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**IFLA Presidential Meeting 2011 - Libraries Driving Access to
Knowledge: Action
for Europe
*Session 1: Access to Information as a Human Right***

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Koninklijke Bibliotheek, National Library of The Hague,
Netherlands

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Summary

While information and communication technologies offer new possibilities for accessing information, they do not remove regulatory and other barriers that exist in some countries. ICTs create unprecedented opportunities for citizens to exercise freedom of expression, enabling them to access information anytime, anywhere. At the same time, ICTs raise new issues relating to human rights, privacy, and communication through social networks. UNESCO is studying these new trends under the premise that the existing principles of freedom of expression should be applied to both traditional as well as “new” media.

Libraries, as centuries old guardians of knowledge, will remain instrumental in the digital age in helping people to navigate the information deluge. As we move towards the transition to a ubiquitous Internet Society where the web will become the primary destination of most citizens, libraries will continue to preserve the world’s knowledge, enabling access to a broader public through the use of digital technologies. UNESCO will work with IFLA and the community of library and information professionals to prepare and accompany this transition to a truly digital age, by leveraging the possibilities of a rights-based approach to building knowledge societies, using new technologies.

Honorable President of IFLA

Honorable President elect of IFLA

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank both IFLA and FOBID for inviting UNESCO to be part of this very proactive reflection. As you may already know, this is an area that UNESCO has been working in for over 65 years and it is an integral part of the Organization's mandate to "*maintain, increase and diffuse knowledge*".

I am particularly honoured to be opening this first panel session on "*Access to information as a human right*", not only because this is of increasing relevance in our rapidly changing world, but also because it has, in effect, always been a central focus of UNESCO's activities. UNESCO combines the important issues of access to information, freedom of expression, freedom of information, and libraries and archives as key elements in our current overall strategy *of building inclusive knowledge societies*. Human rights, especially freedom of expression and freedom of information, are indeed the foundation of *knowledge societies*. UNESCO works closely with its 193 Member States through advocacy, standard setting and capacity building in all of the afore-mentioned areas. We are in fact the only UN agency with a specific mandate to promote freedom of expression, with respect to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights *and* the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which advocate the "*freedom to seek, receive and impart information*".

Knowledge societies, as promoted by UNESCO, is a broader concept than *information societies* which is principally concerned with technological breakthrough. Knowledge societies contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities, and encompass social, ethical and political dimensions. The concept of knowledge societies rests on four interrelated principles, all of which are very relevant to our discussion today:

- Freedom of expression
- Quality education for all
- Universal access to information and knowledge
- Respect for cultural and linguistic diversity.

Access to knowledge is the binding theme here, and the advent of new communication and information technologies brings with it many opportunities as well as challenges for the achievement of right to knowledge for all.

We are all aware of the immense possibilities that ICTs can offer for accessing information. 80% of the world's population are now living within areas covered by mobile networks¹; the number of Internet users has risen to 2 billion worldwide and growing; trends towards greater pluralism and diversity in radio and television have been brought about by the digitalization of broadcasting; the advent of social networking and of opportunities for self-publication through Web 2.0.; and the quality and capacity of networks are increasingly crucial to the use of information and communications and to the creation and exploitation of knowledge.

However, we cannot ignore the fact that today a large number of the world's people is still deprived of access to knowledge, and as our discussions will highlight, this is not only a technical issue, or one of having access to computers, but lies in issues such as the production of relevant content and information, acquisition of abilities, skills and competences for being media and information literate. In addition, it is important to highlight the importance of the right to information as well as the existence of legal frameworks that allow freedom of expression and freedom of information.

FOI/ FOE trends overview:

As affirmed in the WSIS Geneva and Tunis phases, *“freedom of expression and the free flow of information, ideas, and knowledge, are essential for the Information Society and beneficial to development.”* Freedom of expression enables people to share ideas and experiences, to learn from others, and to influence the outcome of decisions that affect their lives. There have been many developments over the years in community broadcasting and in the media which have furthered opportunities for the right to free expression. Trends over the past ten years support the conclusion that issues of access to the Internet will diminish, and questions relating to the actual use of the Internet are now coming to the fore in all regions of the world as Internet development and Internet governance reach a point of transition. I must underline that UNESCO takes a firm stand on the affirmation that the same principles of

¹ Towards Knowledge Societies - David Souter, UNESCO 2010

freedom of expression must apply to both - traditional and new media. This is an area that we are actively advocating both in the context of the WSIS follow-up and at the Internet Governance Forum. The right to information is an integral part of the right to freedom of expression, and both are fundamental underpinnings of democracy and all other rights and freedoms.

If we look at the state of affairs today concerning **freedom of information**, we can see both - good and bad news. First, the “bad news” is that the majority of the world’s States have still not adopted legislation which promotes the fundamental right to information. Where right to information laws have been adopted, their implementation often faces significant challenges, including political and bureaucratic resistance. The good news is that we are welcoming a growing global recognition of the right to information, and this is reflected in international statements, conventions and jurisprudence, as well as in more recent trends at the national level towards the adoption of right to information laws. UNESCO assists many Member States in developing the wider legal environment so that it is consistent with and supports the right to information, and this also includes press freedom, the protection of freedom of expression and fostering public awareness about freedom of expression and the right to information, to develop capacities to exercise that right, particularly for marginalized groups and women.

Technological trends have dynamically changed the modalities for freedom of expression and the exchange of information and resources, opening up new opportunities for free expression and participation. Particularly in those countries with limited freedom of expression, ICTs such as the Internet and mobile phones are powerful channels for empowering populations and in giving them a voice.

Parallel to the increasing use of ICTs is a global tendency towards more and more regulation and control. At the same time, ICTs raise new issues related to human rights, in particular privacy, when it comes to communication through social networks. The real challenge here lies in the task of fully exploiting the potential of new media, while not compromising civil rights and liberties, including the freedom of expression. We recently published a report entitled, “*Freedom of Connection – Freedom of Expression: The Changing Legal and Regulatory Ecology Shaping the Internet*”, and this report makes it clear - freedom is not the inevitable by-product of technical change, and it must therefore be guarded by wise legal and regulatory measures. To address these concerns and challenges, international multi-

stakeholder collaboration has to be fostered. Indeed, UNESCO has taken initiatives to sensitize and assist its Member States to ensure that all legislation, including regulatory frameworks for ICTs, is conducive to freedom of expression and press freedom – be it telecommunications or media law, trade or competition law or other aspects of legislation with relevance for the rich variety of transactions over ICTs.

Media and Information Literacy (MIL)

Traditionally, literacy has been described as the ability to read, write and count. During the last decades, broader concepts and aspects have evolved in response to changes in society, particularly with innovation in ICTs and its growing impact in society. Literacy in general became a plural, dynamic and situational concept which relates to the ability to identify, understand, create, communicate and compute information. It also involves a continuum of learning for individuals to achieve their goals, develop their knowledge and potential and participate fully in community and wider society.

UNESCO believes that it is fundamental to ensure that all people have the key set of competencies – knowledge, skills, and attitudes – to succeed throughout all stages of the life cycle. Therefore, UNESCO aims at bringing broader concepts and aspects of various literacies together. Within this context, UNESCO has adopted MIL concept as an important prerequisite for fostering equitable access to information and knowledge. Information and media literacy enables people to interpret and make informed judgments as users of information and media, as well as to become skilful creators and producers of information and media messages in their own right. In this process, IFLA is a strategic partner for UNESCO. Both Organizations worked closely on numerous occasions in this area such as the preparation of the Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning or still on-going development of Media and Information Literacy indicators, which will enable our Member States to measure progress made towards knowledge societies. We are greatly thankful to IFLA members for their continuous support, dedication and professionalism. We are also working to encourage the development of national information and media literacy policies in Member States.

Universal Access to information and knowledge

In 2001, UNESCO established the Information for All Programme (IFAP) to provide a platform for international policy discussions and guidelines for action in the area of access to information and knowledge for the participation of all in knowledge societies. Amongst many achievements of IFAP, the development of a template for *National Information Society Policy* and the *Information Society Observatory* are two points that deserve a special mention. The Observatory aims to provide building blocks for the development of national information policy and strategies frameworks, by making up-to-date information accessible. Both will serve complementarily towards building knowledge societies, and UNESCO Member States are actively engaged in the information society debates where library and information professionals play a significant role.

Knowledge that is generated goes back into society as an input or basic resource for further development. UNESCO emphasizes the promotion of a three-pronged strategy of “Openness” – Free and Open Source Software (FOSS), Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Access (OA) to scientific information. UNESCO has developed a FOSS portal that is used heavily to access information on software. Another portal developed by UNESCO is the Open Training Platform (OTP) that has over 3400 training resources under 293 categories. The portal is supported by over 5000 members and institutions around the world. UNESCO has been promoting Open Access to scientific information and encouraging Member States to have suitable policy frameworks to adopt both Green and Gold routes to providing access to scientific information published in peer-reviewed journals.

I have been informed that IFLA will issue a statement of Open Access during this event. UNESCO would welcome such statements and declarations that would help us to develop capabilities in Member States to build and sustain Open Access journals and repositories.

We are also planning to develop a series of standard setting instruments on policy and capacity building for Open Access in the future. The Global Open Access Portal (GOAP) currently under development will be the first destination for information related to OA. OER is yet another strategy of openness for quality education for all. The term was first coined at UNESCO in 2002 during the “Forum on the Impact of Open Courseware for Higher Education in Developing Countries”. Since then, UNESCO has been a leader in the field of OER, and

UNESCO is currently developing its OER platform that would enable the Organisation to share its select products in OER form, and also help to track its adaptation in different parts of the world.

If we go back in history, Article 27 of the Human Rights Declaration states that “Everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits”. While this was articulated in 1948, it is only feasible today due to the advancement of ICTs to see the statement of the declaration making impact in the life of individuals and society. ICTs have played the role of catalyst to ensure that the rights are exercised by people to access information and knowledge, thereby fostering the building of knowledge societies. However, inappropriate use of social media and blurring of boundaries of private and professional life brings in undesirable consequences. Especially in the context of teachers and teaching as a profession, and libraries and library professionals, it is important to adhere to the time tested principles of privacy, copyrights and ethical practices in communication of information. ICTs are evolving and new ICT applications are being created everyday around the world. We need to keep track of these developments and adopt and adapt these to provide universal access to information and knowledge.

UNESCO is also committed to providing information and knowledge to marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities. ICTs provide an opportunity for persons with disabilities from being passive observers to becoming active and equal members of society. The accessible, affordable and adaptable ICTs and the Internet increase the independence of persons with disabilities and we are therefore working on a global report on the use of ICTs in Education for Persons with Disabilities which will provide a number of recommendations on mainstreaming ICTs to support people with disabilities.

Multilingualism in Cyberspace

The advent of the Internet has brought about vast new opportunities for sharing information and knowledge in various languages. Today, anyone in principle can produce content and put it online for the rest of the world to see and share this content. UNESCO is convinced that the Internet has a key role to play in fostering pluralistic, equitable, open and inclusive knowledge societies. In principle, the Internet is open to all languages of the world when certain technical criteria are met, and when the necessary human and financial resources are in

place. Everyone should therefore have access to the multilingual Internet. Nations, communities and individuals without access to the Internet and its resources will certainly be marginalized with limited access to information and knowledge, which are critical elements of sustainable development.

However, many languages and multilingual content are not present on the Internet. There is a vast linguistic divide, which exists in cyberspace today and this will only exacerbate the digital divide. Speakers of non-dominant languages need to be able to express themselves in culturally meaningful ways, create their own cultural content in local languages and share these through cyberspace. UNESCO strongly believes that the Internet must be multilingual and culturally diverse where every culture and language has its own space.

In this context, libraries play a significant role by providing access to multilingual content as they often are the only free of charge Internet access points for people who simply cannot afford having Internet connection at home or even at the work place. It also provides access to numerous language tools such as e-dictionaries, spell check, verb conjugation, thesaurus, and grammar as well as machine translation. In addition, digital libraries remove physical barriers to accessing information, including multilingual collections for linguistically diverse users. Therefore, it is important to provide necessary support and pay attention to the needs of librarians enabling them to become better multilingual and culturally diverse content users and providers.

Libraries and Heritage Institutions

Libraries and archives safeguard identity and memory and, by linking the past, present and future, they are fundamental to the attainment of all rights whether these are civil or political; economic, social or cultural. These institutions have facilitated the right of access to information for centuries. From the legal deposit decree of King François I in 1537 to the first freedom of information law passed by Sweden in 1766, these legal provisions have been reinforced in recent years through Freedom of Information laws in different countries around the world, although as previously noted, still not in a majority of countries.

Libraries enable their patrons to obtain free and universal access to information, but more importantly, they often assist them to have an informed opinion on issues. However, inequitable

access to information is a major issue that increases the divide within, and among nations. Since information is largely channelled through libraries and archives, these can play a key role in enabling different sectors of society to receive, generate and/or disseminate information on all areas of interest. Moreover, they also facilitate the policies of, and services provided by, local and national government.

A broad mantle of social responsibility that has been entrusted to libraries and archives serves as the basis for their contribution to creating well-informed citizens capable of exercising their democratic rights and playing an active role in society. But reconciling the right of access to information held by a state and the need to limit access to information in the interests of national security can be a difficult balancing act. Undeniably, some state information needs to be kept secret, but governments' definition of security can lead to overly restrictive policies which hamper efficient communication of data by information institutions, and this can become a source of public concern.

Libraries and archives have been centres of intellectual freedom from time immemorial. No other institution can have more claims than the library to be the place to germinate new ideas and thinking in the minds of men and women. Libraries, especially public libraries offer a convenient meeting place for citizens to come together and express their voice for change and development by taking collective action. Even in the age of Internet and web 2.0, where we have a plethora of applications to share ideas, it is important to meet and seriously debate ideas.

But the opportunities presented by ICTs require appropriate mechanisms and safeguards to protect personal data against misuse or loss and at the same time, ensure the right to access information, especially the public domain information. The right to privacy must not be held hostage to the right to freedom of access to information.

The social responsibility of libraries also extends to the elimination of information barriers. Efforts must be engaged to ensure that the right to information is available to all persons, especially those with disabilities. It should be easily accessible to them in a form that is appropriate for their needs allowing them the possibility to exercise their human rights to benefit from scientific progress, technological innovation, cultural expansion and education.

UNESCO has cooperated with IFLA to support its efforts in providing more services in libraries for people with disabilities. In this area, UNESCO supported the development of guidance for Inclusive Access to Digital Office Documents, as most digital documents produced globally are not designed inclusively. This presents significant barriers to access information and knowledge, education, employment, culture, social exchange and civic engagement for an ever-increasing contingent of the world population with disabilities.

Through its flagship Memory of the World Programme and its involvement in the World Digital Library, UNESCO is playing a leading role in promoting the mission of heritage institutions, in addition to ensuring that access to information as a basic human right is maintained. The Memory of the World Programme has seen an increase in the listing of human rights archives from the Plan Condor in Latin America to the Tuol Sleng genocide archives in Cambodia. Not only does this action support the right to know, but it also encourages other institutions to undertake similar measures to safeguard their own collections.

Paradoxically, modern documents are more endangered than older ones. The increase in digital materials and their short life expectancy have given rise to concerns about long-term preservation. Furthermore, as audio-visual and electronic documents are machine readable only, they need specific equipment and/or software to be retrieved. But playback equipment rapidly becomes obsolete resulting in the inability to access the content. Therefore, timely migration to newer technologies, operating systems and software platforms are key factors for consideration in maintaining the right to information. In this regard, in 2012, UNESCO in cooperation with IFLA, ICA and private sector companies plans to organize an international Conference to explore the main issues affecting the preservation of digital documentary heritage. We expect that the outcomes will help to develop a strategy for greater protection of digital objects and the implementation of policies that will further the right of permanent access to information.

Libraries and information centres have always played a significant role in access to information and knowledge. Open Access to the shelves of the libraries has been the system followed, where any user can go to the catalogues and shelves to browse and find the required information. With the advent of new technologies, libraries have provided better technologies for Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC). Interestingly, UNESCO is also a leader in library automation with its CDS/ISIS software. This software gave libraries a new way to think, and

organize information. While today there are many different options available, the CDS/ISIS work that UNESCO did long back is also currently being used by enthusiastic Open Source professionals to develop newer versions. We believe that to build libraries for the knowledge society, we need to think of “Openness” as the key, and make the libraries a truly open and democratic place for ideas to nurture, foster and develop into change for sustainable development of society.

Despite the changing environment, libraries and archives continue to have a distinctive role in supporting education and training at all levels. Notable successes, the Library of Alexandria and the World Digital Library, exemplify the new opportunities created by the Internet to open up access to information and knowledge on a scale that was not possible before. The Library of Alexandria is the home of a massive digitization project of ancient maps and papyri, and treasures of Arabic heritage. It is also a founding member of the World Digital Library that permits multilingual content to be freely accessible online.

Conclusion:

From the creation of UNESCO, its documentary heritage programme has been founded on one objective, that of enabling access to the knowledge and information produced anywhere in the world by ensuring its continued availability through preservative actions. As the format of information has changed in response to technological or societal progress, UNESCO has contributed to establishing library expertise in most countries of the world, providing assistance for the migration from traditional to electronic information management, and coping with technological obsolescence that enable libraries to maintain their fundamental mission.

In this way, UNESCO through its programmes in education and learning, sciences, culture, communication and information, has been able to contribute to achieving global development objectives such as those outlined in the World Summit on the Information Society's Plan of Action, or the Millennium Development Goals. Its focus on creating 'info structures' and equipping all peoples, including disadvantaged, marginalized and vulnerable groups, with the capacities to benefit from access to information and knowledge, remains true to its own constitutional mandate of spreading access to, and protecting, the world's sources of knowledge. Despite having to manage conflicting rights involving the right to transparency and

to secrecy or the right to access and to privacy, the right to knowledge remains an overriding factor for information institutions and their fundamental mission.

"The knowledge divide today more than ever separates countries endowed with powerful research and development potential, highly effective education systems and a range of public learning and cultural facilities, from nations with deficient education systems and research institutions starved of resources, and suffering as a result of the brain drain,"

- Towards Knowledge Societies, UNESCO 2005

Thank you.