



Review of the 2007 International Federation of Library Associations Annual Conference

Durban, South Africa

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Background:

For those unfamiliar with IFLA, its mission is to be “the global voice of the library and information profession.” An ambitious mission and one fraught with challenges. Nonetheless, IFLA does work at a different level than national associations such as ALA or professional groups such as SLA. I just started serving a four year term as ACRL’s Science and Technology Section’s representative to IFLA’s Science and Technology Standing Committee. IFLA has very complex organization of 45 sections or standing committees grouped in 8 divisions, all overseen by the Governing Board. It operates in multiple languages. Headquarters are in the national library of the Netherlands located in The Hague.

The Science and Technology Standing Committee:

Unlike ALA, IFLA schedules all committee meetings on either end of the conference week. I arrived in Durban Friday August 17th and attended my first committee meeting Saturday and the second one the following Friday. Much of the committee’s attention is focused on conference program planning and execution. For the several new members, this seemed like a limitation, and current members were open to exploring more ideas for work. Any committee has cycles of activity, and it appears that this one is due to go on an upswing. New members include a colleague of mine from the Alfred Wegner Institute in Bremerhaven, library school faculty members from the University of South Florida and Texas A&M, the assistant director of Bibliothèque de l’Université de Marnela Vallée and the library director of Cité des sciences et de l’Industrie. We join other members from Finland, Canada, Sri Lanka, China, Russia, United Kingdom and India. All in all, there are 18 members.

There is potential for some interesting work coming out of the committee. For next year’s program, we want to look at the role of libraries in facilitating the public’s understanding of science. Also, we will be part of a satellite pre-conference on government science information and government portals. I’m revising the committee’s strategic plan. Others are investigating international science publishing trends in terms of access issues such as format, free/fee and language (Chinese is of particular interest). TO keep up with the Committee’s work, check out the web site - <http://www.ifla.org/VII/s7/index.htm>.

Opening Keynote:

It was colorful, festive and musical. The geographic breadth of the audience was stunning. I was sitting next to someone from Germany, yet surrounded by people from

Korea, Mali and South Africa. One tip I picked up: when addressing a large audience with many dignitaries, you can cover your bases by saying “All protocols recognized.”

Justice Albie Sachs was the keynote speaker (<http://www.concourt.gov.za/text/judges/current/justicealbiesachs/1.html>) . He spoke of libraries on legs and the need to record human knowledge and experience, libraries as havens especially as places to study for those who live in chaos (e.g. the townships), and libraries as digital experiences. He recounted when he was imprisoned in the 1960s under the 90 Day Law where all he had was the four walls and his toes. Eventually, he got the right to receive books (besides the Bible) and writing materials. An unknown librarian filled his requests . He never could penetrate Proust, even in solitary confinement. But Moby Dick he found to be very moving, especially Pip’s dive to the deep. Books, reading and thinking kept Justice Sachs sane during his long periods of confinement. He eventually became a justice of the SA Constitutional Court, but never will forget the anonymous librarian who gave books to a possible illiterate prison guard to take to the Sachs, the prisoner. Justice Sachs conveyed the hope, struggle and pain of SA.

The Sessions:

The sessions are as varied as the committees and attendees. For a complete program, check out the IFLA web site - <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla73/Programme2007.htm>. In general, there was a strong African presence in subject matter and speakers which gave the conference a unique feel. Here are few selected sessions from those I attended.

Challenging Trends in Higher Education

The four presenters covered topics as ranging as how libraries should be involved in collecting and preserving data (Kaniki from the SA National Research Foundation) to restructuring of academic libraries in Morocco to promoting HINARA, AGORA and OARE (three services providing access to scientific journal) to African libraries, Take home: monitor what is happening with libraries and data, realizing this is not just a US issue.

Open Access: A panacea for developing countries?

Alex Byrne, the current IFLA president and a librarian from Australia, sees open access as a strong player and encouraged libraries with their institutions as hosts for OA journals. He is also a strong proponent of copyright protection of indigenous knowledge. This relates to providing access to local content, a challenging and not trivial challenge in developing countries. Mark Funk from the Medical Libraries Association gave a good overview of open access and mentioned that BioMed Central has a database of funding agencies’ policies vis a vis open access.

Gates Access to Learning Awards

These were fascinating even though all involve public libraries. The librarian from Bogota described the city’s ambitious library building program where she convinced the city government of the importance of libraries in the poorest communities. They have built four mega libraries as well as numerous barrio libraries. A project in Bangladesh

where 20% of the country is water took libraries, computer labs and training facilities to the people via boats. All of the projects reminded me of the power of libraries, reading, and literacy in very real ways.

Resource Discovery Initiatives at National Libraries:

This panel presented various initiatives focused on adding value to library resources. Caroline Brazier, British National Library, reviewed its strategic plan and ended with an intriguing list of questions:

- Should the BL spend money on retrospective conversions or digitization?
- Do we need to moderate or authenticate content added by scholars and others to our digital collection?
- Who will provide the search tools – libraries, vendors, Google?
- How can we make the rich physical collection more accessible in the digital environment.

Of interest may be the UK Research information Network reports (<http://www.rin.ac.uk/search-discovery-access-menu>).

Pam Gatenby, National Library of Australia, explained NLA's strategy as one that will "simplify and integrate services that will allow users to find and use materials." They are working with Google to make the catalog more accessible, but is running into relevancy ranking problems. They are using A9 to search across their varied cultural databases. They are experimenting with a commercial vendor Destra Media to provide access to contemporary Australian music as an augmentation to the Music Australia collection (<http://www.musicaustralia.org/>)

Patrick Danowski, Berlin State Library, challenged the audience to work with Library 2.0 tools in meaningful ways. As an example, he demonstrated the widget he has developed that links wikipedia records to library catalog records. His point being that wikipedia users can become library users.

Finally, Elizabeth Niggeman, European Digital Library, explained the purpose and growth of the EDL. Currently, 24 libraries are involved with 259 collections (159 searchable while the rest are just browsable.)

In additional sessions, other national libraries described projects of interest. The Czech Republic National Library reminded all of the challenge of sustainability of digital libraries. They recently used Digital Repository Audit Method Based on Risk Assessment (DRAMBORA, <http://www.repositoryaudit.eu/>) for an audit of the adequacy of their digital architecture. The National Library of the Netherlands is doing impressive work archiving e-journal articles. They have an automatic daily batch ingest of 5,000-10,000 articles. They are also developing an emulator to use in digital preservation – DIOSCURI (<http://dioscure.sourceforge.net/>). Of course, there were many more projects and initiatives discussed.

Access to Information Network – Africa

This is an IFLA initiative to build capacity to deploy and provide access to information throughout Africa. The panel provided four very different perspectives on the challenges of doing this. Denise Nicholson gave a stimulating presentation on copyright as it plays out in Africa. There is tendency to adopt stricter copyright laws than necessary, and this is an alarming trend. Free Trade Agreements with the US can wreck havoc with intellectual property rights. There are heartening developments such as the draft treaty on Access to Knowledge being discussed with WIPO and the African Copyright Forum that is pushing for improved access to knowledge. The archivist from Botswana made a compelling argument that Freedom of Information laws mean nothing with government processes create scare and asymmetric information. A South African librarian outlined the complexity of SA publications law and the resulting difficulty with providing public access and transparency. Finally, a librarian from Nigeria told a stark story of a community of prostitutes without any type of social services where the library recognized a need and stepped in. All the panelists in their own manner and from individual perspectives posed the question of what librarians can do make access to information accessible and productive.

Libraries 2.0

What library conference exists these days without mention of 2.0 in some program title? Here the gamut ran from a demonstration of a living language lab using SCOLA and embedded in the information commons at the University of Nebraska-Omaha to the service model at the University of Pretoria to planning a Europeana web page at the French National Library. The University of Pretoria had several intriguing ideas for providing better service for its 50,000 student including Skype on every computer in its information commons, 60 minute workshops for staff repeated several times a year, experimentation with federated searching using GoogleScholar and integration of Blackboard with library instruction. Some ideas are new and others familiar; but they demonstrate the commons bonds we have in libraries with experimenting with new services as ways to better address the needs and expectations of users.

Field Trips and Social Events:

Our committee visited the Oceanographic Research Institute (<http://www.ori.org.za/>) and UShaka Aquarium (<http://www.ushakamarineworld.co.za/>). Of course, this was right up my alley. The institute director gave a good overview and I had the opportunity to talk to him about issues and challenges. One of the HMSC researchers has been looking for a possible contact to work on coelacanths, so this is a possibility. The aquarium is well done is slightly on the entertainment end of the spectrum.

Of course, there were several social events that provided ways to meet people and talk. The various countries traditionally hold county caucuses the first evening of the conference. The US Caucus was an opportunity to identify various representatives of US associations and hear what they thought were the major issues and goals. The most striking was a brief report by Winston Taub on copyright negotiations with WIPO. A beach party one evening gave all a chance to tip toes into the Indian Ocean. A final gala at the Durban City Hall was replete with officials, food, drink and excellent music.

Standing in line, I had conversations with the National Librarian of Latvia, the president of ALA and a library architect from Ohio, to name just a few. My Finnish and German colleagues from the Science Committee proved to be intrepid dancers.

Final Thoughts:

Personally, I find the exposure to international perspectives on our issues invigorating and challenging. The variety of libraries represented provides a breadth of programming in a reasonably sized conference. I admire the work IFLA does on the international field (e.g. copyright work at WIPO). The efficacy of the Science and Technology Committee will only tell over time as new volunteers follow through on commitments to projects and programs. Throughout the week in Durban, I continued to make interesting contacts that may develop into good projects or contacts for OSU and Oregon libraries. IFLA is a different venue and sometimes it is good to step out of the comfort zone of our usual professional associations. Next year, the annual conference will be in Quebec City August 10-15. I would encourage people to consider attending as it is fairly close and would be an opportunity to experience IFLA without having to travel for two solid days.