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Back Talk — Come Flash With Me! (at IFLA 2017)

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Picture this: You’re in the central market square of Wrocław, Poland, the former Prussian Breslau, all lovely 17th century buildings, most now housing cafes that spill out into the square in the pleasant summer months. You’re minding your own business, and perhaps you’ve just been buying pralines in E. Wendel, the best chocolatier in town — but something seems a little odd. Who are these people, wandering around in front of the handsome public library, brandishing books and phones and tablets, muttering to themselves? You look a little closer and you realize they’re reading, and about the time you realize this, they all suddenly stop in place, while a videographer passes back and forth among them. Say what?!

What you’ve just blundered into is a librarians’ flash mob, gathering by prearrangement to capture public attention and to celebrate libraries and reading. The instructions went something like this: “WLIC-goers should appear in the Square in the general vicinity of the library at the stated time — and on the time start walking around the square, reading aloud from a book or eBook, in the language of their choice. After about ten minutes, watch for the leaders and freeze in place when they do, books in hands.”

OK, yes, as someone said, Beethoven flash mobs at least have tympani and French horns, and librarians are, well, quiet, but it’s nonetheless an energizing idea.

(The Polish National Library made a video, of course: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEU_HuCXmx4)

This actually happened to you if you were in the Wrocław city center around midday on Saturday, August 19th, of IFLA’s annual World Library and Information Congress, which was headquartered a couple of miles away at Centennial Hall, built in 1913 to celebrate a century of liberation from Napoleon. Knowing international librarianship, you’d have known that the people wandering and muttering looked like Congress delegates — globally and richly diverse, of all ages, reading in all kinds of formats. Though it was IFLA’s always-zany New Professionals Special Interest Group that sponsored and organized the flash mob, all participants were committed to the difference that libraries make. (Another showcase for IFLA diversity is always in its Tuesday cultural evening, in which delegates and guests dance till midnight!)

IFLA does its work through five divisions, led by over 60 committees and special interest groups that stay in working touch through the year and then sponsor public programs at the Congress, mixing that kind of hard work with socialization, library tours, and a little frank tourism. Wrocław is a handsome mid-sized city, a Polish post-communist success story. The progressive and inspirational mayor, Rafał Dutkiewicz, in office since 2002 and regularly re-elected, came to greet delegates, and we learned a bit about the impressive community and business revival he has led. The city sits on the Oder River and offers numerous parks, excellent eateries, boat tours, and warm hospitality.

As always, the WLIC programs are too numerous to attend. I’ll mention a couple of collections-related highlights, which could just as easily have been in place at the Charleston Conference:

- Three committees (Metropolitan Libraries, Public Libraries, and Acquisitions/Collection Development) sponsored a program about “Unique Circulating Collections,” including loaning “Internet in a box,” circulating art in a remote Finnish town, providing petting zoos, lending clothing, and much more. Who knew?

The Acquisition & Collection Development Section’s open program, chaired by the talented and multi-lingual Lidia Uziel (Head of Harvard University Library’s Western Languages Division), headlined case studies in the building of large digital libraries and their impact on local library activities. For example, we learned from Agnieszka Leszynska (National Library of Poland) of Poland’s effort to build a centralized Polish digital library, which then devolved into a series of regional digital collections. In a media-rich presentation, Harry Verwayen described the Europeana Project’s strategy, and the audience was particularly taken with the use of young Ambassadors to promote and support public awareness of this major effort. Jean-Luc Jankowski described a significant partnership between the BNF (Bibliothèque Nationale de France) and Flatirons Jouve to build a contemporary national digital book library, which then could not be properly realized because of legal and ownership disputes. Lynn Wiley (University of Illinois) described some key impacts of HathiTrust on the work and flows of her library. The Committee hopes to expand on this topic at the 2018 WLIC.

Donna Scheeder, long a pillar of the Congressional Research Service in the Library of Congress, was completing at this Congress a successful two-year term as IFLA’s elected president, now succeeded by Glòria Pérez-Salmerón, former Director of Spain’s National Library. (Immediate predecessors have come from Germany, South Africa, Canada, and Finland.) The hallmark of Scheeder’s term has been, while working closely with IFLA’s Secretary General Gerald Leitner, the patient and broad-based building of a global visioning process designed to concentrate the attention of librarians and supporters and build commitment to shared action for promoting the broadest possible access to knowledge and freedom in its use, in
The 2018 SSP meeting will be in Chicago on May 30-June 1 at the Sheraton Chicago Hotel.

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Endnotes
1. http://modelpublishingcontract.org
2. See the full version of this article for details on each of these vendors’ offerings.
3. Illustrations of the map appear in the full version of this article.
4. For example, see http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2016/04/whoa-downloading-pirated-papers-everyone.
9. See the full version of this article for a list of Suber’s questions.

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an environment of rapid technological development. Read more about the IFLA Global Vision project, which is getting energetic input from thousands of librarians and friends worldwide; results will form the basis of IFLA’s strategy after 2018. See: https://globalvision.ifla.org/ and join in the discussion! The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is supporting this work.

Next year, IFLA’s WLIC will be held in Kuala Lumpur. It’s always refreshing to see, as the meetings travel from one continent to another, the opportunities that are made for local professionals to travel to at least the Congress when it comes to their neighborhood. This year, Polish librarians had that precious opportunity, as two years ago was the case for librarians from all over sub-Saharan Africa, when IFLA met in Cape Town.

The work of IFLA is valuable for many reasons, of course. But in the end, the greatest value is the inspiration that comes from experiencing the powerful presence of libraries from many different societies — societies with their own challenges — and the collegiality that this marvelous profession breeds across all the boundaries of language, culture, religion, ethnicity, and politics from every continent but one, in endlessly animated discussion with one another. It’s the Charleston Conference or the Fiesole Retreat on steroids — and without Katina!

Takeaways? Really truly, all of us, in our many settings, are global ambassadors one way or another. And while we’re at it, we have fun too — whether in Poland or Charleston. It’s the best game in the world.