



Librarians' Activities in Relation to Media Monopoly

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From the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s, there was a active subgroup of the ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table called the Alternatives in Print Task Force (later the Alternative Media Task Force) that was concerned with the influence of media conglomerates on library collections, as well as on the reading public's appetite for books and its beliefs about the world. This group (AIP for short) saw media concentration and the market-based media system as an intellectual freedom issue because it effectively limits the diversity of library collections insofar as those collections are shaped by the industry's marketing efforts and publishing choices. AIP was a manifestation of a broader discourse about media monopoly that has since faded to some extent. The conversation about media monopoly has faded because of the rise of the internet's potential to provide outlets for a greater diversity of voices and changes in the publishing industry that have lowered the barriers to entry faced by small, independent publishing houses and self-published authors. Despite these positive changes, however, library collections still reflect mass-market publishing, and the broader economic changes that affected the publishing industry have continued apace. Mass-market publishing is still controlled by a small number of conglomerates with a fiduciary responsibility to shareholders that makes profits paramount. In an industry with small profit margins, the effect has been a steady reliance on blockbusters and an endemic shyness about publishing books that challenge the overall system.

Proponents of media diversity who are informed by an awareness of the limits of the free market as a means of distributing texts have mostly been concerned with the obstacles faced by those wanting to promote progressive and radical views, especially views that challenge capitalism. Self-published books about golfing techniques or amateur attempts at genre fiction have been less of a concern, though the theory may still be said to apply. In terms of the ideal of free access to a range of ideas to inform a democratic society, obstacles that limit access to ideas farther from the political

center are a legitimate concern because they artificially circumscribe democratic discourse. Analysis of this problem in works published in the '80s and '90s was quite sophisticated. Among the touchstone works were Ben Bagdikian's *Media Monopoly*, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*, and works by Robert McChesney. These works were informed and inspired by Upton Sinclair's 1919 book about capitalism and newspaper publishing, *The Brass Check*.

Attention to these issues has been given in works that focus on the library context as well. These include 1982's



Alternative Materials in Libraries, edited by James P. Danky and Elliott Shore, and 1996's *Alternative Literature: A Practical Guide for Librarians*, by Chris Atton. Additionally, two reference sources focused on alternative publishers and alternative periodicals, respectively. Under the auspices of AIP, Byron Anderson compiled *Alternative Publishers of Books in North America (APBNA)*. After its sixth biannual edition it became a web resource in the late 2000s. The Alternative Press Center published two editions of *Annotations: A Guide to the Independent, Critical Press*. Both resources were published with prefaces and introductions by notable thinkers in the field of media diversity and the alternative press.

The librarians involved in AIP (myself included) advocated for special attention to the alternative press in collection development activities.

We felt that this was necessary, because of the distorting influence of the market, in order to address the call of the Library Bill of Rights to “provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues.” In the '90s, we lamented the fact that the problem of market distortion of the information life cycle was not given attention by ALA's intellectual freedom establishment. We did recruit ALA past-president Nancy Kranich to contribute the preface to the sixth edition of *APBNA*, which gives a fine summary of the problem of media consolidation (it is available on the web at the Library Juice Press website: <http://libraryjuicepress.com/apbna-preface.php>). More importantly (though probably not because of our influence), in the mid-2000s an IFC subcommittee was formed, The IFC Subcommittee on the Impact of Media Concentration on Libraries. In 2007 they released their report, “Fostering Media Diversity in Libraries: Strategies and Actions.” After the report was published, the subcommittee was dissolved. That report, which is



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available on the ALA website (www.ala.org/offices/sites/ala.org/offices/files/content/oif/ifissues/fostering_media_dive1.pdf), represents significant work by the subcommittee and makes an important statement. Unfortunately, it seems to have been shelved by the IFC in the sense that it didn't lead to policy changes or advocacy efforts, and its findings have not been incorporated into updates to the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*. The report doesn't suffer from the datedness that the seminal works of the '80s and '90s do in the internet era; it addresses the contemporary context.

I want to take this opportunity to call on ALA's intellectual freedom establishment to follow up on the subcommittee's report and renew its attention to the problem of media consolidation and media diversity in libraries. For many people, intellectual freedom

and “economic liberty” (i.e., a free-market economy) seem to go hand and hand. Historically, they may have been related developments, going back to the seventeenth-century European Enlightenment. In the way that capitalism has developed, however, the market system has come to present special problems for the dissemination of ideas, partly by creating a bias in its own favor. Librarians who are attuned to this problem consider it to be a core intellectual freedom issue. There is precedent for addressing it in the library world, including at the level of the IFC. With the OIF now seeking new directions, this may be the right time to take a fresh look at the problem. Perhaps the IFC subcommittee could be reformed, or perhaps its existing report could inform new updates to the *Manual*. It is my hope that the problem of market distortions in the dissemination of ideas will be given some attention by the intellectual freedom establishment in the coming decades.