Brecha entre investigación y práctica bibliotecológica. Cómo reducir la distancia

The gap between research and library practice. How to reduce the distance

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Historical Antecedents and Contemporary Imperatives for a Global Approach to Library Science Research and Practice

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Introduction

Although the practice of Library and Information Science is very localized and in service of specific communities of patrons, the profession's broader mission is often tied to transnationally situated professional ideals that relate to global and often universalized phenomenon. For example, Information Literacy is promoted through programs such as UNESCO and is a growing concern among multiple disciplines and organizations because of its importance to the sustainability of institutions of governance (Onyancha 2020). We engage in this work, knowing we are working within a global context even when actions and activities are focused locally.

The profession's engagement with the UN SDGS is another example of a clear global ambition within the field that provides both an important contribution to shared global problems while also serving to legitimize the social contributions of libraries on a local scale (Bradley 2016; Igbinovia and Osuchukwu 2018). We

also see our field move from library science to information – reflective of the prominence of information within the globalized economy that sees astounding levels of "information transfer" in the form of "financial transactions", globalized media, information commodification, and development of knowledge within a networked context (Castells 1989; Sassen 1995). A global approach to research in LIS is important since it helps us better understand underlying structures that impact the development of library programs, allows us to see areas where local approaches and practices may provide distinct advantages, and helps to provide a voice to practitioners and researchers from less represented cultures and linguistics groups who seek to contribute their work to the wider, global field. The global nature of the field has roots within the establishment of librarianship as modern profession. At the same time, research within LIS tends not to reflect the transnational roots and reality of the professional space in which we operate. This chapter briefly explores the historical antecedents while and discusses several approaches to better integrate global publishing and research methods into the field.

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

In the early 20th Century, the Paul Otlet, the Belgium lawyer, peace activist, and bibliographer among other things, sought to promote the integration of knowledge from across the globe so that rapidly forming international academic associations could better share work from among the disciplines, scholars could know other's works, and the public could become more aware of other cultures. Otlet's overall aim was to use information organization and dissemination as a means to create a peaceful world that operates under a system of global governance – ending what was then called an anarchical system of nation states. Otlet's information organization built from Dewey to create the Universal Decimal System, and for governance, he's often credited as being a principal architect of the League of Nations (Rayward 2003).

While the work of Boyd Rayward shows us the extent to which Otlet's work helped create and predict our current information infrastructure, Otlet was not alone in his utopian visions for the power of information dissemination. Florence Wilson, the League of Nation's first librarian (and first female library director in Europe), similarly sought to apply librarianship in a manner that would both respond to universal needs and promote structures such as public libraries. Moving from the League of Nations, Wilson taught at the Paris Library school where she would have played a small part in the foundation of IFLA and went on to work for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, to promote libraries and book networks as vehicles for peace and what we now call the liberal democratic order (Witt 2015).

As we all know, from the development of IFLA and leadership of untold libraries from countries around the world, Wilson and Otlet were not alone in their work. Otlet sought to build globalizing tools that would disseminate knowledge to help to build up a civil society and forms of supranational governance. Wilson worked to spread the ideas of cosmopolitanism, cultural exchange, and access to knowledge as a means to govern open societies.

These historical roots of modern librarianship are still evident –especially within the activities of IFLA. We work in a transnational context and seek to promote libraries, knowledge organization, and things like information literacy as a means to resolve our global problems. IFLA'S efforts within the un SDGS and current global visioning attest to this continued ethos.

Looking back at some of the work that developed modern librarianship as a profession, it is clear that there is a long tradition of working within a global context and toward solutions to global problems. It is also clear, that these historical antecedents to our global work were conducted in ways that our contemporary perspectives see as clearly coming from a Western set of priorities and ideas of civilization and librarianship. Many of the local practices, initiatives, and rationales for library activities have remained localize and in some manner are lost to these larger global narratives.

For this reason, it is important that we develop ways of thinking about our profession that are inclusive of the diversity of voices around the world while also honoring the tradition of striving for change and impact on a global level.

OPENING ACCESS TO GLOBAL RESEARCH NETWORKS

International journals in the field of LIS such as *IFLA Journal,* strive to publish original research accessible to librarians and researchers from around the world (Witt 2019). Being a truly inclusive journal, however, faces historical, systemic, and economic barriers that make this goal difficult to achieve when one includes access to opportunities to publish within concept of access to knowledge. It is well documented that scholars who are not native speakers of English or from regions that are less represented on editorial boards struggle to get their work accepted in international peer reviewed journals. The work of sociologist Fran Collyer provides striking evidence of bias toward the global North in both citation patterns and acceptance rates of scholars, which impacts the way in which knowledge is transferred around the world (Collyer 2018). The problem of un-equal access to publishing opportunities and the often one-way flow of knowledge and techniques should be of great concern to the library profession as a whole since this issue impacts both the collections we build and the manner by which professional practices are shared and adopted transnationally. Allowing patterns to persist through which Western scholars and English language dominates the research agenda for LIS is neither just nor sustainable.

The recent COPE study on issues in publication ethics documents the extent to which journal editors across the humanities and social sciences are aware of the issue of inclusivity in academic publishing. Of a survey of over 650 editors, 64% report problems of language (i.e. English) and writing quality as barriers to inclusivity. In addition, 55% of editors struggle to recognize and deal with bias in the peer review process. Among editors of Libraries

and Information Technology journals, the issue of inclusivity was equally salient among respondents to the COPE study (COPE 2019).

The *IFLA Journal* editorial committee and editor are keenly aware of this issue and work to avoid the continued replication of barriers to an equal transnational exchange of techniques, ideas, and professional knowledge within the field of library and information science. It is clear that there can be improvement. *IFLA Journal's* acceptance rate for submissions since 2016 is 32%, a number consistent with many academic journals. As members of a scholarly community, we consent to a rigorous double-blind peer review process helps to ensure new ideas are promoted and the methods that drive research and discovery are sound. Submissions from Africa and the Asia Pacific region, however, are rejected at rates above the average while those from North America, Europe, and Latin America are closer or less than the average. This is a problem for us all. Although scholars from Africa and the Asia Pacific region submit more manuscripts for review and are thus well represented in the journal, there is a clear need to work towards review processes, organizational structures, and professional development programs that can help make research and publishing more accessible to all of our colleagues in the field. Over the past several years, *IFLA Journal* has implemented policies and activities aimed to make publishing more inclusive.

As noted previously, language is one of the primary barriers to inclusivity in academic publishing. The Esperanto movement in the early 20th century attests to the fact that language is a long-standing barrier to sharing scientific knowledge (Gordon 2015). Academic writing requires language that is clear, precise, and appropriate to the professional terminology on a specific field. This is a difficult challenge for any researcher to meet when working within their first language not to mention their second or third language. To the extent possible, the journal's editorial policies attempt to decouple language from the review of the novelty, research method, methodology, and analysis of each manuscript. We ask reviewers to focus their review to the content of work and attempt to overcome challenges presented by manuscripts that have

been translated or written by non-native speakers of the journal's publishing language. Rather than reject papers that are difficult to comprehend because of language, the editor will often return a manuscript for language editing when a paper seems to be within the scope for the journal. Through this process, *IFLA Journal* addresses language barriers within the final editorial process by providing an editorial assistant to work with authors to improve language and readability for papers that have been accepted on the merits of the research. Further steps in the editorial process require either financial resources or skilled volunteers to work with authors on improving the language within their manuscripts. This can slow down the publication process by several weeks as author and editorial assistant trade revisions. Although imperfect, these interventions lower to some degree the significant barrier presented by language.

To increase representation, *IFLA Journal* changed the composition of the editorial committee. Following the practice of many international journals to have regional editors, the journal added members to its editorial committee to both increase submissions from and provide mentorship to potential authors in regions that are less represented. Working with the IFLA Professional Committee the journal added editorial committee members designated to represent the Asia and Pacific Region and the African Region in 2019. An editor for Latin America was added in 2020. These three new members guarantee further diversity within an editorial committee of nine at-large members. We hope this will help the journal avoid some of the biases described in Collyer's work. Of course, this is likely not enough to cover the breadth of diversity found within these continents.

The journal editorial committee aims to provide professional development to scholars and practitioners in the field by offering a series of workshops on research methods and practices. In August of 2019, the *IFLA Journal* editorial committee partnered with Sage and the IFLA Social Science Libraries Section to host a two-day workshop on qualitative research methods for library and information science practitioners. Hosted by the Laskaridis Foundation

in their beautiful library in Pireaus, Greece, this workshop attracted 20 participants from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North America. To make the workshop accessible, the IFLA Professional Committee provided funding for 8 participants to receive scholarships to supplement costs of travel and lodging. Featuring a keynote address from Professor Judy Broady-Preston the editor of *Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication* and CILIP President, the workshop provided participants with access to journal editors and reviewers to learn more about the publishing process and ways to better position their work for publication. Additionally, the workshop introduced students to methods and tools to equip them to design, conduct, and critique qualitative and mixed methods research. Participants explored the strengths and weaknesses of a variety of data collection methods and evaluated strategies for using and combining them. The majority of the workshop focused on issues of research design and data collection to allow participants to design projects and community programs in a manner that will allow results to be shared with the broader professional community through peer reviewed journals.

Although the wide arc of history and difficult to surmount economic issues contribute greatly to unequal access and representation within academic publishing, editorial boards are increasingly striving to implement policies that will limit bias from within the peer review process. We hope the changes *IFLA Journal* is making in editorial policy and committee composition will make a positive impact on the field. Adding research and publishing workshops to these activities will hopefully disseminate what is often insider's knowledge on the publishing process and make publishing research more accessible to the global library profession.

GLOBAL STUDIES APPROACHES TO RESEARCH

Peter Lor's recent book, *International and Comparative Librarianship,* provides both an exhaustive and compelling rationale for the need to further develop the theoretical underpinnings of

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LIS research and especially comparative and international research from within the field. Lor notes that global as a research construct within the context of LIS and other fields attempts to decenter the nation state to better comprehend the global patterns and connections that impact our work (Lor 2019).

As the sociologist Mohammed Bamyah notes:

> [...] global epistemology is vast, but it can be captured in two general approaches. The first approach identifies local phenomena that could be explained in terms of global processes. Here, the global is made to explain the local. The second approach targets global phenomena directly so as to identify their general patterns. Usually, this is the opposite of the former approach: Local or situational phenomena are brought together to explain the global (Bamyeh 2019, 189).

The type of global research employed by scholars in the growing Global Studies community is typically found in the social sciences with much work coming from the fields of Urban Planning, Sociology, Anthropology, and Communications studies through researchers such as Emanuel Wallerstein, Saskia Sassen, Manuel Castells, Arjun Appadurai, and Roland Robertson to name a few. Aside from adopting theories and methods borrowed from such scholars, it is important for us to consider other professions from which we might borrow. For example, the field of Education works within a similar local and global paradigm and has a robust comparative and more recently global studies research agenda (Rizvi 2007, 256-263).

Integrating global studies perspectives into LIS research requires more than a basic familiarity with globalization or key global and transnational phenomena. It requires novel ways of thinking about one's research including an ability to see issues from multiple perspectives, to identify and analyze the connections among relevant actors and institutions that exist at difference scales (local, national, regional, global) and skills with which to research and then articulate such differences and relationships. In global studies graduate seminars at the University of Illinois, we work to develop global perspectives within research methodologies by

asking a series of guiding questions that aim to tease-out the global within one's unit of analysis. These include:

- Must a global studies approach cross various regions, such as north/south, east/west, urban/nonurban? How would our understanding of a topic be affected by using such an approach?
- How do the concepts of geography and scale affect our understanding of this issue?
- Would the explicit inclusion of these concepts have enhanced our understanding?
- What do scholars in other disciplines and geographic areas have to offer to my research topic?
- What is the unit of concern (individuals, small collectives, nations, something else)?
- How would shifting or expanding the unit of concern affect our understanding of the subject?
- How does my research approach characterize the relationship (and its directionality) between local-national-global?
- How do I construct the definition of the local or global? What is the political stake in this definition? What is the political stake in defining something as a local, national, or global issue?
- Does my vantage point make the global or local more or less visible than it would have been if I had chosen another vantage point?

To help develop an ability to engage these questions in a meaningful manner, it is important to identify, engage, and critique theoretical perspectives that provide a useful frame for developing research questions and describing research in a manner that can engage the interplay between global processes and local cultures. For example, World Culture Theory has been adopted widely in education to explain an apparent global convergence of education through a neoinstitutionalist lens. This approach looks not only at nation-states but also NGOS, and other institutions. World Culture Theory could be a useful approach to global and normative trends

within the field, such as the evolution of information literacy, and its use may provide new ways for both researchers and practitioners to understand their position within broader processes and critically view aspects of "world culture" they are helping to create while providing them with the power to adopt these "world cultures" to their own local settings and needs. In addition, the use of theories that have been adopted in other fields creates an opportunity to situate trends in LIS within a broader context, allowing for academic exchange and dialogue outside the narrow confines of discipline.

Post-Colonial Theory is also a potentially useful means to understand trends in the field as they have developed historically and globally. Post-Colonial Theory examines the assumptions, ideas, and, practices that were used to produce, interpret, and evaluate knowledge about non-European peoples. It thus seeks to address cycles of colonization and imperialism and colonization by examining economics, politics, religion, and culture and how these operate in relation to imperial and colonial hegemony. This form of analysis can help both researchers and practitioners see how they may unknowingly replicate colonial power structures or create new ones that impact cultural ownership, language, and indigenous rights. For example, a post-colonial perspective on contemporary digitization projects such as those to preserve the Timbuktu Manuscripts might help practitioners better implement aid projects that consider the cultural meaning of these manuscript to the local owners, understand the material needs of the community in ways to help preserve manuscripts rather than to digitize and provide copies, and implement modes of access that are sensitive to local ideas of intellectual property as opposed to international norms.

These examples are meant to provide illustrations of how "global studies" perspectives can be applied in both research and practical manners. At its core, this perspective is one that draws from a broad interdisciplinary foundation of research that seeks to understand in a historical and contemporary manner the ways in which global processes, flows of knowledge and power, and technologies impact the practice of librarianship. In addition, bridging these theoretical perspectives between the research and practitioner also

enables librarians at a local level to better aid their patrons as they address solutions to broad and seemingly unmanageable global issues that impact their lives.

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La bibliotecología, como área que se dedica al estudio del conocimiento intencionalmente registrado, tiene dos vertientes: la profesional y la disciplinar. En cada uno de esos territorios, el practicante y el investigador de la bibliotecología hacen tanto una labor loable como aportes sustanciales; sin embargo, practicante e investigador pocas veces se observan y complementan. Hay diversos trabajos que han tocado el problema de la división o brecha entre práctica e investigación en bibliotecología; aun así, la convergencia entre ambas no se nota, por lo que ésta sigue siendo un tema pendiente.