The politics of promoting freedom of information and expression in international librarianship

John Alexander (Alex) Byrne

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Abstract

In 1997 the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) initiated a project to promote and defend the right to information. This decision to engage pro-actively with human rights was a radical expansion of the profession’s self-conception.

Applying an action research methodology, this study traces the development and implementation of the Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) initiative. It traces the origins of the decision, and assesses the outcomes of its first five years as it developed from a project into a continuing and central program of the Federation. Both the internal effects on IFLA and the consequences of the project for the profession of librarianship are explored.

The thesis locates the key decision in the history of librarianship, its growth as a profession paralleling the development of libraries as institutions. In turn, the decision is also located in IFLA’s own history, and the way it survived and worked to advance the ideas and tools of librarianship amid difficult and changing international environments.

The politics of professionalism is at the core of the study. The disturbing innovation which FAIFE represented took IFLA outside its traditional focus on the status and techniques of the profession, postulating a new role for the Federation. By investing librarianship with a higher responsibility, it has gone further than the now widely accepted expectation that professionals will place community interests before organisational and personal interests at all times. The responsibility to promote the fundamental human right to information has been
embraced as the key principle underlying and informing library and information service, the touchstone for evaluating professional priorities. This locates the primary purpose of the profession outside the profession’s institutional base in a supranational, absolute and almost universally recognised social goal.

Adopting these aspirations and this role carried many dangers for IFLA. It would inevitably seem a deviation into politics by some. It heightened the risks of both internal dissent and external criticism. It challenged the habitus of disinterested professionalism by invoking a more interventionist social responsibility for IFLA, its constituent library associations and the broader profession. It drew on evolving and contested understandings of professional responsibilities in a complex global environment and has redrawn the accepted boundaries of professional discourse in librarianship.

At least so far, the consequences have been beneficial for IFLA, reinforcing its jurisdiction and strengthening the Federation. As an international federation of professional associations, IFLA faces particular challenges in working across diverse national traditions, ideologies and cultures. Its existence and effectiveness rest primarily on internal cohesiveness. Its capacity to develop the FAIFE initiative into a program without schism, and indeed with growing support, has strengthened rather than weakened its organisational capacities. Through that process IFLA has reinvented itself, to a considerable degree, as a form of transnational social movement organisation. It has developed strong relationships with other civil society organisations while maintaining its position as a respected international professional body. It has strengthened its position by becoming a vigorous advocate for the right to information, thereby becoming an actor in the growing international concern with human rights.

This study of a decisive period in IFLA’s history offers a rare example of an international professional association in transition. In examining this project to promote unrestricted access to information as the reciprocal right of freedom of
expression, the research is a case study of the politics of an expanding sense of professionalism. IFLA’s experience is pertinent to a range of other organisations, and is itself part of the realignment of international political discourse in response to the growing influence of international organisations and the priority of human rights in international political agendas.
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Preface
& acknowledgements

In December 1997, I was appointed to be the inaugural chair of the Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). The IFLA Executive Board invited me to take that position because of my contribution to the establishment of the Committee by the IFLA Council.

Establishment of the Committee reflected major changes in the Federation. New emphases inspired most significant revision of the IFLA Statutes as well as the Federation’s preoccupations and ways of conducting its business. The geopolitical centrum which had been located between North America and Northern Europe was being replaced by a more global orientation. ‘Access to information’ was coming to be recognised as the fundamental motive of the Federation, a change in ethos which challenged the previous boundaries of professional concern in the field of librarianship.

My acceptance of the Executive Board’s invitation to chair the new Committee offered me an exciting chance to create a new area of professional activity within the Federation and to integrate my concerns about human rights into my professional life. It also presented the opportunity to take an insider’s view of a period of major political change within a significant international professional organisation. The opportunity provided a window into the politics of professionalisation, seen through the context of librarianship, with the changes catalysed by a growing concern with a basic human right, the right to know.
Commencement of this study at the beginning of 1999 enabled me to trace the
development of the FAIFE initiative over its first five years, from the Council
resolution which established the new Committee in August 1997 to the Council’s
endorsement of the Glasgow Declaration on Libraries, Information Services and
Intellectual Freedom in August 2002. My position provided access to both
documentation and the participants in the establishment and development of the
initiative. I could examine the internal operation of the project, and many of the
discussions which preceded it, as well as the documentation made publicly
available over the period, including publications, statements, minutes of meetings
and presentations. As a member of the IFLA Governing Board from August
2001, I was also privy to the Board’s discussions on FAIFE and related matters.

This privileged access offered an extraordinary opportunity to examine political
change within an organisation while it was happening and from within. However,
I was an actor in most of the processes and events as the initiative developed and
the instigator of many of them, which raises issues of responsibility and
objectivity. As chair of the Committee and, later, a member of the Governing
Board, I was bound to advance the initiative as effectively as possible, to respect
confidentiality where required and to endeavour to maintain the status and
reputation of the Federation. As a researcher, I needed to maintain an independent
and, as far as possible, objective stance and to critically examine the progress and
consequences of the initiative. These roles juxtaposed the passion and drive
which I had to inject into the initiative if it was to succeed with the detachment I
needed if I was to consider its development dispassionately – including the many
elements in which I was personally involved.

These contradictory responsibilities were reconciled by my adoption of a
participant observer or action research methodology. That approach, which is
discussed in the Introduction, separates the roles of participant and observer. The
observer should impartially consider the processes, events and results while the
participant takes action. But since the roles are combined in the one person, the
approach demands a constant negotiation between the roles and continual wrestling with the perspective.

In the case of this study, the method enhanced my practice as an actor in the initiative by requiring me to read widely, contextualise the occurrences and examine them critically. This offered many insights into the initiative’s development which, in turn, informed my actions in seeking to advance that development. The research was grounded by detailed reference to a broad range of relevant literature, use of official minutes, conference proceedings and other records of IFLA activities, and also my own records of discussions and correspondence (including, especially, email messages). Confidentiality did not hamper a frank account because the events and issues were recorded in statements, at meetings and on websites. During the work, I wrote many reports, conference addresses and papers, journal articles and news items. I have drawn on them in preparing this dissertation and noted the sources in the list of references.

This study is not a history of IFLA but it did require detailed examination of the Federation’s development with particular reference to political considerations such as the position and role it has adopted at various times in relation to human rights and developing countries. Key issues for the study lay in a number of very broad domains including the changing conceptions of libraries, the recognition of the right to know as a human right, moral regulation and intellectual repression, professionalism and ethics, internationalism and international organisations. These have been discussed in relation to the focus of this study, the promotion of unrestricted access to information via libraries. The need to stay within the word limit for this thesis has demanded some brevity in the treatment of the complexity of these issues.

Because the focus of the IFLA/FAIFE project is global, examples are drawn from a variety of states. Many examples have of course been drawn from Australia
because I am based in Australia and have a close understanding of the Australian library and information context and of local issues.

In addition to the access to discussions and documentation, this study has been facilitated by the contributions of so many colleagues to the initiation and development of the IFLA/FAIFE initiative. While it is impossible to acknowledge the contributions of all, some played special roles or gave particular insights which assisted the study. Robert Wedgeworth, Marianna Tax Choldin, Børge Sørensen, Monica Ertel, Robert Doyle, Christina Stenberg, Søren Møller, and Tony Evans played key roles in the creation of IFLA/FAIFE. Wedgeworth, Warren Horton and Leo Voogt were instrumental in promoting my involvement with the project. Voogt, Sørensen, Jan Ristarp, Carsten Frederiksen, Ross Shimmon and, latterly, Susanne Seidelin were crucial in shaping the IFLA/FAIFE Office into such a vital and effective element of the project. Many members of the committee and other IFLA colleagues contributed enormously to the initiative’s evolution and our growing understanding of the issues and the most effective modus operandi within available resources. Choldin deserves special mention because of her constant commitment and invaluable intellectual input to the IFLA/FAIFE project.

Outside IFLA, my supervisor Associate Professor Rod Tiffen has been a constant source of encouragement and gentle prodding for this often over-committed student. His perceptive comments have challenged me to view the IFLA/FAIFE project from outside the professional world of librarianship while benefiting from insider access to research data.

My successive employers over the period of the study – the Northern Territory University and the University of Technology, Sydney – have provided continuing sponsorship for my work with IFLA. It would not have been possible to undertake such a responsibility without their endorsement and patronage. I am grateful to the institutions and their senior officers, and also to my colleagues in
the university libraries who have encouraged and facilitated my international professional activities.

But, of greatest importance, my much loved family – Sue, Ben and Kate – cannot be thanked enough for their support while I have undertaken doctoral study together with such a large professional commitment and the demands of my work as a university librarian. Their forbearance and encouragement have stimulated me to complete the work in the shortest possible time.

Alex Byrne
November 2003
# Glossary

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABF</td>
<td>Association des Bibliothécaires Français</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALA</td>
<td>American Library Association (USA)</td>
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<td>ALIA</td>
<td>Australian Library and Information Association</td>
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<td>ALP</td>
<td>Advancement of Librarianship (in developing countries - IFLA core activity)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAIFE</td>
<td>Committee on Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (IFLA)</td>
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<td>CILIP</td>
<td>Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (UK)</td>
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<td>CLA</td>
<td>Canadian Library Association</td>
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<td>CLM</td>
<td>Committee on Copyright and other Legal Matters (IFLA core activity)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAIFE</td>
<td>Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (IFLA core activity)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FID</td>
<td>International Federation for Documentation</td>
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<td>ICA</td>
<td>International Council on Archives</td>
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<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and communication technology</td>
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<td>IFEX</td>
<td>International Freedom of Expression Exchange</td>
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<td>IFLA</td>
<td>International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>IGO</td>
<td>Intergovernmental organisation</td>
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<td>INGO</td>
<td>International nongovernmental organisation</td>
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<td>IPA</td>
<td>International Publishers’ Association</td>
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<td>ITU</td>
<td>International Telecommunication Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Library Association (UK) – included in CILIP since 2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>MSF</td>
<td>Médecins Sans Frontières</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Nongovernmental organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>OFLC</td>
<td>Office of Film and Literature Classification (Australia)</td>
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<td>PAC</td>
<td>Preservation and Conservation (IFLA core activity)</td>
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<td>TSMO</td>
<td>Transnational social movement organisation</td>
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<td>UAP</td>
<td>Universal Availability of Publications (IFLA core activity)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
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<td>WCC</td>
<td>World Council of Churches</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organisation</td>
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<td>WIPO</td>
<td>World Intellectual Property Organisation</td>
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