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# LIBRARY ETHICS ON AN INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

## IFLA and its committee on "Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression" (FAIFE)

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▪ L'International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) a mis en place le Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) pour souligner son engagement éthique et promouvoir la liberté intellectuelle et la mission essentielle des bibliothèques en tant que portes du savoir et des idées. Les activités de la FAIFE vont de la collecte d'informations sur l'état du monde en termes de libre accès à l'information et de liberté d'expression (*World Report*) à l'élaboration de divers manifestes (p.ex. *Internet Manifesto*) et de matériel pédagogique approprié. Un de ses derniers projets a pour objectif la création d'un code international de déontologie pour les bibliothécaires. Le premier numéro de la *FAIFE Newsletter* a été lancé récemment. Conjointement à la présence de la FAIFE sur *Facebook*, *Twitter*, etc, cela permet d'envoyer des nouvelles, de réagir immédiatement si nécessaire et d'inviter les gens à interagir et à participer à des débats sur le sujet. L'objectif global est d'élever le niveau de sensibilisation à l'éthique dans le monde des bibliothèques, de renverser les modes anciens et nouveaux de la censure et de surmonter toute menace à la liberté intellectuelle.

▪ International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) wenst via de oprichting van een Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) niet alleen haar ethisch engagement te benadrukken maar ook het bevorderen van de intellectuele vrijheid en van de corebusiness van bibliotheken als toegangspoort tot kennis en ideeën. FAIFE's werking gaat van het verzamelen van informatie over de vrije toegang tot informatie en de vrijheid van meningsuiting (*World Report*) tot het opstellen van manifesten (bv. *Internet Manifesto*) en gerelateerd onderzoeksmateriaal. Een van de laatste projecten heeft tot doel het uitwerken van een internationale ethische code voor bibliotheekwerkers. *FAIFE Newsletter* ging onlangs van start. Samen met de aanwezigheid van FAIFE op *Facebook*, *Twitter* e.d.m. geeft dit de mogelijkheid om nieuws te brengen, kort op de bal te spelen en om aan te zetten discussiefora. Het uiteindelijke objectief is een ethisch bewustzijn in de informatiewereld te ondersteunen, alle mogelijke vormen van censuur een halt toe te roepen en om het even welke beperking van intellectuele vrijheid te overwinnen.

**T**he International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) was founded in 1927 and since then has been the leading international body representing the interests of library and information services and their users. IFLA's core values embrace the principles of freedom of access to information and freedom of expression embodied in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>1</sup>. In 1997 IFLA established its Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) to emphasize its ethical commitment and to promote intellectual freedom and the vital mission of libraries as gateways to knowledge and ideas<sup>2</sup>. The committee consists of 17 members

who are nominated by their national library organisations.

FAIFE's task is described as monitoring the state of intellectual freedom within the library community world-wide, supporting IFLA's policy development and co-operation with other international human rights organisations, and responding to violations of free access to information and freedom of expression<sup>3</sup>. The overall objective is to raise awareness of the essential correlation between the concept of the library and the values of intellectual freedom. To reach this goal, FAIFE collects and disseminates documentation and aims to stimulate a dialog both within and outside the library world<sup>4</sup>.

At first FAIFE saw its main role in combating censorship and helping to remove obstacles to free access; however its activity has become much broader and more pro-active<sup>5</sup>. The committee's work not only includes discussion, education and advocacy in regard to free access and freedom of expression but also transparency or anti-corruption, which have been the topics of various workshops and learning material.

## World Report

A very important publication in terms of providing an overview over libraries and their contribution to free access to information and freedom of expression is the *World Report*, which usually appears bi-annually. Since 2010 the *World Report* is an online publication only and can be downloaded free of charge<sup>6</sup>. The report is based on a questionnaire and the responses provided by the respondents of each country and additional research in third party resources. As many as 122 countries are represented in the 2010 issue. The questionnaire includes sections like "country details" or "library statistics" which are more or less purely descriptive. Other sections deal with highly important questions in regard to library and information ethics like "use of filtering and blocking software" or freedom of access to information for disabled or socially deprived people. Section six is entitled *Ethics and IFLA initiatives* and deals with the adoption of a national code of ethics for librarians and further IFLA and FAIFE declarations and manifestos. The latest *World Report* records 59 countries that have, and 51 countries that do not have, a code of ethics for librarians (12 participants didn't answer the question). 24 respondents indicated that their library associations intended to adopt one within the next two years. One of the latter was the Belgian Vlaamse Vereniging voor Bibliotheek, Archief & Documentatie (VVBAD)<sup>7</sup>. Many of these codes of ethics for librarians adopted by national libraries or librarian associations, or implemented by government agencies, are available online. FAIFE maintains a website which provides access to 35 national codes at the moment<sup>8</sup>.

## Internet Manifesto

Without doubt the *World Report* provides most interesting information in regard to the state of

the world in terms of free access to information and freedom of expression. Beyond its ongoing activity, FAIFE has developed several manifestos and declarations which have been adopted by the IFLA General Conference and Council. The first that should be mentioned is the *Internet Manifesto*, adopted in 2002 and translated into more than 20 languages<sup>9</sup>. Its intent was to transfer the traditional library values of freedom of expression and freedom of access to information in the age of the Internet. The Internet Manifesto calls for unhindered access to the Internet by libraries without any barriers to the flow of information. Access should be subject to neither any form of ideological, political or religious censorship, nor to economic barriers. Libraries have to provide Internet access to all of the members of their communities, regardless of age, race, nationality, religion, culture, political affiliation, physical or other disabilities, gender or sexual orientation, or any other status. Users have the right to seek information of their choice. Libraries and other providers of Internet access have to respect the privacy of their users and recognize that the resources they use should remain confidential.

If these declarations seem familiar, it is not surprising, because they express values and standards which are relevant in regard to traditional library work. Nevertheless it was, and still is, very important to stress the relevance of these values in the Internet environment. Governments and stakeholders try to restrict access to Internet sources, periodically referring to pornography, political radicalism or terrorism. But as advocates of free access to information, librarians should oppose any attempts to censor or filter access to Internet sources. On the other hand it is certainly true that the Internet involves challenges. The appropriate means to deal with information overload and low quality information is definitely not censorship but training and education. Librarians should provide the information and resources for library users to learn to use the Internet and electronic information efficiently and effectively. Furthermore users should be assisted with the necessary skills and a suitable environment in which to use their chosen information sources and services freely and confidently. The *Internet Manifesto* has been adopted by more than 30 library associations. FAIFE has offered dozens of workshops in countries all over the world to acquaint colleagues with the *Manifesto's* values. Guidelines, workshop manuals and PowerPoint-

presentations have been developed for this purpose and are available online for free<sup>10</sup>.

## **IFLA Manifesto on transparency, good governance and freedom from corruption**

Another truly important manifesto prepared by FAIFE is the *IFLA Manifesto on Transparency, Good Governance and Freedom from Corruption* which was endorsed in December 2008<sup>11</sup>. The starting point of this document is the special role that libraries are able to play in fighting corruption. Through promoting and protecting free access to information and making available the most accurate and unbiased information to each and every person, they are in their very essence transparency institutions. Just as important in this regard is the role of public, as well as academic, libraries in disseminating government information and informing citizens of their rights and entitlements. By enlarging the knowledge of citizens and enriching their discussions and debates, libraries make an excellent contribution to transparency and good governance. A set of learning materials for use by librarians working in the areas of transparency, good governance and freedom from corruption is available for free online<sup>12</sup>. These materials include a workshop manual and Power-Point-slides. They are intended for use by library professionals who are engaged in training their colleagues about the challenges that libraries face when supplying information to users about transparency and corruption: "The IFLA manifesto on transparency and these Learning Materials call on the library profession to make its own house as clean as possible, before recommending means by which the library can be made a practical contributor to transparency activities and become an effective partner in society's struggle against corruption"<sup>13</sup>.

## **Workshops and training materials on health information**

Giving preference to African, Latin American and Asian countries, FAIFE has organized workshops for librarians on public access to health information and information about HIV/AIDS available through libraries. These activities,

generously funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) from 2006 to 2009, emphasize the social responsibilities of libraries in relation to one of the big issues and major challenges facing the world today: the HIV/AIDS pandemic. A precondition to effectively fighting the virus definitely is the provision of good information about prevention and treatment. Thus partnering health services and health NGOs libraries can provide life-saving information. Training manuals and other learning materials created to support a one-day workshop on this topic have already been successfully used by librarians in different countries<sup>14</sup>. The whole set of materials is available for free through the IFLA website<sup>15</sup>.

## **Interventions, debates and publications**

In the past FAIFE has organized several missions to some of the countries where extensive suppression and censorship of information have been reported. Members of the committee have visited Cuba (1999), Kosovo (2000), Tunisia (2005) and Israel as well as the occupied Palestinian Territories (2007). Reports on these missions have been published immediately<sup>16</sup>.

FAIFE is responding to controversial issues and current disputes in the matter of information ethics in different ways. The committee organizes debates and its members contribute lectures to conferences or publish articles and statements reflecting sensitive issues. At the World Library and Information Congress 2006 in Seoul, FAIFE organized e.g. a session dedicated to the Danish cartoons of Prophet Mohammed followed by an article examining ways of looking at the problem<sup>17</sup>. The last World Library and Information Congress 2010 in Gothenburg presented two sessions organized by FAIFE. The first was entitled *Have the censors retired or just gone to the Internet?* with speakers from Egypt, South Africa, USA and Denmark. The second program highlighted censorship, threats of privacy and *Google's* near monopoly position.

In October 2010 the first issue of *FAIFE Newsletter* was launched. It will appear 2-3 times per year<sup>18</sup>. This periodical gives the opportunity to react immediately if necessary and to provide news and other information. According to FAIFE's newly developed media plan, FAIFE is present on, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Flickr* and *YouTube* in

order to improve its visibility and to invite people to interact and participate in corresponding debates. The *Newsletter* and *FAIFE's* presence in the social media are intended to expand the public's knowledge of the principles of intellectual freedom and librarianship. Another very important way of reacting and drawing attention to an emerging situation or urgent event is the newly created column "Spotlight" on FAIFE's website<sup>19</sup>. Spotlights are written by FAIFE committee members or the chair. Recent spotlights in 2011 cover the effect of *WikiLeaks* on freedom of information<sup>20</sup> and the new press and media act in Hungary<sup>21</sup>.

## International code of ethics

One of FAIFE's latest projects has as its goal the creation of an international code of ethics for librarians. Besides core values like free access to information and the fight against any kind of censorship, national codes of ethics for librarians give attention to many other highly important topics. Non-discrimination and equal treatment of customers, neutrality in collection building and indexing, and confidentiality and data privacy are some of these. The list could be completed with, for example, statements in regard to social responsibility, copyright issues or personal integrity. Of course national codes of ethics for librarians are in a certain way affected by cultural, historical and social characteristics. Each code has to reflect different conditions.

In these circumstances, the question must be asked if it makes sense to develop an international code of ethics for librarians. Is there enough common ground? Is there a need for an international code, and what could be its function? A look at related professions shows that

archivists<sup>22</sup> and museum professionals<sup>23</sup> have had international codes of ethics for decades. Although both international Codes of Ethics have a different function as well as a different status for ICA (International Council on Archives) and ICOM (International Council of Museums), it seems obvious that they have proved their worth in both communities.

This was another reason why FAIFE took the decision to task a working group with drafting such an international code of ethics for librarians. The working group consists of 5 members from 5 countries who are, with one exception, members of the FAIFE committee. The work started in summer 2010 and is kindly supported by Globethics<sup>24</sup> who, among others, provide expertise and work space on their online platform. The plan is to present a first draft in summer 2011 and to have an open discussion then. At the best a formal launch could be envisaged at World Library and Information Congress 2012 or 2013.

Although FAIFE's resources are limited, the committee's work has been successful and has had impacts inside and outside the library world. Without a doubt, further efforts are needed to support and to improve the level of ethical awareness, to defeat old and new modes of censorship and to overcome any threats of intellectual freedom.

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## Notes

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- <sup>4</sup> International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression. *Libraries and Intellectual Freedom* [online]. <<http://archive.ifla.org/faife/faife/presen.htm>> (consulted on 8 March 2011).
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