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Library and publishers – a partnership?

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IFLA was founded in 1928. A number of German librarians were already present at the foundation ceremony, in particular Adolf von Harnack and Heinrich Uhlendahl. When Heinrich Uhlendahl, the legendary Director of the German National Library (Deutsche Bücherei) in Leipzig, who held this position from 1924 right through until 1954 despite all contemporary political upheavals and changes, was arrested by the Nazis in 1933, the international library world unleashed such a storm of protest that Goebbels immediately ordered his release.

It was planned to hold an IFLA conference in Germany in the 1930s. But in spite of the fact that the Olympic Games were staged in Berlin and Garmisch in 1936 and the International Publishers' Conference was held in Leipzig and Berlin in 1938, IFLA always refused to contemplate meeting in Nazi Germany.

W. Munthe, the distinguished Norwegian librarian, was IFLA President from 1947 until 1951 and was the first to welcome German libraries and librarians back into IFLA and re-establish contact with the outside library world. He and Gustav Hofmann, the Director of the Bavarian State Library, were close friends, and in 1956 an IFLA conference was held in Germany for the first time, in Munich, under the chairmanship of Gustav Hofmann. There may only have been 350 participants but they were the crème de la crème of the international library and academic scene.

Gustav Hofmann was President of IFLA from 1958 until 1963. He was the first German to take over the presidency of an international association again after the Second World War and he made Joachim Wider, Director of the Library of Munich's Technical University, a polymath librarian who spoke eight languages, IFLA's first part-time General Secretary.

In 1968 a Congress was held in Germany for the second time, under the heading “Books and libraries in the industrial society”. An unusual feeling of change was in the air. A large number of new universities with new and unusual forms of library budgeting had been founded. But the conference was to experience a great shock: During the IFLA meeting in Frankfurt, Warsaw Pact troops marched into Prague and crushed the Spring Uprising.

In 1970 the Conference theme was “Lenin and libraries”; there then followed the great professional debates “The organisation of the library profession”, “Reading in a changing world”, “Universal bibliographic control” and “National and international library planning”.

In 1976 preparations had been made to hold the Congress in Seoul in South Korea. However, not only did the Soviet Union and all the East European countries protest, they also declared that they would resign from IFLA if the Congress was held there and in this they were supported by Lausanne.

In 1981 the Congress was held in Leipzig and entitled “The role of national centres in national libraries”.

The Cold War was at its height, and the Congress centred more on visa problems than on professional questions. For most Western visitors it was their first opportunity to take a look at the DDR and to visit areas outside Leipzig.

In 1983 Munich was chosen as venue; the topic was “Libraries in a technical world”. There were 1,500 participants and Munich showed itself to great advantage.

Today we are here in Berlin, the capital of re-unified Germany and the city with the most heterogeneous library landscape in continental Europe. The German State Library (Deutsche Staatsbibliothek) in East Berlin and the State Library Prussian Cultural Heritage (Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz) in West Berlin have amalgamated to form the Berlin State Library (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin), the largest library in the whole of the German-speaking world. The America Memorial Library (Amerika Gedenkbibliothek) in West Berlin and the East Berlin City Library (Stadtbibliothek in Ost-Berlin) have combined to form the Berlin Central and Regional Library (Berliner Zentral- und Landesbibliothek). An unusually broad-based network of university and special libraries supplies more books and information than any other comparable location in continental Europe. And yet the problems cannot be ignored. The economic situation in Germany has forced massive budget cuts, staff cut-back and reductions in important areas of library service and provision. The general situation in libraries is subject to more massive changes than ever before. The proportion of electronic information transfer media has increased rapidly, yet book and periodical production has not been reduced and it has proved impossible to cut back on print products, leading to a further budgetary short-fall. Today no library is financially in a position to provide access to the complete literary information spectrum on its own. This development has been further underlined by the world-wide economic concentration process taking place in the publishing and media industry. There is no denying the consequences of this process. The academic publishing house Springer, the very essence of a serious private academic publishing company, was sold to Bertelsmann four years ago. In the meantime Bertelsmann has transferred Springer to an investment group which has acquired the academic publishing sector of Wolters Kluwer but is unable to amalgamate the two as the approval procedures required by the relevant cartel legislation have not yet gone through and indeed may possibly never do so.

Libraries have for their part pressed for the rejection of these fusions, since they lead to a further monopolisation of academic information supply with all the problems associated with it.

A further strain on the relationship between libraries and publishers has been made by developments in copyright legislation. The notorious Paragraph 52a of the new Copyright Law enables considerably more text excerpts from fully copyright-protected works to be transferred to databases for the purpose of further dissemination than was previously the case. This means that libraries are better able to fulfil their function as literature provision agents; it must not, however, be forgotten that this will lead to a further reduction in the sales of specialist academic publications in book and periodical form, so that it will become increasingly difficult to produce these publications at all. Yet if these titles are not even published, no electronic system, however excellent, will be able to process and disseminate them. We are talking not so much about the dispossession of the publishers but much more about the fact that academic publications which ought to be distributed more effectively will in fact not be published at all.

Publishers and libraries are partners and this partnership must be strengthened and expanded. Academic publishers could not exist without academic libraries or indeed without libraries generally. Libraries could not operate without the products of these publishers. Both spheres have the task of providing the academic world and its readers with comprehensive information and must therefore work closely together. Both must together ensure that the general structural requirements are met and an immense amount of work lies before them before this can be realized. Both spheres must work together to bring about a significant improvement in reading education. Nobody is able to read a text from a computer monitor for longer than three minutes and still be in a position to grasp it in such a manner that he can remember and process it over a longer period of time. Reading education fulfils an extremely important function here, for the number of people unable to read, clearly comprehend and absorb a text is continually growing. Only people able to read books are also able to think analytically and really deal with professional challenges. In spite of the undoubted value and significance of electronic information it is quite clear that the book is an absolutely irreplaceable medium. Real knowledge and education, both essential for future development, can only be achieved by the reading of books.

In 1948 the American officer and German émigrée Jella Lepman came to Munich and founded the International Youth Library (Internationale Jugendbibliothek) as a Unesco project. Today it is the largest children's and youth library in the world and its achievements are universally recognized. In 1949 the America Memorial Library (Amerika-Gedenkbibliothek) was founded by Americans in Berlin. It became and indeed remained the most important lending library in the occupied and later divided city. The Goethe Institute, which today maintains 117 cultural institutes world-wide, has in the last few years established a further 55 Goethe Reading Rooms in Eastern Europe and China. Thanks to generous support from publishers in the German Federal Republic and with the help of the German Foreign Office it has been possible to establish a network of libraries which, at comparatively minimal cost, have been able to achieve ideal loan and user statistics. Not only do we need a plan for the further development of the library system at national and international level, we also need to realize it.

We must work together to ensure the development and efficacy of school and prison libraries.

The importance of libraries can be clearly illustrated when we examine the development of unemployment. Studies have shown that in those cities with the highest rise in unemployment the increase both in bookshop turnover and in the number of loans registered in public libraries has been far above average. Time and again the book proves itself to be the cheapest and most profitable information and educational medium in existence. IFLA is the ideal forum for the libraries of the world. We must intensify our cooperative efforts to assist countries in Africa, large parts of Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America to achieve general informational equality. The World Bank and other United Nations organizations must broaden their programmes considerably in order to optimize results and here libraries and publishers both have a contribution to make. The electronic media available today open up a whole new range of possibilities. We are now able to distribute information in ways previous unthinkable. Online connectivity has given us the chance of disseminating and applying today's knowledge throughout the whole world.

Libraries and publishers share the same goals and the same problems. Both have to work efficiently, woo their customers and sell their wares. Libraries must work on retaining their position as the information and knowledge centres of their respective universities, cities or institutions and on serving their customers. They must provide comprehensive collections of material and process and supply information. It will become increasingly clear to publishers that they can no longer rely on their products selling themselves automatically but that production will follow the dictates and needs of the market. Buyers will subject their choice of books and publications to much more critical appraisal and it will become more difficult to sell and distribute these products. Both our spheres are going through a period of upheaval in the development and distribution of knowledge. Whereas 15 years ago 98% of all information was still distributed in paper form, the proportion of information on film and in electronic form is now continually increasing. More and more electronic information products are appearing which require neither publisher nor library; the information can be transferred directly from producer to consumer. Book supply is dependent on publishers, bookshops and libraries, whereas electronic information is not, at any rate not in some areas. Cost is a decisive factor. The retail and subscription prices of academic journals have increased by on average around 350 to 400% over the last twenty years. Yet nearly half of all academic periodicals are produced by academic organizations, universities, associations, academies and other institutions. Even today, most of them supply data to the publishers for printing and shipping, and of course the publishers charge for this service. As soon as the consumer is prepared to accept delivery straight to his or her computer screen instead of in printed form, more and more academic institutions and their staff will start supplying their information directly to the end user as part of a member subscription packet or at much reduced subscription rates.

Will this mean an increase in information trash? In other words, will ever more texts and information be published on the internet without any kind of critical pre-selection process? The publishers' most important function is to check and to assess information as to its worth and suitability for distribution. What qualitative criteria should we apply here? There still exist many distinguished publishing houses whose good name alone stands as a guarantee of excellence and quality for libraries and customers alike. The internet often affords no such opportunity for assessment and pre-selection.

Libraries and publishers alike face enormous challenges. Whilst technical possibilities and problems increase disproportionately, budgets are shrinking rapidly. In order to survive in the future, both sides will need to combine their strengths and intensify their cooperative efforts.

There is no better place to begin than with IFLA and this international library congress in Berlin.