

## **Claudia Lux**

### **Equal Access to Information through Libraries and Some Ethical Dimensions**

*Presented at Ethics and Human Rights in the Information Society Round Table I: Towards an Equality of Access to Information - Ethical Issues Involved - Knowledge and Culture*

When I was 7 years old, I regularly borrowed books from my hometown library. I had a small booklet in which all titles to be borrowed were listed and stamped by our librarian. One day she asked me: “How come you are always reading the Pippi Longstocking books by Astrid Lindgren instead of reading more suitable, serious literature?”

I was only seven then, but I somehow had the feeling that she was interfering with my personal freedom in at least two ways:

1. Apparently, I was not able to freely choose (at least from within the children’s book section) what I wanted to read and
2. Recording every single title that I borrowed in my library booklet seemed an invasion of my privacy - this record would be available to every librarian when I come to borrow a new book.

Free and equal access to information and the safeguarding of the privacy of library patrons are key ethical elements for libraries today.

The story also demonstrates a change within ethics: today parents would be happy if their children want to read Pippi Longstocking instead of other books, the parents are not comfortable with. Our ethical judgements today will differ from those tomorrow.

### **1. Free and Equal Access to the Internet in Libraries**

The Librarians’ Code of Ethics has always highlighted free access to information and freedom of expression as the basic value of our profession.

In 2002, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) approved the IFLA Internet Manifesto which considers the unhindered access to information as essential to freedom, equality, global understanding and peace. The Manifesto states that intellectual freedom, the freedom of access to information and the provision of unhindered access to the Internet by libraries are core values of the library profession.

At the same time, it is unacceptable that a private copy of copyright material should not be permitted in the digital world and that people feel unease when making private copies for personal or educational purposes. Ethical values can not restrict this but have to support full usage of digital material which benefits the development of a whole generation.

“IFLA encourages all governments to support the unhindered flow of Internet accessible information via libraries and information services and to oppose any attempts to censor or inhibit access.” (<http://www.ifla.org/III/misc/im-e.htm>, 9.9.2007)

It is the role of libraries to provide access to information, to knowledge, and to culture. Libraries guarantee equal access. The digital divide is not only a global phenomenon, but is

also clearly present within Europe itself. There is a digital divide between northern and southern parts, between Eastern and Western Europe, between cities and the countryside, and between the rich and the poor in the same places. Libraries help to bridge the digital divide by offering unhindered access to the Internet and to knowledge in its various different formats. Everybody is able to use the library, no matter if he or she is a wellknown author, a young shareholder or an unemployed and homeless person.

*Recommendation No. 1:*

*To pursue this policy of bridging the digital divide, it is important that libraries provide equal access and that the usage of the Internet in libraries is free of charge. Those who give access to information must be protected and not made responsible for the content.*

2. It is common practice for libraries to provide these services not only to those holding library cards, but to everybody. To ensure each European citizen's democratic participation in society, a free and equal access to information is essential.

The Code of Ethics of the American Library Association from 1995 explicitly states the importance of intellectual freedom and the resistance of libraries against all efforts to censor library resources which would include the Internet today. It further treats privacy and free access to information as important values to be supported by librarians. It serves as a model code of ethics for other library associations in Britain, Germany, etc.

FAIFE, the IFLA Core Program of Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression, is monitoring the situation of free access reporting any violations thereof. And violations do occur indeed - not just somewhere far away, but right here in Central Europe, interfering with libraries' pursuit of their ethical commitment to provide unhindered and equal access to information for all.

As a consequence of FAIFE work, libraries and information services respect the privacy of their users, including the resources used by library patrons being kept confidential and being deleted after a period of time. Another means of achieving privacy is the implementation of new technologies to support reader self-service. This has been demonstrated by a survey conducted in Vienna and Munich and a collection of comments made by library users following the introduction of self-service products on a big scale (RFID).

Not only was the privacy of users violated by the US Patriot Act, but there was some evidence that also in Europe this came up as a discussion and librarians have to fight once and again for the data protection of their users.

*Recommendation No. 2:*

*Any personal data of users and their human rights must be protected.*

“It is our job to protect the right of people to obtain the books and other materials they need to form and express ideas.” (<http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0518-24.htm> 10. 9. 07)

3. Limitations such as a lack of multilingual access to the Internet are key elements of discussion. Libraries have always been forerunners in providing multilingual access to

information. They have built up special collections of foreign language books and they do just the same, albeit somewhat differently, in the new information society. To name but an example, the International Reference Service InfoPoint (QuestionPoint) enables users anywhere within a network of World Libraries to ask questions in their local language (in Polish, French, Italian, German etc.). The answer will be given by a partner library in the respective country in the same language that had been used by the library patron. (see homepage of the Central and Regional Library Berlin [www.zlb.de](http://www.zlb.de), Link: [enquiries](#)).

*Recommendation 3: Libraries are multilingual access points.*

Discussions are being held among library and information specialists on the limitations posed by search engines and filters. Being professionals, they retrieve information and knowledge not only from one source but from various different sources. Being well trained, they have learnt to evaluate information and can pass this competence on to their users.

As the code of ethics takes a clear stance on free access to information, IFLA generally opposes information filters. Given any child protection laws, however, libraries are bound to install technical filters as they have a legal duty to ensure that movies are adequate for a child borrower's age. Based on legal child restrictions the management of filters are possible. Nevertheless, it implies a restriction of the unhindered access to the Internet and is therefore critically viewed by the library community.

During a discussion on child protection in public libraries in Berlin, the Central and Regional Library Berlin was cited as a model. Not so much as a model in the context of information filters or restrictions, but rather as a model of education for children wishing to use the Internet at the library. Librarians do not only have a "responsibility to facilitate public access to quality information and communication" (IFLA Internet Manifesto), but also to assist users and to teach them how to find the safe and relevant information they require.

The IFLA Internet Manifesto, which is published in 19 languages, states:

"In addition to the many valuable resources available on the Internet, some are incorrect, misleading and may be offensive. Librarians should provide the information and resources for library users to learn to use the Internet and electronic information efficiently and effectively. They should proactively promote and facilitate responsible access to quality networked information for all their users, including children and young people." (<http://www.ifla.org/III/misc/im-e.htm> , 9. 9. 2007

In many libraries, children and young people have to go through a short training programme before they are allowed to use the Internet on their own. Apart from a general introduction to the World Wide Web, they learn the most important rules for using it - rules of behaviour when chatting, mailing, or surfing the Net. At the end of the programme, they must pass a computer test in order to get their permission to use the Internet. At some later date, they are given information on how to find research material, how to compare search engines, databases and other information providers. All this is done with the assistance of professional librarians. Frequently, these information literacy courses are available not only to the general public and to students of all ages, but also, more specifically, to women, members of migrant groups, the visually impaired, senior citizens etc.

IFLA aims to heighten social awareness of the importance of user education and information literacy. Librarians have been committed for centuries to teach people how to retrieve information. This has not changed all that much in our days, but the constantly growing amount of information and the abundance of knowledge in a hybrid information society imply a great deal more to be learnt and to be taught.

A lack of school libraries run by professional staff as well as insufficient space and technology in Europe are prominent features of the situation of children and young people of our age. Where public libraries are able to co-operate with schools, progress is evident.

But to effectively educate a whole generation, every school would have to offer regular information literacy courses run by library and information professionals for at least 60 hours every year. This would not only help to improve students' skills in the use of technology but further their knowledge on how to retrieve safe and reliable information. A programme of this kind would improve the academic competency of a whole generation.

I firmly believe that professional information literacy programmes offer a more appropriate and sustained protection for our children and young people than information filters. Besides, they are in line with the values of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and, in particular, with Article 19:

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

#### *Recommendation 4:*

*Professional information literacy programmes offered in libraries are a more appropriate and sustained protection for our children and young people than information filters.*

Libraries are at the heart of the information society. There are hundreds more of best practise models demonstrating how libraries support development by applying information and new technologies. Libraries provide an excellent infrastructure for the democratic use of the Internet in a safe environment

Librarians cherish their values just like everybody else does. They uphold their moral and religious opinions, and their distinctions between good and bad. But a librarian's ethical principles include the ability to distinguish between personal views and professional responsibilities. Librarians must be able to provide neutral support. No matter what a person wants to know, wants to read, or wants to see – librarians are keen to provide it. And they are developing codes of ethics to this effect with the aim to ensure free access to information.

The quotation by Thomas Jefferson engraved on the wall of the America Memorial Library, a big and lively public and reference library of the Central- and Regional Library Berlin which opened its doors in West Berlin in 1954, reads:

“This institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, not to tolerate any error as long as reason is left free to combat it.”

The quotation has originally been written for the opening of the University of Charlottesville and is the key to dealing with free access to information, be it printed or digital. It is the key to creating a tolerant and open society.

Tolerance is an essential ingredient for the ethical principles of librarians in the Information Society, so that they may “uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources” (Code of Ethics of the American Library Association, 2002) It is therefore important for librarians to be protected by law and by a Code of Ethics so that they are not accused of upholding the principles of intellectual freedom, or of providing access to information, knowledge and culture whilst attending to people’s information needs.

#### *Recommendation 5*

*The network of all libraries in Europe, with each library as a safe open, tolerant public space for everybody, provide the best effective infrastructure to launch programmes of the information society for the public.*