

A Decade of Change: From Student to President, but Always an Intellectual Freedom Advocate

By Martin Garnar

In 1998, I was a library student at the University of Denver's recently resurrected library and information science program. My advisor, who was chair of the state Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC), suggested that I attend a meeting and see if I was interested in getting involved. I was surprised that a mere student would be welcomed onto a committee and eagerly accepted her offer. The first meeting I attended was focused on the new concerns about internet filters and how they might impact access to information. When we talked about the need to educate our colleagues about filters, I volunteered to be part of the "Intellectual Freedom Road Show" that traveled around the state and was presented at regional conferences. Suddenly, I was supposed to be the expert on an emerging technology and found myself testing different versions of filters (both free and proprietary), all the while hoping that my university's information technology department wouldn't penalize me for my search activities.

After two years of presentations and work on updating our state intellectual freedom manual, somehow I found myself as chair of the state Intellectual Freedom Committee. At the time, things looked pretty good. The library world was doing quite well. We had just received our first state grants for libraries after years of hard legislative work. The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) had not yet been signed into law, and state versions of the bill were not in existence. The USA PATRIOT Act and the horrors of September 11th were a year away. I thought my biggest concern would be handling all of the Harry Potter challenges. Boy, was I wrong...

During my tenure as IFC chair, our committee and our profession faced a number of unexpected challenges. Instead of reaping the benefits of the long-awaited state grants, we found ourselves scrambling to preserve longstanding programs that were taken for granted. After an expected victory in the CIPA case at the 3rd Circuit Court, we were shocked to learn that the U.S. Supreme Court decided to uphold the law, thus sending libraries scrambling to find filtering solutions or ways to cover the lost federal funds if they didn't choose to filter. In addition, we found ourselves facing a stream of state filtering bills that wore down our resistance and were ultimately enacted for school and public libraries. Finally, the very roots of our civil liberties were shaken with the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act. Instead of my anticipated presentations on how to submit a challenge form, I found myself on Colorado Public Radio and at countless luncheons speaking about the dangers of the USA PATRIOT Act, all the while wondering if my activism made me a target for FBI investigations. Was

anything being gained from this time of turmoil? Yes. The Colorado IFC became an experienced producer of information, having nearly cornered the market on USA PATRIOT Act brochures and publications. In fact, it won national recognition for its work by receiving the SIRS-ProQuest award for intellectual freedom activities. IFC members continued to travel around the state sharing ways of promoting intellectual freedom in spite of the new political climate, thus gaining valuable presentation skills in the process.

For a state-level committee, the IFC was very active. This was partly due to frustration with the state association's executive board. In 2002, there was a movement to adopt resolutions protesting the USA PATRIOT Act. The Colorado IFC campaigned for the state association to adopt such a resolution, but were overruled by concerns that advocacy for civil liberties would jeopardize the newly-won state funding for library collections. The pragmatic arguments won the day, and the state association's board rejected the initial resolution expressing concern about the USA PATRIOT Act. However, the state legislature still voted to strip funding for library collections despite our official lack of support for the new "anti-terrorist" legislation. From the state IFC's perspective, we had betrayed our principles for the sake of funding and still lost out. When we received the SIRS-ProQuest award for the best regional project for our USA PATRIOT Act brochure, we felt a sense of vindication for sticking with our principles but were still saddened by the political climate that forced our pragmatic colleagues in the state association to demur from supporting our opposition to the USA PATRIOT Act.

At the time (2003), there was some idle conversation about taking over the state library association's executive board so that intellectual freedom issues would have greater prominence going forward. By 2006, idle conversation had turned to action. The president of the state library association was a member of the Intellectual Freedom Committee. I continued this trend when I was elected in 2006 to be the president-elect of the state library association. When I assumed the office of president in 2007, the Intellectual Freedom Committee's focus had shifted from being concerned about reporting challenges to library materials to the protection of patron information from over-enthusiastic collection by the government. Little did I know that the next issue would be noteworthy of journalistic investigation.

In 2007, the state Intellectual Freedom Committee invited the United States Attorney for Colorado to participate in a civic

dialogue about the anonymity of information. The U.S. attorney came to a preconference presentation that was devoted to the ethical implications of providing anonymous access to the internet. The preconference was an excellent exercise in discussing the variety of viewpoints while exploring the strengths and weaknesses of each position. During the dialogue, all sides acknowledged that we shared the common ground of protecting children, but there were differences in how we would reach that common ground. A week after our preconference, the local paper featured a story titled "Libraries secure for kid porn" (Cardona, 2007). This immediately put libraries on the defensive as we didn't want libraries to be seen as the safe haven for child pornography. A series of meetings ensued, but we could not come to agreement on the best way to police illegal activities while preserving the rights of innocent citizens. The eventual resolution to this situation was the resignation of the U.S. attorney when Barack Obama was elected president in 2008. In the absence of a legislative remedy, the Colorado community is not assured of privacy protections from the USA PATRIOT Act. We are still waiting to see what the legislative landscape will reveal as current legislative questions are resolved.

In 2003, I was asked to look back at my years as state IFC chair. Initially, I was disheartened by the threats to privacy stemming from the filtering requirements and the desire to collect information about our library users. However, I quickly saw that the library profession needed to be proactive about challenges to reader privacy and that we were making good headway towards developing educational programs needed to inform our colleagues about the changing landscape. Looking at the current state of affairs, I see that we continue to need leaders at all levels who are well versed in the intellectual freedom issues facing society as a whole, while still being articulate about the local issues that our colleagues face daily.

As in the past, librarians are challenged to inform our communities about the threats that may restrict access to information, while retaining the believability that we have labored to secure. The challenge of 21st century libraries is to ensure access to information while teaching our communities to be ever vigilant to new threats to open access. Only a consistent commitment to the importance of free information will provide the energy needed to keep up the fight.

References:

Cardona, F. (2007, November 18). Libraries secure for kid porn. The Denver Post. Retrieved from http://www.denverpost.com/ci_7494175

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