Access to Information and Integrity Trends

Report of the IFLA event at the Dag Hammarskjold Library, 11 July 2022

An event held at the Dag Hammarskjold Library on 11 July 2022, in the margins of the High-Level Political Forum, provided an opportunity to review the trends which are shaping how far access to information is enabling sustainable development today.

In particular, recognising the emphasis on the importance of integrity in Our Common Agenda, it addressed the subject of the degree to which citizens of all types can count on the integrity of the information they access and rely on, and what can be done to make sure that this is the case.

With panellists coming from a wide range of library types, and five continents, it also brought together the insights of a wide range of information practitioners whose shared mission is to ensure that everyone has access to the information they need in order to achieve their goals. In the light of the goal of the 2030 Agenda to ensure that everyone has the possibilities and tools to realise their own development, this is an important and valuable perspective.

As such, we hope that these collected ideas can represent an early input into the process of defining the planned UN Code of Conduct on Integrity in Public Information. The trends and issues they identified can be summarised as below, under the following main headings, which are detailed subsequently, along with suggested actions

1) Access to quality information is a pre-condition for individual, community and global development
2) New barriers and opportunities for providing this are emerging
3) The 'demand side' of access to quality information matters if we want to achieve results
4) Individuals' needs are different, meaning that we need to enable and support a responsive approach
5) The world's network of >2.5 million libraries represent a key pre-existing resource in this regard

1) Access to quality information is a pre-condition for individual, community and global development

While the value of information may be a given in the library, information and communications fields, it would be a mistake to assume that this is the case

everywhere. There are key challenges both around ensuring that people see the value in quality information, and in delivering access to it.

Access to information, in the right format – or the absence of this – can also be a bottleneck issue. In addition to the difference it can make for individuals, it is a pre-condition for researchers to be able to develop the insights and innovations that enable progress towards the Global Goals, as well as for the policymakers who are taking the decisions that shape this work.

Crucially, universal access to quality information cannot be left to the market alone, given that it has a value that goes beyond pure economics. We must not end up in a situation where people are excluded from it for want of financial resources. Furthermore, activities such as preservation, which are vital if we are to be able to cross-check the claims of today against what was said in the past, have long been accepted as a public good.

Of course, this does imply that there needs to be public investment, and so advocacy, especially in the wake of the pandemic, with governments facing pressures to cut budgets. It also suggests the need for a form of advocacy towards wider populations, highlighting that this is a right that they have, a power that they can exercise to improve their own lives. We need to build a world where uncertainty drives a desire for more information, rather than a retreat into simple solutions and conspiracy.

Proposed action: reaffirm the importance of access to information, as a basis for work both on the ground to build demand from people, and with the governments and other institutions who can make a reality of this.

2) New barriers and opportunities for providing this are emerging

At the core of the event held at the Dag Hammarskjold Library was the understanding that the landscape of access to quality information is not static. There are evolutions and trends, with differing (and often interacting) impacts on the degree to which people and institutions can realise this right.

One obvious example is the growing role of digital technologies in our lives, and the changing ways in which this operates, including the business models that underlie the online economy.

Clearly, there are important possibilities which can be realised. Although it is now more than 20 years old, the open access movement, which allows people outside of those affiliated to wealthier institutions to access the results of scientific research, this was the result of the possibility, created by the internet, to bypass expensive physical printing and distribution infrastructures.

Nonetheless, digital technologies also bring new possibilities to control, and so privatise – or at least monetise – information accessed and used online. Open access and open science are still not the norm across all disciplines everywhere, placing a key block on cost-free access to reliable research for users.

Furthermore, as the Secretary General underlined in Our Common Agenda, the way the internet works can also support polarisation and facilitate the spread of mis- and disinformation in ways that are harmful for social cohesion and democracy, including by leaders themselves.

Perhaps more prosaically, advances in the digital world also place new expectations on those providing or supporting access to information, who need to work to avoid falling behind. The pandemic in particular has forced many to improve their digital games.

Beyond the digital world, climate change and the economic shocks of the last years have drawn new attention to the need for resilience. In addition to information systems themselves needing to be able to respond accordingly, their value in helping people take the best decisions in uncertain circumstances shouldn't be underestimated.

Of course, these evolutions are not confined to any one country, meaning that there is value in taking an international approach, at the level of the UN, both to building up an understanding of what is happening and finding a response.

Proposed action: highlight the need for attentiveness towards emerging issues affecting access to quality information, potentially through the establishment or adoption of some form of global observatory or regular reporting mechanism.

3) The 'demand side' of access to quality information matters if we want to achieve results

There has already been extensive work around promoting openness and transparency in government, such as the initiatives taken by UNESCO around SDG 16.10 (both as concerns journalistic freedom and ethics, and access to government information).

However, trying to control the 'supply-side' of information can be complex. The fight against mis- and disinformation can all too easily be co-opted by those who want excuses to suppress free speech and legitimate criticism. Pressuring private platforms to regulate speech can also have the perverse effect of leading to over-censorship as they seek to avoid liability and criticism. Governments and courts are themselves inevitably slow to act in comparison to speeds of circulation online.

Therefore, in addition to proportionate efforts to address the deliberate sharing of misinformation and the factors that facilitate its spread, the response, therefore, has to include a focus on the individual – the consumer of information.

As already highlighted above we need first to encourage a thirst for credible information. But also, we need to invest properly in building the skills, throughout life, to find, evaluate and apply information. While this includes the media literacy skills that are already at the heart of Global Media and Information Literacy week, it also stretches to wider abilities both to deal with the information we receive in our daily lives – from finding practical information online to participating in democratic debate, from dealing with market data to using eGovernment services.

An added bonus of such an approach can be to give information users greater confidence to live in a world of information saturation and uncertainty. Of course, at the same time, we also need to build the skills and awareness among users to be ethical themselves. Promoting integrity in the use of information should also contribute to longer term goals in this space.

Proposed action: ensure that any future initiatives around access to quality information include a significant component focused on the consumer – i.e., the 'demand-side', and not just on the producers of information.

4) Individuals' needs are different, meaning that we need to enable and support a responsive approach

A core principle of librarianship is the understanding that people's information needs are different, and so that a key role of the librarian is to establish both what these needs are, and the best way of meeting them.

The same logic will apply to any effort to guarantee access to quality information – a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to grant the equity of access that is needed to make this inclusive. This is at the heart of new approaches to delivering more caring systems, which do the necessary to ensure that everyone is able to benefit from services and rights, regardless of their situation.

At a fundamental level, one area of focus will need to be on ensuring that everyone has the meaningful internet access needed to be able to make the most of the possibilities that digital brings. This means not only connectivity, but also devices, and of course the skills mentioned above.

Another will be on thinking hard about how to package information in ways that are most helpful to users. This is an issue from the level of individual citizens and learners to that of senior government officials. Faced with information abundance, and often

limited time, there is a real value in putting time into organising information effectively and helpfully in order to support decision-making.

Finally, and as a more general point, there is a value in looking at questions of access to quality information through an equity, diversity and inclusion lens in general. Doing so from the earliest stage of policy design and ensuring that the perspectives of potentially disadvantaged groups are recognised and internalised, will help ensure that information doesn't become a driver of inequality.

Proposed action: in any component about the 'demand side' of access to quality information, ensure that policies are crafted with individual needs in mind, and recognise the effort required to meet these.

5) The world's network of >2.5 million libraries represent a key pre-existing resource in this regard

There are over 2.5 million libraries of all types around the world, representing a well-known, pre-existing network, staffed with people with deep understanding of their communities' information needs and habits, as well as a long-term perspective.

Crucially, they usually have strong relationships in their communities (be this local, institutional or professional), and are well-placed to act as a platform or meeting space, or even a provider of lifelong learning. Finally, they are of course non-commercial, removing one major barrier to access, and have much less of the stigma attached to them that other public institutions may have.

They also tend to be open to partnerships with other stakeholders in this space, both governmental and non-governmental, creating possibilities to combine strengths and expertise in order to make a reality of access to quality information for all.

This expertise also makes them a potentially interesting actor to involve in policymaking around access to quality information. Having a library representative engaged would open up possibilities to draw on the experience of the field as a whole and ensure a focus on the interests of information consumers and users.

Proposed action: any proposed framework around access to quality information should call on governments and others to make the most of libraries at all levels and of all types.

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