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This is a book review by Louise Cooke.

The Politics of Promoting Freedom of Information and Expression in International Librarianship: The IFLA / FAIFE Project

Alex Byrne

As inaugural Chair of the IFLA Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE), Alex Byrne is eminently well qualified to write about the early years of the project. He does so very comprehensively, offering an insider's view to the politics – both internal and external – that have shaped (and in many cases, constrained) the Committee's activities and functioning. The book is based on Byrne's doctoral thesis, charting the development of the Committee from the initial founding IFLA resolution in 1997 through to the endorsement of the *Glasgow Declaration on Libraries, Information Services and Intellectual Freedom* (IFLA, 2002) in August 2002.

As Byrne discusses, the FAIFE initiative is symbolic in its indication of a movement within IFLA away from narrower (and arguably, safer) concerns with the technical aspects of librarianship and promotion of the profession, towards the embracing of a concern with the wider societal and political context in which libraries and librarianship operate. The adoption of an activist role with regard to the promotion of the right to information may, for some, represent a contestable extension to the boundaries of professionalism within librarianship. To promote this right on an international scale is no easy task: Byrne leaves us in no doubt as to the difficulties and complexity faced by FAIFE in reconciling the different national and cultural boundaries to the principles of freedom of access to information and freedom of expression. In doing so, the reader is afforded a unique insight into the development, operation and politics of a global, campaigning group. The dangers of the Committee adopting and promoting (or being seen to represent) a narrow Western, Anglo-American hegemonic perspective are discussed, as are the legitimate boundaries for a professional body with regard to such campaigning activities.

After some initial introduction in chapter one to the context in which the decision to establish the FAIFE committee was taken, the second chapter goes on to offer historical analysis of the changes to the symbolic role in society played by libraries, particularly from the latter part of the nineteenth century onwards. Byrne argues that six dominant paradigms have characterised the establishment of a shifting identity for libraries, namely those of treasury, education, revolutionary, democracy, access and connected. The relevance of such paradigms of library identity to freedom of access to information and freedom of expression is not hard to identify. From this highly theoretical discussion, the reader is then offered a very detailed analysis of the establishment and development of IFLA itself. Although this may reveal some previously undocumented insights into the working of the organisation, and the tensions within which it operates, for many readers it may represent a level of detail that is inherently and unavoidably tedious.

IFLA's post-war role, and its responses to issues such as the Cold War, Stalinism, and McCarthyism, are, of course, critical to its stance on freedom of

access to information and freedom of expression: in this respect, Byrne portrays an organisation desperately trying to avoid offending member organisations by retreating into its pragmatic role as the agency of advancement of technical standards of librarianship. As the twentieth century progressed, Byrne describes a shift in IFLA's focus towards the needs of developing countries, and alongside this movement, an increased recognition of the organisation's potential obligations in the arena of human rights. However, he notes that it was not until the1976 Congress in Lausanne that intellectual freedom began to occupy an explicit place on IFLA's agenda, with a new emphasis on Universal Availability of Publications. This move towards recognising its potential role as an advocate of increased access to information was to lead to the establishment in 1995 of FAIFE's predecessor, CAIFE (Committee on Access to Information and Freedom of Expression).

Thus, in chapter five, the book moves on to a description of the birth and development of FAIFE, and here again we get an insight into the complex difficulties of establishing such a body. We are able to witness some of the internal disagreements and disgruntlement with regard to levels of contribution, struggles to secure adequate financial resources and sustainability, as well as the need to ensure balanced representation in order to combat an impression that IFLA had started to leverage the issue of human rights as a vehicle with which the 'developed' northern bloc could castigate the south. Once again, however, the level of detail will be more than most readers might wish: the minutiae of which IFLA officers attended which conference may serve well to offer evidence of the high level of activity in which FAIFE officers have engaged, but such details inevitably detract from more interesting debate around the questions of professional obligations and responses to issues of intellectual freedom.

More interesting, however, is the analysis in chapter six of FAIFE's response to a range of recent challenges to freedom of access to information and freedom of expression, particularly those with direct relevance to library and information services. The chapter makes a strong case for the need for constant vigil and monitoring of intellectual freedom across the globe – including in our own backyard. It also provides a strong rationale for the need for a body such as FAIFE to intervene on behalf of librarians facing prosecution for their views or for their work in providing unfettered access to information. A list of incidents, issues and events of concern to IFLA/FAIFE (p.91) from 1997 until 2002, starts with the Front National attempts to control content in French libraries and ends with the PATRIOT Act in the US, taking in Russia, the UK, Israel, Cuba, Yugoslavia, Indonesia, China, Australia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Japan, Afghanistan, Canada and Hong Kong along the way.

Somewhat oddly, it isn't until chapter seven that Byrne turns to a discussion of the nature of the right to information as an inalienable human right – this would surely have been more logically placed at an earlier point in the book. Nevertheless, the discussion is thorough and interesting, and offers some new perspectives, particularly with regard to the impact of the commodification of information. The final chapters are used to draw together

the conclusions of the book, firstly with regard to the role and increased influence of value-driven Non-Governmental Organisations, such as Amnesty International and Greenpeace, as representatives of 'transnational civil society'. Byrne speculates that the – almost unachievable – need to achieve harmony and a consensus of purpose in such international bodies can act as a major barrier to taking effective action on matters of principle. In the two remaining chapters, Byrne reflects on the nature of professionalism and professional ethics, and the transition of IFLA towards a body that can be situated within a growing international discourse of human rights and social responsibility.

Taken as a whole, the book represents a thorough and meticulous analysis of the impact of politics on the development of international bodies, as well as offering intelligent discussion on thorny issues such as what we mean by professionalism, what are the boundaries with regard to political involvement of professional bodies such as IFLA, and how can organisations that are themselves subject to internal conflict effect change on a global scale? It is in the transformation from PhD thesis to monograph that the book is least successful: although authoritative and comprehensive, it still reads very much like a PhD thesis, and tends to be structured accordingly with an excess of detail that detracts from the central interest of the work. Of course, this may be more or less of an issue for different readers – arguably, despite the critical importance of intellectual freedom to the information profession, students of international politics may find this book of more immediate interest and practical use than will students and practitioners of librarianship.

References

IFLA (2002) *Glasgow Declaration on Libraries, Information Services and Intellectual Freedom.* The Hague: IFLA, 2002.