

Advocacy and Collaboration in a Time of Global Upheaval: Insights from IFLA Regional Divisions

Introduction

At the 2025 IFLA World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) in Astana, the IFLA Regional Council brought together librarians and advocates from across the globe to reflect on the pressing challenges facing libraries in an era of political polarization, social unrest, and digital transformation. Under the theme "Advocacy and Collaboration in a Time of Global Upheaval: A Unified Response from the IFLA Regional Divisions," the session highlighted how libraries are navigating censorship pressures, promoting multicultural engagement, championing access to information in overlooked communities, and responding to emerging threats to democratic participation.

The presentations spanned continents and contexts, from European courts to Canadian prisons, from African misinformation campaigns to Latin American policy initiatives, demonstrating that while challenges vary by region, the library profession's commitment to intellectual freedom, equity, and democratic values remains universal. The full recording of the session is available on the IFLA [YouTube channel](#).

A Unified Response in Divided Times

Alejandro Santa, Chair of the IFLA Regional Council 2023-25, launched the session with an empowering [speech delivered by video](#) from Buenos Aires, Argentina. Alejandro emphasized the critical importance of regional representation within IFLA's governance structure. He highlighted the strengthened state of the Regional Council, noting its transformation over his two-year term into an active and well-represented body, evidenced by high engagement in recent elections. Santa underscored the Council's fundamental responsibility to maintain a strong presence in every region while respecting each area's unique characteristics; to amplify the voices of libraries, information professionals, and the communities they serve, particularly those currently unheard.

A panel discussion with Regional Division chairs: Diane Koen (North America), Saif AlJabri (Middle East and North Africa), Ertuğrul Çimen (Europe), and Lin Li Soh (Asia-Oceania), discussed how libraries across regions are tackling global upheaval with creativity, resilience, and advocacy.

Diane Koen addressed political and financial pressures in North America during a period marked by polarization and eroding institutional trust. She emphasized that libraries are responding by defending the right to read through strong governance, clear intellectual freedom policies, and community engagement, supported by advocacy resources from associations such as ALA, Canadian Federation of Library Associations, the Urban Libraries Council, the Canadian Urban Libraries Council, and IFLA.

Ertuğrul Çimen highlighted how European libraries are evolving into vital spaces for civic engagement and democratic resilience, transforming from knowledge repositories into platforms for dialogue through reading clubs, media literacy workshops, and youth programs. Despite challenges including limited funding and political polarization, digitalization enables broader outreach while libraries counter misinformation and promote media literacy.

Lin Li Soh showcased technology-driven initiatives promoting digital inclusion and multicultural engagement across Asia-Oceania. She highlighted Singapore's National Library Board StoryGen AI prototype, which allows users to customize local folktales, including a Halloween version featuring ghosts and monsters from Malay, Chinese, and Western traditions that successfully engaged youth with their cultural heritage.

Saif AlJabri described the disparate conditions across MENA, where some libraries benefit from governmental support while others in conflict-affected areas struggle to maintain basic functions. Despite severe disruptions in crisis zones, libraries remain essential for preserving heritage, protecting collective memory, and ensuring access to credible information as they evolve beyond traditional repositories toward multifaceted community centers.

These presentations collectively demonstrate that whether confronting censorship, bridging cultural divides, championing marginalized voices, or combating misinformation, libraries worldwide are redefining their role as guardians of equitable access and democratic engagement.

Defining the Boundaries: Curation or Censorship?

Juliana Pranke (German Library Association) opened the presentations with a thought-provoking [case study from Münster, Germany](#), where the city's public library placed advisory stickers on books denying historical events such as the Hiroshima bombing and the moon landing. The labels described the titles as "works with controversial content" made available in the spirit of intellectual freedom.

When challenged in court, Münster's Administrative Court ruled that libraries may comment critically on books as part of their educational mission, provided they do so objectively. However, a later ruling restricted libraries from attaching negative evaluations, reigniting debate over whether labeling constitutes necessary

curation or censorship. Pranke emphasized that this unresolved tension goes to the core of librarianship: Are libraries neutral access providers, or do they have a responsibility to educate and contextualize? The Münster case illustrates the fine line between defending intellectual freedom and curating responsibly in polarized times.

Building Digital Bridges Across Divides

The session's exploration of digital literacy and inclusion revealed how libraries are adapting to serve as both technological gateways and cultural bridges. **Nabi Hasan** (Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi) presented a comprehensive framework for empowering digital literacy among researchers and librarians. Hasan argued that digital literacy has evolved from luxury to necessity, particularly for those who serve as critical knowledge dissemination and innovation channels.

[Nabi's presentation](#) outlined practical strategies for integrating information literacy into research workflows, combating misinformation through critical thinking frameworks, and harnessing emerging technologies like AI, virtual reality, and augmented reality to create immersive learning experiences. Libraries must transform into dynamic hubs, offering workshops and training programs that promote lifelong learning while ensuring no one is left behind in the digital age.

Catarina Lei and **Emily Chan** (University of Saint Joseph, Macao) further explored the multicultural dimension of digital inclusion in their ["Whisper" project](#). This innovative initiative reimagines academic libraries as interactive multicultural hubs, using spatial audio technologies to create immersive experiences where stories, cultural heritage, and languages converge.

Through multilingual content, cultural ambassadors, and digital storytelling, the project tackles linguistic and digital access barriers while fostering intercultural dialogue. With participation from more than 20 contributors across 10 languages, Whisper demonstrates how libraries can serve as catalysts for inclusive knowledge ecosystems. By aligning with UN Sustainable Development Goal 16—ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms—the project underscores libraries' role in building peaceful, inclusive societies.

Combating Misinformation and Strengthening Democracy

The threat of misinformation emerged as a critical concern across multiple presentations. **Monica Danquah Mensah** (University of Ghana) addressed the specific challenges facing Sub-Saharan Africa, where the rise of mis/disinformation threatens information integrity, democracy, and development. [Her presentation](#) examined the roles and strategies of libraries and information professionals in combating these issues, focusing on interventions like media literacy programs, fact-checking initiatives, stakeholder partnerships, and policy responses.

Monica's research, guided by the PRISMA-ScR framework and analyzing studies from 2015-2025, identified significant gaps in research, practice, and policy. Her recommendations aim to strengthen libraries' role in promoting credible information and building resilient, trustworthy information ecosystems throughout the region.

Financial Threats and Policy Advocacy

The session addressed direct threats to library sustainability through Jelena Glisovic's account of the [Serbian Library Association's fight](#) against a proposed Public Lending Right (PLR) tax. In 2024, this tax threatened mass public library closures by placing unsustainable financial burdens on institutions already struggling with limited resources.

Glisovic detailed how the Serbian Library Association led a comprehensive advocacy campaign, urging the government to reconsider and calling on international bodies to condemn the proposal. While Serbia must align with the EU's Rental and Lending Directive, the proposed PLR scheme would have endangered access to reading and public services. The campaign achieved initial success in halting the harmful proposal, but the challenge remains to ensure a revised, library-safe PLR model that supports both creators and communities.

Supporting Marginalized Communities

Two presentations highlighted libraries' vital role in serving marginalized populations often overlooked by mainstream services. **Kirsten Wurmman** (Manitoba Library Association and Manitoba Law Library) [spotlighted the information needs of incarcerated individuals in Manitoba, Canada](#) noting that what happens behind prison walls is a reflection of the health and vitality of Canadian society.

Manitoba has one of Canada's highest incarceration rates, with 75% in remand and 80% of inmates being Indigenous, despite Indigenous people making up only 18% of the population. Provincial prisons lack mandated library services, limiting access to legal, cultural, and educational resources. Since 2012, the Manitoba Library Association's Prison Libraries Committee has worked with community partners to create humane, informative spaces in prisons through collaborative efforts involving library workers, legal clinics, student-led initiatives, and abolitionist coalitions.

Despite severe barriers—including the absence of internet access, outdated technologies, and chronic underfunding—advocates persist in challenging systemic racism, colonial legacies, and arbitrary censorship in correctional institutions. Wurmman closed with a call to "imagine otherwise," invoking Daniel Heath Justice's reminder that envisioning better futures is both an act of resistance and hope. (Heath, Dan, *Reset*, 2025).

Inês M. Ferreira (EBLIDA) and **Claudia Serbanuta** (Communities of the Future Association) presented the [LiBri project's approach to supporting displaced communities across Europe](#). Active in five European countries with over 50 libraries and NGOs, LiBri demonstrates how libraries can play central roles in integration by forming strategic partnerships with local authorities and migrant-led groups.

Despite being trusted institutions, libraries are often overlooked in inclusion policies. LiBri addressed this by mapping stakeholders, co-creating local strategies, and offering practical tools like intercultural toolkits and advocacy platforms. The project provides replicable strategies for making libraries key drivers of inclusion, reflecting the global nature of migration and the universal need for welcoming, supportive community spaces.

Regional Perspectives and Global Connections

The session's global scope was reinforced by **Ricardo Crisafulli Rodrigues** (IBICT, Brazil), who explored the current landscape of libraries and information services in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Brazil. [His presentation](#) addressed challenges posed by limited public policies and social inequalities while highlighting positive developments in countries such as Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia.

Rodrigues gave special focus to national infrastructure efforts in Brazil, particularly in science and technology information, and discussed the role of institutions actively engaged with IFLA in contributing to international cooperation and professional development. His analysis demonstrated how regional challenges require both local solutions and global collaboration.

Collaborative Strategies for an Uncertain Future

Several key themes emerged from the session that point toward effective strategies for library advocacy and collaboration in times of global upheaval:

Technology as Enabler and Challenge: Multiple presentations highlighted how digital technologies can both bridge divides and create new barriers. Libraries must simultaneously embrace innovation while ensuring equity and accessibility.

Community Partnership: Successful initiatives consistently involved strategic partnerships with local organizations, government bodies, and community groups. Libraries cannot work in isolation but must build coalitions to address complex social challenges.

Evidence-Based Advocacy: Presentations like those from Serbia and Ghana demonstrated the importance of research, documentation, and systematic approaches to advocacy. Data and evidence strengthen libraries' positions in policy discussions.

Cultural Responsiveness: Projects in Macao, Europe, and Canada showed how effective library services must acknowledge and celebrate cultural diversity while addressing linguistic and social barriers.

Democratic Values: Across all presentations, libraries emerged as essential democratic institutions that must actively defend and promote values of intellectual freedom, equal access, and civic participation.

Conclusion

The IFLA Regional Council's unified response is not prescriptive but aspirational: that libraries everywhere, despite differing challenges, can find strength in collaboration and shared principles. In an age where truth itself is contested, where democratic institutions face unprecedented pressures, and where global crises demand local solutions, the library's mission—to provide access, foster dialogue, and uphold freedom of expression—remains more vital than ever.

The transition to the new IFLA Regional Council leadership for the 2025–2027 term builds upon the outstanding collaborative spirit and inclusive representation fostered during the previous term under Alejandro Santa's guidance. This solid foundation enables continued progress toward strengthening the global library community.

The current term's priorities, under the leadership of Ertugrul Cimen, aim to focus on deepening collaboration with all IFLA units—particularly the Professional Council (PC), the Management of Library Associations Section (MLAS), Law Libraries Section (LLS), and the Special Interest Group: Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE)—to initiate joint projects and strategic partnerships. Enhanced communication and cooperation across IFLA's regional and global library sectors will advance library advocacy and democratic participation, ensuring that libraries continue to serve as cornerstones of informed, equitable societies.

Through sustained commitment to these shared values and collaborative approaches, the Regional Council and our Regional Divisions strive to meet the challenges ahead while remaining true to its fundamental mission of serving all communities with integrity and purpose.

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