



## **THE LIBRARY AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REVISITED**

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### **Abstract**

In an attempt to assess the role of libraries as contributors to the freedom of (official) information published in the journal *Alexandria* in 2001, Sturges examined both the definition of freedom of information and the actual role of libraries in providing better access to official documentation. He concluded that libraries are not so much agents of freedom of information as iconic representations of commitment to freedom of information. The present article examines progress towards reorienting libraries towards effective participation in the freedom of information process. In the mid 2000s the IFLA FAIFE committee framed an IFLA Manifesto on Transparency, Good Governance and Freedom from Corruption, which was adopted in 2008. Learning materials derived from the manifesto were piloted in India and Vietnam in 2009. By far the most thorough attempt to embed the Transparency Manifesto in the library practice of a country has been led by Crnogorac in Serbia. The importance and success of the whole programme that has so far culminated in the Serbian experience is assessed in the light of the 2001 analysis.

### **Introduction**

Just over ten years ago a journal article assessed the relationship between the library and freedom of information (Sturges, 2001). This addressed the question as to whether libraries had an actual, as opposed to a notional connection with freedom of information. On reflection, what the article referred to as freedom of information would better be called freedom of expression (as in Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights) or, even better again, transparency. In the body of the present article, transparency is the term we will use. The earlier article listed the absence of censorship, existence of independent media and whistleblower protection as conditions for freedom of information. More specifically it discussed open government, access to official files (which is what the term freedom of information taken more strictly actually means), access to one's own personal data (via data protection laws) and freedom of information laws as such.

These conditions of society and laws were then linked in the article to the IFLA concept of Universal Access to Information (UAI) and the ideals of progressive librarianship. Ideals and practice do not, however, always coincide. So the article then used some space to point out the ways

in which aspects of accepted library professional practice did not relate well to the ideal of freedom of information/ transparency. Stock selection, information retrieval, and dilemmas over neutrality and engagement were discussed to make the point that the library was not always the user-friendly institution that its promoters tended to claim it was. In particular, the attitudes and practices of libraries in relation to Internet access and software filtering in the library were examined in the light of the Council of Europe EBLIDA Guidelines (Sturges, 2000). The article summed this up by suggesting that ‘Only to a very limited extent is the library an agent of freedom of information, but its visibility at so many places in developed societies certainly has an iconic role.’ (Sturges, 2001, p.14) A clearer and more up to date way of putting this would be that the library is not a particularly effective transparency institution. In what follows, we will describe what has been done by IFLA FAIFE (the Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression Core Activity and Committee, set up in 1997) to point the direction for libraries to reorient themselves as transparency institutions. In particular we will describe the programme undertaken in Serbia.

## **The Transparency Manifesto**

The idea that FAIFE should work towards a new IFLA Manifesto on transparency began to take shape during the mid 2000s when the first author of this article was both Chair of FAIFE and Academic Consultant to an action research project that included local Chapters of the anti-corruption NGO Transparency International from Pakistan, Nigeria and Croatia as partners. (Sharma and Sturges, 2007) Despite the doubts expressed in Sturges (2001) the idea that libraries could be rethought as transparency institutions, contributing towards good governance and limiting the scope for corruption, began to seem a natural one in this context. To assist in this rethinking, FAIFE enlisted the aid of the two national library associations that have a permanent FAIFE committee in their structure.

First of all, the Croatian Library Association agreed to attach a FAIFE one day workshop entitled ‘Libraries, Civil Society Organisations and the Struggle Against Corruption’ to its 6<sup>th</sup> annual celebration of the International Day of Human Rights at the National Library of Croatia in Zagreb, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> December 2006.. The Department of Information Science at the University of Zagreb’s Faculty of Philosophy also agreed to be a partner, and FAIFE was able to draw on financial support from Sida, the Swedish development agency. Speakers from Croatia itself, Bosnia, Germany (a representative of Transparency International), Russia, South Africa, the USA, and Britain were brought together for the occasion. Discussion ranged widely across the nature and extent of corruption, the activities of anti-corruption campaigners and activists, and the incidence of corruption in the library profession itself. At the end of the workshop the Croatian Library Association drew up a strong statement on the role of libraries in the struggle against corruption and the FAIFE representatives compiled a list of sub-topics that might eventually form part of a policy statement.

The second phase of the process involved the FAIFE Committee of LIASA, the South African association, when LIASA was also the host of IFLA’s World Library and Information Congress in 2007. The Goethe Institute in Johannesburg was recruited as a further partner, not least because the Institute has excellent meeting facilities in its premises. A WLIC pre-conference was arranged for August 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> with invited speakers, including librarians, researchers and civil society activists, and other participants from South Africa, Germany, Serbia and a number of other countries. Once again FAIFE was indebted to Sida for financial support to make the event possible. The intention was for this pre-conference to bring the discussion much closer to the specific issues that could form parts of an IFLA policy. For this purpose LIASA/FAIFE identified a locally-based rapporteur, Thabiseng Taole, to put together a first draft of a policy document from the themes

discussed at the Goethe Institute. Following the successful and very stimulating set of presentations and discussions in Johannesburg, this is exactly what she did.

The original draft was subsequently redrawn a number of times over as its content was exposed to the FAIFE Committee and the IFLA Governing Board, before it was formally accepted as the IFLA Manifesto in 2008. Amongst other aspects of the draft, the title was frequently altered to obtain some sort of balance between the fully explicit and the easy-to-remember. Simply calling the Manifesto 'Transparency', 'Good Governance' or 'Anti-Corruption' or permutating any two of these were all tried. In the end only the long and, admittedly, clumsy title that the Manifesto now bears would do. Throughout the process FAIFE was very concerned that in taking IFLA and its members further into a socially-engaged policy area than they generally ventured, it was necessary to have a document that could be 'owned' by the library profession. The slow process of discussion and drafting began with colleagues from an emerging central European democracy and a very newly democratic African state, before opening up the process very widely, so that the policy would not be a product too closely associated with the industrialised 'old' democracies of Europe and North America.

The ten clauses of the Manifesto call on the library profession to make itself as corruption-free as possible, supporting this process with a new or strengthened code of professional ethics where necessary. Because a poorly-paid and insufficiently respected profession is more vulnerable to corruption, the Manifesto recommends campaigning on librarians' status and pay. Librarians are then advised to build on their existing strengths in the form of relevant collections and access facilities to support transparency. Where a country has freedom of information laws librarians are recommended to make the library a support centre for potential inquirers under the provisions of the law, and where there are no such laws, to campaign for their introduction. Training programmes for both librarians and their users are suggested, as is extensive collection and organisation of official information materials. Finally, cooperation with anti-corruption NGOs and citizens' advice centres is recommended. Most of this will not be easy policy to adopt in countries where corrupt and authoritarian governments suppress criticism in brisk and heavy-handed fashion. In such environments it will represent an ideal to be pursued over the long term, but wherever there is scope for change and improvement, the Manifesto offers the profession a clear statement to guide it.

## **Dissemination and Responses**

The existence of a policy document is only a starting point. IFLA was anxious not simply to consign the Manifesto to whatever fate it might meet after its launch. To increase the likelihood that it would be known and used, funds from SIDA and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation were committed to creating and introducing learning materials. These could be used by library associations, academic institutions and other interested parties to introduce the Manifesto to professionals and their allies in civil society. The process began at an experts' workshop held in Karlsruhe, Germany on Dec 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> 2008. Invited participants from countries including Russia, South Africa, Nigeria, Mexico, New Caledonia ably organised by Mikkel Lund Jensen from Denmark worked systematically through the Manifesto. They sketched out a day's worth of essential information and activities that could be delivered as a Transparency Workshop to librarians and other interested parties anywhere in the world. The detailed report of proceedings was then turned into the materials which can be accessed at [www.ifla.org/en/publications/learning-materials](http://www.ifla.org/en/publications/learning-materials) . The IFLA FAIFE methodology for such sets of materials then provides for them to be piloted in some suitable host country or countries by experienced presenters either from the FAIFE Committee or closely associated with it.

Two pilots were carried out, the first in India 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Nov 2009 (by Kai Ekholm, Chair of FAIFE and Barbara Jones, FAIFE advisor and former Secretary), and in Hanoi, Vietnam, on 30<sup>th</sup> Nov and 1<sup>st</sup> Dec 2009 by Paul Sturges. To further reinforce the dissemination of the Manifesto, two Workshops were carried out during 2011. These were at Reykjavik, Iceland, on 8<sup>th</sup> Feb, by Paul Sturges and Paivikki Karhula, and in Buenos Aires, on 28<sup>th</sup> Sept., by Paul Sturges and Alejandra Martinez, with funds from the IFLA Stichting. The two locations were chosen advisedly: Reykjavik to recognise Iceland's Icelandic Modern Media Initiative (IMMI) which seeks to reform the nation's information laws on the principle of transparency and in line with the most progressive and successful information laws in the rest of the world; and Buenos Aires to celebrate Right to Know Day (28<sup>th</sup> Sept each year) during the city's year as World Book Capital.

Has the Manifesto been read and acted upon? On whether it has been read, we can only offer the evidence of online visits to the Manifesto text at the IFLA Website. In the period 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2009 to 4<sup>th</sup> March 2012, the online text of the Manifesto was visited 2,648 times from 79 different countries and territories. India and the USA were the most frequent source of visits to the Manifesto text, but Serbia ranks 4<sup>th</sup> in the list. The Manifesto Learning Materials were also visited 1,132 times from 61 different countries and territories. India was the biggest source of visits, but Iceland and Argentina were also well represented. As is typical of such figures they include high percentages of very brief visits, presumably from casual surfers. Nevertheless we can conclude that the relevant documentation is being accessed and that although the figures are not especially high, there is a solid and continuing level of interest. But this does not provide any answer to the second question, has it been acted upon? To suggest the shape of an answer to that question, we will describe the Serbian experience and offer it as an example of good professional involvement.

### **The Serbian experience**

Serbia is an important choice as the venue for a transparency-related project. Serbian colleagues lament the levels of corruption throughout society, not excluding the library sector. Indeed, the 2011 Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International, 2011) ranked Serbia at 86 out of the 182 countries surveyed. According to the index, New Zealand was the least corrupt country (with a score of 9.5 out of 10) followed closely by Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Singapore. The most corrupt were identified as North Korea and Somalia, each with a score of 1.00. Serbia's low score of only 3.3 makes the point that its middle of the list position is no consolation and further confirms the sense that the country is seriously corrupt. However, at the same time another list, the Right to Information (RTI) index (Access Info Europe, 2011) cast a very different light on Serbia's situation. This index deals with the legal framework for information rights in 89 countries throughout the world, using 61 different indicators drawn from international standards and data on law and regulation in the various countries. The very first country in the list, with a score of 135 out of a possible 150 was Serbia. To illustrate the significance of this, Germany, with a mere 37 was the least positive performer and held last position in the survey. The contrast is striking since Germany, with a score of 8.00 was in 14<sup>th</sup> place in the CPI index. Germany appears from the two indexes as a country with comparatively little corruption but a very poor right to information framework. Serbia's position is the reverse: a corrupt country with a high quality right to know framework. There is an obvious implication. Crnogorac and her colleagues in the Serbian Library Association identified Serbia as a country perfectly positioned for interventions in favour of transparency, good governance and freedom from corruption.

To say that Serbia's is perfectly positioned does not, however, mean that such an intervention was easy. Sturges in his unpublished contribution to the Zagreb workshop in 2006, challenged his audience as follows: 'Can libraries effectively acquire transparency-related publications and databases; can they provide information services that deal with laws, rights and entitlements; can

they liaise effectively with civil society organisations; can (and should) they campaign to improve the laws on information access? All of this requires imagination and a certain amount of courage.’ The challenge to be courageous was taken up by the Serbian Library Association, despite a genuine sense of danger. The Serbian Library Association obtained funding from the IFLA / ALP Core Activity for a project entitled (after the same title as the Manifesto) Transparency, Good Governance and Freedom from Corruption. They started the project at a Librarians’ Day in the city of Nis, with 70 participants. Seven libraries (Krusevac, Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kladovo, Bor, Pirot, and Pozarevac) were selected to participate. Cooperation was obtained from:

1. Anticorruption Agency of Republic of Serbia <http://www.acas.rs/>
2. The Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection of the Republic of Serbia. <http://www.poverenik.org.rs/index.php/en.html>
3. Transparency International – Serbia Chapter <http://www.transparentnost.org.rs/>
4. Individual supporter: Ms PhD Vesna Pesic, Member of Serbian Parliament and well known fighter for human rights in Serbia
5. Ombudsman – Protector of Citizens of Vojvodina <http://ombudsmanapv.org/cms/index.php>
6. Ombudsman – Protector of Citizens of City of Novi Sad
7. US Embassy in Belgrade <http://serbia.usembassy.gov/>
8. American Corners in Serbia <http://www.americancorners-sam.net/>
9. Goethe –Institute, Library – Belgrade  
[http://www.goethe.de/ins/cs/bel/srindex.htm?wt\\_sc=belgrad](http://www.goethe.de/ins/cs/bel/srindex.htm?wt_sc=belgrad)

In reviewing the Project, the crucial importance of the contributions of the first two of these emerges very strongly. The Anti Corruption Agency sent a Board member to six of the events and the Commissioner for Information organised important lectures on the anti-corruption theme in Belgrade. Without this support, the Project activities would have had much less credibility. In effect, Serbia’s excellent national right to information structure provided an umbrella for the activities directed at librarians and their users.

As an important early step, FAIFE advisor and Director of the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, Barbara Jones, was invited to visit Serbia from Feb 1<sup>st</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> 2011. She conducted a workshop on the Transparency Manifesto on Feb 4<sup>th</sup> at the Goethe Institute in Belgrade and gave talks at other locations. The project that followed consisted of a series of activities, during April May and June 2011, to raise awareness about the problem of corruption by promoting and providing free access information and freedom of expression in the library community in Serbia. Activities included citizens’ panels and workshops to train librarians in the use of information that will help citizens in understanding the law and exercising their rights and claiming their entitlements. The Transparency Project activities were conducted in seven public libraries and eight American corners throughout Serbia.

When the project was finished, the feedback forms collected made it possible to claim the following:

1. The right to know – librarians and citizens involved in the activities were grateful to learn more about how to get information on their right to know, and about their right of free access to information of public importance.
2. Freedom from Corruption – both the message that there is a right to live free from corruption and the account of the consequences of corruption were well received.
3. Librarians generally said they had been made aware of their potential role as citizens’ advisors on free access to information.
4. Librarians also agreed that they had been shown how they might support this and similar campaigns particularly by arranging talks about fight against corruption

5. The message that campaigns and discussions on this subject are important examples to follow and that it was necessary that they should be continued in the future was regarded as strongly conveyed.

The organisers emerged from the campaign firmly convinced that public libraries can be centres to support the right of free access to information and promote the importance of a culture of being aware and informed throughout society. However, the experience also confirmed that the librarians who work in Serbian public libraries have not previously grasped that citizens should be able to use the library to seek for information that falls outside the traditional domain of literature and scientific publications. Consequently the library's transition to a new role in the service of citizens – will be slow and not easily achieved. What has been done through the project activities is to embed the idea of the library as a transparency institution somewhere in the collective mentality of the Serbian library profession. What is needed in the post – project period is to nurture and strengthen that idea. As indication of its commitment to this idea, the Association invited Paul Sturges to speak at their conference The World / European Horizons of Librarianship in the Digital Age in Belgrade on the 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> October 2011, and at the Librarians' Forum at the Belgrade Book Fair which took place at the same time.

### **Concluding remarks**

Times are not easy for libraries in most parts of the world and even in countries that have previously been seen as leaders, such as the United Kingdom, there is contraction of the sector and confusion over roles. Electronic delivery of information and recreation challenges the functions of fixed-point, print-based institutions such as the library in ways for which answers have not yet been completely developed. During the first decade of the twenty first century, IFLA has provided forums for the discussion of new or modified roles and the work of its FAIFE Core Activity and Committee has been important. In particular, its work has, in effect, asked the question - Is one way forward for libraries to be better transparency institutions? Only the library sectors of IFLA's member countries can provide an answer to this. Circumstances for libraries are difficult but, as Gramsci put it, pessimism of the intellect needs to be accompanied by optimism of the will. The IFLA Manifesto on Transparency, Good Governance and Freedom from Corruption, with its accompanying Learning Materials provides an important lead, and the example of Serbia shows how that lead can be taken further forward. A further reassessment of the 'The Library and Freedom of Information' might be appropriate after the elapse of another decade.

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