

LIBRARY SCIENCE IN MEXICO: a Discipline in Crisis

by Angel Castillo
& Carlos Martínez

In May 2006, the biggest public library in Mexico was opened. The Mega-library, as it was named by the Secretary of Culture, was built at the northwest side of Mexico City's center, right on the corner of one of the most popular neighborhoods in the city.

The Mega-library project was part of a National Reading 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 \$3500 million dollars in software updates.

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-story building.

After the first six months some serious issues appeared. The collection is not representative of the vast and relevant literary Latin-American and international world. Some of the most renowned writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, or Eric Hobsbawm for example, or their most important works such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* do not figure on the catalogue, and the ones that do, cannot be found physically in the collection. Instead of that, what has been generously collected was the last Secretary of Culture's *Public Inform* with multiple copies on the shelves.

Also to be mentioned is the overwhelming presence of police officers outside and inside the library. Cops walk around and in-between the tables, throughout the entire library, or stand on every corner like vigilantes while outside the library. The police officers do not allow anyone to sit on the floor or lean against the walls, giving no explanation for this "rule," but issuing offensive threats of arrest. This police presence in the library is a

microcosm of what the government is doing in the country to manage its lack of achieved consensus within a society growing angrier everyday.

All these inconsistencies and abuses have been going on and on without any kind of public critical expression from the librarians, and most of what is known about the library has been researched and published by a couple of newspapers and a weekly magazine.

Just a week after the new president took office (from the same political party as the last one), on December 1st 2006, under a huge police siege and after six months of public demonstrations, city riots, journalist assassinations, dissident disappearances and, of course, the doubt of a legitimate electoral process, the budgets for education and cultural sectors were cut as never before in order to give more money to the police and military sectors. Also cut was the budget for libraries and the Mega-library.

The country lives in a police state where every single corner is under vigilance and where citizens are searched by police officers in order to “prevent insecurity.” In a country that has just passed through several social conflicts that have led 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 do they do anything to offer diverse opinions or points of view other than the official version. 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.

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, nor have librarian’s organizations. Leaving aside budget cuts or authorities’ censorship, this is a consequence of the education librarians get in school.

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 view, automatization and information technology will determine the way librarianship behaves as information science in the information society. Accordingly, what can be noticed in the Study Programs is that the education of students, teachers, and also researchers, is mostly technical.

For example, by analyzing the 2001 Study Program of the Library Science School at The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), we find subjects such as “Information Marketing”¹ (technical, but not scientific) and we also find the complete lack of any humanistic or theoretical subjects. Academics in this field just keep the discipline on 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.²

Similarly, librarians have adopted concepts such as “information society”³ without any critical or theoretical perspective, but with a doctrinal acceptance of a concept as a “Commandment.” And they have not even analyzed, from any historical perspective, whether or not any past civilizations, such as the Greeks or the Renaissance or even the Enlightenment, could have been called an “information society” as well, or even what this concept implies in a political manner, because for them knowledge society or information society are reduced to one word: technology.

In the present work, we analyze the technical and positivist perspective and education of librarians in Mexico while we locate librarianship as a discipline in crisis. 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’s⁴ critique 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 led to a behavior where Thinking cannot be “thought” or “analyzed” because it had become an “automatic process” for the exigencies to direct praxis.

Luis Villoro⁵, a Spanish-Mexican philosopher, says this kind of rationality limits thinking to question the means or the instrumentation to an end, but not to question the end itself.

Herbert Marcuse⁶ talks about the principles of positivism: the sole validation of thought as a process reduced to mere experience of the facts, and the orientation of knowledge determined by mathematics and physics in order to arrive at exactitude. For Marcuse⁷, positivism means a

transformation where philosophical thought becomes affirmative thought and the harmony between theory and practice is realized, while our reality becomes industrial and technological. 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 stands as the triumph of instrumental reason.

In librarianship the technification of knowledge begins when concepts of other disciplines are adopted 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, etcetera. As for them, a subway ticket and *The Communist Manifesto* are just different formats of the same thing: information. Under this postmodern perspective, librarian’s ahistorical appreciation of knowledge perpetuates itself through the hierarchical circle of research, education and work practice as well as in every uncritical publication they manage.

Furthermore, for many of our students, 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 deny any critical interpretation of social and cultural Mexican reality by limiting research and discourse to a given set of facts of experience and they ignore 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 treat data as immutable and truthful, that is, they reject any kind of reflective or critical thinking. For Horkheimer⁸, 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 Horkheimer⁹, data must not be considered just for the “space-time relationship” that makes it manageable and quantifiable, but also as mere superficial parts of a social, historic and humane context, acknowledging that knowledge is not just about classifying and calculating, but more importantly it is about transcending the immediate. An example of this could be how the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules present data that never seem to change and stand as immutable signposts of all knowledge.

Consequently, librarianship, bibliometrics or even library and information marketing subjects are an excellent example of the mercantilization 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 http://www.dgae.unam.mx/planes/f_filosofia/Biblio.pdf. This program

is uncharacteristically contrary to the Philosophy School's humanistic tradition. The subjects do not correspond to a formative reflective thinking, but are completely directed towards pure technical, administrative questions as well as to library service marketing. School authorities argue that humanities were left as options for students who are interested in studying historical archives or antique books, as if humanities were some kind of tool to treat old books. Moreover, showing his complete misunderstanding and ignorance of the humanities, Adolfo Rodríguez Gallardo, the author of a book entitled *Librarian Education: Towards its Humanistic Recovery*, said that cataloguing was actually part of the humanities as it, in fact, was an activity that "served mankind."

For reasons like this, 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 Enlightenment thought, library science neglects the fact that it was because of a critical social and political movement, that the public library was created. Because of this, most Mexican librarians have not developed the ability to work from an internalized critical position, preferring instead to praise each other by funding organizations, such as CUIB, AMBAC, CNB, etcetera, and publications that do not have any kind of social or cultural relevance, but serve primarily to justify ignorance and incompetence.

Marcuse's Critique

The central concern of this article is to show how library science in Mexico treats knowledge in a technical, administrative and mercantilist way and to offer suggestions for a different approach. Our critique is based in five premises: a) that there exists within librarianship a lack of comprehension and critical interpretation of reality; b) that librarians are not well served by notions of the immutability of concepts and definitions; c) that the technical reduction of knowledge does not serve us well; d) that it is a myth and pretension to consider technology as the essence of librarianship; and e) the formation of critical librarians is essential to the future of the profession.

The management of science and technique as a method of domination characterizes 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 argued, librarianship's failure to engage in any kind of theoretical-philosophical reflection has taken the profession to the point of denying the possibility, much less the vital importance, of a critical understanding of facts.

Marcuse shared the same concerns of his 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. Librarianship need to care about this state of affairs also, instead it eliminates from its conceptual horizon critical and doubtful elements and its function has become simply to serve as a vehicle of an established order; in other words, thinking becomes linear and affirmative of the status quo. The majority of teachers and students spread this way of thinking through their papers and classes, leaving aside 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.

Towards a Redefinition of the Librarian

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 can emerge the development of a wider vision of reality for librarians and librarianship, especially for a critical perspective of social context, and the library can also contribute to the debureaucratization of knowledge.

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

For this reason it is important to finish this paper by raising a series of questions: What kind of librarian wants to 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?

The librarians who stand as answers to these questions are ones who allow library science to embrace the seed of authoritarianism and dogma, and have let it be 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 along with the image of an information technology controlled world.

This 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. 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 appear 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.

“Information professionals” is what librarians call themselves nowadays, seeking “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 unofficial and uninstitutional created knowledge. As Horkheimer said, this ability of the dominant group to integrate those who do not show any resistance but pure subordination, means nothing other than 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 just as the rest of the media are, and suggests that these are not the people who should be entrusted with this public task, unless they understand and act in accordance with their social responsibilities. Moreover, this is neither 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 should serve.

The ultimate success of the kind of public space the library could become depends, not on the use of the latest information technologies or the excellence in the daily operative tasks librarians do, but on the big and little possibilities people get from them to participate and take possession of the space, resources and choices this place has to offer, especially at a time when the politics of exclusion and extermination corrupt and threaten every single aspect of life.

Footnotes

1. In general, this subject treats users as clients and the library as a private institution.
2. Geir Vestheim spoke clearly about this subject: The lack of basic philosophical, sociological and historic thinking in practical librarianship is quite a paradox: Libraries collect, organize and distribute theoretical knowledge through books and other media to all kinds of people, but we do not have much theory on the social and cultural functions of librarianship itself. p.1
3. Robert Danton explains this matter: Yo sostendría que todos los tiempos han sido eras de la información, cada una a su modo, y que los sistemas de comunicación siempre han dado formas. Vid. Robert Darton . El coloquio de los lectores p. 371
4. Vid. Horkheimer, Max. *Dialéctica de la Ilustración: fragmentos filosóficos*. Madrid: Trotta, 2005, p. 79
5. Vid. Villoro, Luis.. *Poder y el valor*. México. F.C.E. 1997, p 101
6. Vid. Herbert Marcuse. *El hombre unidimensional*. Barcelona: Ariel p. 199
7. Idem . p 199
8. Horkheimer op. cit., p 80
9. Horkheimer. op. cit. 99

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