

# LIBRARIES: Ensuring the Public's Right to Know in the Information Age

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by

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A decade ago, we were facing serious cuts and closings of libraries in the U.S. The New York Public Library hired a new director named Vartan Gregorian. And he said: "Just because we are public, in the public sector, doesn't mean we have to be ugly or poor!" Reporters would ask-aren't libraries closing? In response, ALA galvanized librarians and library users. We started a media/advocacy campaign.

Today, we have no excuse to be ugly or poor. We are proud of the progress of our libraries and all we have done together to make this happen, and all the library champions who have spoken out on our behalf. We have renovated central libraries in many cities, newly expanded academic libraries, exciting community programs, digital libraries, and free Internet access in almost every library in the country. Indeed, we are experiencing a renaissance in libraries throughout the United States.

But all is not well. We have many children as well as adults who cannot read. Citizens are participating less in our democracy. Voting is at the lowest levels ever, people are attending fewer political rallies, and volunteering for social causes less. Apathy is rampant. While the public has more access to information than ever before, they know less about their government, their representative, and issues of the day.

We must also keep in mind that...

- Many believe that everything is available on the Internet.
- All access to electronic information could be on a pay-per-view basis
- Almost all public access could be filtered if a new law takes affect next fall.

Thanks to the work of ALA and librarians throughout the country, none of these realities have happened yet.

When I'm interviewed by the media today, I'm asked "won't libraries be obsolete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Are we still going to need libraries?" You and I know that we will not only need libraries, but they are more essential than ever to ensuring our information rights in the information age.

America's libraries, at the heart of every community, stand in defense of freedom. Benjamin Franklin founded the first lending library even before he helped found the new republic. Franklin, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson were among the nation's founders who believed that a free society must insure the preservation and provision of accessible knowledge for all its citizens. When they turned their attention to designing a government capable of preserving freedom for the citizenry, they looked to an institution with the potential for realizing their ideal. For if an informed public is the very foundation

of American democracy then America's libraries are the cornerstone of that democracy. As James Madison eloquently stated: "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance and that people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power that knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or tragedy or perhaps both."

Benjamin Franklin's novel idea of sharing information resources was a radical one. In the rest of the civilized world libraries were the property of the ruling classes and religion. American democracy was founded on the principles of freedom of information and the public's right to know. America's libraries ensure the freedom of speech, the freedom to read, the freedom to view. Libraries provide the resources the public needs to be well informed and to participate fully in every aspect of our information society.

Libraries provide the real and virtual spaces in communities for the free and open exchange of ideas fundamental to democratic participation and civil society. As community forums, libraries present thoughtful, engaging, and enlightening programs about problems facing our democratic way of life--programs that have a vast potential to renew communities and encourage active citizenship. From librarians we can learn how to identify and evaluate information that is essential for making decisions that affect the way we live, work, learn, and govern ourselves. America's libraries are ideally suited to play a critical role in rekindling civic spirit by providing not only information, but also the expanded opportunities for dialogue that the public needs to make decisions about common concerns.

Today, libraries continue to operate at the leading edge of citizen participation in the political process. For years, the public has registered to vote and cast election ballots in libraries. Citizens attend forums with candidates in local libraries and learn more about their positions and voting records. They monitor the work of both elected and appointed officials through the publications housed in library depositories of government information, where they also gather data for taking positions on various issues facing their communities. During campaign seasons, citizens find voter guides and other relevant information about elections and referenda in libraries and engage with authors who write about political issues at events held in libraries. They also find information about deadlines for voter registration, locations of polling places, and valuable electronic links to high-quality electoral information in print as well as on the web.

Libraries utilize new media to reach out to communities across America. One key way they support democratic action and citizen participation is through the development of electronic web sites that guide users to valid and reliable information that informs their choices about candidates and issues.

In the information age, libraries and librarians are more essential than ever. They are essential to our economic well being, to global understanding, to the advancement of learning, to meeting the challenge of information overload, to closing the digital divide, and to ensuring public participation in the democratic process.

Yet, no matter how essential our mission, we must struggle to raise public awareness. Like never before, we must capture the public's imagination about the value of libraries and librarians to democracy. Our challenge in this new decade of the 21st century is to act-to raise our voices to effectively present what we do-to show how librarians make a difference. We must work together to tell the full library story to leaders in government,

business, education and the general public. We must speak with a unified voice. What we need are articulate advocates armed with facts, cases, examples, stories, testimonials, pictures, that show how libraries and librarians help and how the lack of either hurts. We need to find users willing to tell their success stories-how they got their start or improved their lives at the library. We need ammunition to ensure that the battles to come are fought loudly, visibly, and successfully.

Now more than ever we face serious threats to public access and the free flow of ideas. What is at stake is not only the basic and fundamental role of libraries, but also the public's access to information and knowledge and the basic underpinnings of our democratic society. We must act quickly if we are to convince the public that libraries are the information and literacy access points they and their children need to succeed in the 21st-Century information society.

Our library association, ALA, can profoundly influence funding and public policy, and ensure public access to information. ALA provides us the platform, the resources, the opportunity. When we speak out articulately, with a unified voice, we can galvanize public support for libraries and librarians, and the public's information rights.

Over the course of my involvement with ALA, I have learned first hand that building partnerships and speaking out for the public's information rights works. It worked 10 years ago when we stemmed the tide of libraries closing. It worked when we fought to ensure free electronic access to government information. It worked when we fought to protect fair use under the copyright law. It worked when we fought to secure subsidized telecommunications rates for schools and libraries. It worked when we fought to ensure intellectual Freedom in the digital age. It worked when we promoted new programs and increased funding for all types of libraries. It worked because we not only spoke out but we also built successful partnerships between ALA and other stakeholders.

What do we need to do?

1) We must recognize why these issues are so important to libraries. We must be informed about the issues and the players (stakeholders) on all sides. We must participate in the public policy process, be visible, gain a seat at the table. We must raise issues to others, to the press. We must participate actively in the debate over fair use, the free flow of ideas, and the digital divide. And we must communicate the implications for public access.

2) We must speak out. We must tell people about the value of libraries to democracy. We must speak with a unified voice.

3) We must build partnerships and coalitions. We cannot be effective on our own. We must get organized and work together with others to make a difference and extend our reach. We must enter the struggle adequately armed, flanked by coalitions concerned with promoting public access. We must galvanize grass roots action.

Our library association, ALA, provides us the forum to take all these actions. Through ALA, we develop our positions and build consensus-the tools of deliberative democracy. We recommend legislative action, and we secure a seat at table. We identify model programs, educate our members, develop leaders, train members as advocates,

develop effective messages, build partnerships, and learn new skills. Together, we make a difference for libraries in every community.

Right now, we are formulating a new public awareness campaign to demonstrate the crucial role of libraries and librarians in our democratic society. This campaign is about convincing the American public and decision makers that our libraries are not institutions of the past. That we must build information smart communities that can thrive in the 21st-century information society. And these communities require well-funded, effective library services—library services easily available to all individuals, where they live, where they work, and where they study. That's what the Campaign for America's Libraries is about.

This is a critical time for library advocacy. Decisions that will determine the frontiers of information access in the 21st century are being made now all around the world. Successful library advocacy efforts need each and every one of us—as individuals, as librarians, as library supporters, and as members of library associations.

The campaign for America's libraries will build upon a strong foundation of public support and a long history of successful communications efforts. Our goal is to present a positive, consistent set of messages over a multi-year period, underscoring that:

- 1) Libraries are changing and dynamic places. Librarians are techno-savvy, on the forefront of the information age. In a world that's information rich, they are information smart, and help ensure a society where everyone is information literate. You'll find the right answer at your library.
- 2) Libraries are places of opportunity. They are a part of the American dream. They are a place for education and for self-help. And because they offer free access to all, they bring opportunity for all. They are the cornerstones of democracy.
- 3) Libraries bring you the world. Libraries are unique. In person. Online. Where else can you have access to nearly anything on the Web or in print as well as personal service and assistance in finding it? Remember: the ultimate search engine is at your library...

Librarians must speak out loudly and clearly for those democratic ideals we hold so dearly—namely equal and ready access for all. We cannot afford to sit back and let information be provided only for the few, only for special interests, only for those who can afford high prices, only for those who can utilize highly sophisticated computer software and hardware. We and only we can make public access happen for all citizens. We must capture the public's attention, their imagination. We must seize the initiative, articulate our values and communicate our important message.

In closing, let me say that you know best the value and importance of your libraries to your constituents. I urge you to speak out and tell your story. Work together through your library associations to communicate your important message. And build those partnerships to ensure that you have an informed citizenry that participates actively in your democratic society.

We are delighted to be here to participate in the exciting work of the Library Associations in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Thank you for letting us join you. I hope ALA and your three library associations can continue to work together over the years ahead to ensure citizens in your countries a civil society where the public has access to information they need to flourish in the 21st century.