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Public libraries in Brazil : perspectives for development

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Abstract

Briefly surveys the history of public library development in Brazil and the current state of public library services in the new political climate. Concludes that librarians need to develop cultural activities and community information services in order to attract popular support, and to work through their associations to win the necessary backing of politicians.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN BRAZIL : PERSPECTIVES FOR DEVELOPMENT

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It is said that the history of Brazil is so full of priests and friars that it resembles a history of the Catholic church ⁽¹⁾. So it is with the history of its libraries, which begins with the ecclesiastical libraries in catholic convents and churches, during colonial times.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Royal Portuguese family, flying from Napoleon's troops, arrived in Brazil, bringing with it the most precious books of Portugal, which formed the basic collection of the National Library, founded in 1810.

Following the creation of the National Library, many public libraries were founded in some states, mainly after Independence in 1822. Some of these, again, reflected the influence of the church - some of their collections came from libraries owned by bishops and priests and some of the latter even worked as librarians in the public libraries ⁽²⁾.

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The course was very much a classical one, concentrating mainly on book preservation. Only in 1936 was the first course founded which reflected new developments in librarianship; its first teachers being Adelfa Figueiredo, a Columbia University graduate and Rubens Borba de Moraes, who had had a good training in library science abroad. Prior to this, the Mackenzie Institute, an American school in São Paulo, had offered a short course conducted by the same Adelfa Figueiredo and the American librarian, Dorothy Gropp.

The 1936 course was sponsored by the city of São Paulo, which was reorganising its cultural activities and needed librarians to work in the Municipal Public Library. This course marked the beginning of American influence on Brazilian librarianship, which lasted until the 1970s.

Many students from other states of Brazil, attracted by the quality of this course, encouraged by the fact that local governments were starting libraries everywhere and needed trained manpower, travelled to São Paulo to study and, in returning to their home states, started new libraries, library science schools and library associations.

In 1938, graduates of the São Paulo course founded the first library association. The seed thus planted in São Paulo eventually developed into 26 local associations, 28 undergraduate and 5 graduate courses.

Enthusiastic graduates of the São Paulo course contributed substantially to the spread of public libraries in the country. The Government was also willing to create a system of public libraries, and in 1937, the National Book Institute (Instituto Nacional do Livro: INL) was founded with the twin objectives of book promotion and library development.

Due to these two factors, i.e., the existence of professional librarians and the decision of policymakers to support the development of libraries in the country, several new public library buildings were erected in the 1940s and early 1950s. However, though many libraries were established they were not enough to meet the needs of the population.

Since the 1950s there has been a greater emphasis on the development of special libraries, whose users, today, would be able to make better use of their libraries' resources had they been users of school and public libraries where they would have been trained as information users.

From 1960 to 1975 the number of papers presented to the Biennial Brazilian Congress of Librarianship and Documentation reflects librarians' interest in special libraries as well as the Government's emphasis on planning for economic rather than social development. As a consequence, few papers were presented on public libraries since they did not have the support from policymakers necessary for their development.

Two works by foreign authors, both published in 1975, reflected the bad condition of Brazilian public libraries, at that time. A paper by Peter Havard-Williams ⁽³⁾ recorded his view that public libraries were in poor

condition when compared with other kinds of libraries and Cavan MacCarthy (4) described Brazilian public libraries as "deplorable".

In 1976, aware of the situation, the INL stated a special project to establish a National System of Public Libraries (5) through subsystems in each state in the federation, aiming at having a library in each of the 3,953 Brazilian municipalities. It also developed a program for publishing books and journals in library science, including both translations and original works by Brazilian authors; sponsored congresses, meetings and seminars; developed a program of personnel training and assistance to local systems, and distributed books to municipalities with which it had a formal agreement.

On the whole, the present situation of public libraries in Brazil is not as bad as it was ten years ago, but neither is it as good as it should be. Later in this paper some examples of existing public library services will be described. Although public libraries arrived early in the country, Brazilian librarians are still struggling to keep them alive and to ensure that they are recognized by society and well supported by government. There is still a long way to go until the day when policymakers and society will be aware of the real value, not only of public libraries, but also of information, as a means of development and self-fulfilment.

An analysis of the conditions which affect the development of public libraries in Brazil, of the country's present economic, social and political situation, and of the most recent data on public libraries will enable some conclusions to be drawn concerning the state of public

libraries today. Libraries started in church organisations; today, information which concerns the common citizen is often passed by word of mouth in the neighbourhood bar. The alternative provision of community information by the public library is seen as one way in which public libraries can become more vital and effective institutions.

Development of public libraries in Brazil: some factors and facts

The background paper for the Regional Meeting on the Present Situation and Strategies for Development of Public Libraries in Latin America and the Caribbean ⁽⁶⁾, sponsored by Unesco and held in Caracas, in 1982, recorded many factors which affect the development of public libraries as such: transformation of a rural into an urban society, economic conditions, population growth, education, literacy rate, publishing, and, last but not least, the willingness of policymakers to create public libraries and supply them with sufficient funds to grow and to offer good services. Other factors may be added to this list, such as: the efforts of library directors and of librarians, how well the library fulfills its users' expectations, community involvement, and so on.

It is difficult to generalise about the influence of these factors on public library development in Brazil because of the many and often extreme differences which exist between various parts of this huge country. Brazil is the fifth largest country in the world, with a land area of more than 8.5 million square kilometres. It ranks fourth in terms of population growth, but the growth rate in the north east - one of the poorest parts of the country - is double that in the south - one of the wealthiest. The total population is 130 million, but the Amazon

region is sparsely populated, whilst the State of São Paulo has 25 million inhabitants, 12 million of whom live in the metropolitan area of São Paulo city. (7)

The southern states have a mild climate and good soil, are industrialized and have literacy rates much higher than in the northeastern states, where literacy is as low as 60% in some states. The northeast suffers from droughts, floods and a lifetime of misery that makes migration to the south a desperate and sometimes useless attempt to survive. But even the south, at the present time, is suffering the effects of a crisis in the country's economy; and, although Brazil is considered the tenth world economy it ranks fortieth in terms of the quality of life. The country's economic policy in the late years has aggravated adverse social conditions, widening the gap between rich and poor, and between south and north. (8)

A factor which affects library development at the local level is the financial situation of the municipalities, most of which do not have sufficient income to support basic services such as water supply, sanitation, health and education. The only exceptions are the rich industrialized cities like São Bernardo, in São Paulo State, where the major car industries are located, and where the public library has an automated cataloguing system and modern branches.

On the whole, libraries have developed best in places where politicians and policymakers have been heavily influenced by their personal use of libraries or by librarians, through professional and family relationships. This has caused many fluctuations in the fortunes of

state public library systems and municipal libraries. If a government which has supported the city library changes, the work of some years may be destroyed through deficiencies in maintenance and personnel and through the degradation of the collection. This situation reflects the absence of legislative provision to guarantee support for public libraries; the failure to include library and information systems in the national and state development plans; and the lack of community involvement in the work of public libraries.

Community participation in library work does exist in places like the city of São Paulo, which has an Information Desk and Videotext facilities at the Central Library, and where the population is starting to care for library services after their sixty years of existence. An example of this community involvement is the foundation of an Association for the Defence of São Miguel Library, after the closing of this branch due to lack of funds to pay for the rent of the building. Heavy political pressure was created and the library was eventually reopened in a new building.

The population of Brasília, the national capital, is currently circulating a petition, which now has 130,000 signatures, asking for the creation of a public library. But, by contrast, the State Library of Minas Gerais, a beautiful building by Brazil's most famous architect, Oscar Niemeyer (the builder of Brasília), is not fully operational and is involved in a slow and seemingly endless process of renovation, and not a single letter of complaint has been sent to local newspapers asking the authorities to take action to accelerate this process.

The absence of pressure from the people on politicians in support of libraries reflects, to some degree, the lack of reading and also library use habits, and the ignorance of the value of information for the solving of problems which are common in developing countries. Training for information use is an education problem and someone who is no more than functionally literate, who attended school (a school which did not have a library) for only a few years and who has no local public library, will probably go to the neighbourhood bar to get the information he needs to solve his daily problems, such as his working rights, medical care, and children's education. One can imagine the quality of the information received under such conditions and its lack of impact in effecting improvements in a person's way of life. People are just not aware of their rights to knowledge, information and libraries.

The lack of libraries in schools has also distorted the public's views of the aims of public libraries which are so heavily used by students that they have come to be considered by adults as only "a thing for the students", a place to study and read. So, the adult population hardly uses the library.

Since students who come to the library usually do not have a room at home to study, they stay in the library for long periods and libraries, therefore, require many seats, which become empty during vacations.

Some libraries, however, through heavy programs of cultural activities have succeeded in attracting adults, involving them in the library's activities and problems, as shown by the above mentioned situation in the community of São Miguel; and this has been the trend during the last ten years, in most of the libraries in the country. Cultural activities can work as a lure for users who do not have the reading habit or the habit of coming to the library for information. However, in themselves they are usually insufficient to create community support, and librarians now see the provision of community information, not only as a desirable service in its own right, but as an additional way of attracting support.

In some states, the library systems are well run, well sponsored and are beginning to encourage their communities to care and fight for their libraries. Others are running backwards, whilst others are just waking up to their problems. A general view of the situation can be seen in Table 1.

A brief analysis of the data shows that:

- * public libraries reflect the conditions of the country;
most of the libraries are situated in south and southeast Brazil (Minas Gerais, São Paulo, Paraná, Rio Grande do Sul)
- * the total of 3,600 public libraries does not mean that most of the municipalities have libraries; according to INL, only 2,500 out of the 3,953 municipalities offer this service to their inhabitants; at the same time, it is necessary to question the quality of the services offered.

loans accounting only for 25.2% and reading in the library for 74.8%, as a result of the use of the public library by students as a resource for school tasks.

- * there is only one volume for every 8 inhabitants.
- * readers account for only 2.2% of the whole population.

The reliability of the data is doubtful, or uncertain: the questionnaires are sent to local libraries, where sometimes, the person in charge may have only an elementary school education and if the state system is not providing enough assistance respondents interpret them differently. Library statistics are still in their infancy in Brazil and are not collected or processed in accordance with a standard or pattern. This may explain the low number of readers (2,919,155) when compared to reading (30,788,703). Ten volumes per reader appears much too high a level, at least when compared with similar data for the city of São Paulo, which has the largest public library system in the country. In São Paulo 20% of the whole population are registered as readers but they only read 1.4 volumes per capita per year.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES, PERSONNEL, VOLUMES, READERS AND READING

1982

STATES OF THE FEDERATION	LIBRARIES	STAFF	VOLUMES			READERS AND READING		
			BOOKS	SERIALS	LEAFLETS	READERS	Reading in Library	LOANS
Rorônia	6	35	32202	9365	289	2156	29930	17690
Acre	10	47	29125	7062	1635	2119	26629	3506
Amazonas	22	103	214685	108211	5462	9356	184429	30730
Roraima	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Parâ	71	170	291142	33004	13232	33234	370292	76005
Amapâ	4	13	20882	592	656	1039	14725	2197
Maranhão	74	280	310096	9725	11296	25973	120416	16094
Piaul	61	204	134520	10362	8526	19104	122180	27557
Cearâ	92	330	279784	129282	10792	25567	262172	51846
Rio Grande do Norte	164	340	486704	79363	41599	46265	171577	123202
Paraíba	80	254	205275	16193	9354	53673	166939	32270
Pernambuco	135	541	495060	80996	32409	79838	713956	128340
Alagoas	61	232	163705	16488	7058	17760	122893	10220
Sergipe	53	155	101882	7524	10119	18839	543925	29233
Bahia	234	767	605578	74841	39136	87693	995180	119070
Minas Gerais	598	1458	2354455	163384	111059	427765	2574700	1580704
Espírito Santo	64	159	241554	14921	6656	31614	138959	61223
Rio de Janeiro	157	968	1133402	96830	44411	74872	1431128	533502
São Paulo	579	2005	4179277	307673	73620	1036333	7830018	2284904
Paraná	352	806	1551811	211367	101891	284042	4512913	1104983
Santa Catarina	216	319	980514	71102	34100	108764	536329	382891
Rio Grande do Sul	300	857	2003176	255694	160154	418535	1624713	970924
Mato Grosso do Sul	50	110	136853	7309	6847	17010	144102	14055
Mato Grosso	35	99	96915	6701	6643	11086	71266	4128
Goiâs	172	208	348640	18797	22705	38821	231170	60024
Distrito Federal	10	73	70939	5169	3066	47697	119478	63386
Brasil	3600	10533	16368176	1737955	762715	2919155	23060019	7728684

FONTE: MEC/SG/SEINF/Se.viço de Estatística da Educação e Cultura.

Many authors who have studied the situation of libraries in Latin America have pointed out their problems and also the actions needed to change the situation. Some of the problems, such as a lack of research studies and of comprehension of library aims and objectives, can be solved by the action of librarians, either individually or through their associations. For example, by research on public library use and users, political involvement, a closer dialogue with the State, a change in the role of the public librarian, a definite concept of public libraries with objectives which correspond to the country's needs, etc.

Library schools have the special task of supporting public libraries by providing research into social information channels and the people's need for information. Some papers on this subject have been published in Brazil; for example, Ana Maria Polke studied community information flows in a poor neighbourhood in the state of Minas Gerais, and A Santos and others studied the information needs of migrants arriving in Brasilia and Sao Paulo (9, 10).

Some library schools have good faculties, with many members holding doctorates from abroad, mainly the United Kingdom. This qualifies them to develop research studies on public libraries and their users. Many studies of special libraries and their users have already been carried out, since library schools are, at present, mainly concerned with scientific and technological information. However, the double function of public librarians as cultural activators and community information specialists should, from now on, influence the curriculum of library schools.

Public librarians, without diminishing their libraries' cultural activities, which bring good community involvement, could do more to implant community information services, using the mass media to let people know the service exists, as the city of São Paulo did through a local radio station ⁽¹¹⁾. Marketing the image of the public library is a task for librarians and library associations.

As long as public libraries meet their communities' information needs it is expected that they will improve their relationship with society, bringing the necessary support for survival as well as increasing both the demand for their services and the number of users, thus creating a climate for greater political support if only to please voters who are library users.

As libraries depend on the will of politicians, it is up to librarians to develop strategic planning, not only to improve the condition of the existing libraries, but also to implant new ones under a system supported by basic legislation.

The new political climate in Brazil favours the increased participation of people in decision-making; indeed, "participatory democracy" is almost becoming a panacea. People need information in order to participate in political decisions and this is a situation which public libraries, librarians and library associations cannot ignore. Public libraries should therefore develop programs to discuss controversial themes which demand any kind of public hearing, or plebiscite; for example, discussions on the new constitution, ecology, women's rights, etc.

Brazilian librarians have been considered in the past as professionals who did not get involved with politics; adopting, sometimes, a somewhat timid position towards government actions. Now things are changing and there is a strong feeling among librarians that if they want to have their profession and library services recognised by society and government, their action has to be firm and even aggressive.

Librarians are becoming conscious of their situation as a professional minority - 16,000 librarians corresponded, one year ago, to the number of unemployed engineers - and as such they should act. Strengthening library associations is certainly a means of reaching a better comprehension of librarians' role in society and of improving their status. A motivation, at the present time, for librarians' active participation in their local associations is the political struggle for better libraries in the country. But, we have a long way to go; the British Library Association support has been a great help, as well as the publications of the American Library Association Washington Office. IFLA could with advantage show greater concern for the management of library associations, especially in developing countries.

The dialogue with the State is not easy in developing countries. Explaining to policymakers that information and development are interdependent, and that libraries are therefore essential, is as hard as explaining to an illiterate mayor in the interior of Brazil the meaning and the role of a public library. This is the real situation we face.

Librarians are professionals who are always daring and accepting challenges, especially public librarians, and taking libraries to the interior of Brazil with enough support of the communities served is a challenge for our creativity and organisation. In Brazil, librarianship has been officially recognized as a profession for only 23 years. If we succeed in the tasks I have outlined, we may consider ourselves as having reached maturity as professionals.