

## Information Literacy, Libraries and Policy Makers

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: RESPONSES TO SPECIAL QUESTIONS

The organisers of this conference asked some special questions to which I would like to answer before my more detailed paper. My answers give you an overview of my perspective to the general topics of this conference.

### 1.1. What barriers exist to developing and enhancing effective national information literacy policies?

The topic is easily underestimated and/or passed by. It is such a part of the future that today's decision-makers cannot see all the consequences. It is very abstract compared to trade or agricultural policy. It is difficult to count its importance in financial terms.

It should be clearly connected into larger policies such as those that create an Information Society.

### 1.2. How important is it to promote information literacy as a basic right?

Very important. Future citizens cannot use their other rights without it. In the Information Society, information and knowledge are the basic resources, and access to them is a necessity.

In this paper, access to information covers ability to use information, technical access to it, the organisation of information, and direct/personal help for finding it.

### 1.3. If it is an important basic right, what should be done about it?

When it concerns politicians, they can start up local or national programmes for information literacy and allocate resources for them.

Public information and public services should be available via the Internet, and necessary help to use these new tools.

Exchange of experiences on a national and international level is important, as well as encouraging the activities of citizens.

Production of Internet material in the native language and digitising the existing cultural heritage motivate citizens to learn information literacy.

Libraries can be seen as a tool for promoting information literacy, as well as schools and media.

## 2. POLITICIANS AND LIBRARIES

Which are the elements that **influence** the attitude of a politician towards libraries? For a great deal of them, it is their personal experiences and the mentality and the status of libraries in a **given** country. I am happy to live in a country where, beginning from our national epic *Kalevala*, knowledge has been appreciated from the ancient times. It seems this has an influence on our library policy. A further example: in France, French language

matters have a high status, and this led to the strengthening of libraries in the recent decades.

According to my experience from Finland and the European Parliament, library policy is one of the fields where only a slight connection with political parties can be seen. Until now, the pro-library policy-makers are politicians who have seen the light—and this enlightenment seems to be quite an individual process.

For many politicians, the important insight concerning libraries has been connected with the need to build up a democratic Information Society. They see that in assisting citizens to acquire information and skills, libraries have a role alongside other important actors. Schools teach pupils basic information skills, and the media keep citizens up to date on recent events and fill in the background. Archives and museums offer contacts with the past. Libraries' core role is to help satisfy individual citizens' need for information and culture. Their entire machinery—including catalogues, information service and interloans—is geared to this purpose.

The role of schools and media in the Information Society has conquered a big share of the political discussion. The libraries (and other memory institutions) have not. Paradoxically, this can be due to the fact, that the economic importance of libraries is so low, much lower than its real importance in the society. This might be the reason why until now there have been too few library promoters among politicians.

The phenomena behind the importance of library matters are also very conceptual and complicated. Just think about the copyright legislation and the status of libraries as intermediaries for ordinary people in this connection. I participated in the first phase of the great copyright directive debate in the European Parliament, and it took a lot of energy and effort from many politicians to get clear what is this all about. I must say it was challenging (because the atmosphere was so heavily on performers' and producers' side) to speak about citizen's right to information in the situation where gigantic, emotional campaigns were run by performing artists, led by MEP (Member of the European Parliament) Melina Mercouri.

A concrete example about libraries' significance as places where citizens can get information is reflected by librarians' experience in Mozambique and Russia. There, people may travel long distances in order to read a law book when they begin to believe in the reality of political/democratic change and the rule of law. In many Western European countries, this situation could be a politicians' dream.

### **3. ENLARGED LITERACY**

Though still a necessary skill, literacy in reading traditional linearly printed texts is no longer sufficient for our citizens. The ability to interpret pictures is also necessary, as well as the ability to navigate within the hierarchical menus of the Internet, through all the branching paths of its gardens—and, for example, the ability to use text message (SMS) features on mobile phones.

The Finnish views on the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning of the European Commission [1] gives some statistics: The functional literacy study [in Finland] found that about 10% of adults are in the functional literacy risk group and about one fourth in the deficient skills group. The differences between age groups are systematic and large in favour of the younger age groups. Nearly half of people between 46 and 55 years of age and two thirds of people between 56 and 65 have been found to belong to the risk group or deficient skills group. The situation can be approximately the same at least in many Western European countries.

The ability to read includes both a technological dimension, as well as a dimension of content. Both of these are changing since the amount of different media is increasing and more and more technology is required to use these media.

The Internet is strengthening freedom of expression. However, this also brings an even greater dimension of misinformation and other fabrications to a national and international level. It is becoming more and more difficult for the average citizen, as a citizen and as a person, to discern the substantial information from all of the information available.

As an example of the importance of libraries, I would like to compare them with some search engines in finding material from Internet. As a politician, I appreciate the library criteria to select Web pages for their virtual libraries according to the quality of the content, thus helping people to find good and essential material. Many search engines act like unqualified universities offering academic degrees which can be bought for a price: by paying a fee to the provider, a Web publisher can get a higher position on a search hit list than it actually deserves.

Reading comprehension, judgement, and spontaneous exploitation of information are the higher objectives taught in all literacy types. Skills such as picture interpretation and media critique of the information on the Internet fall into this category.

Technically, literacy must be expanded from being linear to being two and three-dimensional. Texts and information on the Internet and mobile devices are organised in different ways than they are on paper. Adapting to these ways is not always easy and obvious, at least not to the adult population.

#### **4. RESPONSIBILITIES OF LIBRARIES**

What responsibility does the library have in broadening literacy? Should it just deal with content-literacy? To what extent can the broadening of technological skills be included? Who can the library turn to for co-operation in expanding this new literacy to the population? How would the work be distributed?

The notion that libraries have a partial responsibility to guide the adult population in particular is clear. Schools and peers educate the children and the youth.

Libraries retain the traditional task of maintaining children's book literacy and schools will continue to be a partner in this matter. Some future vision even indicates that

libraries will remain the only place where children will still be able to obtain printed material. For this reason, the status for printed material will be preserved, although much more will be developed in addition. For the politicians, this is not a difficult goal: most of us are full-hearted defenders of the status of books in the library.

Libraries also play a role in spreading information literacy to people who might not come into contact with the Internet otherwise. The SeniorSurf Day which has been held a couple of times at libraries in Finland, Sweden and Norway offers older citizens an opportunity to find out about all the "goodies" on the Internet in a familiar environment. SeniorSurf Day has been a big success with in average 10,000 participants in each country per day. It has encouraged many seniors to take more advanced courses. These are arranged by adult education centres in Finland and by various educational organisations and even telecom operators in the other Nordic countries. The conclusion has been that libraries should work alongside educators and attract new "customers." In Finland we remember the days when libraries got their first Internet terminals and it did not take long before young surfers, mainly boys, were joined by middle-aged women, older men and other "unlikely" user groups. People apparently considered libraries a safe place to learn new skills.

For librarians, it might be interesting to hear about the hot discussion around the first Finnish SeniorSurf Day. Our libraries—Finland is, indeed, the country of Nokia— included to the campaign-day a programme of SMS guiding (cell phone instruction), but this did not happen without debate. There was a positive attitude towards teaching Internet skills. The broadening of this kind of literacy was clearly accepted as suitable for libraries. The approach to the teaching of SMS, however, was more controversial. About 20% of the participating libraries left that option out of their programme and many of the libraries which did not take part in the campaign had been criticising it. They did not consider this sort of instruction to be a function of the library; as it is short messaging, whereas libraries should be focusing on more substantial communications. Afterwards, the libraries, which included mobile phone instruction, evaluated their experience as positive. They saw the library as an appropriate place for expanding technological literacy. According to the feedback reports, visitors did not experience the library as being a commercial premises in spite of the instructors from the mobile phone shops. They were able to ask questions, express their wonder and learn in peace. The pressures of commercialism were not present. The need for people to learn about text messaging became apparent to the participating libraries. And further, the feedback suggested that similar programmes should be organised for other groups, too (ethnic groups, women, unemployed, etc.).

## **5. ACCESS FOR ALL**

If we want to ensure easy access to information, we have to ask about infrastructure, too; and this is a task for the policy makers. Does the technology allow access to all citizens?

The situation in the Nordic countries is good. In Finland the telecom network is completely digitised, for example. Neighbouring Sweden is ahead of us in one area: they

have already decided to extend the broadband network to every home and business by 2005. I personally think that the technology (broadband or something else) should be chosen, but politicians are also responsible for proper access for remote areas where there are no commercial potentials. In most other European countries the digitisation of telecom networks and other such measures are at least under way. Some of the Central and Eastern European countries, having had very outdated technology infrastructure, used 90's technology to jump directly to very sophisticated solutions. For example, Estonia is very far along in providing its citizens with modern identity cards, which can be used for several electronic services. But Estonians need information literacy training to get all the benefits of their new system!

Turkey is another concrete example of how a goal-directed policy can lead to results. Turkey wanted to begin negotiations about membership in the European Union. The weak and unreliable telecommunication and electricity infrastructures were considered to be an obstacle. In the middle of the last decade the Government, together with major Turkish and multinational corporations, made substantial investments in the energy sector and in the expansion of the country's telecommunication facilities. As part of this effort, funding was granted in 1996 to build up the Turkish Academic Network and Information Centre, providing academic libraries manageable as well as affordable access to the Internet. Here, Turkish libraries could use the general policy of their country for their users' benefits.

## **6. ORGANIZED ACCESS**

Many politicians do ask whether the expansion of the broadband network to every home and business, or even the existence of Internet, will reduce libraries' significance in offering access to information. My answer is: "of course not." We need as many different ways to get information as possible. Nordic libraries' greatest significance as access providers dates back to the early days of the Internet, when there were relatively few computers around. This is still the situation in most other countries. But also after this first phase, direct links to homes mean more pressure on libraries as organisers of information, producers of content and developers of services.

In addition to the technical access, concerning beneficial use of information, libraries do grant a very important element for all information users: they organise content. The large amount of work that goes on behind the scenes to catalogue and describe content is just now coming more into view. The flood of information on the Internet—2.5 billion to 10 billion Web pages according to estimates—makes finding information a tiresome and haphazard affair. Many people have started to appreciate libraries as providers of bibliographies and article indexes when they compare the ease of access to printed information with hit-or-miss Internet searches.

The ability to use the tools to find information provided by libraries can be seen as a part of information literacy. And surely, libraries are in charge of this part of user training.

There is no way to organise all the information on the Internet reliably, but libraries can make a unique contribution. They supplement other ways to find Internet content in an important way. Libraries' big advantage is their reliability, which serves as a guarantee of quality: people can trust what they get at the library. Libraries also save people time. While a search engine may produce 200 miscellaneous references, a library can supply 5 to 10 references which are sure to be relevant.

## **7. OTHER POLITICAL ASPECTS**

Of political interest is news from the United States, a leader in the use of the Internet. A study which was conducted for the Department of Commerce two years ago [2] indicated that libraries and other open access points to the Internet were much more important to disadvantaged population groups than to others—libraries actually promote equality. Library professionals who visited the United States this past summer were told that some public services would soon be available only on the Internet. Open access will be all the more important in this case.

Public information and transparency fall within the scope of libraries' expertise. This applies to the production of information and to its presentation and the ensuring of access to information and services. In many countries the best public Web sites have in fact been created by including librarians—who are, after all, professionals when it comes to organising information—in design work. Here it is worth mentioning the role played by the Library of Parliament in various countries. In Finland the Library of Parliament nowadays offers Web pages in Braille and sign language. Examples can also be cited from other parts of the world. The Biblioteca del Congreso in Argentina has an Internet room with dozens of terminals, open around the clock to the public. No wonder it was selected to share the second Access to Learning Award from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, with a grant of US\$250,000. At this point I have to mention that in July 2000, the first Access to Learning Award and a US\$1 million grant was given to the Helsinki City Library for its outstanding work in promoting opportunities to avail of the potential of information technology and the Internet. This indicates some elements of the work Helsinki City Library has done for information literacy.

From the political point of view, the eIFL Direct project [3] of the Open Society Institute (OSI, Soros Foundations Network) is an interesting case. In 1999, the Network Library Programme and the Publication Programme of OSI organised a competition between the big vendors of electronic information, to arrange the biggest framework licensing contract in the world. The aim was to negotiate on behalf of 39 countries the price level and the provisions of use. The financing, then, and the national consortia for the administrative matters, were arranged in the participating countries. The framework contract is beneficial to libraries - this is understandable taking in account the size of the total deal. Nowadays, eIFL Direct project via the subscription agency EBSCO provides electronic access to over 5,000 journals, primarily in the social sciences and humanities. eIFL Direct is mainly available to libraries in countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, Central Asia, southern Africa, and Guatemala and Haiti.

However, due to political reasons the libraries in some countries have been excluded from the programme, or many special arrangements must be done to realise the possibilities. Not all governments in the concerned 39 countries share a positive attitude towards the Soros Foundations. It is considered to interfere too much in national matters, and the policy of Soros, work for open societies, has not reached applause everywhere. Belarus has restricted the OSI work in the country. The eIFL Direct programme is anyhow available, but the strict currency regulation make the money transfers very complicated. The Hungarian government said "no thank you" to the eIFL Direct Programme, and let an outside consultant office negotiate a national licensing agreement for the Hungarian research libraries. The acceptance among the Hungarian librarians has been controversial.

From some of the eIFL countries, knowledge has been gained: the primary challenge to libraries on the field of information literacy is to train an adult group, the researchers, to use electronic sources. There are many researchers who have not understood the benefits of the electronic databases. In addition, lack of language skills can be an obstacle. Until now, most of the material offered by the eIFL Direct is in English. Efforts to add material in other languages (e.g. Russian) are under way. The librarians say it is sometimes easier to motivate the students than researchers to use the eIFL databases. Here we see that the library's responsibility to teach information literacy can vary a lot from country to country.

## **8. DEVELOPMENT DEPENDENT ON RESOURCES**

Libraries in many countries are ready and willing to expand the scope of their activities. The bottleneck is resources. Although libraries in Europe have seen a clear rise in their budgets since the 1970s, resource requirements have risen at an even faster pace, especially since the advent of the Internet. Budgets are still tailored for "book libraries," while the Internet has sharply increased the amount of content that must be catalogued and described, not to mention the need to train their users in information literacy.

The Internet brought extensive opportunities to develop services which must also be maintained. A special problem concerning public libraries is low pay. People who know how to organise information are in demand, and commercial firms can offer much higher salaries to lure them away. The approaching pension crisis, known at least in the whole of Europe, does not make the situation any easier.

## **9. EXAMPLES OF ACTIONS AND SOLUTIONS**

If there is money, a lot can be done. I would like to refer to some concrete solutions developed by libraries, using the advantages of the new technology. All examples combine in one form or another the advantages of the traditional personal library service, and new innovations. If and when we consider finding and evaluating information to be an essential part of the information literacy, these examples are relevant for us.

The iGS, *information Gas Station* [4], is one of the development projects started by Helsinki City Library with the Access to Learning Award grant. It is a movable information service unit, based mainly on wireless communication and Internet sources. It has a little banner on the roof, giving a daring promise: "Ask whatever." The library presents the iGS on railway stations and municipal service centres, at fairs and other events, offering whom ever passing by an opportunity to ask any question. This brings very near to all people the traditional strength of the libraries: personalised information services. They derive added value to users from interaction and the possibility to verify and specify the need. Face-to-face encounters with the client make the most of the accumulating expertise of the library worker. Optimally, the information seeker learns retrieval skills and becomes familiar with information sources in the process. On the iGS, this concerns especially the Internet.

The iGS team, consisting of ten librarians and library assistants from different Helsinki City Library units, has learned some interesting lessons. For example, they say that the motto "Ask whatever" is much better than "Ask a librarian." Why? Because the word librarian seems to guide people to make only "fine" and very well formulated questions. The threshold to ask a question on the iGS is clearly lower than in a library. The questions and answers from the iGS are collected to a database, to be analysed later. One important element in the analysis will be the comparison of the iGS questions and questions in the ordinary libraries.

In Denmark and Sweden, there are several versions of chat-type information services, run by libraries and offering the same possibility for learning information sources and evaluation in a personal contact. For example, the library of the Swedish National Institute for Working Life is offering a service called Phibi [5], where one can connect with a librarian on duty and find the answer to the information search together. The service is free of charge, and available several hours daily.

An idea, under construction in Finland and having a clear connection with information literacy, is the planned radio programme *Ask whatever* (compare with the iGS experiences!). It has two starting points, one of which concerns my position as an Administrative Council member of the Finnish state-run broadcasting company YLE. In that capacity I personally know how badly new ideas are needed for digital broadcasting. Therefore, when hearing some librarians to look for presenting their information search and evaluation skills via some kind of radio programme, I got very enthusiastic and want to forward it with the political means I have. In practice, the idea is to answer listener's questions, and in that process explain why certain sources are selected in certain cases, and some other for some other answers. In other words, it will be a broadcasted, interactive information source & media critics training course!

The fourth concrete idea I want to present, comes from Tampere, a city of 200,000 inhabitants in Finland. Initiated by the local politicians, the city has started a major programme called eTampere, aiming to lift the whole population at least one step higher on the Information Society and information literacy steps. The Tampere City library has been active in many of the projects. The leading project is the internetbus Netti-Nysse (the name is the Tampere way to say Internetbus). The Internet site [6] presents: ANetti-Nysse puts Web "on wheels" and takes it to the users. The purpose of the netmobile is to

encourage the residents of Tampere to start using the computer and the Internet and give them initial instruction. Netti-Nysse can be booked for any group of citizens, or individuals can sign up to open tuition groups. Groups of neighbours, clubs, societies—any group of people who want to learn use the computer and the Internet can book the Netti-Nysse and have it come to their neighbourhood. Instruction is informal: there is always someone to help, but the users proceed at their own pace. Efficient instruction, learning by practical experience and using the Internet are the pillars of Netti-Nysse.

The purpose of the netmobile is to lower the threshold to the Information Society by providing instructed access to information technology for all. Basic instruction is free of charge.

Netti-Nysse is run under the library, and some of the tutors are librarians. The history behind this arrangement is long. The City Library got a new, quite extraordinary building in 1986. It was such a sight, that it was presented to all the guests of the decision makers. During those roundtrips, the politicians and leading officials of Tampere got information about the library again and again, and this led to improvement of the status of the library. They learned the lesson about the potential of libraries, and used their knowledge when creating the idea of Netti-Nysse.

Netti-Nysse has found its place quickly: the bus is fully booked and the feedback as been very positive. In November 2001, Netti-Nysse and City of Tampere received recognition for "Best Practise of eGovernment" from the European Commission. A second recognition came from the National Board of Education. Netti-Nysse won also a Finnish prize of an innovative adult education practice. This was very remarkable: all library friends know how difficult it is to get attention for libraries from the education field.

On my own living area, Eastern Finland, two regional governments with the regional public libraries are running a project called Electronic Library of Eastern Finland. The purpose is quite general: to develop electronic library services on the huge region, which is losing population, and suffering more of unemployment than the rest of the country. In March 2002, a seminar on digitising the information sources gathered libraries, museums and archives under one umbrella. Another seminar in February, for professionals of the concerned areas, was offered about organising Web resources: which are the tools, which might be the preferences in this endless work, etc. The January discussion topic was how to guarantee safe use of Internet for children. The project wants to reach ordinary people, too: a course for Web writing has been offered to the public, as well as guidance for buying a PC as Christmas present.

## **10. THE EUROPEAN UNION, LIBRARIES, AND INFORMATION LITERACY**

The European Union has taken various initiatives in this area, though the lack of coherent and long-term policy is clear. Libraries have been included in the EU's Framework Programmes for Research and Development since the 1990s. This has led to an unprecedented degree of networking among European libraries, together with the sharing of new technology. In 1998 the European Parliament approved its first report on the role

of libraries in modern societies [7]. This report has received considerable attention and led to action particularly in the member states. Its role inside the European Union, especially in the European Commission, has been smaller, due to the political changes in the Commission soon after the adoption of this document. I was the *rapporteur* of this document, and I have been lecturing about the topic in countless seminars all over Europe, and even outside (e.g. in Brazil). The report seemed to conclude something very actual about the library challenges of the moment. I have been told its arguments have been actively used in many countries.

The report emphasises among other things information literacy, putting it into perspective with the traditional literacy:

Libraries may—and should—contain all media suitable for use at them. The experience available from music is as valid as that provided by reading, and knowledge obtained from video is just as good as that which is accessed in writing. Different storage formats are appropriate to different contents: telephone directories are subject to change, and it makes sense to store them electronically. The most important access criterion at libraries is the quality of the material. Thus libraries primarily provide content rather than packaging according to particular models.

The experience of libraries has been that new media do not supersede old. On the contrary, the various media support one another in the library context.

Despite the above, at general public libraries and school libraries the emphasis is on literacy and literature. Full citizenship and participation in other activities in modern society require literacy and a good command of language. Libraries continue to give children a means of consolidating their literacy, as well as challenging adults to improve theirs. Network information, meanwhile, challenges people to read in a new way, a critical attitude to the media being a prime concern here. The media equivalent of literacy is sometimes called "mediacy." As providers of public Internet stations, libraries can significantly enhance the network skills of members of the public; experience of network teaching organised by libraries in various countries is very encouraging. [7]

The European Commission presently links libraries with cultural heritage and access to public information. Both of these are real and significant links, but they do not cover the entire field. The lack of an overall vision is apparent in the EU's draft programme on lifelong learning. It sees libraries as places where people can pick up information on the run and compares them to bus stop! European library organisations and some adult education organisations have naturally objected strongly to this and emphasised the importance of libraries [8].

In its answer to the programme, also the Finnish Government [1] concretely pointed to the possibilities the libraries can offer: Finland considers it important to develop the recognition of knowledge and skills in non-formal and informal contexts. Libraries play an important role in offering access to information networks for all and helping people in information retrieval. Under the 1999 Library Act, one of the primary aims of library

services is to promote the development of virtual interactive services and their educational and cultural content.

## APPENDIX

Libraries are a good answer to many of the challenges in the Information Society, including the promotion of information literacy. The demand for libraries' expertise in modern society is quite clear. What is still unclear to many decision-makers is the wide range of functions that libraries can fulfil if they are asked to do so and supplied with adequate resources. For this reason libraries must continue to draw attention to their own role and opportunities in different connections, with perseverance and courage!

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## Endnotes

1. *Finnish views on the Memorandum of Lifelong Learning of the European Commission*. Accessed: [europa.eu.int/comm/education/life/report/finland\\_13\\_re~1\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/life/report/finland_13_re~1_en.pdf).
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