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## 590: Local Notes -- The American Library Association and Professional Limits

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# 590: Local Notes — The American Library Association and Professional Limits



## The Case for Saying Less

by **Steve McKinzie** (Library Director, Corriher-Linn-Black Library, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC 28144; Phone: 704-637-4449) <smckinzi@catawba.edu>

**T**he American Library Association (ALA) recently threw its weight and influence behind specific federal health reform legislation. On August 19th, the Association sent a letter to every member of Congress urging the passage of a “public option” in reference to health care legislation. The letter stated emphatically that the association ... “supports a “single-payer” option and believes [that] removing public options ... would not accomplish the strong reform needed.”<sup>1</sup>

Of course, such pontifications by the ALA on non-library issues are nothing new. The ALA has a record of speaking out on a wide range of issues — environmental topics, gender concerns, foreign policy — even the treatment of terror suspects. Nevertheless, this habit of the ALA’s speaking out so frequently presents some real problems. Whatever may be the merits of these various views (and some of the perspectives do indeed have merit), the association takes enormous risks by such political arm twisting and maneuverings — risks that have far-reaching ramifications for the organization. By passing numerous political resolutions on non-library related questions, by heading the recommendations of the ALA’s Social Responsibilities Roundtable, and by indulging its desire for political relevance — by saying, in short, so many things about so many topics — the association squanders precious political capital. That’s right. Such actions inevitably undermine the ALA’s unique and valuable role — its voice for librarianship and its advocacy of libraries.

Everyone has had the experience of witnessing the phenomena of someone whose boldly brazen posturing does more harm than good: the articulate faculty member who seems

only on making his own views known, the fellow librarian who doesn’t know how to listen, but has a way of making sure everyone else hears what she thinks, or the local town gadfly ready to volunteer an opinion the minute the town hall floor opens for debate. These folks aren’t necessarily wrong. They simply talk more than they should.

Most of us have also likely had the opposite experience — instances where you find yourself in the presence of individuals who carefully weigh their words — who speak out when the time is right and on matters close to home. People such as this have a way of winning your admiration. You instinctively respect someone who speaks rarely but speaks well. Such people gain a hearing. Sometimes they have an expertise to share. Often they have a constituency to serve.

Their voices you heed — not because you necessarily agree (often you don’t) — but because you respect their understanding and their advocacy. You recognize that they are not easily drawn into peripheral issues, that they’re not the slaves of one political ideology or another. On the contrary, they have a mission. They have a purpose.

You may not know, for instance, what **Amnesty International** thinks about global warming (for the record, they don’t have an official view on the topic) but you likely know a lot about the organization — that they care about human rights abuses — that they champion the rights of the politically oppressed, whether such people find themselves abused by the left or mistreated by the right. To be sure, the organization is political and outspoken, but the leadership of **Amnesty International** is

also unabashedly judicious. They weigh their words. They choose their fights. They know their mission. They understand their purpose.

I think the ALA should be like that. We should be outspoken in our advocacy for libraries and access to information, and just as importantly we should be careful to speak well and to speak infrequently. Let us remember that like any professional organization, the ALA has only so much political capital. If we squander that capital, that influence, on issues unrelated to librarianship, we will have just that much less clout — that much less influence on issues that touch our profession directly.

The ALA’s mission statement makes this point better than I. It insists that we, librarians and library staff alike, are to “provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services” — that we should do so, as the statement delineates, with a view “to enhance access to information for all.”<sup>2</sup> Such professional perimeters embolden our advocacy, but they also narrow our focus. We should speak out eloquently on censorship, champion literacy, and insist on the promotion of First Amendment Liberties. Doing so is within our sphere of influence, within our expertise and responsibility. Speaking out on non-library-related issues, however, only weakens our fundamental, primary mission. That we should never do.

Consequently, the ALA must re-examine its tendency (tempting though that tendency may be) to advocate certain controversial political positions that have little or no specific relation to the profession. ALA must, in a sense, regain its focus, remember why we are here and what we are about. Most importantly, the association should employ its precious political capital for the promotion and advocacy of libraries and librarianship — that and nothing more. 🌸

### Random Ramblings from page 74

To conclude, I think that the **Gates University** can quickly establish its excellence, especially in the Humanities and most of the Social Sciences where the crop of qualified PhD’s far exceeds employment possibilities. Of course, the University will need to recruit a core of seasoned faculty with international reputations, but **Bill’s** generous funding should allow the University to get many of its top choices. I’ve heard the rumor that the University might move more slowly in the STM fields where the expense of laboratory space might not give as good a return on investment as in other areas. In addition, the outlook for federal government

spending is not good over the next decade with the explosive growth in deficits. I won’t mind if I can spend a little less on the exorbitantly expensive STM serials.

I think that I should go for now. I’ve probably said too much, but I hope to get useful comments from the progressive and forward thinking experts in the library and information science field. I’m quite willing to revise my plans. Who knows if another innovation as radical as the Internet is just around the corner. The rapid technological change has enriched some corporations and bankrupted others. (Think of **Microsoft** and **DOS** versus **Kodak** and film.) Why should things be any different for higher education and libraries? 🌿

#### Endnotes

1. For a copy of ALA’s press release and letter, see ALA’s Washington Office page: [http://www.ala.org/ala/newspresscenter/news/pressreleases2009/august2009/pubop\\_wo.cfm](http://www.ala.org/ala/newspresscenter/news/pressreleases2009/august2009/pubop_wo.cfm).
2. From the Coalition for Networked Information, A Compilation of Position Statements, Principles, Statutes, and Other Pertinent Statements. <http://www.cni.org/docs/infopols/ALA.html>.