

We have reviewed your website, but would love to hear a bit from you as context for this conversation about EIFL's mission and focus. How long has eIFL been in existence?

eIFL.net (electronic Information For Libraries) started 10 years ago, in 1999 as a project of the OSI (Open Society Institute). At that time, Soros Foundations Network was present in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. When those countries broke from the Soviet system, we received a lot of requests for library development. There were a lot of requests for grants to subsidize subscriptions to current journals. These libraries had huge gaps in information, a lot of content had not been allowed by the Soviet system. We thought it wasn't sustainable to just pay for a one year subscription. We saw the electronic publishing industry was starting to grow and expand. This created an advantageous opportunity whereby we could put many libraries together and negotiate broad access to resources. We kicked off eIFL –we ended up getting a 99% discount, with a country-wide license for access to thousands electronic journals.

Once we were able to provide access to electronic journals we ran into a new problem. People didn't know how to operate in an electronic environment. People were used to doing research by reading hard copies of journals. We needed to figure out how to reach the user community and let them know what resources are available to them. Somebody had to pay for access to these journals although the price was very, very low. So we started mobilizing library communities, and formed a library consortia whereby the strong institutions could help weaker institutions, share the costs.

In 2003, Open Society Institute decided that we were ready to become our own organization. We moved from Budapest to Rome. Since 2003, we've grown and expanded geographically to 50 countries and added new regions: Africa, South East Asia, the Middle East. Programmatically we added new areas, in addition, to lowering financial barriers to enabling access to knowledge in developing and transition countries. We watched global developments of the legal framework, and there were lots of new barriers coming our way. There were introductions of digital rights management and regulations that would lock the content and make it inaccessible to most libraries.

We had thought there would be a trend towards the opening of content but now there is a movement to lock the content. The entertainment industry is lobbying to keep the copyright laws more strict. So we got engaged on an international level – advocating for a balanced copyright laws with exceptions for educational institutions such as libraries. We've been engaged on that front. We do a lot of work to educate librarians, so that they can voice concerns.

We are also involved in the open access movement which is looking into changing scholarly publishing models. In the current model the author writes a research grant which is funded by the government, the university pays the researcher, and then the researcher publishes in one journal. Then that same country and institution has to pay to the publisher to buy access for the content that they funded. The publisher has the monopoly and can decide what price to charge. The movement is looking into changing this model. With open access publishing the publisher determines how much it costs to administer the article. The author then pays a fee to publish the article and it is made available to everyone. In developing countries we advocate for open access – journals have never had any income from these areas anyway. We help institutions set up repositories of articles, theses, dissertations.

The goal of research is to be shared and cited, to be seen by peers. Libraries play a role since they help to set up and maintain the access to the research.

Because we work with developing countries, many of the libraries we work with are getting access to expensive, top-quality content, but their infrastructure is pretty poor. Some are still struggling with having proper library automation systems. We promote a free and open source software program with library applications. Licenses for commercial library software are expensive; developing country libraries can't afford to buy them.

Can you tell us more about your network members? How do they get connected to eIFL, and what do they get as a result of this connection?

Our core members are research and university libraries (over 2K), but also some public libraries and NGOs. Each individual institution connects with us via the country consortium. The consortium is largely a volunteer base, and is not paid. Some consortia have paid staff, but most do not.

In general librarians are pretty organized. We have big professional networks. eIFL is well-known and connected. When we go to a new country, first we have a stakeholders meeting. After two days of meetings the librarians will agree they want to have a consortium – agree on governing structure, actions. We meet annually, bringing one person to a face to a face meeting every year to keep them updated on what's happening with us.

Our organization organizes the staff based on program area. There is myself and my assistant in Rome, I am in charge of the whole organization. Person in charge of consortia and geographic expansion is in Italy, three hours by train from Rome. E-resources licensing person is in Oxford, UK and our negotiations with publishers lawyer is in London. Our intellectual property program has a manager in Ireland. The open access is based in Ukraine. We also have a person in Canada. We are dispersed. We depend on the leadership on the ground. Our network is great; we use strong consortia as resource people to go and talk peer to peer to the weaker consortia.

I understand that you've tried in the past to establish some kind of partnership with the Wikimedia Foundation.

In 2005, Jimmy Wales came to eIFL general assembly where all our country coordinators come together once a year. We thought it was interesting to hear what Wikipedia really is and what they are doing, to raise awareness of these librarians about Wikipedia. He was great. Enjoyed it, met a lot of people. We had some general conversations, but we never discussed any concrete actions and there was no follow-up. We connected last year to Wikipedia Academies, but again we had some general conversations but never discussed any concrete actions. There was no follow up, but libraries have the physical locations to host the Academies and eIFL.net has contacts with the librarian community. That could help to recruit participants for the Academies, and then you could collaborate with Wikipedians within a country who could run the Academies.

This year eIFL general assembly will be hosted by Bibliotheca Alexandria, Egypt. It will mostly be university librarians. This would be a point to connect with Wikimedia, to gather insights for the strategic planning process but also to talk to our network members about Wikimedia.

eIFL appears to support libraries that are in areas still dominated by colonial languages, such as Sub-Saharan Africa. What is the attitude toward providing materials in local languages vs. the colonial language?

All the top scholarly journals are in English. Language is an issue in scholarly publishing. In the network, we have Russian-speaking and French-speaking and English-speaking countries. In terms of scholarly content, there is very little available electronically in French. When they set up institutional repositories, they post whatever they have in whatever language.

I think Wikipedia is great because it provides information in local languages.

I always think the national language is important. But it's interesting when it comes to Africa: all the librarians have good foreign language knowledge. In the former Soviet Union, Russian was the language so they have limited knowledge of English. I find that Africa – when they come to meetings, they have a good command of English or French. If education system is in English or Swahili, this is what language the content has to be in. The older generation is knowledgeable and good command of the colonial languages.

What do you think Wikipedia should do in terms of advocacy?

Wikipedia should be connecting people locally. Leaders of Wikipedia on national level should meet locally and see what is happening in terms of open access. We have powerful networks locally – it would be interesting for them to meet up with the Wikipedians.

There are different advocacy levels. Funding is one level. Also you can meet with officials and start educating them about copyright laws. Wherever we go we review the law. We provide “model eIFL law” – what they should be advocating for. We provide professional help on open access. We run a lot of workshops on open access advocacy – trying to change the paradigm – answer all the questions. We help them with policy papers and technical questions.