Más Con Menos: Lessons on Innovation from Cuban Libraries

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Abstract

How would your reference practices change if you only had four computers in the entire library? How do you conduct interlibrary loans if there is no available union catalog? How would you preserve rare books without climate controlled storage? These may seem like good discussion prompts for your next disaster management meeting, but for Cuban libraries, they are the realities of everyday life. Despite shortages of goods and oil, Cuba's libraries have maintained high standards and provide excellent service. Learn about measures taken during the "Special Period" and in present day Cuban libraries to support innovation. The innovations touch on methods of instruction, data curation, restoration/preservation, and setting up and populating intranets with multiple partners. Many of the innovations in use have potential applications in U.S. libraries. The creative problem-solving mindset of Cuban librarians will also be discussed to aid U.S. librarians in adopting a similar problem-solving mindset.

Introduction

In October 2011 the Special Libraries Association (SLA) organized a trip to Havana, Cuba. SLA's sponsorship was vital in obtaining visas, arranging travel, and coordinating meetings in Havana. This paper will provide a brief background of Cuba, including "The Special Period," present vignettes showcasing innovative strategies from libraries, and end with a discussion of application of these innovations for librarians in the United States (U.S.).

Background

Cuba is an island in the Caribbean and was a Spanish colony until 1898, gaining independence in 1902. After the Cuban revolution ended in 1961, it adopted a socialist economic system (U.S. Department of State, 2011). After the revolution, Cuba's main trading partner was the USSR. Cuba had little industrial infrastructure and imported most consumer goods, oil, and foods. The USSR dissolved in 1991, and Cuba lost its major source of supplies and its export market, entering into the "Special Period." This was marked by massive changes in Cuban society: the government limited and rationed goods and services, including organizing required carpools; required people to obtain permits before buying specific items (and limited the number of permits available); decreased energy demands by taking elevators out of service, removing light bulbs and air conditioning; and provided classes, supplies, and land to encourage agricultural development. Since the 2000s, Cuba has increased economic ties with other countries. The extreme pressures of the Special Period have relented, but many of the changes that it forced on Cuban society are still in evidence.

Cuba and its closest neighbor, the United States, do not have a good relationship. The United States currently prohibits U.S. citizens from traveling to and spending money in Cuba. The U.S. also has interpreted this law to prohibit companies with U.S. ownership --regardless of percent of ownership -- with trading with Cuba. In 2004, the U.S. levied fines on Daimler-

Chrysler's North American Holdings group because its Mexican partner traded with Cuba in 1999 (U.S. Office of the Treasury, 2011). The increasingly globalized marketplace means that there are fewer companies without ties to the United States who can trade with Cuba without fear of sanctions.

Cuba is connected to the World Wide Web through an 8 to 16 MB per second connection (the average U.S. broadband speed is about 4000 MB per second). Cubans must obtain a permit to buy Internet access, and Cubans suggested that this government-provided Internet is monitored and some web sites are blocked. Few Cubans own personal computers, and Cuban libraries have fewer computers than libraries in the United States.

Vignettes from Libraries

La Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba"Jose Martí"/ Jose Martí National Library of Cuba

The National Library of Cuba is charged with collecting and preserving the history of Cuba. One recent project is digitizing newspapers from the history of Cuba. The National Library has limited climate-controlled storage, so preserving these is a priority. They recently purchased a flatbed scanner that can scan full-sheet newspapers, but the Library does not have enough hard drives to hold the digital scans. The National Library also directs the operations of public libraries, considered to be the heart of social, cultural, and educational development in Cuba. Public libraries frequently collaborate with other groups to promote good health and social habits like tobacco avoidance or personal hygiene.

The National Library also does much original cataloging for Cuban materials. They are unable to join OCLC due to U.S. law, but they do exchange cataloging data with individual libraries across the world. To mitigate problems caused by the lack of a union catalog, libraries have robust collections. All publishers are required to publish enough copies of each book to offer one for sale to each public library in the country. A library in Havana has a more unique system for obtaining desired items: they simply download ebooks. Curiously, some of the ebooks they own are not available for purchase from the publisher in this format. When asked, a librarian stated that "If [the publisher] didn't want us to have [this ebook], it wouldn't be available!"

Reuben Martinez Villena Public Library

The Reuben Martinez Villena library has a strong print collection. There is a wider variety in types of materials than a typical American library-- the magazine rack in the main reading room holds popular magazines as well as peer-reviewed journals and trade magazines— but the magazines were published between 1990 and the present. Most of the reference collection was published prior to 1970. To access more recent materials, the library has built and populated an intranet. If a patron asks a question that cannot be answered using the print collection, a librarian searches this intranet. If the answer cannot be found on the intranet, the librarian connects to the Internet. When an answer is located, the entire web page is copied onto the library's intranet for future use.

Special Library of the Museum of Natural History

This library was created to support staff of the museum and natural history researchers in Havana; like all other libraries in Cuba, it is also open to the public. It has a small physical space for its collection, and does not have any climate-controlled areas. The library owns many rare

and unique materials, such as surveys of Cuba's flora published in the 17th century. The librarians have knowledge on how to care for rare materials, but they have few supplies—acid-free cardboard is not manufactured in Cuba and is very expensive to obtain. They aim to arrest decay: old materials are stored laid flat instead of standing on their spines and placed in areas with good airflow to inhibit mold and mildew. In addition to rare books, this library also has robust collections on natural history. The librarians explained that other libraries donate weeded materials—the goal is to ensure that all materials are used. This redistribution is a common practice in Cuba.

National Center for Medical Sciences Information's INFOMED
The National Center for Medical Sciences Information established a national intranet, INFOMED, during the Special Period. The original goal was to help health care professionals share knowledge and coordinate supplies. INFOMED has been increasing in content each year; it now includes full text journal articles, databases, textbooks, and guidelines, and can be accessed at speeds approaching 4000 MB per second. Every doctor in Cuba is provided with a computer and modem to access INFOMED. INFOMED recruits well-known doctors in Cuba to curate medical specialty portal pages. These curators select materials to feature on their portal pages based on new developments in their specialty. INFOMED provides the expertise to obtain, digitize, and maintain active links. INFOMED has also built teleconference centers in central and eastern Cuba -- Havana is on the western side of the island --to permit training of health care workers and librarians in use of INFOMED. Since capacity is limited and these teleconference centers are not accessible to all, attendees at these sessions agree to train others on using INFOMED.

Universidad de las Ciencias Informáticas/ University of Informatics Sciences
The Universityuwas founded in the early 2000s in order to graduate students who could integrate computers into everyday life in Cuba. There are few computers in use in Cuba—libraries use print card catalogs, cash registers and gas pumps are analog, and the majority of cars are from the 1950s. The United States' trade laws mean that U.S. companies cannot sell software to Cuba. With this barrier in place, this university teaches its students the vital skill of reverse engineering: viewing a software demo and then creating their own version. Students also learn more traditional computer engineering topics and the specialized hardware and software they are developing is driving Cuba's computerization.

Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation for Nature and Humanity
Antonio Núñez Jiménez was a prominent figure in Cuba. He worked as a speleologist, biologist, historian, sociologist, writer, and cartographer. This foundation holds his personal library, his writings, and materials he collected. In addition to preserving these materials, the Foundation is charged with making the natural history of Cuba available to the public. They do this in part by partnering with other groups to put on workshops across Cuba on sustainable agricultural practices and wastewater management.
This library owns a significant amount of older material-- from the colonial period and before-- that needs preservation. Librarians are partnering with universities in Spain to test new materials and strategies for preservation, including use of natural fumigants, different materials

for book boxes and storage, and new methods for de-acidifying paper. As techniques are developed, librarians also provide preservation workshops to Cuban librarians.

U.S. Government Interest Section Libraries

The final library visited was not a Cuban-run library, but the libraries at the U.S. Government Interest Section. Since the U.S. and Cuba do not have formal relations, the Interest Section stands in for an embassy. Cubans have access to two small libraries in the U.S. Interest Section that include computers and Spanish-language books about the United States. There is an intranet which includes recent news about the U.S. and answers to questions about U.S. culture, and government. The computers are also connected to the Internet via a 4000 MB per second connection. Librarians stated there was a two-month wait list for computer sessions. The librarians teach classes on using the Internet; most popular are classes on blogging software and social media.

Themes and Applications for the U.S.

After visiting these libraries, several themes emerged that drive Cuban librarianship. These themes can serve as stepping-off points for innovation for U.S. librarians.

Personal Connections

Cuban librarians believed that by forging personal connections, we can affect a change in the world. It was inspiring to see people with what in the U.S. would be considered a paucity of physical resources speak excitedly about how they have helped their patrons and other libraries. This may be related to the stronger curatorial role taken by Cuban librarians in the information-seeking process: instead of simply guiding patrons to available information, they aid them in assessing validity and accuracy of materials.

Share Broadly

Cuban libraries frequently shared materials, information, and staff with other libraries in order to conduct special projects. Many of the libraries visited mentioned other libraries—the public library owned weeded materials from the Special Library of the Museum of Natural History's collection and many librarians had attended workshops at the Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation. The number of librarians is smaller is Cuba and the funding is different (since all funds come from the Cuban government), but it seems that U.S. librarians and libraries could learn much from this close-knit community and figure out ways to more efficiently share weeded materials, staff expertise, or expensive supplies.

Partner Outside Your Mission

There was more openness to partnerships outside traditional areas of librarianship. The Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation holds information on Cuba's natural history, and runs workshops on sustainable agricultural and wastewater treatment. These workshops support the Foundation's mission: if people are able to grow more food themselves, or can ensure that their current source of water remains potable, they are less likely to eat native plants and animals, cut forests to obtain more land, or spoil additional water. Many U.S. libraries already partner with groups promoting literacy, but consider finding other groups: a local high school science fair

would be a great place to exhibit rare materials from a science library, or an art opening may provide opportunity to promote unique collections.

Understand Copyright

There was a difference in opinion on copyright shown by Cubans; many felt that if an item was available in some format, they could download it, digitize it, copy it, and otherwise transform it as desired. Given the more robust enforcement of copyright in the U.S., it is not a good idea to import these practices as a whole. However, this provides an opportunity to review U.S. copyright laws, as well as competing copyright schemes (e.g., Creative Commons). There are actually many materials that are available for re-use without payment; by understanding copyright librarians can use alternatively copyrighted materials as appropriate. This also provides an opportunity to educate patrons on the copyright of their own materials: if faculty and graduate students are aware of other publication options besides mainstream publishers, these free-to-reuse materials become more prevalent and easier to find.

Let Projects Expand Organically

Many projects and processes at Cuban libraries have grown to meet the needs of patrons. The uses of intranets—as reference adjuncts at the public library, and as platforms for prestigious doctors to communicate new information at INFOMED-—are especially inspiring in this regard. While Internet access is becoming more ubiquitous in the United States, there are still "Internet dead zones" in areas where people need access to information. Intranets maintained by libraries could help to fill needs in these areas.

Be Willing to Lose

Preservation is a major need in Cuba: libraries have many rare and older materials, and climate conditions and lack of appropriate storage space mean that these materials are deteriorating. Libraries are conducting experiments on their materials to research new methods of preservation. These are true experiments, in that the paper may be more brittle in 30 years rather than less brittle as predicted. The reality is that these materials may not last another 30 years under current storage conditions, so it is worthwhile to attempt some intervention.

Let the Small Stuff Go

Preservation of materials is a significant focus of librarianship worldwide, but conducting this according to best practices is difficult in Cuba. The Special Library of the Museum of Natural History permits users to copy and republish content from their rare books. While the physical item may be lost to decay, much of the information is preserved, instead of the item and all the information being lost. Many libraries in the U.S. are attempting to fulfill their missions with fewer staff members and less money. Focusing on the final outcomes of what you are striving for, and letting go of some of the interstitial accomplishments, may be a more realistic way of managing these leaner times.

Conclusion

The tumultuous history of Cuba, the deprivations of the Special Period, and Cuba's steps to reconnect with the global economic market have influenced their library systems. Libraries

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and librarians in Cuba and the United States have similar goals, even though their practices can be very different. By considering why these practices have been adopted, librarians in the United States can consider using these practices, or the decision-making processes that led to these practices, to inspire innovation in their own work.

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