

New Norcia and Freedom of Information

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression: this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

In the fiftieth anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human rights, the annual New Norcia Library Lecture was a passionate plea of a librarian to support Article 19. The lecturer was Alex Byrne, who chairs the Committee on Free access to information and Freedom of Expression within the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA).

His concluding words were :

In an increasingly interconnected world, information is more than ever crucial. The human right to freedom of expression and free access to information is the foundation of autonomy, both individual and societal. Librarians must defend that right vigorously, ensuring that it is not compromised nor abrogated. While taking a duty of care when appropriate and taking steps to respect individual cultures and individual preferences, we must stand for freedom, in both expression and access to information.

As Pro Vice-Chancellor (Information Resources) of the Northern Territory University, Alex also spoke of providing information to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. He has developed protocols in consultation with them about information which is culturally sensitive.

The New Norcia Library Lecture, held in the monastic town of New Norcia, 132 miles north of Perth, is popular with public librarians, librarians from universities and Information Studies students. The lecture, always informative and often provocative, is followed by a large lunch and concludes with a lively panel discussion. Librarians drive up from Perth for the day, enjoying the spring wildflowers en route, and can visit the museum, art gallery or archives while in the town.

In 1999, New Norcia will be privileged to have the library lecture delivered by Father Leonard Boyle from Rome, who, as Vatican Librarian, embarked on a modernisation programme which included the digitisation of many thousands of documents from the peerless collection in the Vatican Library. The lecture is scheduled for September 16.

Susan Johnson

See Alex Byrne's own account of his lecture : "National Front demands access to right-wing material, Bishop burns books" in *Incite* v.19, no.11 (Nov 1998) p.8-9.