

What's so international about international librarianship?

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Introduction

Let me begin by some background of a personal nature. My very first international publication, a chapter on university libraries in South Africa, appeared in a book entitled *International handbook of contemporary developments in librarianship*, edited by Miles M Jackson (Jackson, 1981). After this, I wrote quite a lot of other things, not specifically international. But my career led, through various detours, to the National Library of South Africa. Paradoxically, national librarians are among the most internationally minded members of our profession. After all, most countries have only one national library. If national library directors want to exchange ideas with their peers, they have to seek them in other countries and in forums such as the International Federation of Library Associations and institutions (IFLA) and the Conference of Directors of National Libraries (CDNL). In the course of thirteen years as a national library director, I visited, on professional business, more than thirty countries on all continents and became quite deeply involved in international library matters.

As the end of my contract approached, I rather dreaded the end of my international activity, which tends to be addictive. But I looked forward to continuing to indulge my interest in matters international by writing a book on international librarianship. So I did some preliminary reading, approached a publisher and started sketching out what I wanted to cover. But before I could get very far, I was rather unexpectedly catapulted into the position of Secretary General of IFLA. This means: complete immersion in international librarianship but no time to write about it.

All this to warn you that what I have to say today is provisional. It is informed by personal experience rather than by extensive reading. My literature search is far from complete. There is a lot that I still have to read, probably including some seminal works. Some of the generalisations at which I arrive today are bound to be wrong. How wrong, I hope to find out and if all goes well in a few years' time you'll be able to read about it.

A field dominated by anthologies

If you search in bibliographic databases using the search term “International librarianship”, you will find a fair number of monographs that include these words in their titles. In a review of Carroll and Harvey’s *International librarianship: cooperation and collaboration* (Carroll and Harvey, 2001), W.V. Jackson (Jackson, 2003), not to be confused with Miles Jackson, made the following observation:

Although the literature of comparative and international librarianship has not flourished in recent years, one type of work seems to recur periodically. This is the anthology of articles... by various authors: such compilations generally include pieces both geographical (that is, about a country or region) or topical (for example, about co-operation, buildings and so on) in nature (Jackson, 2003).

I concur with Jackson’s observation. Most books on “international librarianship” are compilations of chapters by various authors, describing library conditions in particular foreign countries or regions, along the lines of the following (real) examples:

- The standardisation of Chinese bibliography
- University libraries in West Africa
- Public libraries in Nigeria
- Library and information services in Bermuda
- Indonesian university libraries and their reference services

In these volumes we also find chapters on international library co-operation, the work of international agencies in the field of librarianship, and relations between countries in the field of librarianship. More real examples:

- Colonialism and the development of libraries and archives in French Indochina
- IFLA and international librarianship
- Anglo-Nordic library relationships
- International cultural exchange through libraries
- International influences in Thailand

The second group of examples come closer to what I understand by international librarianship, as I shall discuss shortly, but what has generally been missing is attempts to systematise or develop a conceptual framework for international librarianship. In most cases the introduction or preface to the compilation is extremely brief and provides only the most cursory attempt at defining what is meant by “international librarianship”. For example, Miles Jackson’s impressive volume of well over 600 pages offers no attempt to provide a systematic introduction or conceptual framework. The 1985 Festschrift for William J Welsh (Price and Price, 1985) is an example of a book with the words “international librarianship” in its title, but which does not say anything about international librarianship as such. Presumably the title, *International librarianship today and tomorrow*, was chosen because Welsh, at that time Deputy Librarian of Congress, was well-known in

international circles and participated actively in forums such as IFLA and the Conference of Directors of National Libraries.

There is a striking exception to the general trend in books on international librarianship, the book *World librarianship: a comparative study*, by Richard Krzys and Gaston Litton (1983). This is an ambitious attempt to create a “world librarianship”, defined as “the abstraction referring to the status of the profession in all parts of the world during a specified period of time” and its scientific investigation, which they call “world study in librarianship”. Under this they subsume “international library science” and “comparative library science” (Krzys & Litton, 1982:3). Their work does not appear to have attracted followers; certainly the terminology they attempted to introduce has not been adopted by later writers. Generally, the field remains dominated by anthologies.

If you're not American you must be international

It has struck me that the way we understand “international librarianship” may be related to the different ways in which the word “international” is used in American and British English. In the USA the word “international” is commonly used to mean “from another country”. Thus an “international student” or an “international visitor” in most cases is just a student or visitor from another country. In British English we would call them *foreign* students or *foreign* visitors. In British English the expression “international scholar” would be used only for a foreign scholar who enjoys international renown.

This analysis suggests that the multilateral or multinational (many to many) connotation of the word “international” is lost in American English and replaced by a one to many connotation (American to other). What is not American is “international”. This is illustrated by Stephen K. Bailey’s 1966 definition of “international education” as “...non-American substance of school and university curriculums in the United States”, cited by Carroll (1970:175). It is debatable whether the semantic shift of “international” from British to American English can be explained by the parochialism or isolationism so often attributed to Americans. This is also unkind. It is more likely (and charitable) to assume that “international” is simply used in the USA as a euphemism to avoid labelling other people as “foreign”. Be that as it may, it would be interesting to determine whether the meaning given to the word “international” in the USA has had any effect on the conceptualisation of international librarianship, and whether this is different from the way international librarianship has been conceptualised in Britain. But I cannot do that today.

For now, in my view, the term “international librarianship” should not be used in the titles of books merely containing a collection of chapters about libraries in various countries. Something more is needed. In this lecture I will try to explore what that may be. Before I do that, however, I need to say that for the purposes of this lecture I interpret “librarianship” broadly to encompass the study of processes, systems and theories relating to not only libraries but also other allied information agencies. I also need to undertake a little excursus on international and comparative librarianship.

International and comparative librarianship

Louis Shores (1966) defined comparative librarianship as follows:

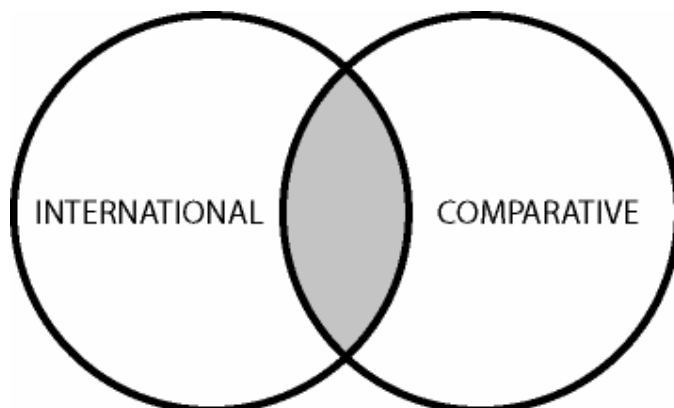
...the study and comparison of library theory and practice in all of the different countries of the world for the purpose of broadening and deepening our understanding of professional problems and solutions. (Cited in Appendix I, Definitions) of (Carroll, 1970).

Here comparative librarianship is clearly international. Comparisons within countries (between cities, states or library types, for example) are excluded.

In the preface to his 1981 book, referred to earlier, Miles Jackson distinguishes international librarianship from comparative librarianship:

...the terms “international” and “comparative librarianship” are regarded as having different meanings but both are of importance in understanding world librarianship. International librarianship is limited strictly to those activities that involve librarianship and all its aspects across national boundaries. It would thereby exclude comparative analysis, but include such activities as exchange of librarians, books, ideas, and the study of library systems in different countries. On the other hand, comparative librarianship should lean on the tradition of comparative studies found in other fields such as political, government and legal studies (Jackson, 1981).

Relating international librarianship to “activities that involve librarianship and all its aspects across national boundaries” is a good beginning, but I find the exclusion of comparative analysis unsatisfactory. It would be much simpler to use the words “international” and “comparative” as overlapping and not mutually exclusive, as in the following Venn diagram:



This suggests that comparative librarianship may be conducted at both national and international levels. After all, we can compare library systems or conditions between

countries or within countries. It also suggests that that international librarianship may or may not have a comparative dimension.

From exoticism to understanding

If this seems like splitting hairs, bear with me for a little longer. Comparison is a step up from mere description. This implies that we consider the aims or teleology of this intellectual activity. I would like to look briefly at the motives or rationales of those who have written about international librarianship, and how these relate to the results achieved. I suggest that authors who have contributed to what is broadly known as international librarianship have been variously motivated by the following, or combinations thereof:

- Exoticism
- Philanthropy
- Influence
- Internationalism
- Co-operation
- Innovation
- Understanding

Exoticism

The first cluster of motives can be placed under the label of exoticism. It includes curiosity about how things are done in foreign countries, a love of travel and adventure, and the prestige that comes from having been where others have not. Writings motivated by exoticism tend to be anecdotal and descriptive.

Philanthropy

The second motive is philanthropy, love of our fellow humans. Here we have accounts by librarians and students who have travelled to other countries to assist in library development there. Accounts of their experiences also tend to be anecdotal and descriptive, with occasional analytical and evaluative elements.

Influence

Often interwoven with the previous motive is, thirdly, cultural or economic influence through foreign aid for library development, the intention being to extend or strengthen the influence of the country providing the assistance. Accounts in this genre tend to be descriptive or promotional, but insufficiently evaluative.

In this context it is interesting to consider Frances Laverne Carroll's systematic attempt, in a doctoral dissertation submitted in 1970, to analyse the goals of international education and to apply them to international librarianship in US library

schools (Carroll, 1970). Carroll constructed an instrument for the evaluation of “internationalism in education for librarianship in the United States” (p.34).

As part of her research, Carroll analysed the schools’ calendars (“catalogs”) to see whether they contained any references to “internationalism”. The results were somewhat meagre. The most cogent statement of the goals of internationalism in library education was found in the calendar of the Graduate Library School of the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn: “The post-war expansion of American education has created a need for librarians with the special skills necessary to acquire and process overseas and foreign language materials to support the multiplying number of language and area study programmes.

As an aside, it would be interesting to determine to what extent interest in international librarianship in the USA correlates with the development of area studies and teaching of foreign languages. A further question that arises is whether the apparent decline in international librarianship (in terms of literature and the teaching thereof in LIS schools) could be a result of declining interest in area studies and foreign language teaching.

Given the lack of explicit goals in the library school calendars, Carroll used the goals of international education as her point of departure. She undertook a detailed analysis to determine whether the goals found in the literature were major or minor goals or activities. The goals were then related to the goals of internationalism in library education (p.42-43). Without going into the details, the goals found in the literature (as discussed on pp. 43-55) can be summarised as follows:

- International understanding. This has three dimensions:
 - Attitude (an affective dimension concerned with feelings of friendliness and willingness to co-operate)
 - Knowledge (a cognitive dimension concerned with understanding the behaviour of other people)
 - Strategic knowledge (another cognitive dimension concerned with understanding the intentions of others with a view to decision-making, e.g. in foreign policy)
- Advancement of knowledge. This can be divided into two dimensions:
 - Diffusion or transmission of existing knowledge, e.g. through primary, secondary and undergraduate education
 - Discovery or production of new knowledge, including synthesis through research and scholarship
- Technical assistance
- To advance the objectives of US foreign policy (including the combating of communism and the strengthening of relations with the allies of the USA)
- To promote international understanding and appreciation of the United States
- To gain perspective on one’s own values and traditions

In view of her objective of developing a checklist, Carroll eliminated the last four as minor goals, leaving only the first two goals as appropriate goal statements for library science. Her analysis highlights some of the ambivalence inherent in international studies, particularly at the height of the Cold War. Do we study librarianship in other countries with altruistic or self-centred motives? Some goals are clearly

subordinated to national policy interests. Others too, may not be as altruistic or idealistic as they look.

Internationalism

In the context of international librarianship, and especially in the context of international library co-operation, internationalism frequently features as a shared value. This appears to be an idealistic motive: librarians engaged in international co-operation are described by Harrison (1989:xv) as “citizens of the world with a strong faith that what they are supporting is really worthwhile and that both short-term and long-term good will come from it”. In the USA internationalism has had a strong protagonist in Frances Laverne Carroll, who devoted much research to the internationalisation of library and information science education. Internationalisation is defined by Carroll and Harvey (1987) as “the process by which a nationalistic library school topic, an entire curriculum, or an entire school is changed into one with a significant and varied international thrust, the process whereby it is permeated with international policies, viewpoints, ideas and facts”(p.x).

Co-operation

Librarians have a long and honourable tradition of co-operation. Peter Havard-Williams goes so far as to make co-operation the central theme of international librarianship. He wrote: "I define international librarianship as co-operative activity in the field of librarianship done for the benefit of the individual librarian in the whole of the world, and done frequently by the likes of you and me" (Havard-Williams, 1972:170). International co-operation in respect of document supply, bibliographic standards, preservation and other technical areas will undoubtedly remain an important motivation. But rapid developments in information and communications technologies and the accompanying phenomena of globalization and disintermediation, efficient co-operation among librarians worldwide is needed for us to participate effectively in the global forums. These are forums such as the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), where far-reaching decisions are made that affect free and fair access to information resources in libraries serving the peoples of the world (cf. Schleihagen 2004).

Innovation

A fifth motive is innovation. As K. C. Harrison (1989:xii) has put it: “...librarians with weather-eyes on professional practices in other countries have been able to adopt, adapt and apply many of these to their own library situations.” Such transplanting has occurred particularly in technical library processes. This has led to writings of a technical and evaluative nature.

Understanding

Finally, there is the quest for understanding. Earlier I cited Louis Shores's statement of the purpose of what he calls comparative librarianship: "broadening and deepening our understanding of professional problems and solutions" (Shores 1970).

In his Foreword (Asheim, 1989) to Harrison's *International librarianship* (Harrison, 1989), Lester Asheim points to the value of "learning-through-participation... not only through actual practice as a librarian in some other country, but also through the mutual exchange of ideas and viewpoints made possible through international associations... Both of these... provide the librarian with the opportunity to have direct contact with the practice and philosophy of library service in varying circumstances and at different levels of societal development, and from this insight, to identify and appreciate the many factors outside of librarianship itself that shape and define the nature of a library's services and its social role." (p.vii)

Asheim goes on to list a number of factors outside of librarianship that determine who uses libraries, how and why, and what barriers inhibit their use. Such factors operate everywhere, "...but somehow we can see and understand this much more clearly in a foreign setting than we can when we are looking at a phenomenon with which we feel comfortably "at home"(p.viii). What I find significant about this motive is that is concerned with self-understanding, which represents considerable progress from the starting point of exoticism. (It can be said that self-understanding, achieved by seeing the self in relation to others, is the ultimate goal of travel.)

A more recent statement of this motive is found in the introduction to a new column, "International perspectives on academic libraries" in the *Journal of academic librarianship*. The editors of the column, Philip J Calvert and Rowena Cullen, wrote:

It is hoped that this column will help broaden the journal's perspective outside North America; raise issues faced by academic librarians in the developing as well as the developed world; and identify issues that are common to all academic libraries, but to which the solutions must sometimes be modified to suit particular countries, cultures or economic environments. It should also be remembered that, although North America academic libraries are the driving force behind much innovation in the LIS field and are the source of much new thinking in the discipline, librarians in other countries have sometimes to deal with certain issues before they become critical in the United States or Canada; hence there will be times that the flow of information will travel in the other direction (Calvert & Cullen, 2001).

This statement raises interesting questions about the notion of librarians in different countries learning from one another.

Each one teach one? Learning from one another

In Miles M. Jackson's *International handbook of contemporary developments in librarianship* (Jackson, 1981), he refers briefly to LIS development in developing

countries and poses some questions for researchers in international and comparative librarianship:

One such question is what can a nonindustrialized nation offer to an industrialized nation in terms of contemporary developments in librarianship? Can American librarianship learn from Nigerian librarianship? Can librarianship in Papua New Guinea learn from librarianship in Jamaica? (p. xxxi-xxxii)

Jackson's rationale appears to be mainly concerned with learning: librarians in country A learning from the library situation in country B. He touches on the issue of learning taking place between developed and developing countries. Diplomatically, the examples he gives involve a developed ("industrialized") country learning from a developing ("nonindustrialized") country, and a developing country learning from another, distant, developing country. The wholesale export of library concepts, ideologies and technologies from rich to poor countries is not touched on, but one does not have to be a Derrida to see it lurking under the surface, with all its political baggage.

We need to unpack the idealistic notion of learning from one another. What can one learn? The most obvious answer is there are techniques, technologies and systems invented or developed in country A that may not be known in country B, and that may fruitfully be adopted there. A typical expression of this is the visiting librarian or expert from country A, who says to colleagues in country B, "Gosh, don't you do/have/use XYZ? You must get it. It will solve your problems." Of course, things are not always as simple as they seem. Apart from the fact that libraries in country B may not be able to afford XYZ, there may be various local factors that would make it difficult to implement system XYZ successfully. This could apply when both countries A and B are developed countries, but it is particularly the case when country A is a developed country and country B a developing country. There may be such a large gap between the countries, politically, culturally, economically, etc., that the advice, however well-meant, is quite unrealistic. Techniques, technologies and systems are not ideologically neutral. An attempt to import XYZ without also importing the conceptual and ideological schema and value system that underlies it in country A, may be doomed to failure. And country B may not want to import country A's ideologies and values.

When one thinks of librarians in one country learning from their colleagues in another, technology transfer comes to mind first. Techniques, technology and systems could cover a wide range of know-how: the use of 3x5 inch cards, the dictionary catalogue, AACR2, the Library of Congress Subject Headings, an integrated computer library management system, or an electro-magnetic book theft detection system. But it does not always have to be so tangible. Other imports could include library legislation, the system of legal deposit, the organisation of an interlibrary lending system, the organisation structure of the country's public library system, or the system of training librarians and information workers, with the hierarchy and names of qualifications awarded.

Sometimes it is as interesting to see what is *not* learned. In an article entitled "A distant mirror: the story of libraries in South Africa", published in *Daedalus* in 1996,

I looked at US influence on South African librarianship (Lor 1996). During the apartheid years the South African library community continued to adopt American technical innovations, for on-line searching, example integrated library management systems, and electronic book detection systems, but significant elements in the white leadership of the profession filtered out professional values such as freedom of expression and equal rights for all library clients.

What about two developing countries learning from one another? Jackson's example of librarianship in Papua New Guinea learning from librarianship in Jamaica is appropriate here. This is not so much a question of political correctness, but one of commonalities. Two developing countries might have a great deal in common. In the case of Papua New Guinea and Jamaica, both are islands, they have a tropical climate, they underwent a period of British or British-influenced colonial rule, are members of the (British) Commonwealth and use English as the official language. But there are also significant differences, for example in their ethnic composition and heritage, number of languages spoken, duration of British colonial rule, per capita GDP, literacy rate, etc. Intuitively one feels that, to learn from one another, it might be wiser to pair Jamaica with Trinidad and Tobago and Papua New Guinea with Guiana. Underlying such a judgement are certain assumptions about what countries should have in common to make possible sensible comparisons, mutual learning or technology transfer. Therefore a major task of a systematic international librarianship would be to surface and test the assumptions. This would require identifying the factors that influence library development in different countries, evaluating their impact, and understanding why they impact on libraries the way they do.

Finally I come to Jackson's example of what American librarianship can learn from Nigerian librarianship. A very obvious answer is: how very fortunate American librarians are. International librarians can impart a sense of perspective: "Go home Americans," one might say, "and thank your lucky stars for your magnificent resources and your great free public library tradition, to mention just a few privileges." One might be tempted to add: "And stop complaining that you don't have enough." But international librarianship should not form the basis for smugness or complacency. Rather, it may enable some of us to at least exercise our profession with a greater awareness and appreciation for what is so easily taken for granted. And American librarians should not thank their lucky stars, but the library pioneers, the farsighted philanthropists and educational leaders, democracy, and (possibly) free-market capitalism. This of course raises more questions and underlines the importance of understanding what one observes in other countries.

There are other things American librarians can learn from Nigerian librarians. For example, some Nigerian experience in serving small rural communities, serving illiterate users, and dealing with oral history, oral traditions and indigenous knowledge may be of value.

Finally, a greater understanding of the situation in a developing country would help librarians and others in developed countries who want to do good through aid programmes, staff exchanges, book donations and the like, to do so more sensibly and with greater sensitivity to the needs of the beneficiaries. In the foreword I referred to earlier, Lester Asheim (1989) also refers to the value of international librarianship in preventing errors in assisting developing countries: "...all-too-often the actual

attempts of the more advanced countries to assist the developing ones in the establishment or development of library services are marked by incredible errors and miscalculations, arising out of the failure to take these outside influences into account” (p.viii). He cites the gift of a number of bookmobiles to a country with a shortage of fuel and poor road network. Such donations are made out of “...ignorance born of the belief that whatever works for us will work for everyone” (p.viii). Librarians from developing countries can tell many horror stories of well-intentioned but useless book donations. A better and more sensitive understanding of needs and circumstances in the recipient countries could go a long way in avoiding such errors.

The scope of international librarianship

To conclude the lecture I would like to look briefly at the scope of the field and the major themes that should be addressed in contemporary studies in international librarianship.

The following is an outline of the material that comes to mind:

- Terminology, definitions, scope, conceptual structures of international librarianship
- Sources: journals and other sources in the field¹
- Values and orientations: internationalism, social responsibility, third world solidarity; American, British, European and Soviet approaches
- Research method: international surveys, case studies, etc.; assumptions and validity of comparisons
- International comparative studies, regional studies, and country comparisons: national and regional non-library factors; explanatory theories (e.g. influence of Calvinism, climate, orality & literacy)
- International diffusion of library theories and techniques: technology transfer; adoption of innovations, adaptation, rejection
- International influences: Transatlantic, Anglo-American, Continental European, colonial, post-colonial
- Role of cultural and information agencies (USIS, British Council etc.) and philanthropic foundations (Carnegie Corporation, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Soros, etc.); Book donations (Ranfurly, Sabre, etc.)
- International non-governmental organisations in LIS: IFLA, FID, regional library associations, specialised international associations
- UNESCO and other intergovernmental organisations; international attempts to promote national library and information policies (UNISIST, NATIS, etc.); literacy, reading and book development policies

¹ Journals that regularly contain articles relevant to international librarianship include *COMLA newsletter*, *Focus on international and comparative librarianship*, *IFLA journal*, *Information development*, *International information and library review*, *Library times international*, and *Libri*. Mention should also be made of the *Unesco bulletin for libraries*, long deceased. *Library and information science abstracts (LISA)* and *Library literature* are indispensable tools for literature searching in international librarianship. A significant proportion of the literature is not yet on the Web.

- International co-operation in library and information services: international interlending and UAP, bibliographic control and UBC, preservation, international advocacy, etc.
- Development aid to libraries in the emerging and developing countries; role of development agencies active in LIS-related projects (Danida, Sida, IDRC, etc.); development assumptions and concepts; evolution of development efforts
- International information relations: North-South, South-North and South-South power relations and information flows; digital divide; intellectual property issues, WIPO, WTO, GATS etc.; barriers to expression and access; WSIS

Considering this list, it seems that the topics can be grouped under three broad themes within international librarianship: international relations and influences, international organisations, and international comparisons. A comprehensive treatment of international librarianship would require that all three be covered.

For the discipline to develop, it is necessary us to move beyond the anecdotal and descriptive contributions to those that serve explanation and understanding. We need to develop a more coherent conceptual framework for our research and find appropriate methodologies. We should explore whether we can draw on comparative studies in disciplines such as education and political science, to help us in this endeavour.

Conclusion

People get involved in international librarianship for different reasons. As in all international relations, the practice of international librarianship involves a mixture of good intentions, ignorance and self-interest. The task of the discipline or sub-discipline as it is researched and taught, should be to reinforce the good intentions, dispel the ignorance, and expose the self-interest.

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