



Connecting All Public Libraries with ICTs: WSIS Target 4

The [International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions](#) (IFLA) is the leading organisation for libraries around the world, working both to support the profession to improve services to users, and to advocate for libraries in the wider policy environment. Given the vital role of the Internet in providing access to knowledge, IFLA engages strongly in issues around WSIS Target 4 – Connecting All Public Libraries – as well as around broader Internet governance.

Activities this year

In line with the arguments set out in the WSIS Principles, IFLA continues to promote the importance of public access in libraries as a means of realising the potential of the Internet for all. As well as providing the first taste of the Web for those who go on to obtain their own access, libraries play an ongoing role with many others, either because they cannot afford a connection or a device, or because they prefer the welcoming environment and support that the library offers. With evidence that people use the Internet in different places (and on different devices) in different ways, public access in libraries continues to form an important pillar of a comprehensive access strategy, even in the best-connected countries and regions.

Faced with the ongoing challenge of bringing together the technical capacity, funding, training resources and physical infrastructure necessary to deliver connectivity, IFLA has looked to work closely with like-minded organisations, notably IEEE, EIFL and People-Centred Internet, in order to pilot new initiatives showing what is possible when libraries, governments, the technical community and other civil society actors come together.

In 2017, we looked to identify a number of countries in order to pilot this sort of approach. Tunisia provided one example, where IFLA members worked with library charity EIFL, the government, and NGOs, in order to promote the connection of all libraries in the country, and provide of digital literacy training to users. This work requires commitment from the government in making connections, experience in libraries in providing access, and support from civil society groups who can help library users develop the skills they need to make the most of the Internet. We are also beginning to look at Colombia, where the National Library has already shown its commitment to bringing connectivity to rural areas.

Elsewhere, there is a regular flow of examples of library connectivity projects which are helping achieve progress across the WSIS agenda, from using Internet access and in-person work to promote education, to deploying digital tools to support people with visual impairments through EIFL's [Public Library Innovation Programme](#). The excellent work undertaken through [1 World Connected](#) has also highlighted successful examples of how connecting libraries leads to concrete progress.

IFLA has, through its [Library Map of the World](#) project, started to collect data not only about the number of libraries in the world, but also those which are providing Internet access – through terminals or WiFi – to their users. As this work advances, it will become possible to target further efforts on connecting libraries around the world.

Trends and Experience

While more and more people are accessing the Internet around the world, evidence that the gender gap is rising is a concern¹. Libraries have a unique and proven role as a more welcoming environment

¹ IFLA, TASCHA (2017), *Development and Access to Information*, pp27

for women, with many library based connectivity projects seeing greater frequentation by women than by men. Such projects provide a useful opportunity to promote the digital skills that enable women to realise the potential of the Internet.

With concern about fake news looking like a durable feature on the Internet governance landscape, the need for broader skills development is also clear. Libraries have an established record of promoting information literacy, but in 2017 we have seen a strong uptake of materials for libraries to use in teaching people about how to spot fake news². The unique position of libraries, as a trusted public service, open to all of the community, makes them particularly effective partners in helping to avoid some of the pitfalls of Internet access.

A continuing challenge for libraries in offering public access is concern around secondary liability for copyright infringements. A German legal case, judged in late 2016, left a number of doubts as to how far a library – or other public wifi provider – should go in collecting information about users in order to avoid being taken to court in the case of infringement³. Recent moves in the European Union to limit safe harbour provisions severely risk seeing the potential of Internet access and platform seriously restricted⁴. For libraries to be able to offer free WiFi access, it is vital that they should neither face liability, that any collection of data about users be kept to a strict minimum and performed in a transparent manner, and that when they or others facilitate access via platforms, these should not be subject to disproportionate or invasive filtering requirements.

While the lack of locally relevant content has long been understood as a factor that weakens incentives to go online, the role of libraries in helping users to develop their own content is becoming clearer. Libraries' activism in promoting article creation – and editing – on Wikipedia has started to ensure a more balanced representation of different groups, geographies and people⁵. More can still be done in order to ensure full and meaningful access to information – i.e. the possibility not only to find information online, but also to understand and apply it, and to create new information.

The recent decision by the US FCC on net neutrality has been widely criticised within the library sector as risking reducing the value to users of Internet connections in libraries⁶. As possibilities to prioritise or restrict traffic grow, it will be important to pay close attention to the impact these have on public Internet connections.

Finally, IFLA, working alongside the Technology and Social Change Group at the University of Washington has published the first Development and Access to Information report⁷. As the first in a series, this identifies a basket of indicators of different aspects of access to information. As trends

² IFLA, *Real Solutions to Fake News: How Libraries Help*, 20 August 2017, <https://www.ifla.org/node/11584> (accessed 5 January 2018)

³ EFF, *European Court Allows Copyright Owners to Demand Open WiFi Networks be Password Protected*, 26 September 2016, <https://www.eff.org/nl/node/93108> (accessed 4 January 2018)

⁴ IFLA, *The European Copyright Reform's Potential Harm to Fundamental Rights and Freedoms*, 30 November 2017, <https://www.ifla.org/node/18584?og=29> (accessed 4 January 2018)

⁵ ALEMANY, Dolores (2017) Making women's history matter: Female presence in and through Wikipedia, IFLA Library, <http://library.ifla.org/1782/>

⁶ For example, Association of Research Libraries, *Net Neutrality to be Revoked by Federal Communications Commission*, 29 November 2017, <http://www.arl.org/news/arl-news/4439-net-neutrality-to-be-revoked-by-federal-communications-commission#.WlIZAGinE2w> (accessed 4 January 2018), and The Verge, *What Public Libraries will Lose Without Net Neutrality*, 14 December 2017, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/12/14/16772582/public-libraries-net-neutrality-broadband-access-first-amendment> (accessed 3 January 2018).

⁷ IFLA, TASHA, *ibid*.

become apparent, this will help build an understanding of the interplay of different aspects of information access (physical, legal, social and individual), and support progress on relevant Sustainable Development Goals.

Innovative Policies, Future Actions and Initiatives

New techniques for bringing the Internet to remote communities offer exciting possibilities for libraries and their users. Recent projects in Colombia have seen the government allow particular frequencies to be made available for public access use, with libraries playing a key role as hosts for antennae. The Institute of Museum and Library Services in the US has also started to make grants for similar initiatives in the US, with research already exploring this potential⁸.

Similarly, Internet-in-a-box type efforts have proven useful in regions where Internet connectivity is still to be guaranteed. The example provided by the Peace Libraries in Colombia is particularly rich, given the fact that the aim of the work is to help reintegrate people and communities previously isolated by the civil war⁹.

Libraries are also involved in a number of community network initiatives, in both developed and developing countries. They can serve as hubs – interfaces with backbone – as well as centres supporting skills and organisation. Examples include Wireless Leiden in the Netherlands, where libraries have been important nodes in the community network established there¹⁰.

While not a new concept, the use of Universal Service Funds (USF) to support the connection of libraries has much validity. In the European Union, the WiFi4EU programme, while not specifically supported by USF, offers an interesting example of government support for public access. With the modalities of applying for funding still unclear, however, IFLA has called on the European Commission to ensure that the criteria favour library connectivity projects. We will look forward to using future reforms of USF schemes elsewhere to ensure that they benefit libraries and their communities, and so help deliver on this WSIS Action Line.

Over 2018, IFLA will work with other members of the Internet Governance Forum Dynamic Coalition on Public Access in Libraries to establish a toolkit of policies which can help advance progress on this action line. Accepting that situations and frameworks vary strongly from one country to the next, this will not be prescriptive, but at least indicate where there should be reflection.

Conclusion

Connecting all libraries to the Internet, at effective speeds, continues to be vital both as a means of bringing the unconnected online, and as an element of a complete access offer elsewhere. Evidence of the difference library connectivity can make continues to build, and there is useful work on how libraries can partner with others. Libraries also have an important role to play in new forms of maximising access, as hubs, training centres, and partners. IFLA looks forward to exploring these issues further in 2018.

⁸ Radsliff Rebmann, Kristin, Te, Emmanuel Edmund, Means, Donald, *TV White Spaces in Public Libraries: A Primer*, Information Technology and Libraries, Vol 36/1, March 2017

⁹ Soros, Alexis, Weil, Patrick, *Colombia's Libraries of Peace*, Project Syndicate, 27 June 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/colombia-mobile-libraries-by-alex-soros-and-patrick-weil-2-2017-06?barrier=accessreg> (accessed 3 January 2018)

¹⁰ See Wireless Leiden, www.wirelessleiden.nl