



International  
Federation of  
Library  
Associations and Institutions

## **IFLA-Biblioteca Alexandrina Conference on the Publishing Economy in the Arab World**

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*Intervention, IFLA Manager, Policy and Advocacy*

Thank you Dr El Feki, and thank you Dr El Halaby.

I wanted first of all to pass on the greetings of Glòria Pérez-Salmerón, President of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, and Gerald Leitner, its Secretary General, and of course my boss.

And I wanted to congratulate the Library of Alexandria for holding this event, bringing publishers and other publishing experts together to talk, to listen, to learn.

These sorts of opportunities are vitally important, and too rare.

We need to talk, to hear each other. Indeed, only last week, we held a great meeting at IFLA's Headquarters with the International Publishers Association, as well as representatives of rightholders, authors, archives and museums.

This conversation is vital because, too often, the relationship between libraries and publishers can seem like a zero-sum game.

A pricing decision is good for one, bad for the other. A copyright reform creates winners and users.

This is what the world looks like when you take a short-term perspective.

Yet in the long run, we are part of the same ecosystem. And just like in any ecosystem, the health of any one part depends on that of others.

We have an interest, not just in co-existing, but in co-operating.

And so too do the societies we serve.

It is not by accident that in those countries which demonstrate the strongest and richest cultures, there are publishers helping new and exciting voices to be heard.

Ensuring that new writers get the support and guidance they need to reach readers, managing systems of peer review and creating platforms, helping users themselves discover new ideas.

Nor is it by accident that in those countries with the highest levels of literacy and love of reading, there are also strong libraries.

The job of libraries is to ensure that the knowledge, the ideas, the inspiration contained in books, is not the preserve of the better off. To ensure that all children can learn to read for pleasure. To ensure that all students can access the materials they need to learn. To ensure that everyone can access their collective cultural heritage.

Of course publishers work with markets other than libraries. And libraries are not only about books – they also promote community building, life-long learning, and internet access to name just a few.

Nonetheless, it hard to imagine a library without published books, or a publishing sector without libraries.

And so, together, libraries and publishers create of a bridge between authors and readers who, otherwise, would risk being isolated and unable to connect.

This bridge is essential.

The book sector arguably makes a bigger, and a broader contribution to human development than any other part of the cultural economy.

It enables learning and innovation, as well as pleasure. It helps people find their place in the economy, in culture, in society, in civic life.

Given this, it is also particularly important to ensure that it is equitable.

That as we sustain and grow the flow of quality new works, we can find ways of guaranteeing that no-one faces impossible barriers to access it, and become the writers and researchers of tomorrow.

Knowledge should not be a tool for exclusion and stagnation, but for inclusion and innovation.

Our ecosystem – of libraries and publishers – helps make this happen.

This is unique, and worth protecting. To do this, we also need to work together.

Of course, the first step towards cooperation is mutual understanding. The programme organised by the Library of Alexandria here is a great way of doing this.

It's sadly not often enough that there is the opportunity to sit down, listen and learn.

Especially in a digital age, where everything seems to move so quickly, where disruption has, for some at least, become a religion, where the immediate instinctive reaction to the rapid change around us is so easily to panic.

It is true that digital has brought new challenges.

I am sure that many of the speeches here today and tomorrow will touch on this.

It is clear that readers no longer rely on the library reference desk to find out basic facts. More and more material is available for all, directly, online. I admit that I myself didn't go to the library, but to Wikipedia in order to read about Alexandria before coming.

Similarly, writers do not have to pass by a conventional publisher in order to reach an audience. Self-publishing, blogging, and social media have offered an alternative route.

Indeed, it is a climate where anyone who sets themselves up as a gatekeeper risks being bypassed.

The threat of disintermediation looms.

But it is far inevitable.

And it certainly is not desirable.

Because the skills, the judgement, the values of libraries and publishers cannot be replaced by an algorithm.

Indeed, the obvious problems with over-reliance on algorithms are helping to emphasise the importance of quality information.

Key to the uniqueness of the book sector in the past has been the work of publishers and libraries to help bring useful information and insights to the fore, efficiently and effectively.

As underlined, this takes skill, investment and organisation. Of course both publishers and libraries need to maintain their standards in order to deliver this. I am happy to see the stands outside this conference as testimony to this.

Through the work of organisations like IFLA, like the Arab Federation of Libraries and Information, the International Publishers Association, and of course the Library of

Alexandria, under the leadership of Dr El Feki, there is a continuous effort to provide excellent services.

But we also need to ensure that wider society – that pays for publishing through buying books, and for libraries through taxation – understands the value we bring.

The health of the publishing economy – as well as the health of the library sector – depends on it.

Of course, this is easier said than done.

We need to be careful about negative arguments. We cannot, and should not just dismiss the internet.

It has permitted has allowed for giant strides towards the long-standing library objective of equitable access to information for all.

While clearly what is illegal offline should also be illegal online, we should not come up with artificial new constraints.

This would be to do a huge disservice to the flourishing of creativity that it has permitted – especially among previously marginalised groups, as well as to the half of the world still waiting to get online.

And of course, simply dismissing the internet, and demanding respect and trust puts us at risk of looking like we're paternalistic, patronising, on the wrong side of history.

And however right we might be, we will have lost the argument. Because when people stop caring about quality, about verifiability, then we are in a truly dangerous situation.

We need rather to build a convincing, positive case. Thanks to initiatives such as this conference here today, we are well on the way.

To show that today, as much as ever, this unique bridge between creator and reader formed by excellent libraries and excellent publishing is as vital as ever, as much in a digital world as in a physical one.

And this is what I'm looking forward to hearing today. To learning about how publishers across the region are creating and deliver value.

I am sure that each of the speakers, not least José who will be speaking next, will have important insights to share about how publishers across the Arab-speaking world and beyond are laying the foundations for the future.



I know that we couldn't have a much better place to do this.

Of course Alexandria was the home of the most celebrated library in antiquity.

The authoritative collection of ancient texts, the guarantor of the passage of knowledge from mind to mind, from generation to generation.

And today's Library of Alexandria continues to offer great examples of the value that a modern library can provide, within and beyond its walls.

In collecting and promoting heritage, in supporting research, in accelerating the creation of accessible format works so that everyone can benefit from access to information.

So once again, thank you Dr El Feki, and your team, for your invitation, and for all your work in establishing the programme for this event today and tomorrow.