

Panel discussion Access to knowledge as a human right

Introduction and questions

We recognize the right of free access to information and the right of freedom of expression as fundamental to democracy. These rights, fundamental to all citizens of the world are a prerequisite for improving their lives and even leading their lives in a complex, ever changing world. We recognize that these basic twin human rights are under pressure from the ICT development, in the sense that copyright is regulating vital parts of information in the media landscape and as such is setting barriers for access to information. Barriers are put up for some and exclude other communities from vital information on one hand. On the other hand, the sheer development of a digital media landscape is creating a digital divide that excludes a huge part of the world's population from important information. It lets the digital divide grow into a knowledge divide and a social divide that is threatening the coherence of societies.

Recognizing these attacks on basic human rights, the question to the panel representing The European Parliament, UNESCO, IFLA/FAIFE and EBLIDA is to identify these three types of barriers:

The traditional suppression of access to information and freedom of expression in non-democratic societies, that is still going on even if a positive side of the social technologies (mobile phones, twitter, face book etc) delivers powerful counterattacks. Secondly, the copyright related barriers to information and thirdly, the digital divide: the panellists must consider if their organisations have adequate policies, strategies and programmes for maintaining the twin rights as foundation and frame for the lives of citizens in our communities and particularly in Europe.

Does the EUP have the right strategies to create vital knowledge societies for all - or is the digital divide still not bridged (which several statistical figures indicate), is the work of UNESCO up to date as far as addressing the threats towards our culture? Is the work of IFLA/FAIFE properly focused on all three barriers towards fulfilling the ideals of the rights? Are, for instance, the annual reports used efficiently in political discussion? Is the effort of EBLIDA towards creating a European policy for libraries sufficiently focused and is the lobby work EBLIDA was born to do towards the European Union and the Commission seriously enough?

Outcome

The outcome of the lively panel discussion where the audience was very active was basically a NO to the questions asked above.

Libraries are working hard to change; they are more focussed on supporting the societal agenda and contributing to solving problems related to for instance illiteracy, media literacy and integration and inclusion and support to education and lifelong learning. Likewise the effort of FAIFE and EBLIDA are recognized, but mainly within the professional circles. The library organisations fail when it comes to communicating and lobbying for new roles and platforms for information and knowledge work. The advice from the MEP was to partner and merge the library organisations into one and join forces with related organisations; to focus the lobby more properly, to be more process- than content related.

This result is a milestone in our understanding of the situation, an understanding that European librarians must act on. Action for Europe!

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