Advocating for a free internet

By Justin Unrau.

There may have been other sessions at the BC Library Conference which included hip-hop videos about copyright policy, but "Points of Convergence: OpenMedia, BCLA and the Future of Library Advocacy" was probably the only one to add in a call to action for information professionals to get involved in internet freedom in a concerted way.

While the panel included three people, the main speaker was Steve Anderson from OpenMedia. His goal was to introduce to the information professionals in the room the kinds of internet advocacy that his organization has been doing in Canada, and why it's important. Myron Groover (from the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre and chair of BCLA's Information Policy Committee) and Barbara Jo May (Okanagan Regional Library) were on hand to connect OpenMedia's work specifically to the work of librarians and archivists.

The four pillars of internet freedom that OpenMedia espouses are 1) internet affordability, 2) wireless choice, 3) copyright, and 4) online privacy.

Anderson explained that the first organization he worked with as part of his open internet advocacy was dealing with American net neutrality laws (net neutrality is the idea that internet service providers cannot speed up or slow down access to the internet based on the type of information being used), but he soon discovered there was no group in Canada bringing people together on issues of internet freedom.

In 2008 Bell began slowing video services (exactly what net neutrality rules would punish), and Anderson was part of "the geekiest crowd ever" to protest on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. They went on to try to educate Canadians and show them why it's not just geeks who need to care about a free internet.

Building community support is a huge part of OpenMedia's project and they've had success in getting huge numbers to sign petitions to the CRTC and chip away at legislation. The biggest problem with many of these high-level laws and trade agreements is that they are debated in secret or pushed through without debate. Anderson explained how OpenMedia tries to get citizen voices involved in that process in the name of an open and transparent democracy.

After Anderson's exhibition on why these are important issues, Myron Groover brought the connections back to individual librarians. He called for us to use reference interviews as teachable moments for grassroots advocacy so that our library members know what is going on and how an internet that is less than free will affect them.

Barbara Jo May reminded us that librarians have an interest beyond just advocating "for libraries," but for our citizens. As a profession predicated on intellectual freedom librarians need to educate ourselves and our members on information rights.

But we don't need to do it all ourselves. The panel agreed that the goal is not to wait till something terrible happens and then leap into action, but to influence policy. To do that librarians need to form partnerships with others who are working towards the same goals of informationally empowered citizenry that we have.

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