IFLA 2011
PUERTO RICO
13-18 August, San Juan

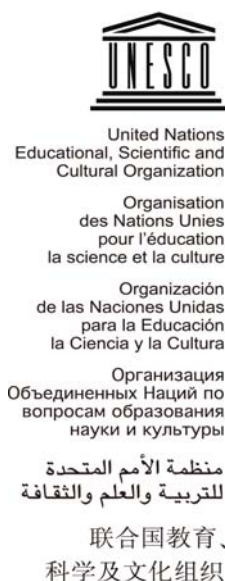**World Library and Information Congress: 77th IFLA General Conference and Assembly**

Keynote Speech:

Towards Digital Literacy: What libraries can do

Jānis Kārkliņš
Assistant Director-General for
Communication and Information
UNESCO,
Paris, France

UNESCO

United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Meeting: **114 — *Beyond the United Nations Decade of Literacy: what libraries can do* — Literacy and Reading Section with National Libraries**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am particularly honoured to open this session, "*Beyond the UN Literacy Decade: What Libraries Can Do."* The theme is one that is very close to UNESCO's mandate, which aims to *"Collaborate in the work of advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples, and to maintain, increase and diffuse knowledge",* including by ensuring the "*conservation and protection"* of the world's recorded knowledge. Within this context, libraries and literacy are two areas of significant relevance for UNESCO, particularly in view of its role as the lead United Nations coordinating agency for the Education for All (EFA) goals, where literacy is of course an inherent part of the right to education, and where libraries can a play a crucial role in the creation of literate societies.

I would like to use this time to share UNESCO's experience in this field over the past few years with you, either as part of the specific coordination of the UN Literacy Decade, or in our advocacy and programmatic work, and particularly underline three specific points that I think really embody UNESCO's values and programme objectives in this area. I hope this will lay some ground for further exchange in the discussions that will follow.

First, let me just briefly touch upon the United Nations Literacy Decade to put our discussion today into perspective. As you know, next year, the outcomes of the Literacy Decade (which was launched in 2003) will be evaluated, and the final report will be presented to the UN General Assembly at its 2013 session. Literacy rates have indeed increased during this period, but they have increased at a very slow rate. Looking even further ahead, it is evident that many countries will not achieve the 2015 targets of the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals, including for primary education and literacy. The lowest regional literacy rates can still be observed in South and West Asia, and in Sub-Saharan Africa[1], and what does become clear, is that global efforts to make literacy central to all levels of education, in both formal and non-formal settings, through all delivery modes, must continue beyond the time-bound targets that have been set. In addition, the learning needs of youth and adults, including persons with disabilities, linguistic minorities, refugees and other disadvantaged social groups, are not taken into consideration and not clearly linked with other international goals such as the eradication of poverty, health or gender equality[2].

In this sense, and given the magnitude of the global literacy challenge, we can view the Literacy Decade as an initial process that has launched a global vision of *Literacy for All:* one that implies a plural notion of literacy, and the creation of dynamic literate environments, encompassing North and South, urban and rural, those in school and those out of school, adults and children, boys and girls, and men and women. More recently, plans for achieving international commitments in this area have been revised, some taking into account potential opportunities provided by technological changes, and others recognising new types of literacies, and indeed a modified role for libraries in the development of literate societies. It is important that we reassess this role in light of recent technological developments and in light of the challenges that libraries and readers currently face, in particular public libraries and school libraries, and I'm sure that our discussions here today will bear some concrete conclusions to this regard.

Libraries are key institutions in the context of achieving global literacy. As outlined in the UNESCO/IFLA Public Library Manifesto (1994), key missions relating to information, literacy, education and culture are at the core of public library services. All around the world, libraries provide spaces that are dedicated to providing free and equitable access to information, be it in written, electronic or audiovisual form, collecting knowledge of the past and present, and

---

[1] *Source*: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, September 2010.

[2] EFA Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO, 2010 and World Report on Disability, WHO, World Bank, 2011.

making it available to the general public. Libraries have always made a special effort to serve all members of society as a key part of their mission, introducing innovative services for their community of users, and playing a significant role in strengthening democratic processes. Among these innovative services are non-print activities, such as lectures, films and discussion groups, or the encouragement and facilitation of the return of adults to learning and vocational training.

All of these services underscore the role that libraries play in promoting literacy, and at UNESCO this is a role that we emphasise as crucial to global efforts to make literacy central to all levels of education.

This reinforces the first point that I would like to underline which is the relevance of libraries within the framework for the development of literate societies: societies in which all literate individuals have the means and the opportunity to benefit from rich and dynamic literate environments.

UNESCO has defined *literate societies* as society where:[3]

(a) *The vast majority of the population acquires and uses basic literacy skills;*

(b) *Major social, political and economic institutions (e.g. offices, courts, libraries, banks) contain an abundance of printed matter, written records and visual materials, and emphasize the reading and writing of texts; and*

(c) *The exchange of text-based information is facilitated and lifelong learning opportunities are provided.*

This definition is, I find, very apt to our discussion today as it provides us with a three-tier approach to the global literacy challenge, where the presence, activities and mission of libraries, as institutions that are devoted to the promotion of a particular cause, can be highlighted as a central element of each. The recognition by all stakeholders of these instrumental roles is a prerequisite for the establishment of appropriate cooperation for the promotion of specific literacy initiatives. Awareness-raising is therefore an important action in this regard.

---

[3] EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006, page 421

Here, I will throw in my second point, which in fact echoes UNESCO's approach for building *open, pluralistic, participatory and inclusive knowledge societies,* and is one that should certainly be applied in the context of building literate societies in the digital age and considering what libraries can do.

As you may well know, libraries are not immune to societal forces. The library is an integral part of the society that surrounds it. In a similar manner, neither are libraries immune to the forces of technological change that surround them, and many changes have been made to adapt the mission of libraries to new information landscapes.

The exponential growth of information that is being produced in various digital formats worldwide has led libraries to cooperate through partnerships (both public and private) to optimise the sharing of resources, for example through the introduction of inter-library loans, and by allowing access from multiple locations - from workstations throughout the system, and often from home. This point brings forward one of the bigger challenges that libraries face, which is adapting to technological change in a suitable and pertinent manner. Other more traditional roles of libraries have also evolved in the face of technological change: the types of information available to users in digital form has continued to grow as well as development of digital libraries of all kinds; indexing and abstracting services may now provide abstracts of texts; and users are increasingly interacting with online systems, resulting in the service that librarians provide changing gradually.

There are, however, obstacles that are triggered by the progress that has been made in communication and information technology over the past few decades, and these must not be overlooked. Significant uptake of e-books, for example, has considerably modified the eco-system of readers, publishers and librarians. But this is not solely about books becoming electronic; this is also about changing the environment surrounding book production; and changing traditional copyright practices, providing new ways for legally sharing information such as Creative Commons. But, at the same time, this is also about adding new obstacles for social groups, such as persons with disabilities, if the technology is not designed to allow access to information and knowledge for all. The digital gap between those who access information and those who create it may deepen if specific requirements such as the *Universal Design for All or Web Content Accessibility Guidelines* (WCAG) are not promoted. Other marginalized groups, may not be able to access new formats, as digital platforms and application hardware are either unavailable, or have not been updated.

Such 'obstacles' to information can be countered by the sharing and use of effective practices that give direction to future cooperation and strategies for literacy. I will mention a few of these areas, all of which are key in maintaining Open, pluralistic, participatory and inclusive knowledge societies.

- **Open formats / free access:**
  UNESCO underlines equitable access to information, targeting not just individuals but also those who produce information. Libraries and library professionals must work to provide knowledge-based services for all, to advocate open access to all types of information, and actively promote access to digital library and open access initiatives that offer quality information, for example, open courseware, open access journals, metadata harvesting services, national-level open access repositories and institutional repositories.

  UNESCO is currently implementing a comprehensive strategy that promotes open access and open formats including through policy development, capacity development and clearing-house functions. This strategy focuses primarily on enabling access to information and data resources in developing countries. A prime example of our work in this area is the UNESCO Open Educational Resources Platform which will be launched in October this year and where end-users can freely access and adapt UNESCO publications and content to their local needs. UNESCO has also been working closely with IFLA on open access to scientific information and research.

- **Multilingualism:**
  Language is the primary vector for communicating information and knowledge. The opportunity to use one's own language in global information networks determines the extent to which one can participate in society. Current data indicates that 82.6% of all Internet users in the world can be reached through communication in just ten languages – (these are English, Chinese, Spanish, Japanese, Portuguese, German, Arabic, French, Russian and Korean), but there are consequently substantially less digital resources available online for the remaining population of both existing and potential users. Wikipedia, for example, which provides access to a vast amount of digital resources, is only available in 276 languages out of approximately 6000 currently existing languages.

  UNESCO strongly supports the development of a multilingual cyberspace, to promote wider and more equitable access to information networks. In this regard, libraries can play

a significant role in providing access to multilingual resources (both print and digital), as institutions which provide access to resources free of charge, and who serve the 'underserved' as part of their core mission.

- **Digitisation of library collections:**
  Where feasible, the digitization of collections should be undertaken by libraries, and UNESCO encourages the use of Open Source software for the development of digital capacities. Greenstone is one such software that is widely used by libraries around the world to build digital collections and to archive and share information with users, and UNESCO has produced a multilingual version of the *Free and Open Source Greenstone Digital Library software and user manuals* in cooperation with the New Zealand Digital Library Project and the Human Info NGO who are based in Antwerp . A feasibility study conducted by UNESCO suggested that the open source *Greenstone Digital Library*, associated with appropriate training and documentation, also constitutes a unique resource for the development of digital libraries for Africa. We have also cooperated with IMARK (www.imarkgroup.org) to develop a free e-learning resource for librarians and information specialists on Digitization and Digital Libraries. This is available in four languages.

- **Preservation of digital resources:**
  While it is important to digitize printed resources, it is also important to preserve the content that is digitally created. The *UNESCO Charter on Preservation of Digital Heritage (2003)* recognizes that information and creative expression are increasingly produced, distributed, accessed and maintained in digital form, creating a new legacy – the digital heritage, and these must be preserved and made accessible for all, including for persons with disabilities. UNESCO, by virtue of its mandate and functions, has the responsibility to:
  (a) Promote the implementation of the Charter in cooperation with intergovernmental and international non-governmental organizations involved in the preservation of the digital heritage;
  (b) Serve as a reference point and a forum where Member States, intergovernmental and international non-governmental organizations, civil society and the private sector may join together in elaborating objectives, policies and projects in favour of the preservation of the digital heritage; and

(c) Foster cooperation, awareness-raising and capacity-building, and propose standard ethical, legal and technical guidelines, to support the preservation of the digital heritage.

To this end, UNESCO, together with IFLA, ICA and private sector companies Google and Microsoft, will organize, in late 2012, an international conference on digital heritage preservation with the aim of reducing the threat to digital heritage, while ensuring greater awareness of the issues needed to maintain access to digital content. We hope that the conference will be a turning point and will result in concrete and concerted action by all stakeholders in preventing mankind from developing a "digital Alzheimer" disease.

- **Education for Librarians:**

  The importance of pre-service training for library and information science professionals cannot be ignored in this context if libraries are to effectively use and promote relevant digital technologies. Curricula for educating library professionals in many countries are not up-to-date, and fail to accommodate new developments. Therefore, there is a strong need to revisit education for librarians and analyse how their current education and training caters to the issue of information literacy, information ethics, digital preservation, information accessibility, and information for development. These are the priority areas of the *Information for All Programme (IFAP)*, and we believe that educating new generations of librarians in these areas is a vital task. In the digital world, it is also important that the library professionals are well-equipped to handle issues related to intellectual property rights so as to serve the community better and negotiate effectively with vendors and publishers who offer digital resources under different licencing agreements.

These are just a few examples of areas which UNESCO view as important elements in the consideration of future roles for libraries, and are areas where cooperation can be facilitated to work towards literacy goals.

Now, let me come to the final point which I wish to underline today, and that is a vision that looks towards the achievement of *digital and information literacies* as part of a strategy to develop 'fully literate' societies.

Information, as we all know, is the essential ingredient for the spread of knowledge. But as more and more people have become active participants in the Digital and Information Age, the quantity and quality of information that is available has in fact become an issue. According to an estimate by International Data Corporation, the amount of information

7

created and replicated in 2011 will surpass 1.8 zettabytes (that's 1.8 trillion gigabytes) - growing by a factor of 9 in just five years. Much of these 1.8 zettabytes will never be published through traditional channels, and although the content is digitally available, it may not be fully accessible to all.

"Digital Literacy" is therefore an important component of literate societies, enabling individuals to locate, organize, understand, evaluate, and analyse information using digital technology. It involves a working knowledge of current high-technology, and an understanding of how it can be used, and libraries can be proactive in assuming the responsibility of educating the community of users to make them digitally literate. Many public libraries in fact are focal points for the facilitation of the development of information and computer literacy skills, some simply by providing free access points to computers and the Internet.

Taking literacy concepts further, UNESCO has introduced a concept of media and information literacy, to define the ability of people to interpret and make informed judgements on the information that they consume, as well as to become skilful creators and producers of information and media messages in their own right. Perhaps, this point is best illustrated by the case of a young girl who recently invited her friends on Facebook to a birthday party, and over a thousand people turned up. This and many other similar stories, particularly those that relate private or personal experiences, indicate that more needs to be done to ensure that there is a better awareness of the existing opportunities and dangers of the information age, and to empower individuals to make informed decisions.

UNESCO's mission in this area consists of encouraging the development of national information and media literacy policies in Member States, including in education, and UNESCO's '*Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers'* has been widely promoted through consultations with experts from all regions. We are currently developing media and information literacy indicators for policy-makers and education specialists to measure levels of media and information literacy in society and in view of the institutional role of libraries as brokers of media and information literacy, IFLA is a strategic and valuable partner for UNESCO in this process. This is, in effect, an important element of libraries' mission to empower self-critical citizens who are able to access, evaluate and use information effectively and ethically in order to achieve personal, social, occupational and educational goals.

Conclusion:

Ladies and gentlemen,

As described in the Belém Framework for Action, adopted during the Sixth International UNESCO Conference on Adult Education in 2009: *"Literacy is the most significant foundation upon which to build comprehensive, inclusive and integrated lifelong and life-wide learning for all young people and adults".* In the construction of literate societies, libraries are a significant development factor, providing an accessible space whether online or offline for reading material for all ages and all literacy levels, and ensuring access for citizens to a wide range of community information, including for minority and marginalised populations.

Libraries have a clear role to play in all three components that constitute literate societies, including enabling populations to acquire and uses basic skills, providing an abundance of printed matter, written records and visual materials, and facilitating text-based information lifelong learning opportunities.

UNESCO strongly encourages the appropriate use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as the essence of future cooperation to promote libraries as valuable contributors to the eradication of illiteracy, particularly in view of the potential that ICTs offer for enhancing traditional and alternative modes of literacy and learning. Throughout, the approach for action in this area must be to build open, pluralistic, participatory and inclusive literate societies. UNESCO view the promotion of digital and information literacy as a necessary part of this action, putting into practice a more enhanced and more developed notion of literacy within the community.

Stimulating dialogue in these contexts with all stakeholders (including librarians, information managers, media professionals, archivists, experts working with marginalized groups, IT&T industry representatives, policy-makers and many others), is therefore crucial to building fruitful cooperation and to share practices that enable libraries to face challenges and adapt to the fast-pace developments of the information age. At the same time, librarians need to reach out to governments, civil society organizations, educational institutions and other professional associations to raise awareness and ensure a better understanding of the role that libraries play in the evolving knowledge societies.

Gatherings like this one are especially important in this regard, and it is my hope that this conference and its outcomes will facilitate cooperation for the building of thematic and interdisciplinary bridges that really bring forward the crucial role of libraries in building literate

societies – one which is not just about books, but encompasses a key role in the development of literate societies that underlines social, economic and political empowerment, and is an essential means for building citizens' capabilities to cope with the evolving challenges and complexities of life, culture, economy and society.

Thank you.