

Libraries and Democracy

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Democracy, "rule by the people", has been a growing and vital ethic of this century and will, I believe, be the hallmark of the next. Unique among institutions in a healthy nation, libraries are open to the whole community and able to provide open and unbiased access to all information. Their closest partners are journalists, scholars and other writers and the publishers and distributors of books and journals. But many of those, quite rightly, can take a partisan view: presenting the arguments for or against a particular opinion or worldview. Libraries alone seek to provide completely open, balanced and unbiased access to the ideas, dreams, experiences, understandings and ... nightmares ... of our pasts, presents and, hoped for futures.

In this respect, free and open libraries are vital to the success of democracy. Without them, we are vulnerable to those who would seek to recreate our futures – and even our pasts. All of us, librarians, parliamentarians and the community generally, must develop libraries and strengthen them in order to develop and strengthen our democracies.

As we are all aware, from ancient times democracy has meant "rule by the citizenry", not just the monarch, the barons or the landowners. Since the French Revolution, two hundred and ten years ago, it has meant that the legitimacy of a nation's government is derived from its selection by the people of the nation without coercion. It is clear that the peoples of the world are "yearning to be free"; seeking to govern our own affairs, to express our personal and collective individuality and to have our distinctiveness recognised.

But democracy didn't just come in a pretty, gift wrapped box with a label saying "Open, switch on and operate". Like many gifts, it has come in kit form with badly translated, garbled instructions: "Lift up here, opening of mechanism in one operation without return in middle, do not force, reversal impossible...". With many lapses, we have gradually learnt how to manage effective democracy and to renew it constantly. We have come to recognise a working democracy from one that is flawed or false. We have developed institutions and processes to support democracy. My own country, Australia, gave us the secret ballot, that essential mechanism to select representatives and test community opinion without bribery or intimidation. Our antipodean neighbour, New Zealand was the first to recognise voting rights for women. Others, and notably India, have extended the vote to minorities. The Scandinavian countries gave the world ombudsmen and exemplary models of stable democracies.

Despite the horrors of totalitarian dictatorship experienced in many countries for many years, this century has seen the adoption of democratic models of government in most nations. Many that have been totally undemocratic in operation have nevertheless used the language and rhetoric of

democracy as camouflage: examples such as the German Democratic Republic, the People's Republic of China, and the People's Consultative Assembly in Indonesia come to mind. In many there has been a semblance of representation, with parliaments in name and elections in form - but not free and fair elections, nor open and democratic parliaments.

In parallel with the spread of democracy and forming an essential co-requisite for it, has been the nearly universal recognition of human rights, at least in name. We can point to early examples of statements of individual rights by rulers, religious leaders and peoples. But it has been since the publication of "Les droits de l'homme" at the French Revolution, that we have had a clear test for respect for human rights, including intellectual freedom. That test has been elaborated and codified in many, many international and national instruments particularly since the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948.

Intellectual freedom

Although we cannot, of course, dismiss personal security, health, housing, education and all the other rights, intellectual freedom is fundamental, for without the freedom to think one's thoughts, conceive ideas, formulate views and express them freely, we do not have the possibility of democracy. In a nation in which we cannot express an opinion for or against a government, ideology or dogma, we do not have the freedom to select a government, ideology or dogma.

That key right of intellectual freedom is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as Article 19:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers".

It has been confirmed by the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 19), the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (Article 9), the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Article 10), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and other similar conventions. By ratifying the Universal Declaration and other instruments, nation states bind themselves to its provisions that must then be reflected in the law and practice of the nation. Statements advocating freedom of speech, conscience, belief or the like, often expressed in terms similar to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are also included in most national and regional instruments such as bilateral and multilateral treaties, and statements by governmental and non-governmental bodies .

In Sweden and Australia, in common with many countries worldwide, that right is largely respected but never without any boundaries and often facing threats. Such threats come from politicians, religious leaders and community groups, often with well meaning intentions but posing a threat to democracy. In the United States, for example, it may be (and too often is) the banning of books in public and school libraries, each of which titles, in the view of at least some, "conflicts with the values of the community". Old favourites of such community censors include Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex*, John Grisham's *The Client*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Kevin O'Malley's *Froggy Went A-Courtin'*. This year has seen the great Kansas step backwards with a prohibition on the teaching of evolution in state schools. In Australia, our step backwards has been national legislation to censor the Internet, to which I will return later.

However, in some nations the situation is far worse, with little or no respect for intellectual freedom. In Burma, for example, the ruling government, the State Law and Order Council (SLORC) abrogated the election result and openly persecutes those who advocate democracy and bans the publication of their views. It does not recognise the provisions of the *Universal Declaration of*

Human Rights. Its neighbour, China, the most populous nation in the world, has an appalling record of intimidating activists for democracy and practices strong censorship. In Indonesia, the fourth most populous nation, there has been some improvement. During the past year, formerly banned newspapers and journals have been permitted to publish and the Ministry of Information was closed after the election of President Abdurrahman Wahid in October 1999. Information, long suppressed, on such issues as the extra-judicial killings in Aceh and Timor Timur has been published. And the works of the great Indonesian writer, Pramodiya Ananta Toer, have at long last been published in his own country, many years after their international publication and acclaim.

These few examples illustrate the strong relationship between lack of intellectual freedom and the absence of genuine democracy. Without the opportunity to speak, write, read and hear freely, democracy cannot work. Conversely, undemocratic regimes fear free speech. As the American emancipist Frederick Douglass put it in his famous plea for free speech in Boston in 1860:

Liberty is meaningless where the right to utter one's thoughts and opinions has ceased to exist. That, of all rights, is the dread of tyrants. It is the right which they first of all strike down. They know its power. Thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers, founded in injustice and wrong, are sure to tremble, if men are allowed to reason...

There can be no right of speech where any man...[is] compelled to suppress his honest sentiments.

Equally clear is the right to hear. To suppress free speech is a double wrong. It violates the rights of the hearer as well as those of the speaker.

In today's world, we continue to recognise those dual rights, the right to speak and the right to hear, as fundamental. However, we take them out of the meeting hall, into the media, into publishing and into libraries. We look both forward in time, guaranteeing those rights for future citizens of the world, and backwards, ensuring that we can read and hear both the wisdom and the foolishness of the ages. As the Peruvian writer, Mario Vargas Llosa, noted in 1994:

In all totalitarian and authoritarian societies, if there is dissidence it is through the written word that it manifests and keeps itself alive. In a good number of places, writing is the last bastion of freedom. With its demise, the submission of minds to political power could be total. In the kingdom of the audiovisual, the master of technology and budget is the king of cultural production. And in a closed society, this means always, directly or indirectly, the state. He would decide what men should and should not learn, say, hear and (in the end) dream.

Libraries: the doors of perception

Dmitry Likhachev, the great Russian writer and scholar, similarly called on people to remember history and supported libraries and authors. Fighting through the years of Stalinism and on to the time of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, Likhachev stood for intellectual freedom and recognised the key role of libraries in achieving intellectual freedom.

Libraries gather, organise and deliver the information the peoples of the world need for their health, wealth and pleasure. Libraries deliver highly technical information but also the resources which educate and entertain the children of the world. Libraries make available both the thoughts and dreams of great writers and the mundane documentation of day to day government. They present both the wisdom and the folly of the ages. They prize honest information, not propaganda, and a diversity of voices, allowing users to make up their own minds.

Because libraries have always dealt with the works of great authors from any country and received publications across borders, they have a natural global focus. The Great Library of Alexandria

sought to hold all the works of every country in the then known world. Its successors form a global network of libraries big and small. Some are very specialised, providing specialised materials to select groups in a university or other organisation but together the network is open to all. Of course, national and public libraries have the primary responsibility to be open to all but they can draw on the resources of other more specialised libraries.

Library staff members not only make such resources physically accessible but also provide clients with assistance to locate that which they need and to develop their skills at finding and evaluating information. Through such staff, libraries facilitate access by all, from young children to venerable scholars.

Libraries: a foundation for democracy

In all its richness, this is the soil on which healthy democracies flourish. Key understandings about freedom, democracy and humanity are found in our libraries. Access to national and international laws and legal materials is complemented by access to current and past opinion and critical analysis. Information for life, including health, work and relaxation, is enriched by ideas.

But information and ideas are not enough. Access to information and ideas is a necessary but not sufficient condition for democracy. Catherine the Great of Russia, for example, was a correspondent of Voltaire and interested in the great ideas of the Enlightenment, but she nonetheless extended and strengthened the empire of Peter the Great. The magnificent library she founded in 1795, now the Russian National Library, purchased Voltaire's books with his acerbic marginalia but their presence in Leningrad did not mitigate the horrors of Leninism and Stalinism. The Lyceum, founded near St Petersburg at the same time as that library, was intended to produce an honest and well educated elite for Russia. It certainly educated Pushkin and other writers and intellectuals but many were exiled for their ideas.

Democracy can be corrupted in many ways. There can be the perversion of democratic ideas and processes to maintain an elite. Without libraries, our access to information is limited in time and place. We are vulnerable to rumour, innuendo and misrepresentation. The village gossip feeds prejudice and xenophobia. In a modern society, the mass media can become a 'super gossip', passing on half truths or even downright lies. The media can become the creature of governments, political parties, big business, telling us what those groups want us to hear. Through manipulation, bribery, corruption, intimidation, use of defamation law and censorship, the media can be led or forced to present slanted, inadequate or untrue information. Those who control the media can control our minds. But free and open libraries permit us to see a diversity of views, to see what is being said in the present and what was said in the past. Unless libraries become complicit in distorting the historical record, in the manner of Orwell's *1984*, all can use them to check the veracity of public rhetoric.

Poor libraries are deliberately or inadvertently complicit. They provide inadequate and misleading information. Intentionally or not, they act as a tool of the powerful and thus undermine democracy. They can facilitate oppression. There are many examples, sometimes initiated by well meaning librarians, sometimes imposed by authorities. In the USA for example during the Cold War, some libraries felt that they should not hold the subversive works of Marx and Lenin – while others felt that there was a need 'to know your enemy'. In 1970s Australia, *The Little Red School Book* was seen as Maoist subversion of our children. In Germany, more understandably but nevertheless dangerously, Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is still restricted. Libraries have too often been seen as instruments of the state, as institutions which exist only to further the views and values of the government in power. This has been particularly true in totalitarian societies, of course, where libraries have been explicitly seen as agents for achieving the state's aims. Rudolf Malek, the very great Czech librarian, even reported with pride on how the libraries of Communist Czechoslovakia had expunged inappropriate materials and replaced them with suitable socialist materials.

The defence of democracy is, of course, based on a constitution, laws and conventions working within the context of international laws. But it also requires probity, honesty and integrity of all. There must be truthful reporting of news and opinion but also open access to statistics, facts and history – including partisan and propagandist materials so that we can understand the views of even the most extreme.

In libraries, the defence of intellectual freedom is expressed through the unabashed provision of all the resources needed by our clients. But it needs to go further, as active support for freedom of expression. Our libraries should resound with many contending views, including the unacceptable, and indeed that which we might find hateful. In developing our collections, physical and virtual, we must keep this principle to the fore, actively making available controversial and contentious materials. In making such materials available, even those that we may find repugnant or just nonsensical, we are not endorsing their arguments, but upholding the essential principle of intellectual freedom. In the words of the *IFLA Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom*, we are endeavouring to "make available the widest variety of materials, reflecting the plurality and diversity of society" and to "ensure that the selection and availability of library materials and services is governed by professional considerations and not by political, moral and religious views".

In noting that "Libraries provide essential support for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development for both individuals and groups", the *IFLA Statement* is pointing to the heart of democracy. It challenges us to feed that growth by providing rich intellectual support in our libraries.

These challenges lie within our normal professional practice and sit comfortably within the responsibilities of our libraries. But the *IFLA Statement* goes further, enjoining us to note that "Libraries contribute to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom and help to safeguard basic democratic values and universal civil rights" and that "Libraries shall acquire, organize and disseminate freely and oppose any form of censorship". Those points urge us to resist censorship beyond our own libraries, in the national interest. In the current climate, they encourage us, not only to ensure intellectual freedom in our own libraries, but also to speak out against attempts to limit intellectual freedom in the wider community, as in the initiatives to censor Internet access.

Rights and responsibilities

I have placed considerable emphasis on human rights but we also have responsibilities to ensure the rights of others. In the library context, these include the rights not to have our identity and religion demeaned, not be defamed individually or on a collective basis as Jews, blacks, Muslim, Aborigine, They include the author's moral rights of integrity and attribution. They include the rights not to be disturbed or threatened by statements of intolerance and racial hatred. They include the rights not be affronted through being forced to see offensive pornographic or violent images and text.

But, too often, "rights and responsibilities" becomes the mantra of the reactionary. It becomes an excuse for the suppression of dissent, for the dismissal of diversity. In a civil society, we need respect for others, their views and interests. The rights of each individual depend on respect for the rights of other individuals. The rights of a community are built from individual rights, they are not imposed by the collective. Ensuring my rights demands my respect for your rights and to achieve that respect I need understanding. That understanding grows from free and open access to information about your identity, history and views.

Freedom does not mean licence. A well ordered and open society, such as Sweden, needs a compact of respect. A legal system is built from laws about personal safety and security, laws to prevent coercion and intimidation and laws to safeguard property. It operates within a system of checks and balances.

However, when we come to intellectual freedom, we are entering a dangerous area when we seek to limit freedom of expression and free access to information. While we must stop those who would initiate a modern day Kristallnacht, do we really want to limit our capacity to learn, think and dream? Do we really think that the men of terror and nightmares will disappear because we do not read their thoughts and plans and do not learn their methods?

In our system we need to have mechanisms to correct misrepresentation, prevent and correct defamation and prevent 'hate speech' and incitement to violence. But we must be careful that such mechanisms do not become mechanisms to control our right to know. In a media filled world we can have difficulty distinguishing news from opinion, and even from propaganda. We need to have accurate information on political ideas.

Some other limits to access to information are reasonable in a civil society. They include some matters of national security, the privacy of personal information which has no public interest, and the capacity for organisations to conduct business in confidence so that their competitive position is not lost. But all these limits can be, and are, misused to prevent access to information which the community needs know. Businesses use 'commercial in confidence' to hide dishonest transactions and environmental damage. Governments use 'national security' to cover up their embarrassments. Individuals and organisations use 'personal privacy' to hide dishonesty and corruption. For example, both 'national security' and 'personal privacy' are currently used in Russia to limit access to information on the Gulag because many of the prisoners worked on defence projects and many files contain details of individuals, both prisoners and jailers.

Abetting terrorism is often cited as a concern. But do terrorists really need libraries? The recent explosions in Moscow were made by a truckload of carbon with other ingredients to make a simple gunpowder –discovered in Chinese antiquity! Between 15 September and 1 October 1999, St Petersburg police found 8,483 kg illegal explosives. Earlier in the year a metal detector in the metro indicated that an abandoned plastic bag contained a dangerous substance, but it contained a five volume complete set of Lenin's writings. One officer said: "We were looking for something that could have exploded in the metro, and we found something that had blown up the entire country."

In recent times, there has been much concern about dangerous, subversive and offensive materials available via the Internet, from home and from libraries. In the USA, this led to the Communications Decency Act which was struck down by the Supreme Court after intensive work by the American Library Association and other organisations.

My own country, Australia, is a liberal democratic nation in which libraries seldom experience any difficulties. But, unfortunately, one ultra conservative member of Federal Parliament, Senator Brian Harradine, used his position to get our Federal Government to introduce Internet censorship. The *Broadcasting Services Amendment (Online Services) Act 1999* introduces a censorship regime which will place the onus on the delivery channel, including Internet service providers and content providers – and including libraries. In pandering to ultra conservative elements in the Senate, the Minister and his Government have placed Australia's democracy at risk. Although the proposed tools have been demonstrated to be ineffective the legislation was passed. We must now fight for its repeal.

The Internet undoubtedly provides access to much that many of us may find offensive, but the crude 'nanny' systems and the obtuse tools of the censor interpose a protective authority which presumes to override our judgement of what we may view, read and say. Tendentious media comments feed such concerns, implying that our community is populated by impressionable innocents who will do terrible acts under the malign influence of the Internet – as in the suggestion that Internet use by the perpetrators may explain April's horrifying Columbine school massacre in the USA. However, millions of children play computer games like *Doom*, listen to Marilyn Manson, watch *South Park* and other violent television and film, and access the Internet "without breaking

the law, much less committing murder". The availability of guns in the USA might better explain such events than the effects of violence on the media. Marilyn Manson himself noted sadly that:

This tragedy was a product of ignorance, hatred and an access to guns. I hope the media's irresponsible fingerpointing doesn't create more discrimination against kids who look different.

Such laws strike at our right to know, our rights to freely access information and to openly express our views. They strike at the heart of librarianship, subverting the responsibility of libraries and information services to provide clients with the information they need, and to present all views without bias and in a balanced manner.

IFLA and IFLA/FAIFE

Dealing with these matters is a complex issue when we seek to address it at a national level. At an international level, it becomes even more difficult. Not only do we need to achieve a social compact within a community which has agreed to live together but we need to find a dialogue between competing ideologies, faiths and values. We cannot arrogantly assume that our values are universal, imposing them on others, but nor can we dismiss individual freedom with amorphous concepts such as 'Asian values'. Although we will not always agree, we can find common ground as professionals in addressing the issues facing librarianship, not least in the areas of access to information and freedom of expression.

In his conclusion to a survey of the major ethical and legal issues facing librarianship, Froehlich notes that

Librarianship is a service profession, a nurturing profession, generally following the ethic of care. ... the world needs more "care", and the interests of libraries and information centers foster concern for all peoples, their individuality and relationships, interests that should not be quantified or devalued.

As librarians, we must take this duty of care but must also vigorously defend both freedom of access to information and freedom of expression while simultaneously guiding and assisting our clients to obtain the information they desire for education, work and entertainment. We are active communicators of information who shape the use of information through our decisions to acquire, or not acquire, our choice of description through classification and subject headings, and our guidance to clients. We shape collections, in all formats, to suit the needs and desires of our clients; we describe their contents in ways which will help them identify that which they want; and we help them find what they want.

IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, has responded to this professional challenge. After two years of background investigation, in August 1997 it established IFLA/FAIFE, the committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression, which I have the honour to chair. We have been fortunate that the Danish library community has funded the establishment of an office to support this work.

The period of investigation identified the following broad issues:

- to provide and protect the right of every individual to have access to needed information;
- the development of libraries in order to bridge the information gap between the information rich and the information poor;
- intellectual freedom including the protection of library materials and personnel from censorship.

The priorities of the IFLA/FAIFE committee and office are to:

1. Promote freedom of access to information and freedom of expression as fundamental human rights which are vital cornerstones of the mission of libraries to be gateways to knowledge in support of human rights, peace, democracy and development.
2. Be the leading organisation in responding to attacks and limitations on libraries and librarians, seeking the support and assistance of other organisations as appropriate.
3. Support and assist other organisations which are addressing other relevant issues which may indirectly affect libraries and librarians.

The work has started. The office opened on 1 July 1998 and the committee is active. A worldwide network of rapporteurs is being established. We are developing contacts with related organisations such as Article 19, PEN International, Index on Censorship and Amnesty International. Policies and procedures are being created. We will build on the excellent work of those international bodies and such library organisations as the American Library Association's long standing and admirable Office for Intellectual Freedom.

This is developing a peak international body to deal with the issues of freedom of access to information and freedom of expression which impinge on libraries and information services. But this will not be enough. The work of our committee will need to be supported, morally, practically and financially by library and information workers, organisations and associations throughout the world. Each of us needs to articulate the indivisible right

... to freedom of expression... freedom to hold opinions without interference and [freedom] to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Taking a stand

Few of us have the courage of Aung San Suu Kyi to stand alone against tyranny. But together we can make a stand. Our library associations can provide the shared support to help us make a stand. Through solidarity they can help us take the hard decisions, adopt the unpopular positions. Through international networking with other associations and with IFLA's IFLA/FAIFE Committee and Office, they can marshal resources which enable us to counter restrictions on the rights to know and to say.

Just as in other professions, we have an ethical responsibility. Our responsibility is to do good for society by facilitating the free flow of ideas. We don't endorse them, we make them available so that our communities and each individual in them can live in an enlightened world. Our library associations articulate that ethical dimension, help us understand it and help project it to the wider communities. Many a librarian has felt stronger and been treated with more respect by being able to refer to a library association's code of ethics, statement on freedom to read or similar document.

The human rights expressed in the Universal Declaration are fundamental. They provide a foundation for individual liberty. Their expression may differ from country to country, society to society. In some, they may be more brashly, more stridently, displayed; in others, they will be more subtly expressed within a community bound by strong religious or cultural ties. Nevertheless they are universal in asserting the right of the individual to be respected and to be able to choose how to live his or her life.

All of us who work in libraries should join the fight to preserve intellectual freedom. The *IFLA Statement* is a good place to start. Let's display it in our libraries, promote it to our clients and communities, stand up for the rights both to access information and to express our views, and oppose censorship, on the Internet and elsewhere.

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