

Beyond Article 19: Libraries and Social and Cultural Rights, edited by Julie Biando Edwards and Stephan P. Edwards. Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010.

reviewed by Katharine Phenix

Under Ronald Reagan, Secretary of State George Schultz announced that the United States government would not renew its membership in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on December 19, 1984, ostensibly because UNESCO was becoming too politicized, the budget was bloated, and there were “management failures”¹ by the Director General Amidou Mahtar M’Bow, a Muslim from Senegal. The third reason Secretary Schultz cited is perhaps more telling. It included these phrases: endemic hostility towards the basic institutions of a free society; in particular, a free press, free markets and, above all, the rights of the individual.² This last statement is in reference to the content of the MacBride Report, written by a 16-member International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems. Published in 1980 under the title *Many Voices, One World: Towards a New More Just and More Efficient World Information and Communication Order*, its conclusion called for a New World Information and Communication Order. The report noted that access to information and its sources and flow was largely controlled by the Western media bureaus such as the Associated Press and Reuters. Its recommendations, involving de-commercialization of the media and coordinated international government regulation and control, among many others, including strengthening cultural identity and encouraging grassroots communication, was primarily backed by Third World coalitions and Soviet countries. This could not be supported by the US, commercial interests in the US, and our friend, Great Britain.

The withdrawal was not without dissenters at the time. The ALA Government Documents Round Table (GODORT) pleaded for the US to remain in UNESCO and at least keep in touch.

RESOLVED, that the Department of State and the Congress to monitor closely future developments in UNESCO so as both to safeguard important American interests in the library, information and communications areas during the period of withdrawal and to facilitate a continuing process of reform that will permit the United States to rejoin UNESCO at the earliest possible date.³

Other opposition is described by Mahoney and Roach in their letter to the *New York Times* “Spread the Truth About UNESCO.”⁴

This withdrawal robbed a generation of Americans (the UK withdrew in 1985 and returned in 1997) of the opportunity to learn about and participate in what is known as second and third generations of human

rights development.⁵ We have remained stolidly in support of the first generation of human rights which are defined by in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR):

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Second generation rights evolve from the first, and include a societal right to a quality of life, to welfare, education, and leisure. They include the right to work, to choice of work, for equal pay for equal work, to join a trade union, and the right to “social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality” (Article 22). Exercising these rights requires the intentional promotion of the “many voices.” With our withdrawal from UNESCO, librarianship in the United States was left behind in the evolution of the understanding of the role of libraries and cultural rights.

We have begun to reclaim and recognize that the foundation for library services to the individual is solid and bound up with Article 19. We must begin to embrace our responsibilities to second and third generation human rights as expressed in the UDHR beyond Article 19, which speak to cultural rights and group rights, including...access to culture and to community at the public library. There is a new canon of literature addressing human rights in libraries, and this work builds and expands upon it.

Beyond Article 19 is a slim volume comprised of four excellent and diverse discussions of the direction already embraced by libraries and librarians as they re-create their purposes and re-think their policies. Most of the authors focus on Article 27 of the UDHR which states:

- (1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
- (2) Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

In the first essay, Julie Biando Edwards sets the stage for bringing us all to the place where libraries are representations of Culture and centers for preserving and enhancing communities of culture. She says “...the current literature has by and large not connected libraries, community, and human rights in a way that allows us to conceptualize our role in reflecting and creating the cultural life of the community as human rights work.” (p. 15) Her “new vision of librarianship” draws from a 1952 UNESCO study of Article 27 called “Study of the right to participate in cultural life.”⁶ Edwards notes that libraries are specifically mentioned four times, and

their work implied in other sections. The authors discuss new technologies of communication and conclude that:

...these new developments should enable the man on the street, as well as the small privileged minority, gradually to acquire the ability to enjoy the most liberal and civilized forms of cultural life in all its rich diversity, to keep in touch with the advances in science, and to profit from what has been handed down by the world's civilizations.

Edwards recognizes that this document is seated in a period in history when Westernization wasn't considered to be such a bad thing, even to the point of encouraging destruction of indigenous culture, but this study is nuanced in support of multiculturalism, and goes on to say:

On the other hand the man on the street is now often uprooted from his natural environment and can rely less and less upon a fabric of beliefs and accepted patterns of behaviour characteristic of the group in which he lives; the demands made on him from every side complicate his life. Many thinkers are convinced that man's only hope of recovering a harmonious balance is to strive independently after a deeper spiritual understanding. From this point of view it is of vital importance that all shall have the opportunity of taking part in cultural life, for such participation seems supremely apt to furnish modern man with the means of achieving this clear-sighted harmony.

The works that follow Edwards introduction build on the importance of a libraries' relationship to cultural expression. Natalia Taylor Poppeliers reminds us again that several UN documents specifically mention libraries, or implicate them as institutions which promote popular participation in culture, or at least preserve it, as well as cultural centers, museums, theaters, cinemas, and traditional arts and crafts. Within the context of libraries in Africa, a generation of Colonial repression is revealed. Libraries can be seen as representative of Colonial repression in Sub-Saharan Africa, or in the case of indigenous peoples of the Global North, a "tool for the promotion of the interests of the ruling classes"(p. 120). This takes us right back to the moment the US left the human rights movement, in response to the MacBride report, *Many Voices*, which warns against top-down, Western biased information, calls upon indigenous voices in native languages to balance corporate interests, warns against Colonial interference in local practice and land use, and recommends:

Strengthening Cultural Identity

Promoting conditions for the preservation of cultural identity of every society is necessary to enable it to enjoy a harmonious and creative inter-relationship with other cultures. It is equally necessary to modify situations in many developed and developing

countries which suffer from cultural dominance. We recommend: Establishment of national cultural policies which should foster cultural identity and creativity, and involve the media in these tasks. Such policies should also contain guidelines for safeguarding national cultural development while promoting knowledge of other cultures. It is in relation to others that each culture enhances its own identity.

Poppeliers revisits “community” in the African context and warns against using dominant technological models, or, information and communication technologies (ICTs) to further promote western cultural expansion and reduce, rather than amplify local community expression and communication.

Franz Albarillo’s “Cultural Rights and Language Rights in Libraries” explores some of the dynamic tension between individual and group rights as defined as cultural rights. Since information is mediated by language, it is a most fundamental right of culture. He notes “it is a positive sign that there are 10,000 entries in Swahili in Wikipedia.” Just recently the Special Rapporteur...has declared that access to the Internet is a fundamental human right,⁷ but if Internet information is only available in the languages of the ruling classes, then whole populations are denied that right. Librarians are called upon to make a “fundamental shift from equitable access and “by the numbers” policies to a broader understanding that people have a universal right to information...which is represented in language, poetry, technology, and so on.” Paraphrasing Nigerian writer Ngugi wa Thiong he concludes “Our collections need to restore people’s beliefs in their language, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacity, and ultimately in themselves.” (p.111)

The final contribution to this work is “We Collect, Organize, Preserve, and Provide Access, With Respect: Indigenous Peoples’ Cultural Life in Libraries”, by Loriene Roy and Kristen Hogan. The authors again focus on Article 27 of the UDHR and recognize that critical interpretation of culture requires recognition of indigenous cultures. “We believe that in consciously engaging with Article 27 librarians can begin a consideration of the intersection between indigenous rights, their cultural expressions, and the service and philosophical missions of libraries” p. 116. After a discussion of who are indigenous peoples, and librarians’ failure to record tribal history and/or conform to tribal protocol, we are reminded that “a key part of indigenous peoples’ cultural rights is indigenous control over indigenous cultural practices and creations.” This is in its way, the most radical of propositions, but the most logical extension of what cultural rights in the library context really mean.

“...libraries cannot support indigenous peoples’ cultural rights without including indigenous librarians and library consultants in shaping the space and work of the library. If it seems to some non-indigenous librarians almost impossible to develop relationships

with indigenous communities, librarians, or advocates... obstacles do not absolve non-indigenous librarians from seeking indigenous partners” p. 137.

Here we see the classic clash of cultures, a Western library perspective of open access and information for all, meeting a conflicting culture of stories told only during a certain season, or selected access to cultural property. Roy and Hogan remind us that the UDHR and two of six major initiatives of the ALA strategic plan plus its policy 59.3. address issues of indigenous people and cultures in libraries. This is the place where our policies must directly inform our practice of reflecting the culture and cultures of community.

Toni Samek, author of *Librarianship and Human Rights: A Twenty-First Century Guide* (2007), writes in the preface:

Together these teachers and learners make a stark case for global library citizenship...but these cultural workers are...far outnumbered by bureaucratized, corporatized, and militarized library and information workforces and discourses. And I am left pondering the weight of library complacency, which will undoubtedly limit the place of this book...

Furthermore, in her introduction, Edwards states

It is absolutely essential to note, however, that while this book advocates for an exploration of librarianship beyond Article 19, we understand that a focus on promoting, protecting, and supporting the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community may be a luxury for many librarians.

I disagree with the general tone of these statements. I do agree with Julie Edwards that using community as a starting point for re-defining the public library purpose and mission is necessary and that it is the very act of recognizing, encouraging and promoting the cultural treasure embodied in the communities served that will anchor the library as a center of common good and become essentially *the* daily work of librarians and not a luxury at all. I point to my own institution, the Rangeview Library District “anythinks” which encourage playfulness and participation, programming and transformation and defines its trustees, staff, and volunteers as geniuses, wizards, and explorers who actively seek to remove barriers to participation (e.g. dump the Dewey Decimal system, remove overdue fines, and rename librarians as Experience Guides) and thus provide open space for cultural expression.

Additionally, James K Elmborg describes in “Libraries as the Spaces Between Us: Recognizing and Valuing the Third Space”⁸ the history of the library as “third place” and now “third space” movement. He concludes

A library is a fundamentally different place than a bookstore of the cloud, and one profound difference is the presence of librarians. If we allow our space to become abstract, then we will lose that difference. Third Space is not a panacea for all that is wrong with the world or libraries. However, it does form a realistic way of understanding what is going on in the world right now, and it leads the way to an intellectually rigorous way of thinking about librarianship in a world of borderlands, migration, hybridity, and the ongoing effort to create a more fair and just world.

These are positive steps toward libraries as agents of human rights potential, just as this book is, as Edwards states in her Introduction, “an act of optimism... which will generate further inquiry and writing.” p. 5

FOOTNOTES

1. U.S. confirms withdrawal from UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – transcript. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1079/is_v85/ai_3621166/
2. See The US’s Return to UNESCO: Relaxation or Hardening Before the Ghost of MacBride?, by Divina Frau Meigs, in *Quaderns del CAC*: Issue 21. http://www.cac.cat/pfw_files/cma/recerca/quaderns_cac/Q21fraumeigs_EN.pdf
3. ALA. GODORT Resolution Regarding Continued United States Membership in UNESCO. <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/rts/godort/godortresolutions/19840111114.cfm>
4. Spread the Truth About UNESCO. *New York Times*, December 5, 1987. Letter to the editor by Eileen Mahoney and Colleen Roach. <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/05/opinion/1-spread-the-truth-about-unesco-275587.html>
5. McCook, Kathleen de la Peña and Katharine Phenix “The Future of Public Libraries: Human Rights and Human Capabilities,” in *Introduction to Public Librarianship*, 2nd ed. NY: Neal Schuman, 2010. p. 345.
6. Study of the “Right to Participate in Cultural Life: Basic Document, pp. 4-5. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001272/127221eb.pdf>
7. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue, 16 May 2011. This report explores key trends and challenges to the right of all individuals to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds through the Internet. http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A.HRC.17.27_en.pdf
8. Elmborg, James K. “Libraries as the Spaces Between Us: Recognizing and Valuing the Third Space.” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 50 (Summer 2011): 338-50.