

# Libraries: open spaces

Kay Raseroka



A portrait of Kay Raseroka, drawn by "The Book Tree" at the WSF in Mumbai, January 2004. Artist: Unknown. Photo: M.B.

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Libraries share with the World Social Forum the principle of provision of open spaces, which encourage reflective thinking, exchange of experiences, interlinking of common interests for effective action. This workshop, therefore, provides the opportunity for discussion of our values amongst likeminded organizations of the WSF, and libraries globally through the participation of IFLA. It is only on the basis of shared values that a foundation for partnership and commitment towards interlinking of influence and taking of action for the good of humanity may arise. May our discussions reinforce our belief in social inclusion through democratisation of information access and contributions to the emerging knowledge societies.

Library and information services have a key role in society for providing access to information resources. They provide a public space through communication between readers and books, whether for discovery of new information, life-long learning, or person-to-person enquiry and group discussions can take place. These activities are enshrined in Ranganathan's Five Principles, the beliefs that librarians share as enshrined in the IFLA core values and form the basis of professional library and information services, globally.

These principles and values are an aspiration towards the provision of unhindered access to information for humanity, in the quest for knowledge to meet day-to-day human needs.

Libraries "encourage social inclusion, as they strive to serve communities regardless of age, gender, economic or employment status, literacy or technical skills, cultural or ethnic origin, religious or political beliefs, sexual orientation, and physical or mental ability" (Libraries@the Heart of the Information Society, [www.ifla.org](http://www.ifla.org)). There are 2.5 billion registered library users worldwide. They access spaces that take a large variety of forms from those that operate from under a tree, mobile examples and hybrid libraries combining both physical space and collections with a virtual library of electronic materials and services.

The ability to read is, historically, the prerequisite for independent use of library services.

Traditionally libraries are repositories of printed materials and thus access to their content demands functional literacy and thus implicitly deprives oral-aural communities of the human right to freedom of access to information. This print focus contributes to a social injustice that affects millions of people directly and billions indirectly.

Those that are affected directly are those declared illiterate, people whose languages are not written and whose knowledge, that they are literate in, is transmitted orally and therefore unavailable in libraries. The indirectly affected are those who read in languages in which there are limited information resources and those that are accessible only through scripts that are not generally used for widely accessible communication. Thus libraries

contribute to aspects of the digital divide between North and South, rich and poor, urban and rural populations and men and women, as long as the core value of freedom of access is circumscribed by literacy. The democratising process inherent in library service cannot be advanced unless and until the system is redesigned to address people centered communication rights, and information needs.

### **The right to memory**

Memory, is defined as the store of things learned and retained from an organisms activity (Webster,1987).It revolves around the ability to retrieve some impression of some past experience or some past event that has had some impact on our mind (Gedi&Elam,1996). Memory has to be retrievable and be shared experience or accessible through communication for it to be public.

By definition communication is a sharing of thought or information i.e. a gaining of access to information through whatever mode such as listening, reading or seeing. It involves the ability to transmit and/or receive, decipher and analyze accessed information. In order to participate fully in communication there is need to have the ability to create and share own experience or knowledge thus contributing to the cycle of information sharing, or a way of contributing to public memory. The communication of memory is the basis of community. The role of the library as the repository of memory for humanity imbues it with the responsibility for the communication of this memory in all ways that are possible. This responsibility includes the deliberate analysis and appreciation of oral transmission/ person-to-person information sharing processes of information as an essential part of the communication role of the library. The integration of these processes in library operations and systems will advance the democratizing role of the library.

### **Information and communication technologies**

The advancement of information communication technologies (ICT) as tools that facilitate communication needs to be exploited to the fullest by libraries, beyond the current use in the organisation of printed materials. Libraries need to extend their responsibilities and embrace an active role in collecting, preserving and conservation of the non-print communication media particularly memories of oral cultures and indigenous knowledge. The broad spectrum of library and information service facilitators: from collectors and organisers of content to providers of information services need to collectively address this issue at local, national and international levels in order to fulfill the mission that arises out of the core value of freedom of access to information. In this way the basic divide between those who have a right to communicate and those whose memory is lost through lack of

communication, will be bridged.

## **Conclusion**

If this proposition is accepted, it implies a fundamental change in the role of the library. As a facilitator of communication, the library has to establish contextual operations that are determined by the needs of the community they serve. Indeed the introduction of ICT use in libraries is changing the dynamics of library use.

The silent library has become the humming library as users discuss and learn from each other how to operate ICTs for accessing to information and skills building in the use of technology. The extension of library services to include a range of telecentre services that provide access as well as mediate information access for the non reading public, provides the entire spectrum of services whilst incorporating day to day interaction with the community, and thus learning of the real challenges faced and require information.