

Towards IFLA's centenary: historical sources and themes

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Abstract:

This paper is intended as background for members of IFLA's Special Interest Group (SIG) for Library History (LibHist), and for others who may be contemplating conducting research on IFLA with a view to the celebration of IFLA's centenary in 2027. Specifically, the SIG anticipates compiling a commemorative volume of contributed chapters which will not only celebrate IFLA's achievements, but also examine some themes critically. An outline is given of the sources that can be used for the historiography of IFLA, and a list of themes that may be considered for chapters of the proposed commemorative volume is suggested. Unpublished documents about IFLA may be found in IFLA's own archives, held in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (Royal Library) in the Hague, in the UNESCO archives in Paris, and elsewhere. IFLA's own publications are important sources of information about it. The records of IFLA's variously named sessions, general councils, conferences and congresses are especially important for the earlier years. Much information on IFLA's activities and achievements can be gleaned from IFLA publications, such as guidelines and standards, policy statements, and reports on the work of IFLA's various professional units and strategic advisory committees, the IFLA publications series, and report series. A good deal of this material is published on IFLA's websites, current and archived. There is much published literature about IFLA. A number of historical accounts are cited, among other published articles, books, book chapters, and theses in which IFLA is referred to. The paper concludes with a listing of suggested themes for research on IFLA.

Keywords: IFLA, Centenary, Historiography, Sources

Introduction

A centenary celebration is an appropriate time to write or revise the history of an organization. Officially IFLA traces the founding what of is today the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) to a meeting in Edinburgh in September 1927, although a fair amount has been written about exactly when and where IFLA was founded and who may take credit for it (e.g. Breycha-Vauthier 1961; Málek 1970; Vries 1976; Guerrini and Speciale 2012). But 2027 is as good a year as any to celebrate. It also allows us time to prepare a fitting celebration.

Traditionally a celebratory volume is produced with chapters on the history of the organization, reminiscences of surviving elders, and congratulatory contributions. IFLA's Special Interest Group (SIG) for Library History (LibHist) is planning to contribute to the centenary and one of the projects under consideration is an edited volume of chapters on IFLA's history. Such a compilation, it is suggested, should not merely update the typical uncritical, laudatory historical accounts already published in the past. Instead of, or in addition to such accounts, it should subject IFLA's history to a critical examination of themes and trends, ideally interpreted in terms of relevant theoretical perspectives.

This paper is intended as background for members of the LibHist SIG and other interested scholars who may be contemplating research on IFLA with a view to the centenary. It briefly outlines the major categories of unpublished and published source material, and suggests a number of themes that may be worth exploring.

Unpublished sources

Unpublished documents about IFLA from its earliest days may be found in IFLA's own archives, held in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (Royal Library) in the Hague. It is not quite certain how accessible this material is. I have arranged to visit the Royal Library after the 2022 IFLA Congress to inspect the IFLA Archives.

The archives of other international organizations can also be expected to hold material about IFLA. The first is the League of Nations (1920-1946). From 1928 to 1958, Tietse Pieter Sevensma, the Chief Librarian of the League of Nation Library, was the Secretary General of IFLA and IFLA's secretariat was housed in the League of Nations Library, now part of the United Nations Library in Geneva. The second major international organization that is relevant to IFLA and may hold useful archival material is the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), founded in 1946. UNESCO saw libraries as playing an important role in pursuing its mission of "the building of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture, communication and information" (UNESCO 1945). Accordingly, during the first three decades of the post-war period, UNESCO provided considerable guidance and support to both IFLA and IFLA and the International Federation for Documentation, known as FID for its French name, *Fédération internationale de documentation* FID (Lor 2012). UNESCO still plays a significant, if somewhat reduced, role as a partner of IFLA. We can infer from this that UNESCO's archives at its Paris headquarters should contain material about these organizations.

There are various other smaller archives where material on IFLA can be found, for example in the FID's archives, which are also held in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, and in the archives of national library associations and national libraries which are members of IFLA. All these possible institutional sources need to be explored. In addition, I anticipate that archival material relating to IFLA may be found in various libraries and archives housing the papers of persons who played significant roles in IFLA, including IFLA presidents, secretaries general and other professional leaders, in so far as their papers may have been preserved.

When officers of a voluntary association are succeeded by others, the association's papers which they dealt with, should normally follow them, but until the association gets permanent offices, the process of handing over can go awry. In the case of IFLA, the process appears – at least as far as we can judge without further investigation – to have been well handled. This too deserves examination.

Oral history

Mention should be made here of the oral history project that was launched by the IFLA's LibHist Special Interest Group in 2020 with a view to the IFLA centenary. Groups of volunteers have commenced work on recording oral histories of three categories of IFLA personalities: IFLA presidents, secretaries general, and other person who made notable contributions to IFLA. The transcripts and recordings will be added to a collection to be administered by the IFLA Secretariat. At least some of this material should be available for use in the coming years.

Published sources

Various categories of published materials can be distinguished and are discussed below:

- Publications by IFLA: conference reports, minutes, and papers
- Publications by IFLA: other materials about IFLA
- Publications by IFLA: publications about matters other than IFLA itself
- Publications by other parties about IFLA
- Publications with casual mention of IFLA

IFLA publications: conference reports, minutes and papers

An excellent point of departure in accessing both published and unpublished materials in this category is the chronology of IFLA painstakingly compiled by Jeffrey M. Wilhite and covering the 85-year period from the founding of IFLA in 1927 to 2012 (Wilhite 2012). Wilhite's year-by-year account enables the researcher to follow these changes, as well as the dates on which major committees, professional units, and initiatives were initiated.

Wilhite's main sources were the proceedings of IFLA "sessions" as published in the *Actes du Conseil Général / Proceedings of the General Council* (1927-1968), and their successor series. Strictly speaking these are not unpublished sources, as they were printed and distributed to IFLA members and certain other parties. The titles used for these proceedings reflected the naming of the meetings, being referred to first as 'sessions' (1927-1952), with "conference"

only emerging in 1980. What old-timers knew as the 'IFLA conference' became the IFLA World Library and Information Congress in 2003.

Wilhite also lists a number of other sources, including the *IFLA repertoire* (1931-1968), the *UNESCO bulletin for libraries* (1947-1978), the section "IFLA communications", which appeared in the journal *Libri* (1953-1974), *IFLA news* (1962-1974), the *IFLA directory* (1971-?), and *IFLA journal* (1975-), which replaced *IFLA news*. As IFLA grew and became more complex, the degree of detail in these sources tended to diminish.

IFLA publications about itself

IFLA has produced many publications introducing and promoting itself, and describing its activities. Among others, the *Annual report*, referred to above, serves this purpose. On the IFLA website there is a page about IFLA's history, giving references and clickable links to PDF files. This site (<https://www.ifla.org/history-publications/>) also includes publications other than those of IFLA itself. Individual professional units have also published brochures aimed at recruiting members. Many of these have been ephemeral, but more recently they have been published on the website and can be found by using the (not very intuitive) search function. Indeed, today the IFLA website is the single most important source of information about IFLA and a search there is indispensable in any historical research. This leads us to the next category.

IFLA publications about its activities

Over its almost one hundred years of existence, IFLA has published a vast amount of information in addition to the resources referred to above. These includes standards and guidelines, manifestos and statements of principles, technical reports, reports of research projects, reports of conferences and workshops, and major report series such as the trend reports (<https://trends.ifla.org/>). IFLA has a number of publications series. The best-known are the *IFLA Journal* (1975-), the IFLA Publications Series (180 volumes at time of writing), the IFLA Series on Bibliographic Control, and the IFLA Professional Reports.

We should not overlook publications relating to IFLA's annual World Library and Information Congress, including prospectuses, promotional newsletters, and the congress programme (see <https://trends/ifla/org/>.) In recent years all of the above have increasingly been published online. These publications are not necessarily about IFLA itself, but reflect what it does and the significance of its activities.

Many publications about IFLA's activities are produced by IFLA's professional units (sections, special interest groups, and divisions), and to the former core activities, now reformed into advisory committees (<https://ifla.org/advisory-committees>). They issue a variety of publications about their activities, such as annual reports, reports on project outcomes, professional and technical reports and guidelines for best practice, and newsletters.

Other publications about IFLA

In addition to material published by IFLA itself, a great deal has been published about IFLA in articles, books, conference papers, and theses. These include:

1. items specifically about IFLA,
2. items describing IFLA activities, events (conferences, etc) and programmes,
3. interviews with IFLA personalities, and
4. items about other LIS matters in which the role, contribution, etc. of IFLA are mentioned

What the researcher finds relevant depends on the topic of interest and how much material can be found on it. In some cases, a mere casual mention of IFLA may provide evidence of IFLA's involvement in an event or process, or of the presence of IFLA in a given country.

IFLA's institutional repository, the "IFLA Library", should not be neglected. It was launched in 2013 and is growing steadily, as congress papers and other resources are added to it continuously. It can be searched and browsed, and access to the materials is instantaneous (<http://library.ifla.org/>).

A good place to start searching would be the bibliography of Wilhite's book (Wilhite 2012, 339–46). The majority of the approximately 140 references, listed in alphabetical order by author, are to IFLA publications. The bibliography in the thesis by Vries (1976), in the same order, covers material for the period 1927 to 1940. In addition, a bibliography of publications on IFLA's history can be found on IFLA's website (<https://www.ifla.org/history-publications>). Materials are grouped in some broad categories. Substantial bibliographies can also be found in relevant books and articles. For example, The book by Alex Byrne (2007) on IFLA and freedom of information has an impressive bibliography, which is, however, not limited to works about IFLA. For serious historiography, however, searches in bibliographic databases are essential.

Various encyclopaedia entries have appeared about IFLA, for example those in the various editions of the *Encyclopedia of library and information science (ELIS)*. It is worth looking at the entries in successive editions since they have different authors and different emphases.

An important source for the history of IFLA's first fifty years is the celebratory volume, *IFLA's first fifty years; achievements and challenges in international librarianship* (Koops and Wieder 1977), published as IFLA publication, no. 10, and reprinted in 2011 as an e-book by De Gruyter. For IFLA's 75th anniversary a much less ambitious but nevertheless useful brochure was produced (Henry and Davis 2002).

Conceptual frameworks

Historical research should not be undertaken in a theoretical void. A suitable theoretical framework adds value, especially in the case of more ambitious contributions. A great deal has been written on the theory of organizations, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international NGOs in the context of management studies, international relations, development studies, civil society and political-economic actors, etc. This literature may provide useful theoretical frameworks for the historiography of IFLA.

Topics in the literature

The last part of this paper is concerned with the topics that occur in the literature about IFLA, and the themes that would be worth exploring in our historical research. I base this on an analysis of a Zotero database of literature that I collected myself during the approximately ten years that I worked on my book on international and comparative librarianship (Lor 2019). Since the book was published, I have continued adding material. After sifting through over 500 items to omit irrelevant or marginally relevant items, I was left with a corpus of 281 items. I estimate that a more thorough search could turn up twice as much material, but this corpus must suffice for the purposes of this exploratory analysis.

To the 281 most relevant items, one or more of sixteen tags were allocated. The tags were developed inductively, i.e., on the basis of “literary warrant”, not deductively using predetermined categories. The allocation of tags is set out in the Table 1, which gives a rough indication of the topics that occurred in the literature I had collected.

Table 1: Tags allocated to literature about IFLA

Topic (in alphabetical order)	Items
Advocacy	17
Conferences/Congresses	25
Cooperation, collaboration with other NGOs etc	15
Core activities, advisory committees & programmes based at HQ	76
Countries: country and regional participation and activities	36
Development of LIS & involvement in developing countries	46
FID: relations with FID	6
General IFLA history	60
Incidental mentions of IFLA (snippets possibly useful for context etc.)	22
Regional offices	3
Relations with funders, sponsors, etc.	24
Sections, SIGs & professional structures: their activities & histories	19
Standards & guidelines	17
Statements & manifestos	12
UNESCO (relations with)	24
WSIS (World Summit on the Information Society) (participation in)	11

NOTE: many items were allocated more than one tag. The total number of tags allocated is 412.

The tags most frequently allocated related to IFLA’s various core activities (today’s advisory committees) (76), the history of IFLA generally (60), IFLA’s involvement in LIS in developing countries (46), IFLA’s presence or activities in relation to specific countries (36), conferences/congresses (25), relations with funders and sponsors (24), and relations with UNESCO (24).

Suggested themes for research

The topics covered in the literature, and inspection of the items included, suggested a number of themes for research on the history of IFLA. A good deal of the literature contains relatively superficial descriptions of events and developments in roughly chronological order. That suggests the first theme: (a) annalistic, general history. Seeking a framework for more analytical and critical themes, I was reminded of an observation by Edgar Schein, who wrote that all organizations “have to deal with two fundamental sets of issues – external adaptation and internal integration” (Schein 2011, 314). Although Schein was writing about organizational culture, this suggests that we might distinguish two broad areas: (b) IFLA’s external environment and how it responds to it, and (c) how IFLA conceptualizes and organizes itself. These areas obviously overlap, since in any healthy organization the two sets of issues must be dealt with holistically.

Group A: Annalistic, general history

1. Updating or supplementing the book by Wilhite (2012) to cover the period after 2012
2. A general history of IFLA since the half-centenary in 1977, to cover the period since the volume of Koops and Wieder (1977) marked IFLA’s half-century in 1977.
3. Divisional or section histories.
4. Compilation of a comprehensive bibliography of literature on IFLA.

Group B: IFLA’s external environment and IFLA’s response

5. IFLA in relation to a century of societal and political change, for example, IFLA and the evolution of internationalism in the 20th century
6. IFLA and globalization
7. IFLA’s Anglo-American heritage and how this affects its relationships with non-English speaking members and the non-English speaking world
8. IFLA’s presence and impact in specific regions or countries, against the background of political-economic factors
9. IFLA and the developing world: initial neglect, awakening, various responses including the ALP (Advancement of Librarianship in the developing world) Programme, the creation of regional sections, regional offices, and later programmes to aid in the development of library associations, etc. Evaluative studies can make use of a wealth of literature on development studies
10. IFLA’s relations with the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations (the forerunner of UNESCO)
11. IFLA’s relations with the FID (I have started working on this theme)
12. IFLA’s relations with UNESCO (cf. Lor 2012), with special reference to the preservation of cultural heritage, e.g. IFLA’s participation in the International Committee of the Blue Shield, the Memory of the World, and IFLA’s relations with other “peak bodies” (international organizations recognized by UNESCO as spokespersons for their sections) such as the International Council on Archives
13. IFLA’s relations with UNESCO, with special reference to issues of access to information resources (copyright issues, open access, etc.), and IFLA’s relations with other “peak bodies” such as the International Publishers Association
14. IFLA, documentation, and information science: competition with FID; IFLA’s striving to carve out a niche for itself; filling the gap left by FID’s demise

15. IFLA and the construction and dissemination of professional best practice: standards and guidelines, technical reports etc.
16. Impact of information technology (the Information Society, Internet 2.0 and beyond, social media). How has this environment changed? How has IFLA adapted and utilized the new media?
17. The development of IFLA's role in international advocacy; evolution of areas of advocacy, where advocacy was initially conducted alongside the promotion of professional best practice, from international bibliographic and library cooperation pre-WW2, through the Universal Bibliographic Control (UBC) and Universal Availability of Publications programmes, to the more explicit advocacy at the World Summit on the Information Society and after
18. IFLA and freedom of information: FAIFE and IFLA's responses to threats generally and in individual countries
19. IFLA's manifestos and statements of principle: partnerships, impact
20. The impact of information technology (the Information Society, Internet 2.0, social media). How has this environment changed? How has IFLA adapted and utilized the new media?

Group C: IFLA as an organization

21. IFLA's general evolution in terms of growth and stature (from a "gentlemen's club" to a widely respected international organization)
22. The evolution of IFLA governance, organizational structure, and management, using relevant theory from the business literature, e.g., organizational development theory, and organizational history as a management and promotional tool; also using the extensive literature about the management of NGOs; transition from "amateur" SGs to professional association managers
23. Professionalization (IFLA's contribution to the professionalization of librarians and information workers, and the professionalization of IFLA)
24. The growth and proliferation of IFLA's professional units over time – to what extent they reflect adaptation to the evolving information environment or ecosystem
25. IFLA's membership: growth and stagnation?
26. IFLA's finances; the role of donors and sponsors
27. Evolution of IFLA's annual meetings: councils, conferences and the WLIC
28. IFLA's communications
29. IFLA and professional best practice: standards and guidelines, technical reports etc. Evaluation of their impact.

These are merely suggestions that arose from my exploratory analysis of the existing literature. Many more themes may be identified. I want to stress that much interest and depth of analysis will be attained if use is made of the wide range of relevant literature from outside the field of LIS. In addition, the above list tells us that a framework needs to be devised for the LibHist SIG's planned edited volume.

Conclusion

There is no lack of material awaiting IFLA's historians. There are interesting and challenging themes to explore. I hope that this overview has generated interest and will prompt members

of the audience to consider participating in the LibHist SIG's centennial projects and contributing to the historiography of IFLA.

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