

Prepared by the American Library Association, Intellectual Freedom Committee  
Subcommittee on the Impact of Media Concentration on Libraries

## **INTRODUCTION**

In June 2003, the American Library Association (ALA) passed a resolution deploring the Federal Communications Commission's actions changing media ownership rules that encourage further concentration of the media.

of its impact and identifying innovative ways to provide materials, information, and services that foster media diversity in libraries.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this document is to provide libraries, library consortia, and library networks with a centralized list of strategies and actions to help them fulfill one of their key responsibilities: to provide access to a diverse collection of resources and services.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the document, special attention is given to the acquisition of and access to small, independent, and alternative sources—including locally produced and international ones—in all formats: print, AV media, and electronic. These sources in

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<sup>1</sup> While the term diversity implies difference, experts have found the concept difficult to define or measure with any precision. In Europe, media diversity generally refers to the promotion of culture (national identity) and the protection of cultural heritage. Diversity of culture, content, and sources are all presented as aspects of media pluralism. Internal pluralism aims at ensuring that a wide range of values find expression within a single media organization. External pluralism aims at ensuring the maintenance of many media organizations and sources, each expressing a particular viewpoint. Political pluralism focuses on a range of political views represented in the media, while cultural pluralism is about the need to represent a variety of cultures that reflect the diversity within a society. Media pluralism is safeguarded through European policy instruments that regulate licensing, ownership, access, and programming. Not so in the United States, where First Amendment protections preclude intervention with respect to content. Instead, policy makers grapple with a regulatory regime that aims toward media diversity, but relies primarily on the marketplace for direction. For several years, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) has convened a Federal Advisory Committee on Diversity in Communications in the Digital Age to

particular, including *open access*, collaboratively produced and other free Internet sources, have the potential to counteract the influence and consequences resulting from increased concentration of media ownership that affects all types of libraries.

The actions proposed in this document offer numerous approaches to countering the negative effects of media concentration and to promoting the growing, yet often less powerful, body of small, independent and alternative sources of information. Each library will need to decide which actions are most appropriate and realistic to meeting its goals within budgetary and space constraints. The actions are presented as a means to reach a goal common to all libraries: providing access to a diverse collection of resources and services.

### **Background**

A primary mission of libraries is to provide a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities they serve. Through this mission, they celebrate and preserve the ideals of a democratic society by making available the widest possible range

balance. Libraries must provide forums—both physical and virtual—that create opportunities for individuals to engage in the open and balanced exchange of viewpoints and ideas.

New technologies and market innovations now enable the distribution of more specialized content, creating what Chris Anderson calls the “long tail”.<sup>4</sup> Instead of a mass production push system, an emerging pull economy allows niche products to coexist with best sellers, providing important openings for institutions like libraries to fulfill their unique responsibility and obligation to provide a forum for unheard voices. As librarians become more aware of the challenges and opportunities surrounding media consolidation and its impact locally, they are devising new strategies to ensure broader access to a diversity of resources. In addition to reviewing their selection and organization policies, they are using new technologies to create and preserve knowledge and deploying new methods to promote media literacy and teach critical thinking skills. Given that the mainstream media are consolidating and the alternative voices are ever smaller and less commercialized, librarians must no longer depend on traditional, passive approaches to acquisition. They must be vigilant and assertive in seeking out alternative voices. In short, libraries must assume an active leadership role if they are to ensure access to a broad spectrum of ideas. Otherwise, they will abrogate their responsibility to guarantee free expression and promote the public interest in the digital age.

## **I. COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT**

The development and management of responsive collections is a central obligation of librarians and library workers. The quality of a library’s services and programs is directly dependent on the strength of the collection. Thus, it is essential that the collection fully reflects the needs and interests of the library’s community of users, and furthermore, that the library staff is proactive in anticipating needs and acquiring the diverse and often unique resources necessary to meet these needs. Building collections and providing access to materials in different formats produced by independent, small, and local producers helps to ensure that multiple voices, perspectives, and ideas are represented in the collection.

First and foremost, libraries should implement collection development and management policies and practices that foster this goal. The selection, acquisition, cataloging and organization of materials, in particular, have a profound impact on the richness, quality, and perceived relevance of a library’s collection. Librarians should adopt collection development and selection policies that have clear, unambiguous guidelines for developing balanced, diverse collections. While there are numerous popular tools that identify and review materials from mainstream media outlets, librarians need to consult additional sources to obtain information about lesser-known materials. Practices such as vendor selection, ordering procedures, subscription decisions, and license agreement negotiations should reflect the goal of building a diverse collection of materials and media. Likewise, the cataloging and organization of materials should facilitate access to the full range of resources acquired by a library. The strategies

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<sup>4</sup> Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).



Encourage distributors to include more diverse media producers in their approval plans and inventories

Review approval plan profiles to ensure that they identify and procure a diversity of media

Order from and pay small/independent publishers quickly and directly, especially when their materials are not readily available from library distributors

Encourage small/independent/alternative producers to offer bulk discounts or preferential rates for multi-branch library systems, library consortia, and library networks

Obtain public performance rights that allow groups to show small/independent/alternative films, and also buy films for personal or face-to-face classroom use not requiring rights clearance, which are thus less expensive

Facilitate the acquisition of local materials and publications not commonly acquired by libraries to provide greater and sustainable access to the public

Distribute guides to help small/independent/alternative media producers work effectively with libraries

Produce guides to help librarians work with small/independent/alternative media producers

Establish standing orders with independent presses and media producers

### **Cataloging and Issues of Access**

*User-centered cataloging* and classification practices help to facilitate access to library collections. It is important to pay particular attention to the procurement and

formats offered. While the trend toward group purchases and bundled packages of databases presents libraries with hard-

Promote access to a variety of free websites that enable the creation, sharing, and remixing of knowledge, music, video, and other art

Feature access to the Internet Archive, which provides access to the Internet of the past, including library catalogs and censored pages otherwise inaccessible

Educate and train users in media, information, and other 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies

Streamline access to free and independent databases along with commercial ones through federated searches, periodical finders, staff picks, and other website marketing devices

Encourage and request database aggregators to include small/independent/alternative resources in their packages, specifying sources that will be most useful to your community

Utilize free open source software

Support the development of open source library applications

Serve as a local community resource regarding technology, including open source applications

Offer space for local LINUX and UNIX user group meetings

Enhance access to open source software and other technology resources





Create a collection of zines and offer programs on how to create zines

**Government Information**

The public's access to government information is the foundation of a democratic society. Libraries have a long history of providing access to government information, particularly through its participation in the Federal Depository Library Program. This role is changing as government information is increasingly available in electronic format and commercial vendors provide sophisticated interface overlays with the goal of improving searching and access options. As this trend becomes more prominent, libraries need to promote their unique role in making federal, state, and local e-government information and services available, along with assistance from knowledgeable staff. The library's web site can offer a starting point to accessing government information on the web. This, combined with the library's print collections, can be a vital nexus to informed citizens.

Actions

Serve as a repository of information about the local community, its people, and its history, in order to foster a unique community identity

Collect local government and other information so residents can find pertinent facts and other information about their communities

Produce local information and referral databases and make them freely available on the library's web site

Address the special concerns of rural communities and their libraries

Digitize and preserve materials that are unique to a local community

Provide sufficient content and services that address the civic needs and interests of local communities (i.e., localism)

Purchase and showcase materials that represent the cultural diversity of local communities

Identify hidden or unique collections

Seek out and maintain unique local materials, especially ephemera and other primary resources

Cultivate community awareness to support local collections

Build partnerships with individual and institutional donors, private foundations, and local businesses

Conduct public awareness campaigns focusing on subject content interests and the potential loss of vital local stories and histories

Create a plan for policy statements that describe the scope of collecting, materials identifying, cultivating sources, staffing, and sustainability

Provide administrative support at the highest level for unique and local collections

Retain original items that are reformatted or archivally copied

Build special collections that include alternative, independent, small press media



underserved populations within a community are preserved for future generations. Libraries, more than most other community institutions, have the facilities, equipment, and knowledge to fulfill this stewardship role for the community.

### Actions

- Collaborate with small/independent/alternative media outlets and other cultural institutions in the community (e.g., PEG and PBS stations, college and independent radio, and museums)
- Serve as an information commons where local citizens can exchange, share, and understand each others' unique cultural viewpoints
- Showcase alternative producers at programs, book parties, and lectures
- Include small/independent/alternative producers in bibliographies, exhibits, and other public endeavors
- Collaborate with local teachers, agencies, and groups (like book or parenting groups) to discover their needs and suggestions and encourage them to include in their reading and viewing lists, curricula, and programs the **most relevant** nonmainstream titles your library has or can collect.
- Utilize low power radio to broadcast events at the library
- Provide opportunities for the public to deliberate about issues of common concern
- Work with the library's outreach services, programming, and marketing departments to assure awareness and coordination of available resources among the targeted groups
- Create feedback mechanisms, such as focus groups or citizens' advisory panels, to help meet changing needs
- Train staff to be aware of and sensitive to disabilities which afflict many citizens
- Reach out to local providers of services to individuals with disabilities
- Meet with leaders of local ethnic groups to build relationships, encourage awareness of and use of the library, and gain understanding of the groups' needs in terms of the library
- Hire library staff with knowledge and/or language skills relevant to the population, and who have a commitment to serving the population
- Understand and respond to the fact that different neighborhoods may vary significantly in their ethnic composition, and that this composition is dynamic over time

### **Reference and User Services**

Libraries increasingly aim to be as self-service as possible, with the idea that staff time can be saved for more essential duties. Reference and user services are what we are saving that time for. Without a librarian who knows the full spectrum of diverse resources and how they interrelate, without a librarian to conduct an expert reference interview to help users understand how to fill their needs, without a librarian to find resources to fill needs in a timely fashion at the right intellectual level, much of the library collection may go unused, and many user needs may go unfilled. If libraries are to help users access a diversity of resources, reference services need to be excellent and readily available.

Actions

Provide service to users through a variety of new technological means, and continue to support traditional face-to-face and telephone reference and readers' advisory services without which many users will not find what they want and need.

Support ongoing training to improve the librarian's ability to know and teach others to utilize the full spectrum of library resources—print, AV, and electronic.

Library use is increasing and libraries and librarians are more necessary than ever. Nevertheless, the continued relevance of libraries is still questioned. Intense competition for public and institutional dollars makes it crucial that librarians garner public support to maintain and expand library and information programs. Libraries play a role like no other institution in our democracy, yet they are not always able to communicate that uniqueness. The challenge is to capture the public's imagination by fostering an understanding of the value of libraries and librarians to our democracy. In an age when the public sphere is under attack, librarians must stand in defense of the public's right to know and promote free expression and access to a diversity of ideas. No one else will stand up with the same conviction, with the same dedication, with the same determination to protect and promote the public's right to access a diversity of ideas.

#### Actions

Promote the library as an important source for a diversity of ideas unavailable from the mainstream media

Position the library as an entity that promotes the sharing of ideas

Observe Media Democracy Day, Freedom of Information Day, Sunshine Week, Constitution Day, Banned Books Week, and similar annual events that call attention to freedom of information and democratic participation



Oppose changes in media ownership rules that encourage further concentration of the media

Oppose copyright laws, regulations, rules, and practices that limit the public's access rights

Support policies that strengthen and expand the public's information rights

Demonstrate how libraries are impacted by media consolidation and their importance to countering its impact

Support anti-trust actions against attempts by large media companies, including scholarly publishers, to merge

Support laws and regulations that promote and preserve equitable and affordable acquisition, distribution, and transmittal costs, such as licensing fees, postal rates, cable fees and broadband fees for small, independent, alternative, and community media.

Focus activism on antitrust issues, court cases, and regulatory actions, as well as legislation

Partner with groups supporting more diverse media and opposing media consolidation and other policies that restrict the public's access to information

### **Intellectual Freedom Advocacy**

The American Library Association's efforts to protect and promote intellectual freedom serve as a model for and inspiration to library groups throughout the U.S. and abroad. Part of the reason for ALA's success is its strong organizational support for this core value. Leading these efforts is ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC),



Digital Repository

An organization that has responsibility for the long-term maintenance of digital resources, as well as for making them available to communities agreed on by the depositor and the repository.

Folksonomy

Internet-based information retrieval method consisting of collaboratively created labels that catalog content such as web pages, online photographs, and web links. A folksonomic approach to metadata creation enables the personal classification (or tagging) of digital resources.

Institutional Repository

A digital collection capturing and preserving the intellectual output of a single or multi-institutional community.

Open Access

Resources that are openly available to users with no requirements for authentication or payment.

Open Source

A program in which the source code is available to the general public for use and/or modification from its original design free of charge.

Peer Review

The process by which scholarly articles are chosen to be included in a refereed journal. An editorial board consisting of experts in the author's field review the article and decide if it is authoritative enough for publication.

Social Bookmarking

The practice of saving bookmarks to a public website and tagging them with keywords.

User-centered Catalog

An online catalog that is born and assumes its form while it is consulted, and whose form is conditioned, if not determined, by its users.

ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee, Subcommittee on Media Diversity, 2003-2007

Byron Anderson

Karen Brown

Kent Oliver, IFC Chair  
Jim Scholtz  
Patricia Sharp  
Ann Sparanese  
James Teliha  
Milton Wolf  
Shingjoun Yeo  
Deborah Caldwell-Stone, ALA staff liaison