

# Access to libraries of all ages for people of all ages

## The right to information

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### Abstract

The human species is developing itself through ages. The ability to read and write, initially a skill of the happy few, could not be limited to those in power: hence the right to education for all. The pleasure of being surrounded by books, once a privilege for the rich and learned, could not be denied to the populations, eager to learn and thirsty for knowledge; hence the right of access to information, materialized in the establishment of libraries for an increasingly wider audience and the development of public libraries throughout the country.

Civilisations who take democracy seriously know that a country's prosperity depends on open access to information and public discussion by informed citizens. This is the basis for true citizenship. For this is equally necessary the ability of all to be literate, starting with giving all children access to books and reading materials for pleasure. The ability to read, literacy, goes beyond mere book reading, but implies even more so the ability of reading the signs of civilisation. That is why libraries have been established with a variety of readings in mind. The private collector collects those items which provide for him a special sign of literacy and knowledge. In the case of public libraries, the role of public collector is performed by professional librarians. They collect, fulfilling a public task, on behalf of the users and their needs for literacy and knowledge.

Libraries are of all ages: they have older and younger collections; the turn into the 21<sup>st</sup> century marks a major shift in their role. Establishing a library building and building up collections is only one step in an ongoing process of libraries. Giving access to digital materials is another one. The major challenge is to transform these sources into practical services, not only for those who have already access to a variety of sources, but for people of all ages. Children have a right to information as well. Lifelong learning can only have a meaning if being served and supported by library activities which include all age groups, starting with the very young. That makes a library truly public, and a public treasure to be maintained and cared for throughout ages.

The development of mankind seems to be a never ending story, but in fact it is a multitude of stories. Every human being has his or her own unique life, which results in a unique story, added to the great library of life. Some of these stories seem hardly written down, are almost unreadable. Others seem to be written in capitals and only to consist of summit experiences. The hidden aspects of such a life seem only readable by those who have a great knowledge of the human species, which is also knowledge of themselves.

## **Human development and education**

All these human lives have developed their own way of expressing themselves. It is not necessarily only the lives which are reflected in books that are the only important ones. But it takes some deeper thinking and reflection to read the stories of those, who have not been in power, who have not been able or willing to express their lives in the written word. These people have been known by their fellow-men. They were subjects of many stories and communication, sometimes reflected in a popular song, a folk tale or myth. They are also part of the great library of life.

It is through contacts with people that we learn a language, not only our mother tongue but also the ability to communicate. Therefore, all literacy starts with orality, the ability to talk and tell, sharing common stories and issues, participating in the community, communication. In this sense, it is incorrect to call millions of people illiterate, because they cannot read and write. This maybe so, but they are able to talk, to tell, to reflect on what is going on in the community. Their oral literacy is of high standard as they are sensitive to details, to an incredible variety of wordings and to images for describing situations, a rich vocabulary with inventive words, gestures and mimics.

Literacy in a true sense is always related to context. Understanding the context in which one lives, being able to read the signs of nature around one, make one literate in that context

With the advent of script, when mankind started to develop written languages, a different form of literacy was created: those who were able to write and read. For a long time, reading and writing were considered as magic or a sign of distinction. It was only for a selected, elite group, who acknowledged the power related to this literacy and used it accordingly: the rulers, wealthy merchants and the clergy were for a long time the only literates. The invention of the printed book made the distribution of the written word easier, but at the same time the power to control was held by a book elite. Education was for the happy few. Even the Latin schools, coming into existence later, were only open for boys, and not even of all classes.

The raising awareness of people to be acknowledged as people in their own right, not only as tradable servants, knights, women and children put pressure to those in power. The Magna Charta, the various revolution, and finally the era of Enlightenment, started the long way for developing the notion that all men are equal and should be treated accordingly. This notion has finally found its recognition in the formulation of human rights, as we know them now: the right of respect, human dignity for every human being, and the right of non-discrimination: equitable treatment, regardless of age, background, belief, sex, origin etc. This right of equitable access also applies to education and information.

The pleasure of being surrounded by books was once a privilege for the rich and learned. The precious books, the rich collections we still find in Europe, in cities which a long history, like Evora, have been collected as a sign of Aristocracy, Book literacy, Civilisation. It is the

ABC of the rich past, which we still can admire today, and which has value today, on condition that access is provided.

In the nineteenth century, access to information, to education could no longer be denied to the populations, eager to learn and thirsty for knowledge. This resulted in the recognition of the right of access to information, materialized in the establishment of libraries. In the beginning these libraries were only established for clubs, limited groups of people of the same standing. Gradually, they were opened for an increasingly wider audience. At the same time, initiatives were taken, first as a form of charity, or based on socialist ideas, to set up libraries for the working class, for those with less money and education. Gradually, public libraries are set up throughout the country, as a sign of Civilisation, of Democracy and Education for all. The ABC is transformed into CDE for all.

Education in schools starts with the ability to read and write. It should help today's children to express themselves and to search for the information they see fit for their lives and development.

The access of all to the rich past, and to the sources of today's information should be guaranteed through the realisation of the right to information.

### **Development of the right to information as a human right**

The right to information or access to information is the expression for the value information has for human development, both individual and social, and citizenship. Human rights are the common and internationally accepted framework to protect human values.

Whenever the right to information is considered as an individual right, it is mostly presented only in the perspective of citizenship, as the right to know about the decisions and activities of authorities, the right to have information for forming political opinions and participation. Public libraries have a longstanding tradition to serve this democratic function.

The long and intensive debate on the freedom of information has also resulted in the rise of a general right to information of every human being, as a continuation of the right to education: the right to educate and teach oneself.

Explicit and implicit formulations of the right of access to information can be distinguished. The more explicit formulations refer directly to the communication process in terms of freedom of expression, of opinion, of seeking, receiving, and imparting information. More implicit formulations refer to rights which presuppose a right of access to information. Examples are: the right to education, the right to privacy, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief, and the right to participate in cultural life. Both explicit and implicit formulations of the right to information and knowledge can also be found in for example the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

The right to information in a general sense means the right to have access to sources of information. As a human right this right protects human dignity and development. Its history as a human right shows that the holder of this right has developed from a specific holder: the press, later journalists and the media in general, to the public at large, and finally as a right of every individual. It remains to be seen whether – as is the case with other human rights – such marginalized groups as minorities, children, women, the elderly, migrants, mentally or otherwise handicapped people have equal access to information. As citizens in a democratic society they should have their rights implemented as well.

Therefore, the state – or in a decentralised situation – the municipal authorities, have to respect these rights in relations to all citizens. In the case of the right to information, the authorities' obligation to support the free flow of information means to make provisions. Arrangements have to be made so that citizens can access the documents and information they need. The public library is such an arrangement, guaranteeing access to information for all. But as not all people have the same skills and abilities, the state should take measures to encourage disadvantaged groups to take part in society, seeking information and their benefits as democratic rights, and speaking up for themselves and their culture. A special role is for government in the role of provider of government information. Access to such information is needed for the transparency of government and the dynamics of (local) democracy, involving citizens in society.

### **Access to information and national strategy**

The leading thought in the right of access to information is the notion of equal access. The general principle of human dignity requires that all human beings are valued equally, without discrimination. All should have the same opportunities to live a dignified human life, hence equal access to information and knowledge which may contribute to the quality of life and fulfilment of citizenship. In the policy statements of many countries and also internationally the idea of access for all has received new significance in the context of the expected benefits of new information technology. The focus is often on equal access to digital networks and services as described in a Canadian report: "Although it is generally agreed that access to networks and services should be equitable, affordable and ubiquitous, it is also recognised that access will depend on many different factors, including: physical factors, technical factors, and economic factors. As well, communities will define access in different ways..." It is not very difficult to see that inequity in access opportunities can be found for individuals and/of various community groups, based on education, class and low-income groups, gender, language (due to predominance of English) age, skills/the disabled, visible minorities, and those residing in inner-city and rural communities.

Currently, there are several matters of great urgency related to ensuring that access to the information infrastructure is available to all people. The public must have facilitated access to the existing (non-digital) public information services while the transition to the electronic

medium is underway; and public education and information programs related to the information infrastructure must be provided for the public at large.

The top policy priority is the need for a national information access policy which positions the public libraries. Examples are policies on the development of the hybrid library, the 21<sup>st</sup> century library etc, as can be seen in Netherlands and Denmark. A key part of such a strategy is the development of new institutional arrangements which pursue a balanced approach to ensuring that the wide range of potential social, cultural and economic benefits of the information infrastructure will be shared equitably by all.

In the information society, the state has the obligation to ensure access to electronic information in the same way, by providing the necessary infrastructure. And again, libraries are part of it, as the main knowledge providers to the general public. Furthermore, if information created with public funding leaves the public domain, citizens are very often facing financial obstacles to access that information. The authority has to see to it that public funding is for the benefit of the citizens, and has to strike a balance between public domain, users of general information and right-holders. Basic information should not be the exclusive right of anyone. Where intellectual creativity is involved, works of literature art and science, a honorary has to be paid. If the state wishes to stimulate culture and science, and has created libraries as local information centres for lifelong learning, lending rights should be taken up in the cultural policy of the state, not be passed on to libraries and citizens, creating new forms of inequality.

### **Citizenship and literacy**

Civilisations who take democracy seriously know that a country's prosperity depends on open access to information and public discussion by informed citizens. Information and citizenship are closely related. It is not difficult to see how important information is for the development of citizenship. When we speak of citizenship, we can refer to T. H. Marshall's definition of citizenship in three senses:

1. civil citizenship, which refers to equal legislation for all and a duty for citizens to obey the law;
2. political citizenship, which refers to political equality and the moral duty of citizens to be involved in the polity of the State;
3. social citizenship, which refers to economic rights e.g. a minimum income or financial aid, and the obligation not to misuse these rights.

To these forms of citizenship can be added a fourth one:

4. cultural citizenship, which refers to the right of belonging to a community from which one derives one's identity. This could be the national community, but also local and regional

communities play a role. In a multicultural society the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of the dominant culture, the social-cultural integration is the central issue of citizenship.

It should also be noted that the nation-state from which Marshall departed seems to become less important in a globalizing world.

In general, only one way in the government-citizen communication process is considered: the government (local, regional, national or in European form) who wishes to distribute information to citizens to inform them, to stimulate them and to convince them of government policies. But there is also the other side: people who, as citizens, seek information in order to construct their lives, ameliorate their homes and living conditions, educate themselves, form opinions and express themselves as members of various communities.

This requires that people are literate in many ways: able to talk and tell their stories in the community - needing a community forum; able to read and write - requiring access to interesting sources; and able to educate themselves: receiving support in their learning processes en for exploring sources of civilisations.

### **Transformation of library tasks in literacy, knowledge and citizenship**

Libraries are concerned with true citizenship. For this is equally necessary the ability of all to be literate, starting with giving all children access to books and reading materials for pleasure. As librarians have discovered a long time ago, when reading is experienced as a pleasant activity, it will receive a positive attitude, on which a lifelong literacy is based. The ability to read, literacy, goes beyond mere book reading, but implies even more so the ability of reading the signs of civilisation. That is why libraries have been established with a variety of readings in mind. It also means that libraries will develop various forms of reading promotion, and invite to expression of a variety of literacies. To give some examples from the Netherlands;

The Netherlands Public Library Association NPLA ([www.debibliotheken.nl/english](http://www.debibliotheken.nl/english)) has national tasks in the field of reading promotion: innovation, programmes, professional quality and implementation of ICT.

In the course of time a number of national reading programmes have been developed, which allow local libraries to align their local activities and to promote the role of libraries in the field of reading. National reading promotion policy focuses on reading for pleasure, including all ages, and people with various backgrounds. The programmes pay special attention to beginning literacy and encourage even 'weak' readers to participate. Examples are: Children's Book Jury, National Reading Programme, National Reading Aloud Days, 50+ reading aloud, Reading Clubs etc. These actions address various age groups and follow a *Reading Curriculum*, parallel to the technical reading curriculum and language development in schools.

Partnerships have been established with publishers and booksellers, and also with schools and other educational or child care institutions, for coordinated actions: establishing the Foundation Reading ([www.lezen.nl](http://www.lezen.nl)); joining the Book Promotion Foundation ([www.cpnb.nl](http://www.cpnb.nl)) and to distribute reading programmes and activities.

In recent years, ICT has been a good tool for offering reading promotion through dedicated websites ([www.leesplein.nl](http://www.leesplein.nl)) and the library portal ([www.bibliotheek.nl](http://www.bibliotheek.nl)).

A new challenge is to focus on target groups which have reading difficulties ([www.makkelijklezenplein.nl](http://www.makkelijklezenplein.nl)) or with little or no reading experience at all: (functional) illiterates. Very often this is also requiring a multicultural approach by the libraries. Therefore, a website with citizens' information in six languages (including Spanish) has been developed to support newcomers: [www.ainp.nl](http://www.ainp.nl)

Increasingly, digital services and websites are developed by the NPLA, and used to encourage reading, both in a school setting and for pleasure. The main website for reading promotion is the Reading Square ([www.leesplein.nl](http://www.leesplein.nl)) It provides materials and tips for children, young people and adults in an attractive setting which encourages reading for pleasure. A new feature are lists of films which are based on children's literature.

Reader's advice services do exist in digital forms: De *leestipmachine* gives reading tips for young people, in a humorous setting; a tool developed by the Provincial Library service Drenthe ([www.pbcdrenthe.nl](http://www.pbcdrenthe.nl))

A Reading tips machine for novel readers is available as an asset of the library portal: <http://romanadvies.bibliotheek.nl/>, and gives five title suggestions, after a reader has given some information about what he or she likes to read.

A digital reference service, Al@din( <http://aladin.bibliotheek.nl>) offers possibilities to ask questions on all topics of interests. The queries from children and young people on this digital service delivered by hundreds of librarians are increasing.

Some local libraries (Haarlem, Oss) have already set up forms of a digital children's library, which will be used for setting up a national children's digital library.

Participation by children to give their views on books and to recommend them to others, are encourage through a digital site called My Stamp ([www.mijnstempel.nl](http://www.mijnstempel.nl))

Peer-to-peer information on books might prove to be another helpful reading promotion tool.

Another implementation of literacy concepts can be found in the professional focus on pre-school children and families. Public libraries have contacted kindergartens, child care institutions, nursery centres etc. to promote the importance of reading and reading aloud at a very early stage for children. Research has proven early reading (aloud) advantages and positive effects on language and personal development. The idea that literacy is a need and an asset for every stage of life, has helped to develop a reading promotion plan. This reading

development plan follows the reading–technical skills developed by children, but adds library activities for free reading and reading for pleasure incentives.

In this way, tailor made services for every age address literacy needs.

Functional illiteracy is a major problem for people in the information society, as also the IFLA papers state. Therefore, Dutch libraries are involved in various initiatives for combating illiteracy, e.g. participating in the Week of Learning, Literacy Day etc.

The NPLA is active to take steps for similar programmes to improve information literacy parallel to reading literacy and reading for pleasure by making digital services interactive, and peer-to-peer. These tools become valuable incentives to develop and maintain literacy as a skill and attitude which will help to be included in society and find one's way through life. In general, when the public libraries got connected to the internet (2000) they also started with providing courses in media education, including information literacy skills and teaching critical attitudes to value digital sources. New types of literacy courses are more theme-based, e.g. job seeking, using internet; e-learning for a vocational qualification, etc. Cooperation with associations for seniors results in increased interest from seniors to use digital services and improve their skills in this field.

When the European Commission launched the concept of Lifelong learning, librarians were sceptical, because of the strong stress laid on the economic motives. "*all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective.*" Learning is good for a persons' job and recruitment position. Later on, the effect of learning on personal development was also included. Still, libraries were not yet satisfied with the European reports on these issues. The European Commission stressed the need for local learning centres, but apparently forgetting that libraries have always been centres for non-formal and informal learning. This is the right time for libraries to show a transformation of their public task in the Knowledge Society.

Learning opportunities should be available to all citizens on an ongoing basis. This means that citizens each have individual learning pathways, suitable to their needs and interests at all stages of their lives. Lifelong learning is also about providing "second chances" to update basic skills and also offering learning opportunities at more advanced levels. All this means that formal systems of provision need to become much more open and flexible, so that such opportunities can truly be tailored to the needs of the learner, or indeed the potential learner.

In the Netherlands, in the field of lifelong learning progress has been made by making libraries very visible in the Week of Learning; national and local partnerships with the regional educational centres (ROC) and "folk universities". New digital sources are made available and target groups are addressed by libraries in a fresh way: starting in Dordrecht, Tilburg, Eindhoven, Nijmegen and Lelystad. Libraries are partnering with cultural institutions and schools to support and deliver new forms of cultural–educational service. The national policy is to provide schools and education with a stronger cultural content, supported by

extra subsidies and pilots like Alliances, and Casanova, (Eindhoven, Den Bosch, Utrecht Waterwin, Deventer, Heerde and Leiderdorp) which are coordinated by the Association.

As we know from Portuguese research (Calixto), libraries can fulfil roles, which for citizens in a European context will lead up to a European CV and more mobility; visibility of learning opportunities and possibilities to learn in other countries. Libraries will mark their transformation by:

- Facilitating access to learning opportunities by making them more visible, introducing new provision and removing obstacles to access, for example through the creation of a dedicated learning space in libraries. Special efforts are necessary in this context for different groups such as ethnic minorities, people with disabilities or people living in rural areas.
- Creating a learning culture by giving learning a higher profile, both in terms of image and by providing incentives for the people most reticent to opt for learning.
- Striving for excellence through the introduction of quality control and indicators to measure progress. In concrete terms, provision must be made for standards, guidelines and mechanisms whereby achievements can be recognised and rewarded. Professional organisations, such as IFLA are developing these standards, especially instigated through the presidential programme of 'Lifelong literacy', which relates to the UNESCO decade of Literacy, and programmes such as Literacy for All.

## **Treasure**

Municipalities and communities should know and acknowledge that a library in their vicinity is a treasure. Libraries are of all ages: they have older and younger collections; the turn into the 21st century marks a major shift in their role. Establishing a library building and building up collections is only one step in an ongoing process of libraries. Giving access to digital materials is another one. The major challenge is to transform these sources into practical services, not only for those who have already access to a variety of sources, but for people of all ages.

## **Recommendations**

It is the role of public libraries to perform a major role in offering access to a variety of sources of information. Many basic professional principles (IFLA) and international declarations (UN, UNESCO) describe the role of public libraries to serve and support literacy, knowledge and citizenship.

They will include the following points in their service policies:

- *Inclusive access*

Departing from the right to information libraries have to guaranty access for everyone. This requires special attention for those who are disadvantaged or excluded from mainstream activities. Very often they are the people in most need of factual and reliable information, sometimes in a minority language.

- *Creating communities of readers*

Library collections are treasures of the community, in the past and the present. They will only continue to exist, when communities of readers are formed to preserve the culture the library sources represent. Through reading, discussing in fora and presenting in new forms of expression, a community opens up at the same time that it maintains its culture and builds on a rich future.

- *Citizen's information needs*

The information needs of citizens should be point of departure for selection and supply. More and continuous research is needed, but at least the following can be discerned: information related to leisure activities, work (including volunteering) and study, general knowledge, culture and self-help. Especially this last mentioned category is of utmost importance, as very often decisions on life situations are at stake: health, housing, family relations, education. Both government and non-profit organisations offer information in this field, but the citizen has to be approached from the perspective of his/her formulated problem or question. Many citizens first want to orientate before going to that actual civil servant or authority. This orientation-information is of utmost importance. Therefore public information services of the government/municipality should be presented integrated in the local library.

- *Integrated 'old' and new forms*

New tools for disclosing and seeking information are not necessarily better in all cases. Citizens must get used to them. Apart from skills, a new critical attitude towards sources of information has to be learned. Libraries will therefore develop policies in which tradition and technology play their part for the best service. They will also provide integrated media-education and training for reading and information seeking citizens.

- *Professional decision making*

Libraries are public services, executed by professionals, based on annual plans agreed upon by the library board and funding authority. The authority is responsible for the adequate annual funding; the professionals take care of development and management of collections, staff organisation and development of services. Professional librarians perform the role of public collector of the collections.

- *Co-operation and networking*

Complexity of social structures and variety in citizens' question requires that one librarian or one library cannot have the answer to all and everything. Co-operation is needed within the

library branch, calling for division of labour and specialisation; but also with other disciplines and public services, e.g. services to the elderly, migrants, children and young people, handicapped, ex-patients, ex-drop-outs. Co-operation requires a different attitude and other social skills. Therefore, in a city with various types of libraries, a library platform should be created to align the services and to promote cross-overs

In this way, a library is truly public, and a public treasure to be maintained and cared for throughout ages.

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