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Прегледни рад

Public Relations Powered by Cycling Librarians

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Abstract

Public relations is a key factor of library advocacy. A group of enthusiastic international librarians have been using their passion for cycling and libraries to build public relations and increase library advocacy through the Cycling for Libraries unconference. This paper discusses the potential that cycling and unconferences have for continual improvement of libraries' public relations.

Keywords:

libraries, public relations, advocacy, cycling, conferences, unconference, librarians, networking, professional training

The night before the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) 2010 conference in Goteborg, a small group of librarians arrived in front of the conference center, tired but full of enthusiasm after riding their bikes from a pre-conference organized by IFLA's New Professionals Special Interest Group and Management of Library Association Section in Boras, 70 kilometers away. Mace Ojala¹ (Helsinki City Library) and Jukka Pennanen (National Library of Finland) proposed this ride as a fun way of traveling and meeting other librarians. This trip was a precursor to a dedicated series of events that were to follow in the next years: *Cycling for Libraries*².

Cycling for Libraries is the only international unconference of its kind, drawing an average of 100 librarians from multiple countries. The organizers, a team of Finnish librarians and supporters, lead

this cycling group through towns and cities along a designated route, stopping at libraries along the way and meeting fellow librarians. Participants typically cycle 60 kilometers a day, while engaging in conversation about professional issues. During the unconference, participants are encouraged to share their experiences via social media using the #cyc4lib hashtag to help promote the events. At the beginning of each day, participants and people who want to follow along with the event can watch the professional videos created by Kirjastokaista, a web TV and radio team that supports libraries in Finland³.

In 2011, the well-known Copenhagen to Berlin bike route was updated with some detours to include more than twelve library visits and an exclusive ride through the Rostock Highway Tunnel. This biking trip was prepared as a mobile unconference which prompted discussions of library topics while cycling between and stopping at a variety of library destinations. Around 80 international librarians

¹ Mace Ojala, "Allow Me to Rephrase: /We/ Are Arriving in IFLA2010 by Bicycle from Borås", *Riippumatonsiantuntija*, <http://xmacex.wordpress.com/2010/07/05/allow-me-to-rephrase-we-are-arriving-in-ifla2010-by-bicycle-from-boras/> (accessed July 7, 2010).

² "Cycling for Libraries", *Cycling for Libraries*, www.cyclingforlibraries.org (accessed September 18, 2013).

³ "About Kirjastokaista", *Kirjastokaista*, <http://www.kirjastokaista.fi/en/tietoa-kirjastokaistasta/> (accessed September 18, 2013).

and library supporters rode this inaugural route, with numerous local librarians joining along on various days.

The second edition of *Cycling for Libraries* was prepared by the same organizing team with the great support of library associations from the host Baltic states: Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The group of cycling librarians (and library lovers) rode over 600 kilometers from Vilnius to Tallinn. They stopped for library visits, met with local politicians, and joined in for cultural gatherings. As a result of being joined by local librarians for short distances, this trip brought attention not only to librarians, but also to the realities of the local libraries that were visited.

The latest from this unconference series took place in 2013 from Amsterdam to Brussels, putting public libraries on the agenda of civic interests. *Cycling for Libraries* proved it was a viable form of library advocacy when members of the Dutch, Flemish and European parliaments engaged with the group in active discussions about the future of libraries. With the help of Civic Agenda, an independent organization that seeks to push the agenda of public libraries across Europe, international librarians made their voices heard in European forums and contributed to the launch of an EU Parliamentary written declaration on "The Impact of Public Libraries in European Communities"⁴.

The project grows yearly but continues to keep the same daily routine for the participants: waking up, packing, biking the whole day, stopping to visit libraries, and checking in at the end of the day. Along the way, while pedaling or over a coffee, participants get to know each other and discuss issues that are relevant to them. Most often these issues include the work they do, the challenges faced in their home libraries, inquiries into the library-related realities of other countries and cultures, and hopes about the future of information sharing. The visited libraries, with their local innovations and struggles, are often a topic of conversation while riding bikes. Without necessarily producing definitive conclusions, these discussions shift as the *Cycling for Libraries* tour stops to visit other local libraries.

⁴ "MEPs Welcome 100 Cycling Librarians to the European Parliament in Brussels", *Cycling for Libraries*, http://www.cyclingforlibraries.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Cycling-for-Libraries_Press-Release_EN.pdf (accessed September 18, 2013).

Cycling and Libraries

Libraries have undertaken a variety of initiatives to ensure that they stay relevant to the needs of the people whom they serve. Not surprisingly, cycling and libraries are not strangers to one another. Providing library services via bicycle is an outreach initiative that has appeared in cities all over the world. The Seattle Public Library, in the United States, has a program called *Bikes on the Go*, where a librarian takes a custom made bike, stocked with books and library card applications, to city events like farmer's markets⁵. One objective of this program is to recruit a younger demographic to use the library, and to build awareness of what the library can do. Jared Mills of the Seattle Public Library explains his experience with the *Books on Bikes* program as, "Sometimes you're answering reference questions in the building and sometimes you're on a bike, I would like to be part of ushering in this new era of librarianship that's just a lot more mobile and agile and really responsive to the community and the [sic] needs"⁶. This proactive approach is just one way in which librarians are building community with their patrons.

Not only can libraries provide services while on a bike, cyclists have often come to rely on libraries for services. For many cyclists, "the library is often the primary source for connectivity, local information, and entertainment"⁷. Those who go on long cycling tours can stop in libraries to find information about the local area, or use the library's other resources and amenities. Participants of *Cycling for Libraries* are quite aware of this, as librarians and as patrons who need to utilize the library's resources during a stop along the route. During the trip, it was quite normal for the cycling librarians to use the host library as a place of comfort and rest from the road. If internet was available, many participants checked email and social media, drank coffee or beer, or even took advantage of the comfortable seating to take a nap. The library stops were also very educational, as the local librarians often

⁵ "Books on Bike", *Seattle Public Library*, <http://www.spl.org/using-the-library/library-on-the-go/books-on-bikes> (accessed August 25, 2013).

⁶ Gabriel Spitzer, "Books on Bikes' Helps Seattle Librarians Pedal to the Masses", NPR, <http://www.npr.org/2013/08/11/210248982/books-on-bikes-helps-seattle-librarians-pedal-to-the-masse>, (last modified August 11, 2013).

⁷ Boyd, John and Elizabeth Cramer, "Bicycle Tourists: Staying Connected at Public Libraries", *Public Libraries* 52, no. 3 (May 2013): 22-25.

gave brief presentations about their library and the types of initiatives they were working on with their community.

The relationship between cycling and libraries goes both ways. It can also mean that the library loans out bicycles or bike tools to their patrons. In Copenhagen, the Bicycle Library allows for patrons to check out bikes for 3-4 days at a time, as well as provides cultural programming on the topic of innovative cycling⁸. The library has many different types of bikes in its collection, ranging from folding bikes, to a three-person bike called "The Conversation Bicycle." The purpose of the Bicycle Library is to increase the development of innovative cycling and to promote cycling culture internationally. Copenhagen has a strong cycling culture, so it is very natural that the library would fill a need to enable people to get on bikes and start cycling. Not surprisingly, Copenhagen was also the starting city for the inaugural *Cycling for Libraries* trip.

While the participants of *Cycling for Libraries* are mainly librarians, one does not have to be a librarian in order to participate in a group bike ride for library advocacy⁹. In Brooklyn, New York there was an organized ride called *Bike the Branches* where 400 participants raised \$20,000 for the Brooklyn Public Library. Participants registered and were given the choice to ride to various library branches in the neighborhood. It helped raise awareness of the importance of the public library, engaged the local community, and raised additional funds to help the library offset costs. Similarly, the *Bicycool Library* in Poland, is another group ride that goes from library to library¹⁰. Their goal is to promote reading, bicycles, and libraries while building community. This project encourages people to create their own group rides and provides information on their website on how to implement this kind of event.

Cycling and libraries can be a very powerful combination. It is clear that there is not one way that they can be used together. The participants, the

purpose, the programs, they all may vary; but the activities themselves are almost always innovative and engaging.

Unconferences and Professional Development

Librarians need to have access to continual professional development opportunities in order to provide current and innovative services for their patrons. Professional courses, classic conferences and meetings are often sources for inspiration. However, among these professional development opportunities, the unconference format has gained fans in the past few years because it offers creative learning opportunities. Participation, openness, dynamic content, and radical trust, are core characteristics of these types of events, making unconferences a very modern way of providing learning opportunities for librarians¹¹. Having a flexible format dedicated to sharing knowledge and engaging individuals in dynamic conversations makes unconferences an open space for developing best professional practices.

Given the changing nature of librarianship, there is a continual tension between staying the same and being in a state of perpetual change as libraries respond to the information needs of their communities. The unconference format allows for this tension to be addressed according to the interest of the participants. This format has proven to be popular, and now librarians have the opportunity to take part in a number of unconferences such as *Next Library* (organized by Danish librarians)¹², *Library Camp* (UK)¹³, or the *Chicagoland Library Unconference* (USA)¹⁴ to name a few. A benefit of unconferences is that they can be organized by anyone, and do not necessarily rely on professional organizations to build their audience. In many ways, unconferences are organized like a grass-roots effort, allowing everyone the chance to shape their own experience.

⁸ "Why Have a Bicycle Library?", *Bicycle Innovation Lab*, <http://www.bicycleinnovationlab.dk/bicycle-library/about-the-bicycle-library> (accessed September 3, 2013).

⁹ "Brooklyn Public Library's *Bike the Branches*", *Brooklyn Spoke*, <http://brooklynspoke.com/2013/04/17/brooklyn-public-librarys-bike-the-branches/> (accessed September 13, 2013).

¹⁰ "Bicycool Library", *Bicycool Library*, <http://bicycoollibrary.org> (accessed September 17, 2013).

¹¹ Amanda Etches-Johnson, "The Unconference: What It Is and Why It Matters", *Access* 16, no. 2 (2010): 26-27.

¹² "About", *Next Library*, <http://www.nextlibrary.net/about> (accessed September 13, 2013).

¹³ "What Is Library Camp", *Library Camp*, <http://www.librarycamp.co.uk/> (accessed September 13, 2013).

¹⁴ "About", *Chicagoland Library Unconference*, <http://cluncon.org/about/> (accessed September 13, 2013).

Cycling for Libraries is an innovative example of an unconference. Mace Ojala once referred to it as "the longest one" since it spreads over more than nine days. Even though participants come with "homework" that they want to discuss during the trip, the energy they put into cycling and experiencing new places ends up influencing their topic of conversation. The learning experiences that occur during the trip often lead people to surprising discoveries. One example was from the 2013 trip from Amsterdam to Brussels. Participants looked at ways in which public libraries served everyone in their community, and then learned about how in the Netherlands and Belgium, fee-based memberships supported these libraries. For some librarians, paying to use the public library was a foreign concept since libraries are free to use in many countries like the United States. However, in the current economic crisis, libraries in the Netherlands and in Belgium are urged by their local authorities to become more financially self-sustainable. While these economic challenges made it hard for local librarians to improve their services, the learning opportunity for the cycling unconference participants was not lost. Example of efforts made by these librarians to continue to provide quality services for their patrons were a true inspiration for everyone.

It is difficult to measure the changes brought to libraries by those who have participated in unconferences. However, the dynamic and educational value of unconferences play a large role in the professional development of librarians by allowing them to brainstorm about the problems they are directly facing in their home libraries. As the librarians invest effort into sharing their experiences while participating, they also gain from learning about everyone else's input. For *Cycling for Libraries*, these experiences create a true bond between the participants that carry into long-term friendships even after the event has been completed. As a flexible platform, unconferences are truly an asset for the professional development of librarians.

Public Relations and Libraries

The main mission of *Cycling for Libraries* is to elevate the profile of libraries and librarians in the public's eye. Seeing over 100 librarians on bicycles riding through a city is quite the spectacle, and draws attention from the local community. For

Jukka Pennanen, librarians need to take action and "Be more courageous, more proud"¹⁵. The kind of attention that has been drawn to the annual event has really built awareness of the importance of libraries. Part of the shift in how libraries communicate to the public about what they can offer is achieved by leaving the library and meeting people in unexpected places. Getting outside of the library is essential to building this awareness, especially now when many libraries are facing budget cuts.

In 2013, *Cycling for Libraries* took their advocacy initiative even further by arranging meetings with local politicians. Many of the stops along the route involved speaking with European Parliament members, as well as representatives from library associations. In the Hague, the group went to the Dutch Parliament to hear from members of various political parties and professional associations, and discussed how important libraries are to their communities. In an unconference-like fashion, groups sat around round tables to talk about viable solutions for issues facing libraries today like budget cuts and extending services. The cycling tour ended in Brussels with a dinner at the European Parliament with members of the EU. In previous years, *Cycling for Libraries* drew media attention, gaining newspaper and television coverage in the towns that they stopped in, in addition to support on social media. This positive attention reinforces the mission of advocacy for libraries, and spreads attention about the *Cycling for Libraries* project.

Local area's library association and local librarians helped organize many of the stops along the *Cycling for Libraries* route. From snacks to discussion tables, cheering to dinners, local associations prepared for and welcomed the international librarians. These local visits were not only an inspiration, but also a very good way of making the local librarians and their associations more visible in their communities. This added to building relationships with the professionals who the *Cycling for Libraries* participants met along the way. The simple goodwill put forth by these fellow librarians and professional associations were much appreciated by the cyclists and the organizers of the trip.

¹⁵ Rebecca Aslop, "Cycling for Libraries 2012 – Librarians Take to the Baltics by Bicycle", *Library Journal*, <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2012/08/shows-events/cycling-for-libraries-2012-librarians-take-to-the-baltics-by-bicycle> (last modified August 16, 2012).

Conclusion

One of the biggest benefits of participating in *Cycling for Libraries* is the opportunity to network and bond with other librarians all over the world. It's amazing to see that despite language and cultural differences, the dedication to librarianship is the same. At every library stop there is an opportunity to learn about what interesting things are happening in that library community. In turn, participants can take what they've learned back to their home libraries and implement new ideas. Since

everyone comes to the trip with a professional problem or area of focus that they'd like to work on, the time spent on a bike allows someone to think about how to approach their problem or discuss with a colleague and brainstorm ideas.

During the last evening of the 2013 *Cycling for Libraries* unconference, the 2014 route was announced. *Cycling for Libraries* plans to go from Barcelona, Spain to Lyon, France in August. The plan is to end at the IFLA World Library and Information Congress 2014 in Lyon. Consider cycling along with other international colleagues for the trip of a lifetime.

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Библиотекари на бициклима јачају односе библиотека с јавношћу

Резиме

Вожња бициклом и промоција библиотека само су наоко неспојиве. Године 2010, група финских библиотекара предложила је забавно путовање бициклом у дужини од око 70 километара као прилику за неформално дружење библиотекара, размену искустава и промоцију библиотека. Године 2011, библиотекари-бициклисти возили су од Копенхагена до Берлина, 2012. од Виљнуса до Талина, а 2013. од Амстердама до Брисела. Стотинак библиотекара и пријатеља библиотека прелазило је, у просеку, 60 километара дневно, заустављало се у локалним библиотекама у којима су их дочекивале колеге и представници локалних власти, разговарало са грађанима и представницима медија, прикупљало нове идеје.

У протекле три године Cycling for Libraries постала је бицикличка конференција, заправо највећа не-конференција у библиотечком свету, која омогућава учење без реферата, power point презентација и седења у затвореном простору. Последња бицикличка тура показала се као моћан вид заступања интереса библиотека јер су чланови холандског, фламанског и Европског парламента ступили у контакт са бајкерима и развили активну дискусију о будућности библиотека. При томе су бајкери директно утицали на доношење декларације Европског парламента о улози јавних библиотека у европској заједници.

Локална библиотекарска удружења, као и сами библиотекари, на успутним станицама помажу целу акцију: од хране до дискусионих трибина. Посете локалним библиотекама нису само инспиративне за бајкере, него су и одличан начин да локалне библиотеке и удружења постану видљивији у својим заједницама. Једна од највећих предности учешћа у бицикличким турама је прилика да се библиотекари повежу са колегама широм света. На свакој успутној станици, у свакој библиотеци, постоји могућност да виде специфичне облике рада и да касније примене оно што су научили у својим библиотекама.

Кључне речи:

библиотеке, односи с јавношћу, заступање, бициклизам, конференције, не-конференција, библиотекари, умрежавање, професионална обука

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