

## TASK FORCE ON ELECTRONIC MEMBER PARTICIPATION

Report to Council  
Annual Conference, 2008  
Anaheim, CA.

### 1. FORMATION OF THE TASK FORCE

The Task Force on Electronic Member participation was formed following the Annual Conference, in August, 2007, in accordance with a vote of Council, following up on a recommendation of the Committee on Organization (in ALA CD #27.1, Item 2).

Some of the underlying reasons for pursuing greater electronic participation included:

- A desire to increase opportunities for ALA members to participate in the business of the organization
- A desire to increase the opportunities for ALA members to derive benefit from their membership
- A desire to enable ALA members for whom (for whatever reason) travel is a hardship, to participate more fully in the business of the organization, or to partake of its offerings.
- A desire to increase the effectiveness of the organization (with subsidiary results including the possibility of decreasing the length of conferences, decreasing conflicts at conferences, etc.)

### 2. CHARGE OF THE TASK FORCE

**The Charge:** To examine existing documents and develop recommendations to adapt ALA policies to help the Association move forward with effective-e-participation practices; to survey current and planned e-participation throughout the ALA and its units; to explore, in consultation with BARC, the financial implications of expanded e-participation; and to report its findings to the ALA Council at the 2009 ALA Midwinter Meeting in Denver, CO.

This charge is broader than that originally proposed by COO, but it is not all-inclusive. One of the difficulties faced by the TF was identifying and defining the array of issues involved in order to organize its discussions, and to establish its boundaries. In the process, the TF concluded that it is not responsible for describing or recommending the particular form of the electronic future for the Association. This conclusion was made in part because of the recognition that technological capabilities are changing so rapidly that any attempt to establish particular mechanisms, platforms, software, hardware, etc., would be useless, as the possibilities might well have changed even before recommendations could be brought to a vote.

### 3. PURPOSES AND LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION

#### 3.1 PURPOSES

The TF found it impossible to determine how to adapt ALA policies for the future without considering how and for what purposes e-participation might be used, and what its advantages and disadvantages might be. Accordingly, three primary **purposes** were identified:

- Participation in non-governance activities, such as programs and conferences
- Participation in governance activities, (including all business meetings, and between-meeting activities of officers, boards, committees, task forces, interest groups (etc.) at all levels in the Association, but not including programs, receptions, and other non-business activities that may be sponsored by an organizational entity)
- Participation in “communities of interest” not necessarily connected to either formal programming, or to governance.

The TF considered two types of electronic involvement with the association to be outside its area of concern:

- Administrative activities such as registration for membership or conferences, and electronic voting
- Continuing education activities offered electronically

### **3.2 LEVELS**

Within each of the three types of participation within the scope of the TF, three **levels** of participation were identified:

- Observe only (read-only access to a committee discussion list; see real-time transcripts of Council discussion; see a webcast of a speech, etc.)
- Some interaction (ability to join in an electronic discussion, but not to vote; ability to submit questions to a conference speaker, etc.)
- Full interaction and participation (live access to meetings, including ability to join in discussion in real time, etc.)

### **3.3 PURPOSES AND LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION**

During the past six months, the TF has been working its way through the list of purposes and levels of participation, considering the applications, advantages and disadvantages, policy impediments, possible fiscal implications, etc. of each purpose and level. This work is not yet complete, but some preliminary observations can be made:

- The options for e-participation in non-governance activities are numerous, highly varied, and changing almost daily, and therefore, it is both impossible and undesirable for the TF to try to prescribe or define what forms of e-participation in non-governance activities should be pursued or preferred. ***Instead, all units at all levels should be encouraged to experiment with all sorts of e-participation in non-governance activities, working closely with ALA’s ITS staff; paying close attention to fiscal matters, and gathering data about such matters as registration, participation, response, and anything else that could provide information that would be useful to the Association as it works toward increasing electronic participation. In addition, providing electronic access to certain governance activities, where there is no policy impediment (e.g.***

*providing streaming audio, webcast, or podcasts of Council meetings), should also be encouraged*

- The options for e-participation in governance activities are numerous, highly varied, and changing almost daily, and therefore, it is both impossible and undesirable for the TF to try to prescribe or define what forms of e-participation in governance activities should be pursued or preferred, but this does not mean that the TF cannot suggest directions or encourage certain courses of action. In the case of governance activities, the capabilities of ALA's IT staff and infrastructure may be more of an issue than with non-governance activities, so it is possible that there may need to be more prescriptiveness about what can or will be supported.

As an observation on electronically conducted committee work, it should be noted that the TF discussion of “purposes and levels” is being carried out using the Moodle classroom environment. Despite our expectations that the software would be simple, and even intuitive to use, it took several weeks following initial set up for kinks to be worked out. Even after all members had succeeded in signing in, and in participating in conversation, members found themselves gravitating back to the electronic discussion list whenever use of Moodle was not absolutely required.

## 4. POLICY ISSUES

### 4.1 RELEVANT POLICIES

The policies with the greatest impact on the ability to expand electronic participation include:

- **Definition of a meeting. Policy 7.4.1.** A Meeting is an official assembly, for any length of time following a designated starting time, of the members of any board, committee, task force or commission, etc., during which the members do not separate except for a recess and in which the assembly has the capacity to formalize decisions. Conference calls, Internet chat sessions (and their equivalents), and in-person meetings are recognized as meeting subject to the open meetings policy (ALA Policy 7.4.4) (Asynchronous electronic discussions by electronic mail or other asynchronous communications methods do not constitute meetings because they are not an official assembly with a designated starting time.)
- **Virtual Members. Policy 6.16 1.** Definition of Virtual Members. Virtual members of committees or task forces have the right to attend meetings, participate in debate, and make motions. Virtual members are not counted in determining the quorum nor do they have the right to vote.
- **Open Meetings. Policy 7.4.4.** All meetings of the American Library Association and its units are open to all members and to members of the press. Registration requirements apply. Closed meetings may be held only for discussion of matters affecting the privacy of individuals or institutions. (See also “Current Reference File”: Interpretive Statement on Open Meetings Policy.)
- **Meeting Attendance. Policy 4.5.** Requirements for Committee Service. With the exception of virtual members, members, members of all ALA and unit committees are expected to attend all meetings. Failure to attend two consecutive meetings or groups of meetings (defined as all meetings of a committee that take place at one Midwinter Meeting or Annual Conference) without an explanation acceptable to the committee chair constitutes grounds for removal upon request by the chair to and approval of the appropriate appointing official or governing board

- **Voting without physical presence. Article VIII, Section 8.** Votes in the Executive Board, as well as in committees, may be taken by mail, electronic system, or conference call, provided that all members are canvassed simultaneously. An affirmative vote from two-thirds of a quorum of the body shall be required. Each committee shall have the authority to set a time limit within which the votes of its members shall be recorded, but if no such time limit is set no vote shall be counted unless received within 30 days from the day the text of the matter voted upon was mailed properly addressed to those entitled to vote on the matter involved. **Also Article X, Section 2.** Voting by mail shall be deemed to be by postal services or electronic means as determined by the executive director who shall be responsible for ensuring the integrity of the ballot.
- The openness of business conducted by organizational entities between conferences (No policy extant)

## 4.2 POLICY FINDINGS

- So far as the TF has been able to determine, there are no policy impediments to providing electronic participation opportunities to any non-governance Association activity.
- There are issues of longstanding practice connected to e-participation in non-governance activities that should not be confused with policy issues, and which are probably primarily fiscal in nature. (e.g. various practices connected to conference attendance, how exhibits are handled, etc.)
- There are significant policy impediments to certain kinds of e-participation in governance activities.
- The Open Meetings Policy should apply only to meetings.
- A separate policy, partially patterned after the Open Meetings Policy, should be created to cover business related activities of governance units that are conducted outside of formal meetings. (e.g., the "open lists" issue). The TF will discuss this matter more fully after it has completed its survey of purposes and levels of participation. The TF asked division and roundtable boards for their opinions about opening electronic discussion lists, and in particular board discussion lists, beyond the membership of the body, and these responses will inform the TF discussion. ***In the meantime, any organizational entity that has an electronic discussion list and that has no concerns about the privacy of its discussions should be encouraged to open its discussion list to members either for read-only access, or for full participation, on an experimental basis.***
- There are ambiguities and/or omissions in the bylaws and policies that may be interpreted to permit certain kinds of electronic participation. For example, neither they bylaws nor the policy manual specify what is meant by "present" or "attendance." Similarly, "open" and "closed" as applied to meetings are not defined.
- The definition of "meetings" is such that a meeting may be all or partly actual or virtual.
- Thus, closed meetings may be held in which all members are only virtually present, in which all are physically present, or in which some members are physically present, and some are only

- For entities whose meetings are normally open, if a mechanism is utilized that makes participating in synchronous meetings electronically, and, for non-members, observing them electronically, there is no need to distinguish between regular members and virtual members.
- The TF believes that the creation of the committee membership category “virtual members” may be an example of the Association acting too quickly; that technological capabilities exist now, or will soon exist, such that there should be no need to maintain a category of members who participate throughout the year, but who may not vote.
- If virtual membership is an untenable category, a variety of parliamentary and organizational issues arise, including questions of quorum, proportionality, etc. As it works toward specific recommendations, the TF will consult with COO, and with the Parliamentarian.
- Similarly, if virtual membership as it exists currently were revised, the policy on meeting attendance would need to be looked at. As would the current (confusingly written) policy on voting without physical presence, which could be read to require a greater-than-majority vote for passage of a measure, and which allows for a non-synchronous vote. Again, the Parliamentarian will need to be consulted.
- The Open Meetings Policy does not guarantee that observation of the meeting is free of cost, only that if you can “get there” (physically or virtually), you may “observe”.

## **5.0 FISCAL IMPLICATIONS**

No decisions about expansion of electronic participation can be made without considering their fiscal implications. Because the TF is not the appropriate body to address these matters, it has a liaison with the Budget Analysis and Review Committee (BARC), with which the TF charge directed the TF to work. Charles Kratz, a member of the TF, and Executive Board Liaison to BARC serves in that capacity. Because of the pace of TF work, BARC has not yet had an opportunity to react to actual recommendations. The TF intends to have its recommendations in at least a draft form by October of this year, so that BARC will have some opportunity to react prior to Midwinter, 2009. Although the TF hopes to have completed its task by its original deadline, it concedes that there might be some need for at least a segment of the TF to continue to exist, with a reduced charge, after Midwinter, if BARC has not been able to complete its work. Among items needing to be considered are the following:

- Conferences are a major revenue source for the association
- A major part of the revenue from conferences is derived from exhibits, where vendors meet attendees face to face.
- Virtual conference attendance cannot be free or artificially low-cost. Virtual conference attendance fees must be established to defray the cost of providing the service. Those who attend meetings physically pay to do so (travel, meals, hotel, registration – and the registration fee is applied to the shared cost to the association of putting on the conference); those who attend virtually must also pay to do so (through a registration fee that covers the shared cost to the

association, including costs associated with supplying the electronic participation, and possibly increased costs of putting on a conference with fewer attendees)

- Some electronic participation mechanisms must be supported by the organization. For example, if a meeting is to be available by webcast, the association must have the technological capability (and staff) to support it. This may have an impact on overall Association funding (and thus membership fees and conference fees). Support of these activities would represent a major change from the past, and might necessitate a re-examination of the formula by which overhead or other services are divided between the Association and its divisions.
- Some aspects of electronic participation must be borne by the participant. For example, if a physical meeting is made electronically available to virtual members, depending on the technology used, the virtual members must have access to their own computers and software, must pay their own telecommunications costs, etc.

## **6.0 INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ISSUES**

The TF recognizes that:

- Technological means exist to enable any level of electronic participation in Association programs and business.
- Capabilities vary in terms of expense (to the individual and the association), ease of use, logistical requirements, feasibility, and cost.
- At present, some capabilities may not be readily accessible, easily usable, or affordable to a significant portion of the Association membership.
- Because capabilities for electronic participation are developing rapidly, and because use of such mechanisms by ALA membership can be expected to become more commonplace in the future, patterns, practices, and policies governing use of electronic participation in ALA should be written in such a way as not to “freeze” them into the situation that pertains today.

As it began to work through the discussion of purposes and levels of participation, the Task Force came to realize that questions might arise about information technology (costs, staffing, capabilities, etc.) for which the TF did not have answers. Even in the absence of specific questions to be answered, given the extended nature of the TF work and charge, it was felt that ALA’s Information Technology & Telecommunications (ITS) Office needs to be kept abreast of the direction of TF discussions. Accordingly, the TF asked for a liaison from ITS to be named. Jenny Levine agreed to serve in that capacity.

## **7.0 POSSIBLE MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT ELECTRONIC PARTICIPATION**

In the process of doing its work, the TF has become aware of some notions about electronic participation that will need to be understood and addressed as the association decides how to proceed:

- Notion 1: That full electronic participation will enable so much work to be done between conferences that conferences can either be significantly shortened, or even eliminated. Those who have experience working on committees that conduct a substantial amount of business

electronically know that despite the ability to work year-round, the reality is that work usually happens sporadically, with long lulls in between periods of activity. The Task Force on Electronic Member Participation has had the same experience. All members are interested in advancing electronic participation; all have some sense of urgency about moving forward; all have some degree of comfort with doing work electronically. Yet despite members' best efforts, TF work has also been sporadic, with long lulls. As is true of other committees and task forces, all members are volunteers; all have "real lives" outside the TF; personal or family issues can cause inability to participate for extended periods. Thus, while ability to conduct work electronically, and the availability of useful and effective electronic mechanisms with which to do it can increase the ability of committees to do work between meetings, the extent to which the work product can be increased or speeded up may not be so great as some imagine. The controlling factor may be more human than technological.

- Notion 2: That electronic participation will involve little or no cost to the individual participating electronically. This is a notion that many have without realizing they are making such an assumption. Virtual conference or program attendance fees must be established to defray the cost of providing the service. As noted above, "Those who attend meetings physically pay to do so (travel, meals, hotel, registration – and the registration fee is applied to the shared cost to the association of putting on the conference); those who attend virtually must also pay to do so (through a registration fee that covers the shared cost to the association, including costs associated with supplying the electronic participation, and possibly increased costs of putting on a conference with fewer attendees)".

## **8.0 INFORMING ALL UNITS OF POLICIES, ETC.**

It is important that all units be aware of existing policies regarding open meetings, the definition of a meeting, requirements for meeting attendance, and virtual membership. The TF has become aware of instances in which committees have conducted votes non-synchronously, and in a manner that is not open to the membership. They have mistakenly believed themselves to be in full compliance with policy, or perhaps have believed that as division or roundtable entities, they were not bound by policies that apply to the Association as a whole. It is apparent that communication and understanding of relevant policies is not all it should be. Whether or not policies change, communication to all units and entities about those policies is critical. The Executive Director and Headquarters staff will have primary responsibility for ensuring effective and ongoing communication about these matters.

## **9.0 MEMBERSHIP INPUT AND INVOLVEMENT**

The TF conducted a member survey in June, 2008. A second survey period was opened in order to collect information following the Annual Conference. Approximately 1300 responses were received in the first survey period. The results of the survey will inform the work of the committee, as well as provide useful information to other bodies as we move into a future of greater e-participation. Information received from Division Executive Directors and Round Table Liaisons concerning what types of e-participation is currently supported by the organization, and what plans currently exist for addition or other types will further inform the TF's work.

The TF was a major agenda item for the two membership meetings at the 2008 annual conference. There was a great deal of useful comment from the members in attendance, and TF deliberations over the next six months will be informed by input received at those meetings.

The TF discussions are available for ALA members to follow, as messages posted to its discussion list, and to its activities on the classroom software Moodle, are accessible by searching under “Electronic Discussion Lists.”

## **10.0 CONCLUSION**

The TF has no action items at this time. It does, however, have “encouragement” items contained within this report, which are indicated by being in *Italics*.

After discussing things within the TF, both electronically and in person, and after reading comments from the user survey, and hearing comments from the membership meetings, the TF has found it necessary to remind itself that the design of a perfect future is not within the TF charge. We hope, however, to help to move toward a desirable and feasible future. This cannot be done without examination of the reasons for what we are doing currently, and the reasons for suggested changes. And it cannot be done without some willingness to entertain change or to come to new understandings regarding things that we have come to take for granted.

The Task Force looks forward to the completion of its work in the next six months, and to bringing recommendations to Council at Midwinter, 2009. We will make an effort to have drafts of our final report (or parts of it) circulated to the Council list in time for some discussion prior to Midwinter.

The Task Force thanks its staff liaisons Lois Ann Gregory Wood, who kept us on track and ferreted out answers to questions, John Chrastka, who set us up on Moodle, and got our survey out, and its ITTS Liaison, Jenny Levine for listening in to identify areas where we need help.

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Janet Swan Hill, Chair

And members: Vibiana Bowman, Courtney Young, Dawn Vaughn, Gina Persichini, James Casey, Judy Nelson, Joe Sanchez, Keri Cascio, Karen Schneider, Charles Kratz, Lisa Gieskes, Michael Miller, Peter Hepburn, Stephanie Sarnoff, Sue MacTavish