

IFLA – A Provocative View

D. J. Urquhart

Libraries are concerned with collecting and making available the records of mankind. They are concerned with all types of records irrespective of how or where they are produced. They are concerned with all the techniques for promoting the use of their records. Inevitably librarians should have a world outlook on their problems for they are really the servants of mankind. To librarians national boundaries are handicaps to be overcome so they should be organized on a world basis.

So far this has not happened. It is true that there are organizations such as IFLA, ICA and FID, but are they really adequate? Each considers itself an “international” organization. Undoubtedly each has very limited resources. Unfortunately part of these resources are devoted to duplicating activities and to trying to decide the boundaries between these organizations. One effective organization would be better than three ineffective ones.

In future it will be necessary to create one organization which will cater for those who classify themselves as librarians, archivists or information officers. In designing such an organization special attention should be given to making it worldwide as distinct from “international”. Basically the problem of information transfer is the same everywhere. It is concerned with making the maximum use of the world’s store of information and ignoring national boundaries. The problem is quite different from political and economic problems. So the type of organization librarians need should not be similar to the type of international organizations designed for political purposes. But that is the type of organization IFLA is at present. To think in terms of national representatives enhances the difficulties created by national boundaries and these are what librarians should be seeking to eliminate. So somehow IFLA has to cease to be as it is now a federation of national organizations.

Besides the long term philosophical advantage of having a “world” organization of librarians the proposed organization would have some practical advantages over the existing organization. This has resulted in the representatives of associations who attend IFLA conferences being to a great extent those who hold office in their organizations irrespective of whether they have anything to contribute. Many of these regard a visit to IFLA as a “perk” which provides some foreign travel at somebody else’s expense.

As a result many are seldom seen at the conference meetings. Of course there is a good excuse for this. Many of the meetings are somewhat dreary affairs. Often the organizers ask the speakers to “summarize” their papers. There appears to be some translation difficulty in understanding this term “summarize” even to those

whose native language is English. Often it appears to mean in practice "give your complete paper and amplify it". The result is that there are long discourses, and discussion is stifled or made impossible because of a shortage of time. But the discussion of new ideas be one of the main activities at IFLA conferences. Perhaps in future there will be a statute to the effect that nobody presenting a paper to IFLA (excluding the President giving his presidential address) may speak for more than ten minutes and that those who contribute to the discussion on any paper should be allowed not more than five minutes.