



IFLA Presidential Meeting 2011

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IFLA imperatives: expounding access to information

I would like to begin by thanking FOBID and the Koninklijke Bibliotheek for graciously offering to host the IFLA Presidential Meeting for 2011. The connection between the Netherlands, especially The Hague, and IFLA is a long and strong one. The Hague has been the location of IFLA's Secretariat for many years. Dutch libraries have been very strong supporters of IFLA and for that, as President, I would particularly like to place on record IFLA's sincere gratitude to the Dutch library profession for its unwavering support to the Federation. I would also wish to recognise the libraries and librarians of other European countries as they too have also been staunch supporters of our Federation. To all those who will be making presentations and leading discussions on the topics we will be exploring in these two days, please accept IFLA's sincere appreciation.. IFLA also wishes to thank all those who, in any way, have contributed to the hosting of this meeting. I am sure that our deliberations, exchanges and outcomes will more than compensate for the many hours of hard work that you have put in to make this event successful.

IFLA has at its core the provision of quality library and information services for all. Changes in technology, the exponential growth of information, reasons for needing information, how information is used and how knowledge is created have all dramatically impacted on our profession in many ways in recent years. Indeed, even in my two years as President-Elect and 20 months as President, there have been many substantial changes within our profession with significant positive impact on the growth and development of the world including the European Union. Whatever the thrusts, developments and advances the importance of providing access to information which in turn changes lives and creates new knowledge remains unchanged and steadfast. There have been significant advances in IFLA imperatives, for example, IFLA has signed the Berlin Declaration on Open Access and a working group has developed a proposal for consideration by the Governing Board on the issue of open access.

The three core issues to be debated at this year's Presidential meeting are information as a human right, the protection of one's intellectual creations (copyright) and open access. All of these issues can be subsumed under a theme the **democratization of information**. I see the democratization of information in very broad terms, namely everyone should have equitable access to creditable, unbiased and unfettered information enabling one to make sound decisions in and on every aspect of one's life. The quest for democracy is more than ever at the forefront of our thoughts given current world events. People are demanding opportunities to make choices based on information that is gained freely and openly, without prejudgment or prejudice on the part of others.

As much as it is important to take a bird's eye view of democratization and the contribution of libraries to the propagation of democracy, IFLA has grown its imperatives and has an association with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it has the FAIFE programme and has a strategy with regard to open access.

IFLA and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

There is an assumption that all human beings (and IFLA is a supporter of this assumption), by virtue of their existence, deserve certain rights and dignity. This assumption is clearly articulated in the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states:

'Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.'

One of the most significant institutions upholding this right is the library and information services fraternity. The library profession has a rich history of alignment with human rights issues, movements, and declarations. Librarians have long been aware of the many ways human rights values intersect with the values of the profession. Phenix and de la Pena McCook point out that human rights values permeate library policies beyond the professional round tables inhabited by intellectual freedom, social responsibilities, and international relations. As we carry on with our duties as public service librarians, we should keep in mind our history of human rights advocacy, and note the work we do today as a continuation of the commitment to the contributions of our programs, collections, and services toward keeping an open society, a public space where democracy lives.

An interrogation of all the articles in the Declaration demonstrate strong synergies with access to information. For example, article 26 says that everyone has the right to education. The article goes on to say that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Can we contemplate an educational process without access to information? Access to information and education go hand-in-glove. Access to information is a prerequisite for any educational system. This is especially so if the educational process is to contribute to upholding fundamental freedoms.

It is beyond debate that there is an inextricable link between access to information and the Declaration on Human Rights. Therefore, it is imperative that IFLA continues to push this human rights agenda hard and open all of the flood-gates to ensure the free flow of information.

Access to information, censorship and copyright

However, there are issues which hamper this march towards opening the access to information flood-gates. One of those issues is censorship. I would like to share my view of censorship: it is less philosophical and more pragmatic. The common interpretation of censorship is the control of information and ideas circulating within a society. Essentially, it significantly restricts free access to information, negating the role of the library in driving access to information. Historically, censorship centered around material deemed to be indecent, obscene; blasphemous; or treasonous.

What I would like to bring to the fore is the 21st century concept of economic censorship. It is a very difficult concept to define but I want to draw an association between economic censorship and the principle of isolation and deprivation. The exorbitant cost of information is a major barrier to access to information resulting in isolation and deprivation: isolation in that there is a break in the connect between information and possible solutions to problems and deprivation in terms of not getting access to critical information to resolve problems. It is this isolation and deprivation that puts a stranglehold on growth and development.

It is my view that the barriers to access to information is economic censorship: devoid of the infrastructural issues, the issue of affordability controls access to information and its circulation to the widest possible audience. However, it must be acknowledged that librarians, through their professional associations, have long been committed to the social justice principle of free access to information. IFLA representing the views of its members (associations and institutions) has taken a very firm stand opposing censorship in libraries. IFLA has developed a Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom where it states that ‘IFLA supports, defends and promotes intellectual freedom as defined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. IFLA asserts that a commitment to intellectual freedom is a core responsibility for the library and information profession. IFLA therefore calls upon libraries and library staff to adhere to the principles of intellectual freedom, uninhibited access to information and freedom of expression and to recognize the privacy of the library user.’

Running in tandem with censorship is the issue of copyright – an issue for debate at this Presidential Meeting. The activities of IFLA’s Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) programme is designed to protect libraries from the assaults of the censor. Although stated in a different context, Paul Sturges makes the assertion that “censorship actually bites long before a document enters or does not enter the library.” He goes on to state that, “the library is at the end of a chain of either approval or censorship that means the collection may lack significant material, but the material that it does hold is legal.”

In one teases out this assertion, copyright issues become difficult for libraries to address as authors have already committed their work to publishers and have strangled their work within strict copyright laws. Libraries have to deal with rigid attitudes of publishers and aggregators towards copyright that limit the ability of libraries to provide access to information. If an author gives up all rights to an article or a book to a publisher, she or he may not be allowed to publish it—or even parts of it, including making it available on a website or in an institutional repository. This process of self censorship means fewer access points for the public and a greater dependency on commercial partners who have a preference to profits as opposed to the right to access information.

Exacerbating the problem is the fact that libraries are also facing the difficult task of dealing with an array of commercial licenses that dictate who will access information and in what way. This was not a concern when libraries were the owners of their own collections. Now libraries have been reduced to the more precarious position of being subscribers. Publishers are not only copyright owners but also copyright police: they can shut down access with little or no warning if they consider that license terms have been breached. Libraries have been losing ground on the fair use or fair dealing front which they enjoyed previously.

Libraries and Open Access

If we work from the premise that information is an essential building block for the generation of new information, restricted access to information means stifled production of new information. And, as we extend this over a

period of time the world begins to retrogressive. In this scenario, there is limited new information to address new problems. The information that is available is so expensive that only a handful can afford to ‘purchase’ the information. In an environment where information is only accessible to a handful, anarchy rules. The ‘uninformed’ do not have sufficient information to lodge any meaningful challenge to the order of the day. The recent challenges to governments in the north Africa is as a result of access to information. Admittedly, it was via informal methods using social networking technologies. The significance of sharing information is enormous as it equipped the citizenry with information to lodge a challenge, to express their needs and demand changes to improve their lives. However, the downside is the information being conveyed at that point in time had a very limited lifespan and has not been captured and preserved for the entire world to benefit from its contribution.

Throughout the history of information services, the creation and production of information resources have been the forte of professionals. Authors and editors are volunteers in the intellectual production of information, that is, research information is produced without payment to the authors and/or editors. However, the physical production of information which has been the domain of established publishers and database vendors is always governed by profit. Control has been tight, with a generally agreed-upon understanding that the emphasis on expertise both in creation and in production serves to ensure the quality of information resources.

However, as pointed out by Wallace and van Fleet, Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia represents a completely different paradigm. Authors and editors are volunteers in every sense: the general principle is that nearly anyone can—and by implication, should—be a contributor to Wikipedia. There is no centralized editorial control. Instead content is influenced by individual contributors working collaboratively to achieve consensus and, when that fails, calling for a vote among interested contributors. The result can be thought of as a sort of democratized reference resource by, of, and for the people. Can this be one of the conduit for the free and open access to information?

Openly sharing of information has been identified as a method of equalizing access to information. This equalizing of access to information conforms to the principles espoused by IFLA and to the adherence to the Declaration on Human Rights. The inability of researchers to gain access to the world’s science and scholarship contributes to the growing gulf between the developed and developing world. The adoption of cutting-edge technology has compounded the issue and adding significantly to the “digital divide”. However, this divide is not restricted to the technology divide, but also a content or knowledge divide. IFLA, recognizing the importance to bridge the divide has engaged in a number of strategies such as supporting the open access movement. As much as technology contributes to the divide, IFLA accepts that the Internet has the capacity to provide a platform to significantly contribute to openly sharing of information.

As early as 2002, IFLA developed an Internet manifesto in support of its belief that the Internet can contribute to sharing of information. One of the core principles of the *IFLA Internet Manifesto* is that unhindered access to the Internet by libraries and information services, facilitated by the Internet, supports communities and individuals to attain freedom, prosperity and development. It goes on to state that barriers to the flow of information should be removed, especially those that promote inequality, poverty, and despair.

The Manifesto continues by establishing principles of freedom of access to information via the Internet and noting the need to develop strategies, policies, and plans to implement the Manifesto. It aims to highlight the importance of unhindered access to information to help communities and individuals to attain freedom, prosperity and development.

The *Manifesto* emphasises the role of libraries and information services in facilitating that access as essential gateways to the Internet. They provide a mechanism to overcome the barriers created by differences in resources, technology, and training – the digital divide. National libraries, in particular, play an important role through encouraging the establishment of appropriate infrastructures and assisting library to develop and implement plans to facilitate access to information via the Internet.

Complementing the *Manifesto* is the *IFLA Statement on Open Access to scholarly literature and research documentation*. Given the potential of open access to drive access to information, the IFLA Governing Board adopted the *Statement* in 2004 which states that it is committed to ensuring the widest possible access to information for all peoples and acknowledges that the discovery, contention, elaboration and application of research in all fields will enhance progress, sustainability and human well being.

IFLA has continuously grown its commitment to this imperative. From the acceptance of the *Statement* in 2004, to the theme of the Congress in Sweden 2010 and subsequent signing of the Berlin Declaration on Open Access, IFLA has continuously made the point that open access to information, especially its concern for access to scholarly literature in the developing world, is a priority. A Presidential Working Group has drafted a white paper on open access which will be presented at this meeting. There is no debating the issue that open access contributes to sharing of information, bridging the digital divide and all of the other positives of openly sharing of information.

Conclusion

The core principle for debate at this Presidential meeting is human rights, copyright and open access. If any organisation is to commit to and uphold the rights enshrines in the Declaration, it has to address the critical issue of removing all barriers to access to information. Human rights and human dignity starts with the citizens of the world understanding that they have those rights and have to access to information to ensure that those rights are not violated. Barriers to access to information are couched in different forms including that of copyright and the economic barrier. Therefore, it is important to remove those barriers to create or attempt to create a playing field where all are having equal access to information and contributing to their own growth and development with the end result being a better world. The core business of libraries is to distribute information. Therefore, by implication the core business of libraries is to open access to the collection of the world for the citizens of the world to grow as one.

I am sure that we will have a very productive Presidential Meeting and that we will find ways of removing barriers to information.

I thank you.

Ellen Tise