**User Generated Content (UGC)**

Libraries traditionally develop and maintain collections and provide access to resources to meet the needs and interests of their communities. In doing so, they help ensure that everyone has the chance to become literate and educated, helping (at least indirectly) to prepare the writers, creators and innovators of the future.

Increasingly, however, there are efforts to make this relationship more direct. Indeed, the ability to create is, arguably, part of any comprehensive definition of access to information – the core mission of libraries[[1]](#footnote-1). From creative writing to coding, there is an understanding that libraries have an active role to play in helping citizens produce their own content and services. Thanks in particular to their strength in serving marginalised communities, libraries can have a democratising influence on the production of content, just as they have long democratised access to it. The Internet offers exciting possibilities to do this.

**The Internet and User-Generated Content**

Current concerns about net neutrality[[2]](#footnote-2) have highlighted a key feature of the Internet as originally created – that all ‘packets’ of information are treated equally. In the past, the need for a printing press and distribution network meant that only certain actors were in a position to share ideas and information. Now, at least technically, anyone can communicate with the world across the web – from individuals to the biggest corporations and government.

The emergence of Web 2.0 has created further possibilities. In the early years of the Web, most websites were [static](https://techterms.com/definition/staticwebsite), meaning each page had fixed content that did not change unless updated by the [webmaster](https://techterms.com/definition/webmaster). Many Websites now are built on top of a database, with content generated by users forming at least part of this raw material.

As a result, the gap between creators and users has arguably become much less clear. This is well illustrated by the term ‘user-generated content’ itself, with the traditionally passive ‘user’ turned into a creator, or ‘generator’. Nonetheless, the definition of the term remains unclear. There appear to be two main ones in circulation, depending very much on what the word ‘user’ refers to.

**The Narrow Definition:** this stems from the assumption that a ‘user’ is the user of a particular product or service, and that the content they produce relates directly to this. This certainly appears to be the definition adopted by commercial operators, for example a hotel[[3]](#footnote-3) which uses reviews to inform and encourage potential clients, a clothing or drinks brand that encourages users to share photos of themselves with a product to tap into friendship networks or give a touch of authenticity, or fan fiction. Such contributions can also be a rich source of metadata about customers, helping firms to profile or target more effectively. Clearly the concept of user-generated content under this definition is not new, but the scale, thanks to the development of Web 2.0, certainly is.

**The Broad Definition**: this focuses more on the ‘user’ as Internet user in general, and the (perhaps utopian) idea of the Web as a place where everyone, however niche their interests, can create and find people who share their passions.

The OECD[[4]](#footnote-4) appears to have adopted this broader approach when talking about the ‘participative web’ in 2007, suggesting that there are three main characteristics of User Generated Content (UGC) – that it should be made widely available over the Internet (i.e. posted in a public space, rather than private messaging), that it should contain some creativity (so simply reposting a photo or video doesn’t count), and that it should be outside of professional uses and practices (so not passing through traditional ‘gatekeepers’).

This broad definition is perhaps also more loyal to the original concept of the Web as a place where everyone can become a producer of information. But just as in the case of the narrow definition, it is also not necessarily a new idea. From letters to the editor of a newspaper, to underground magazines and newssheets, there have long been possibilities for non-professionals to share ideas. However, again, the Internet has allowed this to happen at an unprecedented scale.

This definition – and in particular the third characteristic – is not perfect. ‘Professional uses and practices’ are increasingly unclear. Many traditional newspapers are starting to complement the work of paid journalists with ‘citizen journalism’[[5]](#footnote-5). Independent bloggers can make money through advertising, either directly or through an agreement with (commercial) hosting platforms[[6]](#footnote-6). However, this is only true for a small number of people[[7]](#footnote-7). For the majority of those generating online content, the main motivation is not commercial. It is rather a desire to express oneself, to share a personal passion, to inform or inspire others, to take part in community and/or democratic life, or to simply leave a mark.

Given the interest of libraries – to encourage users to become producers of information, as part of a broader mission to promote comprehensive and meaningful access to information – this broader definition (with the caveat that the motivation of the creator is not directly or indirectly commercial) is perhaps the most useful.

As such, it makes it possible to include blogs, postings in forums, personal websites, comments, photos, videos and Tweets, either published directly to the Internet, or through platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Pinterest. It also includes Wikipedia, arguably one of the biggest user-generated content platforms, community archives, and fan sites.

**User-Generated Content: Issues for Libraries**

The subject of user generated content raises a variety of issues relating to the activities of libraries, both professionally (i.e. how can libraries themselves make use of the opportunities created by the Internet for user content creation), and politically (what broader rules or principles are needed to allow this to happen most effectively).

In order to build up a better understanding of the possibilities – and issues – at stake, it would be valuable to draw on the experience of IFLA’s membership – as well as past Conference papers – to explore the following issues. On the basis of the findings, points to highlight in a statement could be identified.

**UGC and Creativity**: the Internet has offered new tools to create content and opportunities to share it. Many libraries have sought to bring traditional activities aimed at promoting creativity into the digital age, for example through makerspaces and FabLabs. ***What ideas and approaches exist for promoting creativity in libraries?***

**UGC and Freedom of Expression:** user-generated content, under the broader definition used in this piece, is a powerful example of the exercise of the right to free speech. Yet free speech is also not an absolute right, for example when it is dangerous and or restricts the rights of others. ***Given libraries’ engagement in promoting free speech, what issues are raised in particular by user-generated content from a free speech perspective?***

**UGC and Intellectual Property**: while the concept of ‘remix culture’ may still seem like a minority issue, people (professional and otherwise) have long drawn on existing ideas and works in order to inspire new ones. Some have talked about ‘user-derived content’, which clearly uses copyrighted works, but not in a way that competes with or replaces the original[[8]](#footnote-8). However, an intellectual property system built around the interests of ‘traditional’ commercial producers may be ill-suited to such a system. Canada, for example, has an exception for UGC, and a similar provision is proposed by some in Europe. Fair Use, in the US, arguably also allows for this. ***How should IP (copyright) rules approach the re-use of existing material in user-generated content?***

**UGC and Licensing**: as published works, UGC does attract copyright, although this can easily be signed away through the terms and conditions for using a platform. Where this isn’t the case, the work of libraries and their users is facilitated when clear information about authorship and usage rights is available. Open licences – such as Creative Commons – provide a relatively standardised way of doing this, and allow users to oppose uses they do not support. ***How can libraries help users generating content to ensure that their work is accompanied by the right information?***

**UGC and Privacy**: content posted online, unless specific steps are taken, is available globally. As underlined, this provides exciting new possibilities for free speech, but also means that people need to think carefully about what they do, and do not want to share with the world. ***What can libraries do to help people understand the implications of sharing their work and ideas online?***

**The Role of Platforms:** Platforms have made it very easy for people to share their own content, without having to go to the effort of building a website or customising a blog platform. However, as underlined above, many seek to monetise content uploaded by users, through placing adverts, exploiting data gathered about uploaders or viewers, or other means. Users may also face moderation or other content regulation policies which limit what they can do and share. ***What rules or provisions should be in place in order to protect and empower people uploading content?***

**UGC and Preservation**: whereas traditionally published works are, in most countries, subject to legal deposit schemes, this is not necessarily the case for works published otherwise. Web harvesting projects exist, but are not necessarily universal – the Library of Congress, for example, has recently announced that it will not archive all tweets, but only those which are newsworthy[[9]](#footnote-9). ***What approach should libraries take, in their preservation efforts, to user-generated content?***

**UGC and Local Content**: There are ongoing concerns that a lack of content relevant to individuals and communities means that people do not see the value of going online[[10]](#footnote-10). Part of the responsibility for this lies with ‘professional’ content producers, who may need to take further steps to ensure information is accessible (for example through translation). However, another way of ensuring that everyone can find online information and services that are relevant them is by empowering everyone to become a creator or contributor. Projects such as community archiving, contributing to Wikipedia or producing works in local languages can all help. For marginalised communities in particular, this can be powerful. ***What can libraries do to support the delivery of locally-relevant user-generated content, in particular for under-served groups? What other provisions are necessary?***

**UGC and Citizen Science**: for some years, there have been discussions about the possibilities for citizen science – the engagement of the general public in scientific research, often in collaboration with professionals. This stands in contrast to the traditional, academy-based model of research. In addition to making new energies and resources available for science, it importantly takes place outside of the academic institutions where there is both licensed access to copyright works, and the infrastructure to help researchers publish. ***What issues does citizen science create for different types of library? What support can be offered for it?***

1. This argument is made in IFLA’s Development and Access to Information report, produced in partnership with the Technology and Social Change Group (TASCHA) at the University of Washington: IFLA, TASCHA (2017), *Development and Access to Information*, <https://da2i.ifla.org/sites/da2i.ifla.org/files/uploads/docs/da2i-2017-full-report.pdf> (accessed 29 December 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. IFLA (2016), *IFLA Statement on Net Neutrality and Zero Rating*, <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/10700> (accessed 29 December 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Or hotel booking site, or travel guide site [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. OECD (2007), *Participative Web: User-Generated Content* <https://www.oecd.org/sti/38393115.pdf> (accessed 29 December 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For example, https://witness.theguardian.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The phenomenon of the ‘Youtuber’, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘*a person who uploads, produces, or appears in videos on the video-sharing website YouTube*’, is illustrative, with some earning enough money to live on, or at least sufficient celebrity to negotiate commercial deals with other actors. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Discussions around the ‘Value Gap’ in Europe and elsewhere have provided various sets of numbers on how much money platforms such as YouTube pay out. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for example, Awam, Mariam, *The User-Generated Content Exception: Moving Away from a Non-Commercial Requirement*, IP Osgoode, 11 November 2015 http://www.iposgoode.ca/2015/11/the-user-generated-content-exception-moving-away-from-a-non-commercial-requirement/ (accessed 29 December 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ArsTechnica, *Library of Congress will no longer save every tweet*, 27 December 2017, <https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2017/12/library-of-congress-to-get-selective-about-the-tweets-it-keeps/> (accessed 29 December 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The existence or absence of ‘Local Content’ has been the subject of two Best Practice Forums at the Internet Governance Forum (2017: <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/bpf-local-content-0>, 2014: <http://www.intgovforum.org/cms/documents/best-practice-forums/creating-an-enabling-environment-for-the-development-of-local-content/412-bpf-2014-outcome-document-creating-an-enabling-environment-for-the-development-of-local-content/file>) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)