To: Walter Anderson

From: Lloyd Etheredge

Re: How the Secretary General Can Foster a Global Virtual Public Library with Free
         Access for UDCs

Proposal

    That the Secretary General convene a Global Online Library working group, charged with developing policy options and a roadmap to achieve a global virtual public library that is free to individuals.

Background

    A global virtual (public) library is a great vision of the information revolution. The key step to realize the vision is for the largest public library systems to work together (and, potentially, negotiate) on behalf of their users, to guide the systems created by the for-profit sector. The Secretary General can be a catalyst to bring these stakeholders together; and also assure UN representation for users in UDCs.

    Today, at least two companies (Google and Amazon.com) are quickly digitizing millions of volumes in major research libraries. The easiest prediction is that they will sell, on demand, inexpensive laser-printed copies of any of these titles in the public domain. It is *possible* - but not assured - that they also will operate full-service, free, online library services supported solely by advertising revenues. However, many expensive and high-use volumes (e.g., reference books, scientific and technical journals) are likely to be excluded from the "free use" category, together with an unknown (but possibly large) percentage of other copyrighted material.

    - Almost every UN-member country has decided to operate free public library systems for its citizens. Applying this model, the best system (in the public interest) is for the world's public library systems to negotiate and pay legitimate annual subscription fees to secure

online use of reference books and other copyrighted material, which then become free to individual users.[1] The example of Singapore, where the government has provided bold leadership to develop such a national system, suggests that the evolving worldwide system will be better if public library systems act together, as agents, rather than permitting the conditions of online access to be determined by monopoly and oligopoly suppliers in the developed world, who directly set the terms of access for individuals.[2]

Additional Comments

   - Google and Amazon.com are *for profit* companies. Whatever their initial plans, their long-term corporate policies may change.[3]

   - In the information age there is substantial risk that UDC users will be overcharged, as the marginal cost of providing universal access to an online virtual public library serving the developed world is close to zero.

   - The government of Singapore might be willing to provide leadership for an UN-developed working group. In the US, the Coalition for Networked Information (www.cni.org - 200 members) has been a leader in organizing discussions, although it does not negotiate for its affiliated members.

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[1] An international payment system can be devised, based on statistical sampling, similar to the international system to pay royalties for the playing of music on radio stations.

[2] http://www.nlb.gov.sg/. See also Irene Tham, "Library Goes Online in Singapore," ZDNet Asia (September 8, 2001), online.

[3] We have seen that - even for drug companies, where many researchers and other employees may have deeper humanitarian motivations - UDCs will be overcharged unless the requirements of the for-profit system are honored by collective negotiations and purchasing.