



## IFLA Statement on Digital Literacy

18 August 2017

Digital technologies have dramatically transformed our lives. Yet even with physical access to these tools<sup>1</sup>, it is not a given that all can take full advantage of the opportunities created to receive, apply, share, and create information.

Just as basic literacy – the ability to read and assimilate information – is essential for individuals to participate and flourish in society<sup>2</sup>, realising the potential of ICTs for personal and community development requires everyone to have the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours. Media and information literacy is a central part of this.

Given libraries' mission to help all their users access and apply the information they need for personal and community development<sup>3</sup>, this is an important part of the practice of librarianship. This statement sets out the case for action, defines 'digital literacy,' offers examples of how libraries are contributing, and makes recommendations to governments and other stakeholders.

### The Case for Action

The exponential growth in the availability of information brought to us by technological advances brings not only promise, but for many a sense of information overload and frustrations linked to a lack of confidence in using digital tools.

Differences in digital skill levels and attitudes often replicate those seen in society as a whole. The digital divide follows much the same fault-lines as pre-existing gender, economic, social and educational inequalities. It is not just a question of digital natives and digital immigrants; young people too can find themselves on the wrong side of the divide<sup>4</sup>.

As digital technologies become ever more essential to all aspects of living – communication, learning, use of government services and work (as well as looking for work) – the digital divide may even deepen existing fractures in society<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, the UK government has even recognised the provision of digital skills as an obligation alongside literacy and numeracy<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This includes both fixed and mobile devices – mobile internet access is growing rapidly, and is making an important contribution to ensuring that everyone can get online

<sup>2</sup> See the joint IFLA-IPA-IAF-RWF Statement on Literacy (2016)

[https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/documents/joint\\_statement\\_on\\_literacy\\_and\\_reading.pdf](https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/documents/joint_statement_on_literacy_and_reading.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See the IFLA, TASCHA, (2017), *Development and Access to Information Report 2017*, <http://da2i.ifla.org>

<sup>4</sup> Shoemaker, Chris (2015). *From the President*, Winter 2015 Young Adult Library Services, [http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org.yalsa/files/content/YALSA-Winter%202015\\_Final%20PDF.pdf](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org.yalsa/files/content/YALSA-Winter%202015_Final%20PDF.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> IFLA, TASCHA (2017), *Ibid.* The Development and Access to Information Report, produced in partnership with the Technology and Social Change Group at the University of Washington, underlines the importance of skills, alongside physical connectivity, permissive laws on freedom of expression, and cultural norms favouring access to information for all as essential for development.

<sup>6</sup> UK Government (2017), *Digital Strategy*: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-digital-strategy/executive-summary>

Furthermore, there is evidence of declining confidence in the Internet. Cybercrime and inadequate privacy protection give the impression that the Web is a dangerous place, leading users either to disconnect (or not connect at all), limit their activities, or seek out ‘safe spaces’<sup>7</sup>. The rise of ‘fake news’ and tales of anti-social behaviour online are used to justify calls for censorship by governments and others<sup>8</sup>.

IFLA both supports the right of all to sustainable, inclusive development<sup>9</sup> and an open Internet that offers people the opportunity to improve their lives, and rejects censorship and unnecessary or disproportionate restrictions on access to information online<sup>10</sup>. Enhancing individuals’ capacity to access and get the most out of the Internet, and to do so with confidence, offers the best, most sustainable solution for realising the potential of the Internet.

## Digital Literacy

We use the term ‘digital literacy’ to describe the ability to harness the potential of digital tools. IFLA promotes an outcome-orientated definition – to be digitally literate means one can use technology<sup>11</sup> to its fullest effect - efficiently, effectively and ethically – to meet information needs in personal, civic and professional lives.

Existing studies<sup>12</sup> indicate that the definition of digital literacy remains fluid. The term includes basic technical skills, such as the ability to operate a computer and perform tasks such as word processing, form-filling, searching, e-banking and use of government services.

It can also encompass knowledge of how the Internet works, and especially the way in which data (including personal data) travels and may be used. This implies, in particular, an awareness of cybersecurity issues and risks to privacy, and of the tools and practices which can help users stay safe online.

It implies an ability to use technology creatively, stretching from blogging or editing Wikipedia to designing websites or writing code, as well as creative expressions through multimedia tools such as podcasts and videos. Such uses can lead both to personal fulfilment, and professional and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Furthermore, digital literacy incorporates less technical elements, such as legal and ethical knowledge and global citizenship<sup>13</sup>. It implies compliance with the same standards of behaviour online as offline, respect for the human rights of others, and the necessary openness

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<sup>7</sup> Such ‘safe spaces’ may of course not be more respectful of users’ privacy than any other parts of the Internet. See also the IFLA Statement on Net Neutrality and Zero Rating, which expressed concern about moves that would lead users to use only one platform or a small number of sites.

<sup>8</sup> For example Germany and Russia have recently moved to crack down on sites with content that other users claim is illegal: <https://rsf.org/en/news/russian-bill-copy-and-paste-germanys-hate-speech-law>.

<sup>9</sup> IFLA and others (2014), *Lyon Declaration*, [www.lyondeclaration.org](http://www.lyondeclaration.org)

<sup>10</sup> IFLA (2014), *IFLA Internet Manifesto*: <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/224>

<sup>11</sup> Or teach ourselves how to use technology

<sup>12</sup> Kenton, J., Blummer, B. (2010). *Promoting digital literacy skills: Examples from the literature and implications for academic librarians*. Community & Junior College Libraries, Vol. 16:84–99.

<sup>13</sup> Combes, B., (2016), *Digital literacy: A new flavour of literacy or something different?* Synergy, Vol. 14, No. 1.

to move beyond national and language boundaries, and cultural and religious differences. It also requires media and information literacy skills<sup>14</sup>.

It is clear that digital literacy overlaps with other areas of competence, notably media and information literacy. It also covers skills that some will be able to develop autonomously, but where others will need help. It depends extensively on the prior existence of basic literacy skills. And finally, digital literacy is a lifelong learning process. As technology changes, citizens need to keep updated. Research has demonstrated that without this, we tend to use technology in the way, and with the tools, we learned to use it initially (by ourselves, by experimentation and self-affirmation).

### **What libraries are doing**

Libraries have always had a crucial role in the dissemination and application of knowledge and in providing a place for (informal) life-long learning. They have also been quick to fill in gaps in connectivity by offering public Internet access<sup>15</sup> and use of other technological tools.

As such, many libraries have therefore made the logical step of seeking to develop the digital literacy of those who do not master digital services and technology, who feel uncomfortable online, or who do not understand the impact - positive or negative - of what they do in their digital lives. Librarians are aware that the ability to use technology meaningfully facilitates professional, personal and social endeavours.

Thanks to their trusted place in communities, as well as their in-depth knowledge of local needs, libraries are uniquely able to help users make the most of digital tools. And an empowered, equitable access to, and use of, digital tools promote open and healthy societies.

There are many examples of how libraries are promoting digital literacy at all levels, to people of all ages and in different situations; a selection is featured in the annex to this document.

### **Recommendations**

To ensure that the potential of digital technologies is realised for all, and makes a full contribution to equality and development, digital literacy needs to receive the necessary recognition and investment. As highlighted, while many citizens will find ways to develop digital literacy on their own, many others require the support of institutions such as libraries.

Libraries of course will have to take steps. They should position digital literacy as a core service of libraries, with adequate planning, budget and staff<sup>16</sup>. For librarians to be able to teach digital

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<sup>14</sup> Defined by the IFLA Recommendations on Media and Information Literacy (2011) as: *‘the knowledge, the attitudes, and the sum of the skills needed to know when and what information is needed; where and how to obtain that information; how to evaluate it critically and organise it once it is found; and how to use it in an ethical way. The concept extends beyond communication and information technologies to encompass learning, critical thinking, and interpretative skills across and beyond professional and educational boundaries’*.

<https://www.ifla.org/publications/ifla-media-and-information-literacy-recommendations>

<sup>15</sup> IFLA and others (2015), *Principles on Public Access* <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/10328> (accessed 2 August 2017)

<sup>16</sup> Demers, J. (2016). [Make New Friends, But Keep the Old: Introducing Digital Innovation Services at the Toronto Public Library](#). IFLA WLIC 2016, Columbus, OH, and Fortier, A. and Burkell, J. (2015) Hidden Online Surveillance: What Librarians Should know to protect Their Own Privacy and that of their Patrons,

literacy, they may need training themselves<sup>17</sup>. It may be necessary to form partnerships with external actors in order to provide best service to users.

IFLA therefore makes the following recommendations.

National and local governments should:

- Promote digital literacy as a right, and as an enabler of personal, social and economic development, and for civic participation.
- Ensure that libraries are able – legally, practically (including in terms of their own skills) – to train users in digital literacy, and are at the heart of government strategies in the field<sup>18</sup>.
- Support libraries in the implementation of spaces for digital literacy and innovation to help citizens being producers/creators as well as consumers.
- Refrain from censorship or discriminatory, unnecessary or disproportionate blocking of content online<sup>19</sup>.
- Strive to achieve objectives for basic literacy included in the UN's 2030 agenda.

Schools should:

- Draw on the unique expertise of school libraries and librarians, as well form partnerships with other libraries, to develop key digital literacy skills among students and to assist educators in integrating digital literacy skills in curricula.

Higher education institutions should:

- Apply the skills and knowledge of librarians, in academic libraries and embedded in learning management systems, to improve digital literacy among students and researchers

Economic sectors should:

- Promote digital literacy in their workplaces and communities, in partnership with libraries and business librarians, when possible.

*Statement prepared by a drafting team comprised of representatives of the Public Libraries, Literacy and Reading, Information Literacy and Metropolitan Libraries Sections of IFLA*

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*Information Technology & Libraries*, 34(3), 59-72, <https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ital/article/view/5495>, argue that this is a real possibility for libraries

<sup>17</sup> Martzoukou, Konstantina & Elliott, Joanneke (2016). The development of digital literacy and inclusion skills of public librarians. *Communications in Information Literacy* 10(1), 2016,

Talavera-Ibarra, A.M., De la Vega, A. (2015). [Opportunity for all. Three social inclusion experiences in Peru's public libraries](#). IFLA WLIC Cape Town.

<sup>18</sup> See for example the UN Digital Strategy (2017), which commits to 'develop the role of libraries in improving digital inclusion to make them the 'go-to' provider of digital access, training and support for local communities' <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-digital-strategy/2-digital-skills-and-inclusion-giving-everyone-access-to-the-digital-skills-they-need>

<sup>19</sup> See also the IFLA Statement, *No Development Without Access to Information: We Need Alternatives to Internet Shutdowns*, forthcoming

## ANNEX – Examples of Libraries Promoting Digital Literacy

### *Tietoris, Tampere, Finland*<sup>20</sup>

In Tampere, a Finnish city located 170 km north of Helsinki, the local public library has inaugurated a service providing computers and tech support to help all patrons using ICTs in everyday life. The library has set up three *Tietotoris* (Knowledge Marketplaces) where librarians teach courses to help citizens. Each *Tietotori* is equipped with 20 computers including Internet connections and a set of software. There are 10 persons working permanently at the *Tietotoris*.

Courses are free, and the majority of participants are seniors and immigrants. The curriculum focuses on how to access digital bank services, deal with government agencies and declare taxes online, and access personal health information and prescription details. There is also a program for preschoolers, where all 6 year old children in Tampere are taught to use library and information using a special game. The *Tietotoris* also provide free basic courses on Internet use, e-mail account creation and management, social media, and digital equipment, and personal tutoring on specific questions.

### *Mill Park, Melbourne Australia*<sup>21</sup>

In 2011, the Australian government adopted advanced broadband and identified 40 hubs for the promotion of digital literacy. The program targeted the entire population with a special focus on retirees, low income earners and indigenous Australians. The Mill Park Branch Library, as one of these hubs, received computers and other digital devices to be used by patrons on- or off-site. A full-time trainer coupled librarians with patrons, and the training program lasted two years, with four six-month blocks of instruction, and focused on education, home, business and health, using a mixture of one-on-one and group training, video conferencing, downloadable media, demonstrations and broadband content.

There was heavy investment in a marketing campaign to promote the services to senior citizens, people with disabilities, and small business owners. A second target group included local schools and universities. The marketing campaign was supported by brochures, toolkits, posters and a wide array of schedules and newsletters.

### *BiblioTech, San Antonio Texas*<sup>22</sup>

BiblioTech Digital Library is located in San Antonio, Texas, and it is the first all-digital public library in the United States. It opened on September 14th, 2013. BiblioTech has actively worked to bridge literacy and technology gaps in San Antonio and surrounding areas by establishing a community presence in physical locations as well as an online presence through the digital collections and resources. Librarians provide residents with technology access to enhance education and literacy.

BiblioTech also promotes specific programs for individuals in jail, especially young adults, and for soldiers on duty overseas. The library has a very active outreach team that travels

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<sup>20</sup> Personal testimony, Director of Library Services, Tampere City Library

<sup>21</sup> Rolan, Greg & Denison, Tom & Mackenzie, Christine (2015). Broadband, digital literacy and public libraries: the Mill Park story

<sup>22</sup> Cole (2016)

throughout the region and offers engaging presentations to students, parents, and educators. They also coordinate school-wide library events. Librarians offer many courses on site promoting the applied use of digital literacy, such as “First and Junior LEGO” classes to improve children’s science and technology skills, as well as courses on the basics of genealogy and family history to help participants to navigate online genealogy databases and build their family tree.

*Rural Library Connectivity Project (RLCP), Western Cape, South Africa<sup>23</sup>*

Many households outside the Metro-City of Cape Town – Smart Cape do not have access to computers or the Internet. The RLCP, working with in various libraries throughout the Province, aims to address this imbalance. It started in 2008/2009, with a rollout to 20 libraries, with a further 200 connected by 2016. In addition to the connection, there is support and training for staff from ICT Support Officers. They give librarians a complete ‘walk through’ of the RLCP.

The RLCP has had a positive impact on communities in the Western Cape. Children now have access to more information via the Internet to complete tasks, assignments and research projects. School projects, assignments and research can be done and even be produced in electronic format. Small businesses are growing through online advertising. Online job applications are completed, addressing unemployment.

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<sup>23</sup> See paper presented at IFLA’s Public Libraries Satellite Conference 2015, Cape Town  
<https://publiclibrariesatthecrossroads.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/rlcp-ifla-presentaion-2015-3.pdf>