

Access to Information: A Librarian's Responsibility?

Russell Bowden

Russel Bowden is an Honorary Professor of Thames Valley University [UK], an Honorary Fellow of IFLA (where he has worked in a voluntary capacity for more than twenty years including four years elected its First Vice-President) and an Honorary Life Member of the Sri Lanka Library Association.

The traditional, if over-simplified, public perception of libraries in the past was of rooms shelved with books and a librarian concerned to keep the books tidy and dusted, well-ordered in their places, all well-catalogued and with loans carefully recorded. That was the past. The consequences for librarians and these professionally threadbare services were poor reputations, low social status and pitifully poor salaries. In some places this picture remains little changed.

The development of special libraries in the US and the UK in the early half of this century for the industrial, commercial and research sectors forced some librarians to be more interested in what was inside the covers of the magazines and books - this was information - and introduced new concepts of service to the users who were paramount, over the maintenance of the books and journals, in the form of the selective dissemination of this information. So did the transfer take place of librarians' interests away from the maintenance of buildings and its library contents to emphasis on the information inside the books and on services to supply this information to the users.

However special librarians' knowledge, skills and techniques were slow to spread outside to the wider and more traditional areas of librarianship [hence the subsequent damaging division of the profession into documentalists or information scientists on one side and librarians on the other - now happily reuniting]. This picture changed in the US quickly, although less fast in the UK and Europe, with the advent of the Information Technology revolution. Some librarians and information scientists perceived that IT could provide new opportunities for the development and enhancement of user services in two ways: the first by computerising 'house-keeping' functions like registration of users, overdue, loans and renewals etc and secondly through the importation of information from remote sources. Today there can be few librarians who remain unaware that the future of the LIS profession is no longer bound up with the safe care of buildings and the stocks they contain [in which no future lies] but instead with the fullest exploitation of the information that the library either contains itself or through access to it via the international information networks made possible because of the IT revolution's marriage of computers with telecommunications. Today librarianship is synonymous with information transfer and no longer with book-keeping.

Looking after books and buildings provided librarians with few, if any, intellectual challenges. Responsibilities before the librarian were often more related to custodianship - hence their poor reputations, status and salaries - in comparison to other professions like medicine, the law etc. carrying immense responsibilities, in some cases, connected with grave decisions on matters of life and death. The new concern for the information content of books and journals, data-bases and networked information changes that cosy relationship of librarian to building and books. In its place is information. However information, to some, is dangerous. The right information to the right person at the right time [to mis-paraphrase Ranganathan] can be reversed to prove this contention - the wrong information to the wrong person at the wrong time. The results are not difficult to imagine especially in the context of recent Lankan political events. Information is important and

information transfer is a new and very significant social responsibility for the library and information science profession. Indeed one might argue that without such information-based responsibilities the LIS profession is not a profession but, instead, as with its old traditional custodianship role, it is nothing but a skills and techniques-based service supplier.

Social responsibilities connected with the core of our professional knowledge and skills are easy to deduce. They are, in addition to Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science - re-applied to information in place of his references to "books" - the relevance to the user of the information, its accuracy, its up-to-dateness, comprehensiveness, reliability, authority and source. These should provide no surprises because they form the core of our professionally unique competencies. There are, however, two additional responsibilities that are social but closely related to our professional ones that, it can be argued, are equally or even more important. Clues to what these are is contained in that exciting and most moving document - the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights [the fiftieth anniversary of which has just been celebrated]. Article XIX states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers" [1]. In other words our other two responsibilities are : freedom of expression [without which some of the books now in our libraries would never have come into existence] and the protection of rights of access to information. In support of these views and closer to librarianship sources are two statements from Unesco emanating from the Paris 1974 conference on the Planning of National Library and Information Services [the NATIS Conference]. In the succeeding years, for unknown reasons, they have gone almost un-noticed and yet they provide important guidance and support for the modern librarian. The first states: "Information is an essential part of a nation's resources and access to it is one of the basic human rights...." Another NATIS quotation provides a clarion call to the LIS profession which large parts of it have chosen to ignore. It states: "Information is not only a national resource vital for scientific and economic progress but it is also the medium of social communication and as such ... every citizen should therefore be aware of his right to the information he seeks - and of its importance - whether it be for professional advancement, performance of his social duties or recreational reading. "[2] Here are the pointers for the modern librarian concerned with the information content of his or her collection and understanding that the library's customers require more than just a book-lending [or even more restrictive a reference only] service, and need instead access to information for his or her childrens' education, for social, business, work or professional advancement or just for recreation.

Librarians' responsibilities today therefore are now firmly based in the provision of information to users and as the SLLA's Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics makes clear librarians: " (3) Shall have an obligation towards facilitating the free flow of information and ideas and to protect and promote the rights of every individual to have free and qual access to sources of information, without discrimination, and within the limits of the law." [3] To be responsible along with other professions such as journalists, the media and intellectuals and writers for the rights of people to express themselves freely or have access to any information that they require is not a new LIS responsibility in all countries. The American Library Association for more than two decades has supported its Office for Intellectual Freedom. It has undertaken sterling work on Capitol Hill in turn supported by the ALA's Intellectual Freedom Round Table established as long ago as 1973. It led the way alone for twenty years and even when during the IFLA Paris 1989 Conference a worker priest urged IFLA Council to take a stand on intellectual freedom issues the international organisation baulked at the task. However today the situation is different. In the early nineties "Concern was expressed about increasing infringement on free expression and the free flow of information in many parts of the world and the resultant limitations on the ability of libraries and librarians to serve the needs and interests of their users". [4] Now one of the main subjects of IFLA's Long Term Policy is "The improvement of access to and availability of information". Since IFLA Council gave approval in 1997 to the establishment of a Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression Committee supported by a IFLA/FAIFE Office [opened in July 1998 in Copenhagen's Department of Culture and financed by that city, the Danish Government and the

library community] work is actively being undertaken with two full-time Officers. This new Committee's membership of twenty-two includes countries with very different views and attitudes towards freedom of information and expression and is drawn from Armenia, Australia, Cameroun, China, Croatia, Cuba, Denmark, Mexico, Nigeria, Norway, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, United Kingdom, United States and Zimbabwe. [5] Its purpose is "to advise IFLA on matters of international significance to libraries and librarianship ... including, but not limited to: Censorship of library materials; Ideological, economic, political or religious pressures resulting in limitations on access to information in libraries, or restrictions on librarians and other information specialists who provide reference and other services". [6]

IFLA's adoption of this major new and, some may believe, controversial subject for its work is only in response to these and similar pressures from its members. Not all however. In examining the world and countries' governments and national politics it will not be difficult for each reader to name countries where IFLA's new initiative will not be welcomed. Nevertheless these new objectives now have been irrevocably adopted by IFLA's Council. What are the consequences for librarians around the world and especially those in membership of library associations, or libraries, in membership of IFLA? Perhaps it is too early yet to be able to predict accurately, but impressions of these are available from the report of a Committee on Access to Information and Freedom of Expression that IFLA's President appointed under the chairmanship of Professor Tony Evans in 1995 with members drawn from a wide range of countries with different views on these subjects e.g. Belgium, Croatia, Cuba, Denmark, France, Ghana, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Lithuania, Nigeria, Norway, Romania, Russia, Sierre Leone, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom and the United States. The Report, to the 1997 Copenhagen Council, states the now agreed IFLA policy: "All people should be able to use libraries freely and effectively to pursue lifelong learning, independent decision making and cultural and economic development". IFLA "affirmed these principles and the following actions that are necessary to comply with them and stresses that Librarians and Library Associations themselves also have a primary responsibility to endorse and advance them." Among the actions that IFLA urges on its members are: "Librarians have a professional responsibility to present in the libraries under their control all perspectives on both current and historical issues: collections and services should not be subject to any form of ideological, political, racial, linguistic or religious censorship" and "Library Associations and Libraries should challenge any form of censorship which inhibits fulfilment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment..... A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, gender, race, religion, nationality, social or economic status, or views". Finally to assist library associations and libraries embarking along this difficult path IFLA "will cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting the abridgement of free expression and access to information." [7]

Of course it would be too easy for some library associations or librarians to ignore IFLA's new policy. That I believe would be to make a profound mistake. What these new professional responsibilities of librarians, undertaken in society on behalf of users, has done [if we wish to take them and not to ignore them] is to provide the LIS profession with a foundation that is central to the function of a librarian in society; it has provided us with a *raison d'être* that is truly professional so that, so long as we are observed to have adopted these new responsibilities, other professions will quickly grow to understand them and then respect us as a consequence. We, as Librarians, will be able to hold our own as equals with the other professions that for too long we have too meekly served, with little, if any, respectful recognition. As a further consequence we shall be able, because we will have earned it, to work towards obtaining the respect that we deserve and aspire to the status that we have yearned for and press for salaries that will more accurately reflect the new and very serious responsibilities that we shall be undertaking for the users we serve and for the societies in which we operate our libraries.

It will not be easy there will be a price to pay - nothing comes free. Individuals who have expressed themselves freely have in some cases also paid a high price. Observe the cruel confinement that

Salman Rushdie has had to undergo [I make no comment on the book] in engaging in the right of the author to have freedom to express freely and openly his views. Observe the 'disappearances' recently of intellectuals in Iran or, over a longer period, in Turkey of journalists and writers and, nearer home, the fate of the late Richard de Soyza. Active engagement, therefore, in these areas in the future will not be easy. Shall we run away from them [and by being seen by other professionals and others to have done so yet again further damage the battered image of the librarian]? Alternatively do we wish to be actively and positively involved?

Let us be clear. For too long our profession has been hyper-conservative, backward-looking, secluded within the restrictions of the library's four walls, concerned to too great a degree with our books, our magazines and our cataloguing and classification schemes. Unfortunately most of these interests are concerned with "running our libraries 'good'" which the public expect us to do in the same way that a doctor manages his surgery efficiently but is expected to provide far more in terms of specialist advice, expertise and skills. Our inward-looking concerns are at the cost of the provision of first-class outward-going specialist advice and expertise on information content and values to the users. [Sometimes we forget that the purpose for which in the first place the library was established was not to provide us with jobs but a service to the community which pays for it!]. Today the users come first; their information needs an equally important first and then the protection of the user's rights to have access to whatever information is required (as provided for under law] as the second priority along with the protection of the freedom of the user or writer freely to express himself [again within the law].

In order to address the consequences of this new and most important initiative from our international professional organisation and in order to be in harmony with our fellow professionals world-wide the Sri Lanka Library Association is going to need to give careful consideration to its work and priorities in what will be agreed to be a difficult area in which to work and where much tact and diplomacy will be required. It will also need to consider very carefully what advice to provide - because it is the librarians only professional organisation in the Island - to its members on how to adopt these new, significant social and professional responsibilities and how to change and develop professional work to accord with them. It will require major efforts from all - SLLA Council and members alike. IFLA's IFLA/FAIFE Office in Copenhagen stands ready to advise and assist.

References

- [1] United Nations. Universal declaration of Human Rights. Article XIX.
- [2] Unesco. National Information Systems (NATIS). Objectives for national and international action. Intergovernmental Conference on the Planning of National Documentation, Library and Archives Infrastructures. Paris. 23-27 September 1974. Paris. Unesco. 1974. [COM.74/NATIS/3]
- [3] Sri Lanka Library Association. Code of Conduct and Ethics. Colombo. SLLA. 1998.
- [4] International Federation of Library Associations. A report prepared for the IFLA Council meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark 1997. The Hague. IFLA. 1997. [*Mimeographed*].
- [5] News item from *IFLA Journal* 24 (1998) 5/6. p. 343
- [6] News item from *IFLA Journal* 24 (1998) 1. p. 61
- [7] *op. cit.* [4].