

IGF DC-PAL SESSION REPORT, IGF 2022: User-Centred Internet Governance

While the extensive work carried out by libraries and a wide range of other actors – governmental and otherwise – to build digital skills is certainly important, these efforts nonetheless risk focusing primarily on how to use existing tools and work within existing rules, rather than how to bring about change.

Yet in the spirit of the Internet Governance Forum itself, decisions that are taken about the way the internet works should be inclusive, given their significant effect on major parts of our lives. In order to avoid these decisions being made with the input of only a limited range of voices, it is therefore important to ensure that as many people as possible are equipped with the knowledge and confidence to engage actively in decision-making about the internet.

The session drew strongly on the specific experience of libraries, highlighting their increasingly strong role in supporting civic engagement more broadly – including through use of digital tools – as well as in developing more and more advanced digital services – including through co-design with users.

The host of the session, Sarah Kaddu, Research and Graduate Coordinator, EALIS, Makerere University, introduced a panel made up of Ramune Petuchovaite, Manager, Public Library Information Programme, EIFL, Damilare Oyedele, Founder Library Aid Africa, and Peter Balaba, Nakaseke County Libraries, Uganda. Stephen Wyber, Director of Policy and Advocacy at the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, brought in the experience of Ab Velasco and Fiona O'Connor, Toronto Public Library, who were able to join given the time of day at which the session was held.

Peter Balaba emphasised his own practical experience of extending connectivity in a largely rural community, as well as providing the skills and materials to make this valuable. This had required considerable investment of time and effort, and intense work with and reflection, but which had already brought welcome progress and guarantees of ongoing investment. However, the library had then taken this work further, recruiting members of the community to co-design eGovernment services, already giving citizens the opportunity to shape, rather than just take as a given the digital world around them.

Ramune Petuchovaite reiterated this point, drawing on other examples of innovations enabled through connectivity as well as the unique characteristics of libraries. Targeted efforts to build libraries' offer and capacity had made them into key centres for activating citizens online, such as to make for a safer internet, or to engage in wider democracy. Their multifunctionality, focus on responding to needs, and combination of staff, spaces and skills made them particularly valuable as partners, especially when it comes to trying to plan for inclusive policies and programmes.

Stephen Wyber, drawing on the experiences of Toronto Public Library in Canada, highlighted work there to build the awareness of citizens around internet governance issues. Working with Toronto Mesh, Torontonians increased their knowledge of how the internet works, and crucially the key decision points in internet governance. This turned out to be such a success that the same

organisation worked through libraries to run a course on building a peer-to-peer internet. This echoed in many ways the role of libraries in guifi.net in Catalonia, where they had acted not just as posts for antennae, but also as spaces for discussion and planning.

In terms of gender balance, there were three men and two women on the panel. Three of the panellists were African, and two European (with one of these representing voices from North America). Participation in the room was unfortunately limited, with around 5-6 each of men and women attending at least at some point during the programme. It was not always possible to assess whether online participants were men or women, but of those participating actively, these were balanced.

Damilare Oyedele underlined the risk, nonetheless, that this potential could remain unfulfilled without both the integration of libraries into planning at the national level, and stronger efforts to deliver mindset change in the profession itself. Nonetheless, the potential was there for libraries to turn their long-standing roles in delivering access to knowledge and civic services into a basis for promoting a more active, more participatory approach to internet policy making.

In the subsequent discussion, participants underlined once again the importance of outreach in making decisions about the internet, in order to ensure that these rules are tailored to need, and do not simply neglect significant public interests, such as education and research (as has arguably been seen in recent European Union laws).

They looked also at the barriers to participation, often linked to a perception of technicality, or of a lack of time, but in many countries, of course, the fact that decisions are not made in an adequately open fashion. Crucially, there was a need to overcome the sense that internet governance was something only for the technicians, or only for business.

In concluding, the panellists once again emphasised the importance of working to ensure that the internet needs to be worked in a way that reflects the interests and needs of all, and that the best way of doing this is through more inclusive governance. Flipping the argument, becoming a full 'internet citizen' was also arguably one of the highest forms of digital literacy, in that it implies an ability to evaluate, critique, and seek to improve the way the digital world functions.