

The National Library of Venezuela

Focal Point of the National Information System

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Virginia Betancourt was born in Costa Rica in 1935, the only child of Rómulo Betancourt, Venezuelan President from 1960-1965. For political reasons, she spent most of her youth in exile. She studied Sociology at the University of Chicago. She has been director of the National Library of Venezuela since 1974. During this time she has worked to establish a national library system which includes the development of government and university information networks. In recognition of her work, she has received several national and international awards, including the International Book Award from the International Book Committee in 1979, and the Isabel La Católica Order, awarded to her by the King of Spain in 1987.

The National Library of Venezuela, now 141 years old, has 900 staff and a 1988 budget of \$14.5 million. Its stock of c.2 million items includes over 1 million books and manuscripts, 15,000 peri-

odicals, and audiovisual materials. Many changes have taken place since 1974 during a process of modernization, as part of a project to create a national information system, including the development of a National Audiovisual Archive (the first in Latin America) and the creation of a conservation service. During this time the National Library has also carried out a series of actions to support and promote the national book industry. As a result of the experience accumulated, the National Library is able to serve as a reference point for other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean in planning and developing their own services and national systems.

INTRODUCTION

In 1974, in an effort to promote democratic ideals and reaffirm national identity, Venezuela's 141-year-old National Library began a process of modernization, as part of a project to create a National Information System. Based on the NATIS framework proposed by Unesco, this system was designed to support national development plans, promote hu-

manistic, scientific and technological research and attend the ever-growing information needs of the community.

A National Library Law passed in 1976 marked the transformation of the traditional National Library into a self-governing body with a clearly defined role, its own budget and Board of Directors, and a recognized position within the public administration. Because of its natural link with the academic world, the

library was assigned to the Ministry of Education.

New and important responsibilities were assigned to the National Library as promoter of the National Library System. The library's primary role as the repository, organizing, preserving and disseminating agency for national documentation was reaffirmed and extended to include two new tasks: the development of a National Audiovisual Archive, an innovation in Hispanic America, and the creation of a Conservation Service.

In addition, the library was designated as coordinating body for the development of a National System of Library Services. It was given direct responsibility for establishing the National Public Library System, and for providing technical assistance and standards to school, university and other specialized libraries, including those of the federal, state and municipal governments.

In subsequent years, several laws and decrees were passed to provide a legal base for the library's activities. The Legal Deposit Law, by which publishers and distributors of printed materials are required to deposit their publications with the National Library, was revised and updated in 1979 to extend its coverage and include non-book materials. As a complement to this law, a 1982 decree compels ministries to send 20 percent of the total edition of each title published by them to the library. In order to promote the creation of information networks, a 1978 Presidential Order obliged the ministries to set up Central Libraries to coordinate and supervise their sector information units. Recently, the library has participated very actively in the creation of legal instruments to establish policies for protection and development of the national book industry.

The results of the National Library's ten-year old experience have been highly satisfactory. The strategy of simultaneously attending to the modernization of the National Library, and the development of a Legal

Data Base linking the Supreme Court, Congress and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has paid off. Awareness of information as a strategic national resource has emerged among high level decision makers, researchers, writers, photographers, graphic artists, and film producers. The library has demonstrated that through the creation of library networks, a National Library System can be efficiently organized to serve the needs of decision makers and researchers, as well as those of children and young people.

Today, the National Library's staff numbers over 900 persons, including 375 librarians and library-related personnel. Its budget has increased ten-fold during the past ten years, reaching 210 million bolivars (14.5 million US dollars) in 1986. Construction of a new headquarters for the National Library was begun in 1981, and is now 70 per cent complete. Partial occupation is now taking place.

THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

Collections

By the second half of 1987, the book, periodical and audiovisual collections of the National Library of Venezuela were made up of approximately 2.4 million volumes, accounting for more than half of the library's collections. These collections include Rare Books and Manuscripts, Official Publications, Reference and General Book Collections.

Periodicals number over 15,000 titles and 870,000 issues of Venezuelan and foreign periodicals. More than half the titles and 90 percent of the issues belong to the Venezuelan collection. Periodicals make up about 37 percent of the total collection. Microfilms of newspapers of the 19th and early 20th century are available for consultation.

Audiovisual and special materials represent 17 percent of the total collection and include such varied material as music scores and recordings, maps, atlases, posters, post-

cards, graphic works, catalogues, calendars, agendas, photographs, films and videotapes. The largest collection is of Venezuelan, Latin American and Caribbean photographs from the 19th and 20th centuries; they number over 300,000.

The development of these collections is based on a policy which at present gives highest priority to a comprehensive Venezuelan collection, and modern Caribbean and Latin American printed material.

Acquisitions are effected through the Legal Deposit Law, purchases at home and abroad, donations from institutions and individuals, and international exchange and reproduction.

Technical Processes

In order to fulfil its obligation to facilitate access to its collections, and to provide valid

standards for the National Library System, the National Library has made great efforts to modernize its own technical processes, according to the most up-to-date international standards.

In 1974, the Library formally adopted the latest edition of the Dewey Decimal Classification System and the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules for processing its collections. It also acquired and implemented Northwestern University's On Line Totally Integrated System (NOTIS) to create a data bank for its bibliographic and audiovisual material. Finally, the technical processes of both the National Library and the Public Library System were centralized so as to maximize available resources. A bilateral agreement was established with the Library of Congress for MARC tape exchange.

By 1979, the National Library had created



its own automated system, SAIBIN, comprising NOTIS IV and DOCUMASTER, a complementary system by which a document's contents can be registered and reviewed. At present, the National Library's Automated Data Base contains more than 700,000 entries; fourteen institutions are now connected to it, including the National Congress, the Supreme Court, Central University, the Ministry of Foreign Relations, the Venezuelan Institute of Higher Defence Studies and the Central Public Libraries of the Federal District and the State of Zulia. A legal and judiciary Data Base has been developed within the system, the first of its kind in Hispanic America. In 1986, the automated system was expanded to respond to the demands of universities and industries which have sought to be incorporated.

The demonstration effect of applied auto-

mation has made it relatively easy for the library to establish national standards for technical processing of printed and audiovisual materials, making it possible to create and maintain an on-line union catalogue of Venezuelan documents, to produce catalogue cards and to publish catalogues and bibliographies. These include the National Bibliography, the publication of which has been automated since 1981.

Conservation and Preservation

The important task of preserving the collections of the National Library is coordinated by the Centre for Document Conservation. The creation of the centre in 1975 represents a landmark in Latin America, since for the first time, the preservation of the National Library's valuable collections is carried out by



specialized personnel using the most up to date microfilming and conservation equipment.

The centre not only attends to the preservation and conservation needs of the National Library's collections, but also provides advice and service to other institutions, both public and private, and to other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean region. In 1987, the centre was designated Regional Centre of the recently created IFLA Programme for Conservation and Preservation (PAC).

Besides its regular conservation and microfilming activities, the centre is also responsible for disseminating information pertaining to conservation and for training its own and other institutions' personnel.

Services to the Public

Because of the diverse nature of its collections, the National Library of Venezuela serves the needs of a wide variety of users, including researchers, university students, high level public servants, members of the armed forces, graphic artists and film producers, among others.

At present, the library is housed in five different buildings located in the Caracas Metropolitan area.

The library is open throughout the year from Monday to Saturday, except for five public holidays.

The services offered by the National Library include:

1. In-library reading service, including reserve privileges until research is concluded.
2. Reference services and user access to on-line union catalogues.
3. National and international interlibrary lending services.
4. Special services for registered researchers, which include acquisition of material not available in the library.
5. Reprographic services: duplication by photocopy, microfilm or photography.

COORDINATING THE NATIONAL LIBRARY SYSTEM

The Public Library System

Beginning in 1978, the National Library, backed by a federal funds programme and by state and municipal funds, coordinated the establishment of 23 public library networks, one in each of the 20 states, two territories and the Federal District.

These networks consist of a Central Library, subsidiary of the National Library, located in the state capital, public libraries in the capitals of municipalities, and reading rooms in other towns. There are 25 mobile units, including a library boat, to give service in remote and inaccessible areas. Each network is coordinated by a professional librarian who belongs to the National Library's staff. The library buildings, collections and personnel are provided by state governments, municipalities, or private, non-profit organizations.

The Federal District has a pilot network, where different experiments and ideas are tested and, if approved, applied in other states.

In the process of organizing the public library system, the main emphasis has been on procuring or adapting appropriate buildings, on training personnel at various levels and, last but not least, on setting up a national centralized technical services office, to carry out the selection, acquisition, processing and distribution of a basic collection of 1,300 titles, in accordance with the collection development policy for public libraries.

During the past decade, the development of the National Library System has cost approximately 90 million US dollars. At present, the system covers 97 percent of the nation's municipalities.

School Libraries

The National Library began to take an active

role in the development of school libraries in 1984, as a result of the adoption of a new basic education curriculum which emphasizes the development of essential mental skills (language and mathematics) and requires the use of a variety of reading materials not available in schools and classrooms. This new curriculum is based on a new Education Law which extends obligatory education from six to nine years and requires that teachers be college graduates. The law started a quiet revolution of such magnitude that 20 universities are participating in a common programme to provide teachers with a bachelor's degree through an open university system.

The National Library has participated in the implementation of the new law in several ways: by giving technical assistance to the Ministry of Education in the definition of a collection development policy and in the selection of titles to be acquired for school libraries, by facilitating the access of curricula, by participating in a high level Committee on Reading Promotion appointed by the Ministry of Education, by offering school teachers the possibility of using public library resources in their classrooms, and by opening a special section in public libraries to serve teachers who participate in the bachelor degree programme.

Other Specialized Libraries

The National Library has played a significant role in the organization of a wide spectrum of specialized libraries.

In an effort to encourage the development of information systems within the public administration, in 1978 the National Library sponsored an Executive Order which established the creation of a Central Library in each ministry. This library would serve as a coordinating agency for the institutions' own Information Centres and for the specialized libraries in the sector corresponding to the ministry. It would also act as an auxiliary

agency for legal deposit. Subsequently, the National Library has provided technical assistance to these libraries. At present, by request of the planning minister, the National Library is acting as consultant in the creation of a Governmental Information Network.

Technical assistance is also given to university and other research libraries. One of the biggest challenges in this area is the incorporation of these libraries into the automated system. Although this has been taking place gradually since the creation of the system, within the next three years the incorporation of university libraries will be practically completed, thanks to a joint project sponsored in 1988 by the National Library and the IBM Company of Venezuela.

An important milestone in its relationship with specialized libraries was the National Library's production in 1985 of a national-automated list of foreign periodicals specializing in science and technology which are available in the country at present. This publication has served to underline the library's importance as a coordinating and standardizing agency.

SUPPORTING THE NATIONAL BOOK INDUSTRY

Aware of the insufficient development of the publishing industry in the country, the National Library undertook in 1984 a series of action to support and promote the national book industry. In 1985, several studies were carried out to determine the causes underlying this industry's stagnation. Subsequently the National Library carried out a diagnosis of each of the sectors involved in the production and distribution of books and held meetings with representatives of both public and private sectors associated with book production. The result was a joint document proposing a series of measures to promote the development of the publishing industry. In April 1986, in response to the actions taken by both the National Library and the incipient industry, the

Ministry of Development created a special commission to examine the situation and propose corrective measures. The commission's recommendations resulted in a presidential decree by which a set of policies to develop book production was established. The National Library was designated as the Executive's Advisory Agency in the application of these policies.

Another action taken by the National Library to promote the publishing industry was the 1987 creation of a special fund to finance the edition of books for children and young people. It is hoped that in the future other national, regional and international organizations will contribute to this Fund.

It must also be pointed out that the National Library is at present the ISBN National Agency, designated as such by Presidential Decree no 741 (13 Aug.85), which officialized the establishment of the ISBN system in Venezuela.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The experience accumulated by the National Library since 1977 in the development of library and information services is serving as a reference point for other countries in the Latin American and Caribbean Region in planning and developing their own services and national systems.

During the last ten years, authorities and technical personnel of library institutions in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Panama, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago have made observation visits to the different units of the National Library, and have requested and obtained technical assistance.

The National Library has also contributed to the installation and implementation of the NOTIS IV System for automation of library administration and technical processes in the National Library of Chile and the Library of the Bank of the Republic in Colombia. These

institutions have agreed to share their new resources with university and public libraries in their countries. The National Libraries of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago have received advice in the creation of conservation programmes for their collections.

The leadership conferred by experience upon the National Library of Venezuela has led it to propose, with the backing of regional and international organizations, international projects aimed at serving its own needs and those of other countries in the Region. One of the most important of these is the Regional Programme for Graduate Studies in Information, designed to produce information professionals in management of information services. Initiated in 1986, it has attracted students from seven different Latin and North American countries. Another important project was the creation of the IFLA's Regional Centre for Latin America and the Caribbean Conservation and Preservation Programme, through which the National Library's Conservation Centre has become the focal point for training, production, and translation of technical documents, for conferences and regional workshops, and for activities to promote documental conservation in the Region.

HOUSING THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

Although the idea of constructing a new headquarters for the National Library was first conceived in 1958, with the advent of Venezuela's democratic system, it was not until 1974 that a special Presidential Commission was created to study the site for a new National Library.

In 1981, a 45 million-dollar project for the new building was approved, as part of an urban renewal programme for Caracas' downtown area. When the site is fully developed, the National Library will be part of Foro Libertador, a thirteen-hectare complex which includes the National Archives, the Su-

preme Court of Justice, the History Museum, the Supreme Electoral Council and a Cultural Centre.

Scheduled to be in full operation by 1991, the specially designed new building will gather under one roof all of the services of the National Library, in 81 thousand square metres of gross construction area. Its deposits will be able to house over 5.8 million volumes in compact stacks, and more than 1,000 reader seats will be available in eleven specialized reading rooms for book and non-book materials. The building features an auditorium, a bookshop, and large exhibition galleries, as well as the most advanced technology for collection preservation, distribution and maintenance. This includes controlled environmental conditions, lighting for special library purposes, data communications for consulting computer-based catalogues, mechanical systems for distributing books from storage to reading areas, special workshops and laboratories for conservation, binding, photography and reprography, and sophisticated systems for fire protection and security control.

THE FUTURE

Ten years ago, a Library Act assigned to the National Library a new administrative status

and important functions which enabled it to serve as the nucleus for the gradual development of a National Information System. Today, the economic crisis and the growing demand for information at all levels are determining factors in designing the strategy of development for the National Library in the future.

During the next few years, the National Library will continue to reinforce its role as the main reference information centre on Venezuela and as the coordinating and standardizing agency for the National Library System it will give vigorous support to the production, organization, standardization and use of information in the most important public organizations: Congress, the Supreme Court, ministries, the Planning Office, state governments, and municipalities, as well as in universities and research institutions; it will promote a more intensive and effective use of scientific and technological information produced in the country for industrial and agricultural development; it will continue to support the development of the national book industry and of national policies on reading promotion; and finally, it will encourage the establishment and development in Latin America and the Caribbean of national information systems and of preservation programmes for information in all formats.