answers are not available.

And certainly, the value of research and empirical exploration is critical to our

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world view. As researchers, we understand the personal and professional growth that results from extended study and analysis. As readers, we welcome challenges to our beliefs, knowing that those challenges will encourage further discussion and generate new thinking. As a corollary, we value education as a means to improve life and preserve our democratic form of government. As Jefferson wrote, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." I can write without irony that we librar-

ians believe our work helps end ignorance and preserve freedom.

Indeed, the journal you hold in your hands is a testament to the value we place on research in our profession. For some fifty-nine years, *College & Research Libraries* has provided some of the best thinking about our profession and its practice. Through *C&RL*, we share that research and we invite argument about it. We also value that research in our promotion and tenure policies: Publication in *C&RL* is an honor not easily equaled. We who read the journal respect the authors who have invested their time and risked their egos to confront us, indeed to challenge us to change.

And there is the paradox. For at the same time the profession, and perhaps our values, are changing, we need the stability of traditional values. We encourage change in order to improve our ser-

vices and remain relevant to a changing society. Yet change threatens our comfort and forces us to reevaluate ourselves. Through an understanding of what we hold dear, of what our core values are and what they really mean, we can move confidently forward to translate those values into action. Without a clear understanding of our core values and the unity of mission it brings, many aspects of the profession will suffer: our instructional programs, our legislative action efforts, and our attempts to use technology to accomplish our goals. Churchill said, "The present is hard; the future is veiled." As we lift the veil, clear values will help us face the future.

W. LEE HISLE
President
ACRL