

Beyond the limits of space and time

Summary of the presidential address given by Robert Wedgworth to the 61st IFLA general conference, 20–25 August 1995. The full text of this address is available at <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/ifla/conf/ifla61/61-wedr.htm>.

In a world divided by ancient and modern conflicts, ravaged by natural and man-made disasters and humbled by its relationship to the universe, the general conference of IFLA convenes once again to celebrate the world of knowledge and information.

A changing community

For libraries and librarians these are most interesting times. The entire chain of relationships that have sustained twentieth century libraries and librarians from author to bookseller to user is being transformed by economics and technology.

Increasing costs of information resources and increasing types of information resources that can be acquired by libraries place increasing demands on library funding sources that are either stable or declining.

Authors and scholars are increasingly suspicious of libraries as they fear that new information technologies threaten their control over their works. Librarians, on the other hand, try to use whatever legal means are the most effective in providing access to information. These different perspectives have resulted in a shaky balance of the rights of authors against those of users in the making of copies for educational and scholarly uses.

Traditionally, libraries served a literate user who voluntarily came to the library. Broadening the library's public to include reluctant readers and even non-readers is an important agenda for school and public libraries in many countries that challenge the education and training of librarians to adopt new skills and strategies.

Perhaps the most dramatic change our library communities face is the rapid pace of technological change stimulated by telecommunications and the existence of international computer networks.

Preserving the records of human culture and making them available to those who want and need them continues to be the primary mission of libraries and librarians.

The changing IFLA community

In order to meet the needs of libraries and librarians in the developing world, IFLA's response has been a new core program, *Advancement of librarianship in the Third World* (ALP), adopted in 1990 for an initial period from 1992–97.

The deterioration of library and archival materials, recognised for some time as a threat to the future of many library collections has found substantial encouragement from the UNESCO program, *Memory of the world*, dedicated to the protection and preservation of the world's cultural heritage.

Changes in the IFLA community are both daunting and stimulating. Ambitious re-development plans we saw being carried out in Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan this year were very encouraging. The re-education of librarians, the search for new sources of library support and the enthusiasm of library users are admirable signs.

From the national libraries to the smallest school or public libraries fewer materials are being acquired, fewer librarians and staff are being employed while the number of users increases. Managing scarce resources in the face of enormous opportunities to expand and develop library and information services is a constant theme being played by libraries throughout the world.

A more inclusive community

Based on the work of our Cuban colleagues at the 1994 general conference and supported by the work of the core program on *Universal Data Transfer* (UDT) at the National Library of Canada, IFLA has successfully launched its effort to become a more inclusive community. More than one third of the papers to be presented at this conference have been available via the

internet prior to the conference and the remaining papers will be added for the international library community to use.

Although internet use is growing exponentially, its use in developing countries still lags considerably. According to Nicholas Negroponte, there will be about one billion people with access to the internet by the year 2000 compared to his guess of 20 to 30 million at the end of 1994. The fastest growing networks are in Argentina, Iran, Peru, Egypt, Philippines, Russia, Slovenia and Indonesia, in that order. Thirty-five per cent of the host processors for internet connections are outside North America.

Having launched IFLA into the electronic age, we now will need to develop adequate programs through the ALP, UDT and the member sections and divisions to help the membership cultivate the kinds of alliances and relationships that will lead to greater access to the internet by libraries throughout the world.

The indivisible community

Throughout this century librarians have developed the infrastructure, the techniques and the programs to bring information and knowledge to users. The mission of libraries in pursuit of this goal requires that we insist that culture and ideas belong to the world. That each individual has a right to know of the world's culture and ideas, and that librarians and libraries are one of the principal guarantors of access to the world's cultures and ideas.

Our struggle to revitalise libraries and librarianship is not about techniques and finance. It is essentially one of values. We must be able to persuade governments, business, education, religious and civic leaders of the value of libraries as educational institutions that stimulate and inspire learning; that libraries are information access agencies that improve the quality of decision-making; and that libraries can contribute substantially to the improvement of the quality of life at all ages. ■