

# It Takes a Village

by Ruth Levor



## Reporting on the Results of the AALL Spectrum Reader Survey

*Editor's Note: this is an excerpted version of the full report, which can be found in its entirety on AALLNET at [http://www.aallnet.org/products/pub\\_sp0003\\_report.asp](http://www.aallnet.org/products/pub_sp0003_report.asp).*

Approximately a year and a half after the conversion of the previous *AALL Newsletter* into a magazine, the *Law Library Journal* and *AALL Spectrum* Editorial Board and Advisory Committee worked with Editor Peter Beck and a professional consultant to design and conduct a reader survey. The purpose of the survey was to gather reliable data about how useful and enjoyable the magazine is to readers and chiefly to set direction for future issues and for the work of the editorial board.

The survey results have been invaluable in guiding our planning process. The sample set of magazine readers was random, except that the number of survey recipients was equally divided among the following groups: government and court librarians; academic librarians; and corporate, and law firm librarians. The results were weighted to equalize the views of the three representative groups.

### What We Learned

On the whole, *AALL Spectrum* readers have received the new magazine favorably if not entirely enthusiastically. Most respondents read the *AALL Spectrum* on a consistent basis and immediately upon receipt. They find it easy to read, and they appreciate the design. They like the direction the magazine has taken with respect to content and format, but even among the positive responses, most indicated qualified enthusiasm. Particular

areas for growth are in providing lively and interesting items pertinent to job performance and in representing law librarianship as an interesting and important profession.

The most urgent need that respondents report is, not surprisingly, for information on technology and the Internet. They would like to see *AALL Spectrum* devote much more coverage to subjects like systems, hardware, software, electronic services personnel, technology planning, and electronic research and instruction. Court and government librarians report a significantly higher degree of satisfaction with the magazine's coverage of technology, and with the magazine's overall content, than do members of the other two groups.

The "publics" also rated *AALL Spectrum* more highly than the other groups did in its coverage of trends in law librarianship. However, most respondents rated the coverage of Association activities and professional concerns highly. Most also rated *AALL Spectrum* highly, second only to e-mail, as an effective medium to inform them about award, scholarship, grant, and volunteering application deadlines. Readers indicated that the best ways for *AALL Spectrum* to inform them of these deadlines are calendars with deadlines and explanatory articles, but 26% of the respondents, evenly divided among library types, selected forms as the best instrument.

When asked about their favorite features in *AALL Spectrum*, most cited the cover story, *The CRIV Sheet*, and the other feature stories. Other sections that were cited in the top three by over 60% of respondents are the "Washington Brief," "From the Secretary," and "Committee News." Readers asked most for more coverage

of technology planning and products, the Internet, legal research, librarian and staff career development and training, and access to government information. Smaller majorities want more coverage of copyright and licensing, professional ethics, and vendor relations.

The survey asked about "pass-along" practices—i.e., to what extent readers pass *AALL Spectrum* or specific articles along to other librarians and/or members of the legal community. Very few readers use the magazine in this way, and since librarians are notorious information routers, we deduce that readers do not view its contents as very useful or of great interest to those in companion professions.

Why did we ask our readers if they pass their issues of *AALL Spectrum* along to others? The AALL Strategic Challenge for 1994–1998 placed a strong emphasis on promoting the profession "to the public, the legal community, and the world." When *AALL Spectrum* was being created, it was agreed that, in order to support the above mission, the magazine should appeal not only to AALL

members but also to "attorneys, law school faculty, government officials, judiciary, court administrators, publishers, para-professionals, and others."

Now that the magazine is in its third year of publication, the editorial board realizes the ambitiousness of the "global appeal" plan and believes that **priority must first be given to addressing member needs**, as expressed in the

reader survey. We are gratified by the overall positive responses to the magazine, and we need to focus our limited resources on the ongoing task of recruiting talented authors and generating ideas for articles and columns. We do not believe, nor apparently do our readers, that "pass-along" appeal currently warrants our priority efforts until we have attained a greater variety and number of willing writers and a higher level of reader satisfaction.

The survey questioned the appropriateness of articles that go beyond reporting information to the realm of opinion, critical analysis, and humor. All were deemed appropriate for inclusion. To a great extent, the magazine was rated well on the quality of these articles, but there was considerable room for greater progress in recruiting articles critical of the profession and provocative articles in general.

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Last of all, the “new look.” Seventy-two percent of readers said that “innovative magazine design” is appropriate for *AALL Spectrum*, and a whopping 86% said that the magazine is doing a good job of including innovative design. Sixty-seven percent said that the magazine design enhances, rather than detracts from, the editorial content of the magazine. Court and government librarians were the most favorably disposed to the design.

The magazine’s editor and editorial board are encouraged by the survey results, which indicate a general, if not total, acceptance of the magazine’s new look, style, and content. Even more important, they offer us guidance in pursuing excellence, in fine tuning the format and content of *AALL Spectrum*, in enriching the content, and in recruiting and evaluating submissions for publication.

## What We Can Do

### Sustain and enrich content of interest to readers.

We need to increase reader enthusiasm by generating more and more articles that captivate their professional interests and imagination. We are convinced that many potential authors don’t realize that they have ideas and experiences that would be interesting to their colleagues. In the same vein, they may believe that anything that is submitted must be a full-length feature article. One of the advantages of the more flexible graphic format is that it can accommodate even a worthy paragraph or two in an eye-catching box. Publication in *AALL Spectrum* does not, therefore, require a full feature-length article, although those, of course, are gratefully welcomed.

It is no surprise that the survey told us that we need to be persistent in **recruiting authors to write about technology and the Internet**. While we have discussed targeting the Computing Services and Micrographics/Audio-Visual SISs for potential authors, we think that there are also many others in the organization who have stories to tell and tips to share. Another highly rated subject field is **legal research topics**. Many of you have thoughts and experiences to share about **librarian and staff career development and training**. (Note: the full report lists the specific topic ideas identified for each subject area.)

### Make the magazine attractive to talented authors as a venue of choice for publication.

By the nature of our work, law librarians are almost all talented writers. That, and your intimate familiarity with the profession, makes you, our own membership, the richest (although not the only) source of authors for the magazine about our profession. However, time is scarce, and recognition for the work of writing is limited to the joy of seeing your name in print and a few pats on the back from colleagues.

We can’t help you find more time, but we certainly can do a better job of thanking authors and column editors for their hard work. To begin, there will be a special reception for the editorial board, *Law Library Journal* editor Frank Houdek, *AALL Spectrum* editor Peter Beck, and the contributors to both publications at the 2000 AALL Annual Meeting in Philadelphia. We hope that this reception will become an honored tradition—an opportunity to recognize the valuable work of AALL’s authors, to allow writers and editors to share experiences and ideas, and just to relax and socialize.

Thanks to the generosity of CCH, there will also be a more tangible incentive to publish in *Law Library Journal* and *AALL Spectrum*.

**Readers asked most for more coverage of technology planning and products, the Internet, legal research, librarian and staff career development and training, and access to government information.**

CCH has generously offered to fund two substantial AALL Annual Awards, one for the presently unfunded *LLJ* Article of the Year Award and the other for a similar new award for contributions to *AALL Spectrum*. A subcommittee is presently drafting proposed criteria and procedures for these awards. We hope that competition for these awards will spark more interest in writing and add more substance to our publications.

### Ensure that the magazine contributes to the achievement of the goals of the Association’s Strategic Plan.

When the magazine began publication in September of 1996, the projected focus was “external.” The external focus was intended to go beyond Association business and news and to concentrate about 67% of

the content on “legal information issues.” This concept was consistent with AALL’s vision, which was, in part, “to become a strong leader in the library, information and legal communities; to become an Association whose opinions are sought and valued; [and] to play a primary role in the education of law librarians, help members to understand and keep pace with rapidly changing technologies.”

Our experience and the survey results lead us to redirect the external focus in some respects, most especially to the need and desire for information on the Internet and technology as they relate to our professional endeavors. While we do not plan to abandon efforts to recruit articles on legal information issues, the survey results afford us guidelines for defining those issues more narrowly.

## How We Can Do It

**... not without your help.** Each and every AALL member is a potential author. You all know something that the rest of us would like to know, whether it’s a small tip on how you’ve learned to do something or to do it better, a longer report on something of interest, a polemic on a topic that really ticks you off(!), or something that will make us laugh.

Librarians and other legal information professionals, by the nature of our training, work and/or inclinations are known for our writing skills. Writing for the magazine is an excellent way to gain name recognition, to enhance credibility when interviewing for a job, to meet colleagues who are interested in what you have to say, to entertain and to keep those creative juices flowing! For the magazine to appeal to and serve the membership, “it takes a village,” and the inhabitants of the AALL village are YOU!

YOU have something to say that is of interest to us all. Whenever you’re ready to “say” it, please contact the Editor, Peter Beck (see page 1) or me (see below).

The Editorial Board looks forward to seeing your name in print!

**Ruth Levor** ([rlevor@acusd.edu](mailto:rlevor@acusd.edu)) is Chair of the *Law Library Journal* and *AALL Spectrum* Editorial Board and Advisory Committee and Associate Director of the University of San Diego Legal Research Center in San Diego, California (619/260-4604).

