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Advancing library services for the blind in the global information society

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As you are aware, IFLA has devoted considerable energy and resources to the World Summit on the Information Society. We have done so because it is of extraordinary importance to libraries and information services. For the first time, the governments of the world and international organisations – especially those in the United Nations system – have been discussing our issues in a concerted fashion. They have realised that the emerging global information society is important for all peoples whether they live in a rich, developed nation like Norway or my own country, Australia, in a vast but underdeveloped state such as China or in a tiny Pacific island nation like Niue. The information society has the potential to improve the lives of all, wherever they may live, or to further disadvantage those who have been marginalised in the past. We must hold fast to the vision of an equitable information society which will deliver benefits to all and both promote and work towards strategies which will deliver those benefits to all.

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Such a vision is expressed in the Declaration of Principles (World Summit on the Information Society 2003) agreed at the December 2003 meeting of the Summit in Geneva:

We, the representatives of the peoples of the world, assembled in Geneva from 10-12 December 2003 for the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, declare our common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

IFLA's response (IFLA and Byrne 2004) to this vision was to say:

IFLA and its members share a common vision of an inclusive Information Society in which everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge and which is based on the fundamental right of human beings both to access and to express information without restriction.

In these powerful statements, both the WSIS Declaration and IFLA's response talk about all people by using terms such as "inclusive" and "everyone". Both emphasise human rights and aspire "to enable all to achieve their full potential". So what does this mean for blind and print-disabled people?

There is no direct reference to blind and print-disabled people in the Declaration but clause 3 states that:

In building the Information Society, we shall pay particular attention to the special needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups of society, including migrants, internally displaced persons and refugees, unemployed and under-privileged people, minorities and nomadic people. We shall also recognize the special needs of older persons and persons with disabilities.

IFLA's response is more direct, stating that:

Many libraries have specific programs tailored to the needs of the marginalised and vulnerable; others are specifically designed to meet the special needs of some groups, such as the libraries for the blind.

But is this being put into effect? The second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society which will culminate with a meeting in Tunis this coming November is supposed to be action focussed. It is intended to deliver results against the WSIS Plan of Action (World Summit on the Information Society 2003). That Plan does include some relevant recommendations including the need for national e-strategies to address the special requirements of people with disabilities. It also recommends the design and production of both ICT equipment and services and content suited to their needs, which should be enhanced by the use of assistive technologies. And we can see some useful results through the work of individual organisations and collaborative ventures such as the DAISY Consortium.

Responding to the needs of the print-disabled

This is all well and good but how can it reach those in need throughout the world?

The ambitious statements of the Declaration and IFLA's response encompass those losing their sight through trachoma in their desert homelands as well as those blinded by war and disease and those born without sight. They call on us to assist not only those fortunate enough to live within easy reach of some of the fine library services represented among the membership of this IFLA Section but also those living in remote areas or in areas not served or underserved by appropriate library services. They call for the use assistive technologies but also the provision of relevant content – content which needs to be provided in suitable formats and multiple languages.

And, just as for any other clients, the print-disabled exhibit many and varied interests and wish to draw upon the full range of library services. Some, at least sometimes, want to access community, governmental and commercial information such as how to buy an energy efficient and reliable washing machine or to object to the redevelopment of an adjoining property. Other needs include information resources which will support education, work, the exercise of civil rights and entertainment. And any of this information may be required in the clients' preferred languages. As with other clients, the print-disabled need assistance to develop the skills to locate, assess and use relevant information.

To respond whole-heartedly to these extensive needs and to promote a people-centred and inclusive Information Society in which all can achieve their full potential and improve their quality of life clearly demands more than our services can provide even in the richest nations. We need the expertise that has been built up in dedicated services. We need their commitment to the needs of the print-disabled. But we also need the capacity to extend services across nations and into underserved and unserved regions.

Achieving inclusion through partnership

This call for inclusion nationally and internationally is a tall order. Its achievement will demand new approaches and new methods which will build on current strengths to extend services to those in need.

The drive to create equitable access for all including the print-disabled will cause us to rethink some of our strategies. For example, rather than undertaking the labour intensive and costly reformatting of materials to enabling formats we need ways of delivering content which will allow it to be accessed and used in suitable formats. This is achievable as has been demonstrated by the IT staff at the UTS Library. They have used style sheets to allow content delivered via the Library's website (<http://www.uts.edu.au/lib>) to be output in small or large font to a screen, suitably formatted for printing, to a Braille, in a form suitable for voice output software and so on. In doing this they have achieved two main goals: a significant and welcome reduction in the work required of the hard-pressed UTS Library staff and a changed relationship with our print-disabled clients. Although any reduction in work is of course welcome, the latter achievement is much more significant because it has meant that we no longer treat the print-disabled as 'different' or in need of 'special service' in our delivery of digital information but instead provide all of our clients with the facility to access our web enable information in the format most suitable to their needs.

Of course this approach doesn't work with all of our resources but its success is driving a reconsideration of our whole delivery strategy. If we can make resources available digitally in an enabled format then why would we make materials available in other formats which cannot be easily enabled? Why, for instance, would we have a hard copy print collection of student readings when a digital collection is more accessible (and of course can be readily made available 24x7)?

Such approaches work and can help us fulfil our vision of an equitable Information Society for all. But their achievement is dependent on addressing a range of other obstacles. Principal among these is of course the digital divide and the resultant information inequality. A digitally driven strategy such as that adopted by UTS Library can only work where there is a highly developed, readily available IT infrastructure, the resources and skills to support it and the client capabilities to use it. Thus implementation of such strategies means that we have to insist that the global community – including governments, businesses and NGOs – must address the infrastructure and affordability issues. Together with others we must address the education and skills issues, especially the crying need for information literacy. And we must support initiatives to create and deliver relevant content in appropriate languages.

This is a big agenda. It is an agenda which extends well beyond libraries and information services. It is an agenda which can only be fulfilled by working in partnership with our colleagues and with those in other spheres. In this work, IFLA plays its part by providing for a in which colleagues can come together to explore issues and develop solutions, by developing standards which underpin and facilitate collaboration, and by advocacy to highlight the issues which governments, business and we need to address.

It is of course the agenda to create an inclusive global Information Society so it seeks to address the needs of all people not only those with print-disabilities. But as the anecdote from UTS Library shows, addressing the needs, the most important needs of the print-disabled is a way into addressing the needs of all. In pursuing this agenda, we need specialist expertise, the knowledge and skills which have been developed over the years in providing services tailored to the needs of the print-disabled. But we also need ways of increasing the reach of those services and multiplying their efficacy many times over. To do this we need to work in partnership within IFLA - across our sections and divisions - and with colleagues in related areas as well as those in business and government who have much greater resources than us.

Through such initiatives as the DAISY Consortium, library services concerned with the needs of the blind and print-disabled have shown us the effectiveness of collaboration. The challenge put up by the World Summit on the Information Society to develop a truly equitable information society asks those services to find new levels of collaboration within and across countries and from rich to poor which can provide models for others to emulate.

References

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