

Public Libraries in Mexico: History, Problems and the Future

**Sandra E. Cortez
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The purpose of this paper is to introduce the historical development of libraries in Mexico, particularly the public libraries, which have so long suffered from inadequate funding and indifferent attitudes. In addition, the services offered by these institutions has been effected by the poor or substandard education of its librarians, the sometimes remote locations of some libraries, the quality of materials housed, and lack of access to the higher quality and current materials of the academic libraries. Highlighted also will be the goal of public libraries in Mexico, an evaluation of their patrons, and their future in the country.

Libraries in Mexico existed long before the Spanish conquest of the country, though it's often thought the Spanish were responsible for introducing libraries in Mexico. As explained by Maria Teresa Chavez, the libraries that existed pre-Spanish conquest were those of the ancient indigenous pueblos and contained important manuscripts that were systematically destroyed by the guerras in their invasion of the pueblos, as well as within the first years of the Spanish government's establishment (Chavez 31). A great number of libraries were built after the Spanish conquest, but the first public library in Mexico City was the Biblioteca de la Catedral de Mexico, which opened in 1788 (Chavez 31). A new movement in libraries occurred when in 1921 Jose Vasconcelos, once director of the Universidad Nacional and later to the Secretary of Public Education, stressed service to the people, collaboration with schools, and continued work (Chavez 32). These concepts serve as the beginning of the foundation of the service ethic that specifically public libraries continue to adopt to this day. In addition, this brings forth the fact that public education and libraries were linked together, and continue to be, by the government. For example, the Secretaria de Educación Pública became the Departamento de Bibliotecas, which founded public libraries with great book collections and worked to fulfill the needs of different social and cultural groups (Chavez 32).

The Departamento de Bibliotecas was responsible for establishing public libraries in the Distrito Federal and other states that served not only children in their primary and secondary schools, but adults as well. For example, in 1940 the Departamento del Distrito Federal established public libraries for the laborers and farmers in the colonias of the city (Chavez 33). The public libraries in Mexico were and may still be controlled by the Departamento de Bibliotecas de la Secretaria de Educación, thus public libraries are all established by the government. They employ American standards such as the Dewey Decimal System, as well as the International classification system, Library of Congress subject headings, and American Library Association cataloging. There are libraries that serve the general public and are government-established, such as La Biblioteca Nacional, the library of the Congreso de la Union, and the American government established Benjamin Franklin Library. Chavez believes that establishment of libraries is an excellent thing for Mexico, but it's the country's ideology regarding library service and purposes that needs change. She feels that libraries in Mexico should open their doors to the world and collaborate with other country's libraries, as well as participating in the communities of Mexico. Service to adults, not just children, is crucial in establishing an educated and well-rounded people. She sees the function and purpose of the library as a social and political tool to serve and fulfill each community's needs, and in order to do this effectively there needs to be a good selection of books and a better understanding and respect of librarians. She feels that people should feel at home when in the

library. Ana Maria Magaloni reinforces and implements this sense of community some 25 years later with her work on the National Program of Public Libraries. She states, "The integrating of the libraries with the community has been aided by the Mexican character, which puts high value on hospitality and neighborly cooperation. The libraries reflect the cohesion of communities..." (82). Finally, Chavez call for an end to the human resources crisis of libraries through better library education programs and acquisition of better equipment to aid librarians in their work.

This leads to some of the general reasons libraries and librarianship in Mexico have had problems serving the needs of their people. The issue of the quality, and in some cases the nonexistence, of library school programs in Mexico is recognized by many authors. Guadalupe Carrion, in a speech delivered to the Graduate School of Library Science at the University of Texas at Austin in 1977, points out that 'personnel without a good basic or professional preparation' has been a cause of suffering services (4). He sees a direct link between services offered by librarians and the economic resources allocated to them. Librarians must play an active role in the socio-economic development of Mexico for them to gain the recognition and funding they need for their libraries and their library education (5). The people that run the libraries influence the image and opinion the general public has and the role the library plays in the country, and more specifically each community. Carrion believes education at the professional and postgraduate levels should be established in Mexico. There is a need for better quality library programs in Mexico, but he also recognizes the potential and establishment of two schools in Mexico City that offer regular programs for library education. They are The National School of Librarians and Archivists, from the Ministry of Education, and the Autonomous University of Guadalajara (12).

Regional and national cooperation is important in establishing good library education programs and creating a more favorable image of the library and thus librarians. Carrion feels that through organizations and associations, standard curricula could be set up and masters programs created. Regionally, programs such as exchange of professors, continuing education programs, methodological evaluation of schools, and joint research projects would raise the level of librarians and support future collaborations in the field (11). Carl M. White also sees the "underdevelopment of librarianship as a profession" as a hindrance to Mexico's library capabilities and development (51). When speaking on the future of library service in Mexico, he feels 'manpower' is their greatest asset, but it's the quality of that manpower that will determine success. He states, "To organize and operate library and information services of professional grade requires 'a new generation' of university-educated librarians" (104). In addition, White reinforces Carrion's view that national and regional library activities supplement and strengthen local libraries and are "essential to give effect to the conception of librarianship as a vigorous, well-rounded branch of social service" (69). Recognition of the importance of cooperative and collaborative programs continues throughout the literature on Mexican libraries. E. Dale Cluff, in a 1991 article, lists several suggestions for supporting cooperation such as working groups of library staff consisting of U.S. and Mexican personnel, an exchange of library school faculty and students, and access to U.S. post-graduate programs, scholarships, and internships (370). Many of which have been implemented in recent years. For example, the Texas Library Association's Texas-Mexico relations Committee manages a grant for the exchange of librarians between Texas and Mexico (Cunningham 110). The public conception of the field as vital, innovative, and important will lead to visible public support and advocacy, which the Mexican government will hopefully interpret as a need for more funding.

Another area that effects public library service is that of standardization of bibliographic information. White sees standardization as "crucial to the improvement of library service" in Mexico (61). The American Library Association has helped Mexico by providing as an example and

services in working out standards. Mexico has adopted and looked to ALA's standards not only on bibliographic information, but also on library furnishing and library education and management. Of course, an agreement on ground rules for "methodical improvement" must be met (62). Through the influence and guidance of ALA, Mexico is doing work on the standardization of bibliographic information, such as the MARCAL format, which is the Spanish translation of the MARC format (Carrion 21). This aids in the technical processing of bibliographic materials. Public libraries rely on central processing which reduces work but also fails to take individual community needs into consideration.

It is through organizational conferences, such as the Mexican Library Association, and excellent programs, such as the 1983 National Program of Public Libraries, that exposure to and discussions on Mexican libraries can occur. The Mexican Library Association has been in existence for about 45 years and has worked with ALA and the Mexican government to establish standards, voiced the needs of their communities, and opened the forum of Mexican libraries to the world. Ana Maria Magaloni in her article, 'The Mexican library revolution: taking books to the people,' points out that between 1922 and 1982 351 public libraries were established and discusses her involvement with The National Program of Public Libraries of 1983. The goal of said program was to "provide equal opportunity for free access to reading" not only in the heavily populated and commercial urban areas, but also to the small rural communities (Magaloni 81). This emphasis on reading mirrors the purpose of the public library in Mexico, which is reading and general use. Promotion of literacy and a love of reading were the starting goals of the National Program, but once patrons have acquired skills from reading and an evaluation of the Program were included. Again, the idea of 'community' was reinforced by having librarians go to communities and explain the "benefits of reading books for learning and for pleasure" (82). Magaloni believes the public library should be "living organisms" if they are to impact the community, and not only are librarians going out into the community but patrons are encouraged to reach out to the library. Several publications have been published to educate, familiarize and ease the patron's anxiety over going to the library. For example, Magaloni's "Como acercarse a La Biblioteca" serves as guide to libraries. It explains the different types of libraries, different types of materials, and chronicles the library introduction, progression, and understanding of the library for a boy name 'Pablo.' This puts the patron in the position of Pablo, who asks librarians questions and explains his understanding of the library, in hopes that the reader will come to the same understanding.

Public libraries often serve as a community's only link to books and culture due to the isolation caused by distance and vigorous terrain. This was found to have an impact on library use frequency. Elsa Ramirez Leyva, in a 1987 pilot study carried out by questionnaire, found that distance from the library directly related to the infrequent use of the library, and thus effected the patron's view of the importance of the library in their lives (44). Therefore, it is important to stimulate and encourage patrons to make the effort to travel to the library and read. As Carl M. White states, "without access to stimulating materials to read, the habit of reading cannot be nurtured and the reader will tend to revert to illiteracy" (65). In addition, White feels a 'live' library can serve as the "people's university." This is all too true due to the restrictive and costly services of the academic libraries in Mexico. The government has played a crucial role in the development of libraries as a whole, putting its funding and overall support to the academic and scientific and technical libraries of its universities, while ignoring the needs of the common people for well-equipped public libraries and public librarians.

The economic and political developments of Mexico have greatly influenced the development of its libraries. Modernization of the country has led to changes in the mindset of its people and its government. White feels the continued modernization of Mexico should allow it to give library

development a higher priority (54). This has occurred only in regard to the academic and scientific libraries that help the nation economically by generating monetarily beneficial human resources and capitalistic opportunity. Although, it is through the committees and scientific and technical organizations created for academic libraries that a greater recognition and understanding of Mexican libraries as a whole has been gained and has stimulated discussions. Despite past neglect, the future of public libraries in Mexico should be an exciting and fulfilling one. Cooperation with American library organizations, library schools, and librarians have helped Mexican and American librarians gain an understanding of the needs and progress of public libraries in Mexico. Programs such as TLA's Texas-Mexico exchange of students and librarians support and reinforce exposure to new cultures and open discussions for change in the field of librarianship. Technology in Mexican public libraries is still light-years away from the technology that can be found in its academic libraries, but several public libraries are being recognized on the World Wide Web sites of Mexican government offices, such as the 'Red Estatal de Bibliotecas Públicas' website of Nueva Leon, Mexico. Offered is location and library information, as well as a description of services for some. This is an indication of the direction of public libraries in Mexico. Though still without funds and equipment to support their own websites, maybe their purpose is being served through the education of their patrons about the importance of libraries and the joys of reading and gaining knowledge. Hopefully, the Mexican government will soon recognize the role public libraries play in supporting their economy and building their nation, through community education and encouragement.

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