



World Library and Information Congress: 70th IFLA General Conference and Council

22-27 August 2004
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Programme: <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/prog04.htm>

Code Number: 047-E
Meeting: 149. Library and Information Science Journals
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

Información, cultura y sociedad: a contribution to professional literacy in Argentina

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Introduction

Among the intended purposes of the research institutes of the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras at the Universidad de Buenos Aires(1) there is one which is closely related to the transfer of scientific knowledge: fostering the production and distribution of institutional publications.

Although the first centre for research in Library Science dates back to 1967 –initially, under the Office of the Provost of the Universidad Buenos Aires, later to come under the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras– it is only in 1998 that a plan is put forward for the creation of an academic journal in the field.

The existence of formal argentine channels of communication for the publication of the results of research in Library and Information Science was particularly problematic from the mid-eighties through to the end of the nineties. There were series of monographs, national and provincial library association news-bulletins, and the odd book, all of them mostly published in rather primitive conditions. There were few specialized journals in the rest of Latin America, which often failed to keep to their publication dates. In our own authors' perceptions, however, it was simply an unattainable goal, such was the lack of training in the skills and experience required to attempt the process of scientific publishing. This situation was wrongly attributed to partiality on the part of editorial boards, who would, it was believed, tend to favour their own friends and colleagues in the selection of articles. Though seldom openly voiced, these beliefs came to be seen as so many obstacles in the way of publication of reports. The advances in argentine science are a matter of much concern with the argentine scientific community, who were gradually gaining recognition due to favourable circumstances.

At this time (1986), the Universidad de Buenos Aires launched a programme that continues in existence, albeit with some changes to its original design: applications are invited from graduates and undergraduates for scholarships for further study (master's and doctorates at present) –from that date to 1993, there were a few successful applications from students in our own discipline. In addition, in 1991, the Universidad de Buenos Aires initiates a programme which has uninterruptedly funded two/three year research projects to the present day. The grants are preferably awarded to teams of researchers. The proposals are submitted for internal and external evaluation; the project-leaders' and teams' backgrounds assessed for viability of execution, the proposed publication of papers in academic journals carrying due weight.

The argentine Ministerio de Educación y Cultura –División de Políticas Universitarias- will later issue a decree (2.4277/1993), formally launching a programme of incentives for Academic Researchers in National Universities. The intended purpose of the decree was to foster academic research by rewarding fuller commitment to academic activity and the creation of research groups. The decree became effective in 1994, with 7.961 academic researchers joining the programme. Ever since, members of university faculties who meet the requirements to join the programme have been eligible for an incentive three times a year at the level of their academic standing, which is in turn appraised by experts on submission of a research project developed to the Ministry's specifications(2).

Since a degree course of study in Library and Information Science is offered by eight state universities and two private ones in Argentina, many applicants from the first state university group, were accepted, and joined the system. Scientific research followed and the lack of formally accepted channels of communication it became blatantly evident. The situation became even more critical: there were no recognized standard specifications for the publication of scientific journals. This deficiency was repaired in 1998 at the initiative of the Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliotecológicas (INIBI) where planning began for the design and publication of a specialized

periodical to be published twice yearly: *Información, cultura y sociedad*, the Library and Information Science Journal of the INIBI. The first issue was published in December 1999.

Beginnings

The Institute Director and Editor of the future journal, Susana Romanos de Tiratel, invited a group of faculty members at the School involved in teaching and research: María Cristina Cajaraville, Alejandro Parada, Pedro Falcato, Silvia Pisano y Nicolás Tripaldi. M.C. Cajaraville became the first editor assistant with the rest of the group acting as editorial board members, their intended purpose being the design of a university journal with a focus on research in LIS, which would welcome interdisciplinary contributions. They faced a huge, daunting task at the start. There was everything to think of: a title, a statement of objectives, the appointment of an Editorial Advisory Panel, sections, forms for refereeing of submissions, and administrative procedures; editorial guidelines, format, typeset and art work, contacts for exchanges, indexing and abstracting services, etc., etc. Above all, there was the major concern of meeting the high standards set by, and seeking the approval of the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras Editorial Board. There followed long and intense observation, reading and discussion before the team finally agreed on the title, *Información, cultura y sociedad*, which reflected the main objective of the publication: a journal for those involved in the field of Library and Information Science as well as any other related discipline with similar concerns, with the aim of creating a multidisciplinary medium for informed discussion and exchange that would encourage professional development as well as the updating of Argentina's archives of scientific knowledge.

The next step was putting together the first number for its submission to the corresponding authorities. In June 1998 the School formally approved the creation of the journal. It was now the turn of the University Press experts to go to work on the graphic design.

The first number came out in December 1999. It was dedicated to the memory of M.C. Cajaraville, the journal's first editorial assistant. Some time later Silvia Pisano and Nicolás Tripaldi left the Editorial Advisory Panel. Alejandro Parada was to become editorial assistant, and Graciela Giunti joined the Panel.

One of the first obstacles in the way was keeping to the agreed frequency of publication. This was the reason the Panel decided to hand over the printing to a private company starting with Number 2 July 2000 up to and including Number 5 December 2001. This arrangement came to an end towards the end of 2001.

At the beginning of 2002 Argentina went through the worst of one of its most severe political and economic crises. The University was naturally no stranger to the situation. The team, however, with much determination, dedication and creativity, were able to steer the journal through the dire straits. Very much against the odds, the journal gained strength from adverse circumstances, honing up routines and exploring alternative forms of publication, keeping to the established frequency, and examining ways of extending its readership.

The now well established sections are the following: Editorial, Articles, Research Notes, Professional Matters, Reviews, Academic News, and Papers by Advanced Students who have excelled in their work and thus find an opportunity for early development of their professional skills in 'writing to be published'.

We believe the title has now earned itself a place on the Latin American scene, its presence in the community of researchers being felt as one of the solid alternatives available to communicate their findings and contributions to their field.

Evaluation

We would like to refer to two aspects of the process of evaluation: The evaluation of the articles written by contributors and submitted to a referee, and that of the journal as a whole. The referee system guarantees the observation of standards and the anonymity of both contributor and referee. As regards *Información, cultura y sociedad*, as one of the journals of the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras of the Universidad de Buenos Aires, the journal is assessed by the School's Editorial Committee, delegates from the faculty members body, graduate students and student representatives with some editorial experience. The Committee holds monthly meetings and guarantees the observance of quality guidelines and specifications. The same referee, for instance, cannot evaluate more than one article in one given issue, or be the author of an article in that issue. Referees are expected to be clear, accurate and explicit in their suggestions to contributors. Other formal aspects of the journal are also evaluated such as the number of pages and the balance among the different sections.

It is common knowledge that there are well established international standards for scientific publication, and that recognition world-wide will necessarily be subject to both national and international evaluation. *Información, cultura y sociedad* has been submitted to the Centro Argentino de Información Científica y Tecnológica, which evaluates Argentine publications to the LATINDEX System standards. The journal has been awarded the highest rating.

Communication: the journal in the contemporary scene

The journal has now earned itself inclusion in specialized international data bases such as ISTA, PASCAL-FRANCIS, etc. In order to meet that challenge The Editorial Board has explored different strategies and reviewed its policies accordingly. Every new number was sent to discipline specific indexing services and others in Latin America and the rest of the world. Pascal-Francis (Sciences de l'Information) was the first to list our title on its data-base. There followed inclusion in the Hispanic American Periodical Index and INFOBILA in 2002, and Information Science and Technology Abstracts in 2003. In the same year, the Thompson Corporation Gale Group and the Institute signed an agreement for the publication of the full text of the journal on its data base in Spanish, *Informe Académico*, accessed through INFOTRAC.

We continue to review our strategies for inclusion by other services in the field who have not responded positively to our requests to date. Unfortunately, we have found them reticent in the explicitation of their criteria for the selection of titles. We can only assume there are many reasons for turning us down such as the fact that we are librarians in the developing world, or, perhaps, we could put it down to the plain and simple ethnocentricity of the so-called international services.

The world wide web has pride of place in communication media and the journal's presence in the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras website has been a major step in making our publication known internationally. Before the publication of our first issue there was an advance on our webpage with a call for articles and guidelines for contributors, as well as the list of members and a brief description of the intended profile. The table of contents of the following issues and subscriber information has appeared regularly on the webpage since then. The webpage design attempts to be attractive and elegant yet easy on the eye for all kinds of browsers, even those which are not up to the latest technology. The number of files has been kept to a minimum for faster transmission. In the early days, the School lines were very busy and frequently packed with intensive use of the net. Internet connections were slow in different parts of Argentina and the rest of Latin America, where most of our frequent visitors live. Our decisions, however, turned out to be effective if we are to judge from the feedback available to us on waiting at peak-times statistics. As from the publication of number five, we have been publishing section summaries: articles, research notes, matters of professional interest, and work in progress.

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Professional Literacy

Until only a few years ago, those at the cutting edge of research believed it was impossible to think of a specialized publication in the field: there was simply not enough literature in Librarianship to guarantee the existence of a journal in the field of Library Science. The publication of our own journal and others published more or less simultaneously in our country belie that belief(3). They also prove that informal educational processes may be slow and yet fruitful in the long term.

The Institute journal has always hoped to reach out beyond academia to the librarians, the actual practitioners in the field, and encourage them to communicate their experiences. Whenever our colleagues have been too shy to write about their experience, we have offered our guidance and encouragement before the daunting experience of facing a referee. In this way many people have found their true vocation often suppressed by inhibition and insecurity. This experience led to making room in the journal for the section on professional development, where more practical matters are the focus of discussion. We can now say the Journal has contributed to librarians' developing skills in professional literacy that enable them not only to write papers and reports on teaching and research in the field, but also read and understand the work of Argentine academic researchers and apply the emerging insights to their day-to-day practice.

The Committee, on the other hand, benefitted enormously from the wash-back effect of the actual process of publication: we learnt about scientific publishing, where, above all, modesty and respect for our colleagues' work should play such an important part.

Conclusions

It is hard to imagine the effort demanded by the task of putting together a specialized journal in the field of Library and Information Science in Argentina. However, in spite of inescapable subjectivity, we would like to emphasize that it is possible to achieve several of the objectives that we initially set ourselves: Firstly, the creation of a publication informed by both the national and Latin American culture yet firmly grounded on the findings of modern Library Science. Secondly, the stimulating confrontation of the local production with the international one. Thirdly, as a natural consequence of that confrontation, the encouragement of the openness to confront and make a commitment to the relevant topics in our discipline. The challenge then is to change, to become less insular, more global and critical in our discipline, with the confidence in our capacity to create text that matches that of other countries in similar situations.

In the fullness of time, and with the perspective gained from the performance of a very practical task, such as the publication of a journal, we would also hope to be able to contribute to raising awareness of the need to reflect on the role of Librarianship in the development of the Social Sciences in Argentina. Thus the objective is to sustain a publication which will become one with our aim to create a theoretical and operational identity for the development of our society.

Finally, and this might well be close to impossible to attain, we aim to educate a generation of librarians who would welcome confrontation and debate as a necessary condition for the development of research in the country.

The following statistics will bear testimony of our achievement. The journal has published ten numbers, thirty-five research-related articles (twenty-three Argentine, nine Latin American, four European authors). Five research notes (four Argentine, one Latin American author); five notes on matters of professional interest (three Argentine, one Latin American, one European author); nine course papers; forty-nine reviews of books and electronic resources; ten editorials

Depending on the perspective, this –ten numbers in five years- might be regarded as either a minor or a major achievement. To those of us who have been there from the start, seven years ago, it feels like a long time. There was then the major challenge of changing the perception that the mission was indeed impossible. And yet every one of us now knows this has been the most challenging and rewarding experience of our working lives: it has been world-changing; what’s more, it has changed **us**. It has given a new meaning to our practice. We have gained insights that will be with us for the rest of our lives.

In the process, *Información, cultura y sociedad* has become the clear voice of the Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliotecológicas, which is heard both in Argentina and abroad and may well grow to attract more readers and contributors in future.

Notes

(1) Reglamento de funcionamiento de los Institutos de Investigación de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras (Resolución Consejo Superior N° 2.149/88. Capítulo I, art. 3, inciso f)

(2) For further information see [//http://incentivos.spu.edu.ar](http://incentivos.spu.edu.ar)

(3) For further information see Parada, Alejandro E. 2000. Cuatro miradas bibliotecarias desde el Río de la Plata. *Información, cultura y sociedad*, no. 3, p. 5.