

Chapter 2

Introduction: Comparative and International Librarianship

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ABSTRACT

Globalization of any profession encourages professional collaboration and cooperation at the global stage and enhances possibilities of collaborative development of professional standards, best practices, and public policies. Like many other actors in humanities, the information and knowledge communities also have been historically engaged in bridging divides between the Global North and Global South and the information rich and information poor. The intergovernmental agencies and their different stakeholders have also supported many collaborative intervening global programmes for bridging the knowledge divides or digital divides exist in the societies. Building knowledge societies in the world is a more pervasive goal in the twenty-first century for percolating maximizing benefits and overall growth of the global communities. Various global programmes supported by United Nations agencies such as Education for All (EFA), Health for All (HFA), Information All (IFA), Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), all have tangible components to be enriched by library, information, and knowledge communities. Thus, the communities involved in “international librarianship” have important roles in enriching the global citizens in local settings. This chapter introduces these ideas.

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INTRODUCTION

The terms ‘comparative librarianship’ and ‘international librarianship’ are interchangeably used globally for describing multinational or transnational cooperation in librarianship. After the World War II, international library communities felt the importance of library and information services for building peace in the minds of men and women around the world. Libraries help in strengthening intercultural, inter-religion and inter-faith understanding, expanding frontiers and boundaries of knowledge, transcultural knowledge diffusion, and intercultural dialogues. International academic exchange programmes for library and information professionals have been widely used as capacity building and capability development exercises for library institutions around the world.

The ODLIS Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science defines comparative librarianship as “the study and analysis of similarities and differences in librarianship as practiced in different countries, to identify or clarify underlying principles, expand awareness of successful practices, facilitate cooperation, etc.,” whereas the Harrod’s Librarians’ Glossary defines comparative librarianship as “the study of library services in various countries, reflecting differing national, cultural, political or societal environments. The comparison of similarities and analysis of differences leads to a better understanding of the general principles involved, and mature consideration of the success of varying approaches.” International librarianship has not found any entry either in the Harrod’s Librarians’ Glossary or ODLIS. However, it is being described elaborated in various papers (Keresztesi, 1981).

Table 1 gives an indicative list of milestones of international and comparative librarianship. In this table, various actors in international and comparative librarianship are identified. Major actors included here are IFLA and UNESCO and their various international programmes for promoting internationalism and globalism amongst respec-

tively their member associations and member countries. Other professional societies of global nature, including American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T), Special Libraries Association (SLA), and American Library Association (ALA) also have very strong internationalization programmes for promoting professional development of library professionals in developing and transitional countries. They also have kept their membership opens for professionals around the world.

International awards in the library and information domains help in achieving global competitiveness in local innovative library projects, particularly which have significantly addressed overcoming barriers to access to information. Table 1 also indicates various international awards given to internationally acclaimed action research projects. The Access to Learning Award, IFLA International Marketing Award and EIFL-PLIP (Public Library Innovation Programme) Innovation Award are three major annual awards that invite nominations from countries around the world and have very tough competitions for getting shortlisted and finally awarded. No doubt, they have created an atmosphere of comparative assessment of local library projects that have impacted lives of local communities.

This Table also mentions some other important programmes, driven by international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and philanthropic organizations. The organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, eIFL.net, INASP have brought up new lights in international librarianship. They are also helping in building knowledge societies through engaging various stakeholders in transformation of community-owned and community-driven library services for the common citizens. They have also identified learning pathways for harnessing rippling effects globalization for the benefits of knowledge communities.

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