COUNCIL PERSPECTIVES

Janet Swan Hill,
Executive Board, 2004-2007

Over the years I have written many messages to the Council List, or to Member Forum, and generally have not saved them. Beginning in the late 90s, however, I had been around Council long enough to see that some topics came up again and again, and also that some issues that had come up in my earlier terms on Council had become sufficiently distant that an understanding of their history was lost. Because of this I started to save some of my messages in case I might be able to use them again later. Those messages I present below, organized only loosely by topic. They are unedited except for the addition of a brief parenthetical introduction, and correction of typographical errors. In two cases I have appended to the original messages responses I received off-list that provided additional information or clarification.

Because this compilation is long, here’s a list of what is included.

1. Ave atque vale
2. The place and purpose of council
3. Council operations
4. Service on council
5. In defense of councilors
6. The myth of the level playing field
7. Electronic enhancements for council business
9. Our constituencies
8. Toward a more effective council
10. Closing debate and latecomers to the microphone
11. Participation and dominating the discussion
12. Are motions always necessary?
13. Term limits; council candidates
14. Councilor retention and turnover
15. Council forums
16. Council list
17. Councilors pro tem
18. Removal of a sitting councilor
19. Those who serve
20. Membership and democracy in ala
21. Core values history
22. Membership meeting quorum
23. Membership meeting attendance
24. Councilors and membership meetings
25. Membership meetings process

Twenty-five messages reflecting on twenty-three years on Council or Executive Board. I guess that’s not as excessive as I might have thought.
1. AVE ATQUE VALE

(delivered at my final Council meeting, following my report as Chair of Policy Monitoring Committee)

July, 2010

Twenty-five years ago, I began the first of what would be twenty-three years’ service on Council. I did not run for re-election this year because I will be retiring next year, and my next term would have ended after my retirement, so this is my last set of Council meetings.

I love Council and have enjoyed every year I have been here. It has been an honor, a privilege, and a delight to serve on Council. My thanks to all of you here in this room, and to all those who came before you with whom I have served over the years.

I have made many good friends here, and learned a great deal. I’ve learned a lot about ALA and how it works, and a lot about parliamentary procedure, but more importantly, I’ve learned a lot about democracy. And a lot about librarianship. More than I could have learned if I had confined my activity to one division or roundtable.

There are many in the Association who are critical of Council …. And many Councilors are critical of it as well. They accuse Council of not accomplishing anything, of spending too much time dealing with issues that they consider none of ALA’s business, and spending too much time wordsmithing.

I disagree. The role of Council is to set policy and establish public stands for the Association. When policy matters come to Council in beautiful form, well-written and persuasively justified, we don’t have to spend time on them. It’s a testament to the quality of the work that our committees perform, and a testament to Council’s restraint that we do NOT spend time on things that don’t need it.

As to wordsmithing, it is important to remember that words matter. When we approve something, we approve exactly what the words said, and just NOT what we meant. Wordsmithing helps make sure that the words actually say what we mean. People sometimes get impatient and say “you know what we mean, let’s just pass the motion” … but while we may know what you mean TODAY, (although some of us may not), those who come after us weren’t here, and they have nothing but our words to go by. Words matter. Grammar matters. Syntax matters. It is though careful choice of words, and attention to grammar and syntax that our meaning is made clear.

Finally, about the issue of “it’s not ALA’s business.” Our profession and our association are based on communication, access to information and ideas, and the exchange of ideas. There has to be a place in the organization where issues that many of our members DO consider to be important, and relevant, and connected to librarianship --- where those issues can be brought forward for serious discussion, and where action can be taken.

It’s our job to afford that opportunity, and to listen, to think, to participate, to approach each debate with an open mind, and ultimately to decide. If we defeat the motions brought forward, so be it.

What we do here in Council is important. And we do it well. And it’s work, but it’s also satisfying, and it can be fun. Don’t doubt it. Don’t let others make you doubt it. Set them straight.

(POSTSCRIPT: At the end of Council III, I offered this final exhortation): Don’t mumble. Speak up. Speak into the microphone. Don’t be afraid. If you have something to say, come to the microphone and
say it. If you have a complaint or a suggestion, don’t just mutter to your neighbor. Share it with us all. Don’t split your infinitives, take care with your reflexives, and remember the hortatory subjunctive.

2. THE PLACE AND PURPOSE OF COUNCIL

October, 2005

(This was in response to a message from Melora Raney Norman, as part of a discussion about the proper role and business of Council. It’s a topic that comes up repeatedly. In this case, it arose as part of the “post mortem” of Council meetings that had considered a resolution on the use of torture – a classic example of the kind of resolution that comes in for criticism as “none of ALA’s business”)

I'd like to thank Melora for her earlier message putting the work of Council -- and all of ALA -- into context. I'm going to remember her argument for future use.

Council is not ALA. ALA is an enormous and complex organization that does work concerning virtually every facet of libraries and librarianship, from the tiniest practical detail to the broadest philosophical issues. ALA is the divisions. It's the roundtables. It's the committees. It's the offices. ... And task forces ... And working groups. Each entity has its sphere of authority and influence, its own purpose and goals.

The combined result of it all is not transparent. It's difficult to comprehend. Even people who have been deeply involved in the work of some part of ALA may not understand how the parts fit all together. To someone who is not involved in the work of ALA it's probably ALL mysterious. That person may not understand that the things of most importance to her/him have been delegated to PLA (or YALSA, or LITA, or RUSA, of ALCTS, or some other division or entity), so when s/he sees that Council has passed a resolution concerning the use of torture, s/he may think to her/himself "Why waste time on that stuff, when I want a real decision on genre headings for works of fiction?" (or circulation policies, or story hours, or serials pricing, or whatever). And they may not realize that those things they want addressed (1) are being or have been addressed by the responsible body, and (2) are not what Council is about.

Council is about broad issues; about overarching matters; about things that can't be delegated to the divisions; about things that cross organizational boundaries.

And Council is -- as ALA is -- about democracy.

I was at a joint Division/Executive Board leadership meeting this last week, and at some point the question was asked "what can we do about Council?" I have the answer: 1) Turn in a petition and RUN for Council. And if you are elected, work for change. 2) VOTE for candidates who you think deserve it.

And while we're talking about democracy, cast your mind back and remember who it was that said "democracy" should be included among our core values, and said so with great eloquence. Mark Rosenzweig.

3. COUNCIL OPERATIONS

Addresses three recurring topics: Where our business comes from, what’s appropriate for Council (and ALA) to consider, and participation.

August, 1999
This is, most of you will be delighted to know, the last “part” of the things that have caught my attention in this discussion of council and councilors. I’m continuing the numbering from my previous message.

3. Origins of action. At some point in this discussion, it was observed that Council needs to use its time better. That we have seemed in recent years to spend all of our time responding to resolutions promulgated by the same small group of councilors, or to the action items from committees, and to a lesser extent from roundtables and divisions. This raises two issues in my mind. The first is whether Council ought to be mainly proactive or mainly reactive, whether the “view” of Council has changed over time, whether we are getting more or less action referred to us from committees, roundtables, and divisions, and whether the committees, roundtables and divisions and council all understand this relationship. (In other words, if we aren’t getting much action coming to us from the various units, is it because there isn’t much action to consider, or because the units don’t understand they ought to be sending stuff to us, or is it because WE ought to be originating more?).

The second issue is that of the “same small group of councilors”, and it is the same issue I’ll address below. The councilors who bring matters to council aren’t to be blamed for being willing to do so. If there are those who believe that the matters brought by “the ssgoc” represent too great a proportion of the agenda, then there are some possible remedies at hand. They include having other people bring other matters to the floor, and dealing with the issues that are brought to us expeditiously. Neither of these things is easy to achieve, but if there is a vacuum to be filled, it is not the fault of the people who fill it.

4. Joining in the discussion. Also brought up in this discussion, and also noted among the responses to the survey on how we are doing in reinventing Council, is the oft-repeated complaint about people speaking more than once, or speaking more than 3 minutes, OR SPEAKING AT ALL. It’s an old complaint. We hear people complaining that if we didn’t have people going to the microphones just to hear themselves talk, we’d move along much faster. Yes we would. We would also be having votes and taking actions that were much less well informed. As a “speaker out”, I’d like to note that people don’t go to the microphones just to hear themselves speak. They speak because they have something to say and an opinion to express, and because they were under the impression that communication is a part of what Council is about, and is essential to the process. And THEY speak because others don’t. The way to be sure that “the ssgoc” who speak do not monopolize the floor is to take the floor yourself. Be assured that some of the ssgoc who normally speak WON’T if their point is made well by someone else.

The same thing applies to this e-mail list. From time to time someone complains about clutter in their mailbox, or how much time some of us seem to have on our hands, or complains about that ssgoc again, who dominate the e-mail list. But this e-mail list exists for the use of Council, to discuss matters of concern to us, to hash some things through before our “real” meetings in order to be better informed beforehand and to save time at the actual meetings. If one group “dominates” the e-mail list, it’s because others let them. Those who post messages here are doing the work for which they were elected in the manner that works for them. Some Councilors may not want to post messages (and some may not want to read them). These are valid choices.

5. What’s appropriate. In the last couple of years, we seem to have had many things coming to Council as resolutions which a large number of Councilors have believed to be inappropriate for Council to consider. And yet we did. And some good work came out of them. For instance, Council believed that it was inappropriate to deal directly with the issue of the Hawaii outsourcing contract, because it was a matter internal to one library, BUT a task force on outsourcing was formed, a report was made, and certain actions taken. Council believed that it was inappropriate to condemn particular ILS programs for taking “library” out of their name, BUT a task force on library education was formed, a process was carried out, a report was made, and many actions have been begun. Council believed that it was inappropriate to establish subject headings by act of Council, BUT the matter of a particular group of subject headings was referred to the responsible committee, and action is being taken.
What this says to me is that we need a better explanation to new Councilors (and a reminder to the rest of us) about what’s appropriate to bring to Council and what isn’t. We need to understand that Council deals with policy issues, and that if a particular individual problem can be phrased in terms of its underlying policy ramifications, there is good work that can be done, but that if individual instances at individual libraries or library schools are brought to Council, the likelihood is that Council will (but only after unpleasant debate which we will all wish we hadn’t had) decline to act on them, as being inappropriate to the body. On the other hand, if the issues are brought as policy matters, Council can and will take action. It may not be as satisfying to couch a resolution in general terms, and it may not bring redress for an individual wrong, but it may end up being much more useful for many.

4. SERVICE ON COUNCIL

(New Councilors often feel lost or confused during their first meetings. Many comment on the difficulty of getting up the nerve to speak. The Council Orientation Committee is constantly seeking ways to help. This message was in response to a request from the Chair of that committee for suggestions. I include this message because it considers the potentially self-fulfilling prophecy that Council is intimidating)

June, 2008

This is a follow up to a message sent a few weeks ago by Joseph Eagan, Chair of the Council Orientation Committee, in which he welcomed suggestions for improving Council Orientation. I'm sending this message to the whole Council list, rather than just to Joseph, in hopes that it will inspire other people to chime in.

I try to go to the Council Orientation meeting whenever I can, and plan to be there this year (Saturday, June 28, 8 - 10:30). I go because I get to meet some new Councilors, and because occasionally a question is asked that is well addressed by someone who's been on Council a while. There is always at least a handful (sometimes more) of experienced Councilors there, some having just been re-elected, but some others who are probably there with motivations similar to my own.

The content of meetings has changed a lot over the years. The first ones I went to seemed to concentrate on logistical/practical matters (like how to organize your papers, and useful things to bring with you (as I recall, the list of useful things included paper, paper punch, paper clips, sticky notes, pens, markers, candy, Kleenex). They also stressed the importance of bringing your handbook and manual of parliamentary procedure.

Nowadays, there's usually less stress on the logistical, and more on what a meeting is like, including a presentation by Eli Mina, trying to make parliamentary procedure less intimidating, plus discussion of your role as a Councilor. Sometimes the meeting is in Council chambers, and sometimes it's in a meeting room in a hotel.

I think there's a real place for practical information: the Council pick-up station; the need to get there early to read new documents; the ALA-supplied document folder; a list of possibly useful things to bring, such as pencils, pens, sticky notes, paper clips or a little stapler, paper, Kleenex, candy, a jacket or shawl.

I think there's a need for "geographical/physical information": where Council Chambers are (if orientation is somewhere else); how it's arranged; where to sit; the availability of coffee (etc.); who is on the podium and why; Lois Ann's domain; projectionists; where the microphones are; wi-fi availability; power sources; limitations to table space; recycling containers)

And "operational" information: how to be recognized to speak; timer lights; decorum at the microphones; what to do if someone makes a motion while you are waiting in line at the microphone; vote tally sheets
and what to do with them; motion sheets (location, how to fill them out, the need to fill them out before making a motion, and what to do with the pieces of the form)

And of course parliamentary information, including the fact that making a "suggestion" while at the microphone doesn't constitute a motion and may thus lead nowhere, and that all questions and comments are addressed to the Presiding Officer, and the presiding officer is the one that may ask for/allow the question to be answered.

But what, from my perspective may be most important, is that COUNCIL IS NOT SCARY. Orientation presentations sometimes seem to dwell on the potentially intimidating aspects, and speak of them as if they all were or OUGHT TO BE intimidating. I think that this sets people up to BE intimidated, and not to participate.

The forums certainly need to be covered in orientation, but often they are billed as the place where people who are scared to speak up in Council can come and speak. This disturbs me from two perspectives. (1) Council meetings are the place where ALL (or almost all) Councilors are present. Speaking up in a forum does not mean that information/opinion will get to the majority of the Body. Speaking up in a forum does not free you of the possible need to speak in Council. If you had a potential "deal-maker or breaker" statement that you made in forum, you need to share it in Council. (2) Saying that "it's not so scary" to speak up in a forum implies that it IS necessarily scary to speak in Council (and implies that if you weren't already scared, you ought to be). Presenting Council as frightening may discourage many from participating in "the main event", thus depriving the body as a whole of some potentially useful information/opinion/questions.

Yes, there are certainly people who are nervous when faced with a microphone, and there are varying degrees of reluctance to speak up, and varying degrees of comfort with speaking up in an unfamiliar situation, but I wish we could find ways to encourage people not to be hesitant to join in the floor debate, or in the Council list without starting out with the presumption that it's frightening. For this reason, I wonder whether orientation ought to include a turn at the microphone.

We all started out as "brand new" councilors, and lived to tell about it. Some were comfortable from the get-go, and some were never particularly comfortable. Some came to love it. Some people seem approachable, and others don't, but most actually ARE approachable, and even people you disagree with more often than not are civil, and interested, and helpful. All in all, Council is a friendly place -- it's a pool to dive into, not a rocky beach along which you walk, getting your feet wet only when a wave is unexpectedly high.

5. IN DEFENSE OF COUNCILORS

(There are those who perceive Council as full of old-timers, hangers-on, elitists, and the power-hungry. These characterizations are among the things that may keep people from running for Council, and may lead them to distrust its motives and actions. This message was in response to an editorial in Library Journal that had quoted me out of context)

July, 2005

Since, in an LJ editorial, John Berry chose to quote one of my messages to the Council list, I've given some thought to his observations. My first thought is that I really must learn to be less subtle with my sarcasm and less elliptical in my comments.
When I note that virtue must be its own reward in relation to Council membership, it's an observation that Councilors serve or not according to the satisfaction they receive from that service, because there is no other reward. And those of us on Council are well aware that providing any additional reward is beyond the association's financial ability. If a motion were made to pay us an honorarium, or subsidize our hotels or meals, we would no doubt vote against it. But just as it is every college student's right to complain about the dorm food, it's every Councilor's right to whine a bit about Council.

Volunteerism is one of the hallmarks of US culture. We contribute hours, effort, and money in service of organizations and movements that we believe support the greater good. For many of us, one of those organizations is ALA.

Many people may run for Council and be elected without fully understanding how much time it will take, and how much money it will cost. They have two and a half years to decide whether it's worth it to them to serve again. Lots don't run again. They move into other areas of ALA activity, and good for them.

I make no secret of my fondness for Council. It's obvious that I find service on Council rewarding. But it's not about power. (Power? What power?) It's about these things (among others):

- service to an organization, a profession, and a set of principles that I value. Service that I happen to be in a position to give.
- exposure to a range of library issues, cultures, ideas, concerns, etc. beyond those that I encounter within the context of my own job and institution
- working with people that I would never otherwise encounter
- participating in a democratic process
- learning, and perhaps changing my mind
- discovering how wrong you can be about people
- and much much more.

Council is not to everybody's taste. It bores the heck out of many. It's too expensive for others. It's more work than some bargained for. It's too far from some people's particular professional passions. It's too combative for some. That's fine. But it's silly to castigate those who DO enjoy it, who ARE willing to put up with its weirdnesses while keeping an eye on the goal, who CAN and WILL give it the time and money it takes, who ARE good at it. Neither the people who are on Council, nor those who aren't have an exclusive claim to "how serving ALA and the profession should be done."

A decade or so ago a study was done into how long people serve on Council. I'm sure the report is on file somewhere. One of the things that it revealed is that the number of people who have been on Council "forever" is very small, and that most people serve one term, or maybe two, and no more. It may be that there is an impression that more Councilors are long-termers than is the case because those with longer experience are more likely to be those speaking about issues on the floor, having learned in their FIRST term that it's not such a frightening prospect after all; having been exposed to the context and history of some of the issues that come up for debate; and having seen similar things in the past that make them go "uh-oh" about matters brought to the floor today.

NOTE: I have chosen not to deal with the issue of whether electronic means might reduce the cost of full Council participation, which was -- as best as I can recall -- what originally sparked the conversation that Berry alludes to.

NOTE AGAIN: I am on other electronic discussion lists, in which there is an explicit notice that messages posted to the list may be considered copyright to the author, and may not be quoted without attribution or permission. Even without such a notice, it is my understanding that this would be true. It's
my further understanding that a generally accepted tenet of netiquette is that messages ought not be forwarded or quoted outside the list without permission or at least attribution. Am I wrong about these things?

6. THE MYTH OF THE LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

(Discussions of electronic member participation often emphasize the blue sky and not the ground upon which we walk. They may dwell on the cost and inconvenience of active service as if that were the only issue that affects volunteerism, and as if the widespread adoption of electronic mechanisms would by themselves increase volunteerism, inclusivity, and effectiveness).

February, 2007

OK, here goes. Unpopular views.

There are many ways to serve the profession and the organization. There are many ways to keep up with the profession. There are many ways to encounter colleagues. Not all are equally feasible, accessible, or attractive to all.

Some types of service and involvement involve greater commitment than others. Not all are equally able to make that commitment. Not all are equally willing.

Those types of service that involve the greatest commitment tend to be the ones that are elected at large from among the entire membership (Council, President (incl. elect and past), and Treasurer), or those elected at large within a Division (Division Presidents, Secretaries, etc.). Those who put themselves forward for such positions must understand and accept that they are volunteering for service that is expensive, time-consuming, and inconvenient. If they cannot, or do not wish to accept those conditions, they should seek other ways to serve or be involved in the profession.

I am perfectly willing to believe that in the next few years we will find ways for people to be involved with the organization "virtually", and that the organization and the profession will be enhanced by those developments. I am perfectly comfortable with the thought of experimenting with various models and adopting the ones that seem to work best. But the place to begin experimentation with virtual participation is NOT in Council. I agree with all that Al Kagan has said in the message [that I was responding to]. Beyond that, Council is ALA's legislature. It's huge. It's complex. It's not the place for adventures in "proof of concept."

In any case, there is no such thing as a perfectly level playing field. We cannot achieve perfect equality of opportunity, availability, accessibility, or affordability any more than we can achieve a perfect uniformity of interest, effort, skill, talent and intent among members. We can, and ought to remove mountains and gullies from the playing field, and we need to make sure that whatever hillocks and rills that remain are necessary or unavoidable. In other words, it's reasonable to try to create the fairway, and to remove the sand traps, water hazards, and the rough, but trimming and leveling and clipping and rolling the organization down so that it is all the green is well beyond our collective capability.

7. ELECTRONIC ENHANCEMENTS FOR COUNCIL BUSINESS

(Suggestions to increase ALA's and Council's effectiveness though electronic means reached a critical mass in 2004-5. Such suggestions were often phrased in ways that implied that all ALA work at the time was being done with a quill and paper, and only face to face at conferences. They also seemed to
suggest embracing new technologies quickly and without question. It is amusing to me in retrospect to consider that I was later chaired the ALA President’s Task Force on Electronic Member Participation)

March, 2005

Gentle Councilpeople,

All these discussions about virtual members, wi-fi access, online communities, etc., are running together in my mind, and I’d like to try to make some sense of them for myself. Hence this (very long) message.

The other day, during the 90 second walk between my library and the student recreation center I encountered eight students. Five were talking on cell phones. The last time I was at the airport, I encountered countless people talking on cell phones. If you overhear them, you’ll notice that most of them are talking about trivialities, communicating about things that don't need to be communicated. Just to fill time. Just to feel "connected". ("Hi, Joe. It's halftime and we're up by 6." "Hi, Marty. We just landed. I'll call you when I get to baggage claim." "Hi, Sarah. Just wanted to say hi. I'm really tired. Gotta go.")

We used to leave our work at work, and now we take it home and do business at all hours of any day. We used to get away from work at conferences, and now we bring it with us on laptops and PDAs, and instead of going out for a drink with colleagues, we may sit in our wired hotel rooms and catch up on e-mail.

My experience in librarianship has seen librarians embracing new technologies - or even just the possibility of new technologies – with enthusiasm. Such enthusiasm that has caused them to make process, budget, management, and policy decisions as if the possibility were already a settled reality. While it is invigorating to be part of a profession that differs so wildly from its external stodgy image, the experience of having to retro-fit, retro-plan, backfill, make do, and lose certain functionalities because the imagined alternative is not yet (or never) available makes me appreciate the value of some vestiges of stodginess.

For those who are seeking wi-fi access at conference, I need some help. – if you had wi-fi access, how would you use it? When? What could you accomplish with it that you cannot accomplish without it? What impact would/does wi-fi access during Council meetings (for example) have on your ability to focus on and contribute to Council activities?

Librarians generally want to do the best possible, and they have a penchant for beating up on themselves if perfection is not achieved. Instead of feeling good about how much work we accomplish in Council, for instance, we don sackcloth and accuse ourselves and our colleagues of wasting time. We talk about personal attendance at committee meetings as if it were a waste of time; we discount the value of face-to-face communication; we talk about the work of committees as if the product were paltry, and as if it were not already enhanced by electronic communication.

But stop a moment. Think. Far from only working AT conference, many committees accomplish a lot between conferences, through e-mail, discussion lists, and websites. Documents are shared, ideas are tossed about, strategies are discussed, drafts are turned into final reports, decisions are made. The amount of work that can be got through at conference is increased, as is the yearly product of the committee. Work expands to meet capacity. Committees don't say "let's do X and Y and Z and stop there." They say "let's do X and Y and Z and whatever else we can.” Many committees are already doing way more than they used because of the Internet, and there is no reason to be certain that upgrading
electronic communication will eliminate the need to meet twice a year. In certain committees, it may actually increase that need, as agendas and action plans expand with communication capacity.

Consider circumferential highways. In order to relieve highway congestion in and around cities, beltways were built. Far from decreasing traffic, they increased it. More cars took to the highways, and now the beltways are often as crowded as downtown streets. Increased and enhanced electronic communication for committees can increase their effectiveness and productivity up to a point. But saturation will occur. Already Councilors sometimes complain about being too busy to deal with the Council list. Already committees with electronic discussion lists see that some members contribute during the year and others don’t. At some point the volunteers who make up ALA governance may be unable or unwilling to add to the amount of time they spend on ALA business.

I’m looking forward to the online communities. I wish more people felt comfortable contributing to governance business electronically. I urge us to continue considering ways in which electronic communication can be used to enhance ALA’s work. But I also urge us not to assume any particular outcome, and not to jettison things of value (like face to face communication) in our enthusiasm for the possibilities that new technologies may eventually offer.

8. TOWARD A MORE EFFECTIVE COUNCIL

(Every year suggestions are made for how to make Council more effective. Some suggestions are new and some have been made before. All reflect the personal perspective of the person making them. In the message below, my observations follow my initials (JSH). The indented text contains quotations from the message to which I was responding).

June, 2005

I would like very much to see the format of meetings changed, especially as concerns Council’s activities. Right now the following conditions seem to prevail:

1. Council is an expensive luxury for an elite – either those who can afford it or those who will sacrifice to attend.

JSH: It is certainly expensive. Whether it is a luxury or not is a matter of opinion. Whether “elite” is the proper term for those who feel a penchant, satisfaction, or even obligation to participate is also a matter of opinion. It is certainly a select or specialized group.

2. Council consists to a considerable extent of matters which could be handled by other means – that is, if its membership wished to do that.

JSH: Whether they could be handled equally well by other means is a matter for debate and investigation. At least when we handle things in person, all councilors are attending (more or less) to the matter at hand. The proportion of those who actively participate in electronic discussion now might be a cautionary indicator that shifting some decisions to an electronic forum could lead to a less democratic decision process than now, rather than to a more democratic one. Whether we (the aggregate we of ALA members) would be at all pleased if many of the issues that currently come to Council were delegated to smaller groups that might or might not be elected, and over whose processes we might have even less control than we have over Council is also a matter for careful consideration.
3. Opposition to such changes will be led by the Patrick Henry contingent, for whom the opportunity to debate (themselves, often as not) in a public forum is the principal attraction of the current arrangements.

JSH: This characterization imputes motives to Councilors that are, in my experience, inaccurate. Any individual’s perception of others’ motives is inevitably influenced by that individual’s own preferences, motivations, and modes of operation. I cannot think of a single Councilor who has been a member of the body for any of the fourteen years I have served, who went to the microphone out of a desire to “debate ... in a public forum” for the sake of debate itself. Yes, there have been in that time, a number of voluble Councilors with whom I often disagreed, or whose trips to the microphone have left me mystified, but I have never felt that any of them rose to speak out of anything other than a feeling of obligation to contribute to the discussion, to provide an alternative viewpoint, or to try to influence opinion – as a part of fulfilling their responsibility as an elected Councilor.

4. Eventually common sense and economy will win out. We have only ourselves to blame is this comes later rather than sooner.

JSH: There is nothing so uncommon as common sense. And sometimes what we ourselves may believe to be self-evident, or “commonsense” is nothing of the kind. Indeed, one of the benefits of group discussion is the discovery that what we thought was the majority view is a minority outlook; that what seems obvious to us is obscure to many; that what is obscure to us is obvious to most; that our good idea becomes better through the collaboration of a group; that our “good idea” isn’t so good after all; etc. One person’s economy may be another’s “false economy”. One person’s “efficiency” may be another’s “short-sightedness.” We have only ourselves to blame if we do not fully consider (as best we can) all of the potential results of changes proposed, and open ourselves to the possibility that what seems to us today to be an obvious solution is not in fact the best choice.

9. OUR CONSTITUENCIES

(Chapter, Division, and Roundtable Councilors are elected to represent particular constituencies, while At-Large Councilors are not. Knowing what is owed to the people who voted for you is an issue that troubles many At-Large Councilors from time to time).

May, 2008

First, it is impossible to know the motivations of those who remain silent. My experience suggests that people who remain silent are mostly motivated simply by lack-of-sufficient-motivation to speak up. Silence cannot be generalized as meaning assent, dissent, fear, disinterest, or anything else. The people who remain silent are varied, as are their reasons.

Second, NO ONE KNOWS why any Councilor at Large is elected (or why any candidate is not elected). You cannot know whether people voted for you because (1) they confused you with someone else; (2) they went to your graduate or undergraduate school; (3) they live in your state; (4) they work in your type of library; (5) they checked the wrong box; (6) they agreed with the statement on your bio; (7) they are also members of your “home” division or roundtable; (8) something else.
You serve as a Councilor, and you are true to yourself and your beliefs, but you can’t really know whether or not you (or any other Councilor at Large) are speaking for the people who elected you. And so, you have to speak for yourself. You may have in your mind a vision of “the people who voted for me,” and you may act in a way that you hope your “preferred voter” would like you to act. But you can’t ever know for sure.

I, for instance, assume that some of those who vote for me do so because I’m one of the few Technical Services people who run. Some vote for me because after all this time my name is familiar (but they don’t know quite why). Some vote for me because I’m from the west, or because I went to Vassar, or because they’ve read something I’ve written, or because they like my name, or because they like something in my self-statement. But I don’t ever know how many of which there are. And so, it’s impossible to say “I am trying to represent the people who voted for me.” My only choice, really, is to do the best I can to make what I consider to be the right decisions. But I have to accept the full burden of my decisions. I don’t have the “out” of saying “the people who voted for me want me to do this.”

10. CLOSING DEBATE AND LATECOMERS TO THE MICROPHONE

(At one time Council was much more free to close debate than at present. One of the arguments made in favor of closing debate is that the body has already heard everything it needs to, that after a few people have spoken to the issue we need to move on, and that latecomers to the microphones are just wasting Council’s time. In this message, I disagreed with both)

July, 2008

Some Councilors are quick on the trigger to close debate. Others never vote to close debate as a matter of principle. Most councilors fall somewhere in between. As for myself, I’m fairly near the “don’t close debate” end of the spectrum, but it’s not just a matter of principle with me .... It’s a matter of experience having shown me in many many instances the value of continued debate.

The first people to get to the microphones are usually those most passionate about the topic. Depending on the motion/resolution, the first speakers may be predominantly for the measure, or predominantly against it. A councilor merely listening to the debate may thus gain one impression about where majority opinion lies (and sometimes knowing how much support a particular measure has, and from what kinds of people, can be important in helping us make up our minds). But as debate goes on, those who are less passionate, or on the other side of the issue may make their way to the microphones. (Note that in such a process, having many people express very similar points can be a Good Thing).

There isn’t always a lot of time to read through or THINK THROUGH action items before debate begins. Having a healthy debate, including having many people daring to go to the microphone and saying their piece can assist us in the process of responsible consideration of the measure, first, through being able to hear a variety of points made, and second, by giving us the time we need.

Some motions are made where we may not readily know whether we should give our support. Debate helps. Well, at least it helps me. I have often felt significantly more certain of my vote after having heard debate. And there have also been numerous occasions where I have had my mind changed by debate. --- not because I am all that malleable, but because points were brought up in debate that I hadn’t previously considered. And sometimes those salient/decisive points were brought up rather LATE in the debate.

As debate goes on, new points come to light. People who hadn’t thought they wanted to speak discover that the must – to get clarification, to counter something just said, to provide an alternate perspective, etc.
The shorter debate is, the fewer viewpoints we hear. The shorter debate is, and the greater the pressure we exert on others not to engage in it, the more likely that those with differing opinions, or those who may be confused about something will be not to speak. And we will be poorer for it, and so will they. And for many of us, our votes will be less well-informed than they otherwise would have been.

The less debate there is, the more likely it is that people who have not read or fully considered motions will just “go with the flow” – voting as they perceive most of the rest of the body voting. And we all know that there are sometimes Councilors who don’t read and/or think about the motions or the background information (because they don’t have the time, or possibly because they don’t have the inclination). From time to time even the most diligent of Councilors may find her/himself doing the same things. Allowing and even encouraging debate decreases the likelihood of having people being uninformed about the vote they take.

At Midwinter, when I spoke in the Executive Board candidate’s forum, I mentioned that I had been raised to believe that “Life is a seminar, and your participation is required.” Well, it applies to Council. We aren’t there to drink the coffee, raise our hands, mark our ballots, and go home. We’re there to deliberate. And deliberation includes reading the documents, thinking about the issues, getting clarification when it’s needed, participating in debate, allowing debate and listening to others, and THEN raising our hands and marking our ballots.

When I was first elected to Council, I often voted to close debate, and was often frustrated at how much time we were taking. Over the years, I’ve changed my views, because I’ve experienced too many instances of the benefits of a reasonable debate. Over the years I have also experienced many times having some Councilor with whom I usually disagree (or whom I don’t usually understand) get up to the microphone and say something absolutely wonderful, or fabulously sensible, or make a point more cogently than anyone has before, or point out something important that nobody else has mentioned, or do something else that not only helps me do my work better, but also makes me appreciate them more.

11. PARTICIPATION AND DOMINATING THE DISCUSSION

(A common complaint is that discussion at Council or Membership meetings, or on the Council List is dominated by a relatively small number of Councilors, and that this is undesirable, and possibly one of the reasons that more people don’t join in).

July, 2008

We recently had a message from a member forwarded to us, in which there was a mention of how some individual members “dominated” the discussions in Council and Membership meetings. It’s a comment we may frequently hear, normally uttered (or expressed) in a non-complimentary, tired, or irritated tone.

I have my own opinions about the proper role of Councilors in Membership meetings .... But that’s for some other message, and some other day. I’d like to talk about the issue of a few councilors “dominating” discussion either in Council, or on the Council list.

And I start out by admitting that I am one of the councilors most often at the microphones, and one of the regular contributors to the list. So you know that my opinion is unlikely to be in favor of limiting or lessening participation.
No single Councilor can “dominate” discussion in a Council meeting – we all get to speak only once on each motion until everybody who wants to has spoken. The same councilor may have opinions on many issues, and may rise to speak multiple times, but that can hardly be considered “domination.” (Perhaps such a councilor expresses opinions or espouses views that you personally happen to find irritating, which makes her/his appearances at the microphone SEEM like “domination”). If more councilors would speak during debate, then the impact of the one irritant would be diluted.

(Perhaps some of those who are silent believe they are setting a good example. Sad to say, encouraging people not to sing by not singing yourself only works among canaries)

No single Councilor can dominate discussion on the Council List unless other councilors allow it. A single councilor can certainly add significantly to the message traffic. Perhaps you find Atilla’s message offensive, or too numerous, or off-topic. Well, you have choices. And among these choices are these: Challenge the offensive messages. Question the messages that you believe are off-topic. Consider joining in the other conversations – the more councilors who participate in discussions of council business, the less of an impact there will be of the messages that you don’t care for.

And just as we are not elected to drink the coffee and raise our hands in Council and then go home, we aren’t elected to be Councilors for just those two weeks of the year when we are in Council chambers. Perhaps if there were more participation/discussion between meetings, the meetings themselves could be managed with greater dispatch.

But nobody can make a councilor who is disinclined to speak up do so. And just because a councilor may not speak up, this doesn’t mean that s/he isn’t carrying out her/his duties diligently and responsibly. Such people are simply acting according to their philosophy. Well, the people who speak are doing the same thing. The silent ones may wish that the speakers/writers would pipe down. The speakers/writers may wish that the silent ones would speak up/write. But I doubt that either group will change much, if at all, because the councilors in each group are simply acting on their beliefs about what’s the right thing to do.

12. ARE MOTIONS ALWAYS NECESSARY?

(In an effort to move more expeditiously through business, Council began increasingly to ask for action without making a motion, or to withdraw motions when action was promised. There are reasons to be leery of going too far with such a practice)

July, 2004

It not infrequently happens that a motion will be made, and during the course of debate someone will ask why we need a motion at all.

They’ll say something like “now that it’s been brought to XXXX’s attention, I’m confident it will be dealt with.” The implication often seems to be that we are taking/wasting our collective valuable time in presenting/debating/voting on a proposal. Sometimes a motion will be withdrawn (or not made in the first place) after such a comment, and sometimes we do thus save time, and still things get done.

But this approach always makes me a little nervous. It always feels a little like failing to dot the i’s or cross the t’s .... Or even a little like leaving the i’s or t’s out entirely. Without a motion being approved, nothing is binding. Without a motion being subjected to a vote, we don’t know how much support it has. Without a motion being approved, the record is different. Without a motion being voted upon, the matter is not concluded. Without a vote, you can’t be sure that your “suggestion” will be understood to be an instruction.
Think about the handbook as an example. As part of the discussion of the budget ceiling, there was a lot of discussion about continuing to print the handbook. (Another example of something unexpected taking a lot of Council time.) Following that discussion, someone prepared a resolution that went onto the Council III agenda, but we never got to it. Even without the vote, it’s clear what the opinion of most Councilors would be. I have no doubt that even without a vote, the Executive Director and others will look again at what options might be pursued. But we didn’t vote. There is no binding instruction.

In some instances, I suppose it may be better NOT to have a binding instruction. ... Maybe the instruction was for something impossible, for instance. Or maybe a better option becomes available later.

I would really be interested in hearing people’s views on this. Many people I respect greatly seem to have no discomfort with the “now that our views are known we don’t have to vote on it” approach, and I’d like to understand it better to help me in my own actions vis a vis Council.

13. TERM LIMITS; COUNCIL CANDIDATES

(Most of this message was originally written March, 2006 and posted to Member Forum. When the subject came up again in 2008, I added some additional information and posted it to the Council List. I have also included some information that Norman Horrocks sent to me off-list in response to my first message).

March, 2006 and January, 2008

Hardly a year goes by that someone does not propose term limits for Councilors. There appears to be an impression held by some that Council is largely composed of librarians who have served forever, who have grown old on Council floor, and who hold ALA policy-making in a stranglehold.

A study done in about 1990 showed that such a perception is seriously inaccurate. The overwhelming majority of Councilors serve one or two terms, with some serving three, and a VERY small number serving more than that.

The fact is that Council is not to everyone’s taste. Some people think they’ll like it, but are grateful when their first term ends. Others like it, but are burnt out after two terms. Others like it, but find that they miss the ability to be more fully involved in the work of their home division or roundtable, and so they don’t run again. Some serve a term or two, take a break, and run again. A VERY FEW of us discover that the work of Council is endlessly rewarding, and that our particular talents are well suited to its work, and we run for Council repeatedly. Some are not elected; some are.

Most Councilors, no matter how many years they have served, understand how indispensable to the functioning of Council it is to have a few handfuls of very experienced Councilors around to help them navigate the processes and become more effective in their own service.

Every year the Nominating Committee seeks to put together a balanced slate of Council candidates. They do NOT include on that slate current Councilors whose terms are ending. Every year they have great difficulty persuading enough people to run. Every year there is an open process by which any ALA member can run for Council by acquiring and filling out a petition and getting 25 other ALA members to sign it. And every year many do.

I love Council. Through Council I have encountered many people I would never otherwise have met, and I have come to understand much better the breadth of concerns of ALA members. Council represents
democracy at its best: Any member can run; the membership at large determines who gets elected (for Councilors at large -- Chapter, Division and Roundtable Councilors are elected through those memberships) -- all Councilors have the ability to propose whatever they like; debate is civil and probing; and the group as a whole abides by a majority decision. Councilors work hard to achieve the best result, based on information and debate. Councilors spend a great deal of their own time and money to serve the organization and their profession.

The best lessons to learn from service on Council is that Council is NOT monolithic; that people can and DO change their minds in response to information and reasoned debate; that people are not stereotypes of themselves; that you aren't always in agreement with the same people on every issue.

Because I have gotten so much out of my service on Council, I constantly encourage others to run. I encourage anyone who reads this message to run. Get a petition, get it signed by 25 members, and run for Council. Be aware that service on Council is time consuming, and that it will require a financial commitment to serve. But in my mind, it is well worth it. (If you don't get elected the first time, don't take it personally. No one really knows why Inigo gets elected and Lancelot doesn't. Run again)

Join in; share the work; work for your own point of view; help others. And, for those who might be most vocal in criticism of Council and/or its actions .... Put your money where your mouth is.

(Norman Horrocks provided the following information regarding the study I referred to):

Janet, In the second para. of your March 30, 2006 letter given below you refer to a study of how many terms were actually served by Councilors. I think you may have been referring to my chapter entitled "Decision Processes in ALA : Nudging the Dinosaur" which appeared in 'Library Education and Leadership : Essays in Honor of Jane Anne Hannigan' edited by Sheila S.Intner and Kay E.Vandergrift (Metuchen, NJ :Scarecrow Press, 1990). I wrote in response to two earlier articles - the first was by Richard M. Dougherty (September 1987), "Can One Nudge a Dinosaur?" in "Journal of Academic Librarianship" and the second was by ALA Past President Edward G.Holley in the same journal (January 1988) "Nudging the Dinosaur."

Commenting on the periodic discussions that there should be a limitation of terms served I said ",,it was reported that, in fact, of the 100 At-Large members only five members were serving third terms...There could have been others but Membership has chosen, over the years, not to support would-be third term members. On balance leaving it to Membership to decide would seem best."

On this particular point I would still agree with leaving it up to Membership to decide. As a final observation, of the five members serving third terms when I wrote the above in 1990, only one of them (Mary Biblo) is still an elected At Large member; she is seeking re-election in this year's Council election.

(This text was added in 2008)

Some years ago, Council terms were 4 years long. They were reduced to 3 years primarily in a twinned effort to "bring new blood" onto Council and to reduce the length of time that people had to commit to. I was against the reduction in length of term, and have seen nothing since the term was changed to 3 years to make me change my mind.

Although some people are "naturals" at Council, and seem to "get it" right away, most people who have served on Council will admit that they felt at least somewhat at sea during their first year. (some feel completely at sea). Sometime during the second year most begin to be comfortable, and by the third year
most have pretty much figured it out, and some have gotten good at it. But with a 3 year term, it's only 2/3 of the way through your term that you decide whether you want to run again. And if you are among those who aren't quite comfy yet, you may well decide to seek other opportunities.

Quite apart from the issue of deciding to run, there's the issue of "getting good at it". If it takes a couple of years to get good at Council, and if you (1) force people to run again, and/or (2) limit the number of years or terms they can serve, you are depriving Council of experience that it needs to have around.

Those of you who have state or city offices that are term limited may have the same experience that we have in Colorado -- that imposing term limits guarantees that a significant proportion of the governing bodies are inexperienced, and the result is government that is less good and less effective than we need.

Council has consistently failed to support attempts to impose term limits. Reasons that individual Councilors may not support such limits are varied, but the most common reasons appear to be:

- Term limits are anti-democratic
- If a person serves poorly, the electorate can decline to return her/him to office
- Term limits may be used as one means to silence an unpopular minority view (where a Councilor is returned to office by an active not-so-small “interest group”
- Term limits hinder effective governance, by imposing too great a turnover in a body where it takes a while to “get good at” the operation of the organization.

14. COUNCILOR RETENTION AND TURNOVER

(Turnover on Council is closely related to term limits, and turnover is related to Councilor retention)

May, 2008

Heidi Dolomore has presented an interesting perspective on the issue of term limits -- that perhaps the "problem" is not a matter of turnover or term limits so much as it is of trying to retain Councilors for more than one term.

This leads us into considering such things as orientation and mentoring, which may be quite fruitful avenues to explore. Because after all, it's in our collective best interest to have Councilors who are comfortable and knowledgeable in their role. (I can't resist pointing out that the four-year term increased the likelihood that Councilors would become comfortable with the job before they had to decide whether or not to run again). And those of us who love Council really want others to love it as well.

We hear from some that newer Councilors are intimidated by Councilors who have been around longer, who know the ropes, and who speak up frequently, but I don't think that these are conditions that are intrinsic to being "new" or "old" on Council. I think it's more a matter of individual personality. (In my very first Council meeting, I took public issue with Bernie Margolis on something, and never thought not to). But, even if it is mainly a matter of personality, better orientation or mentoring may still be really good ideas.

You may note that in the first sentence of this message, I put "problem" in quotation marks. When people suggest that we need term limits (and often, a mere inquiry about whether we have considered it in the past is interpreted as a suggestion that we need them), it's never clear to me what "problem" we are trying to solve. And until we define the problem or problems, and have general agreement as to its/their existence/definition/nature, we can't design a good solution.
"Some Councilors have been around forever" isn't particularly persuasive to me by itself (of course, you might expect that it wouldn't be, considering I'm in my 5th term). I mean, it's TRUE that some Councilors have been around forever, but that by itself is not a problem. It's just a fact. The fact that someone has been around for a long time doesn't make them or their influence or their presence or their work BAD. (You may personally think that it's a bad thing that a PARTICULAR Councilor has been around forever, but term limits wouldn't affect only Caligula, whom you want off, it would also affect Guinevere and Athena and Constantine, whom you might be happy to have stay)

"We need more turnover" by itself doesn't speak to me either. DO we need more turnover? Why? What would be the benefits? Would term limits increase turnover appreciably?

"We need more new blood" sounds good, but do we know that having Councilors run for office again is what prevents people from putting their names in the race? It may be that introducing term limits is a solution to the wrong problem.

Off in my other life, I judge figure skating. Some of you may know that following the scandal of the Pairs competition at the Salt Lake City Olympics, a whole new system of judging was introduced. Ask me sometime how much I like it. In any case, the new system makes it virtually impossible for a member of the audience to figure out why the results came out as they did. In Salt Lake, people could immediately see the marks that the French Judge had given, and how they compared to marks others had given, and what impact it had on placement. Now, you can't tell. It's all a mystery. It's as if the problem to be solved was defined as "bad publicity", and so a system of judging was devised to make it impossible for the audience to tell if anything suspicious or questionable was being done, thus reducing the likelihood of bad publicity. But if the problem was actually bad/unethical judging, then replacing the judging system with one in which transparency is lost and accountability is reduced may not have been the best choice.

So by all means let's talk about ways in which we may be able to make service on Council easier to understand, less intimidating, more fun/attractive/desirable/feasible. Let's talk about ways to make Council itself more effective. But let's not assume that any of these issues are necessarily linked to term limits or lack thereof.

15. COUNCIL FORUMS

(In 2004, Council Forums came in for heated discussion, with questions being asked about their purpose, existence and leadership. This message was intended to provide some historical perspective and to raise some issues that are often overlooked).

October, 2004

Who would have thought that Council Forums would become a controversial issue? I'm especially surprised by some messages on the Council List and on Member Forum that seem to suggest that Council Forums somehow infringe on the rights of non-councilors, or that they represent some kind of display (or usurpation) by Council of power. I guess it's an illustration of how ready people can be to discern conspiracies or evil intent.

Well, anyhow .. A bit of history as I understand (and/or remember) it. Once upon a time, some Councilors felt a need to discuss upcoming Council business - to help them understand issues, to ask questions, perhaps to present arguments or draft resolutions, or to try to get their ducks in a row - as a means of
getting ready for actual Council sessions. And so, groups gathered together informally in the back of Council Chambers following council meetings, or in the evenings when few official meetings were scheduled. These informal gatherings came to be called "Council Caucus".

Councilors whose memories are longer than mine inform me that in those earlier days, the conduct of Council meetings was not nearly so professionally handled as it is today (perhaps we didn't have a parliamentarian?), and that it was not uncommon for a chair "not to see" people at the microphones waiting to speak, and instead to recognize others - that you could stand at the microphone waiting/wanting to speak for a long time and NEVER be recognized if you were not an insider. Council Caucuses, therefore, provided a place for "the unrecognized" to be heard, and to come to be known so that they might be enabled to speak in the floor of Council in the future.

This was also back in the days when conferences fit into a few hotels, and Council Chambers tended to be in the official hotel, so gathering in Chambers during off hours wasn't a problem for most people.

Time passed. Council began to be held in convention centers, and getting to and from the convention center at night wasn't as easy as going to the ballroom in your hotel. So, the Council Secretariat began arranging for official meeting rooms for Council Caucus, and once an official meeting room and time were established, the meetings became official, and found their way into the conference program. At some point, other caucuses began to be formed to enable Councilors with a particular perspective or role to meet and discuss, concentrating especially on aspects of business that applied to the perspective/role (e.g. youth division councilors, division councilors, southern councilors).

Council meetings themselves began to be run more professionally and democratically, so Caucuses no longer needed to serve as a way to guarantee that Councilors had an opportunity to be heard and become known, but they still provided an opportunity for discussion or clarification of upcoming matters. And they also provide a smaller group that may help newer Councilors feel at home in Council. The form of the meetings has become somewhat institutionalized, with volunteer facilitator(s), but the meetings have never had any power.

The name of Council Caucus was changed to "Council Forum" recently, after someone pointed out that it isn't in fact a caucus. It isn't limited to any particular party or faction or group - unless you define Councilors-who-want-to-talk-after-hours as a faction. And now somebody has pointed out that it doesn't conform to the ALA usage of the term "Forum." (The other caucuses remain "caucuses", because the name fits them).

Personally, I don't see anything undemocratic about Council Forum. The Forum can't take any action, and the meetings are subject to the same open meetings policy that governs Council. I rarely attend Council Forum because it almost always conflicts with something. I don't feel bereft. Nevertheless, I see some utility to Forum meetings. They provide a means for people who might otherwise not speak up to ask questions. They provide a place for people who might be preparing a resolution to elicit reactions, and to improve the resolutions based on those reactions, before bringing them to Council. This saves time during Council meetings, and may enhance a resolution's chances of passage.

Even so, I have some niggling concerns. If Councilors air their opinions, or ask their questions only in Council Forum, they deprive Council as a whole of their opinions, or of the information they elicit. If issues are discussed with passion in Council Forum, and minds are made up there such that the same passion is not brought to Council discussion, then Council debate is made less effective, and the vote taken may be less well informed. And, in my opinion, one of the responsibilities of a Councilor is to participate, to help inform debate, to share views and opinions with the rest of Council - a responsibility
that is not fulfilled if a Councilor participates in Forum discussion, but withholds participation in general Council debate.

There have been suggestions that Council Forums should be abolished, or combined with Membership Meetings, or the Information Sessions - but it seems to me that these suggestions arise out of a misunderstanding of the very different purpose of each of these meetings, and may perhaps also be fueled by a reflexive distrust of "those in power," whoever they may be. I may not attend many Forums, and the meetings may be badly named, but they serve a useful purpose for many, and to the extent that they enable some councilors to be better informed or better prepared, they have a positive impact on the conduct of Council, and thus ALA business, and they do not detract in any way from the ability of the rest of ALA membership to participate in or influence the activities of the organization as a whole.

16. COUNCIL LIST

(The Council List regularly comes up for discussion – especially the behavior of others on the List, which is frequently cited as a reason that there is not more participation)

May, 2005

In reading through this thread, thinking back to previous discussions on the same topic, and considering some personal messages I have received, I have had the following thoughts:

Each of us has different levels of tolerance for disagreement, different sensitivity to sarcasm, different filters through which we may or may not perceive attack, and different ideas about what constitutes appropriate list behavior. Still, there are some messages that are posted that most of us would consider offensive. Nevertheless, the question has to be asked: What would you have us do about it?

A set of rules of "netiquette" has been proposed many times in the past, and has never found sufficient support (and much opposition). Moderation has been proposed, but has also not found support. Setting a good example doesn't work

So what's left? Formal public censure? I can't imagine such a thing.

There will always be people who post to the list whose mode of communication is not to everyone's liking. And there will always be occasional messages that a few (or even a majority) find offensive. But in real life there are people with whom we disagree and people whom we dislike, but with whom we have to work. We all encounter the cranks and the cranky, the obstreperous and the obstinate, the sarcastic and the psychotic all the time in our day to day existence. And we cope.

And that's what we do here. We cope. The unreasonable will be perceived as unreasonable, and we can take comfort in that. The habitually sarcastic will continue in that mode regardless of what we do, and we can learn to roll our eyes skyward. We are not in control of others' behavior, we are only in control of only our own, and of our reactions. We can choose to be stymied by something over which we have no control, or we can choose to move ahead.

17. COUNCILORS PRO TEM

(Councilors may be unavoidably prevented from attending individual Council meetings or entire conferences and it is sometimes asked whether another person could take their place on Council during
their absence. The question is usually asked in the case of Division, Chapter, or Roundtable councilors who are elected to represent a particular constituency.

August 1999

I have found this a very fruitful conversation, and the sheer number of threadlets it has spawned serve to show that it’s a complicated business, and we are complicated people. All of the topics that have been unearthed in this discussion are of interest to me, but I won’t try to fit them all into this message.

More information: We have been reminded that the Structure Revision Task Force considered many of these same issues only a few years ago. Perhaps their report could be mounted on the website, or distributed to us again, so that those of us who do not keep permanent files of ALA documents, and those who were not on Council at the time could read it at this juncture. Although I recall that the TF’s report was a long and detailed one, I don’t recall that some of the information that we have talked about wanting to see was in it. It may have been a part of the background information that the TF based its report on. Perhaps the Chair of the TF could be asked to search her files for any background information that might be useful to us in the light of our recent discussions. This observation should carry my apologies to the TF, which probably thought it was through with being asked about its work, and which has long since been disbanded.

Chapter representation: I don’t think that the value of Chapter representation is at issue … or at least I haven’t seen any message that suggested that Chapters ought not be represented on Council. My questions from the beginning have been “Is there something in particular about the role that Chapter Councilors (and Division and Roundtable Councilors) play, as compared to the role that At Large Councilors play, that makes it necessary to consider how they might be represented if they are unable to attend a meeting?” and secondly “If these “representative” councilors do have a role that makes it a more serious matter if they must miss a meeting/conference, than it is if a Councilor At Large misses a meeting, what kind of representation is it reasonable to enable, and how could it be done?”

And so I ask myself, “what would I do if I had to miss a meeting/conference, and there was something coming up at Council that I had a special interest in?” I would get in touch with another councilor. I would explain what I am interested in, what my concerns are, and if I wanted to make certain that particular points were made, I would ask her to read a statement from me. If I were a Divisional Councilor or a Roundtable Councilor, I would do the same thing. I’d find a Councilor who belonged to my Division or Roundtable, or if there weren’t one, I’d find a Councilor I respected, and talk with her, and explain my position, and ask her to deliver my message. I would think that these same mechanisms would work well for Chapter Councilors: Find a Councilor from my own Chapter, or state, or find some other Chapter Councilor, and seek assistance. All of these actions can be taken today, without any changes to any rules. The one thing that such a process doesn’t cover is the vote, but I can’t recall a single instance in 8 years on Council when a matter of substance (as opposed to a matter of procedure) has been decided by a vote so close that the absence of a single individual (or a handful of them) would have made a difference. What is more significant than being able to vote is being able to be heard so that you can try to persuade, and that can be arranged today simply by asking another Councilor to carry your message.

Of course, this only works if you know about the issue beforehand. It doesn’t work for matters that arise during the course of a conference. Division and Roundtable Councilors wouldn’t necessarily be up a creek in such an instance, since the Divisions and Roundtables are meeting at the same conference, and could arrange to keep track of what’s going on in Council and to convey statements and opinions to their “proxy helper” as the conference progresses. Chapter Councilors, on the other hand, whether they are there in person, or are being represented by another “friendly councilor” can’t consult their constituency during conference, except insofar as they may be able to get in touch with other ALA members from their
state who are at conference. In such an instance, it seems to me that the best representation for the 
Chapter would probably be another Councilor from the Chapter’s state, since s/he would understand the 
ways of Council and would be likely to understand the special concerns of the state. Failing that, the best 
representation might be afforded by a Chapter Councilor from a similar state.

I recognize that there are circumstances that may arise in anyone’s life that will make attendance at a 
partial meeting or conference difficult or impossible, and I appreciate that these circumstances may be 
maddening and frustrating, but it seems to me that the rate of occurrence among Council as a whole, and 
among the “representative” councilors as a subgroup, is small. It seems to me that there are already ways 
available in which all councilors can manage to make certain that their positions are heard, and in which 
they can be informed about what has happened at meetings. These mechanisms are not perfect, but they 
can be made to answer most purposes.

18. REMOVAL OF A SITTING COUNCILOR

(This message was written after my term on Council and sent to the Chair of Constitution and Bylaws in 
response to a question about the need to provide some mechanism in the ByLaws for the removal of a 
sitting Councilor at large. Although this was never posted to Council List, I include it in this compilation 
because it illustrates the danger of identifying one problem and thinking that that may be all that really 
matters).

June, 2011

Tom, thoughts from a former councilor and policy wonk:

The primary issue is not the quorum. As was pointed out by several people, we don't have a problem with 
the quorum. My recollection is that the last time a council meeting was suspended for lack or quorum 
was many years ago. Thinking back to the layout of the Council Chambers, I think it was the first Atlanta 
annual conference .... I actually walked out specifically so there would be no quorum, so I remember the 
space outside Council Chambers, in a kind of "well" with escalators and stairs leading up to the main 
floor. I walked out because it was Council III, and we had already extended the adjournment time at 
least twice to discuss one of those contentious "why are we discussing this at all?" issues, and the vote I 
walked out on was a vote to extend the meeting yet again -- and I was not alone.

The primary issue is instead, whether a person is fulfilling the responsibilities which s/he was elected to 
fill. Or maybe we should phrase that as whether the person is "egregiously neglecting” those 
responsibilities.

Occasional absences are not at issue. Most Councilors miss meetings or portions of meetings here and 
there because of time conflicts with other ALA-related responsibilities, and they make one-by-one 
decisions about which responsibility takes priority. When I was ALA’s representative to the Joint 
Steering Committee for the Revision of the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, for example, I always 
missed Midwinter Council I because of a conflict with the Committee on Cataloging: Description and 
Access, to which my attendance was critical. Councilors also occasionally have personal or institutional 
situations that keep them away for an entire conference -- illness, mandated administrative retreats, etc.

Constant absence is another matter. Twice in 23 years on Council I can recall there being a Councilor 
who just didn't come to conference -- in one case because after being elected to Council, the person 
changed jobs, and the situation with the new job was such that the person was unable to attend 
conference. In such a case, I would expect a Councilor either to resign, or to make a good faith effort to
work things out, but if that turned out to be impossible, to resign. (Or, if it were in the last year of a term, not to run for re-election).

It can be irksome to have someone "egregiously neglecting" Council responsibilities, and "taking up a seat that someone else might have appreciated having." It may offend our sense of fairness and right. But however irksome it might be, having one person out of nearly 200 missing has limited impact on the effectiveness of Council. So, having nothing in the Bylaws about removal is unlikely to have much impact on ALA and its work, under normal circumstances.

But it's the NOT normal circumstances that make it worth putting something in the Constitution and Bylaws. For example, imagine that a major policy disagreement arose within ALA and within Council such that one Councilor, or a group of Councilors decided to boycott Council. Depending on how many, how public, and about what, that could have an impact on the effectiveness and public posture of Council and the Association.

Therefore, It's my belief that -- now that you've noticed the lacuna -- something needs to be put in the Bylaws. But rather than put in place some elaborate process, with standards spelled out, prefer something general. ... something along the lines that someone quoted from their chapter bylaws -- that Councilors may be removed "for cause" by a vote of the Executive Board. It would be difficult to define "cause" because each situation would likely be unique, and it would have to be be dire for such an action to be considered.

My argument is based on attendance and fulfilling of one's responsibilities. Other issues are harder to define. For instance, if we had a Councilor who was convicted of a violent felony ..... would that be sufficient to justify removal from Council? Or would we instead want to deal with that with Sec. 1, Article III of the Constitution on suspension of membership in ALA? (And if you are suspended from ALA, you can't serve on Council). It's interesting to note, by the way, that Sec. 1, Article III only speaks of "suspension" and not "expulsion."

In any case, it's my opinion that it would be better to have something "on the books" BEFORE a situation arises, rather than having to add to the angst of a serious situation a discussion of whether we have any mechanism to deal with it, and if so, what should it be.

19. THOSE WHO SERVE

(Belief that Council and Association Officers constitute some kind of privileged clannish elite, and that those who accept such positions are generously subsidized by their institutions persist, despite information and opinion to the contrary)

January, 2007

A major purpose of a journalist, and especially an editor/commentator, is to excite response and thought, and by running this column, John Berry has succeeded in that purpose. I take it on faith that the opinions he expresses represent his true understandings and beliefs, but like Amy Gonzalez Ferguson, I find that the ALA he describes is not the one I know.

For instance, the statement "for the most part ALA and its divisions are run by well-heeled administrators, elites whose participation is subsidized by their institutions ...," may or not be fact-based, but it is certainly pejorative in tone. Speaking for myself only, yes I am an administrator, and I am eligible to
receive some money from my institution to support professional activities -- ($1,000/year) exactly the same amount that my institution makes available to every other librarian. Similarly, the statement, "Those institutions, alas, support and/or give time off to only a very small portion of their staff to allow them to attend ALA conferences." is also not true of mine, where all faculty (i.e. librarians) are treated equally, and many support staff also often receive support and time for professional development activities.

We often hear similar statements about support and subsidies, and so forth, but each time it comes up for discussion, it turns out that the "subsidies" and support and are far less prevalent (and far less generous) than most people seem to suppose. As for the "administrators" .... well, in many libraries, the roles of administration, management, and supervision are often very widely distributed, and those librarians who do NOT exercise such roles are in the minority (I just checked, and it's true in my own institution)

The concern for Councilors' expenses is a worthy one, and I have long advocated that ALA ought to provide something other than free coffee, a white ribbon, and the hotel of their choice to its Councilors (something like free conference registration, perhaps?), but just consider the outrage from the membership if Council were to vote benefits to itself.

I am personally opposed to direct election of the Executive Board by the membership .... Not just for ALA, but for any other organization with a legislature (which is what Council is). The top officers should be (and are) elected by the membership at large, but the other leadership of an elected body ought to be chosen by the body itself. Mr. Berry and I will disagree on this point.

As for being approached to serve on committees and so forth, well, to some extent, being a very visible/important person can be a deterrent to being approached. Consider the song from "White Christmas" ..... "What's a General to do when he stops being a General?" People assume that you are too busy to serve on a committee, that you would regard a simple committee appointment as beneath you, or that committee service might represent a conflict of interest with your professional role. So such people - - perhaps especially them -- have to fill out volunteer forms, or approach those appointing officers and committee chairs and say "I would be delighted to serve in any way I can, and the areas of interest in which I feel I could contribute the most are X, Y, and Z."

Of course, any ALA member can run for Council, and a person with extremely broad and general name recognition is very likely to be elected.

I agree with Mr. Berry that ALA-APA has yet to succeed in coming into the consciousness of ALA membership to the extent that they realize that here is an opportunity to be involved in something that may be of great interest to them. There are committees to serve on in ALA-APA, but few people know enough about APA or its structures to seek that service out. As for the time we spend on ALA-APA as its Council .... Well, we expanded that time once when it became necessary. We can expand it again when the press of business for that organization requires it.

The issue of electronic participation is more complex than its proponents perceive (and less complex than its opponents perceive), but certain aspects of it do pose problems in terms of adhering to some of the principles that Mr. Berry and many of the rest of us hold dear -- perhaps especially the principle of openness of meetings. I feel certain that we can figure it out in time, and I also feel certain that for some people it will be "too much" time, and for others it will be "too little".

Finally, Mr. Berry and I run in different crowds, so if our experience with ALA and with its members is different, it oughtn't be a surprise. But my experience is that people who take positions in ALA (including in its divisions and roundtables)on its committees, task forces, and working groups, or who assume roles as chairs and officers are there to work and serve, and not to exercise power, and they do not
regard themselves as any kind of an elite. They regard themselves as colleagues. Sure there are some people who hanker after power and pursue it for its own sake, but from what I have seen in nearly 30 years of service at various levels and in various venues, they are a tiny minority.

Nevertheless, I applaud Mr. Berry's attempt to awaken in some ALA members an interest in participation and service.

20. MEMBERSHIP AND DEMOCRACY IN ALA

(Another message that relates to the continuing perception of Council and Executive Board as a privileged clannish elite)

January, 2007

I was not active in ALA prior to the "great member revolution" of the 60s and early 70s, so I have to take people's word for it that control of the association was closely held and jealously guarded by a relatively small group, that it was difficult to become involved, that it mattered who you knew, and that the organization was not welcoming. Even between now and the late 70s, when I first became active, there has been a noticeable change in how collegially people treat each other.

Nevertheless, probably because I was the beneficiary of work done by others before me, rather than one of those who wrought the change, I do not share the axiomatic belief that people in positions of authority, influence or responsibility are necessarily elitists, or will necessarily make decisions against the interests of the "members." Nor do I take it as an article of faith that opinions or positions developed or put forth at membership meetings will better reflect the needs and positions of the membership as a whole than the positions developed by bodies such as Council, committees, section and roundtable boards, etc.

When it comes to talking about membership and power and participation, we often hear -- intermixed with expressions of genuine principle -- expressions of pure romance. Even if all barriers to participation were removed (financial, geographic, temporal, physical), the portion of the membership body that would be interested in participating in the work of the organization, in determining its direction, or putting forth sustained effort to work for the body would be small. It's true of any membership group. not just ALA. And even when barriers remain, there are people who choose to become involved despite them. (This is not to say that we should not work to make participation of some kind within the reach of more members, it's just to point out that such efforts may have much less impact than many believe).

Another bit of romance is to believe that those people who attend membership meetings truly represent the membership at large. Implementing virtual attendance wouldn't change this. The people who attend are those who have the time, money, knowledge, interest, and inclination. Most members, quite frankly, aren't interested, but that's not by definition a bad thing. Lack of interest may derive from many sources, but one of those is that they are more-or-less satisfied with the organization. (of course others may not come because they don't know about it; some may not come because they are disaffected, etc.). It's also a flight of fancy to assume that those who attend membership meetings would necessarily make better decisions for the association than its governance bodies make. We are so eager to be egalitarian in every way that we often lose sight of what can actually be put into practice, and of the benefits of having a structure in place where people are put into positions of having to take responsibility for their actions.

Jim Casey suggests that direct election to the Executive Board might be effected by taking the highest vote-getters on the Council ballot and putting them on Executive Board. As one who might have been on Executive Board for twelve years had this happened, I have my doubts about the plan. No one knows why any of us gets elected to Council. Some have well-organized groups behind them; some have name
Some would be good on EB, and others would not. Some would be willing to serve, and others would not. One thing is for sure, the membership at large would know a great deal less about how good a particular Councilor would be on the Executive Board than members of Council would. In my opinion, election to Executive Board by an at-large vote of the association membership would be an invitation to forming boards that were so ineffective that the real governance of the association would devolve to headquarters staff, thus making the organization less democratic rather than more so.

There is a structure to ALA, and multiple avenues to participating in that structure and effecting change. Not everyone will be able to take advantage of any of those avenues, and we need to provide as many more as we can. But we need not to fantasize about the impact of those changes; we need to recognize and acknowledge the benefits of structure and the benefits of having people who are heavily invested in service to the organization participating in its governance; we need (she says, speaking to herself as well) not to assume that the ALA that suits our personal fancy or fondly-held world view is necessarily the ALA that really serves its members best.

(Peggy Sullivan responded to the above message with this further information)

Appreciated your comments below. I am not sure that anyone has mentioned on the Council listserv that there was, indeed a time when Executive Board members were elected by the membership. I believe that ended with the ACONDA/ANACONDA actions. I do remember the ballots of those days, with the little photos of candidates which often helped one remember who somebody was, even if not remembered by name. The Executive Board candidates were paired, which usually meant men ran against men, library educators ran against library educators, etc. If I recall correctly, part of the reason for changing to election of Executive Board members from Council was that Councilors, as you suggest would have a better sense of how people would work on the EB from observing them on Council than would the general membership. Another part of it was that Council experience would prepare people to be more effective on the Executive Board. At least, those are the two that stick in my mind!

21. CORE VALUES HISTORY

(As time passes, we lose track of what sparked particular actions. When those who were “in at the beginning” see statements made about the history of some action or issue that are inaccurate or misinformed, they have some obligation to correct them, because knowing the context and having some understanding of what came before may influence future action. This message was written prior to the debate on recommendations of the first Core Values Task Force. It includes information relevant to the impetus for Core Values, Core Competencies, and the Congress on Professional Education)

March, 2000

I’d like to contribute something a little different to this discussion about the Core Values document. That is, I’m going to describe some of the events that I remember that led up to the formation of a task force charged to develop a statement of Core Values, as well as my personal take on the process followed by the Task Force in arriving at its first draft (the one that preceded the draft that we are all now discussing) This is a personal recollection. Others might remember things somewhat differently. Still others were not in a position to recall these things, due to not having been on Council, or at the Congress on Professional Education, or in the Task Force meetings.

It’s possible that some of this will help some of you put things into a context that helps you think about the issues.
When the State of Hawaii entered into an outsourcing contract with Baker and Taylor, whereby all selection and cataloging for the state’s public libraries were to be done by B&T, there was an uproar. The issue was brought up in Council, and there was extended discussion. Some of those speaking to the issue decried the contract because it had relegated “core functions” outside the libraries, and others said that this violated the profession’s “core values”. If my memory serves me correctly, one or the other of these phrases was incorporated into one or another of the resolutions brought to the floor. I remember that when I heard these phrases mentioned for the first time, I dived for my ALA Handbook and began riffling through the Constitution, Bylaws and Policy Manual to see if indeed the contract DID violate “core values” or outsource “core functions”. I also remember that many other councilors headed for their handbooks at the same moment (it was one of those priceless Council moments …. so many of us thumbing through the Policy Manual at the same time).

What I found …. what we all found …. and what was then mentioned in the course of the debate, was that we didn’t HAVE a statement of either Core Values or Core Functions. Several councilors noted that it was a little difficult to censure someone for violating something that existed only in our minds.

Both during those debates, and in the discussion that followed on the electronic list, a number of councilors observed that it oughtn’t be that difficult or that time consuming to come up with a list of core values and core functions, and that we ought to do it.

I remember contributing a message on the list in which I said that I could come up with a list of core functions that satisfied ME very easily, and I did. I believe that I listed: selection and/or identification of materials/resources that meet the needs of the library’s clientele; and making those materials/resources accessible through acquisition, organization, physical processing/preservation, instruction, and user assistance. I think that I also said, in a separate message, that I had my own list of core values …. and it contained only one item: open and equitable access to information. But those were my personal lists.

The issue died down, but was revived soon in connection with Council discussions about the real meaning and implications of the removal of the word “library” from the names of accredited LIS programs. In these discussions, too, we talked about the degree to which LIS programs might or might not be teaching “core functions” and providing educations that adhered to our “core values”. Again we noted that we as an organization hadn’t articulated either of these things, so it was difficult to demand that the LIS programs hew to them. As a result of our debates about library education, however, a Presidential Steering Committee was formed, and a Congress on Professional Education was held.

I was commissioned to provide one of the background papers for the Congress, and because of that was one of the participants. Two of the workshop sessions were particularly focused on the matters of core values and core functions. The rationale was that LIS programs needed to know what the profession regarded as “core” so that they could be guided by that knowledge in establishing their curricula.

We were divided into many small groups of about 20 people each, and asked to identify what we regarded as core values for the profession. Our deliberations were “jump started” with a list of values and values-like words that appeared in ALA’s various existing policy statements. We added to those lists, and then set about organizing them and prioritizing them. All the lists from all the groups were then pooled, and the group as a whole did some additional “weighting” and prioritizing. A similar process was followed for core functions, except that there were no existing policy statements to serve as a starting point.

Following up on the Congress, the ALA President appointed task forces to continue work on what had been begun at the Congress. The Core Values Task Force was one of those. We started our work with the lists that were developed at the Congress. We also sought out and looked at values statements developed by other professions. We considered the genesis of our own task force (including the recent debates that had occurred in which the absence of a values statement was felt to be a problem). We
discussed “what is a value.” We discussed what the purposes of a values statement were, and how those we saw from other professions did or did not answer those purposes. From these sources grew our vision of the statement as something that was short (“short enough to fit on a poker chip”), that was phrased generally enough to be inclusive of all the values of our profession, that did not exclude segments of the profession, and that would not become rapidly outdated. Further, we saw it as something that did not replace anything currently in the Handbook, nor supplant any of our extant policy statements that addressed one or more of our values in detail.

About the poker chip – one of our task force members brought the values statement from her own company. The values (about five of them) were expressed in single words. The company had printed the values on a poker chip, and each employee was given a chip. The values were “explicated” in a small brochure. The task force was struck by the forcefulness and effectiveness of this kind of presentation, and although we did not aim to create a “poker chip” of our own, each time we found ourselves becoming wordy, we would remind ourselves that we were working on a concise statement of values, not a policy manual.

About becoming rapidly outdated: We consciously tried not to use terms that were considered to be “insiders’ jargon” or “code words,” and instead to use common language and terminology that encompassed the meaning and intent of the jargon and code words. An example of jargon is the term “intellectual freedom”, which is librarians’ shorthand for a complex concept that might not be well understood by those outside the profession who might be wondering “what are they about?” The concept is clearly “core” to our profession, but the particular words are not sacred.

Once we had tentatively agreed on the sort of document we were aiming toward, we began to work on the lists that were generated by the Congress, and added values of our own until we “ran dry”. Then began the process of reducing the lists – which by this time took up three walls of our very large conference room – to a manageable size, first by identifying “common themes” and overlaps, and then by developing general “headers” that subsumed all of the values that we had grouped together. No term was accepted unless all who were there could agree that it encompassed, or served as an “umbrella” to all of the values listed under it.

None of us imagined that we would unveil a document and have it immediately acclaimed and accepted by all. We knew that it would be the subject of intensive debate and discussion. (We didn’t anticipate that it would be the subject of intensive debate by the readers of Dr. Laura’s webpage, but indeed it was. We were certainly surprised to discover how many of the readers of that page could read into it a determination to push pornography on children).

Probably none of us would have produced this exact document on our own. I, for instance, would have stopped after the first value. We had philosophical disagreements among ourselves along the way. (For example, the philosophical difference between wanting to name “diversity” – which we agreed to be jargon – as a separate item, or wanting to have it suffuse every value so that it could never be “lopped off”). In the end, however, we produced a draft that we could all support.

And now it’s up to Council.

22. MEMBERSHIP MEETING QUORUM

(Member meetings, their purpose, quorum, and attendance, have occupied a great deal of Council time. Many Councilors have a kind of “romance” with the concept of membership meetings, yet the meetings remain under-attended. In 1999, I grew so tired of having resolutions about membership meeting quorum brought to Council – and defeated after lengthy debate – that I sought to resolve the issue by proposing bylaws changes to remove the provisions that caused the resolutions about quorum to
Although my motions were defeated, a special task force was appointed to examine the issue, and because it must have appeared that I actually cared about membership meetings, I was appointed. Eventually the task force brought forth motions nearly identical to most of what I had originally proposed and they passed. Following that, I was appointed to the Membership Meeting committee – a committee that tried everything it could think of to increase attendance. I have included this very detailed message in this compilation because of the historical perspective it may provide, and because it illustrates the necessity of identifying the problem before proposing a solution.

August, 1999

One of the issues we have discussed repeatedly has to do with the quorum required for a membership meeting. A few years ago, the quorum required at a membership meeting was raised. Primary concerns that led to raising the quorum were that according to the ALA constitution (Article VI, Section 4 (a and c), an action passed in a membership meeting could, (a) refer matters to Council, requiring action, or (c) override a vote of Council. A very small quorum requirement could thus mean that a very small number of self-selected members of the association could override the actions of the body that had been elected through the whole association membership.

Since the quorum was raised, it’s my understanding that there has not been a Membership meeting that has had a quorum. Because a quorum is necessary before business of any sort can be transacted, these meetings have become disjointed and disheartening, turning into “information sessions” and informal discussions with (as it seems to many) little purpose. We have talked repeatedly about ways that we might make Membership meetings “more of a draw”, and various things have been tried, but none has been successful. There are those that believe that nothing WILL work – that people are staying away not for “cosmetic” reasons, but because they don’t see the relevance of their participating.

About once a year since the quorum was increased a resolution has been introduced to Council recommending that the quorum be decreased again so that membership meetings can be held. These resolutions have always failed, because the concerns that led to increasing the quorum remain. I have sat through and participated in many of these discussions over the years, and it seems to me that we have reached an impasse, and that some other approach needs to be taken.

In order to know what approach to take, it would be useful to come to an understanding of what would be most important about being able to hold membership meetings: (1) Is it so that a body would exist that could refer matters to Council? (2) Is it so that a body would exist that could overturn Council? (3) Is it so that there would be a formal opportunity for individual members to meet and hear about and discuss the business of the organization? It would also be useful to come to an understanding of why Councilors vote against decreasing the quorum: (a) Is it because they don’t wish a membership meeting held? (b) Is it because they are concerned that a small number of self-selected individuals might overturn the actions of an elected body? (c) Is it because they don’t wish to be bothered with matters referred from Membership?

Based on the nearly-annual discussions, it seems to me that those who want the quorum decreased want it primarily because of (3), to a lesser extent because of (1), and to only a very limited extent because of (2), and that those who have declined to increase the quorum are more interested in (b), and that neither (a) nor (c) plays much of a part in their decision.

Accordingly, as I said in Council in New Orleans, the problem appears NOT to be with the quorum, but with what a Membership meeting is empowered to do if it HAS a quorum. In other words, the problem is with the Constitution, Article VI, Section 4 (c).
Unless discussion here on the list manages to dissuade me otherwise, therefore, it is my intention to introduce a resolution to alter Article VI, Section 4 (c), by deleting the words “three-fourths vote at any membership meeting of the Association.”

The subsection would thus read: “Any action of the Council may be set aside by a majority vote by mail in which one-fourth of the members of the Association have voted. Such vote by mail shall be held upon petition of one percent of the personal members as certified by the Executive Director of the Association.” This would preserve the possibility of an action of Council being set aside, but would assure that the entire membership had the opportunity to vote on it.

In addition, unless I am persuaded otherwise by discussion here, I would introduce a second resolution (or possibly make it a second RESOLVED) to state IF the first resolution/resolved is approved by the Membership in a mail vote, then Article II, Section 6 of the Bylaws be revised to read: Quorum. The number of members who attend any regularly scheduled or special membership meeting (as covered by Article II, Section 4 of the Bylaws) constitutes a quorum.

Changing, or rather, essentially defining the Membership quorum out of existence, would then make it necessary to delete the words “either” and “or by a majority of the members present and voting at a membership meeting of the Association” and “shall specify whether a vote for ratification shall be taken at a membership meeting of the Association or by mail, and if a mail vote is ordered,” as well as the final sentence from both Articles XI, Sec. 1 and XII, Sec. 1 of the Constitution. Article XI would thus read: All proposals for amending the Bylaws [Constitution] shall originate in the Council. A proposed amendment shall become effective when it shall have been approved by a majority of the members of the Council present and voting at a meeting of the Council, followed by ratification by the members of the Association by a vote by mail of a majority of the members of the Association voting. The Council, on approving a proposed amendment, shall fix the time for the beginning and closing of the balloting. The changes to Article XII are analogous, the only difference being that changes in the Constitution have to be approved at two consecutive meetings held no less than two months apart.

Since I would not want the second or third actions to take effect unless the first passed, I’m not quite sure how this could be handled on a ballot. If anyone knows, I welcome enlightenment on this point. (Since the matter would have to go to Constitution and Bylaws, perhaps they could figure it out)

This still leaves the majority of those in attendance at a membership meeting with the power to refer matters to Council and require a report. I could be persuaded either way that this is a good or a bad thing, and would be happy to hear people’s opinions on it.

It seems to me that we have two main choices open to us: either continue to discuss and then defeat nearly-annual motions to decrease the quorum while bemoaning the difficulty of getting enough members to membership meetings, or eliminate the reasons that we defeat the motions in the first place.

23. MEMBERSHIP MEETING ATTENDANCE

(My experiences with proposing bylaws changes, and with a special task force on the quorum, and the Membership Meeting committee all taken together have formed my non-mainstream opinions about Membership meetings).

August, 2004

In 26 years as an ALA member I have served on 41 association, division, section, and roundtable committees, subcommittees, task forces or teams, and chaired 14. I’ve represented ALA internationally, have been a COA Site Visitor, Secretary of a Section, President of a Division, and Councilor at Large. In
other words, I'm into service, involvement, and the profession. But before I became a Councilor in 1989, I had never attended a membership meeting. Upon becoming a Councilor, I was guilt-tripped into attending membership meetings by some other Councilors who strongly implied that those who did not attend them were irresponsible ingrates, and a lower form of humanity. Attending membership meetings did not enrich my life, did not make me a better member or a better librarian, but it did give me a better basis upon which to inform opinions about membership meetings, as did my service on a presidential Task Force, and an ALA Committee concerned with membership meetings. Here's where I stand now:

Some (relatively few) people care deeply about membership meetings as a vehicle through which to contribute to or influence the association. Some remember the glory years of the 60s and 70s, when membership meetings were lively and well-attended. But most ALA members who attend conferences feel neither a desire nor an obligation to attend membership meetings. (Many have no idea that there is such a thing).

Many reasons have been put forth for poor membership meeting attendance: distant meeting rooms; bad timing; poor signage; poor publicity; inability to get work done (for lack of quorum); meetings "managed" by officers (a practice since abandoned); meetings monopolized by "factions"; meetings monopolized by Councilors. A great deal of effort has been expended trying to address these issues. We've also given door prizes and ice cream, and we've stood in the hallways behaving like carnival barkers trying to get people into the meeting room. Other reasons cited include: People are wrapped up in meetings and work related to their own specialty, and they feel "at home" there. The conference schedule is too full to fit everything in. People elect Councilors and officers to take care of the association as a whole. They just don't see the point of membership meetings.

I think it's the second group of reasons that determines attendance. If people felt a need for membership meetings, the first group of issues wouldn't be enough to keep them away. And there's nothing wrong with that. The membership is letting the association know, by their attendance, what their level of interest is. It's not something that's broken. It doesn't have to be fixed. No member is ever obligated to attend a membership meeting. No councilor is obligated to do so. There should be no guilt associated with staying away.

I'm not suggesting that we eliminate membership meetings. They are in the bylaws, and I think they should stay there. We should establish a reasonable and achievable quorum, provide reasonable facilities for the meeting (time, place, signage, support), and stop beating up on ourselves and each other if they are poorly attended. One day an issue may arise that involves, excites, catalyzes a larger portion of the membership, and when that happens, we have the mechanism in place to enable them to meet, debate, resolve, advise.

24. COUNCILORS AND MEMBERSHIP MEETINGS

(Among issues related to Membership Meetings is what obligation Councilors have to attend them and what role they should play. I see an ethical dilemma for Councilors)

August, 2004

As I mentioned in another message, when I was first elected to Council, some experienced Councilors bullyragged me into attending membership meetings (not me personally) by making statements that implied that it was a part of every Councilor's duty to attend membership meetings and participate in them. In recent years, I have been involved in several efforts to support membership meetings and to make it possible for them to achieve a quorum. In Council debates(on the floor or online) about
membership meetings, it's relatively common for someone to express the opinion that Councilors should be going to membership meetings, supporting them, helping them to achieve a quorum.

I have a problem with that. That is, I believe that there is an ethical problem with me as a Councilor participating in membership meetings - getting two votes on the same issue -- exercising influence over matters that I will later vote on in Council. Perhaps some examples will help explain my dilemma:

In the tenure and promotion process, you may not participate in more than one phase of the process. You may write a letter of recommendation/review OR you may serve on the evaluation committee, but you may not do both. You may serve on the evaluation committee, OR the review committee, but you may not do both. In government, you may serve in the House OR the Senate, but not both. As a member of an Executive Branch Department you may prepare proposals for legislation, but you may not serve in the legislature that votes on them. In the courts, you may be judge, or jury, but not both.

Many of you may disagree with me on this, but I simply can't square it with my conscience to take an active role in membership meetings (speaking to an issue, presenting a motion, voting) and also serving on Council. People have pointed out "but Councilors are members, too". And that's true. But Councilors are members who have sought and accepted a particular role. We have other avenues to influence the association than the membership meetings. Both the judge and the jury member are citizens, but they are citizens with specialized roles and limitations.

It might be argued that even lending my presence to a membership meeting quorum count is questionable. If the membership cannot achieve a quorum without me (and other Councilors), then doesn't that carry its own message about the will of the membership? And if Councilors count as a part of the membership does that subvert the purpose of establishing a quorum at all? If a significant portion of a membership meeting consists of Councilors, doesn't that cast doubt on the independence of the membership meeting? Doesn't it make the membership meeting just another voice of Council?

I don't write this message in expectation that it will change (m)any minds. I know that I am probably in a very tiny minority, and it doesn't bother me. During my time on Council I have considered these matters repeatedly, and have attempted to adjust my thinking to align with what I perceive as a majority view -- considering that if no one else sees these matters as problematic, perhaps they aren't. But I still come back to where I started. This year, as I looked around at the membership meetings and saw a significant percentage of those in attendance - and those speaking -- were Councilors, I thought about some of the criticisms that have been leveled against the membership meeting situation (where members have criticized Council and the Officers for "trying to run" the membership meetings, for setting its agenda, and even for co-opting it). And I thought, "sure enough. Here's Council so determined that there will be a membership meeting that we have taken it over."

So, I offer this as food for thought, and as a possible explanation why some of us may never be active in the membership meetings, and may not even attend them. It's not that we can't be bothered. It may be that we don't think we should.

25. MEMBERSHIP MEETINGS PROCESS

(Reducing the Membership Meeting Quorum did not solve all the problems of Membership Meetings. It just made it possible to hold them. The content and process of Membership Meetings continued to be of concern to many)

January, 2007
Some years ago, I proposed changes to the constitution/bylaws to eliminate the quorum problem for membership meetings. The changes were complex, and were directed at first altering the powers of membership meetings that caused so many Councilors (correctly, I believe) to be wary of reducing the quorum.

Partly because of the sheer complexity of the issues (and therefore the motions), my motions failed (or rather the first failed, so I withdrew the second). Nevertheless, soon after that I was put on a Presidential Task Force on the Membership Meeting Quorum. Eventually that task force came up with motions very similar to those I had originally proposed. They passed Council, were put to a mail vote of the membership, and were passed.

Following that, I served on the Membership Meetings Committee, in which we tried hard every year to identify things that were keeping members from Membership Meetings, experimented with format, etc. Nothing worked very well, and I have just about concluded that it doesn't work very well because the bulk of our membership does not regard the meetings as necessary, or at least regards other things at conferences as much more worth their time. Still, I believe that the Membership Meetings should be retained through this time of relatively little interest, because there may come a time and an issue of such critical importance or controversy that we WILL need to have a place for it to come to the fore. In other words, you can lead that horse to the water, but if he isn't thirsty, he won't drink. On the other hand, if he is thirsty he'll find the river, and you need it to be accessible.

Although I am no longer on the Membership Meetings Committee, I continue to ponder issues related to Membership Meetings, including wondering how they might be made more useful and attractive to the general members, and how they might provide the kind of information and insight that Council could make good use of.

Recently, Leslie Burger, the ALA President identified an issue for Council that might be even more relevant to membership meetings. And that is: the way the agenda is set up, and the parliamentary practices we follow, provides little opportunity for issues to be brought up for discussion if they are not (1) contained within or alluded to by a committee report, or (2) the subject of a resolution. Sometimes there are issues around which discussion and/or clarification is desired or needed, that aren't READY for a resolution to be drafted, but they don't get discussed, because the things that have a resolution drafted take precedence.

For Council, Burger suggested identifying a major topic and devoting a period of time for general discussion (in some form or another), WITHOUT their being a resolution to react to. For Membership Meetings, such a tactic might be useful, but perhaps we should also consider whether an "open comment period" would also be worthwhile. The form that I am familiar with for such a mechanism, is that a time period is set aside, and noted in advance, and those who wish to speak put their name down on a list, and present a statement of a given maximum length (2 minutes, perhaps) when it is their turn. (If equitable access to the list is a problem, you could have a modified lottery, where the first 20 to respond would draw for order of comment, and then the next 20, and so on).

The topic to be addressed is whatever the person wants to bring up. Because statements are taken in the order in which people sign up, there is no debate Thus, it's not possible for the first topic to come up to absorb all of the available time.

Of course, as has been mentioned, the Member Forum is available to every ALA member with an interest in discussing issues related to ALA, and it attracts virtually no traffic. So when people talk about needing to have membership meetings that can be attended by all members, even if they can't/don't attend
conference, I can't help think that we have a mechanism here with this list that COULD be used as a kind of membership meeting or discussion, that virtually no one takes advantage of. Perhaps we need to spend some time thinking about how to make the Member Forum more attractive, useful, used, and KNOWN.