Librarianship in Mexico: a discipline in crisis, by: José Ángel González Castillo; Carlos Alberto Martínez Hernández (MEXICO)

Abstract

Library Science in Mexico is a discipline at crisis. On one hand, in the search for integration into the information society its Study Program changes towards a more administrative and technical model of education; on the other hand, as our introductory example shows, the lack of a humanistic education for librarians, is leaving them in a very unethical position since they do not have what is needed to understand the political and social relevance of knowledge production and transmission. A positivist perspective of reality has invaded classrooms, conferences, publications and research. There is no critical or theoretical thinking in Mexican librarianship at all nowadays and this determines an apathetic and passive performance from librarians, especially in public libraries since these public spaces are open to the social, economical and political characteristics of the place they were built on. More over, the mission of public libraries as social change agents does not accomplish due to the fact that they are not offering any objective alternative to mass media standardization of public opinion. And as TV and media-based democracy spreads throughout the whole country, librarians seem oblivious to this situation. It is because of this, that we believe it is necessary for librarians to get a theoretical and humanistic education while they are in school in order to be prepared and committed with their social role.

Keywords

Librarianship; public Libraries; crisis;   Epistemology; Politics

Resumen

La bibliotecología en México es una disciplina en crisis. Por un lado, en su búsqueda por integrarse en la sociedad de la información su Programa de Estudios cambia de dirección hacia un modelo más técnico y administrativo; por otro lado, como nuestro ejemplo introductorio lo muestra, la falta de educación humanista para los bibliotecólogos los sitúa en una posición poco ética ya que no cuentan con lo necesario para comprender la relevancia social y política de la producción y transmisión del conocimiento. Una perspectiva positivista ha invadido los salones de clases, las conferencias, publicaciones, y la investigación. No existe pensamiento crítico ni teórico en la bibliotecología mexicana actualmente y esto determina una actuación pasiva y apática por parte de los bibliotecarios, especialmente en las bibliotecas públicas ya que estos espacios públicos se encuentran abiertos a las características sociales, económicas y políticas del lugar en que fueron construidos. Además, la misión de las bibliotecas públicas como agentes sociales de cambio no puede cumplirse dado el hecho de que éstas no ofrecen ninguna alternativa objetiva a la estandarización mediatizada de la opinión pública. Y mientras una democracia televisada y basada en los medios de comunicación se extiende a través de todo el país, los bibliotecarios parecen no darse cuenta de la situación. Es por esto que creemos que es necesario para los bibliotecarios tener una educación teórica y humanista mientras cursan los estudios para que se encuentren preparados y comprometidos con su rol social.

Palabras clave

Bibliotecología; bibliotecas públicas; crisis; epistemología; política.

Introduction

On May 2006, the biggest public library in Mexico was open. The Mega-library as it was named by the Secretary of Culture, was built at the north-west side of Mexico City, right on the corner of one of the most popular neighborhoods in the city.

The Mega-library project was part of a National Cultural Program, which also included the implementation of computers in schools and libraries supported by the "new friends" of former President

Vicente Fox, Bill and Melinda Gates. By establishing publicly on T.V. and radio this new relationship, Bill Gates committed himself to "donate" computers and money (he actually donated 30 million dollars) to this program so that every school and every library had access to the web and latest information technology. However, they never talked about the rest of the conditions of this contract, which leaves the government with a debt about $2500 million dollars in software updates. (Velasco, 2004)

The Mega-library was supposed to be the main library in the whole country, a central administrative library in charge of the country's entire library system. The matrix of a national library project represented by a huge rectangular six floors building. (Mateos, 2006)

After the first six months some serious issues appeared. The collection was not representative of the vast and relevant literary Latin-American and international world. In a visit made on July 2006 and after doing some searches in the catalogue, it was clear that some of the most renown writers such as Gabriel García Márquez , or Eric Hobsbawm for example, or their most important works such as *History of the XX Century* did not figure on the catalogue, and the ones that did, could not be found physically in the collection. Instead of that, what had been generously collected was the last Secretary of Culture's Public Inform figuring in the shelves with several copies.

Also to be mentioned is the overwhelming presence we observed in several visits during 2006 and 2007 of police officers outside and inside the library. Cops walk around and in between the tables; through out the whole library or stand up in every corner as vigilantes, while outside the library, the police officers do not allow anyone to sit on the floor or lean back on the walls, giving no further explanation for this attitude but just an offensive arrest threat. This police presence in the library is a smaller image of what the government is doing in the country to manage its lack of achieved consensus with an everyday angrier society.

And all this inconsistencies and abuses have been going on and on without any kind of public critical expression from the librarians, as we had the experience to find out when visiting the place as well.

Just a week after the new president took office (from the same party PAN, Partido Acción Nacional, as the last one, Vicente Fox), on December the 1st 2006, under a huge police siege and after six months of public demonstrations, city riots, journalists assassinations, dissidents disappearances and of course, the doubt of a legitimate electoral process, the budget for Education and Cultural sectors was cut as it has never been done before, in order to give more money to Police and Military sectors, and this included the budget for libraries and the Mega-library. (Vargas, 2006)

In a country that has just passed through several social conflicts that have lead to assassinations, tortured activists, illegal deportations, narco-government secret relationships, etcetera, the libraries and librarians are not working in order to give people alternative information sources about this political reality, nor they do anything to offer diverse opinions or points of view other than the official version of it. The librarians keep working on their daily duties while the library appears as a sterile abandoned cave, completely oblivious to social reality.

The media spreads an alienated official version of reality that comes from the political elites of the country. Propaganda goes through T.V. programs as commercials and public libraries do not do much to fight these dictatorial regime tendencies. Rabinowicz Gisela & Volonté, Jorge (no date):

In Mexico material and intelectual goods have been concentrated in a very few hands. Televisa`s case is impressing because of it`s monopoly in mexicans cultural life during the last 50 years. For example, Editorial Televisa is the biggest spanish speaking group in the world and leader in production,

representation and distribuition in Latin America and the hispanic market in the United States. Nowadays it publishes 82 titles -14 regionals, 10 for the hispanic market in the United States and 58 local titles in Mexico-, most of them leaders in their respective categories, which are distributed in 19 countries of the amerian continent, with a total of 489 regular editions, 62 special editions per year and more than 116 thousand 115 published pages a year. (Rabinowicz Gisela & Volonté, Jorge, no date, p. 10)

These public spaces are not reflecting what the country has been going through or the world either. This situation is due to the lack of social, political and cultural appreciation and understanding shown by librarians.

This example leads us to a relevant and critical issue: Librarianship education is not providing librarians with enough theoretical and critical tools to face what political and social conflicts demand from public libraries.   Librarians have not been capable of taking the responsibility of changing the way public libraries develop in Mexico. Neither do librarian's organizations have. Leaving aside budget cuts or authorities censorship, this is a consequence of the education librarians get in school. Geir Vestheim (1994):

As institutions for dissemination of knowledge public libraries necessarily have to play a double role. On one hand they communicate knowledge based on purposive rationality (knowledge derived from natural sciences, technical sciences, economics etc.), on the other they also communicate knowledge traditions with their roots in humanities, lifeworld experience and the arts. But this concerns only the content of what the libraries communicate. (Vestheim, 1994: p. 12).

Librarianship in México: a concept in crisis.

During the last 40 years, librarianship school authorities in Mexico have been trying to establish this discipline as a science, arguing that the more quantifiable, mathematical, and administrative librarianship activities become, the more positive answers we will get from information processing. According to that, automatization and information technology will determine the way librarianship behaves as information science in the *information society*. However, what can be noticed in the Study Programs is that the education of students, teachers, and also researchers, is mostly technical. See Figure 1.

For example, by analyzing the 2001 Study Program of the Library Science School at The National Autonomous University of Mexico UNAM (See Figure 1), we find subjects such as "Information Marketing" (technical, but not scientific) and we also find the complete lack of any humanistic or theoretical subjects. Academics in this field are just keeping the discipline in a very technical level; therefore, it is difficult to understand how can they talk about history of libraries or the mission of libraries since most of them do not know anything about History. Geir Vestheim (1994) spoke clearly about this subject:

The lack of basic philosophical, sociological and historical thinking in practical librarianship is quite a paradox: Libraries collect, organise and distribute theoretical knowledge through book and other media to all kinds of people, but we do not have much theory on the social and cultural functions of librarianship itself. (Vestheim, 1994, p.1)

On the other hand, librarians have adopted concepts such as "*information society*" without any critical or theoretical perspective but just the doctrinal acceptance of a concept as a Commandment. And they do not even have analyzed, in an historical perspective, why any of the past societies such as the Greeks or the Renaissance society or even the Enlightened society could have been named a "*society information*" as

well, or what does this concept implies in a political manner, as for them, knowledge society or information society are reduced to one word: technology.

Robert Darton (2000, p. 1) explains this matter **: "**for every society develops its own ways of hunting and gathering information   its means of communicating what it gathers, whether or not it uses concepts such as "news" and "the media," can reveal a great deal about its understanding of its own experience.

In the present work, we analyzed the technical and positivist perspective and education of librarians in Mexico while we locate librarianship as a discipline at crisis. And in order to support our argument, we will mostly use the critique of some of the Frankfurt School's authors among some others.

Instrumental reason and positivism in librarianship

Horkheimer's (2005, p.79) critic of instrumental reason is particularly related to positivism when he speaks of how mathematical procedures "shaped the dynamics of thinking, transforming it into an object or an instrument". This have lead to a behavior where Thinking cannot be "thought" or "analyzed" because it has become an "automatic process" for the exigencies to direct praxis.

Luis Villoro (1997, p. 101), a Spanish-Mexican philosopher says this kind of rationality gives all priority to the means and completely neglects a serious inquiry for the end itself.

Herbert Marcuse (1897, p.199) talks about the principles of positivism: "the validation of thinking by reducing it to experience of the facts" the orientation of knowledge thinking to the determination of Mathematics and Physics as means of exactitude.

This way, the ideal of progress and order as the historical axis of positivism ends up with the realization of late capitalism, justifying a scientific and technical progress that means the triumph of instrumental reason.

In librarianship the technification of knowledge begins when concepts of other disciplines are taken uncritically with the end of achieving efficiency and accuracy and without relating any of these concepts to social or political contexts.

Thus, it is interesting to observe how librarians use the term "information" for anything, for any object, for any historical character. As for them, a subway ticket and *The Communist Manifest* are just different formats of the same thing: information.

Under this postmodern perspective, librarian's unhistorical appreciation of knowledge strengthens itself by the hierarchical circle of research, education and work practice as well as in every uncritical publication they manage.

Furthermore, for many of our docents, mathematization of knowledge is the way to follow. For instance, through bibliometrics and quantitative methods such as statistics, they believe they are actually making science, but what they really do is denying any critical interpretation of social and cultural Mexican reality by limiting research and discourse to the given facts of experience and not attending the very problems of cultural practices in Mexico; by not individualizing knowledge or giving it a social and political importance but taking it as useful data for faceless user's needs.

Librarianship and positivism flow together when these two show data as immutable and truthful, that is, they reject any kind of reflexive or critical thinking [45]. For Horkheimer (2005, p.80), this kind of submission to a "logical formalism might seem an objective rationality triumph when it is actually, the submission of reason to immediate data". For this author, data must not be taken just for their "space-time relationship" that makes them manageable and quantifiable but as superficial parts of their social, historic

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[45] **Librarianship is a weak discipline in the sense that it does not produce any theory, but on the contrary it is stuck in description and reproduction of knowledge.**

and humane sense as knowledge end is not just about classifying and calculating but transcending the immediate.

An example of this could be how the Anglo American Cataloguing Rules (AACR) show data that never change and immutable signs [46].

Consequently, librarianship, bibliometrics or even library and information marketing subjects are an excellent example of the commodification of knowledge that shapes the Study Programs of librarianship in Mexico. For instance, on July 29th 2002, the new Study Program of the Library Science School at the Philosophy School of UNAM was approved (See Figure 1); this Program is characteristically contrary to the Philosophy School humanistic tradition. The subjects do not correspond to a formative reflexive thinking, besides; the program is completely directed towards pure technical, administrative questions as well as to the library services marketing. The authorities argument was that Humanities were left as optional courses for the ones who are interested in studying historical archives or antique books, as if Humanities were some kind of tool to treat old books. More over, showing his complete misunderstanding and ignorance about Humanities, Adolfo Rodríguez Gallardo (2001**),** the author of a book named *Formación humanista del bibliotecólogo: hacia su recuperación,* said that cataloguing was actually part of the Humanities as it, in fact, was an activity that "served mankind".

For this reason, librarianship in Mexico has never been able to transcend the technical perspective; and this fact shows the academic and the methodological trauma of the discipline.

Isolated from Enlightened thinking, Library Science neglects the fact that it was because of a critical social and political movement, that the public library was created. In this sense, Mexican librarians do not have the ability to build up an auto critical position, but in fact they prefer to praise each other by funding librarians organizations of their same non-critical kind such as CUIB (University Center for Librarianship Research at UNAM), AMBAC (Mexican Library Association), CNB (National Library College guild), etcetera, and publications that do not have any kind of social or cultural relevance but just work for justifying their own ignorance and incompetence.

Marcuse's Critique

The central idea of this work is to show how Library Science in Mexico treats knowledge in a technical, administrative and mercantilist way. And this is determined by these five premises: a) The lack of comprehension and critical interpretation of reality; b) The immutability of concepts and definitions; c) The technical reduction of knowledge; d) The myth and pretension of considering technology as the essence of Librarianship and e) the complete absence of social and political conscience.

The management of science and technique as a domination method characterizes the Library Science education in Mexico. That is why, it is not necessary to go beyond of the given data, or in other words, the lack of critical interpretation of quantitative data is very common in this discipline. As we have been arguing, librarianship resigned to any kind of theoretical-philosophical reflection to the point of denying a critical understanding of facts.

Marcuse (1987, p. 70**),** shared the same preoccupations of their colleagues at the Frankfurt Institute, that is, he cared about the "logics of domination where the subject was left just as a mere instrument of consumption".

Towards a redefinition of the librarian.

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[46] Cataloguing rules are a rigid system of punctuation signs that surrounds librarians and traps them in a repetitive activity. Its authority cannot be questioned. In this sense, librarians work under a divinity that does not allow them to dissent. There no place for doubt, in fact, for any kind of question librarians anxiously run to get the Grand Book which will solve all their problems: the AACR.

Library Science eliminates from its conceptual horizon the critical and doubtful elements and its function is simply to serve as a vehicle of an established order; in other words, thinking becomes linear and affirmative. The majority of teachers and students spread this way of thinking through their papers and classes, leaving aside the critical thinking of the historical characteristics of social contradictions.

The result of all this, is the realization of a kind of knowledge isolated from the social, historical and political context: Library Science develops an ideological and technified knowledge.

One of the main intellectual commitments of the librarian is to contribute to the construction of a radical democracy, not just to a formal, electoral democracy, but a radical active democracy. In other words, from the library, to contribute to the no instrumental bureaucratization of knowledge, to the development of a wider vision of reality for librarians and librarianship, especially for a critical perspective of social context.

Librarians should stop thinking that technology is the future of the discipline, and realize that the market can not give humane answers for the global most important issues. It is more relevant to have a social-humanistic based education with a technology formative complement.

For this reason it is important to finish this text with a series of questions: What kind of librarian could assure that technology is the future of this discipline? What kind of librarian could say that Humanities are not important for the understanding of the discipline and the world? What kind of professional could design a Study Program under the most uncritical positivist perspective? What kind of librarian could call him/herself a professional if he/she does not even know a little of political and social theory or the contributions of thinkers such as Hegel or Marx to it?

This way, Library Science embraces the seed of authoritarianism and a dogma since it has been structured by a social control scheme, which minimizes the critical abilities of the moral subject. If we keep following this path, this discipline will only form individuals with no social commitment in the future.

Librarian's education is mostly doctrinal and mechanical. There is no complex and critical thinking in Mexican librarianship at all. Under a big cloud of information technology and society information ideology, librarians let themselves go with the image of an information technology controlled world.

There is an instrumentalist vision of reality in which technology is not just the medium, but the very end of librarianship activity. For librarians the most important thing right now is to get people to know and use the newest information technologies even when this means technological dependency and external debt: Molz (2001, pp. 186-187) points out the unprecedented control Information Technology producers have developed over information itself, and thus, the consequences consumers may face when becoming hostages of technology and the of owners of such corporations. Librarians do not know whom they are working for anymore.

What they learned in school does not have anything to do with social activity and participation. They conceive the library as a space closed to the exterior, a space to be ordered for the efficient and quick information flux. They conceive it as a department store, where everything they sell has been efficiently classified and tagged by tradition and authority, and therefore, does not show any ambiguity at all. They appeared apathetic to social conflicts and political activity. And do not consider these issues as a context where public libraries are involved.

Squatters collectives and urban isolated tribes are doing more for public information access by generating their own documents and records than librarians do. This is the case with Biblioteca Social Hermanos Quero, or Okupa collectives throughout Europe and some other parts of Latin America, for instance.

Information professionals is how librarians call themselves nowadays, for example, in the early Proyecto de Modificación del Plan de Estudios de la Licenciatura en Bibliotecología y Estudios de la Información (2001 p. 9) seeking for "integration" into the "information society", but this integration implies the complete denial of any kind of social or cultural activism, any kind of resistance to the qualitative reduction of unofficially and de-institutionally created knowledge. As Horkheimer (2005, p. 99) said that

this "ability of the dominant group to integrate the ones that do not show any resistance but pure subordination, means no other thing but fascism".

And as one version of reality is being institutionalized and legitimized by the government through mass media, education, and also public libraries, all the alternative unofficial historical documents have been neglected by apathetic obtuse librarians which are the people in charge of the collective memory "conservation" and retrieval processes.

This attitude puts librarians as collective memory predators as the rest of the media are and indicates that these are not the people that should be in charge of this public tasks, unless they understand and act accordingly to their social responsibility. Moreover, this is not a democratic nor an enlightened model of a public library and does not accomplish the social inclusion, the participatory politics or the knowledge public access goals and purposes it serves.

The success of this kind of public spaces depends not on the use of the latest information technologies or the excellence in the dairy operative tasks librarians do, but on the big or little possibilities people get from them to participate and take possession of the space, resources and choices this places have to offer when the politics of exclusion and extermination corrupt and threaten every single aspect of life. **CB**

Figure 1. LIS Curriculum at the Department of Library and Information Sciences at the School of Philosophy and Letters, UNAM, Mexico

Organization of Information Recorded in Documents	Foundations of Librarianship	History of Books and Libraries I	Foundations of Information Services	Computing applied to Librarianship	Introduction to Research	
Cataloguing I	Librarianship in Mexico	History of Books and Libraries II	Social Librarianship	Information Technology in Libraries	Quantitative methods	
Cataloguing III	Foundations of Management	Information resources	Reading, readers and libraries	Databases	Qualitative methods	Humanistic optative
Cataloguing by subject	Management of Library and Information Services	Bibliographic theory and technique	Library and information services	Telecommunications in information units	Humanistic optative	Humanistic optative
Dewey Classification System	Management of Human Resources	Publishing and Information Industries	Reference I	Systems and Programs of Library Automation	Free optative	Humanistic optative
Library of Congress Classification System	Marketing of Information	Collection Development	Reference II	Management of Automation Systems	Free optative	
Optative. Selective themes of Librarianship I, II, III, or IV	Evaluation of Units of Information	Mexican Bibliography: centuries XVI-XIX	Users of information	Digital and Multimedia resources	Seminary towards conferral of B.A. degree I	
Indexing	Optative. Selective themes of Librarianship I, II, III, or	Contemporary Mexican Bibliography	Free optative	Didactics of Librarianship	Seminary towards conferral of B.A. degree I	

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