

# DIGITAL FREEDOMS

**W**ith this issue's theme of *Digital Freedoms*, we explore many different definitions and interpretations of this idea. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many libraries needed to think about how to maintain freedom of access to information, and provide equitable access to online technology. But many library and information professionals have long been acquainted with these matters, whether it be ensuring online content is accessible, managing copyright in digital delivery, or upholding privacy principles in their practice. To introduce the theme, Dr Yazdan Mansourian reflects on what digital freedom might actually mean, and how libraries can support it.

Digital freedom is a form of freedom which enables us to practice our personal autonomy and independence in the digital world. It includes a number of legitimate rights that everyone should have, so that they can freely explore the digital public sphere. Moreover, digital freedom allows us to join and participate in digital communities and form an authentic digital identity in the virtual world that truly represents our identity in the physical world.

Just like all forms of freedom, digital freedom has two basic facets: freedom for and freedom from. The first enables us to do something and the second liberates us from something else. For example, freedom of speech allows us to express our genuine views about the world and at the same time protects us from censorship and suppression. Likewise, digital freedom empowers us to freely explore and navigate the digital world and also saves us from hardships such as digital divide and digital discrimination.

I believe digital freedom has two more facets: freedom in the digital world and freedom via the digital world. Freedom in the digital world includes legitimate rights for everyone to browse, seek and share information in different digital platforms such as search engines and social networks. Nonetheless, the impact of digital freedom extends far beyond the digital space and it affects almost all aspects of our personal and social life. In the modern world dominated by digital technologies, digital freedom is an indispensable element of social engagement and social connectedness. Without digital freedom we will be more vulnerable to social exclusion and rejection for participation in various social activities.

The recent Coronavirus pandemic is an obvious example that shows the necessity of digital freedom for everyone. During the lockdown time the online applications became the main communication tools for most people to connect and interact. Those who did not have access to these facilities, or could not freely act in this environment, risked suffering from loneliness and isolation, especially when everyday life activities such as library services shifted online during the pandemic.

Information institutions in the GLAM sector can actively promote digital freedom to serve bigger goals, including community engagement and social inclusion. In particular, public libraries play a vital role in this context by providing free access to digital information for the vulnerable or marginalized people, and by supporting culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups to connect with their communities and the wider society.

Of course, public libraries have already been very active in running training services for the public, such as the Tech Savvy Seniors digital literacy training program. These programs empower library users with new knowledge and skills they need to practice their freedom in the virtual world, but there is much more that can be done. 📧

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