

# Intellectual freedom in the digital age

Ann Symons, American Library Association

When I went to library school thirty-one years ago, we talked about intellectual freedom, the values of our profession, and the mission of the library in a democratic society. We learned that desire to control what others read, hear, and view goes back to ancient times — and that the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) helped librarians who were facing censorship issues.

In 1996 ALA, as the lead plaintiff, sued the US Department of Justice over the newly signed *Communications Decency Act* (CDA). In 1997 the Supreme Court struck down the CDA because it would have banned all communication on the Web considered unsuitable for children under 18 — a clear violation of free speech for adults, the judges said. ALA spent \$1 million on the CDA lawsuit an investment in our values and future of the internet in libraries. Today this new medium is still the focus of debate over how much free speech should be allowed and where to draw the line, especially when it comes to children.

Over the past four years there has been an intense national controversy and

debate over the internet. ALA has been at the centre of this debate; often portrayed in the media promoting access to pornography. ALA believes filtering is not the answer to protecting children from 'unsuitable' content. Local courts have made similar rulings in cases involving the use of software filters in public libraries.

The answer to managing the internet controversy, and the issue of protecting children, is an education issue. This means educating parents and the public about the internet. It means teaching kids to be critical thinkers and make good choices. ALA's job is to provide leadership that helps librarians serve both kids and their parents. We do what we have always done — connect people with the information they need to live, work, and learn in their communities. In the internet environment it means library policy addressing internet access, finding the best and promoting web-sites for kids, and teaching parents and kids to use the internet together.

ALA's web-site, [<http://www.ala.org>], is a treasure trove of material designed to help both parents and librarians. The Of-

fice for Intellectual Freedom, [<http://www.ala.org/oif>], has been a leader in providing information about censorship, filtering, the internet, and how to manage the internet controversy. ALA's newest document *Libraries & the internet toolkit* [<http://www.ala.org/pio/internettoolkit/index.html>] is a must read. Case law and other legal material can be found at <http://www.ftrf.org>, the site of the Freedom to Read Foundation.

As I think about ALA and the year I spent as ALA president I am struck by the fact that over the years neither our values nor our mission has changed. Technology, however, has changed our lives significantly. Our mission, whether we live and work in Alaska or in Australia, is to provide access, to serve our public, and to keep information flowing. We cannot do that without addressing the critical censorship issues facing our evolving profession and associations.

*Ann Symons will be part of a panel session discussing censorship at the ALIA2000 conference in October. The panel will include Derek Whitehead, Richard Holt and Barbara Biggins.*

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