



American Libraries Abroad: United States Information Agency Activities

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AT THE END OF WORLD WAR II, when the U.S. Department of State assumed responsibility for United States informational and cultural programming abroad, several types of libraries were included. In the Western hemisphere, the American Library Association in cooperation with the Department of State, had already established and was administering four libraries modeled upon U.S. public libraries. The first of these, the Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin, had opened in Mexico City in 1942. There were also binational centers in Latin America. These autonomous organizations were primarily institutions teaching English, but they usually included a lending library for members. The first of them had opened in Buenos Aires in 1928; the Office of Inter-American Affairs began giving them some assistance in 1941, and by 1945 there were thirty-eight.

In other parts of the world, the Office of War Information had established reference libraries in major cities of the British Commonwealth between 1943 and 1946. These libraries, known as information centers, had a clearly defined role and were "designed to service writers, the press, radio, American missions, local government agencies, and educational, scientific, and cultural institutions and organizations. They are not lending libraries for casual readers, nor are they in any sense propaganda centers or distributors of pamphlets. A small, highly selective library containing reference material produced in the United States provides information which can best reach the masses of people in an allied country through the media of the press, the radio, and educational institutions."¹

After 1945, the American military government of the United States Army opened a fourth kind of library in occupied areas of the world. These libraries were also called information centers, except in Germany

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USIA Activities

where the term *Amerika Haus* was used. These information centers attempted to supply "as representative a collection of significant United States publications in all fields of knowledge as may be secured under budgetary limitations,"² and provided a wide range of community programming. As is evident, these four types of libraries began with different service goals and different book collections, but shared the general role of libraries in U.S. cultural and information programming.

All four types of libraries were placed under the Department of State by Public Law 402, known as the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948, which was designed to promote the better understanding of the United States in other countries, and to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and people of other countries. Re-organization Plan No. 8 of 1953 Public Law 402 established the United States Information Agency as a separate organization of the executive branch of the government and transferred to it many of the functions previously vested in the secretary of state by the Smith-Mundt Act.

When the United States Information Agency (USIA) was established in 1953, there were 196 information centers and reading rooms in 53 countries as well as 34 binational centers, the majority of them in Latin America, for a total of 230 centers in 75 countries. In 1970, there were 188 information centers and reading rooms in 87 countries and 131 binational centers in 31 countries for a total of 319 centers in 97 countries.³ As the number of centers in the developing nations has grown, the number of centers in the cities of the developed world has decreased.

At the present time, information centers and binational centers require "roughly one-fifth of the overseas expenditure of USIA."⁴ What does this figure represent? And what are some characteristics of the centers? Before dealing with these questions, a word of caution on the meaning of the word "center" is advisable, since it is used to describe a number of different entities. There are information centers without a library, the center on rue Dragon in Paris, for example; there are information centers for reference use only; and there are binational centers without a library in cities where there is a separate United States Information Service (USIS) information center. Not only are these all called "center," but the library may be considered one part of a center while films, lectures, drama, cultural- and community-oriented programming may be viewed as other aspects of center programming that may have little if any direct connection with the library.⁵

There are also basic organizational differences between USIS information centers (or reading rooms) and binational centers. Information

centers are staffed by American and local employees of USIA (which is known as USIS overseas), are funded by USIS, and are part of the official USIS program within each country under the jurisdiction of the cultural affairs officer and his superior, the public affairs officer, who is the ranking USIS officer in each country. Binational centers, on the other hand, are local entities with a board of directors of locally resident U.S. citizens and host country nationals. These are usually incorporated under the laws of the host government and receive most of their financial support by holding classes in English. USIA provides directors for some binational centers, funding for English-language teaching materials, library books and supplies, and consultative service for the teaching of English and for the library. Loans and grants, usually matched by local funding, have been made by USIA to construct some new binational centers. But one must remember that the binational centers are autonomous. The coordinating channel in USIA in Washington, D.C., for both information centers and binational centers is the information center service of USIA.

Most information center and binational center libraries strive to emulate American public libraries in some basic ways, even though they are fundamentally special libraries. Freedom of access, open shelves, an atmosphere of walk-in hospitality, free loan of books—these are American public library characteristics that can still cause astonishment in some parts of the world. The book collections are not only cataloged and organized for use, but generous loan privileges encourage the users to take the books home with them.

It is, however, important to remember that the centers are special libraries with defined goals, defined audiences and collections of limited scope. The primary function of the USIA is "to support government action programs abroad by informing and persuading."⁶ The USIA role has been redefined with increased explicitness. In 1957, President Eisenhower instructed USIA "to submit evidence to people of other nations by means of communication techniques that the objectives and policies of the United States are in harmony with and will advance their legitimate aspirations for freedom, progress, and peace." President Kennedy in 1963 directed the USIA "to help achieve United States foreign policy objectives by . . . influencing public attitudes in other nations." Priority themes have been defined on a world-wide basis. The list, as revised on August 16, 1967, included the following points: "I. Building understanding of the U.S., its institutions, culture and ideas, as a necessary basis for interpreting U.S. actions and intentions throughout the world. . . . II. Building understanding of, and sup-

USIA Activities

port for, the U.S. position on international issues. . . . III. Supporting U.S. efforts to help developing nations build the foundations of independent, modern states, responsive to the needs of the people.”⁷

Within each country, the country public affairs officer (PAO) clarifies the purposes, emphases, and activities of his program in relation to and based upon the official statement of current U.S. national policy objectives within that country. His plan for his country “enumerates the groups and individuals that USIS should concentrate on reaching as well as the programs and media through which the target audiences can best be approached.”⁸ The library is but one of the resources available to the PAO for the achievement of country objectives, but it must also compete with other equally desirable programs for funding and personnel.

What are the resources of the centers? Book collections are usually small. In 1970, sixty-five information centers and reading rooms had less than 5,000 volumes each; ninety-two had 5,000 to 15,000 volumes; twenty-two had 15,000 to 25,000 volumes; and three had more than 25,000 volumes. Binational center collections tended to be even smaller: seventy-five of them had less than 5,000 volumes, thirty-seven had 5,000 to 15,000 volumes, five had 15,000 to 25,000 volumes, and only one had more than 25,000 volumes.⁹

Obviously, the centers must be most selective. Even so, the collections strive to achieve balance since “each collection is expected to have a wide range of viewpoints on topics controversial in American life such as politics, labor, and race. The religious collection is required to maintain a balance among major U.S. faiths—Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish—and within Protestant faiths.”⁹ The U.S. Advisory Commission on Information recommended in its 1970 report that collections should offer “balanced presentations of responsible and relevant currents of American thought—conservative as well as liberal.”¹⁰ The collections depend on the judgment of the staff in the field. Titles are suggested in bibliographies sent from Washington, D.C., on a regular basis, but field workers initiate their orders and are free to use standard professional reviewing tools as selection sources. The rate of volume replacement varies and averages are not particularly informative. However, actual purchase of books in English from the United States in fiscal year 1969 showed 188 information centers purchasing 168,669 new books and the 131 binational centers buying 23,543 volumes.¹¹

Efforts are also made to have as many appropriate books as possible in the local language. Books in the local language are consistently used at least two or three times more heavily than books in English. The

Advisory Commission recommended that the collections should be evenly balanced between English and the local language, or, if possible, weighted toward the local language. In actuality, the proportion of books in English is more often two-thirds of the total. Some centers purchase books locally; all of them receive whatever titles are available through USIS Book Translation Programs; in some languages, order lists and centralized ordering through USIS posts in major publishing centers can be provided.

Every center has a reference collection and receives some annuals and biennials on a regular basis. All have a periodical collection. "The periodicals found in USIS libraries are mostly the ones available in small libraries in the United States, covering the political spectrum from left (*Nation* and *New Republic*) to right (*Reader's Digest* and *National Review*) and including a number of scholarly and specialized journals."¹² Small centers may subscribe to from 10 to 50 titles, medium-sized centers will average 100 to 150 titles, and large centers may have 300 or more titles. Since timely information is that which is most often in demand, and because space is limited, most centers donate their back files of magazines to national libraries or university libraries after three to five years. The centers have vertical files, a representative collection of U.S. government documents, some U.S. telephone directories, and some U.S. college catalogs. All of these are replaced on a regular basis. Film loans and film programming are usually separately administered, staffed and housed, but music collections are generally a part of the center. Some centers have listening booths, a collection of scores, and an active loan program of many kinds of music and spoken records. Others have a small record collection that is primarily used by local radio stations and other institutions. Some centers have slides and film strips for loan.

Who are the users? The highest percentage of users is made up of university and secondary school students. The median age of the world population is dropping and these young people flock to the centers largely to do research and read material connected with their studies. Information centers have phased out their juvenile collections because of budget, space, and program considerations, but some binational centers still have small juvenile collections. Teachers at the secondary and university levels, government officials, journalists, professionals, and business people are other typical users. Generalizations are difficult because of the disparity of literacy levels, educational facilities, curriculums, and other sources of information in different parts of the world. If the resources of local institutions are limited, the variety of demands

USIA Activities

upon center collections inevitably increase. All centers are likely to receive requests ranging from simple directory demands and informational questions to specialized research material needs. Most users have specific goal-directed information needs, and recreational reading, except magazines, is minimal.

Many centers publish subject bibliographies and book lists on a regular basis, and usually distribute these effectively to individuals and institutions. Centers do considerable extension work by mail, book lockers, and other means, to other areas within their countries. Sometimes this becomes a very personal and competent readers' advisory service. Some centers notify individual patrons of new material individually and effectively. Some send out copies of the title pages of specialized magazines to selected patrons to inform them of new material. Some centers have loan collections at education institutions or specialized organizations. The centers try to utilize displays, articles and other means as much as possible to publicize and promote their materials and services. The USIS Information Center in Montevideo, Uruguay, won a John Cotton Dana publicity award in 1969 for its efforts of the previous year.

As in all libraries, whether or not potential users are being reached is an ever-recurring question. Personally, this writer has been more successful in finding a center abroad through casual questioning of the man in the street or a taxi driver than she has been in locating U.S. public libraries by the same method. However, effective use of books and libraries is a learned skill. Binational centers have library orientation classes for their students of English; many information centers offer orientation for classes from secondary schools. But the volume of people often forces many centers to rely on written material and to develop simple folders or indexes on how to use a card catalog or where to find the various kinds of material.

Circulation can be most impressive as a few statistics from fiscal year 1970 show:

TABLE 1
BOOK STOCK AND BOOK CIRCULATION FOR FISCAL YEAR 1970

| | Book Stock | Book Circulation |
|---------------------|------------|------------------|
| Mexico City, Mexico | 34,340 | 172,022 |
| Madras, India | 22,451 | 112,607 |
| Manila, Philippines | 13,620 | 105,070 |
| Georgetown, Guayana | 8,577 | 48,024 |

That same year, thirty-one of the information centers or reading rooms and eighty-two of the binational centers reported a circulation below volume count.³ Attendance figures are consistently much higher than book circulation and represent high use of materials within the libraries. In fiscal year 1970 attendance was twice as high as the book circulation in information centers and three times as high as in binational centers. This level of attendance, 10 million in information centers and 2.5 million in binational centers world-wide, can present problems. The availability of a quiet, well lighted, well ventilated place to read or study is so enticing that many centers have long lines waiting to enter in the morning, and persons literally wait for a chair to become available throughout the open hours. Centers must often therefore require that non-library materials be checked at the door, as is sometimes done in university browsing rooms in the United States.

Space facilities, staffing patterns and customs affect the extent of centers' involvement in general USIS cultural programming within each country. Musical activities are often allied with the centers; some centers have jazz clubs, others regularly schedule recorded or live performances and work closely with the local musical community on programming American material. Book exhibits of representative samples of American university presses or outstanding U.S. printing are consistently popular. In the last several years programs in conjunction with space flights and showings of moon rocks have broken all attendance records. Series of classic and avant-garde films meet with great success; showings of computer-based and black light art have been well received, while exhibits, lectures and programs on such topics as environmental control, urban planning, and the role of youth are currently as popular abroad as in the U.S.

There has been a steady decrease in the number of American professional librarians staffing USIS libraries "who numbered 131 prior to the RIF [reduction in force] in 1953 and 22 last year"⁴ according to an official USIA task force report. Since 1970 the USIS has not only undertaken active recruitment of librarians, but has also sent some young officers, previously generalists, to library school for professional training. American librarians have either country-wide or regional responsibilities in the field. USIA aspires to have local librarians at least on a par with other librarians in their country; because of a steady emphasis on inservice training, they are frequently among the library leaders in their countries. USIA brings twelve local librarians to the United States annually for a three-month training program. They spend one month together at USIA in Washington, D.C., and then travel individually for

USIA Activities

two months. The program is geared to provide familiarization with the U.S. in general, rather than to library training per se, although a short work period in a U.S. library is often included.

Another training procedure used by the USIS is the field workshop, using outside consultants as well as USIS personnel. These workshops are frequently held in different parts of the world for local librarians. Last year two were held in India for USIS librarians from the Middle East, and one was held in Mexico for USIS Latin American librarians. Some local staff in the overseas centers have U.S. library degrees, some have U.S. library experience, and the USIA has arranged U.S. library school attendance for some. However, this does not imply that all local librarians abroad have U.S. graduate library degrees or even the equivalent of a U.S. college degree. But because of the example the American centers give of openness, degree of organization, and service to users, many host country libraries work out arrangements with USIS libraries for training their own personnel. In this hemisphere alone, the information center or binational center libraries in Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, and Uruguay cooperate with the local library schools and government agencies on a regular basis to provide work-study internships, credit courses, and training programs.

What are the major challenges confronting the information centers and binational centers? Former USIA director, George V. Allen, noted in 1969 that centers "are perpetually short of money, manpower, and space;"¹³ and the U.S. Advisory Commission on Information recommended that same year that the centers "need to be redesigned, refurbished and restocked."¹⁴

In 1970 a USIA task force report noted "a decrease in general quality of program, personnel and physical quarters that needs the Agency's closest attention."⁸ More affirmative evaluations are also found. Allen said further that "in my own view, U.S. Information Service libraries . . . are the finest things we have done in many foreign countries,"¹⁵ and the U.S. Advisory Commission on Information called the centers "in many respects the heart of the Agency's overseas operation."¹⁶

In its 1965 report to Congress, the U.S. Advisory Commission on Information had mentioned sixty-eight major incidents of damage and destruction to USIS libraries in twenty years. To the commission, attacks on the centers "attest to their effectiveness . . . for two reasons. First, there would be no point in attacking ineffectual operations. Second, outpourings of deep regret, and in some instances of financial contributions for building repair and book restoration, testify to the more favorable views of an appreciative and more permanent library client-

tele."¹⁷ Allen also remarked upon this: "Paradoxically, our overseas libraries are more admired and appreciated by the people who use them, and at the same time are more often attacked, and more bitterly, than any other American installation abroad."¹⁵ As a check of any recent *New York Times Index* will verify, attacks continue to demonstrate effectiveness.

Currently, attempts to upgrade physical facilities are under way in a number of places. USIA staff consultants with design and architectural backgrounds are actively working with field officers to improve the appearance and effectiveness of centers. In the Near East, for instance, all the USIS centers have been repainted, indeed transformed, with arresting graphics. Efforts to improve staff by inservice training, to maintain balanced and pertinent collections, to reach important potential users are constants for centers as for any other library. At this time, reference service and cultural programming are also receiving special attention. USIS personnel and library consultants are working out more centralization, regionalization, and mechanization of reference service for two areas. Centralization and regionalization are also being used in programming assistance. Speakers with supporting exhibits, books and films on specific themes have been sent to a number of centers.

In their first quarter century, the USIS centers abroad, assessed for what they are and what they strive to be, have been a significant part of American library presence abroad.

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USIA Activities

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