

Terrorism, the internet and free access to information

Safeguarding access to information the key to winning the 'war against terrorism'

The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington shocked and appalled librarians and information professionals around the world. The loss of life and destruction of facilities, including eighty libraries, horrify us. IFLA joins with our library colleagues and the people of the world in mourning the innocent victims and extend our deepest sympathy and support to the families and friends of victims, the survivors and others who have suffered.

Calls to restrict the core human rights to freedom of expression and free access to information are reported in the wake of these tragic events. It has been suggested that some of the suspected hijackers may have communicated with each other by using internet services at public libraries. Terrorists are alleged to have used the World Wide Web to help plan their outrages. Such implications are being used to justify restrictions on free speech and freedom of information and increased surveillance.

But we have not heard the other side of the story. Use of internet news sites doubled during the week after the attacks. Families and friends used e-mail to check on the safety of their loved ones — across the city and across the world. Website operators responded to the thirst for news by bolstering their servers and increasing the frequency of updates. The result was that people throughout the world used websites and streaming audio and video feeds to get up to the minute information on the events and their aftermath.

This demonstrates the force of the ideal of free access to information and freedom of expression. It may be misused, but it strengthens the peoples of the world.

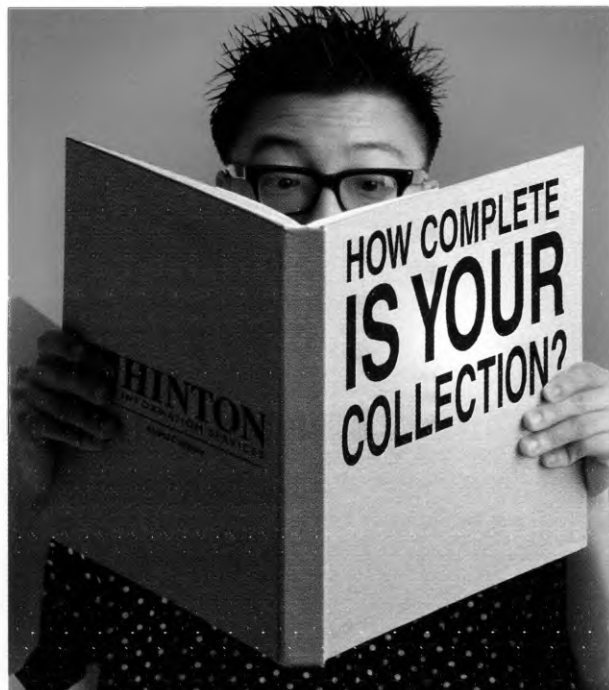
If the campaign against terrorism is to be won, a vital strategy is to safeguard the best access to information. Barriers to the free flow of information should be removed, especially those that promote inequality, poverty and despair.

The chair of the IFLA/FAIFE committee Mr Alex Byrne, said:

'We should build respect and understanding between the diverse cultures of the world. We should help construct communities where people of different backgrounds can live together as neighbors. Freedom is something for which we must fight, not by limiting it but by strengthening it.'

The commitment to intellectual freedom is a core responsibility for the library and information profession worldwide. Libraries have a responsibility to guarantee and facilitate access to expressions of knowledge and intellectual activity. To this end, libraries provide access without fear or favour. That openness is a safeguard of our freedoms. It cannot be limited without endangering those freedoms.

IFLA proclaims that the libraries and information profession of the world will respond to these tragic events by redoubling our efforts to see free access to information and freedom of expression worldwide. ■



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