

Welcoming Address

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Dr Ingrid Parent, President of the International Federation of Library Associations
Mrs Elaine Ng, CEO of the National Library Board of Singapore
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

A warm welcome to Singapore, the 79th IFLA General Conference and Assembly, as well as the World Library and Information Congress. It is our honour and privilege to host you, as you start a week of exciting discussions on future possibilities for libraries. As a young boy, I believed librarians knew everything. Even in this wired world, where almost every household in Singapore has access to the internet, librarians continue to hold their fort. Writer Neil Gaiman puts it well. He said: “Google can bring you back 100,000 answers, a librarian can bring you back the right one.” My apologies to Google.

Providing Access to Information Resources

In Singapore, as in many countries, our libraries have always played important roles in society. When the British set up a trading post here, a school with a library was one of the first establishments set up here. When Singapore became self-governing in 1959, we built our National Library as a key institution. Libraries have played an important role in bringing up our young nation – developing our people’s knowledge and interests. Beyond promoting literacy, libraries key social enablers, providing all people access to information. Whether young or old, rich or poor, the library is a safe haven for everyone to read, to learn, and to meet other like-minded people.

On a larger scale, libraries enrich society, providing the knowledge that enables us to grow in graciousness and civic maturity. Libraries help people connect to one another, through a common interest in learning and sharing of knowledge.

In Singapore, we treasure our libraries and recognise the benefits they bring to society and the nation. Over the years, we have invested in our libraries and in the last decade, grown Singapore’s public library network considerably. To date, we have a National Library, 22 Public Libraries and three Regional Libraries, with three additional libraries coming up in the next few years. Recognising that libraries provide universal and equitable access to information, we have kept our basic library membership free for all citizens and permanent residents.

Libraries in a state of change

Being an island state, Singapore is limited in terms of our land and space. At the same time, we are cognisant of the importance of having libraries accessible to the public. To do this, we have been creative by locating libraries within shopping malls, or co-locating our libraries with other community facilities, to maximise the human traffic. This has worked well to cultivate readers in an otherwise busy environment.

Like the rest of the world, we also face other issues. These include manpower crunch, rising costs, and more importantly, customers whose needs continue to evolve in this digital age.

Our vision for the future

We view these challenges as opportunities – opportunities to re-look at how our libraries provide our services, how we can do this better, by tapping on the technologies that have emerged over the last two decades or so. In Singapore, since 2011, our household residential wired broadband penetration rate has exceeded 100%, while mobile phone penetration rate hit 150% last year. Not surprisingly, mobile data usage has been increasing steadily¹. People now want information 24/7, and they want it quickly, at the touch of their fingers.

To cater to these expectations, our libraries have developed mobile and Facebook apps, and increased our e-book holdings. To reach out to those who may not have direct access to the technology, some of our libraries even loan out these e-devices, so that more in our population can move forward with the aid of technology.

Besides going digital, we also take into consideration the technological advancements when we refurbish our existing libraries and build new libraries. The new generation of libraries will be a place to inspire learning, well-equipped with technology to access multi-media content, and focus on knowledge creation. This requires a re-think of what we have in the libraries, how they are placed and where they are placed.

Libraries will be centres of knowledge creation

Let me elaborate on the knowledge creation. The internet has made available social media-publishing technology likes blogs and YouTube. It has fed a desire to create and share content. So similarly, our libraries will no longer just be about reading and consuming content, they need to be the centres for knowledge creation.

One area we would like to encourage knowledge creation is local content. Singapore is a fairly young nation. Last week, we just celebrated our 48th year of independence. Our people have come out of our nation-building years with new questions: what does it mean to be Singaporean, what binds us, what lies ahead for our future? We believe that libraries have a role to play in shaping the nation's future, and the co-creation of local content can help galvanise our people.

The future library will have more space for co-creation labs, where people can come together to share experiences and ideas, to create new content that could subsequently generate more content. I think this better reflects the value that the library brings to our people – taking us

¹ Source: <http://www.ida.gov.sg/Infocomm-Landscape/Facts-and-Figures/Telecommunications#9>

beyond reading and learning towards greater understanding and comprehension of how we can navigate as a society in a new world. Our librarians must then be able to work with the community to curate this new knowledge in interesting and creative ways.

Librarians must be core to the communities they serve

As libraries continue to evolve in this information age, and the age of the Internet, librarians and information professionals must also pick up new and relevant skills. In this information age, we need to assist people navigate the information deluge. Information professionals are ever more needed to tag content intelligently so that credible information can be easily found. That is why, Singapore's National Library Board recently embarked on a nation-wide information-literacy effort targeting everyone from students to teachers, parents and the everyday library-goer.

With our vision of the future library as a platform for knowledge creation, librarians must be a part of the networked centres of the communities they serve. They must be in touch with the interests and needs of the people around them, and be able to help start self-sustaining community groups.

Hosting the IFLA Congress

Singapore is proud to have the IFLA Congress in Southeast Asia again, after 14 years¹. Asia is a region steeped in cultural heritage. Once home to the ancient empires that left us Angkor Wat, Pagan and Borobudur, as part of one body called the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN for short, Singapore acknowledges the importance of documenting and preserving our cultural heritage as a legacy for new generations to come. This is why I am happy to hear that for the first time in the history of the IFLA Congress, an ASEAN Caucus was held just yesterday afternoon, where the regional libraries shared about their latest developments in cultural preservation. I am confident that our ASEAN libraries will continue to work together in years to come.

Conclusion

Once again, let me warmly welcome you to Singapore for this year's Congress. Whether you are here for the very first time or have visited us before, I am sure you will find your stay a memorable one. John F Kennedy once spoke of the New Frontier, when he pointed out that the times demand invention, innovation, imagination and decision. Similarly, my call to everyone, is for all librarians worldwide to aspire to be pioneers of this digital age, to continually reinvent and innovate for the success of our future libraries. Librarians must continue to be the centre of the life of our nations and roles must evolve with the times and needs of the people. I wish you an exciting week ahead, as you chart the future of the world's libraries. Thank you.

¹ The last IFLA Congress held in Southeast Asia was in Bangkok, Thailand in 1999, and in Manila, Philippines in 1980. Singapore is the 3rd Southeast Asian country in the history of IFLA to host the Congress.