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THE PLACE OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEXICO IN THE MEXICAN LIBRARY SYSTEM

The following observations are based on a visit of two weeks to Mexico, during which we looked particularly at the National Library and its place in the Mexican library system. One of us (Hilary Shaw) spent the better part of two days in the National Library looking at its operations, and we both participated in discussions with senior staff. Inevitably, only a superficial impression could be obtained; our information is very incomplete, and may also not be wholly accurate. Nevertheless, we submit our observations in the hope that they may be of some interest and possibly value to the National Library. In doing so we wish to express our thanks to the senior staff for allowing us the opportunity to look at the National Library and for giving us so much help and information.

We are certainly in no doubt that the issues addressed in this paper are ones of major significance not only for the National Library but for Mexican libraries generally. They may well have been considered before, but if so the consideration evidently resulted in no action, and it is therefore appropriate to raise them again as matters demanding serious and urgent attention.

Throughout the paper, we use the term 'National Library' to refer to the Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliograficas, the Biblioteca Nacional, and the Hemeroteca Nacional. They may be separate organizations, but their work and functions are so closely related that it is appropriate to consider them as a whole.

1. Characteristics of the Mexican library scene.

Before considering the role of the National Library, it is desirable to look at the Mexican library scene, and in particular at deficiencies in the present system.

Local libraries of widely different sizes and quality exist; few would be considered adequate by modern standards, and their development, particularly that of public libraries and some academic libraries, is a matter of much importance and urgency, not mainly for the libraries and their users, but for the scientific, technical, economic and social development of Mexico. At present there seems to be insufficient drive and leadership towards such development.

However adequate local libraries are, they always require support from other resources - support for information services, bibliographic services, and document supply. There are no centralized facilities for the supply of catalogue records in Mexico, no major purpose-designed

document supply sources intended for national use, no acquisition programme to ensure that the country acquires a majority of the publications likely to be needed by its citizens, no machinery for ensuring that publications once acquired are retained in at least one copy for future use, and no current means of access to the holdings of libraries in the country (the union catalogue of serials is now defunct and there has never been any union catalogue of monographs). These are all basic and major deficiencies. Even at a regional and local level, there is very little cooperation, let alone coordination of libraries and information services.

There is no national plan for the development of libraries and information services, nor is there any sign that such a plan is contemplated. There appears to be little concern at government level, and little or no pressure from librarians to involve government or to construct such a plan themselves. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that such developments as there have been in libraries have been isolated and due to individual effort; and even these have sometimes subsequently faltered because of lack of continuity in senior appointments. For similar reasons, there appears to be little or no leadership.

2. Possible functions of a national library.

The first and most obvious function of the national library is to make a comprehensive collection of the nation's publications, in all formats - films and sound recordings as well as printed matter. An accompanying responsibility is to conserve all this material for future generations.

The second function, and an international responsibility, is to produce a comprehensive and up-to-date national bibliography of all the nation's publications.

A national library may also collect, and provide bibliographic access to, publications, including journal articles, concerning the country that are published in other countries.

Associated with the production of a national bibliography, a national library may also offer a centralized cataloguing service, whether on cards or, much more satisfactorily, in machine-readable form.

A national library may also accept a responsibility for acting as a centre of document supply within a country, whether as a switching centre (by maintaining union catalogues and locating items as desired) or by collecting publications itself to satisfy a high proportion of document needs not satisfied in local libraries.

A further function may be the acceptance of material withdrawn from other libraries to ensure its availability for future use.

Finally, a national library may exercise leadership, by planning, coordination, guidance and example.

3. The functions of the Mexican National Library.

Judged against the list of functions above, the role of the National Library in Mexico is extremely limited.

Legal deposit is very seriously incomplete, and recognized to be so. The measures proposed to achieve better collection of Mexican publications in the country seem to us inappropriate and inadequate. This question is dealt with more fully below.

There appears to be little or no programme of conservation. Environmental conditions in the new building on the UNAM campus do not seem to be well controlled; in particular, the atmosphere appears to be excessively dry and the temperature too warm. There does not appear to be any programme of microfilming material in the process of rapid decay, such as older newspapers, let alone of deacidification and/or lamination.

The national bibliography is reasonable so far as it goes, but since it is based on inadequate legal deposit it provides only partial coverage of the nation's publications. Not only that, but existing holdings are not fully analysed: Mexican journals, for example, which are very poorly covered in published indexing and abstracting journals, are not indexed.

The collection of Mexicana appears to be somewhat haphazard, and must be very far from complete.

No centralized cataloguing service is offered in any form.

The National Library plays no role in document supply, either by constructing, or even encouraging the construction of, union catalogues, or by supplying documents itself on any scale. It is supposed to receive two copies of Mexican books, one of which is loanable, but this apparently rarely happens, and serials are not lent at all. The National Library's collection of non-Mexican publications appears to be very small.

The National Library is not recognized as a leader of libraries and information services in Mexico, and plays no part in the planning or coordination of libraries, except in so far as REBIMEX can be considered an example of coordination.

4. Problems facing the Biblioteca Nacional.

There are major problems that face the National Library in performing even its present role adequately, let alone extending its functions.

The stock is divided between buildings in the centre of Mexico City and the new building on the UNAM site. While the university's offer of a site was undoubtedly generous and welcome, it is unfortunate, since it is a long way from the centre of the city, and up to an hour's travelling time by car from the centre of the city must be allowed for.

The National Library's close structural links with UNAM, and its position on the UNAM site, inevitably create a considerable degree of dependence on UNAM. As a result, the Biblioteca Nacional does not have anything approaching full autonomy, suffers from union problems that do not necessarily concern it directly, and tends to be university-oriented rather than serving all libraries, including public and special libraries, equally.

The new building on the UNAM site has many interesting architectural features, but is inflexible, limited in its capacity for expansion, and poor in its environmental conditions for the conservation of books.

The lack of continuity in senior staff is something that the Biblioteca Nacional has in common with most other libraries in Mexico, but it is no less serious for that. It makes long-term planning very difficult, and indeed not very attractive to the occupants of senior positions. Leadership of high quality with some prospect of continuity over a number of years is essential if the Biblioteca Nacional is to fulfil a major role.

Again in common with most other libraries in Mexico, the Biblioteca Nacional suffers from a shortage of professional staff. The absence of professional qualifications need not in itself be a serious matter; what is serious is the shortage of persons who are dedicated to librarianship and information service as a profession, and capable of carrying out professional functions. These include management.

Possibly because of the shortage of professional and managerial staff, the administrative structure of the Biblioteca Nacional appears to be rather loose and weak. The chains of command are not wholly clear. One reason for this is the curious organizational structure at the top. As we understand it, the Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliograficas is a sort of machinery for linking the Biblioteca Nacional and Hemeroteca Nacional with UNAM, the opportunity being taken to use the IIB as

a sort of research and planning body for the Biblioteca Nacional and Hemeroteca Nacional. The arrangement seems however somewhat artificial, and can hardly lead to effective control and management: this is related to the question of autonomy, mentioned above. Equally curious is the division between the Biblioteca Nacional and the Hemeroteca Nacional. We were unable to discover any reason why these two should not be integrated, since their operations have much in common, and the use of common reading rooms could lead to a greater economy of space and greater ease of use. That this division is of historical origin is no reason why it should be perpetuated.

There is evidently no machinery for liaison with other libraries in Mexico, and no consultative machinery.

The above list of problems is large and serious. The solution of some is clearly beyond the scope of the Biblioteca Nacional, but this is not the case with all. Possible measures for improvement are considered below.

5. REBIMEX.

It is necessary to consider REBIMEX separately, because it is evidently a matter of major concern at the moment. It represents an initiative on the part of the National Library, and also links it with other libraries in Mexico. Both of these features are entirely laudable. The aim of REBIMEX, as we understand it, is to try and ensure better collection of Mexican publications. A major library - normally a state university - in almost all of the states of Mexico would accept responsibility for collecting all publications issued within its borders, and send records of these publications to the Biblioteca Nacional, where they would be used to construct a more complete national bibliography.

In nearly all countries, the national library itself accepts responsibility for the collection of all the publications of the country, even if it seeks the help of other libraries in acquiring them. It is accepted that the collection of publications from all over the country may be a very difficult task for the National Library, even if the law of legal deposit is greatly strengthened, but local collection does not necessarily mean local storage and retention. There is no reason why publications should not be collected locally and sent to the National Library, with a copy of each being retained in each state if desired. This would make bibliographic control much easier - the alternative is to induce each of the cooperating libraries to submit records in a standard format that can be used by the National Library, or to edit such records as they submit into a standard format. It would also help to build up a comprehensive

collection of Mexican publications in the capital city of Mexico, where such a collection surely ought to be. The argument that space restrictions might preclude this is difficult to accept. The great majority of Mexican publications appear to be produced in Mexico City, so that the addition of those produced elsewhere in Mexico would not constitute a serious additional strain on accommodation. In any case, the new building houses at present material that belongs not to the National Library but to UNAM, and the space this occupies could be freed if necessary.

If the National Library wishes to set up a cooperative scheme with other major libraries in Mexico, it would seem sensible to use this for building up a national union catalogue of monographs and serials. Otherwise, elaborate machinery is being set up to achieve a very limited objective.

Even with this limited scope, the progress of REBIMEX seems to have been very slow. It appears that there have been two or three years of meetings and discussions, at which various topics have been aired and possibly decided, but nothing has actually happened. We are unable to say whether this is due to lack of manpower, lack of interest, lack of commitment, or simply insufficient drive towards the objective.

6. Proposals for consideration.

As stated above, Mexican libraries desperately need leadership and coordination. There are also several very important functions that are not at present fulfilled. Even within its constraints and limitations, the National Library could, we believe, play a far more positive role in the library system of the country.

- i. Its first step must surely be to define its functions clearly and to develop a programme to achieve them, with a time schedule, a statement of resources needed, and so on. This kind of long-term planning does not appear to be common in Mexico, but it is difficult to see how much progress can be made without it. Even though it is possible to proceed only by one step at a time, it is vital to ensure that such steps as are taken are consistent with a long-term and broad objective; stepping off randomly in different directions is unlikely to achieve useful results.
- ii. A clear function, which is at present partially fulfilled and which the National Library clearly wants to see fulfilled more adequately, is more comprehensive collecting of Mexican publications. This could, as suggested, be achieved by local

collecting with central deposit in the National Library. However, it is likely that a much stronger legal deposit law, with adequate sanctions, is required as well.

- iii. More comprehensive collection of Mexican publications would of course make possible a more comprehensive national bibliography. In addition to the bibliography of books, a bibliography of Mexican serials is an essential need, and an additional desideratum is the indexing of articles in Mexican journals.
 - iv. The collection of publications relating to Mexico published in other countries should be extended as and how resources permit, and each publication should be adequately indexed in a published bibliography issued at regular intervals and cumulated.
- When Mexican publications are being collected, at least two copies of each item, whether printed or in some other form, should be acquired, one for permanent preservation and consultation, and one for interlending to other libraries. At the moment, it is extremely difficult for other countries to obtain copies of Mexican publications on loan or by photocopying. This must be accepted as a firm national and international responsibility of the National Library.
- vi. The national bibliography should be computerized, and the computer tapes, with records in MARC format, should be made available as a Mexican contribution to Universal Bibliographic Control, an internationally accepted objective.
 - vii. National union catalogues of both monographs and serials are an essential and urgent need. We cannot say without some knowledge of the now defunct union catalogue of serials developed by CONACYT whether this can be used as the basis of a new list or whether it would be better to start afresh. In the case of monographs there is no basis. For both union lists careful planning is needed to identify the most 'productive' libraries in terms of titles held, in order to keep the machinery of collecting and recording data as simple, economical and practical as possible. Both lists should be constructed and maintained in machine-readable form. The role of the National Library could range from initiation and general planning through detailed system design to permanent responsibility for the management of union catalogues, but the first stage must clearly be the construction of a coherent plan.

viii. The systems and procedures of the National Library should be subjected to a rigorous review, since it is possible that substantial improvements in efficiency and output could be obtained.

These measures together would constitute an extensive programme, but we believe it is well within the scope of the National Library and not totally beyond the resources it might expect to obtain for activities that would greatly benefit the nation's libraries, the nation's users, and the nation itself. How great the necessary resources are would require more extensive study: a reasonable general estimate might be made in a short time (two or three weeks), but detailed estimates would depend on intensive examination of each proposed function.

Such an examination should be the first priority of the National Library; it could almost certainly be carried out within its present resources but would benefit from some external assistance from appropriate bodies. We could offer some assistance from the British Library Lending Division in the design and construction of union catalogues, and if desired we would be prepared to outline an appropriate research programme.

The mere conduct of research aimed at enhancing the National Library's functions and benefitting the nation's libraries would bring the National Library into closer contact with other libraries - public and special as well as academic - and show that the National Library was prepared gradually to accept responsibilities that would help to establish the leadership the country's libraries so badly need and the status we believe the National Library desires.

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