

# *Promoting Intellectual Freedom Globally through Libraries: the Role of IFLA*

ALEX BYRNE

Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression,  
International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, (IFLA), The Hague, Netherlands

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Libraries have a vital role in the articulation and defence of the fundamental right of intellectual freedom, which is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Free and open libraries present a diversity of views, from both the present and the past. IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, has long promoted the improvement of access to and availability of information through its professional programs aimed at continually raising standards of service. But IFLA members have come to see that the international library community needs to address the dimension of principle, the right of all

to access the information needed to live and prosper and the inseparable right to express ideas and opinions. In response to that recognition, IFLA established the Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) in August 1997. With support from the FAIFE Office in Copenhagen, the Committee is beginning to report on and address issues relating to intellectual freedom and libraries around the world. It promotes intellectual freedom, reports on the global state of intellectual freedom and libraries, and takes action on individual incidents. Through these activities, it helps librarians worldwide to pursue these ideals.

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## *Introduction*

A century ago, in 1899, a war began in southern Africa (Pakenham 1979) which gave us a foretaste of the dark side of the twentieth century. For the first time, we had a media-conditioned war with graphic, detailed and extremely rapid reporting via mass-market newspapers, portable photography, the telegraph and the newly invented moving pictures. More than 20,000 people died in the British concentration camps, which were modelled on those first employed in 1895 by the Americans in Cuba, and which foreshadowed the horrors seen under Nazism, Stalinism and elsewhere. The British leaders, General Roberts and Field Marshall Kitchener, realised they had to control the flow of information and therefore imposed censorship. The Boers produced atrocity propaganda to sway public opinion. The British produced propaganda films about the Boers.

A century later, last year, the pattern was repeated in wars in Central Africa, the Caucasus, the Balkans and the Indonesian archipelago. The world yet again saw people herded into camps, dispossession and destruction, and attempts to control and to distort media coverage.

But in the twentieth century, humanity also witnessed many wonderful and positive developments, notably in public health, agriculture and the use and transmission of data. There have been extraordinary technical innovations and political and economic gains, of which the establishment of the United Nations and the process of de-colonisation must rank highly. All of these achievements, and many others, were based on information.

Often, it is immediate information that is required. When the Indonesian army and the locally raised militias went on a rampage in East Timor last September, the mass media focussed the world's attention, stimulating a response. In

Alex Byrne chairs the Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA URL: <http://www.ifla.org>). He is the University Librarian at the University of Technology, Sydney (PO Box 123, Broadway NSW 2007 Australia) and can be contacted on Tel +612 9514 3332, Fax +612 9514 3331. Email: alex.byrne@uts.edu.au

other cases more considered, detailed and extensive information is required, including the work of scholars but also peoples' histories and knowledge. Journalists, both electronic and print, excel at rapidly describing and analysing contemporary events but often a longer term perspective is required.

Libraries provide that community, national and international memory. They preserve and make accessible the legends and myths which feed identity and the histories and literatures which promote understanding. They gather, organise and deliver the information the peoples of the world need for their health, wealth and pleasure. It was a library that preserved and transmitted the monk Gregor Mendel's paper on the inherited transmission of plant characteristics, a foundation for the science of genetics, which appears likely to transform the new century. It is the international network of libraries, databases, etc which enables doctors across the world to seek to understand and deal with AIDS, muscular dystrophy and Alzheimer's disease. Libraries deliver not only highly technical information but also the resources that educate and entertain the children of the world. The free flow of information is the business of libraries.

### *Intellectual Freedom*

Although we cannot, of course, neglect personal security, health, housing, education and all the other rights, intellectual freedom is fundamental. Without the freedom to think one's thoughts, conceive ideas, formulate views and express them freely, we do not have the possibility of freedom and democracy. In a nation in which we cannot express an opinion for or against a government, ideology or dogma, we do not have the freedom to select a government, ideology or dogma.

That key right of intellectual freedom is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as Article 19:

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. (Universal Declaration)

It 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 (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. 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 (de Varennes 1998; Garcia 1990).

In many countries worldwide, that right is largely respected but never without any boundaries and often facing threats. Such threats come from politicians, religious leaders and community groups, often with well-meaning intentions but posing a threat to democracy. In the United States, for example, it may be (and too often is) the banning of books in public and school libraries, each of which titles, in the view of at least some, "conflicts with the values of the community". Old favourites of such community censors include Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex*, John Grisham's *The Client*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Kevin O'Malley's *Froggy Went A-Couttin'* (Doyle 1997). Last year saw the U. S. State of Kansas step backward with a prohibition on the teaching of evolution in state schools.

In Australia, the step backward has been national legislation to censor the Internet. Community concern about dangerous, subversive and offensive materials available via the Internet, from homes and libraries led to the Communications Decency Act in the USA, which was struck down by the Supreme Court after intensive work by the American Library Association and other organisations. Unfortunately, in Australia, one ultra conservative member of Federal Parliament used his position to get the Federal Government to introduce Internet censorship. The *Broadcasting Services Amendment (Online Services) Act 1999* introduces a censorship regime which will place the onus on the delivery channel, including Internet service

providers and content providers, including libraries. Although the proposed tools have been demonstrated to be ineffective (McCrea et al. 1998) the legislation was passed. Free speech advocates, including the Australian Library and Information Association, are now seeking its repeal.

However, in some nations the situation is far worse, with little or no respect for intellectual freedom. In Myanmar, for example, the ruling government, the State Law and Order Council (SLORC) abrogated the last election result and openly persecutes those who advocate democracy, banning the publication of their views. It does not recognise the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its neighbour, China, the most populous nation in the world, has an appalling record of intimidating activists for democracy and practices strong censorship. In Indonesia, the fourth most populous nation, there has been some improvement. During the past two years, formerly banned newspapers and journals have been permitted to publish and the Ministry of Information was closed after the election of President Abdurrahman Wahid in October 1999 (Moscow Times). Information, long suppressed, on such issues as the extra-judicial killings in Aceh and Timor has been published. And the works of the great Indonesian writer, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, have at long last been published in his own country, many years after their international publication and acclaim.

These few examples illustrate the strong relationship between lack of intellectual freedom and the absence of genuine democracy. Without the opportunity to speak, write, read and hear freely, democracy cannot work. Conversely, undemocratic regimes fear free speech. As the American emancipationist Frederick Douglass put it in his famous plea for free speech in Boston in 1860:

Liberty is meaningless where the right to utter one's thoughts and opinions has ceased to exist ....

There can be no right of speech where any man ... [is] compelled to suppress his honest sentiments.

Equally clear is the right to hear. To suppress free speech is a double wrong. It violates the rights of the hearer as well as those of the speaker. (Douglass 1860)

In today's world, those dual rights, the right to speak and the right to hear, are recognised to be

fundamental. However, they have come out of the meeting hall, into the media, into publishing and into libraries. They look both forward in time, guaranteeing those rights for future citizens of the world, and backwards, ensuring the possibility to read and hear both the wisdom and the foolishness of the ages.

### *Libraries and intellectual freedom*

Dmitry Likhachev, the great Russian writer and scholar, called on people to remember history and supported libraries and authors. Fighting through the years of Stalinism and on to the time of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, Likhachev stood for intellectual freedom and recognised the key role of libraries in achieving intellectual freedom (Ulman 1999).

Libraries gather, organise and deliver the information the peoples of the world need for their health, wealth and pleasure. Libraries deliver highly technical information but also the resources to educate and entertain the children of the world. Libraries make available both the thoughts and dreams of great writers and the mundane documentation of day to day government. They present both the wisdom and the folly of the ages. They prize honest information – not propaganda – and a diversity of voices, allowing users to select and evaluate.

Because libraries have always dealt with the works of great authors from any country and received publications across borders, they naturally have a global focus. The Great Library of Alexandria sought to hold all the works of every country in the then known world. Its successors form a global network of libraries big and small. Some are very specialised, providing specialised materials to select groups in a university or other organisation but together the network is open to all. Of course, national and public libraries have the primary responsibility to be open to all but they can draw on the resources of other more specialised libraries.

Library staff members not only make such resources physically accessible but also provide clients with assistance to locate that which they need and to develop their skills at finding and evaluating information. Through such staff, libraries facilitate access by all, from young children to venerable scholars.

Without libraries, access to information is limited in time and place. All are vulnerable to rumour, innuendo and misrepresentation. The village gossip feeds prejudice and xenophobia. In a modern society, the mass media can become a 'super gossip', passing on half-truths or even downright lies. The media can become the creature of governments, political parties, and big business. Through manipulation, bribery, corruption, intimidation, use of defamation law and censorship, the media can be led or forced to present slanted, inadequate or untrue information. But free and open libraries present a diversity of views, from both the present and the past. Unless libraries become complicit in distorting the historical record, in the manner of Orwell's 1984, all can use them to check the veracity of public rhetoric.

Poor libraries are deliberately or inadvertently complicit. They provide inadequate and misleading information. Intentionally or not, they act as a tool of the powerful and thus undermine democracy. They can facilitate oppression. There are many examples, sometimes initiated by well meaning librarians, sometimes imposed by authorities. In the USA during the Cold War, for example, some libraries felt that they should not hold the subversive works of Marx and Lenin – while others felt that there was a need "to know your enemy" (Mosher 1954). In 1970s Australia, *The Little Red School Book* was seen as Maoist subversion of our children. In Germany, more understandably but nevertheless dangerously, Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is still restricted. Libraries have too often been seen as instruments of the state, as institutions existing only to further the views and values of the government in power. This has been particularly true in totalitarian societies, of course, where libraries have been explicitly seen as agents for achieving the state's aims. Rudolf Malek, the very great Czech librarian, even reported with pride on how the libraries of Communist Czechoslovakia had expunged inappropriate materials and replaced them with suitable socialist materials (Malek 1963).

Besides those mentioned above, more recent issues affecting libraries have included:

- In 1997, the National Front won power in a number of municipalities in the south of France. The newly elected councils demanded that their libraries should cease to offer "left wing" publications, including some

daily newspapers, and should instead offer publications associated with the National Front. In the ensuing furore, the libraries were accused of "left wing" bias, the councils arguing that they were advocating balance. The matter has calmed somewhat since the libraries showed that they could not cancel the newspapers as they had long term subscription contracts and also agreed to stock the publications sympathetic to the National Front. However, many of the library staff members who were involved, have now left those libraries.

- In 1999, a student at the University of Central England, in Birmingham, took photographs of illustrations in a book about the eminent photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, which had been published by Jonathan Cape. She dropped the film off for developing at a pharmacy. The shopkeeper decided the photographs were obscene, informed the police, who demanded the book from the University and laid an information with the Office of Criminal Prosecutions. The matter was subsequently dropped.
- Also in 1999, at Yekaterinberg, in Russia, books by modern philosophers were burnt by order of the bishop who was evidently alarmed by developments in modern Russia. A counterpoint to this is the story of literary repression as documented in the KGB's own archives which has come to light since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Shentalinski 1997). Some 1500 writers perished, many were tortured, most died in isolation in the Gulag. The nature, and even the dates, of their deaths were suppressed. But their manuscripts were often preserved. Buried deep inside the Lubyanka were the stories of such great figures as Isaak Babel, Boris Pilnyak, Pavel Florensky and Osip Mandelstam.
- In Afghanistan, the Taliban are driving women from public life, denying them individual human rights, including the rights to access information and to speak out in such areas as their own health.
- In Iran, actions have been taken against librarians and writers who have been considered to offend against Islam and the religious leaders.
- In Cuba, agents of the state have harassed independent libraries.
- Some initiatives to address information issues for indigenous peoples have commenced in Australia and elsewhere (Byrne et al. 1994).

Dealing with these matters is a complex issue when addressed at a national level. At an international level, it becomes even more difficult. Not only must a social compact be achieved within a community that has agreed to live together but also a dialogue must be found between competing ideologies, faiths and values. Values cannot be assumed to be universal, nor can individual freedom be dismissed by refer-

ence to such amorphous concepts such as 'Asian values' (Hansen 1997; Kelly and Reid 1998) Although there will not always be agreement, common ground can be found among professionals in addressing the issues facing librarianship, not least in the areas of access to information and freedom of expression.

In his conclusion to a survey of the major ethical and legal issues facing librarianship, Froehlich notes that

Librarianship is a service profession, a nurturing profession, generally following the ethic of care. ... the world needs more "care", and the interests of libraries and information centers foster concern for all peoples, their individuality and relationships, interests that should not be quantified or devalued (Froehlich 1997)

Librarians must take this duty of care but must also vigorously defend both freedom of access to information and freedom of expression while simultaneously guiding and assisting clients to obtain the information they desire for education, work and entertainment. Librarians are active communicators of information who shape the use of information through decisions to acquire, or not acquire, choice of description through classification and subject headings, and guidance to clients. Librarians shape collections, in all formats, to suit the needs and desires of clients; describe contents in ways which will help them identify that which they want; and help them find what they want. Library associations articulate that ethical dimension, help members understand it and help project it to the wider communities. Many a librarian has felt stronger and been treated with more respect by being able to refer to a library association's code of ethics, statement on freedom to read or similar document.

### *IFLA and FAIFE*

One of the main objects of the Long Term Policy of IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, is "the improvement of access to and availability of information". Through its Sections, Divisions, Round Tables and Core Programmes there has been a very longstanding commitment to obtain information access for all. Programmes such as Universal Availability of Publications (UAP) have many

proud achievements that have helped all gain access to published information. Effective acquisition, cataloguing, interlending, etc. are all essential and members take professional pride in continually raising standards of service.

Nevertheless, IFLA members have come to see that while initiatives to improve such services are essential, there is another dimension which the international library community needs to address. It is the dimension of principle. Librarians must stand for the principle that every individual and all the peoples of the world have the right to access the information needed to live and prosper and the inseparable right to express their ideas and opinions. This intellectual freedom encompasses the essential principles of freedom of thought, freedom of inquiry and freedom of expression. It has been stressed in the preamble of the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto:

Freedom, prosperity, and the development of society and individuals are fundamental human values. They will only be attained through the ability, of well-informed citizens to exercise their democratic rights and to play an active role in society. Constructive participation and the development of democracy depend on satisfactory education as well as on free and unlimited access to knowledge, thought, culture and information. The public library, the local gateway to knowledge provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of individual and social groups.

IFLA fully supports the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto in emphasising that the libraries' collections and services should not be subject to any form of ideological, political or religious censorship, nor commercial pressures. But IFLA has gone further in responding to this professional challenge.

A resolution at the Paris Conference in 1989 drew IFLA's attention to the need to focus on intellectual freedom. At the Istanbul Conference in 1995, an ad hoc Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (CAIFE) was established under the chairmanship of Mr Tony Evans. CAIFE identified the need for an ongoing commitment from IFLA to promote freedom of access to information and freedom of expression with particular emphasis on its implications for libraries and information centres, their clients and those who work in them.

The two years of background investigation identified the following broad issues:

- to provide and protect the right of every individual to have access to needed information,
- the development of libraries in order to bridge the information gap between the information rich and the information poor;
- intellectual freedom including the protection of library materials and personnel from censorship.

Adoption of the CAIFE report led to the establishment of the Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) at the Copenhagen Council meeting in August 1997. The Committee, which has representatives from countries across the globe, is fortunate to be ably supported by the FAIFE Office in Copenhagen. The Office was made possible by generosity of the Danish library community, the City of Copenhagen and the Danish Government with support from many nations, and the Nordic countries in particular. The Committee's mandate is clearly drawn from Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was quoted above. FAIFE will build on the excellent work of existing international human rights bodies and such library organisations as the American Library Association's long-standing and admirable Office for Intellectual Freedom (ALA).

The Committee took a little time to establish as nominations were invited from IFLA national association members throughout the world. However, it held two business meetings and a number of other sessions at the Amsterdam Conference in 1998 and had a busy program organised at the 1999 Conference in Bangkok. Like other IFLA Committees, it is somewhat hampered by only being able to meet during the annual conference. Fortunately, with email, the Committee can stay in touch and its members have produced a number of country reports that were published on the Web at the end of 1999. A worldwide network of *rapporteurs* is being established to assist the Committee.

The FAIFE Office opened on 1 July 1998 and has developed an effective presence for IFLA in the international promotion of intellectual freedom. Its staff members have established contact with a wide range of international bodies including the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), Unesco, the Council of Europe, ALA, Article 19, Index on Censorship and the

Norwegian forum for Freedom of Expression. They have attended and presented at a number of conferences and written many articles. And, they have developed and published, with sponsorship, a pamphlet translated into more than a dozen languages. The Web site they have developed has become a vital source of information and resources for those promoting freedom of expression and access to information. Policies and procedures are being created.

An IFLA statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom has been produced and is expected to be as influential as the Unesco Public Library Manifesto. It will assist librarians to resist limitations on freedom of expression and access to information. It will help influence policy makers to vigorously promote free access to information and freedom of expression.

The priorities of the FAIFE Committee and Office are to:

1. Promote freedom of access to information and freedom of expression as fundamental human rights, which are vital cornerstones of the mission of libraries to be gateways to knowledge in support of human rights, peace, democracy and development.
2. Be the leading organisation in responding to attacks and limitations on libraries and librarians, seeking the support and assistance of other organisations as appropriate.
3. Support and assist other organisations addressing other relevant issues indirectly affecting libraries and librarians.

This is developing a peak international body to deal with the issues of freedom of access to information and freedom of expression impinging on libraries and information services. But this will not be enough. The work of the Committee will need to be supported, morally, practically and financially by library and information workers, organisations and associations throughout the world.

### *The IFLA Statement*

The IFLA Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom, approved by the Executive Board on 25 March 1999, begins, of course, by locating intellectual freedom as a fundamental human right which was articulated fifty years ago in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human

Rights, which most nations have ratified. It notes the two aspects of this right, the right to know and freedom of expression, both of which the library and information profession must promote and defend.

In libraries, the defence of intellectual freedom is expressed through the unabashed provision of all the resources needed by clients. But it needs to go further, as active support for freedom of expression. Libraries should resound with many contending views, including the unacceptable, and indeed that which many might find hateful. In developing collections, physical and virtual, this principle must be foremost, actively making available controversial and contentious materials. These might, for example, include the works and Internet sites of the Holocaust deniers, as well as the many scholarly and personal testimonies of the Holocaust. In science, they might include the polemical works of 'creation science' as well as taxonomic studies. In making such materials available, even those that library staff members may find repugnant or just nonsensical, libraries are not endorsing their arguments, but upholding the essential principle of intellectual freedom. In the words of the IFLA Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom, libraries are endeavouring to "make available the widest variety of materials, reflecting the plurality and diversity of society" and to "ensure that the selection and availability of library materials and services is governed by professional considerations and not by political, moral and religious views" (IFLA 1999).

In noting that "Libraries provide essential support for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development for both individuals and groups", the IFLA Statement is pointing to the heart of democracy. It challenges librarians to feed that growth by providing rich intellectual soil. These challenges lie within normal professional practice and sit comfortably within the responsibilities of libraries. But the IFLA Statement goes further, enjoining librarians to note that libraries contribute to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom and help to safeguard basic democratic values and universal civil rights" and that "Libraries shall acquire, organize and disseminate freely and oppose any form of censorship". Those points urge librarians to resist censorship beyond their own libraries, in the national interest. In the

current climate, they encourage all librarians, not only to ensure intellectual freedom in their own libraries, but also to speak out against attempts to limit intellectual freedom in the wider community as in the initiatives to censor Internet access.

### *The role of library associations*

Library associations have a particular importance in furthering this work as they encourage, support and defend libraries and librarians to take a stand on principle. Library associations have the resources to print and distribute publicity materials, to lobby governments and to prepare and give evidence to inquiries. They can provide a focus for activity and a name under which arguments can be presented. They can develop alliances with other organisations, including libraries, but extending out to other professional, technical and human rights bodies.

This is easy to say for those who live in countries in which views can be expressed without fear of retribution. It is much more difficult to say when one's organisation, job, family or life can be threatened. It takes great courage to stand up to such threats. Few have the courage of Aung San Suu Kyi to stand alone against tyranny. But together librarians can make a stand. Library associations can provide the shared support to make a stand. Through solidarity they can help members take the hard decisions, adopt the unpopular positions. Through international networking with other associations and with IFLA's FAIFE Committee and Office, they can marshal resources to enable members to counter restrictions on the rights to know and to say.

### *FAIFE work in practice*

The FAIFE Office and the Committee members routinely respond to many questions, provides support and promote free access to information and freedom of expression. They prepare and publish surveys of the state of intellectual freedom and libraries in each nation.

However, some specific cases are brought to their attention such as those mentioned above. Such cases must be investigated to check the facts, often difficult, involving contact with people who may be in danger and cross-checking with other national and international bodies,

including the national library associations. Then action must be taken, raising the matter with relevant authorities and alerting colleagues.

One such recent case arose in Cuba in 1999. Some Cuban citizens established independent libraries, named "Bibliotecas Independientes", throughout Cuba to grant access to books, magazines, documents and other publications to which there is no access in state institutions and thus to challenge the Government of Cuba to demonstrate its support for intellectual freedom. Investigation confirmed a series of incidents which indicated a pattern of State supported and instigated harassment of those independent libraries in Cuba, including threats, intimidation, eviction, short-term arrests, and the confiscation of incoming book donations or existing book collections.

IFLA protested to the Government of Cuba, urging the Government:

- to stop this harassment and meet the challenge of the independent libraries by upholding the intellectual freedom of all. This would complement the considerable achievements of your country in regard to education, libraries and literacy achieved since 1959
- to adhere to the principles of freedom of access to information and freedom of expression as defined in the IFLA Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom
- to remove all laws that hinder or violate the rights of people to access information and express opinions
- to respect the intellectual freedom, as set forth by the United Nations and to respect these rights as exercised by the independent libraries of Cuba.

While the independent libraries and their supporters (including some in the USA) welcomed this stand, others (again including some in the USA) suggested that IFLA was supporting opponents of the Government of Cuba and specifically the embargo imposed by the USA. IFLA, however, sought to make it clear that it was taking a stand on intellectual freedom by defending free access to information and freedom of expression, and neither supporting nor opposing the Government and their opponents.

### *Conclusion*

The human rights expressed in the Universal Declaration are fundamental. They provide a foundation for individual liberty. Their expres-

sion may differ from country to country, society to society. In some, they may be more brashly, more stridently, displayed; in others, they will be more subtly expressed within a community bound by strong religious or cultural ties. Nevertheless they are universal in asserting the right of the individual to be respected and to be able to choose how to live his or her life.

For libraries and librarians, this means that the ability to provide all people with access to the information they want because access to and transmission of information are essential cornerstones of human rights. For library associations, it means banding together and working with the IFLA FAIFE Committee and Office to support members and colleagues as they pursue the ideal of free access to information and freedom of expression.

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