

Where Social Justice Meets Librarianship

Truth Commissions as Information Spaces for Work and Activism in International Librarianship

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The fight for social justice is a task related to most disciplines of knowledge. The library and information (LIS) arena is not and should not be foreign to this quest. This brief article attempts to bring attention to the importance of establishing a relationship between an area of LIS such as *international librarianship* (IL) and the current concerns in the information world about social justice through the provision and dissemination of adequate information for the citizen.

International librarianship is a discipline that involves, among other goals, the quest to examine and analyze the values and orientations of international information (Lor 2005) (Lor and Britz, 2005). Modern approaches to IL pay attention to the role of information flow and access in the international arena and the challenges that they are facing (Kesselman and Weintraub 2004) (Lor and Britz 2005). Those challenges require responses that relate to ethical pillars such as human rights, social justice, and the examination of the common good (Lor and Britz 2005, p. 65). Some of those values are the matter of this article, especially those that relate to social responsibility and human rights because we consider them as part of the next paradigm of IL; one that complements the problem-solving paradigm within international librarianship. This paradigm suggests that IL acts as a useful area within LIS education because it enables the practitioner/professional to examine other societies and library practices in order to gather knowledge about potential solutions for library and information problems. We suggest here that aside from this pragmatic approach, social justice as an additional goal would enable IL and librarianship in general to gain more power and visibility among other disciplines and it would help establish a closer and more fruitful connection with law, public policy, information economy, and ethics.

The relation between librarianship and human rights has been discussed in the literature in several different ways. Addressing the presence of human rights in librarianship, for example, the unfortunate role of censorship and the illusion of neutrality on the part of the librarian (Phenix and De la Pena McCook 2005), (Byrne 2002), (Darch and Underwood 2005) (Maret 2005). Phenix and De la Pena MacCook (2005) provide a very interesting approach to the connection between librarianship and human rights: "As we carry on with our duties as public service librarians, we should keep in mind our history of human rights advocacy, and note the work we do today as a continuation of the commitment to the contributions of our programs, collections, and services toward keeping an open society, a public space where democracy lives" (Phenix and De la Pena McCook 2005, p. 24).

Interesting and useful for any further discussion is the recognition of the value and role for human rights advocacy that librarianship is cementing. Here we attempt to expand this link between human rights and librarianship to the

extreme by suggesting that an area of librarianship such as IL is perfectly positioned to look at human rights from multiple perspectives of theory and practice. In addition, Samek (2005) has emphasized the fact that "we must recognize that the days of drawing a line between library-issues and so called non-library issues are past (Samek 2005, p. 19)". If we add to these concepts the fact that there is nothing more political than organizing and disseminating information, a factor that is not necessarily well understood (and perceived) in the LIS curriculum, we must understand then the enormous opportunity that IL and its interaction with human rights provide: an opportunity to produce and educate a culture of activism within librarianship's international culture.

Let's remember that there is nothing more political than organizing information. This idea underlies the work of several entities of transitional justice which have been involved in the arduous, difficult, and risky job of building information structures to support historic tragedies in the effort to preserve the memory of them for future justice. The example of transitional justice and its relation to LIS is relevant because it offers a wide array of possibilities for LIS to apply techniques, methods, information technologies, and information structures to build and promote social justice, and therefore to improve the development of nations and societies. We must however remember that other information compounds such as repositories and archives have been working on this matter for a long time.

If development is the ultimate goal, then why not improve one seminal aspect of the development of a nation called social justice? Development is an illusion without justice, and human rights fully integrated as an intrinsic part of the social justice equation. This kind of rethinking is mandatory in the necessary evaluation of library work at present. The rethinking of library tasks and goals is a work in progress through the 21st century and uses activism as one of its main tools (Samek 2006). One step in this process is to look at LIS education and what it actually instructs and conveys in order to redesign some of its core parameters. Social justice should certainly be included among the new parameters. If we are able to suggest an *information society*, we have to acknowledge that this new sphere of information is not fair and balanced for all; its imperfections are highly visible. Mechanisms of control and provision for balance need to be implemented and international librarianship, given its interest in the full and broad international picture, can provide those mechanisms for control and provision.

Let's assess for a second the "electronic environment", "digital world", "global information infrastructure", "wired planet" or any name we want to give it. Two elements of this "new world of information" seem to have paramount importance for the connection between librarianship and human rights: The first one is a fundamental precept of librarianship called *access*. Access to information is recognized as a human right. Therefore, from a general perspective access on itself is a human right entity. The second one is another huge component and fundamental precept of librarianship named *intellectual freedom*. Its study and analysis are part of the LIS curricula in many LIS schools [but for the most part threaded through the curriculum rather than offered in stand alone courses], and its treatment touches upon other disciplines of knowledge such as law and information policy. Provision and dissemination of human rights' information are based on one premise: the information needs to be accessed in a timely and efficient manner. This factor requires fast, effective, and powerful dissemination of information. Without speedy access of relevant human rights information the process of promoting social justice becomes slow

and late. Therefore access and intellectual freedom should remain as necessary elements for any discussion of human rights and librarianship.

The discussion of IL and its definition (Lor 2005) calls attention for the need to position IL within the boundaries of LIS. So many times, the question of why IL is a field of study arises. Why not finally fully support the legitimization of IL through the fight for human rights? Human rights are also the pillars of the information society (Hurley 2003) because of the intrinsic importance of freedom of information and intellectual property in the 21st century information society. It is necessary, however, to become more emphatic about the need to educate information workers on the importance of the understanding of human rights within the sphere of librarianship and international information. Social accountability is for example a factor on the corporate agenda; why not translate the same idea of social accountability to the information arena? IL may help to address current and future issues of freedom of information and intellectual property because the discipline offers the best possible space to integrate critical dialogue about the complexities of international and transborder information flow. Going even further, IL can become an active educational force in the advocacy for social accountability in the production and use of information worldwide. In the same way, international librarianship has the power to argue for a closer connection with the human rights agenda by calling attention to human rights information issues and situations worldwide, and by establishing close connections to other disciplines like political science, public policy, information economy, and law.

Two spaces and one strategy for activism may help to clarify the role of IL in advocating, promoting, disseminating and protecting human rights from the point of view of information analysis, discussion, and advocacy:

Space 1. Truth Commissions and reports. Truth commissions all around the world have been enacted to promote the concept of transitional justice. From El Salvador to Chile, Peru and Namibia, truth commissions can be understood as exhaustive social justice efforts in the gathering, organization and dissemination of testimonies, memory, and data intended to shed light on human rights violations. Efforts of this kind are actually transformative informational experiences for cultures and nations, for the most part shocking and emotionally painful, but absolutely necessary for social justice. IL can bring on an analysis and evaluation of the methods involved in the collection and analysis of the data. It is important however to understand that IL can look at the issue from both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary points of view. Other disciplines already mentioned above can add to the analysis and examination of best practices when dealing with transitional justice too. IL then is very well positioned to address an enormous set of human rights' issues.

Space 2. Cultural Heritage and Preservation. Current attempts to build up electronic repositories of information (visual printed/non printed) challenge the notions of cultural heritage. Cultural heritage international policies, such as those from UNESCO: *World Heritage Convention 1972*¹, *Declaration of Melbourne 1998*², *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2006*³, help to protect and promote the culture and information values of indigenous groups and populations. In the quest to "digitize", "visually

¹ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>

² http://www.unesco.org/culture/forum/html_eng/australia.shtml

³ <http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php->

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record", and "preserve electronically" issues of respect, cultural memory, and recognition of the value and cultural factors of human groups need to be related to basic human rights. Intellectual property and the fair use of information and communication technologies are aspects that IL is concerned about. This is an arena where one of the most important 21st century information battles will be held. The increasing wave of privatization, commercialization, global market fundamentalism and how they impact copyright practices on the part of corporate information forces and international bodies make necessary to bring on elements of human rights to the discussion in order to protect, preserve, and guarantee the survival of cultural heritage for those that genuinely own it.

Advocacy and Activism for Human Rights knowledge. Another area in which IL can play a role is the advocacy and activism for human rights knowledge. Again, those individuals and groups that work in IL could use their expertise and knowledge to advocate for the dissemination of human rights knowledge through the gathering, organization, and design of information tools and systems that would enable more versatile and efficient access to human rights information. IL could also enable more progressive study of multiculturalism and multilingualism in order to enhance and empower the notion and cultural content of human rights all around the world.

Human rights are then an arena in which the traditional forces and values of librarianship can establish connections, dialogue, and advocacy in the 21st century. The assistance of sub-disciplines of LIS, such as IL, may provide with a new way of addressing human rights values in the information arena, ultimately furthering the goals of an emergent global information justice movement.

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