



IFLA Statement on Censorship

Censorship is the deliberate limiting, on the part of a state or non-state actor, of the availability of, access to, or transmission of information or ideas to or among persons. Censorship most commonly occurs in the form of the banning of books, films or other media or the blocking of Internet content. It aims to suppress facts, opinions, beliefs or other ideas that are, for example, inconvenient to a government, objectionable to a religious group, or challenging to those espousing a particular moral code, intellectual paradigm or artistic convention.

Banning of media may occur by such means as prohibiting the publishing, sale, importation, advertising, broadcasting, projection, library lending or artistic treatment of works or content therein. Blocking of internet content can occur through complete or partial Internet shutdowns to prevent communication among persons or groups, or where algorithms filter and block specific content.

Censorship runs counter to Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (examples of other relevant texts are given in Annex 1), which states that: ‘*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers*’.

Nevertheless, some limited restrictions on the absolute access to information and ideas have been deemed acceptable in many societies (examples are identified in Annex 2). The possibility of such restrictions is assumed in Article 29 (2) of the *Universal Declaration*, which states that:

In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

Some limitations on the free flow of information and ideas that are widely accepted, though with appropriate circumspection, might include restrictions on the circulation of, or access to, criminal content such as child pornography or incitements to terrorist activity. Others, such as the “right to be forgotten,” are more ambiguous, raising questions about how to balance, in this case, a resistance to censorship with a respect for the privacy of individuals. See Annex 2 for further examples.

Nonetheless, while there may be certain tolerable limited restrictions on the free flow of information and ideas, Article 30 of the *Universal Declaration* is a reminder that, notwithstanding such restrictions, the intellectual freedom of humanity must generally be respected:

Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

Issues for Libraries

Censorship is a breach of respect, on the part of some members of society, for the human dignity and equality of other members of society. This is achieved by preventing some persons from enjoying access to the same information and ideas as are available to those responsible for or effecting the censorship.

Because censorship prevents the enjoyment of several generally recognized human rights, as expressed most fundamentally in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, IFLA emphatically argues for principles of freedom of expression and freedom of access to information.

While there may be situations where there are restrictions on access to information, these should be the exception, not the rule, be based on legal process, and be reasonable, proportionate, and transparent, remaining in the spirit of the *Universal Declaration*. If a less restrictive means of achieving the intended result exists, it must be preferred.

There is also the risk of self-censorship – conscious or unconscious choices by librarians and other information workers not to give access to specific works on the basis of fear or uncertainty about the reaction by authorities or users. Such censorship risks going unrecorded, making it more difficult to identify and to counter.

All persons, governments and other institutions of society—including library and information services, their associations and their workers—are therefore called to defend and promote freedom of expression and freedom of access to information.

Recommendations to Library and Information Services and Library Associations

- Become familiar with and promote awareness of the fundamental documents cited in the annex to this statement, which relate both to human rights relevant to information and to the library sector's responsibility to promote and defend them.
- As fully as possible, build library collections and provide library services that are free of intentional censorship.
- In collection development specifically, attempt to reflect the full range of opinion on controversial topics or the full range of diversity in the national context, basing decisions on what to purchase or license on professional considerations (quality, currency, format, cost, etc.), rather than as limited by political or religious considerations or cultural prejudice.
- Educate library users on issues of censorship and encourage them to favour and practice freedom of expression and freedom of access to information in their personal and professional lives.
- Insofar as is feasible, ensure libraries are able to use technology to preserve freedom of access to information and expression and the ability to communicate freely on the Internet.
- Advocate for removal of censorship restrictions affecting library and information services and society at large, where necessary with due consideration for local circumstances.
- Support library and information services (and their employees) that are being challenged on questions of censorship.
- Inform IFLA of instances of or ongoing practices of censorship in a state, so that IFLA may be able to support a library association that is dealing with censorship issues in the state.
- Build understanding of the risks of self-censorship.

Agreed by the IFLA Executive Committee, 16 August 2019