



IFLA and Fake News

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Good morning. It is a great pleasure to be here in Zagreb to join you for this Round Table on Free Access to Information – particularly on the International Day of Human Rights. I can think of no better way of marking this important day than by discussing and celebrating the role of libraries in supporting human rights – particularly free access to information and privacy.

As Chair of the Advisory Committee on Freedom of Access to information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) I have a particular interest in these issues, including the issue of fake news. This is capturing an increasing amount of attention, with librarians in many parts of the world thinking what – if anything – libraries and librarians can do to improve the situation.

When considering what we can do, ethics are an important starting point. Our ethics are based on our role in ensuring users and citizens have free access to accurate, quality information and knowledge that is of value to them – and as part of this we support people so that they have access to the skills that they need to find, and make best use of this information and knowledge.

We should fight and work against anything that challenges this role - and fake news is increasingly one of those challenges.

Our response must be to help people find their way through the growing tide of misinformation and disinformation to enable them to find the information and knowledge they need, and this morning I want to talk about how IFLA is working to provide advocacy, tools and support for libraries and librarians across the world to help them do this.

What is IFLA?

At this point it is perhaps worth describing what IFLA is, and what its aims and ambitions are.

IFLA is the international body for professional library associations, and libraries.

It's role, in brief, is to promote high standards of delivery of library and information services and professional practice across the globe, and to encourage widespread understanding of the value and importance of high-quality library and information services in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

IFLA has four core values:

- the endorsement of the principles of freedom of access to information, ideas and works of imagination and freedom of expression embodied in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;



- the belief that people, communities and organizations need universal and equitable access to information, ideas and works of imagination for their social, educational, cultural, democratic and economic well-being;
- the conviction that delivery of high-quality library and information services helps guarantee that access;
- the commitment to enable all Members of the Federation to engage in, and benefit from, its activities.

Over the past couple of years IFLA has been undertaking work to develop a new global vision which is:

- A strong and united library field powering literate, informed and participative societies

and it has identified 10 strengths and opportunities to help achieve this vision. All are relevant to addressing the challenge of fake news, but the first four are particularly linked to what IFLA and Libraries can do:

- The first strength is that: We are dedicated to equal and free access to information and knowledge; the related opportunity is that We must be champions of intellectual freedom - equal and free access to information and knowledge depends on freedom of expression. Libraries' role in ensuring this needs to be better understood.
- The second is that: we remain deeply committed to supporting literacy, learning and reading. The opportunity is that: we must update our traditional roles in the digital age – and that means adapting continuously to develop digital literacies as well as supporting reading.
- The third strength is: We are focused on serving our communities; however, we need to understand our community needs better and design services for impact.
- The fourth is that: We embrace digital innovation, with the opportunity that: We must keep up with ongoing technological changes.

The other strengths and opportunities can be found in an excellent Global Vision summary report which can be found on the IFLA website.

Together, the core values, vision, strengths and opportunities provide the framework for IFLA's work, ensuring that it is in a position to offer advocacy and support to libraries and librarians, to help address contemporary issues.

One of the key ways that it does this is by undertaking research and evaluation on key issues affecting the profession.

FAIFE – as an advisory Committee - has been leading IFLA's work on freedom of access to information and freedom of expression, building on the organisation's long term work in this area.



IFLA and Fake News

As part of this IFLA is interested in fake news and has developed statements which provide a strong basis for its current response.

It is now almost 25 years since the publication of the joint UNESCO – IFLA Public Library Manifesto. This emphasises the need for an informed and educated society, and underlines the public library’s role as a “gateway to knowledge” which provides “a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision making and cultural development of the individual and social groups.”

In line with IFLA’s commitment that libraries and librarians should update their traditional roles in line with ongoing technological changes the UNESCO-IFLA manifesto has been reinforced by the updated IFLA Internet Manifesto published in 2014.

This states that access to the internet and all its resources form a vital part of freedom of access to information and freedom of expression. As such, it forms an essential part of the provision of library services, and should be delivered in a manner consistent with Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Also reflecting the commitment to update the traditional role of libraries and librarians, IFLA published a Statement on Digital Literacy in 2017 which extends the traditional literacy role of libraries and librarians into the digital world, helping ensure that citizens have the skills to manage and use digital information and knowledge, as well as that in print. Digital literacy is defined as “the ability to harness the potential of digital tools... to be digitally literate means one can use technology to its fullest effect – efficiently, effectively and ethically – to meet information needs in personal, civic and professional lives”.

The statement recommends that – like the ability to read - digital literacy should be promoted as a right by government at all levels, and that libraries and librarians in all sectors should develop both methods and spaces in which citizen digital literacy can be developed.

Inherent in these – and other IFLA statements – is a recognition that the libraries and librarians have to respond to the impact that the increasingly widespread use of new technologies is having on citizens and societies.

The Impact of Technological Changes

Whilst technological change evolves alongside innovation, and as individual tools and resources come into and out of fashion, research has shown there are some long term trends which are important for citizens and societies – and therefore for libraries.

These include:

- the move to online retail and shopping;



- an increasing move to digital by default for the delivery of many service industries
- a shift in the delivery of entertainment and news
- the increasingly pervasive use of social media

These long term trends are interlinked, giving rise to important issues that have had both positive and negative impacts on citizens and society.

One key trend in relation to fake news is the increasing number of people who now take their news from digital sources – not just from news sites but many other sources including social media.

Each year Pew Research Center undertakes research into use of social media for news by adults in the US. This has shown that, consistently, around two thirds of US adults get news from social media, at least on an occasional basis. However, the majority of these expect this news to be inaccurate, with concerns about unreliable sources, lack of fact checking and fake news. Indeed, this is the top concern that was raised about news on social media.

The role of social media in news is not limited to the US. In research published in October, Pew looked at the use of both news and social media across 8 EU countries. Younger European – aged 18 – 29 – are more likely to use social media for their news than main news media.

It is clear there has been a major shift in where people obtain their information, how they perceive its accuracy, and where they feel that they can obtain information that they trust.

A major new report by the London School of Economics Commission on Truth, Trust and Technology argues that we are facing an “information crisis”, and if you will forgive a lengthy quote:

“Western media systems are undergoing unprecedented change. As a result, the complex institutional structures of self and co-regulation, professional ethics and legal privilege that supported democratic processes of deliberation and consensus building are being undermined. Established practices of journalistic verification, institutional accountability and the ethical ‘truth filters’ of a free, but responsible, news media are being dismantled. Citizens are realising that replacing these on the new communication platforms is not straightforward.”

The report has identified 5 major concerns – which they describe as great evils – associated with this change:

- **CONFUSION** - Citizens are less sure about what is true, and who to believe.
- **CYNICISM** - Citizens are losing trust, even in trustworthy sources.
- **FRAGMENTATION** - Citizens have access to potentially infinite knowledge, but the pool of agreed facts on which to base societal choices is diminishing. Citizens are becoming more divided into ‘truth publics’ with parallel realities and narratives



- IRRESPONSIBILITY - Power over meaning is held by organisations that lack a developed ethical code of responsibility and exist outside of clear lines of accountability and transparency.
- APATHY - As a result, citizens disengage from established structures of society and are losing faith in democracy

And it is clear that citizens are aware of – and have concerns over - misinformation and disinformation in news coverage, particularly on social media, but may not be clear what to do about it.

If we use the term fake news as a shorthand for this issue what can libraries and librarians do about it?

Librarians and Fake News

It is a complex issue, and naturally there is a real divergence of views on how it can best be addressed.

At an ethical level it is important to recognise that there is a tension between freedom of speech and expression, the right of individuals to hear a range of voices, and censorship of what may be termed fake news. There can indeed be more than one legitimate view of events.

One response has been efforts by governments to ban fake news. Whilst appearing positive, this can be fraught with danger, sometimes reflecting an authoritarian approach which seeks to censor certain viewpoints and opinions, and stifle dissent.

On a practical level, as already mentioned, improving digital literacy is often cited as a potential solution, and it has been adopted as an approach by some professional bodies. A number of academic institutions have also set up guides and tutorials aiming to help students identify fake news. The University of Indiana East in the US has a fake news tutorial and the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom has a fake news game. There are also some examples of public libraries – perhaps mainly in the US – of doing this, although I would welcome some European examples.

However, there are others – for example M Connor Sullivan, in an interesting article entitled Why Librarians Can't Fight Fake News published earlier this year in the Journal of Library and Information Science – who argue against the view that libraries and librarians should take leadership in the current crisis. He disagrees with the view that upholding the core values of librarianship and traditional services is a means for combating misinformation.

Sullivan writes that librarians do not have a full enough understanding of the real danger of misinformation, and that research in other fields directly challenges the solutions proposed by library professionals and cast doubts on their underlying assumptions.



IFLA keeps an eye on current developments, and its Statement on Fake News helpfully adopts a policy based approach.

The statement provides a short background to fake news, pointing out that it is not a new phenomenon, but that digital technologies allow deliberate lies, misrepresentation and hoaxes to be shared more easily, faster and further than ever. It also supports the idea of more research into our understanding of the issue.

It warns that fake news is also being used as a justification for censorship, either to legitimise legislation that has a disproportionate impact on freedom of speech, or to simply strengthen the position of traditional news sources at the expense of new media.

The statement reminds us of the ethical and institutional role of libraries and librarians to help users access reliable and authentic information, including harnessing the potential of digital tools, and through supporting digital literacy.

Following its policy perspective, IFLA calls upon governments to respond to concerns over fake news by

- Refraining from passing laws which will have a disproportionate impact on freedom of access to information and freedom of expression, notably through broadly or vaguely defined ‘bans’ of ‘fake news’, or other restrictions of access to digital resources and the Internet.
- Ensuring that Internet platform regulation does not create incentives to restrict free speech in an unwarranted fashion.
- Showing restraint in referring to “fake news” to avoid legitimising it as an excuse for censorship.
- Investing in media and information literacy programmes at all levels and for people of all ages.
- Supporting research into:
 - the way in which information is created and shared online, while respecting the privacy of users, and
 - advertising models which may distort the way in which information is displayed and shared.
- Working with all relevant partners to promote the value of quality information, ensuring that such efforts do not exclude new or diverse voices.

IFLA also encourages libraries and librarians to:

- Underline the importance of media and information literacy both as a foundation for development and well-functioning societies, and a response to concerns around ‘fake news’.
- Continue to support programmes, strategies, partnerships and information sharing that promote digital literacy.
- Defend the importance of freedom of expression and freedom of access to information.

IFLA will monitor the impact of fake news as it continues to develop as an issue. It is also developing a toolkit to support the statement. This so far includes a widely used



info graphic about fake news for library users, which has been translated into around 40 languages with Croatian being one of the most recent.

Fake news will always be with us, and it has to be tackled at all levels from the actions of the individual librarian and institution, to the professional body, and policy makers at local, national and international level.

And IFLA will continue to look at how it can best support all working in libraries to play their part and support citizens in their make their choices, and exercise their right to access quality information.

Further Reading

IFLA Global Vision Report Summary 2018

<https://www.ifla.org/node/11905>

IFLA Internet Manifesto

<https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/224>

IFLA Statement on Digital Literacy

<https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11586>

IFLA Statement on Fake News

<https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/67341>

Kako prepoznati lažne vijesti (How To Spot Fake News)

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kako_prepoznati_la%C5%BEn_e_vijesti_\(How_To_Spot_Fake_News\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kako_prepoznati_la%C5%BEn_e_vijesti_(How_To_Spot_Fake_News).jpg)

Tackling the Information Crisis

London School of Economics

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/T3-Report-Tackling-the-Information-Crisis.pdf>

Pew Research Centre

<http://www.pewresearch.org/>

Sheffield University

http://www.librarydevelopment.group.shef.ac.uk/storyline/questioning/fake_news_game/fake_news_game%20-%20Storyline%20output/story_html5.html



Freedom of Access to
Information and Freedom
of Expression

Sullivan, M Connor

Why librarians can't fight fake news

Journal of Library and Information Science, March 2018

University of Indiana East

<https://iue.libguides.com/fakenews>

UNESCO IFLA Public Library Manifesto

<https://www.ifla.org/publications/iflaunesco-public-library-manifesto-1994>