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Project: Network of specialist libraries for the Visual Arts in Cuba. First approach to an alternative form of co-operation and development

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Introduction

Creating co-operation networks for the transfer of information is one of the most significant advances of recent decades.

A large number of library networks have been created in various areas of knowledge in order to solve the problems caused by the ever greater accumulation of data, images, ideas, information and objects.

Given the technological advances made and the difficulties faced by libraries on a daily basis regarding access to information – both for library workers and users – there is a genuine wish and need to share resources among librarians. This involves combined activities to improve the situation and to ensure proper use of these resources.

In turn, this leads to information networks, which are defined as a group of libraries that work together, sharing information, goals and users. In terms of library automation, this generally

means two or more librarians who co-operate to some extent or a computerised system that serves two or more terminals or libraries.

These information networks are an essential means of development and co-operation between librarians, as well as the best resource for making knowledge and information accessible. They not only guarantee the transfer of such information, but also ensure that it fulfils its social role, since it is both a universal right and public property.

Networks of specialist libraries are created to provide experts with access to all the relevant and pertinent information available in their respective fields and are the best knowledge support for students in higher education, lecturers and researchers.

Defining the status quo of visual arts libraries in Cuba

There are many specialist visual arts libraries in Cuba, including museums, galleries, centres and specialist schools that have small or medium-sized libraries which house excellent collections. Cuba is currently involved in a major process of making culture more accessible, which has brought large sectors of the people into far closer involvement with the visual arts.

Students from very different spheres, workers from all sectors, young people, adults and senior citizens alike now show great interest in the plastic arts, which have become a fundamental element in the newly-developed educational programmes and the new projects that are designed to raise society's overall cultural standards.

This presupposes access to all existing information on the respective subjects, and it is the task of information specialists to make it available to society so as to encourage the development of knowledge.

The initial need in order to create a network of libraries for the visual arts was to make contact with some of the libraries so as to analyse the conditions they currently face and to discover their real situation within their respective areas.

Therefore, the libraries of nine prestigious educational and cultural institutions were visited. The following stand out for the scale and value of their collections:

- Academia de Artes Plásticas San Alejandro
- Instituto Superior de Arte
- Casa de las Américas
- Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam
- Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales
- Biblioteca Nacional (Sala de Arte)
- Fototeca de Cuba
- Centro Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museología (CENCREM)
- Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes

The head of each library was interviewed about the mission, users, services, central theme and sub-themes of the collection, size of the collection, current situation, means of acquisition,

technological equipment, level of automation, software used for data processing, budget, human resources and exchanges with other art libraries.

According to the data gathered, all these information organisations have a clearly defined social goal defined by the educational revolution currently underway in Cuba. Thus, their main aim is to satisfy the need for information among the growing community of users.

These centres have mutually complementary collections that provide information on a range of themes from the visual arts (painting, sculpture, drawing, engraving, architecture, design, photography, conservation and restoration work) and various geographical areas (Cuba, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Third World and universal art). Their services are designed for use by students, researchers, specialists, artists and the general public.

The collections include a vast range of formats: books, exhibition catalogues, series, CD-Roms, videos, DVDs, slides, tapes, posters, maps, negatives and photographs. In general, they are averagely up to date, with just two claiming to be completely up to date.

The most common form of acquisition is donation. Despite having some publications that could be exchanged, such exchange relationships do not generally exist. Although some libraries co-operate, this is not done either systematically or – on many occasions – mutually.

Automation of information is these centres' Achilles heel. The levels of automation vary greatly but are mainly inadequate, making information harder to access for users and workers in the sector.

Only two libraries (Casa de las Américas and Instituto Superior de Arte) have high levels of automation, with online catalogues and state-of-the-art services. Their technological equipment consists of eight and eleven computers respectively. A further two centres (CENCREM and Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes) have only been working in this field for a short period of time and have had some equipment difficulties since they only have one computer each. For a variety of reasons, the remaining institutions have yet to start the automation process. The Academia de Artes Plásticas San Alejandro and the Sala de Arte at the Biblioteca Nacional have no computers; the Fototeca de Cuba purchased one recently; the Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales uses its computer for other institutional needs and the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam has not yet started the work despite having two computers. The directors of these centres are interested in automation and have expressed the need for financial support to purchase such equipment to their respective boards, also requesting technical support for the task.

The software used by these libraries is Winisis, while Casa de las Américas also uses the SIABUC integrated management system.

Another central issue is human resources. These are often insufficient despite the fact that members of staff are properly qualified and aware of the need to achieve higher levels of development in their work, following the new paradigms for information specialists.

The results of this first approach clearly demonstrate the current state of this type of library. Using a SWOT analysis, the need to create a network of co-operation is evident, shown as follows:

Strengths

- Interdependence between libraries due to increasing specialisation of each centre, and complementary collections;
- Positive attitude shown by librarians to this change;
- Awareness of the need to co-operate;
- High standards of professionalism shown by workers in the sector;
- High value of the collections.

Weaknesses

- Insufficient development of new information technology;
- Difficulty in access to online information (databases, internet, OPACS);
- Limited human resources.

Opportunities

- There is no theme-based network;
- The growing process of granting mass access to culture in Cuba;
- Increasing the number of users and diversifying the demand;
- Growth in education programmes across Cuba.

Threats

- Insufficient financial capital.

It has been shown that designing this network and putting it into practice is an ambitious yet not impossible project. Librarians believe that it must urgently be implemented and are fully aware that we should encourage this co-operation.

The multiple advantages of this service:

- Sharing information, financial, technological and human resources, and making better use of them;
- Achieving higher levels of specialisation;
- Creating new services and improving existing ones so that they can efficiently and effectively satisfy the needs of potential users;
- Practical access to information, both for users and information professionals;
- Greater profitability;
- Co-operation and teamwork;
- Creating a collective database that will enable in-depth research into any topic;
- Developing a common policy for acquiring new funds;
- Avoiding the duplication of efforts and materials;
- Encouraging interlibrary loans;
- Training;
- Standardising bibliographical descriptions to improve information transfer

There is much work to be done, but we will continue to make determined efforts. Co-operation is an essential tool in attempting to implement the mutual use of collection and in minimising the problems facing centres that have more limited financial resources.

We believe that despite the existing difficulties, forms of co-operation such as interlibrary loans, developing collections and exchanging experiences through events should be encouraged. One concrete example is the Meeting of Visual Arts Librarians, organised every two years by the Information Centre of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes.

Moreover, this network could help establish contact with similar institutions at international level. Experience of integration into networks in Latin America and other regions has shown that this is the solution to the problems facing librarians nowadays.