

# Libraries and the Intellectual Freedom

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*"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers".*

Such is the well-known wording of Article 19 of the United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights.

The declaration has been confirmed by the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 19), the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and other similar conventions. One of those is the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms from 1950, which in Article 10 on Freedom of Expression states:

*Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.*

By ratifying the Universal Declaration and other instruments, nation states bind themselves to its provisions that must then be reflected in the law and practice of the nation. Statements advocating freedom of speech, conscience, belief or the like, often expressed in terms similar to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are also included in most national and regional instruments such as bilateral and multilateral treaties, and statements by governmental and non-governmental bodies

What is said in the Universal Declaration is that the freedom to hold and impart opinions constitutes the one side of the freedom of expression while the other side consists of the freedom to search for and take part of those opinions - the freedom of information. This in turn means the right to be able to get hold of, e.g. at the library, what is being published by virtue of the freedom of expression.

Thus, without an actually functioning freedom of information there is no actual freedom of expression. Together these two aspects of the freedom of expression can be said to constitute the intellectual freedom.

*The Human Rights belong to the individual and do not depend on or are connected to a certain form of culture, a certain form of traditions or a certain form of government.  
Therefore no dictatorship in the world can reject the insistence on human rights with reference to their collision with the culture or the traditions of the country.*

Such is the UNESCO interpretation of the actual application of the human rights in relation to the multitude of cultures, traditions and forms of government.

Consequently, to use a library as a source of information is to put a human right into practice,

regardless in what country it is taking place. And to prevent such an act is to violate the human rights and must be condemned by everyone who wants to stand up for these rights – regardless of the regime under which the violation takes place.

On this background I will make a few remarks about the role of the libraries in defending and promoting the freedom of access to information and the freedom of expression, that is to say the issue of the libraries and the intellectual freedom.

The traditional, if over-simplified, public perception of libraries in the past was of rooms shelved with books and a librarian concerned to keep the books tidy and dusted, well ordered in their places, all well-catalogued and with loans carefully recorded. That was the past. The consequences for librarians and these professionally threadbare services were poor reputations, low social status and pitifully poor salaries.

Although in some places this picture remains little changed, today the overall picture is quite different. Today there can be few librarians who remain unaware that the future of the profession is no longer bound up with the safe care of buildings and the stocks they contain but instead with the fullest exploitation of the information that the library either contains itself or through access to it via the international information networks made possible because of the IT revolution's marriage of computers with telecommunications. Today librarianship is synonymous with information transfer and no longer with bookkeeping.

During the 90's the issue of the role of libraries for the intellectual freedom at last has got its place on the agenda.

Thus, in 1997 the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) took the decision to try to speak for the libraries of the world also in matters concerning the freedom of information and the freedom of expression. The decision was taken after some years of preparatory work and discussions under impression of the *fatwa* against *Salman Rushdie* and of the treatment of the libraries in the four towns in Southern France where the ultra-rightwing party *Front National* had come into power. In those towns the politicians have taken over the libraries, and totally exchanged the stock of books and newspapers. Thus among other newspapers the great daily, *La Liberation*, was thrown out of the libraries together with e g fairy-tales and other children's books that speak well about other kinds of people than Europeans, and librarians who have tried to withhold the neutrality and impartiality have been forced to quit.

IFLA's decision implied the establishment of a committee, IFLA/FAIFE (Free Access of Information and Freedom of Expression), and – since 1998 – an office here in Copenhagen that co-ordinates the efforts of IFLA in these areas. IFLA/FAIFE addresses intellectual freedom issues which may directly or indirectly affect libraries and information professionals.

The mission of the IFLA/FAIFE Committee and Office is "to advise IFLA on matters of international significance to libraries and librarianship in regard to freedom of access to information and freedom of expression, 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."

Behind these words lies the task for IFLA/FAIFE to clarify the relationship between the libraries and the freedom of information and freedom of expression. An example of this is the *Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom* that IFLA adopted last year on a proposal from IFLA/FAIFE.

The IFLA/FAIFE website, [www.ifla.org/faife](http://www.ifla.org/faife), reflects the immense differences between libraries

worldwide, even when it comes to the situation for the freedom of information and expression. Of course this is not likely to cause surprise, but what show less differences between the countries is the need to raise the awareness of that the libraries at all do have a role in this connection. This need is to be found as much within as outside the library world, and - almost - as much in developed as in non-developed countries.

So, the libraries in their role in society have to stand up against censorship. What does that mean? *Richard Fitzsimmons*, of Pennsylvania State University, prominent researcher in this field, says: "In modern thought, censorship is an effort by a government, private organization, group, or individual to prevent people from reading, seeing, or hearing what may be considered as dangerous to government or harmful to public morality."

Censorship may be exercised on political, religious, or moral grounds, making the offence one of treason, heresy, or obscenity. At different times censorship has been undertaken by the state, by the priesthood, and by unofficial groups. In a restricted sense censorship refers to the work of a person or agency with the authority to come between the producer to publish, and the consumer to acquire knowledge of, the censored materials".

In all these senses censorship is relevant to the role of libraries.

The wording "freedom of access to information" alone raises great, not to say intricate, demands on definitions and limitations. What information do we talk about, and who makes the decision about that? Will "all" information be accessible and in that case what is "all"? If not "all" information is relevant, what information should not be accessible? Must not there - or at least should not there - be restrictions in the information, out of e g moral, political, religious, security or some other reasons? And what does "freedom of access" mean - must not there be some sort of control on who is using the information and for what purpose, and must not certain information be subject to a charge, at least to make it difficult to get hold of?

As we have seen - and also see today - questions of this kind easily can get the form of a clamp, at least in an open and not-totalitarian society.

In a totalitarian society, on the contrary, questions like these can so to speak be regarded as already answered to as the totalitarian regime, per definition, has a monopoly on all decisions concerning the citizens' life, including the information they can have access to.

The role the libraries in such societies are compelled to play, both in the past and in our time, is not a specifically honourable one, at least in relation to the free access to information and freedom of expression. History can demonstrate frightening many libraries where the librarians have been imposed, by order of the authorities, to burn, cut to pieces or, "at the best", to lock up for the same authorities obnoxious texts and in their catalogues to extinguish them or to distort data about them.

From time to time we must remind ourselves that libraries in totalitarian societies always function as one of the instruments of the power, made use of to ensure that no other ideas and thoughts are accessible for the citizens than those that are in line with, praise or promote the ruling power. Of course this applies, first of all, to such ideas and thoughts that question or downright oppose this power. Furthermore such things might lead to the elimination not only of those who express these ideas and thoughts or of the writings that include them, but also of those who act as intermediates. In fear of this elimination, among other things, the libraries in totalitarian societies are kept clean of such material - when it comes to free access - that does not correspond with a current doctrine. On the contrary, the libraries are used to inculcate the universal validity of this doctrine on every field of life.

Unfortunately the examples of countries where the libraries have been allotted such a role are only too many. Let it be sufficient here to point at the almost schizophrenic situation that the libraries in

the former Soviet empire now experience during the profound transformation from a totalitarian form of governing to open societies, or the propaganda machineries that the public libraries in the four towns in southern France have been transferred into under *Front National*.

No, it is in the open, democratic society that the questions are being put about how far the access to information should go. Only in the open society is it not only possible but also a prerequisite of the openness itself to publicly speak about the right to information. As we all know, the attitude towards the access to information and a public discussion of it is one of the most important standards of the openness of a society.

Generally we describe the role of the publicly funded libraries in the open society as a leading part in building and maintaining of democracy. The importance for the citizens, through the libraries, to get hold of facts in almost any area of human existence, including the social aspects, is - rightly - being described as one of the ground pillars of democracy. Wordings like "the best defenders of the open society are its well-informed citizens" easily appear when we talk about the role of libraries in transforming democratic ideals to reality.

On the other hand today you rather often meet the slightly careless opinion that the role of libraries when it comes to democracy issues is connected to the parliamentary processes, elections and other performances by political parties. That is a dangerous attitude. It is grounded on a populist idea of what function the libraries should have in society: namely unobtrusive institutions that can be used at the politicians' discretion. In reality, and in direct contravention of such an attitude, it is the possibility for the citizens of reaching - via the libraries - an almost literally boundless amount of information that is the crucial factor in the role of the libraries for their participation in the democratic society. Far from first of all is this democratic function of the libraries a question of the most conspicuous manifestation of democracy, the parliamentary process. This might be worth remembering.

However, it seems as even more important to underline that this role of the libraries in society also includes a democracy paradox. The meaning of this is that for a society to claim to be democratic, it also must allow both attacks on the democracy and such views, moral or political, that most citizens strongly repudiate.

As far as libraries are concerned this paradox is transformed into a very concrete obligation. It is urging that on the shelves of the publicly funded libraries there should also be - in the name of democracy - books and other material that speak for undemocratic views and that promote anti-democratic attitudes.

So, it is not easy to be a librarian. Or rather, it should not be easy to be a librarian. The role and functions of the publicly funded libraries in society, and not least in a democratic and information-open society, put great demands on those who are in charge of the libraries. Or, again - rather, they should put great demands on them.

Ironically we have to, again, go to the opposite of democracy, the totalitarian society, for finding examples of that the ruling powers really can put some weight on the role of the librarian. Under many kinds of undemocratic governments around the world and during different periods of time (not the least in our own), librarians have been forced to act directly negatively in relation to the freedom of information and of expression. They have had to serve as the prolonged arm of the law performing pure police work by destroying or hiding documents and texts that the authorities want to withhold from the public. One of the latest examples is the *Front National*-ruled four towns in Southern France that I mentioned earlier. In those libraries the librarians are forced either to follow the very detailed rules set up by the politicians for what shall be found on the shelves, or to quit.

Another illustrative example of censorship at work - performed by a schoolteacher - comes from Index on Censorship, the bi-monthly, London-based, magazine for free speech. In a paper, given

here in Copenhagen 1997, the editor-in-chief, Ursula Owen said:

"Index was founded in the conviction that freedom of speech, along with the allied freedoms of conscience and religion, are fundamental human rights that the world community has a duty to guard. In 1972, when the magazine was started by Stephen Spender, it was responding particularly to the world described so poignantly by Nadezhda Mandelstam in her wonderful memoir *Hope Against Hope*. Here she is writing about the young daughter of her friend Shklovski:

*'She showed us her school textbooks where the portraits of Party leaders had thick pieces of paper pasted over them as one by one they fell into disgrace - this the children had to do on the instructions from their teachers. With every arrest, people went through their books and burned the works of disgraced leaders in their stoves, forbidden books, personal diaries, correspondence and other subversive literature had to be cut up in pieces with scissors and thrown down the toilet. People were kept very busy'.*

In a democratic society, on the other hand, a society attaching great significance to freedom of access to information for all and everyone, the responsibility connected to the realization of this freedom should be visible and emphasized as an important, positive factor in society far more than is the case today.

Such an acknowledgement probably would do right in taking as a starting point an analysis of the moral dimension of the library professions.

As deliverer of information the librarian in his/her professional role should claim the same protection of integrity as the journalist in his/her role as "producer" of the information. To the same extent and in the same way as the journalist, the librarian should claim freedom from pressures from employers and from political and other creators of opinions and ideas. Therefore the librarian should claim that the neutrality that the libraries in the open society are given credit for in reality means that the people working there perform their professions under a total impartiality and under the protection of the significance that the constitution of the country applies to freedom of expression and of access to information.

This certainly is not easily achieved. But in the now rapidly developing society of networks it is even more important that the librarian can find and accept a role as one of the promoters and defenders of the intellectual freedom.

The scope of the ongoing changes of the society has been thoroughly analysed e.g. by the Spanish-American sociologist Manuel Castells in his work *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (1996-98). Castells distinguishes three independent processes sliding over into each other: 1) the new information technique, 2) the crisis that both capitalism and the former Soviet empire have gone through and 3) the new social movements. The dynamics of the time, according to Castells, is not only depending on IT. At least of the same importance are the tremendous changes within the market economy. Capitalism has become truly global and, as he puts it, informational. In this economy individuals - some individuals - are what count, are relevant, not groups or collectives. In the network society the great majority becomes "irrelevant".

At the same time democracy is passing radical changes. As Castells sees it, the welfare state is cracking, politicians meet greater and greater difficulties in claiming their credibility and the notion of citizenship itself is losing its unambiguous definition.

The remedy for this for the great majority very unfortunate development lies, Castells says, in a vitalization of the local community, a liberation of the potentials lying in the electronic communication and a mobilization around symbolically important and traditionally non-political

issues.

In all these fields the modern libraries have huge possibilities. The ability of the librarians to constructively and without prejudices handle the new situation in relation to the old professional roles might be decisive for their future as a major co-actor in the defence of democracy - a role not without great risks. But as has been expressed by *John Berry III*, editor-in-chief of the leading professional magazine *Library Journal*: "If your library is not 'unsafe', it probably is not doing its job".