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Libraries – A Force For Change: - Inspiring, Surprising, Empowering

President's Address
Wednesday, August 15, 2012

Dear Colleagues:

Well you have had a very long, but I hope, useful and energizing day and week. I thought I would share just a few reflections with you of a more personal nature, but not about my husband this time! Rather, thoughts about libraries and about our profession as librarians and the special bond we share no matter what part of the world we come from.

Whenever I see someone with a laptop or an iPad or a smart phone – in a library – in a café, in a park, or any other places we see these devices - I am reminded how fundamentally the world of information exchange and access has changed. And how it has influenced the place of librarians in this brave new digital world.

While communications technology has revolutionized the way information is stored, transmitted, and accessed, it has also generated huge amounts of information.

Some time ago I read a news article that used the term “Information malnutrition”¹ to describe such clutter. Clay Johnson, the author of the book *“The Information Diet”* has coined the phrase to describe what he calls an “overabundance of cheap and popular information - that just like inexpensive but empty calories - is making us sick.”

¹ From an article titled “Information malnutrition” in May 24, 2012 edition of the National Post. Page FP 14

As Johnson so correctly puts it, “It’s a new kind of ignorance that is defined by the consumption of information rather than lack of access to it. It’s now possible to be highly informed but not well informed.”

New communications technologies, as well as other factors such as economic pressures and evolving political and social conditions, have also made us all realize that existing models of operation, of providing traditional and new services, are no longer serving our users well. Transformational and sometimes radical changes are required in order for libraries to not only adapt to changing conditions, but to seize the opportunities to make a greater positive impact on society.

Yesterday we had a session on the President’s theme – Libraries as a force for change in our transforming society. There was a great panel including a politician from Sweden who explored how libraries can fully exploit their potential to be leaders in society, influence decision makers and make a positive impact on peoples’ lives. There were about 400 people present.

I would like to present some of the comments made by the participants at the session about the new environment we are in, and then list some new objectives that will address how libraries and IFLA can take leadership roles in the face of an uncertain future.

In terms of IFLA’s Key Initiative 1, Digital Content

E-lending and new forms of access to information are major trends. More information is going online than ever, and digitization is helping to put more material online, along with private e-lending (eg such as through Amazon). These trends will change the traditional role of a librarian.

As the relationship between publishers and libraries is affected by digitalization we are moving away from an ownership model to new business models which are still unclear.

Self-publishing is an emerging trend. It can benefit users because they can get more access. Librarians can help authors in self-publishing and explore new publishing methods such as crowd funding.

In certain countries the number of virtual users' growth is already higher than physical users, and the access to virtual libraries has no borders.

The expert gatekeeper role in information society is changing, libraries are creating policies around social media and how the public can access information. Librarians are interpreters of information and tasked with ensuring the security and privacy of the data.

Regarding Copyright: The walls between different kinds of information will disappear. There are will many different kinds of content & knowledge. We need to think about how copyright laws need to be created (not only tinkered with) to address this. We need to put international pressure on the publishing industry. As one panelist said, do not take crap from publishers.

Open education models are going to have an impact on the pressure we can apply to publishers. Move beyond the relationship knowledge vs money.

Regarding Key Initiative 2, Capacity building to raise the voice of the profession.

New forms of literacy have emerged, new skills are needed, and libraries' role as trainers & educators is growing again. Library staff need to be prepared and have training in order to renew their focus on training to their communities.

Mobile technology is moving people toward looking at a narrow focus of information. We have an opportunity to expand that view of information again.

Related to the advocacy key initiative:

To lobby for legislation which promotes access to information, librarianship, culture etc - is a task for librarians. We need to partner with other libraries form a consortium and share resources.

Politicians don't think that libraries have an important role. It's hard to change public opinions about the old or traditional image of the library. Librarians are not yet telling their stories or letting their communities know that they have a role in the digital age and can provide trusted access to information and knowledge.

In the digital age the role of libraries in supporting freedom of expression and protecting civil liberties is even more important. Libraries are also part of the debate on Internet regulation as libraries are custodians of information.

And about the key initiative regarding multilingualism:

We need to provide access to everyone, regardless of language. But it is difficult to find multilingual language ebooks so not everyone has equitable access to information.

So, in terms of how IFLA will address some of these points over the next year, some current initiatives will continue, and some new ones will be created.

In terms of e-lending, the Governing Board has developed a background paper that outlines the issues, the serious issues that are confronting libraries. IFLA has just received a grant from the Open Society Foundation to do a Think piece on e-lending by some experts with library and non-library backgrounds, as well as to convene an experts meeting later this fall. The intention is to develop an IFLA strategy on e-lending in 2013.

Open Access issues will continue to be addressed by IFLA's Open Access Taskforce.

In terms of copyright, we will continue our very successful work in lobbying for copyright limitations and exceptions. We have made some very positive connections with WIPO delegates through advocacy efforts by national library associations and librarians.

Privacy issues are addressed in IFLA's Guidelines on Social Media and Privacy in Libraries.

Regarding new roles for librarians, IFLA will expand its very successful Building Strong Library Associations program, and continue the development of the first cohort of our international Leaders Program. IFLA supplies supporting materials to its members on new topics such as copyright limitations and exceptions and e-Lending to help educate librarians and the public. IFLA through ALP also offers training and education activities.

IFLA continues to develop and maintain strategic partners in the information public and private sectors, and including governmental agencies.

And, our FAIFE Spotlights and our participation in the Internet Governance Forum address issues related to freedom of expression and regulation of the Internet.

Finally, IFLA will actively continue to improve the multilingual nature of its website and simultaneous translation activities at its annual conferences.

However there are two major activities that will take place over the next year that will support our efforts to be able to be ahead of the game and not only respond to events around us. The first one is the Trend report that will be developed over the next year and will be launched at our conference next August in Singapore. The report will provide an overview of recent developments, emerging trends and key challenges for access to digital information, and propose how these may have an impact on libraries and their users. The longer term aim is that the report will be updated every 2-3 years. The report will be available to our members to use in their own planning.

The second more philosophical yet grounded in reality activity is to explore how IFLA can place itself in the position where it can effectively advocate for outcomes that benefit the organization, the profession and society as a whole. We are in a multi-stakeholder environment where the dynamics between governments, industry and civil society are changing. To have greater impact and influence, to be the true Global Voice of Libraries and a Force for Change, IFLA needs to fully adapt itself to these new conditions and think creatively in four areas (at least): the access to information environment, the advocacy environment, the professional environment, and the organizational environment.

You will hear more about this activity over the next few months as plans develop. But, with both the list of observations I have just described, as well as some of the activities that IFLA will undertake to address them, it is important to remember that these plans and actions are organic in nature, and will evolve as conditions change. But the direction is clear: we will focus on issues and achieve results.

When all is said and done, of course, while trends in technology are in a constant state of evolution, when the multi-stakeholder environment is shifting all around us, one thing never

changes, and that is the system of values that define our profession – values that are part of our collective DNA. They include our focus on service, on satisfying the information needs of our users to the best of our ability, irrespective of their background, characteristics or beliefs.

It has been the same story in all the nations I've visited in all regions of the world, as it has been for many of my colleagues at IFLA.

No wonder I am proud to be a librarian, as I know all of you are. I can't think of anything else I would rather do.

And, of course, no matter whether we are speaking of physical libraries or virtual ones, it is the people who work in libraries who make change happen. It is all of you, who lead in changing people's attitudes towards the importance of reading, learning and research as well as exchanging ideas with their fellow citizens. In that you should take great pride and tremendous satisfaction.

It has been an honour and privilege to serve as your President for the past year. It has been exciting, challenging and fulfilling. I am confident the next 12 months will be equally so. I look forward to your continuing support and guidance.

Thank you very much.

Ingrid Parent
IFLA President 2011-2013