The Library and Transparency

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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to assess the role of libraries as contributors to the freedom of (official) information published in Alexandria in 2001, Sturges examined both the definition of freedom of information and the actual role of libraries in providing better access to official documentation. He concluded that libraries are not so much agents of freedom of information as iconic representations of commitment to freedom of information. The present article examines progress towards reorienting libraries towards effective participation in the freedom of information process. In 1997 the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) set up its Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) Committee to protect and promote information rights in the context of libraries. FAIFE began by monitoring threats to information rights connected with libraries and quickly added a proactive concern with developing policy and policy guidelines on issues such as internet access in libraries, and public access to health information. In the second half of the 2000s the FAIFE committee was able to use funds provided by Swedish SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to conduct workshops in various countries to increase awareness of and commitment to these and other access issues. A key policy development was the framing, and adoption in 2008, of an IFLA Manifesto on Transparency, Good Governance and Freedom from Corruption. Learning materials derived from the manifesto were piloted in India and Vietnam in 2009, and further workshops were held in Iceland and Argentina in 2011. By far the most thorough attempt to embed the Transparency Manifesto in the library practice of a country has been led by Crnogorac in Serbia. The importance and success of the whole programme that has culminated in the Serbian experience is assessed in the light of the 2001 analysis.

INTRODUCTION: FIRST THOUGHTS ON THE ISSUE

In an article published in Alexandria (Sturges, 2001) the relationship between the library and freedom of information was subjected to a critical examination. In particular, the question as to whether libraries had an actual, as opposed to a notional, connection with freedom of information was
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assessed. Before going further, it has to be admitted that there was a basic confusion over terminology in the article. On reflection, what it referred to as freedom of information would better be called freedom of expression (as in Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights) or, even better again, transparency. In the body of the present article, transparency is the term we will use. The earlier article listed the absence of censorship, existence of independent media and whistleblower protection as conditions for freedom of information. More specifically it discussed open government, access to official files, which is what the term freedom of information taken more strictly actually means, access to one’s own personal data via data protection laws, and freedom of information laws as such.

These conditions of society and laws were then linked in the article to the IFLA concept of Universal Access to Information (UAI) and the ideals of progressive librarianship. Ideals and practice do not, however, always coincide. So the article then used some space to point out the ways in which accepted library professional practice did not always relate well to the ideal of freedom of information/transparency. Aspects of library stock selection, information retrieval, and dilemmas over neutrality and engagement were used to make the point that the library was not always the user-friendly institution that its promoters tended to claim it was. In particular, the attitudes and practices of libraries in relation to Internet access and software filtering in the library were examined in the light of the Council of Europe / EBLIDA Guidelines (Sturges, 2000).

The *Alexandria* article summed this up by suggesting that ‘Through the necessary selectiveness of what they hold, libraries reinforce what society recognizes as genuine or acceptable knowledge. Through their mechanisms for organizing and presenting material to the public they create a series of barriers through which only the initiated can pass. And finally, their public commitment to freedom of information can mask either an unprofessional lack of concern with what the public finds within their walls, or residual traces of the spirit of the censor.’ It then concluded that ‘Only to a very limited extent is the library an agent of freedom of information, but its visibility at so many places in developed societies certainly has an iconic role’ (Sturges, 2001, p.14). A clearer and more up-to-date way of putting this would be that the library is not a particularly effective transparency institution. In what follows, we will explore the concept of transparency in more detail, and then describe what has been done by IFLA FAIFE (the Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression Core Activity and Committee, set up in 1997) to point the direction for libraries to reorient themselves as transparency institutions. In particular we will describe the programme undertaken in Serbia.

TRANSPARENCY

So, what is transparency? We can see it as a metaphor for an overarching concept of the availability of information of many kinds, and in particular
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those types of information that pertain to official, business and social organization. As such it can be seen as a key component of 21st century governance. Transparency is sought in systems of public and corporate governance so that they can be made accountable. Transparency allows examination of the stewardship that is expected of those who own or have the care of resources that are matters of public interest and concern. To sum this up in a dictionary-style definition one might say that transparency is the condition in which knowledge of activities that are of public interest is revealed so as to provide the potential for accountability. Bosshard (2005, p.22) takes the basic metaphor further in an attempt to indicate the ability of accountability through transparency to bring about change for the good. His use of the metaphor that ‘Sunshine is the best disinfectant’ captures the cleansing potential of a regime of transparency, without yet explaining quite how that might work.

Possibly the outstanding example of introducing transparency into a previously secretive system was the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up under an Act of Parliament of 1995. This was a national transparency exercise aimed at healing the wounds of an exceptionally divided society. Its hearings were intended to allow the revelation of the truth about what actually happened in the enormous number of cases of human rights violations that had taken place under the apartheid system. Much of this was a kind of imposed transparency, but the concept includes voluntary transparency. This approach starts with a simplistic type of definition that calls transparency the opposite condition to concealment and secrecy. Florini (2000, p.13), for instance, expresses it precisely thus:

Put simply, transparency is the opposite of secrecy. Secrecy means deliberately hiding your actions; transparency means deliberately revealing them.

The emphasis here is on the choices of the individual or institution, more properly described as disclosure. A text aimed at the business community develops this idea by suggesting that:

Transparency, as currently defined, is letting the truth be available for others to see if they so choose, or perhaps to look, or have the time, means, and skills to look. This implies a passive posture or motivation on the part of the individual or organization under consideration. In today’s broader public context, however, transparency is taking on a whole new meaning: active disclosure (Oliver, 2004, p.3).

These definitions help, but it is best to regard transparency as the adoption of openness, whether imposed or voluntary, in both public and private sectors with the central aim of promoting good governance and a strong secondary aim of combating crime and corruption. To connect this to the work of libraries in an effective way was the mission adopted by IFLA FAIFE through what became the IFLA Transparency Manifesto.

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THE MANIFESTO

The precise origins of the idea that FAIFE should work towards a new IFLA Manifesto on transparency are a little hard to identify. They began to take shape during the mid-2000s when the first author of this article was both Chair of FAIFE and Academic Consultant to an action research project that included local chapters of the anti-corruption NGO, Transparency International, from Pakistan, Nigeria and Croatia as partners (Sharma and Sturges, 2007). Despite the doubts expressed in Sturges (2001), the idea that libraries could be rethought as transparency institutions, contributing towards good governance and limiting the scope for corruption, began to seem a natural one in this context. Libraries, by providing access to print and electronic resources were offering a potential contribution to social, political, economic and other forms of transparency, but attention had seldom been drawn to this as an aspect of the general rationale for libraries. For FAIFE, as IFLA’s Intellectual Freedom core activity, it seemed a worthwhile project to explore this approach to the socio-political role of libraries further, with the aim of developing policy ideas relating to it for IFLA. In the process, the emphasis was shifted from transparency itself towards good governance and, in particular, the struggle against corruption.

To do this, FAIFE enlisted the aid of the two national library associations that have a permanent FAIFE committee in their structure. First of all, the Croatian Library Association agreed to attach a FAIFE one-day workshop entitled ‘Libraries, Civil Society Organisations and the Struggle Against Corruption’ to its 6th annual celebration of the International Day of Human Rights at the National Library of Croatia in Zagreb, 8 and 9 December 2006. The Department of Information Science at the University of Zagreb’s Faculty of Philosophy also agreed to be a partner, and FAIFE was able to draw on financial support from SIDA. Speakers from Croatia itself, Bosnia, Germany (a representative of Transparency International), Russia, South Africa, the USA and Britain were brought together for the occasion. Discussion ranged widely across the nature and extent of corruption, the activities of anti-corruption campaigners and activists, and the incidence of corruption in the library profession itself. At the end of the workshop the Croatian Library Association drew up a strong statement on the role of libraries in the struggle against corruption and the FAIFE representatives compiled a list of sub-topics that might eventually form part of a policy statement.

The second phase of the process involved the FAIFE Committee of LIASA (the Library and Information Association of South Africa) when LIASA was also the host of IFLA’s World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) in 2007. The Goethe Institute in Johannesburg was recruited as a further partner, not least because the Institute has excellent meeting facilities in its premises. A WLIC pre-conference was arranged for 16 and 17 August with invited speakers, including librarians, researchers and civil society activists, and participants from South Africa, Germany, Serbia and a number of other
countries. Once again FAIFE was indebted to SIDA for financial support to make the event possible. The intention was for this pre-conference to bring the discussion much closer to the specific issues that could form parts of an IFLA policy. For this purpose LIASA/FAIFE identified a locally-based rapporteur, Thabiseng Taole, to put together a first draft of a policy document from the themes discussed at the Goethe Institute. Following the successful and very stimulating set of presentations and discussions in Johannesburg, this is exactly what she did.

The original draft was subsequently redrawn a number of times as its content was exposed to the FAIFE Committee and the IFLA Governing Board, before it was formally accepted as the IFLA Manifesto in 2008. The title was frequently altered to obtain some sort of balance between the fully explicit and the easy-to-remember. Simply calling the Manifesto ‘Transparency’, ‘Good Governance’ or ‘Anti-Corruption’ or permutating any two of these were all tried. In the end only the long and, admittedly clumsy, title, the IFLA Manifesto on Transparency, Good Governance and Freedom from Corruption, that it now bears would do. Quite early in the process a colleague from Transparency International had expressed surprise that FAIFE should adopt such a lengthy process, lasting well over a year, to draw up a policy document that an NGO would feel able generate in a fraction of the time. With all due respect to our civil society associates, this does reflect the difference between the way an NGO might work and an appropriate policy-making process for a global association of professional bodies and institutions like IFLA.

Throughout the process FAIFE was very concerned that in taking IFLA and its members further into a socially-engaged policy area than they generally ventured, it was necessary to have a document that could be ‘owned’ by the library profession. The slow process of discussion and drafting deliberately involved colleagues from an emerging central European democracy and a very newly democratic African state, and opened up the process very widely, so that the policy would not be a product too closely associated with the industrialized ‘old’ democracies of Europe and North America. The ten clauses of the Manifesto call on the library profession to make its own house as corruption-free as possible, supporting this process with a new or strengthened code of professional ethics. Because a poorly-paid and insufficiently respected profession is more vulnerable to corruption, the Manifesto recommends campaigning on librarians’ status and pay. Librarians are then advised to build on their existing strengths in the form of relevant collections and access facilities to support transparency. Where a country has freedom of information laws, librarians are recommended to make the library a support centre for potential inquirers under the provisions of the law, and where there are no such laws, to campaign for their introduction. Training programmes for both librarians and their users are suggested, as is extensive collection and organization of official information materials. Finally, cooperation with anti-corruption NGOs and citizens’ advice centres is recommended. Most of this
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will not be easy policy to adopt in countries where corrupt and authoritarian governments suppress criticism in brisk and heavy-handed fashion. In such environments it will represent an ideal to be pursued over the long term, but wherever there is scope for change and improvement, the Manifesto offers the profession a clear statement to guide it.

DISSEMINATION AND RESPONSES

The existence of a policy document is satisfying, but it is only a starting point. After this it is necessary to show that the document has been read and acted upon. IFLA was anxious not simply to consign the Manifesto to whatever fate it might meet. To increase the likelihood that it would be known and used, SIDA and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funds committed to creating and introducing learning materials that could be used by library associations, academic institutions and other interested parties to introduce the Manifesto to professionals and their allies in civil society. The process began at an experts’ workshop held in Karlsruhe, Germany on 8 and 9 December 2008. Invited participants from countries including Russia, South Africa, Nigeria, Mexico, New Caledonia ably organized by Mikkel Lund Jensen from Denmark worked systematically through the Manifesto. They sketched out a day’s worth of essential information and activities that could be delivered as a Transparency Workshop to librarians and other interested parties anywhere in the world. The detailed report of proceedings was then turned into the materials which can be accessed at www.ifla.org/en/publications/learning-materials.

The IFLA FAIFE methodology for such sets of materials provides for them to be piloted in some suitable host country or countries by experienced presenters either from the FAIFE Committee or closely associated with it. Two pilots were carried out, the first in India on 17 and 18 November 2009 (by Kai Ekholm, Chair of FAIFE and Barbara Jones, FAIFE advisor and former Secretary), and in Hanoi, Vietnam, on 30 November and 1 December 2009 by Paul Sturges. To further reinforce the dissemination of the Manifesto, two Workshops were carried out during 2011. These were at Reykjavik, Iceland, on 8 February, by Paul Sturges and Paiviikki Karhula, and in Buenos Aires, on 28 September, by Paul Sturges and Alejandra Martinez, with funds from the IFLA Stichting. The two locations were chosen advisedly: Reykjavik to recognize Iceland’s Icelandic Modern Media Initiative (IMMI) which seeks to reform the nation’s information laws on the principle of transparency and to bring them in line with the most progressive and successful information laws in the rest of the world; and Buenos Aires to celebrate Right to Know Day (28 September each year) during the city’s year as World Book Capital.

Has the Manifesto been read and acted upon? On whether it has been read, we can only offer the evidence of online visits to the Manifesto text at the IFLA Website. In the period 22 April 2009 to 4 March 2012, the online text of the Manifesto was visited 2648 times from 79 different countries and
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territories. India and the USA were the most frequent source of visits to the Manifesto text, but Serbia ranks fourth in the list. The Manifesto Learning Materials were also visited 1132 times from 61 different countries and territories. India was the biggest source of visits, but Iceland and Argentina were also well represented. As is typical of such figures they include high percentages of very brief visits, presumably from casual surfers. Nevertheless we can conclude that the relevant documentation is being accessed and that, although the figures are not especially high, there is a solid and continuing level of interest. But this does not provide any answer to the second question, has it been acted upon? To suggest the shape of an answer to that question, we can describe the Serbian experience and offer it as an example of good professional involvement.

THE SERBIAN EXPERIENCE

Serbia is an extremely interesting choice as the venue for a transparency-related project. Serbian colleagues lament the levels of corruption throughout society, not excluding the library sector. Indeed, the 2011 Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International, 2011) ranks Serbia at 86 out of the 182 countries surveyed. According to the index, New Zealand is the least corrupt country (with a score of 9.5 out of 10) followed closely by Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Singapore. The most corrupt are identified as North Korea and Somalia, each with a score of 1.00. Serbia’s low score of only 3.3 makes the point that its middle-of-the-list position is no consolation and further confirms the sense that the country is seriously corrupt. However, at the same time another list, the Right to Information (RTI) index (Access Info Europe, 2011) casts a very different light on Serbia’s situation. This index deals with the legal framework for information rights in 89 countries throughout the world, using 61 different indicators drawn from international standards and data on law and regulation in the various countries. First in the list, with a score of 135 out of a possible 150 was Serbia. To illustrate the significance of this, Germany, with a mere 37 was the least positive performer and held last position in the survey. The contrast is striking since Germany, with a score of 8.00 was in 14th place in the CPI index. Germany appears from the two indexes as a country with comparatively little corruption but a very poor right to information framework. Serbia’s position is the reverse: a corrupt country with a high-quality, right-to-information framework. There is an obvious implication. Crnogorac and her colleagues in the Serbian Library Association identified Serbia as a country perfectly positioned for interventions in favour of transparency, good governance and freedom from corruption.

To say that Serbia is perfectly positioned does not, however, mean that such an intervention was easy. Sturges, in his unpublished contribution to the Zagreb workshop in 2006, challenged his audience as follows: ‘Can libraries effectively acquire transparency-related publications and databases;
can they provide information services that deal with laws, rights and entitlements; can they liaise effectively with civil society organizations; can (and should) they campaign to improve the laws on information access? All of this requires imagination and a certain amount of courage.’ The challenge to be courageous was taken up by the Serbian Library Association, despite a genuine sense of danger. The Serbian Library Association obtained funding from the IFLA / ALP Core Activity for a project entitled, in line with the Manifesto, Transparency, Good Governance and Freedom from Corruption. They started the project at a Librarians’ Day in the city of Nis, with 70 participants. Seven libraries (Krusevac, Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kladovo, Bor, Pirot, and Pozarevac) were selected to participate. Cooperation was obtained from:

- Anti-Corruption Agency of Republic of Serbia http://www.acas.rs/
- Transparency International – Serbia Chapter http://www.transparentnost.org.rs/
- Individual supporter: Vesna Pešić PhD, Member of Serbian Parliament and well-known fighter for human rights in Serbia
- Ombudsman – Protector of Citizens of City of Novi Sad
- US Embassy in Belgrade http://serbia.usembassy.gov/
- American Corners in Serbia http://www.americancorners-sam.net/
- Goethe Institute, Library – Belgrade http://www.goethe.de/ins/cs/bel/srindex.htm?wt_sc=belgrad

In reviewing the project, the crucial importance of the contributions of the first two of these emerges very strongly. The Anti-Corruption Agency sent a Board member to six of the events and the Commissioner for Information organized important lectures on the anti-corruption theme in Belgrade. Without this support, the Project activities would have had less credibility. In effect, Serbia’s excellent national right to information structure provided an umbrella for the activities directed at librarians and their users.

As an important early step, FAIFE advisor and Director of the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, Barbara Jones, was invited to visit Serbia from 1 to 7 February 2011. She conducted a workshop on the Transparency Manifesto on 4 February at the Goethe Institute in Belgrade and gave talks at other locations. The project that followed consisted of a series of activities, during April, May and June 2011, to raise awareness about the problem of corruption by promoting and providing free access to information and freedom of expression in the library community in Serbia. Activities included citizens’ panels and workshops to train librarians in the use of information that will help citizens in
understanding the law and exercising their rights and claiming their entitlements. The Transparency Project activities were conducted in seven public libraries and eight American corners throughout Serbia.

When the project was finished, the feedback forms collected made it possible to claim the following results:

- **The right to know** – librarians and citizens involved in the activities were grateful to learn more about how to get information on their right to know, and about their right of free access to information of public importance.
- **Freedom from Corruption** – both the message that there is a right to live free from corruption and the account of the consequences of corruption were well received.
- Librarians generally said they had been made aware of their potential role as citizens’ advisors on free access to information.
- Librarians also agreed that they had been shown how they might support this and similar campaigns particularly by arranging talks about the fight against corruption.
- The message that campaigns and discussions on this subject are important examples to follow, and that it was necessary that they should be continued in the future, was regarded to have been strongly conveyed.

The organizers emerged from the campaign firmly convinced that public libraries can be centres to support the right of free access to information and promote the importance of a culture of being aware and informed throughout society. However, the experience also confirmed that the librarians who work in Serbian public libraries have not previously grasped that citizens should be able to use the library to seek information that falls outside the traditional domain of literature and scientific publications. Consequently the library’s transition to a new role in the service of citizens will be slow and not easily achieved. What has been done through the project activities is to embed the idea of the library as a transparency institution somewhere in the collective mentality of the Serbian library profession. What is needed in the post-project period is to nurture and strengthen that idea. As an indication of its commitment to this idea, the Association invited Paul Sturges to speak at their conference The World / European Horizons of Librarianship in the Digital Age in Belgrade on 27 and 28 October 2011, and at the Librarians’ Forum at the Belgrade Book Fair which took place at the same time.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Times are not easy for libraries in most parts of the world and even in countries that have previously been seen as leaders, such as the United Kingdom, there is contraction of the sector and confusion over roles. Electronic delivery of information and recreation challenges the functions of fixed-point, print-
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based institutions such as the library in ways for which answers have not yet been completely developed. During the first decade of the 21st century, IFLA has provided forums for the discussion of new or modified roles and the work of its FAIFE Core Activity and Committee has been important. In particular, its work has, in effect, asked the question: Is one way forward for libraries to be better transparency institutions? Only the library sectors of IFLA’s member countries can provide an answer to this. Circumstances for libraries are difficult but, as Gramsci put it, pessimism of the intellect needs to be accompanied by optimism of the will. The IFLA Manifesto on Transparency, Good Governance and Freedom from Corruption, with its accompanying Learning Materials provides an important lead, and the example of Serbia shows how that lead can be taken further forward. A further reassessment of the ‘The Library and Freedom of Information’ might be appropriate after the elapse of another decade.

REFERENCES


Paul Sturges is Professor Emeritus, Loughborough University and Professor Extraordinary, University of Pretoria. He has travelled widely throughout the world, giving lectures and conference presentations, leading workshops on Intellectual Freedom topics, providing consultancy, and researching. His more than 150 articles, reports and books deal with a variety of issues in information science, with an emphasis on the developing world, and a strong specialization in ethics of information. He was Consultant to the Council of Europe on freedom of expression and public access points to networked information, and also on library legislation, 1997–2001. In addition, he was Chair of the International Federation of Library Associations’ (IFLA) Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) Committee 2003–09. He was made Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2010 for services to libraries in the UK and overseas, and awarded the IFLA Medal in 2011.

Vesna Crnogorac has been the professional Secretary of the Serbian Library Association since 2006, and has worked in the library domain for the last 14 years. She has participated in various international and domestic conferences and professional meetings on librarianship and information science. She has published one co-authored book and over 30 professional papers. She is a member of the editorial board of the Serbian Library journal Bibliotekar, and a member of the working groups of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia for drafting the new Law on library and information activities and other legal library acts. She co-authored and was project manager for Transparency, Good Governance and Freedom from Corruption for SLA.