Back Talk — Articulating a Global Vision for Libraries and Librarians

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Back Talk — Articulating a Global Vision for Libraries and Librarians

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The first time I attended the **World Library and Information Congress**, organized each summer by the **International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA's WLIC** — international organizations need acronyms!), the host city brought out tanks into the streets and staged a political upheaval of world historical significance. It was Moscow in August of 1991. The meetings were mainly canceled as attendees were called home by their governments, but it made apparent for many the strong sense that **IFLA** really does live and act on a global stage.

IFLA brings together professional librarians and their colleagues and friends not only for a week of stimulating exchanges in the annual Congress, but also in through-the-year work of over 60 standing committees and special interest groups, devoted to subjects all the way from art libraries, to copyright, to women in libraries. As the Congress moves around the world, moreover, it represents an opportunity region by region for librarians who can't attend every year to participate when **WLIC** comes to their vicinity (for example, two meetings in South Africa, Durban in 2007 and Cape Town in 2015, when it was truly wonderful to see librarians coming together from all of sub-Saharan Africa to get energy and inspiration from the colleagues from around the world who joined them).

But now **IFLA** has seized an even bigger opportunity. Under the leadership of Secretary General **Gerald Leitner** (former leader of the **Austrian Library Association** and now the full-time executive officer of **IFLA**) and current President **Gloria Pérez-Salmerón** (from Spain), a Global Vision process with remarkable promise has been patiently and carefully built. Previous **IFLA** key initiatives and long-term plans have been made, as for many of our organizations, by leaders, managers, and officers investing thoughtful weeks and months to develop mission statements and strategic goals, which are then fine-tuned with staff and constituent feedback.

This time, an ambitious **IFLA** leadership has imagined that, instead of the usual top-down planning process, the process will be up-ended. Imagine a library organization building an agenda and a plan that has been shaped by tens of thousands of library and information professionals worldwide. First, the world library community is engaged to offer input from all levels, and then that input will become the plan's foundation.

Can this upside down kind of strategic planning, on so large a scale, possibly work? We're learning that the answer is a resounding YES. With careful structure and facilitation, launched over the course of the past year, more than 10,000 librarians from around the world, via some 200 workshops, have participated in face-to-face dialog about the most important issues facing librarianship. [By the time this column is published, the numbers will be much higher.] Special, widely-based meetings

held last year in Athens and this year in Barcelona have focused attention and energy, with a view to preliminary roll-out of the Global Vision at the **Kuala Lumpur Congress** this August. Building on those in-person events, over 20,000 individuals from 190 countries have contributed additional input. On the basis of that massive input, substantial work on an overall **IFLA** action plan will take place between the **KL Conference** in 2018, Governing Board meetings in 2018 and 2019, and the 2019 **IFLA WLIC**.

The underlying intuition that the leadership has seized is that a global organization (one that's been around over 90 years) has a fresh opportunity, with a worldwide network of professionals, for impact across many cultures. For it is remarkable that the notion of "libraries," in a culturally diverse world, is very nearly as strong and consistent as shopping malls have become — however, libraries own a kind of respect across those many cultures that shopping malls will never have! There are libraries just about everywhere, all kinds, and more all the time.

What is impressive is not so much that the Global Vision project identifies elements we never before thought of, but that it "connects the dots" in a compelling way. Four themes emerge for me.

First, as a library and information community, we can and should continue to embody the principles for which we have always stood. Free and equal access to knowledge and information is essential, supported by a commitment to support literacy, learning, and reading. We are, as the Global Vision already affirms, the "guardians of the memory of the world" and have the obligations of guardians accordingly, in the service of our communities.

Second, we can, must, and should embrace digital innovations. Sometimes when I am shaking my head over the latest whiz-bang techno-marvel (most recently, a headset that hears what I'm thinking?!), I remember that

continued on page 85

ADVERTISERS' INDEX

39	ACCESSIBLE ARCHIVES	75	THE CHARLESTON ADVISOR	88	MIDWEST LIBRARY SERVICE
87	AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY	10	THE CHARLESTON REPORT	27	THE MIT PRESS
23	AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION	9	COLD SPRING HARBOR LAB PRESS	21	MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION
35	ASME	55	EMERY-PRATT	17	THE OPTICAL SOCIETY
5	ATG	3	GOBI LIBRARY SOLUTIONS	2	PROJECT MUSE
19	BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING	13	HARRASSOWITZ	31	SPIE DIGITAL LIBRARY
65	BREPOS PUBLISHERS	11	IGI GLOBAL	7	TAYLOR & FRANCIS GROUP
15	CASALINI LIBRI	43	INFORMS		

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ATG Profiles Encouraged from page 84

part of the University of Washington Libraries system, now spans two buildings and shares space with the campus Teaching and Learning Center.

NUMBER OF STAFF AND RESPONSIBILITIES: 16 permanent staff including six librarians (5 FTE) covering services including reference, instruction, circulation, digital scholarship, and a campus repository.

OVERALL LIBRARY BUDGET: Approximately \$1,750,000.

TYPES OF MATERIALS YOU BUY (EBOOKS, TEXTBOOKS, DVDS, VIDEO STREAMING SERVICES, DATABASES, OTHER): The majority of the library's collection development is done in coordination with colleagues across the tri-campus University Libraries system and includes serials, print and e-books, textbooks, DVDs, streaming media, digital archives, and a variety of disciplinary databases.

DOES YOUR LIBRARY HAVE AN ILS OR ARE YOU PART OF A COLLABORATIVE ILS? As a member of the Orbis Cascade Alliance, all University of Washington libraries are part of the consortially managed Ex-Libris Alma and Primo implementation.

DOES YOUR LIBRARY HAVE A COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT OR SIMILAR DEPARTMENT? Because the majority of the library's acquisition work is centralized on the Seattle campus, Tacoma has a collections coordinator, but not a collections department. All subject liaisons contribute to collection development.

WHAT DO YOU THINK YOUR LIBRARY WILL BE LIKE IN FIVE YEARS? The library will be more deeply connected to the learning and research missions of the institution. The specific implementation of this will depend on campus growth and budgets, though it is clear that campus administration is interested in implementing a learning commons, a makerspace, and there is renewed interest in creating more partnerships across campus.

Back Talk from page 86

imagining the digital library goes back to the 1940s in **Vannevar Bush's** famous article "As We May Think" (July 1945, *The Atlantic*), and that the reality of the digital library began to shape itself already very soon thereafter. Our systems predate the personal computer and widespread use of the Internet and continue to evolve. We will continue to be leaders.

Third, we share important working principles. The Global Vision insists that we must be leaders who advocate effectively for librarianship's values and practices, and by so doing ensure that our stakeholders understand the value and impact of our work. We are reminded to be less bureaucratic, more collaborative, and ever change-friendly.

And fourth, the Global Vision reminds us that our new and younger professionals are precious, essential resources, commanding us to care for training and professional development as the single most powerful force we can muster to build a successful future.

During the Global Vision meetings in Barcelona this March, I recalled one of my saddest library experiences ever. In 1999, during the **IFLA Congress** in Bangkok, I traveled to Phnom Penh in neighboring Cambodia, and while there we visited the National Library. It was a dreary and lifeless place, an old French colonial building, dusty, somber and quiet. But, I remind myself now, that, in spite of all the travails of that poor, small country, the national library was still there. I fished out a photograph I took then of a quotation that has since stayed with me. Inscribed in French

over one of the doorways: "Force can bind you for a while," it said (paraphrasing a little), "but an idea can hold you forever." Even after all Cambodia had been through, even though (another photo that is too sad to share) the card catalog drawers were almost empty, even there the idea of the library held on. And from a couple of miles away, another photo of the shiny new "Hun Sen Library," named after the strongman ruler who is still there almost twenty years later. Even the strongman was held by the idea of the library.

That kind of resistance, persistence, and power are what the **IFLA Global Vision** is about. It's a privilege to be part of the process and to encourage everyone to seize the opportunity participate and become part of the Global Voice of Librarianship. 🌱

Rumors from page 71

back and writing up a storm online! **Social Media: the 21st Century Communication Standard? Part 1** as well as parts 2 and 3 are waiting for you to read them and react! <https://against-the-grain.com/2018/04/social-media-the-21st-communication-standard/>

While we are going around our work and lives, I cannot believe what **Leah Hinds** is doing! She and her husband **Patrick** and their two kids, **Maddie** and **Jacob**, (and their two dogs), have been traveling across the U.S. She moves back and forth looking for good reception for her cell phone and how she keeps track of the times and time zones while still conducting **ATG** and **Charleston Conference** business is truly amazing! Kudos to **Leah**! See her letter in this issue, p.6.

Got an email from **Anthony Watkinson** just today! (isn't email wonderful?). Anyway, he was at the 40th **SSP** and met up with **Barbara**

Meyers (Ford). **Barbara** was there as one of the original founders of **SSP**. **Barbara** was a great friend of the **Charleston Conference**. For those of you who are old timers you will remember that for many years, she used to run a **half day Plenary Session** focused on publisher issues. The sessions were always wildly popular. I have tried to reach her by email unsuccessfully so I'm ecstatic that **Anthony** wants to reconnect with her! No grass is growing under **Barbara's** feet. She is now **Interim VP Publications, American Geophysical Union** and **DBA Meyers Consulting Services (MCS)**! Some **ATG history**. In every print issue of **ATG**, on page 5 you will notice the **ATG ad and subscription request form**. That was **Barbara's** suggestion and brainstorm! Hooray **Barbara**! Hope to see **Barbara** in Charleston soon! **Our 40th is coming in two more years (2020)**! Let's reminisce!

Inside Higher Education has been noticing what student reading assignments are this summer for common reading. **Mary Shelley's Frankenstein** tops the list this summer but other

choices include: *Soonish*, by **Kelly and Zach Weinersmith**, *Born a Crime* by **Trevor Noah**, *Just Mercy* by **Bryan Stevenson**, *The Death and Life of the Great Lakes* by **Dan Egan**, *All They Will Call You* by **Tim Hernandez**, *Hamilton: The Musical (Original Broadway Cast Recording)* by **Lin-Manuel Miranda**, *The Good Food Revolution* by **Will Allen**, *The Handmaid's Tale* by **Margaret Atwood**, *Tigerland* by **Wil Haygood**, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by **Jesmyn Ward**, *Lab Girl* by **Hope Jahren**. To read more specifics, go to <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/06/08/what-freshmen-are-reading-summer/>.

And more reading! To be published in July by **ABC-CLIO** — *The Complete Guide to RFPs for Libraries* by **Frances C. Wilkinson** and **Sever Bordeianu**, Editors. Foreword by **Katina Strauch**. Congrats to **Fran and Sever**! <https://www.abc-clio.com/ABC-CLIOCorporate/product.aspx?pc=A5565P>

Have a great summer and see you online! www.against-the-grain.com/ 🌱