

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2009

*Focus on access to online information and knowledge
– advancing human rights and democracy*



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch 2009

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Natasha Primo

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Alan Finlay

Assistant editor

Lori Nordstrom

Publication production

Karen Higgs

Graphic design

MONOCROMO
info@monocromo.com.uy
Phone: +598 (2) 400 1685

Cover illustration

Matias Bervejillo

Translation coordinator

Analía Lavin

Proofreading

Valerie Dee, Lori Nordstrom

Financial partners

Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos)
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*Dedicated to A.K. Mahan - an activist who valued
intellectual rigour and concrete outcomes.*

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Access to libraries

International policy influences on online access to information in public libraries

Stuart Hamilton

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)
www.ifla.org

With over one million libraries and nearly 700,000 librarians worldwide, the library sector is an established part of many people's lives.¹ Since large-scale roll-out of internet access began in the 1990s, the way public libraries provide information to their users has been revolutionised. Librarians have changed their day-to-day work, and library users have migrated from print-only materials to a hybrid of print, electronic and online access to information via the internet. Today technologies continue to develop, and new methods of information delivery are constantly being implemented.

Librarians have shown great ability to move with the times, but the perception of libraries has sometimes been hard to change.² During the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), policy makers proved difficult to reach. The longstanding role that libraries have played in offering public access to information in both developed and developing countries was not fully recognised during the WSIS process, and the Summit's outcome documents downplayed established and functioning library networks by placing libraries' public access credentials on the same level as health institutions, post offices and community centres.³

Post-WSIS, libraries are stepping up efforts to stake their rightful place in the information society and become more engaged in the development of policies promoting public access to technology.⁴ The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), for example, has strengthened existing alliances with international organisations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and has started to work with new partners in the information and communications technology for development (ICT4D) community. A shared commitment to libraries as core providers of public access to online information has led to more coordinated advocacy and a new focus on libraries as the engines behind access to knowledge.⁵

Investment in internet access has slowly narrowed the digital divide across libraries worldwide since 2003.⁶ Significant, hard-to-eradicate inequalities still exist, especially in developing countries; but success stories have emerged like the Biblioredes network in Chile⁷ or the Aotearoa People's Network in New Zealand,⁸ which offer free access to the internet in libraries. Coordinated action undertaken by foundations like Global Libraries has seen library public access programmes rolled out across countries such as Mexico, Latvia and Bulgaria, while governments in Brazil and Russia have also begun to systematically equip public libraries with internet terminals.⁹ Both the public and private sectors are realising that library networks are existing points of public access, and that telecentres and other access providers can benefit from partnerships with libraries.

Librarians are also using emerging technologies to provide new services. Social networking tools help libraries in Brazil and the United States (US) to connect with users, while African librarians have researched information transfer via mobile phone.¹⁰ New technologies are found in existing library premises, but also in newer, purpose-built libraries from Seattle to Brasília, where hundreds of computer terminals sit alongside bookshelves. Wi-Fi networks and remote query services extend beyond premises and opening hours and make the library a 24/7 institution. Increasingly these new services are backed up with new skills for library workers – being proficient in online search is not enough.¹¹ Information literacy skills¹² are now key to optimum user service, and UNESCO and IFLA are providing training in this area.¹³ IFLA has also given policy guidance through its *Internet Manifesto*, and related training workshops have reached over 1,000 library staff worldwide. The *Internet Manifesto* is grounded in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human

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2 De Rosa, C. et al. (2005) *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, OCLC, Dublin. www.oclc.org/reports/pdfs/Percept_all.pdf

3 WSIS (2003) *Geneva Plan of Action*. www.itu.int/wsis/outcome/booklet/plan_action_C2.html

4 Havisto, T. and Mincio, M. (2007) *Libraries and the WSIS Action Lines*. www.ifla.org/files/wsis/Documents/libraries-and-the-wsis-action-lines-en.pdf

5 Tise, E., Raju, R. and Massango, C. (2009) *Libraries Driving Access to Knowledge: A Discussion Paper*, *IFLA Journal*, 34 (4), p. 341-346.

6 IFLA (2008) *IFLA/FAIFE World Report 2007*, IFLA, The Hague. www.ifla.org/files/faife/ifla-faife_world_report_series_vii.pdf

7 APEC (2008) *BiblioRedes: Abre tu Mundo Overview*. www.apecdoc.org/alliance/chile/biblioredes/overview

8 National Library of New Zealand (2008) *Aotearoa People's Network Impact Evaluation 2008*. www.peoplesnetworknz.org.nz/APN_Impact_Report.pdf

9 Murilo, J. (2009) *Bibliotecas Públicas Digitais e Redes Sociais – uma proposta para democratizar a informação* (unpublished); Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2009) *Libraries*. www.gatesfoundation.org/topics/Pages/libraries.aspx

10 Farkas, M. (2007) *Social Software in Libraries: Building Collaboration, Communication, and Community Online*, Medford, New Jersey.

11 Rich, M. (2009) In web age, library job gets an update, *New York Times*, 16 February. www.nytimes.com/2009/02/16/books/16libr.html

12 Information literacy can be defined as a means to “empower people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals.” IFLA/UNESCO (2005) *Beacons of the Information Society: The Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning*. www.infolit.org/International_Colloquium/alexproceng.doc

13 For more information on information literacy see: www.infolitglobal.info

Rights, and reminds librarians of their commitment to provide freedom of access to information to all their users.¹⁴

However, newer services can bring problems too. In developed countries, balancing user demand with supply is difficult if computer terminals are overbooked and equipment overused. All over the world librarians wrestle with the consequences of increased access to information: the use of the internet by children and the installation of filtering software on library computers is a very contentious issue, and many different approaches to the problem are taken.¹⁵ Increased internet access in libraries demands strong policies to guarantee users' rights, but unfortunately decisions about general content filtering are often out of librarians' hands. In this regard, many governments' suspicion of free and equal internet access does little to benefit library users.

If censorship is an age-old concern for libraries, then copyright is not far behind. Copyright legislation in the digital age is outdated and obstructs libraries from fulfilling core functions like the preservation of material. While the rights of copyright owners have been harmonised at an international level, exceptions and limitations for institutions such as libraries have not.¹⁶ This leads to varying practices regarding digital information provision, with many countries lacking legislation to protect libraries.¹⁷ The rights of marginalised groups, such as the visually impaired, are impeded and the full benefits of digital technologies are unable to be reaped.¹⁸ Libraries have stepped up lobbying and advocacy at the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) to remedy the imbalance, but face great resistance to change from developed countries.¹⁹

Overall, the move into the digital era has refocused librarians on their role as information providers. Engagement in the WSIS and Internet Governance Forum (IGF) processes, or advocating at WIPO, has raised awareness of libraries'

position in ICT regulatory frameworks. The fallout from the events of 11 September 2001 has also contributed to this, as librarians realised that user privacy could be sacrificed in pursuit of the war against terror.²⁰ Everything being done by libraries in terms of user training, provision of online services or information transfer through emerging technologies needs to be protected by concerted advocacy work by the library community.

Through the provision of guidelines and policy, organisations such as IFLA can frame access in a human rights context, but very often the best way to show the value of libraries is to let them innovate. The Google Book Search project in particular is a massive moment in the history of libraries. Google's mass digitisation of in- and out-of-copyright books has the potential to provide unprecedented access to an online library containing millions of titles, increasing access to information dramatically. However, the fact that Google is likely the only organisation with enough resources to attempt such a feat means many in the library community are worried that an absence of competition in the market could compromise the libraries' mission to provide equitable access to information, user privacy and intellectual freedom.²¹ The end result is not yet in sight, but through involvement in the Google project, and through other innovative projects like the giant online databases of Europeana²² and the World Digital Library,²³ libraries demonstrate their value as key providers of access to information through technology, existing to serve all members of a community whether they are physically in a library or thousands of miles away on a laptop. ■

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15 Hamilton, S. (2004) *To What Extent Can Libraries Ensure Free, Equal and Unhindered Access to Internet Accessible Information Resources on a Global Scale?* IFLA/FAIFE, Copenhagen. www.ifla.org.sg/faife/report/StuarHamiltonPhD.pdf

16 IFLA, eIFL and LCA (2009) *Statement of Principles on Copyright Exceptions and Limitations for Libraries and Archives*. www.ifla.org/files/clm/statements/StatementofPrinciplesSCCR20.pdf

17 Crews, K. (2008) *Study on Copyright Limitations and Exceptions for Libraries and Archives*, WIPO, Geneva. www.wipo.int/edocs/mdocs/copyright/en/sccr_17/sccr_17_2.pdf

18 Sullivan, J. (2007) *WIPO Study on Copyright Exceptions and Limitations for the Visually Impaired*, WIPO, Geneva. www.wipo.int/edocs/mdocs/copyright/en/sccr_17/sccr_17_www_111453.pdf

19 Love, J. (2009) Obama joins group to block treaty for blind and other reading disabilities, *Huffington Post*, 28 May. www.huffingtonpost.com/james-love/obama-joins-group-to-bloc_b_208693.html

20 Hamilton, S. (2008) Freedom of Information versus War on Terror, paper presented at the European Social Forum in Malmö, Sweden, 18 September. openesf.net/projects/librarians-for-informational-commons-and-another-europe/libraries-and-the-war-on-terror

21 Band, J. (2008) *A Guide for the Perplexed: Libraries and the Google Book Settlement*. wo.ala.org/gbs/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/a-guide-for-the-perplexed.pdf

22 www.europeana.eu/portal

23 www.wdl.org/en

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH (GISWatch) 2009 is the third in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society *from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.*

GISWatch has three interrelated goals:

- **Surveying** the state of the field of information and communications technology (ICT) policy at the local and global levels
- **Encouraging** critical debate
- **Strengthening** networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society.

Each year the report focuses on a particular theme. **GISWatch 2009** focuses on *access to online information and knowledge – advancing human rights and democracy.* It includes several thematic reports dealing with key issues in the field, as well as an institutional overview and a reflection on indicators that track access to information and knowledge. There is also an innovative section on visual mapping of global rights and political crises.

In addition, 48 country reports analyse the status of access to online information and knowledge in countries as diverse as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico, Switzerland and Kazakhstan, while six regional overviews offer a bird's eye perspective on regional trends.

GISWatch is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

2009 Report

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