

LIBRARIES AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

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Introduction

The connection between libraries and intellectual freedom may seem obvious but trivial. Libraries as repositories of books and other documents naturally make some kind of contribution to intellectual freedom: but is this contribution worth talking about? Today librarians worldwide would probably argue that it is worth talking about in a way that they would not have done ten or twenty years ago. There are two types of reason why they might do this. The first is the recognition that libraries are taking on a different role: that of providers of access to electronic resources, chiefly via the Internet. This obliges them, whether librarians like it or not, to get involved in the global politics of information in a way that their traditional role generally did not. The second type of reason can be traced to the emergence of a more mature phase of the development of the library profession. Librarians are less inclined to regard themselves as technicians in the acquisition and provision of documents, and more of active managers of information. In the past librarians seldom queried their role in any depth. They took the case for libraries as given, regarded printed documents as their raw material, and cataloguing as their main mission. They were largely untroubled by broader concerns. Today they know that they need to have more clearly articulated views on the ethical dimensions of what they do.

Libraries and Article 19

With the greater demands on the profession that electronic access creates, and the emergence of a comparatively politicised profession, it has become more common to justify libraries in terms of intellectual freedom. In looking for a more formal expression of this, librarians have turned to Article 19 of the United Nations Universal declaration on Human Rights. This states that:

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

This is not merely a statement of principle, but the wording is pregnant with relevant significance. The terms 'seek, receive and impart' are, of course intended to apply to any human being, but for the librarian they can be seen as a rather precise description of their professional activity. The reference to 'any media and regardless of frontiers' obviously had considerable resonance in the 1940s when they were written, but today they seem like a specific reference to the global information society of the Internet age.

An inference that a modern reader might draw from Article 19 is that, without saying so directly, it calls for the state to give it solid meaning, not just by avoiding interference (censorship and other forms of suppression) in freedom of expression, but by creating and fostering public forums for the exchange of information and ideas. This is certainly the implication drawn by the philosopher Habermas (1991) in his discussion of the public sphere. It also inspires the new Article 100 of the Norwegian Constitution on Freedom of Expression adopted in 2004. This has as its final paragraph:

The state authorities shall create conditions that facilitate open and enlightened public discourse. (Norway, 2005)

This is regarded by the Norwegian authorities not merely as a prohibition on interference in open public discourse, but as an ‘infrastructure requirement’. It creates a responsibility to provide the means by which individuals can develop a ‘reflexive identity’ through encounters, dialogue and the exploration of alternative perspectives. Consequences include state structures to support the freedom to hold meetings, and to form societies and political parties. It demands measures and institutions to provide the conditions for open and free media. Support programmes for the most extensive and unhindered public access to the Internet, in schools, universities, community centres (and libraries) also follow logically and naturally.

These are clear implications for cultural institutions and the schooling system, but it is the rationale that such statements on intellectual freedom provide for the existence and functioning of libraries that is significant here. Turning again to ‘seek, receive and impart’, we find here a set of ideas that can be unpacked to very good effect. Libraries provide bibliographical facilities, documents and electronic access for the seeker of information. At the same time, librarians themselves operate as seekers on behalf of their user population, identifying content either in anticipation of use, or in direct response to demand. Identifying and locating content is, however, only a preliminary to ensuring that the library receives the content on behalf of the user. Finally, the library must be able to impart this content, so that the user is as fully as possible in receipt of what has been required. The process is complete if the user then is placed in a position to impart the information further by any means, including publication of any type that is appropriate.

IFLA and Intellectual Freedom

An enquiry as to IFLA’s chief achievements from earlier decades would probably have brought answers referring to, amongst other things, the development of high quality modern cataloguing rules, technical contributions to programmes for the preservation and conservation of library materials, and the promotion of schemes to ensure universal availability of publications. Without wishing to devalue this work in any way, the twenty first century orientation of IFLA adds a major dimension to this. Armed with a rationale based in Article 19, IFLA has adopted positive positions on libraries and intellectual freedom since the 1990s. It has done this mainly, though certainly not exclusively, through its Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) core activity. The FAIFE Committee was set up in 1997 and funding was obtained from a number of Scandinavian organisations to support and staff a FAIFE Office in Copenhagen. The Office opened in 1998 and the funding lasted until 2006, at which point its functions were transferred to IFLA’s

Headquarters in The Hague. In its early years FAIFE has had continuity of direction from its first two Chairs, Alex Byrne from Australia (1997-2003) and Paul Sturges from the UK (2003-2009). Subsequent funding from the Swedish development agency, Sida, for project activity, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, for IFLA policy work, including FAIFE, has ensured high levels of activity.

The input of FAIFE to IFLA policy has been transforming, but there are still debates to be won. Fairly recently a critic, contributing to an email discussion, dismissed IFLA's emphasis on intellectual freedom as a 'complete and utter irrelevance'. This came not from an old style supporter of librarianship as a technical activity based on organising collections of books, but from someone with a very public commitment to the greater social involvement of libraries. The potential contradictions of these two positions are not important here and were actually a product of the mental gymnastics required to support information suppression in the People's Republic of China. There is actually a valid point lurking in the criticism, because the critic went on to say that more fundamental rights were 'food, shelter, education and health'. This makes a perfectly reasonable distinction between primary and secondary rights, although it makes it badly. Food shelter and health [care] can be accepted as primary rights, but education is surely a secondary right if intellectual freedom (as defined in Article 19) is secondary. The separation of education into a primary group and intellectual freedom into a secondary group may well derive from a view of education as instruction in approved ideas and intellectual freedom as an additional luxury only. A more generous view might take both education and intellectual freedom as primary rights, and this is certainly what FAIFE would argue.

The supporting argument that justifies intellectual freedom as a primary human right would first of all identify the value of intellectual freedom to the individual. The free mind can be justified as a contributory factor to the development of resourceful and independent individuals. These individuals are more likely to be able to provide themselves and their families with food and shelter. They are in a strong position to make themselves aware of the lessons of nutrition and good health. The free mind is better equipped to obtain the fullest benefits from education and to flourish in the work environment and job market. This can then be extended to argue that a society in which intellectual freedom is encouraged is one in which the benefits of democracy are more likely to be obtainable. The effects of this on the primary human rights are potentially enormous. The economist Amartya Sen has argued that no independent and democratic country has ever experienced a major famine (Sen, 1981), for reasons that include the responsiveness of democratic governments and the resourcefulness of a free population. The same idea (that a society of resourceful individuals will solve economic problems) can be extended to suggest that an information society can only flourish fully and achieve sustainability in a condition of intellectual freedom. The creativity and enterprise on which an information society depends is hard to envisage in the context of the suppression of information and ideas.

The implications of Sen's assertion about the virtues of democracy, and its basis in intellectual freedom can be extended to the whole sphere of good governance. This argument is being elaborated by FAIFE in a way that will be explained in the next section. The argument suggests that genuinely legitimate government depends for its legitimacy on the consent of citizens who can read and understand policy. This suggests two levels of requirement, functional literacy as such, and a more developed

‘information literacy’ that enables a reader to contextualise and interpret that which has been read. At another stage, there is a need for social groups and organisations that join individuals together to participate in the democratic process on the basis of a shared understanding of policy and its implementation. This, in turn, depends on flows of reliable information and comment from neutral sources, particularly journalists and broadcasters. These information flows likewise call for the existence of continuing scrutiny of the activities of officials and business entrepreneurs. The argument then goes on to suggest that a transparent and accountable society is one in which there are functions that the library can fulfil and processes to which it can contribute. However, such lines of argument may be pleasing to those who devise them, but what do they mean in practice for a global professional body such as IFLA?

The FAIFE programme

As mentioned earlier, IFLA looks to its FAIFE organisation to deliver activities that follow on from the intellectual freedom argument. FAIFE activity is usually described as having three aspects: education, advocacy and intervention. These categories still work reasonably well, but the separation between advocacy and education is not necessarily as apparent as it might have been a few years ago. An indication of what has been done under these three headings will be followed by a slightly more detailed account of FAIFE’s 2008 advocacy and education work.

Under the heading of ‘education’ the IFLA/FAIFE World Report Series is perhaps FAIFE’s most visible activity and its most lasting contribution to the promotion of intellectual freedom. The Series consists of two publications, which have appeared in alternate years, the IFLA/FAIFE World Report and the IFLA/FAIFE Theme Report. The World Reports are built around a survey of freedom of access to information in IFLA’s member countries. An increasing number of countries have submitted responses to the surveys (over 100 in 2008), making the series an increasingly valuable information resource. The Theme Reports consist of a group of specially commissioned articles on a relevant theme. Also under this heading, presentations at conferences, workshops and seminars on FAIFE themes are made as frequently as opportunities and funds allow. This paper itself represents the content of one such presentation. In recent years, presentations have been made in a number of countries in Europe, North and South America, Africa, and Asia. Recent examples are presentations by the Chair of FAIFE, Paul Sturges entitled ‘Why Intellectual Freedom Matters’, at the BOBCATSSS Conference in Tallinn, Estonia, January 2006, and ‘Reading as a Dangerous Activity’ at the Conference on Reading Promotion, organised by the National Academic Library, Astana, Kazakhstan, April 2007. Published versions of some of these presentations have appeared in journals, and the texts of others appear on FAIFE’s webpages (<http://www.ifla.org/faife/index.htm>).

Under ‘advocacy’ FAIFE has contributed to the development of IFLA policy development in various ways, including a series of formal statements, such as the IFLA Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom <http://www.ifla.org/faife/policy/iflastat/iflastat.htm>, which has been translated into 33 different languages. A Statement on Terrorism, the Internet and Free Access to Information <http://www.ifla.org/V/press/terrorism.htm>, was issued in October 2001 as a result of global tendencies to restrict freedom of access to information on the

Internet. Then in 2002, much of the thinking behind the earlier statements was rolled into The IFLA/UNESCO Internet Manifesto <http://www.ifla.org/III/misc/im-e.htm>. This calls for free and equal access to online information and has been translated into 14 languages, and formally adopted by many. The manifesto is now supported by a set of Guidelines on freedom of access to the Internet (created during 2006) which expand on the theme for the benefit of individual readers and professional organisations. Current policy-making will be discussed at the end of this section.

The ‘intervention’ aspect of FAIFE’s work for IFLA is the most problematic. Responding to reported incidents of the violation of intellectual freedom connected with libraries invariably requires diplomatic handling. There are possible issues concerning confidentiality because of the danger of reprisals towards complainants. By getting involved in controversial incidents or areas of dispute there is risk to the authority and reputation of IFLA. In responding to incidents and violations of the right to access information freely, FAIFE takes care to show that IFLA operates independently and does not support any specific political, economic or other special interest other than the promotion and defence of intellectual freedom. This is not an easy line to follow and only the Chair of FAIFE and the Secretary General of IFLA are authorised to take action. There is a practice of close consultations between those two and the President of IFLA before responses to incidents and violations are drawn up. Responses to incidents and violations fall in categories such as: letters to governments, press releases, IFLA statements adopted by the Council of IFLA, and missions to specific countries to investigate the state of affairs. Over the years, FAIFE has responded to about 40 incidents and violations, undertaken missions to Kosovo and Cuba, and successfully carried out a mission to Israel and Palestine in April 2007.

Currently, the main focus of FAIFE activity is developing a Workshop programme (funded by the Swedish development agency Sida), with learning materials that can be used by local presenters throughout the world. The first of these took the IFLA/UNESCO Internet Manifesto guidelines (mentioned earlier) and created learning materials from them. These have been successfully piloted in 2007 and are in full use in 2008. A second such set of learning materials has been developed on the basis that HIV/AIDS is first of all a problem of knowledge and secondly a matter of infection and treatment. This was introduced as a general theme for IFLA in 2003. Its implications for FAIFE were clear. In many parts of world open discussion of sexually-related matters is not socially accepted and thus it was possible for millions of people to contract HIV/AIDS without any idea of its sexual transmission. FAIFE’s Workshop package on ‘Access to HIV/AIDS Information’ is already being welcomed by librarians in developing countries during 2008. The next package to be developed, in late 2008, will be directed at mobilising the library profession and utilising the resources of libraries in the struggle against corruption. Key aspects of this will alert librarians to the dangers of corruption in the profession itself, chiefly through the over-close relations between prosperous corporations on the one hand, and underpaid librarians on the other.

The basis for this package is a new IFLA policy on ‘Transparency, Good Governance and the Struggle against Corruption’ (accepted at the Governing Board meeting in April 2008). This was drafted by FAIFE on the basis of a thorough consultative process that included conferences in Zagreb (December 2006) and Johannesburg (August 2007). The policy has 10 clauses : the first three are concerned with

eliminating corruption in the management of libraries; the fourth and fifth support the passing or effective administration of Freedom of Information legislation; the sixth, seventh and eight propose ways in which libraries can be focal points for freedom of information-related activity; and nine and ten support librarians in entering partnerships with civil society organisations to campaign for freedom of information provision and development. This promises to be by far the most difficult area that FAIFE has entered. It is quite obvious that for librarians in highly corrupt and repressive states, the policy and the workshops that can be held on the basis of the policy represent dangerous aspirations rather than immediate possibilities for achievement. However, in other countries FAIFE is convinced that the policy and the learning materials will be of immediate use.

Conclusion

What might have seemed a rather tenuous connection between libraries and intellectual freedom has been explained here both in terms of an argument derived from Article 19, and a programme of activity led by IFLA FAIFE. The library profession is changing. Its image has traditionally been negative or neutral and recent developments will not change this particularly swiftly. However, there is sufficient evidence to support the contention that there is a new information profession growing out of librarianship. Conceptions of intellectual freedom play a major role in this process and serve to make librarianship not merely a rather more attractive profession, but even a somewhat risky one. Intellectual freedom, as codified in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration, is likely to remain a central concern of the library world for the foreseeable future.

References

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