



Culture, Cohesion and Connectivity

How libraries support heritage, stronger societies and digital empowerment

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Culture and information are special

Special in their power to strengthen the social fabric of communities. In their contribution to enabling individuals to grow and fulfil their potential. In their ability to drive the ideas and innovations of tomorrow.

This uniqueness is reflected in the way they are governed. eBooks are excluded from new anti-geo-blocking rules. Minimum book pricing is common. Taxes are reduced, subsidies given, and copyright term length is far longer than that for patents. We are a long way from laissez-faire.

This indicates a consensus that culture and information cannot be treated like a perfect market. If government is to get involved, however, it should be guided by principles of universal public service. Culture and information policies should serve to close gaps, not maintain them.

Clearly we are hearing a lot right now about the value gap concept. But there are other gaps that the copyright reforms, discussions at WIPO, and the next Multiannual Financial Framework can help close. Gaps that libraries help bridge, and in doing so, build a culturally stronger, socially more cohesive, and digitally empowered Europe.

First of all, the Preservation Gap. Already in the preamble of the Treaty on European Union, there's reference to the importance of Europe's cultural, religious and humanist inheritance. We can enjoy this inheritance because of the work of libraries.

They have gathered and safeguarded everything from grand treaties to everyday writings. They work for the long-term – longer than human or business lifetimes. They act where businesses will not, given that preservation is expensive, and that the possibility of future revenues is too slim to make a business case. Without them, there is no guarantee of a full historical record.

Secondly, the Access Gap. You have just heard the arguments. In short, the work of libraries is crucial for realising Article 27a of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights: Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits. Regardless of income. Regardless of where they live.

Thanks to libraries, writers and publishers are supported financially today, and tomorrow thanks to the promotion of new talent and demand.

Connected to this is my third gap – the cohesion gap. Access to information is not an end in itself, but a driver of development. From the children in villages here in Bulgaria who can do their homework because of Internet access in libraries provided by Global Libraries, to the open publication of research results on the human genome which have allowed for major advances in bio-sciences.

We often hear that data is the new oil. However, information has been powering societies long before anyone was even comparing anything to oil, and does so now more than ever. Indeed, 19 targets under the SDGs highlight the importance of access to information.

Finally, my fourth gap – the skills gap. Because simply being able to access a computer is not enough. Commissioner Gabriel's call for a doubling of the budget for promoting digital skills is welcome. So too is her scepticism about efforts to 'ban' fake news. Once again, skills – information literacy – provide the only long-term answer.

Libraries are already active. From drop-in clinics for library users in Tampere, Finland, to media and information literacy classes for girls in Kenya. Libraries are a trusted, pre-existing infrastructure, staffed with dedicated professionals. If WiFi4EU is designed in a way that favours their participation, you will find libraries willing to get involved, and help realise its goals.

Of course these gaps exist not only in Europe. Internationally, the United States and World Bank have supported library projects as a means of driving development. But if laws don't change, money invested is money wasted.

At WIPO, discussions are ongoing about a minimum set of copyright exceptions for libraries. This is nothing radical, or indeed a threat to the future of the publishing industry. Rather it is an opportunity to support the readers, creators and innovators of tomorrow, everywhere. As we have seen from the Marrakesh Treaty, international action makes a difference.

It is for this reason that the European Union's continued blocking of any progress is so regrettable. I hope we will see a more constructive approach in May.

In conclusion, Europe needs to look beyond the value gap. It is time to focus on the other gaps that investment in libraries – through finances and laws – can help close. We're confident that you can make the difference.