

## Is information enough to save the region?

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### Abstract

Latin America does not exist. These 42 diverse and developing countries are hardly a union. However, they share geographical proximity, history, strangely unique elements, and the wish to progress. This first issue of a new column, 'Developing Latin America', explores some information issues, literacy rates, regional prominence in scholarly publications, and relevant topics taken from Information Development's publication history.

**Keywords:** Latin America, development, information issues

In the past number of *Information Development*, we parted ways with Editorial Advisory Board Member Archie Dick and 'African Information Initiatives'. Now, coinciding with *Information Development*'s 30th anniversary, we introduce a new column about Latin America, to give visibility and deepen the understanding of information development issues in this region.

Latin America is not a completely clear distinction and its exact definition has been debated. Nevertheless, this label will be used for practicality and for trying to unite these countries under the commonality of an information development agenda. Unless stated otherwise, Latin America refers to Latin American and Caribbean countries: everything from Mexico to Argentina.

### Latin America does not exist

Mexican writer Jorge Volpi made this statement in his award-winning essay 'Bolívar's insomnia: Four inappropriate considerations on Latin America in the 21st century'. This statement and the title of the cited work refer to the large diversity of a region comprised by 42 countries, where many languages are spoken and there are many different cultures, backgrounds, contexts, and attitudes. In recent years, some Latin American countries celebrated their bicentenary of independence and some share a key historical figure behind their past struggles for freedom: Simón Bolívar. Bolívar was probably the first person wanting to unify Latin America and he succeeded, at least during the existence of Gran Colombia (1819-1831), which was a state comprised by the territories of present-day Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama, and parts of Peru, Guyana and Brazil. Volpi characterizes Bolívar's dream as a nightmare, because Latin America does not yet exist as a homogeneous set of countries. But is homogeneity a must in order to define a region? The European Union has unified under the same banner many different cultures and even more languages than Latin America. An issue at stake is that Latin America seems to be united more negatively than positively. Volpi (2009) summarizes the main stereotypes of the Latin-American condition as: violence, football (soccer), magical realism (a literary genre perfected by Gabriel García Márquez and other Latin-American writers), and the lack of political and cultural communication between the nations. The latter is debatable; there are economical treaties among countries and recent attempts at unification through a dubious political movement, 21st Century Socialism, which

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permeates social, economic and even cultural aspects of Latin American societies and fascinates some, even at a mystical level – while for others it is among the most controversial contemporary ideas, being more divisive than unifying.

Regardless of the systems or perspectives adopted by regional governments, traditional issues remain: violence, inequality and poverty; a nationalism that is questionable because it is seen as identification with the government and also as a distraction for the masses; seeing political leaders under a messianic light; and the fact that, as a fragmented region, it does not know enough about itself. Neither, it seems, does the rest of the world: “politics have concentrated in the Middle East, economy in the Far East, and injustices in Africa” (Volpi, 2009: 84).

### **Information Development in Latin America**

A positive milestone for Latin America compared to other developing regions relates to literacy. According to UNESCO (2013), in the 1990s Latin America’s adult literacy rate was 86 percent, as compared with 82 percent in East Asia and the Pacific, 55 percent in the Arab States, 53 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa and 47 percent in South and West Asia. Although in the early 2000s East Asia and the Pacific had a slightly higher literacy rate (92 percent) than Latin America’s 90 percent. UNESCO (2014) projects that by 2015, 10 Latin American countries will achieve literacy rates of 99 percent. Latin America’s prominence in scholarly publications is a relevant issue, at least in information-related research. In general, there are neither many articles published in this field by Latin American authors, nor many written about the region by other authors. Certain issues prevent Latin America’s rise in academic publications; some relate to myths about academic publications being costly and exclusive. Furthermore, it seems that academic institutions have not given research its due importance, nor have they devised clear supporting policies, and the main reason may be financial. It is expensive to send academics to conferences and have them writing articles, thus leaving teaching and administrative functions unattended. Research is costly, but it impacts positively on universities’ reputations. Sadly, this is not usually recognized by the administrative branches of our universities; it seems they only focus on the cost aspect. Another problem is that of the language barrier; it is difficult for some academics to write in English and many prefer to write in one of the languages of the region and to give support to local journals. Johnson (2006) has highlighted this issue before.

### **Tracing the representation of the region in IDV**

From the 30 years of publication of Information Development, we have identified 50 texts related to Latin America, 40 of which were articles, while 10 were short columns. They can be grouped geographically as follows: Latin America (20 entries); Brazil (11); Caribbean (6); Trinidad and Tobago (4); Mexico (2); and Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, Guatemala, Martinique and Peru (each 1 entry). The topics covered in these contributions were: library and information services (8 entries); scientific publications (5); environment and information networks (each 4 entries); business information and health information (each 3 entries); food security, ICTs, ICT for development, information literacy, information professionals, natural resources and patents (each 2 entries); and copyright, digital libraries, e-learning, economy, gender, information needs, knowledge management, online databases and open source (each 1 entry). An annual average of 1.67 Latin American contributions over the 30-year period conceals the fact that the numbers have increased from a total of 10 items in the 1980s to 13 items already in the first 5 years of the present decade – though this amount is still modest compared to the numbers of contributions from or about Africa and Asia. However, representation of the region in Information Development is also reflected in that fact that eight Editorial Advisory Board members from Latin America have served over the years, of whom members from Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela are still active.

### **Is information enough to save the region?**

Our starting question has so far been left unanswered and although we have provided some arguments for answering it, a conclusive response is no easy task. This question will be revisited in future issues of this column through our analyses of many regional information development topics. This time, though, we have taken a brief look at some of the problems and

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similarities of Latin America as a region, its literacy rates and the lack of prominence in scholarly publications, which are both clear information development issues; and some relevant information topics according to the publication history of this journal.

Latin America does have a fairly good standing regarding its literacy rates and we should trust that people who can read and write are able to learn, reflect, and act. It is a common idea among information professionals that people with the best information can make the best decisions. Moreover, informed people can be responsible and active citizens who are able to choose better leaders and demand accountability from them. However, high literacy rates have not necessarily meant progress in the last 30 years. Perhaps there are fewer dictatorships in the region, but ever-increasing violence and crime, together with continuing fragmentation and divisive attitudes due to dubious political movements are still worrisome traits.

The ever-present problem of violence, together with political, social and financial instability, makes it hard to foresee a developed Latin America in the coming years. However, there have been positive milestones such as: higher literacy rates; recent and impressive economic, scientific and educational growth in Brazil and other countries; the rise of open access with regional repertories such as SciELO, CLACSO, and Redalyc, which have been important to give more visibility to academic journals and at the same time increase their impact and raise their quality; and the continuing support of international initiatives driven by organizations as the International Development Research Centre, which aim for empowerment and development through research and technology.

It is vital for information professionals and Latin American academics in general to communicate their research and work through academic publications, to enhance the international profile of the region. Hence the importance of small informative windows such as this one, which can inform and raise awareness as to what is going on in Latin America. In forthcoming issues, we will take into account the topics mentioned in this introduction and many others of historical or current strategic importance for the region, such as information literacy, information professionals, open access, action research, freedom of information, digital citizenship, recruitment, fees, taxes and acquisitions, among many others. To keep the column fresh and varied, we have invited colleagues from the region who are experts in different topics to collaborate in the column for future issues. Developing Latin America means a constant reminder that the region is developing and has to be further developed; this is a work-in-progress. The general aim of research and academic publication should be to work toward regional development, to advance with the region, and most importantly, communicate its issues, challenges, opportunities, and milestones. We hope our readers enjoy this new column.

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