International Cultural Exchange through Libraries

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Library services are usually contained within the borders of a country, leaving international relations as one facet of library cooperation. There exist, nevertheless, other types of libraries to provide services outside a country's border. They are part of international cultural centers, which include activities as diverse as:

- Information services in support of diplomatic missions and government programs
- Education and exchange programs
- Promotion of a language and culture abroad.

The number of these types of cultural organizations is relatively large. For example, a city such as Rome contained thirty-six foreign cultural centers in 1990 while Paris was home to more than forty in 1998. Most of these centers include libraries. To already familiar names such as the British Council, l'Alliance Française, Institut Français, the Société Dante Alighieri, Instituto Cervantes, Spain; Goethe Institut, Germany; and the United States Information Agency (USIA), there can be added the Austrian Cultural Institute, the Fondation du Roi Abdul Aziz Al-Saoud, Saudi Arabia; Instituto Camoes, Portugal; and the former Soviet Institute (Union of Soviet Friendship Societies and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries).

The terms, sending country and receiving country, are used to describe respectively the country on which the cultural service depends and the country where the cultural service is located. This terminology was defined in the Vienna Convention, diplomatic relations between countries, in 1961.

The Organizations—Historical Backgrounds

Language can be seen as a cultural vehicle and as a means to gain access to the literature, the arts, and the history of a country. Language becomes a key element in the building of a national identity, making diffusion of the language a primary objective of the majority of the institutions of this kind.

The first organizations to develop these ideas were the l'Alliance Française, created in 1883, and the Société Dante Alighieri, created in 1889. Both institutions were privately funded. Their headquarters, in Paris and Rome respectively, offered classes in French and Italian to foreign visitors and also trained instructors who later went to teach in the branch centers in other countries.

In the period between World Wars I and II other important organizations were born. In 1925 another private organization, the German Academy, was created in Germany. It opened its first domestic center in 1932 in order to educate foreigners in the field of German studies and send German teachers to other countries, and it later became the Goethe Institute.

In 1933 the Swedish Institute was founded, followed in 1934 by the British government's creation of the British Council as a special branch of the Foreign Office. Its primary mission was the promotion of British interests abroad in the fields of education and culture. The British Council
was the first large cultural organization of international character created by a national government. Operating problems that arose in some countries, such as in Latin America, where institutions dependent upon foreign governments could not be opened, were overcome by the British Council through the formation of anglophilic societies.

The years before World War II also witnessed the first wars of cultural influences. Two powers, Germany and Italy, used their cultural organizations as a means for the diffusion of their totalitarian ideas. The British Council tried to counteract this action by opening cultural centers in areas and places especially sensitive to that influence: Lisbon and various Middle Eastern and Mediterranean countries. Another example of the ideological use of cultural centers was the creation, by Spain's Francoist government, of the Instituto de España in London in 1946 in order to counteract the action of the Instituto Español, which was created in 1942 by the government of the Spanish Republic in exile. At the end of World War II the Allied countries established cultural centers in the larger German cities. The America House began to appear at this time, later spreading to other parts of Western Europe. Its goal was to promote democratic ideas through the use of the libraries as well as through cultural and educational programs.

This historical period also marked the beginning of the decolonization of Africa and Asia; former colonial powers were still interested in maintaining their presence and influence in the new countries. France and Great Britain were the two nations most affected by the process of decolonization. France made a great effort to maintain its linguistic presence in its former colonies, especially in Africa. Great Britain adopted a diversified strategy depending on the status of the countries: foreign countries, former colonies, or countries belonging to the Commonwealth. The model of the cultural center that is still in use today emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, a period that saw the greatest rate of expansion of international cultural centers.

In 1953 President Dwight D. Eisenhower founded the United States Information Agency (USIA), known outside the United States as United States Information Service (USIS). In 1978 the name was changed to International Communication Agency. However, in 1982 it reverted to its former name of USIA. It was established to operate the American government's international programs for educational and cultural exchange. These programs included Fulbright scholarships, radio propaganda, international affairs briefings for American government officials, and the establishment of libraries and information centers.

In the 1950s Spain embarked on an ambitious project to promote cultural centers in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. There were as many as forty-two centers in 1975 despite continuing financial, organizational, and infrastructural problems. In 1991 the Spanish government created the Instituto Cervantes (Cervantes Institute), a new organization of the existing cultural centers in countries where Spanish is not spoken.

Some Asian countries have also established cultural organizations or foundations to promote their language and culture. In 1972 the Japanese government established the Japan Foundation that today consists of eighteen centers worldwide. In 1987 the Institut du Monde Arabe was opened in Paris, with 50 percent of its funding provided by the French government, and the remainder by a group of twenty-one Arab countries: Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen.

Given this historical evolution, it can be said that organizations that created cultural centers, despite their differing strategies and characteristics, shared the following attributes:

- Support of a governmental or para-governmental programs
- Inclusion in the foreign policy of the sponsoring governments
- Emphasis on the teaching of the sending country's language.

The centers act as a means for the development of programs of intergovernmental cooperation, function to disseminate their native culture abroad, and also serve as a conduit for business sectors to gain access to new markets and strategic projects of cooperation in the fields of education and research.
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The Libraries

Nearly every cultural center contains a library. In some cases, cultural centers have even sprung up around a library, such as the Custodia Foundation in Paris. The most important international library directories often do not include all existing cultural center libraries, and the library information given by the organizations (in printed form or on the Internet) often serves more as a propaganda tool than as an objective source of information. From these two sources, it is estimated that there are approximately seven hundred libraries of cultural centers functioning around the world.

Library Policies of Cultural Organizations

Two main groups of cultural center libraries can be defined; in the first group are libraries attached to institutions mainly involved with the teaching and the diffusion of language:

- Alliance Française/Institut Français: These institutions are represented in 150 countries around the world. The French government invests heavily of resources in the promotion of the French language as a worldwide symbol of prestige, especially now that French has been replaced by English as the International language. France has always financially supported the acquisition of high quality collections and, in some cases, has provided spacious library facilities and modern equipment, as exemplified by the new libraries in Madrid and New York.

- Goethe Institute: This institution consists of eighteen centers in Germany and 150 centers distributed in more than seventy countries. Its libraries are quite new and with an overall plan regarding the design of the facilities as well as the acquisition of the collections and the services offered.

- Instituto Cervantes: The varied origins of its centers are illustrated by libraries that differ substantially in size and type of collections, and it is now attempting to update its library collections and to install new information technologies. Instituto Cervantes maintains thirty-seven centers and libraries in twenty-four different countries.

In the second group are those libraries that have developed more diverse activities:

- The British Council: There are 207 libraries and information centers in 105 countries, of which 137 are lending libraries. British foreign policy, in the 1940s and 1950s, promoted reading and libraries in a devastated Europe, especially in Germany. A similar program was launched at the same time in China. In the 1950s the policy of lending libraries and information services as a key element of the centers abroad was reaffirmed, and plans were developed for the colonial territories that were on the verge of gaining independence, some in areas where public libraries had not previously existed.

The British Council has always maintained a policy of diversification. The teaching of the language is not always the main goal in all countries although excellent resource centers are maintained for the teaching and learning of English. A good example of such a center would be the one located in Paris. The classification system used by the British Council for its resource centers – an adaptation of class 450 of the Dewey Classification – has been adopted for their respective languages by many libraries of the Goethe Institute and the Instituto Cervantes. The British Council has acted as an agent for the Document Supply Centre of the British Library since the 1970s, and offers services such as interlibrary loan and document delivery.

- The United States Information Agency: In 1991 the USIA had 160 libraries and reading rooms in 88 countries. USIA libraries are located primarily in embassies. They focus on the provision of information and offer reference and research services. They have sophisticated technological resources and are fully funded by the American government.

In the 1940s, the State Department of the USA started a library program in collaboration with the American Library Association. As a result, binational cultural center libraries were created. They are located mainly in Latin America and the Caribbean. They contain materials about the USA, and they offer, in some cases, other services such as bookstores or counseling in educational matters. They are funded primarily by the US government and are managed by the US government.
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The total number of centers has decreased to fifty distributed in seventeen countries.

The USIA American Studies Collection consists of thirteen hundred volumes on American topics. Titles are selected by experts in various subjects and are donated to institutions as a basis for creating collections in these areas. Many local libraries have also benefited from the USIA’s weeding policy, which requires replacing almost the entire collection on a regular basis.

- The Japan Foundation. There are twelve libraries located in language centers and in cultural centers. The libraries are modern, most of them having been founded or renovated in the 1990s. The collections number between fifteen and thirty thousand volumes. The foundation supports other libraries through the donation of sets of selected books to aid in the formation of Japanese Studies collections.

General Characteristics of the Libraries

The goals of the institutions vary, and within the same organization the activities can differ according to the demands of the city or the country where the center is located. However, it is possible to find similarities among the functions of the libraries of cultural centers and describe some common objectives:

- To build and maintain specialized collections, mainly in the language of the sending country, about that society’s life and culture
- To provide material supporting the study and teaching of the language of the sending country
- To serve as an information center for general or specialized subjects of the sending country
- To promote the cooperation and exchange of students and professionals of both countries.

The multidimensional nature of these libraries makes it difficult to squeeze them into the traditional classification schemes of libraries. They can be classified as special libraries, considering the collection, the type of services offered, and the need to cater to a specific public. At the same time, they share characteristics with public libraries because in many cases they serve the public without restrictions; and, in some cases, especially in developing countries, they actually function as public libraries. Sometimes these libraries also serve to complement university collections, while in other cases they act as governmental or semigovernmental libraries.

Buildings and Facilities

As an official representative of a country, the image of the library is a major consideration in planning and designing the facilities. A pleasant environment has to be created in order to attract potential readers and at the same time, to offer an appealing image of the sending country. This appeal is greater when the differences between the two countries are substantial. Cultural centers in developing countries offer services that are rarely found in the public libraries of the receiving country: access to new information technologies such as automated cataloging, CD-ROMs, online consultation, and Internet access.

This is perhaps why cultural center libraries are often perceived as showcases or propaganda vehicles of sending countries. In some cases the libraries reflect an image abroad that cannot be found even in the sending country. An example of this would be the public libraries that Spain created in the protectorate of Morocco in the 1940s. The library in Tangeria was a model library of that time, compared with the near nonexistence of public libraries in Spain during the same time period.

Obviously, security has become important especially for those centers in countries most threatened by terrorism. Access to the libraries, especially those located in buildings that house diplomatic representations, is only possible under strict regulation, which can be disturbing for many users.

The Collections

The size and composition of the collections vary according to the specific objective of each institution. Over half of the libraries have collections of less than ten thousand volumes; nearly 90% of the libraries of cultural centers have less than twenty-five thousand volumes. The British Council and the French centers, however, break this trend. French centers enjoy a larger number of volumes due to continued financial support as
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well as to the length of their existence. The British Council libraries have always played a central role in the educational and cultural policies abroad and have served as public libraries in some countries, resulting in larger collections.

The collections generally contain materials for teaching the sending country's language, with emphasis on contemporary literature; a selection of publications that reflect current cultural and social issues of the sending country; a variety of audiovisual materials; and a good selection of reference books. In general, collection development policies emphasize the currency of the collections. Outdated and underused materials, as well as those considered inappropriate for the kind of user that the organization wants to attract, are periodically weeded.

Most of the materials in the libraries are in the language of the sending country although exceptions do exist. For example, in the American binational center libraries in Latin America, as much as half of the collection can be in the language of the receiving country. In general, books on literature are in English and nonfiction materials tend to be in the receiving country's language. This high percentage is partly due to their role as public libraries. These collections also help to facilitate promotion of community services and programs. The Japan Foundation libraries hold a large amount of material in languages other than Japanese in order to generate greater public interest in Japanese studies. Collections of books distributed through the Japan Foundation Library Support Program in the USA, for example, are entirely in English.

Within the cultural center library there also exists a special definition of the concept of a local collection. The local collection can include works written in the language of the sending country translated into the language of the receiving country, works written in the receiving country in the sending country's language, works written in the sending country about the receiving country and vice versa; and finally, works written in other languages about the relations between the two countries. Although not all organizations maintain this type of local collection, its importance as a documentary source for the study of the cultural influences between the two countries is obvious. Censorship is an important and unavoidable

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subject in relation to these collections. This issue requires the librarian to possess a high level of diplomacy and a deep knowledge of the receiving country's laws concerning censorship.

The Cultural Centers and the Library Profession

With the exception of some small libraries, the majority of the organizations have at the most one or two qualified librarians on the staff. The head librarian usually comes from the sending country. Other professionals may be selected from the receiving country, and they usually benefit from training programs in the sending country. Differences in professional and economic status between the librarians from the sending country and those hired in the receiving country can be a source of friction, especially in countries where the locally contracted employees do not enjoy the same benefits as the sending country employees.

The specialized nature of the collections and the large distances sometimes separating a library from its head office in the sending country make the employment of an experienced librarian highly recommended. Language is an important factor, but not always decisive. Professional capacity and a positive attitude toward different cultures can have a stronger influence on the librarian's work than merely having a command of the language of the receiving country.

With some effort a language can be learned in a relatively short period of time. Persons with racist beliefs, religious prejudices, and an unawareness of the social realities under which many developing countries exist can have a detrimental effect on a library and foster a hostile environment within the community served.

Repercussions on the Library Profession

The influence that cultural center libraries and their staff have in the receiving countries may vary enormously, depending on many different factors: the size of the country, its level of library development, degree of diffusion of the sending country's language, and the resources given to the library to accomplish its goals. The library community has benefited in
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general from the presence of libraries in cultural centers in other countries in the following areas:

- Development of Infrastructure
  Some public library systems owe their existence to the initiatives of foreign cultural organizations. This is especially true of the British Council's library construction program in former British colonies.

- Training and Exchange of Professionals
  Some organizations such as the British Council and the USIA see as a part of their mission the awarding of scholarships to student librarians for postgraduate or doctorate studies in the sending country. Internships are another means of professional education in cultural center libraries. Students, for example, of the École des Sciences de l'Information, Rabat, Morocco, sponsored by UNESCO, can enroll in practicums at participating cultural center libraries.

- Access to New Library Models
  The presence of more advanced libraries has always been a focus of attention for local librarians working under more difficult circumstances. In some cases, cultural center libraries are little islands of freedom or schools of democracy. They have witnessed technological progress in libraries such as the catalog on micro-fiche in the British Council, the free access to a Dialog database provided by the USIA libraries, and public access to the Internet. Local librarians and users were introduced to new ways of understanding library organization such as open access to shelves, emphasis on public service, and the existence of an atmosphere of intellectual freedom.

- Integration into Local Library Networks
  Generally, the libraries of the cultural centers seek integration into the local or national network of libraries in which they are located. The impact of such integration is greater in countries in which the library infrastructure is less developed.

Present and Future Perspectives

In the 1990s there have been dramatic political, economic, technological, and sociocultural changes decisively affecting the very definition of the international cultural center. These changes include the following:

- The tendency of government agencies to cut spending, primarily on social, cultural, and educational programs.
- The progressive abolition of national borders as a consequence of economic globalization and the process of political integration, for example, the European Union.
- Recent technological advances, the Internet, and virtual programming for teaching languages and for cultural diffusion in general.

As a consequence, strategies have to be reconsidered and new priorities defined.

It is natural for an institution of this kind to ask if it is possible to continue with the same kind of cultural and library policies as before. Some 30 percent of the cultural centers established by countries of the European Union are located in countries of the European Union while less than 4 percent are in countries of the former Soviet bloc. New ideas are surfacing, such as the European Houses, a concept promoted by the European Union to disseminate European culture outside its borders. In other cases, relocation of centers and services is seen as a way to optimize the existing resources and operate more efficiently.

The most dramatic example of the consequences of restrictive policy can be found in the USIA. On October 1, 1999, the USIA was integrated into the State Department of the USA, and dramatic changes are likely. Although it may maintain certain functions such as press relations and the Fulbright scholarships, the libraries, many of which were closed in the 1990s, may disappear completely. Information services, which are increasingly being transferred to embassies and consular offices, could be offered almost exclusively on-line via the Internet. The binational centers might lose the financial support they have been receiving from the American government.

Cultural organizations have discovered quickly the power of the Internet. Sites such as the Cervantes Virtual Center are evidence of this new development. Libraries dedicated almost exclusively to information services are being pressured to use the Internet as their primary means of communication with users, keeping personalized reference services at a minimum. In less developed countries, access to the Internet from a cultural center library can become more than just a service offered to the
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users; it is also a means of promoting the image of the center among the local population. Some problems may arise such as increased demand for Internet workstations and the added cost of maintaining them or conflicts with the censorship authorities of the receiving country. It is a challenge that librarians of the cultural centers will have to resolve in an imaginative and thoughtful manner.

There is no doubt that cultural centers still have a role in cultural diffusion on the international scene. In regard to the libraries, even if their existence is very fragile and they are in many cases afterthoughts of foreign policies not especially sensitive to their kind of services, their presence has been important in many countries for the development and modernization of the library profession and the interchange of experience in the world library community. Many professionals have benefited from these bridges between different countries in libraries that we can properly call cultural embassies.

Notes


2. Interview with Joachim Sartorius, Secretary General of the Goethe Institute, Deutschland, 1 (1997): 8-11.

References


