Resolution Concerning Cuba adopted at IFLA
Council II held at Boston, USA on Friday, 24th August 2001

The following resolution was adopted. 553 votes in favor, 54 against, 12 abstentions.

Be it resolved that IFLA:

1. State its strongly felt concerns about the effects of the US embargo that include
   - Obstacles to the export of information materials to Cuba despite their formal exclusion from the embargo
   - A severe reduction in the capacity of Cuban libraries and citizens to purchase information materials and related technologies due to the economic effects of the embargo
   - Indirect disruption of access to information by Cubans and Cuban libraries caused by the effects on power supply, telecommunications and other aspects of life in Cuba
   - Inhibitions to professional interaction and exchange caused by the restrictions on travel to the US by Cuban nationals and to Cuba by US nationals.
2. Urge the US Government to eliminate obstacles to access to information and professional interaction imposed by its embargo and any other US Government policies.
3. Urge the Cuban Government to eliminate obstacles to access to information imposed by its policies.
4. Support and continue to monitor initiatives by the Cuban library community to safeguard free access to print and electronic information, including via the Internet, and in particular:
   - Support and assist the ASCUBI [Asociación Cubana de Bibliotecarios] initiative to develop a code of ethics for the standards and principles of library services in Cuba
   - Urge the Cuban library community to adopt fully the IFLA Public Library Guidelines [The Public Library Service: IFLA/UNESCO Guidelines for Development. Saur: 2001]
5. Encourage IFLA colleagues to attend the international conference on information in Havana 22-26 April 2002 hosted by IDICT [Instituto de Información Científica y Tecnológica] to help further professional relations with Cuba.

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part of the world. Several times we talked about intellectual freedom and their techniques for building their collections during times of limited budgets. It was obvious that many of their problems resulted from underdevelopment, scarce resources, limited growth, and a precarious economic situation that is typical throughout Latin America.

Visits to Libraries (Services)

On my trips to Cuba, I observed a range of achievements of the library profession as well as a range of problems caused by scarce resources and economic limitations. On the positive side, these limitations have compelled library professionals to be creative, patient, vigilant and resourceful. On the other hand, Cuban libraries face chronic shortages of basic resources — such as office supplies, paper, computers, and budgets for acquisitions and technology. They experience regular problems with the telephone system and international communications, which make library development difficult. Yet, librarians have found solutions to technological as well as other problems, and they have progressed toward their goals of collection building and improved services. For example, they continue to add materials to their collections through exchanges, donations, and by developing new partnerships in Cuba and throughout the world.

Cuban librarians place public service and outreach high on their priorities and they have accomplished a great deal by combining creative writing and publishing programs. They also have embraced culture and the arts as paths to reaching children and youth, parents, working people, individuals with special needs, isolated rural communities, students, the aged, and the sick.

Examples of these programs are:

For children, the public libraries host “game” days and contests about historical figures, the arts and culture, and have developed story times, theater presentations, and art and music appreciation days. For parents, librarians teach classes on integrating reading into family activities and have established “bebetecas” (books for pre-schoolers). They also take books to the workplace or establish reading rooms to circulate books to employees. For the elderly and housebound, they deliver books to their homes on regular visits. In one library closed for repairs, the librarians traveled throughout neighborhoods to meet patrons, give classes, talk in schools about library services, and continue outreach activities. These librarians were without a building for over 6 months, but were never idle.

Another innovative program established by several libraries was a “subscription borrower group” where patrons contribute books and/or pay a small sum to borrow new books. The cost of subscribing is 10 pesos per year — a peso is worth about 5 cents, so about $.50/year. To put this amount in context, I want to mention a few things — a Cuban librarian makes about 300 pesos per month (actually Cuban doctors make the same amount). These “subscription borrower groups” are called Minerva Clubs and they invite patron support and donations to public library popular fiction collections, and are one way in which Cuban libraries have responded to the increased need for new books when publishing declined dramatically in the early 1990s. These clubs, started with donations of materials from Spain, serve large numbers of people and help the library buy multiple copies of high-demand titles. Another point for context — Cuba’s literacy rate is about 98%. Cuba is a nation of readers. Everyone in Cuba owns books, lots of books, and often these books are loaned to friends or re-sold. Their books can also be used to subscribe to this popular fiction club.

Cubans Study their Users

On my most recent trip to Cuba, several in our group participated in the conference “From Papyrus to the Virtual Library” sponsored by the Casa de las Americas. There, we had the opportunity to learn about several studies done by Cuban librarians to assist them in designing and delivering services to library users in their communities. Most of these studies were prepared by Cuban librarian-researchers (investigadores), whose position responsibilities include conducting research and needs assessments on a particular library’s constituencies in order to design improvements in or develop new programs or services. Several librarians presented research that they had completed in the course of their work or had conducted to address a specific need.

It was very interesting to see, through these presentations, what the Cuban librarians sought to change or improve. The topics studied by Cuban librarians revealed an intense interest in preserving the historical record, such as the documents and publications of the various archives, libraries and research centers. They were also interested in intellectual property rights, distance education, marketing of cultural products (i.e. books, websites, etc.), the role of the librarian in a digital world, and the library as promoter of culture in the community and among special populations. It was refreshing to learn about the Cubans’ use of technologies to offer
services to such diverse populations as scientists, teachers, athletes and physical education faculty, workers and administrators of a sugar refinery, environmental specialists, individuals with disabilities and, finally, in the training of library school students. An especially interesting new project involved developing library collections to serve a targeted neighborhood or section of town, after doing an extensive needs assessment.

Their Collections

As I mentioned earlier, Cuban librarians have used a variety of strategies to build their library collections because of their limited budgets. Exchanges (canje) and donations are used extensively to build the collections — because library budgets are so limited. In fact, most U.S. research libraries with Latin American collections have long-standing exchange relations with dozens of Cuban libraries and research institutes. Over 40 years, these relations have resulted in hundreds if not thousands of titles exchanged between Cuban and U.S. libraries. Another way Cuban libraries build collections is through the “deposito legal” (legal deposit) program, which requires all publishers in Cuba to give 5 copies of each title they publish to the National Library. The National Library adds a copy to their collection, sends some copies to other libraries, and uses some copies for exchange with its extensive list of international partners. And, just a plug here, the exchange list of the National Library is on their website (http://www.lib.cult.cu).

The National Library is another place we visited. Founded in 1901 and celebrating its 100th anniversary this year, it has a sizeable collection (over 3 million items), and serves as the country’s main repository for Cuban intellectual patrimony. The Library also provides a full array of services to the public including circulation, reference and children’s services. It also serves as the lead organizer of a network of 387 public libraries in the country. Several librarians at the National Library are in charge of providing training, cataloging and reference tools, program and planning support, continuing education, and technological support to public libraries as well as to about 600 school libraries, 500 health centers, and 1000 information centers in Havana.

At the National Library, we talked about collection building strategies and found that we have a lot in common. We strive to build collections that the reading public wants and that serve to stimulate minds, and to offer various perspectives on cultural and national development and national policy matters. I was heartened to learn of their interest in all types of materials, especially Cuban authors that are published outside of Cuba. This is not new — every time I have been to Cuba I have received the same request — to help them find books about Cuba and by Cuban authors, wherever they may be published in the world.

Now, I’d like to talk about the Internet in Cuba. The Internet, as might be expected, was of intense interest among librarians. During visits, our Cuban hosts asked many questions about how we meet the demands of patrons and how new technologies, especially the Internet, have transformed our profession. We shared our experiences about the impact of technology on our work, and this led to several lively discussions about the impact of change on library services in general and on the rising expectations and desires of library patrons for electronic materials while we must continue to offer traditional products and services. In Cuba at this time, developing professional expertise on computers and the Internet is a top priority for most staff. To accomplish this, they organize workshops, courses, and seminars to teach about computers and information technology.

Cuba already has quite a commitment to web development. Libraries and research centers have an impressive web presence, with nicely designed sites, unique databases and active, energetic developers that are eager to digitize and offer many unique Cuba holdings. At the March conference organized by Casa de las Americas, we saw demonstrations of several new electronic products produced in Cuba. One of them, CubaLiteraria, is dedicated to Cuban literature (http://www.cubaliteraria.com). Billed as “the portal to Cuban literature,” its content and developing database of authors make this an important resource for studying Cuban literary production and publishing. Another website that brings together many Cuban resources is the Portal for Philosophy (http://www.filosofia.cu). And, the Casa de las Americas, has begun digitizing the first 40 years of its important literary journal (Revista Casa de las Americas) with wide-ranging coverage of Latin American literature, criticism, and the arts.

At our visit to the Institute for Scientific and Technological Information (IDICT), we met with a team of web developers and library technology coordinators and they told us about their initiatives in support of business development and commercial enterprises in Cuba. They offer their services to Cuban as well as foreign businesses. However, there are still some obstacles to Internet access in Cuba, such as telecommunications and equipment. But, there is also great interest in and expectation that the
Internet will be more available in Cuba soon. This is a priority of the National Library right now and they plan to implement it in the nation’s public libraries once some of the obstacles are overcome. There is no doubt that the Internet is on its way to every corner of Cuba.

Now I’d like to switch to talking about the two library associations that exist in Cuba — the Association of Cuban Librarians (ASCUBI) and the Cuban Society of Information Sciences (SOCICT). We met with both groups and learned of their organizations and their goals, their activities related to professional training, and their ways of keeping current (actualizarse). ALA officials who traveled to Cuba in May also met with these two groups.

ASCUBI, the Association of Cuban Librarians, has about 1200 members and represents librarians, library workers and library technicians. There are chapters in nine of the 14 provinces. The decision-making body, the Executive Council, meets regularly and one of their agenda items is to facilitate development of relations with sister librarian associations. Cuban librarians pay about one peso per month for dues to ASCUBI (about 60 cents per year). And, they are interested in developing a professional relationship with ALA as well as with individual librarians from around the world. They are currently discussing how they might participate in the ALA Sister Library Initiatives. Their next conference will be in November and they extend an invitation to U.S. librarians to attend.

SOCICT, the Society of Cuban Information Professionals and Technologists, also met with us. They have about 800 members with chapters in all 14 provinces. They regularly host (since 1988) an international forum on technology. During our meeting with the leadership of this association, they asked us to convey a special invitation to U.S. librarians to an upcoming conference they are organizing. This conference, “Information, Knowledge and Society: Challenges of a New Era” or INFO2002, will be an important forum for dialogue between librarians from Cuba and the U.S., and will be held April 22-26, 2002 in Havana. Over 500 librarians are expected to attend from Latin America, the U.S. and Canada. The SOCICT colleagues emphasize that this conference will be an excellent opportunity to exchange experiences, best practices, philosophy and values. In fact, the leadership of ALA has received an official invitation to this conference (this will be reported at tomorrow’s meeting of the International Relations Committee of ALA — Tues. June 19, 2-4 pm, Moscone Convention Center, Rm. 110). I am convinced this conference is an opportunity to create lasting professional relationships and partnerships with our Cuban counterparts, so I am organizing a delegation to attend. Actually, we are working to accommodate several delegations from the US and Canada. If you’ve ever wanted to check out Cuba for yourself, or if you want to be a part of this important dialogue, please let me know and I will sign you up.

In Conclusion

What I’ve concluded from these visits is that Cuban libraries are an important component of Cuban society and serve thousands of people on a daily basis. Librarians in Cuba are eager to provide materials of all kinds to their users who are very well educated about Cuba and about the world and who read a lot. Cuban librarians look for and deposit in their collection materials with different viewpoints, including materials that are critical of the revolution, materials written by Cubans living abroad, and materials on human rights, such as the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The development of libraries in Cuba has been hampered by the economic and political isolation of the country, a movement led by the U.S. with its singular support for, and now Congressionally mandated, economic blockade of the island. This 40-year blockade has made it difficult for libraries to develop, as well as for people to survive with proper nourishment, medicine, and supplies. To combat their poverty and isolation, Cuban librarians have worked with many professional associations, international agencies and universities all over the world in order to acquire books and materials for their libraries. Their primary manner of doing this is through gifts and exchange. One of the main messages we received from librarians in Cuba is that the librarians would appreciate donations of materials and supplies to help them continue to build their collections. The librarians also seek to establish relations with U.S. librarians and professional associations when such relations are based on honesty, mutual respect and professional support.

Independent Libraries

I would have liked to have ended this presentation here. But, I want to address the “independent libraries” issue and describe what I found out about them while in Cuba. I leave the “independent libraries” for last because they are really a small group of people in Cuba who are not representative of Cuban librarianship and who do not deserve mention as part of the history of Cuban librarianship.
Many of you have probably read the information on the “independent libraries” that has circulated widely on ALA listservs, where Robert Kent (speaking for the Friends of Cuban Libraries) claims that these libraries exist despite repression and harassment by the government, that they are bastions of intellectual freedom, and that they deserve the support of librarians throughout the world.

However, based on my research and on my visits to those libraries, I found that these Kent press releases do not provide the whole story of these libraries. Today, in order to fill in the gaps left by Mr. Kent’s spin, I will describe what Larry Oberg and I found out when we visited many of these libraries and interviewed their owners, their neighbors and their leaders.

Using the contact information provided by the “independent libraries” website, Cubanet.org, we visited over one dozen libraries, many located in the Havana area. We reviewed their collections, interviewed their owners and asked them questions about their purpose and motivation, their circulation, outreach, about how they build and finance their collections, about their foreign and domestic leadership, and about their political alliances and goals for the future of Cuba.

We found that the “independent libraries” in Cuba have collections ranging from a few dozen to a few hundred books in private homes. The titles are similar to collections that are displayed in most Cubans’ homes (politics, economics, social history, the arts, medicine, etc.). In several homes, I asked which books have been banned by the government. The answer they gave was “none.” I asked if the books or their library activities had drawn the attention of any governmental, police or security forces; the answer was no. I asked if they had books that Cuban libraries did not have. Some said they didn’t know; others said yes and showed us Cubanet.org newsletters and webpage printoffs, a book by Vaclav Havel, an issue of Newsweek, a book on the theory of democracy, and publications written and donated by the Cuban American National Foundation (an anti-Castro organization in Miami). We were told that the libraries receive regular deliveries of these materials and some monies from contacts in Miami and Mexico. The families also said that they have worked against the Cuban government for years. They told us that they received regular deliveries of materials by personnel from the U.S. Interests Section. And, they mentioned that these materials, especially, were very useful in their efforts to oppose the Cuban government.

In Santiago, we visited one library because we had in our possession an e-mail from Robert Kent that claimed that the founder of this library and its director since 1998, had been harassed and jailed and that the books had been confiscated.

But, what I found was a different story. I asked if the owner had been arrested or if the books had been confiscated. The answer was no. I asked if the government had ever interfered with the library, or taken any books, or harassed her or the owner. She said no. When I asked her where the “owner” of the library was, she said he had left Cuba in 1994 (six years earlier) and currently lived in Miami where he continued to work in opposition to the Cuban government. This information contradicted Mr. Kent’s press release about the government harassment and imprisonment of the owner and the confiscation of his books. By visiting his “library,” we found out that this “owner”— contrary to Mr. Kent’s press release — had not established this “library,” that he had not been an “independent librarian”, that he had never participated in loaning any materials, that he had not been harassed by the government, and he had not had his the books confiscated by the government. In other words, our interview with this “independent librarian” proved Mr. Kent’s email to be false in every detail.

At other homes of these “libraries,” I asked where they had obtained the materials that were not Cuban publications. Some of them showed me packages (indeed still in the packing paper) of materials they said were dropped off by the U.S. Interests Section or were from Miami or Mexico. Again, the materials that I saw that were sent from outside of Cuba were: Cubanet.org website printoffs, Cubanet.org newsletters, website printoffs with the label from the U.S. Interests Section, and the Cuban American National Foundation publications.

Our Conclusions

These “libraries” appear to us to be a public face for a dissident movement within Cuba that has its leadership, financial support and media operations outside the country. The individuals who operate these “libraries” are neither independent, nor are they librarians. They depend upon donations from sources that oppose the Cuban government and, therefore, cannot be considered independent of interests outside of Cuba.

But the supporters of these “libraries” face an interesting dilemma: The fact that these so-called “independent libraries” exist proves that there is some
kind of intellectual freedom in Cuba. They apparently have the freedom to dissent, freedom of assembly, freedom to read materials that criticize the government as well as materials that seek to overthrow the government. They are free to accept money (or "payment for services") as one "librarian" put it) from sources outside the country and free to tell their neighbors as well as foreign visitors and the foreign media about their collections, their services, their purpose, their desires to topple the Cuban government, and their connections to and payments by a hostile foreign government.

The existence of these libraries seems to provide evidence to the contrary of what they claim in their communiques and statements to the press. They do continue to operate; they do continue to report on Radio Marti and Radio Mambi; they do continue to speak to foreign press and to foreign visiting librarians, and they do continue to be well-paid for services rendered. Enough said.

So, now that we know who is who in Cuba and what the real librarians in Cuba are doing vs what the "independent librarians" in Cuba are doing, I would like to pose a question to U.S. librarians — how can we make sure we are learning about what is really happening in Cuban libraries?

My answer is this: we can reach out to Cuban librarians, we can ask Cuban librarians how to be their friends, we can visit Cuba and begin to collaborate with them, we can send materials and books of all kinds for their collections but primarily the books that they say they need to educate their children and their students — not just books for a few dissident "librarians" connected to Miami (who seem to be well-taken care of by our government, for that matter).

More of us need to travel to Cuba to see what is really going on there with libraries. And, we need to realize what the U.S. travel restrictions to Cuba mean. Frankly, I believe we are more restricted on travel than the Cubans would like to pose a question to U.S. librarians - how can we make sure we are learning about what is really happening in Cuban libraries? And finally: Based on our very detailed discussions in Cuba, the real librarians in Cuba know who their friends are. Friends are individuals that respect each other, that do not seek to destroy or mislead, and that base their relationships on honesty, integrity and the values of our profession. I invite U.S. librarians to continue to care about and help Cuban libraries. One way to help is to send donations of materials and supplies. Another way is to spread the word about the accomplishments as well as the real challenges of librarianship in Cuba! And, you can help by visiting Cuba. Join the delegation to Cuba next April for the INFO2002 conference, or go on your own! Your travel to Cuba is an investment in your own intellectual freedom.

WORKS CITED

Biblioteca Nacional Jose Marti (Jose Marti National Library of Cuba). This site contains news of library events, writing contests, and the Library's exchange list that it is willing to donate to its international partners (http://www.lib.cult.cu).

Casa de Las Americas (http://www.cult.cu/casa/indice.html). Library Director, Ernesto Sierra. beacas@cult.cu


CubaLiteraria, is dedicated to Cuban literature (http://www.cubaliteraria.com) and billed as a "the portal to Cuban literature," its content and developing database of authors make this an important resource for studying Cuban literary production and publishing. Portal for Philosophy (http://www.filosofia.cu).

ASCUBI Association of Cuban Librarianship (ASCUBI): President, Marta Terry mar-theory@hotmail.com.

SOCICT, the Society of Cuban Information Professionals and Technologists. (http://www.idict.cu/socict.html).

The INFO2002 conference site is at http://www.congreso-info.cu/. For more details, on the conference in Havana (April 22-26, 2002), contact the conference organizer: Lic. Nicolas Garriga Mendez, President of the Organizing Committee, Apto. 2019, La Habana 10200, Cuba. FAX (537) 338237; Tel (537) 635500; info@idict.cu. For travel arrangements to this conference, contact Marazul Tours (bguild@marazultours.com). To participate in the US delegation, contact Rhonda Neugebauer (rhonda.neugebauer@usc.edu), University of California, Riverside, 909/787-3703.

"Cuba on the Internet," http://www.cuba.cu/cubainternetes.html. Contains one of the most comprehensive lists of Cuban Internet sites with links to specialized portals, media outlets, government sites, libraries, and universities.

University of Havana: http://www.ub.cu/

Escuela Nacional de Técnicos de Biblioteca (Vice Director Moraima D. Lorigados Hernandez), Calle 34, no. 513 entre Quinta y Septima Avenidas, Municipio Playa, Ciudad de la Habana, Cuba. Telephone: 22-4502 or 29-4461

Biblioteca Provincial Ruben Martinez Villena (Public Library): Obispo 59, entre Oficio y Baratillo, Habana, Cuba

NOTE: The above was presented as a paper for the program "Cuban Libraries: Challenges and Achievements" for the American Library Association Social Responsibilities Round Table, International Responsibilities Task Force, June 17, 2001 (WESTIN Elizabethan D, 4:30 p.m.-6:30 p.m.)

Progressive Librarian #19/20