

Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression

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Free access to information for the public and to fight for everybody's right to express himself freely has always been an important value in librarianship. In the UNESCO manifesto on public libraries it is expressed as: The libraries' collections and services must not be exposed to any kind of ideological, political, moral or religious censorship. Neither must those collections or services be exposed to any kind of pressure from economic or commercial interests.

This is our ethical code of conduct. And although we know that it is difficult to fulfil these demands, also we do know that this code of conduct cannot be bent, and cannot be read in a flexible way. It is an unavoidable principle.

The principle in itself is rather new. After the second world war, when western democracies started rebuilding their political and civil societies, the public libraries, among a lot of other factors e.g. education, was made one of the basic pillars of that democracy. Not the institution itself, not the actual library, but the basic principles on which the library movement was based, free access for all of the people to information and knowledge, and freedom for everybody to express and make accessible every opinion inside the frame of normal legislation. Meaning that a free flow of information in itself was a necessity for a democracy.

But as we all know not all countries in the world could be classified as democracies, and during the post-war years even a lot of new - and not altogether - stable countries grew up. So libraries in many of those countries were, if they even existed, not in principle bound to fulfil the ideal code of conduct for librarians and libraries mentioned above. And furthermore - for many of the new, less industrialised countries, the issue of free access to information was not seen as important, when the basic problems was that there was an inadequate national book-production, not enough resources to man libraries or to buy collections, or urgent problems with preservation of existing collections.

For IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations, which was, and is, a truly international crowd of members from all over the world, both the split of the world in two different political sectors and the many new countries became a major difficulty, when an unanimous policy for the basic value of free access to information should be implemented. There were indeed different readings of the principle behind free access to information, and there were many member countries which did not consider the principle an issue at all. This created, during the 70s and the 80s a certain professional conservatism among the majority of IFLA's members, that the issue was not touched on, and that IFLA's major professional efforts were made inside the frame of professional, library technical, and not library policy items.

On the other hand, a lot of events took place in the world around IFLA, which in a way challenged the principle of free access to information and freedom of expression. In recent times we have had the ban on Salman Rushdie, and even more recently the events that took place in the southern part of France, where a number of libraries situated in cities run by Le Front National, was threatened and the city-librarians forced to withdraw. On a broader scale we have seen a new democracy in South-Africa try to rebuild the public library system based on a new concept, and

requiring assistance in that from IFLA and IFLA-members. And we have seen the same happen in Central and Eastern Europe. All that, combined with the fact that IFLA general conferences have been held in countries like China, Turkey, Cuba etc., created the feeling that it was important for IFLA to establish a strong policy to act upon, when the important principle of free access to information and freedom of expression was threatened.

CAIFE

In Turkey in 1995 the general conference approved a resolution put forward by Scandinavian library associations supported by the library association from the UK, to set up a Committee on Access to Information and Freedom of Expression, called CAIFE. During the next two years that committee worked and created the fundamental reasoning for IFLA to deal with the issue.

The CAIFE-members presented to the IFLA-council in Copenhagen 1997 a report with an outline of the reasons for IFLA to deal with the issue. An important part of the report was the principles:

"In order to promote the spread of knowledge, education and culture to all nations throughout the world it is essential that all forms of information should be allowed to flow freely. Not only will such access to information contribute to international understanding but will also enable diversity of opinions to be recognised and respected and the mutual enrichment of cultures to be enhanced.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) fully supports the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto in emphasising the need for both legislation and adequate financial support for libraries from both national, state and local governments.

All people should be able to use libraries freely and effectively to pursue lifelong learning, independent decision making and cultural and economic development.

IFLA affirms these principles and the following actions that are necessary to comply with them and stresses that librarians and library associations themselves also have a primary responsibility to endorse and advance them.

Actions :

- Libraries should be adequately funded to be able to provide the information, staff and other resources which support lifelong learning, independent decision making and cultural and economic development.
- Libraries and librarians have a professional responsibility to present all perspectives on both current and historical issues : collections and services should not be subject to any form of ideological, political, racial, linguistic or religious censorship.
- Library associations and libraries should challenge any form of censorship which inhibits fulfilment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.
- A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, gender, race, religion, nationality, social or economic status, or views.
- Libraries should respect personal privacy, both in the use of information and in the handling and storage of personal data."

And another important part was the proposed strategies :

"The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions supports policies which sustain access to information and freedom of expression such as the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 19), 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.

IFLA will co-operate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting the abridgement of free expression and access to information. For example, IFLA will work co-operatively with the appropriate professional organisations as issues arise involving either the creators of information (authors, journalists, scientists, artists etc.) or the disseminators of information (publishers, bookstores etc.).

The focus of IFLA's formal action, however, will address issues involving libraries, librarians and library associations.

In support of this general policy outlined above there are a number of actions that IFLA should initiate, including the following:

- Request all colleagues world-wide and all library associations to adopt the new IFLA Policy Statement and to keep IFLA informed on all successes and violations of these policies.
- Work with other appropriate bodies such as the United Nations, UNESCO, the International Association of Publishers, FID, the Global Information Alliance and other non-governmental organisations to adopt and implement the IFLA Policy Statement.
- Publish a report on a regular basis and present it to the IFLA General Council, on successes and violation of the rights of access to information and freedom of expression.

If IFLA is requested to address a specific incident, IFLA should seek, if possible, the advice of the national library association(s) in the country where that incident arises. It should also bring the incident to the attention of the national Human Rights Commission (or similar agency) of that particular country. IFLA should also seek, if possible, independent verification from such international bodies as Article 19, the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the International Centre Against Censorship, Amnesty International, PEN or other appropriate bodies.

In recognition of the various differing cultures and political situations that exist across the world, IFLA's strategies will need to be tailored to meet the particular situation that arises. Such strategies would include the following :

- Providing advice, support materials and facilitative assistance to librarians, libraries or library associations as required.
- Working through existing government diplomatic channels offering facilitative assistance such as the sponsorship of fact-finding missions.
- Presenting resolutions to the appropriate governmental bodies and international agencies expressing IFLA's concern regarding specific violations."

The council in Copenhagen agreed with the report, and approved a declaration, called the Copenhagen declaration:

Resolution to Establish a Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression

The IFLA Executive Board has reviewed the report of the Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (CAIFE) and recommends that it be accepted by the Council. The deliberations of the Committee, the Guest Lectures at the past two General Conferences and the interest shown by the membership in this topic suggest that IFLA establish some continuing mechanism to address this important area of activity.

Resolved, that the IFLA Council recommends that its Executive Board establish a Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression that will advise IFLA on matters of international significance to libraries and librarianship in this area, including, but not limited to :

- Censorship of library materials.
- Ideological, economic, political or religious pressures resulting in limitations on access to information in libraries, or restrictions on librarians and other information specialists who provide reference and other information services.

Submitted by the Executive Board

IFLA/FAIFE

Upon this the Executive Board of IFLA on its next meeting in December 1997 set up the Committee on IFLA/FAIFE (Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression). The chair of the committee is Alex Byrne from the Australian National Library, and the liaison between IFLA's EB and the committee is Borge Sorensen, City-Librarian of Copenhagen, Denmark. The committee has an advisory role to IFLA, and furthermore the "mechanism", mentioned in the Copenhagen declaration will be an office provided for by the City of Copenhagen through its Department of Culture. This office will be staffed with two librarians, or library orientated professionals, paid by a concerted effort of the Danish Ministry of Culture, and the Danish Library Community.

In these days we will advertise for an applicant to the position as head of the office, in the hope that we will be able to get it started by April this year.

We in the Scandinavian library community look forward to work with IFLA on the important issue of free access to information and freedom of expression. We are proud that we are able to establish such an office, and believe that our library communities can achieve international experience, and thereby support our national library aims.