

## **ADR Report: What Do You Want to Do about *The Forum*?**

An article in *The Forum*'s July issue was like a warning shot. Al-Anon Family Groups' World Service Office (WSO) has interpreted declining subscriptions as an indication of lack of interest. If we want *The Forum* to continue to exist, we need to do something about it. In case anyone doesn't know, *The Forum* is the monthly magazine the WSO publishes, sometimes referred to as "a meeting in your pocket" because of the shares and information it contains.

Similar to this District newsletter, *The Forum* asks for member shares as one way to be self-supporting (I will get to the subscription issue in a minute). The Statement of Purpose explains, "such sharing is important in helping readers find personal growth and peace of mind through the Al-Anon program. The magazine also includes topics for discussion at meetings as well as news and information from Al-Anon's World Service..."

A couple of months ago, your Group Reps were asked to gather information on how useful *The Forum* is to you. How do you feel about it? I love it. I have gotten a lot of program growth and feel I have become a much more effective trusted servant based on the information and inspiration I find in those pages every single month. The magazine deepens my understanding of and appreciation for the program both personally and in service in a way that other CAL does not. There is no substitute! I absorb so much about our principles from the way they are presented in that magazine. If *The Forum* helps you with your recovery, the WSO needs to know (you can ask your GR to pass along your comments, or email me directly). But that's not all!

I sent an email and received a reply from the Member Content Communications Manager. The best way to make sense of this is to intersperse her reply, in italics, with my thoughts (much of which was in my original email)....

Hello Julie,

Thank you very much for your prompt reply! It has taken me a little longer to get back to you. I feel your thorough reply deserves a thorough response. In taking this time, I'm writing with the understanding that this is all part of the "Knowledge -Based Decision Making" process that you will share with others in the ongoing discussion about *The Forum*, rather than my emails seen by and replied to only by you. I wouldn't like to think of the Forum decision-makers as being stuck on one position and just designating a "manager" to email everyone with their "final answer." I love the *Concepts* pamphlet, especially what it has to say about Concept Five: "members with minority views actually have a duty to present a minority report... when they believe that a wrong decision could seriously affect AI-Anon. When minorities speak out, whether they are right or wrong, they help preserve the fellowship.... By speaking up and being listened to, trusted servants can inform and stabilize group conscience" (*The Concepts: AI- Anon's Best-Kept Secret?*, pp. 12-13). In the sense that I have disagreed with your position I'm in the "minority," although I think the majority of our fellowship at large would agree with me. Please ask the "decision-makers" to take the following points - interspersed with your reply comments - very seriously...

*Dear Debbie,*

*Thank you for writing to your World Service Office—and thank you for your strong support for The Forum. As you know, Tradition Seven states that "Every group ought to be fully self-supporting..." And the WSO operates in that spirit as well. The Forum is fully self-supporting in the sense that the subscription fees pay for the printing and mailing. Subscriptions to The Forum do not generate profits that raise money for the WSO. The WSO produces The Forum at cost for the members.*

*But if we lose 200 subscriptions every month over a period of years, we have to ask ourselves two questions: Do members really want us to continue producing The Forum? We have to assume that members are dropping their subscriptions because The Forum is not meeting their needs. And second, how much longer will the income from subscriptions be enough to support a monthly magazine in the format that we now have?*

Why do they "have to assume" that? Even if it is true, what specific needs are not being met? Research is part of the informed decision-making process. Addressing those needs is an alternative to shutting down the magazine. That is why we need member feedback, so they are not making crucial decisions based on assumptions (it may not be an AI-Anon slogan, but you know what they say about "assume"). And like they say, for every one person who takes the time to write, they are probably speaking for at least a hundred people who agree with them but did not write. We have to take those members into account as well as the ones who speak up.

*Now the WSO could subsidize The Forum, and continue producing it even while income from subscriptions drop. But then the magazine would not be self-supporting any more. In effect, the members who do not read The Forum (perhaps 90 percent of the membership) would—through their contributions—be subsidizing the 10 percent minority of members who do read the magazine. It's not a healthy situation when something is not self-supporting. I may think The Forum is a great publication, but it's wrong if I require the 90 percent who don't agree with me to subsidize what I want.*

*The WSO is not "thinking of letting The Forum go." That is not our decision to make. The fellowship will decide if they want to support the magazine or let subscriptions continue to decline. It is not and never has been, an issue of money. The issue is quite simple—does the fellowship value The Forum as a recovery tool? If that's the case, then The Forum would have a higher profile at meetings, would be read and discussed by more members, and there would be more Forums available per group than just the average of 1.4 subscription per group.*

*For the sake of accuracy I would be remiss not to emphasize that The Forum is not intended to be an outreach tool. The Forum is a recovery tool written by members, for members. Al-Anon Faces Alcoholism is our annual public outreach magazine.*

“Either/or” thinking is a logical fallacy. You say the fellowship will support the magazine with subscriptions or allow it to decline, but there are different ways of supporting without subscribing, as well as an abundance of other considerations that do not seem to be getting past your filters.

For one thing, the “math” is way off base here. How many people do you estimate get to read each copy - 10, 20, more?? The 19,000 subscriptions mentioned in the July article (as well as the groups' free copies) reach exponentially so many more than that, certainly way more than “10%”! The July article also emphasized the decline to 19,000 subscriptions compared to 60,000 when there were 30,000 groups, but does not mention that now we have about 15,000 groups, so proportionally the dropoff is not as severe as they are making it out to be.

I mentioned some of this in my first email. There seems to be a disconnect in terms of our principles. Your reply focuses exclusively on the “self-supporting” principle, which is a hugely important one, but glosses over a lot of other things. We are charged with bringing the program to anybody, anywhere (that's in our Declaration; is it also part of the AFG mission statement?), and despite the narrow definition in your reply, *The Forum* is a huge outreach tool.

It is also a teaching tool for trusted servants, as well as one of the most highly effective information distribution systems the WSO has. That should not be “allowed to decline” by any means. For instance, if *The Forum* ever does “go away,” the WSO should pay the whole cost to distribute “Inside AI-Anon” another way rather than as part of *The Forum*. I trust the delegates will not let you deprive the fellowship of such an important service tool. Really, according to the “10%” logic we would never be able to do service or make announcements, because most of the group members don’t want to hear service-related announcements anyway. But we know it is important, and so we serve.

Please think outside your “subscription” box for a moment. Why should *The Forum* have to live or die by vastly different standards than outreach? The reply I received seemed very compartmentalized, and that does not fit the message we have been getting from the World Service Conference themes over the past few years, such as building bridges and abundance. The WSO will spend loads of money to send trustees to countries where there might only be one AI-Anon group, and so why are they balking at spending whatever it takes to continue making this magazine available to tens of thousands? That makes no sense! (Of course you replied that is “not about the money.” It wasn’t about the money in my original email, either, but about the principles.) In our Area, the Assembly voted to “spend whatever it takes” to make Spanish translation equipment available, even though it serves only a few people. How sad it would have been if we had had to apply that “10%” thinking. Can’t they see how other parts of AI-Anon have no problem with spending to reach out? (I think “anyone, anywhere” includes our own members!) *The Forum* reaches so many more people than either of the above examples that there should be no question in their minds whatsoever that it is worth keeping. And yet they are saying it is up to the members to buy lots more subscriptions, or the very real threat is they won’t continue.

*Please know that The Forum staff will continue to focus on what is most important—creating a valuable recovery magazine that reflects the experience, strength, and hope that our members have and want to share with one another.*

I agree with you on that! I feel so passionately about this because I do find the magazine to be extremely valuable, and I want us to keep it around.

*In service and fellowship,*

*Julie Miller*

*Communications Manager—Member Content*

...The following did not make it into my email reply, but some of it was in my report in our newsletter (*The Alagram*). Some of this is expanded because I had a couple more weeks to work on it....

Maybe my desire to keep *The Forum* going is not a minority opinion in our District, but the way many of my email comments were ignored made me feel like the Forum staff had already made their minds up regarding what parameters they were going to use to make their decision. This reminded me of something I heard in the rooms this month, about the “willingness” portion of Step 8. I heard the idea that those of us who come from backgrounds where people were always saying “No,” and “I’m not going to do that,” and otherwise not letting us participate in decision making, often feel a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, and thus a lack of willingness to act. I know I feel that way when I am trying to discuss something and the other party seems to ignore what I have to say, and although it is difficult, I try not to let that feeling drag me down. So it is recovery to speak up rather than just give up. “Let Go & Let God” = good; “Give up without speaking up” = bad!

It certainly sounded extreme to me when the July article ended by saying, “*The Forum* will fade away unless we, as a fellowship, decide that it is worth our support.” Yes, subscriptions are important, but we support and use it in our own ways, including outreach. Our District Institutions Coordinator reported that she gets batches of 400 back issues of *The Forum* for a bargain \$25 to distribute as outreach material. Some groups give copies to newcomers, and all get a free copy for members to borrow and/or pass on. How does the Member Content Manager know they aren’t being used enough in meetings, and so what if they aren’t used in exactly the ways she describes? Using subscriptions per group as the standard to decide whether *The Forum* is an important enough recovery tool seems to me like not taking the realities of how it is used into account.

So maybe if we want *The Forum* to continue (or maybe she is right and I am in a 10% minority – we haven’t heard back from enough of you to have a good sense of what the magazine means to you – do you want it to continue?), we need to think outside the either/or thinking. One possibility is to ask your GR to ask our Area delegate to World Services to make a request that the WSO fund *The Forum*. They already give us one free copy per meeting. They spend a ton on regular mailings. Why should it be assumed that this magazine needs to run on subscriptions just because they say it does?

Any other ideas? A “forum” implies open discussion, and Al-Anon is all about everybody having their say.

Love in service,

Debbie C., Alternate DR