



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Proclaiming the fundamental right of all human beings to access information without restriction, ALA joins with IFLA in urging the Cuban library community to monitor violations of freedom of access to information and freedom of expression and to take a leading role in actively promoting these basic rights for all Cubans.”

-ALA, January 13, 2004

My recent column on the variety of information available on the Internet sparked two emails: one from the editor of “WorldNetDaily,” an online newspaper and one from the writer of the article I mentioned. Both of these took me to task, one more gently than the other, for my use of the word “slant.”

They make a good point, as I mentioned when I apologized to both of them. To use a word like that and not explain why wasn’t a good idea. So I decided to take advantage of this issue to look at how difficult it can be to glean truth from opinion, especially as it relates to an unfamiliar subject; in this case, the controversy over Cuban independent libraries.

I first read about this topic in a “New York Times” article: “A Library in Cuba: What is it?” (Felicia Lee, 2003). This article, which I thought gave a balanced view of a contentious subject, described

“a little cultural cold war” among members of the American Library Association (ALA), an organization devoted to free access to information. At the 2003 annual conference, dissension broke out over whether to condemn the actions of the Cuban government on the issue of censorship and the imprisonment of 14 jailed librarians.

According to the article, the ALA “deferred a resolution about Cuba to its next meeting in January, saying its members needed more information.” This was not acceptable to some, including members of an organization called “Friends of the Cuban Libraries.”

Since that article, I have read many letters, comments and articles on this same topic. What is fascinating to me about this is that there is just enough information for those involved to express opinions, but not enough for anyone to know exactly what the truth is. In fact, Michael Dowling, the ALA’s

international relations office director, says in the article, “the problem has always been competing versions of the truth.”

I love that: competing versions of the truth. It makes me realize how difficult it can be to say anything positively. We have to ask ourselves: Where are we getting our information? How thorough do we need to be before we come to a conclusion? This seems particularly appropriate in these pre-election days, when versions of the truth are being exchanged daily or even hourly.

The question about the Cuban libraries has to do with whether or not these are truly libraries, or are simply private book owners, supported by the United States government, and trying to distribute dissident Cuban materials. Those who believe they are librarians are adamant that censorship is being employed and that it

must be stopped and the librarians must be released.

Those who think they are dissidents glowingly describe the status of books, public libraries and literacy in Cuba.

What becomes clear after reading the sometimes rancorous discussion of this issue is that information can be presented with one side heavily weighted or with both sides presented equally. For the reader, it can be important to know which you are getting. Without doing extensive research (and even that may not be definitive), sometimes the only way to know this is by examining either the context or the reporter. If in either case you can identify a particular political message, that may be a clue.

On the other hand, it may tell you nothing, leaving you to rely on your own judgment. In the end, maybe that’s the best way.