Edgardo Civallero
Critical notes

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"Human libraries" (I)
Critical notes (01)

They are called "human libraries".

In my village, that was always called "to sit down and talk to someone".

It is very sad to see how some basic human values —human interaction, conversation, exchange of knowledge and affection, closeness, solidarity, understanding— are disappearing in an increasingly impoverished and weakened society.

But it is even worst to see how, instead of pointing out these issues and doing something to solve them (and, at the same time, criticizing the causes that brought us to this unfortunate state of things), we produce proposals and ideas that are anything but sad and poor "patches" to the problem. And on top of that, these ideas become a fashion, a trending topic, a series of hashtags — they present themselves as very advanced and revolutionary novelties.

And some libraries, of course, hurry to embrace such "novelties"... especially because of their eternal fear of falling behind in something (another plague of our modern times).

No, they are not "human libraries". It's called "sit and chat". And it is notthing new: I do not know in yours, but in my town, we invented this stuff centuries ago. And without any need for hashtags.

[And if in your library you want to do something about it, dear colleague, start by chatting with your users as they approach the counter, and stop treating them as objects. Trust me: it is an excellent habit (you may even like it!) And it sets a very good example].

Librarian robots?
Critical notes (02)

"Developing a service robot for a children's library" is an article published in 2014 in the Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology. The article has been widely disseminated and celebrated through blogs, social networks and international librarian discussion forums, since it seems to show the bright future of libraries and LIS.

Apparently, there are countries in the world where there are no librarians available: all of them have very good jobs. To fill vacancies in libraries, they are forced to build robots.

Or it may be that in these countries librarians (particularly children's librarians) are so bad at doing their jobs, they have such mediocre qualities and poor backgrounds, that they prefer their children to grow up socializing with a machine when they visit a library, instead of dealing with human beings.

Or, maybe, we librarians are being replaced by more manageable, efficient and economical machinery, while at the same time getting our younger generations to grow up interacting with screens and robots. We prepare them for that utopian future in which we will be almost-cybernetic, almost immortal organisms, and we will live in space, among the stars.

All this, it seems, looks very promising for the future of librarianship as a discipline, and for that of its workers and professionals. And, of course, for the entire Humankind.

[What about a little analysis of necessities and possibilities first? What about some critical thought, some ethical evaluation, some professional multidisciplinary discussion? What about evaluating if everything looking "shiny", "roboty", "modern"• and "techy" may be actually useful, helpful, healthy and good for libraries and their users, before blindly embracing it? Or are these too many questions to answer, in a world more and more used to go fast and not to lose time, not even to answer vital questions?]

On criteria. And herds
Critical notes (03)

Reading some LIS-related blogs and columns last week, I started to suspect that many librarians have the bad habit of getting certain things (fashions, trends, novelties, theories, ideas...) in closed "packages". They rarely look at what those packages bring inside. And if they dare to open them and look, they seldom dare to question, evaluate or consider if those contents are really useful, if they actually need them.

It could be said that they lack some criteria. Or a bit of courage?

Another bad habit? To imitate, to follow the "referents." The library X doing such and such or the guru Y recommending it does not mean that the rest has the obligation to imitate them, no matter how big that library is, no matter how successful that guru may be. They may lack criteria and good sense. Or their results (which are rarely described with contexts, objectives and other details) may be all wrong... or be "sold" as successes: after all, "cooking" statistics is not strange to our profession — "selling" successes that do not exist to achieve certain objectives (and obtain certain budgets?) is not uncommon.

In short: after my (many and diverse) readings, I got the feeling that many librarians suffer the "herd syndrome": they follow the guide sheep, the one that carries the bell to the neck, blindly.

But the sheep with the bell sometimes leads the herd to the pastures. And others, to the slaughterhouse.

Book donations
Critical notes (04)

A colleague, a librarian from Brazil, told me the story.

A local politician, eager to campaign, thought of going to an indigenous community to get some pictures taken. His advisers suggested the creation of a small library in that community; its opening would be a fantastic opportunity to take those photos. In the end, it wouldn't be the first or the last time those poor devils were used for somebody else's goals, the consultants argued.

So the man sent a batch of books —any kind of books, probably useless ones— to the indigenous village in advance, in order to gain some time and make all the preparations for the "grand opening."

A few days later the politician travelled there, with his entourage of flatterers and photographers. The community received all of them with the town completely decorated: all the (few) streets and houses were literally covered in paper garlands and ornaments.

Garlands and ornaments made with all the pages of the books they received. Until the last one.

One wonders if the members of that community didn't understand why the books had been sent to them... or if they understood it better than anyone — and acted accordingly.

Green, green libraries
Critical notes (05)

"We are a green and sustainable library," I was smilingly announced at the entrance. It happened recently, in a place whose name I do not care to remember.

"What makes you a sustainable library?" I wanted to know. "Well, we recycle our waste and save energy, and we educate our users so they do it at home," was the answer.

I went through the library, mentally pointing out the technological decisions they had made, the way they had invested their budget, the services they supported and those that were lacking, the socio-economic sectors they served (and those who they didn't, the information they provided and the one they stressed... No, it had nothing sustainable: it was another piece of the huge consumerist structure in which we live. That structure that is depleting all resources and crossing all the biophysical limits of the planet and that is facing an unprecedented socio-environmental crisis. It happens that few are aware of how close that crisis is, and how hollow the words *green* and *sustainable* are becoming.

In 2013, Robert Engelman started Worldwatch Institute's *State of the World 2013* with a lapidary phrase: "We live today in an age of 'sustainababble', a cacophonous profusion of uses of the word 'sustainable' to mean anything from environmentally better to cool".

Given the circumstances, I think it's time to stop babbling and act responsibly.

Predatory journals
Critical notes (06)

John H. McCool wrote this story in one of the last issues of *The Scientist* (June 2017, p.23), in an article titled "Why I published in a Predatory Journal."

As part of his campaign to unmask the so-called "predatory journals" ("academic", open access, low-quality journals that invite authors to publish and charge them a large amount of money), he answered a call-for-papers from the *Urology & Nephrology Open Access Journal*, belonging to the infamous MedCrave Group.

He wrote a completely made-up article, based on the TV series "Seinfeld". According to the author himself, he included a terrible amount of ridicule stuff in the text, which could have been detected even by a layman in the matter, with a simple Google search.

After going through a supposed peer review, the journal's editors announced that his article had been accepted. And they wanted to charge him $ 800 for publishing it.

A popular list of confirmed and suspected "predatory journals" is Jeffrey Beall's, with more than a thousand titles.

And yes: they also exist among Librarianship and Information Sciences.

Dangerous statistics
Critical notes (07)

"There are two breads. You eat two. I do not eat any. Average consumption: one bread per person."

This was how statistics worked for Nicanor Parra. The Chilean poet, probably unfamiliar with statistical theory, nevertheless understood two of its most remarkable and dangerous qualities: (a) statistics' capacity to be manipulated (in their elaboration, in their presentation) and thus transmit a deformed, biased or lying reality, which serves to confuse and manipulate; and (b) people's tendency to blindly believe in statistics, even if they do not understand what they are or how they are produced (a situation from which the English sentence "lies, damned lies, and statistics" emerged).

As a discipline, Statistics manages very powerful tools. That makes it a source of potential threats. All Statistics' handbooks, without exception, emphasize the problems, risks and biases involved in the application of statistical techniques and tools to a set of data. "Cooking" (manipulating) statistics is amazingly easy — in fact, there are already classic books on the subject, like the very basic one by Darrell Huff, and serious reports that warn about certain practices, especially when presenting budgets or results of projects.

Handbooks also point out that statistical analysis allows approaching certain results and inferring a number of things within certain ranges, and even (with caution) establishing hypothetical patterns and models. But in no case does it allow for anything more than nebulous possibilities or extrapolations. These handbooks also indicate that subjecting qualitative data to statistical analysis means forcing them to go through a terrible "Procrustean bed."

However, nowadays we have data science, data mining, R-language and tons of new techniques and their sub-sub-sub-disciplines (and their corresponding courses, webinars, MOOCs, meetings, conferences and publications) which are nothing else but old, good Statistics, but applied to modern "big" data with the help of contemporary technology (and with a much cooler name). We also have chats, statements, works and results that clearly demonstrate that the practitioners of these "disciplines" did not read the basic handbooks, or that they had a very hasty and superficial training...

Most of them seem to ignore the two basic problems identified by Mr Nicanor Parra. But they are deeply convinced that they know something anyways...

[Libraries are no stranger to statistics — and their problems. There is even an IFLA manifesto about this topic (which, to tell the truth, adds nothing to the conversation). However, little is said in librarianship about the risks of statistics, about potential conflicts and biases... As with many other aspects of the discipline and the profession, everything seems to be positive and great. But no, it is not].

"Human libraries" (II)
Critical notes (08)

This is the catalog that one of the so-called "human libraries" offers on the Internet.

In short: "Come and meet the ones excluded, discriminated, forgotten and mistreated by your society. We lend them for a little while."

It would be interesting (it would be important, actually) to stop "showing" the same social sectors and human groups, no matter if, as it is usually argued, "it is for their own good" or if it is "to open spaces for them". Those who are willing to really know the most fragile threads of their social fabric do everything in their hands to approach them: trust me, there are many paths. Putting those treads in a library, on a shelf, in a window in plain sight, can make their problems or issues more visible, but it will not solve them (and that window can become a pillory).

If we are going to show certain social sectors on the shelves of our libraries, we could also include in our catalogs our racist, xenophobic and neo-nazi neighbours; all the bankers who have stolen money from their clients; those politicians accused and convicted of corruption; sex offenders (including priests and nuns); animal abusers; bullies...

Or, if we want to do something more positive, we could include the last artisans, artists, narrators, and singers of the community, and those who still perform those tasks and jobs that are disappearing in our societies. Although a committed library would actually go beyond "human libraries" and organize workshops in which those people, those "living books", teach their skills and convey what they know. "Human libraries" just satisfy the curiosity of a few who look from afar: as it happens with library books, the "elements" that compose the catalogs of "human libraries" return to the shelf once the curiosity of their "users" is satisfied.

By the way: soon we can add a librarian in the catalogs of "human libraries" — so that people may remember how it was like to deal with one.

Solidarity, 21st century-style
Critical notes (09)

The world is going to hell.

Do not despair, though: our most brilliant minds have invented drones that will bring the Internet to the entire planet.

That way, it will not matter where I am dying of hunger or thirst, where I am suffering the floods or droughts that we already have, where I am facing war and disaster, where I am enduring the hardships of being a refugee, where my crops and animals are dying, or where I am a slave-worker: I can always update my status on social networks.

And I will be able to receive a lot of solidarity in the form of "likes", and even some nice animated gif, or a sweet emoticon. And, that's for sure, many will re-tweet my status. And a few others will put my picture on their wall, with a message saying "Like if you think he is brave", or "Je suis [my name]". And when I get over two million visits, I'll be in the newspapers (now the newspapers cover those "news"), and maybe someone will create a change.org page, and even organize a crowdfunding (money that will never reach my hands, but that will help to oil the "solidarity industry"...).

And there I will be, hyper-connected, receiving all that lovely solidarity in the form of tweets, likes and visits. Trusting that some invisible deity will take them into account

and save me from the fate that awaits me. One that, if we keep walking the path we are walking, awaits us all.

[All this also applies to the world of libraries; especially to those librarians who think that by "liking" a Facebook page they already become "activists"].

The future's professions
Critical notes (10)

I am told that the professions of the future have to do with virtual reality, big data, data mining and robotics...

I haven't read yet, among many other things, any mention to agriculture, or to any other form of labor to produce food. Probably because of the "disgust" that certain modern and urban societies feel toward everything meaning "peasant", a term associated with "backwardness," something they do not want to be close to.

I haven't read yet any mention to agriculture, horticulture, fruit growing, or any type of production of food that can actually be considered "food" (and not those "vitamin + protein" craps invented by some poor devil of Silicon Valley). And I cannot help wondering what future societies will eat. If, as far as we go, there is something that we can still call "society".

[Unless, of course, those "professions of the future" are intended only for certain inhabitants of this planet: those who deserve to work in something considered "a profession." The others will continue in the same limbo they are in today, sewing the clothes of "the chosen ones", harvesting their food, cleaning and recycling their trash ...]

I am also told that the future of information professionals (librarians, documentalists, or whatever they are calling themselves nowadays) consists in training, training and training, in order not to be overcome by a robot. Those who defend this are those who intimately believe that, in the event that the most probable dystopia is fulfilled and all workers are replaced by robots (more efficient, less fallible, more controllable), they will keep their jobs.

And then I remember that now famous poem (falsely attributed to Bertolt Brecht; in fact, by Martin Niemöller) that ends: "Now they come for me, but it's too late."

I am told, then, that the future is of machines. That they will do everything and that we (all of us? The societies of the so-called "third world" as well?) will be able to dedicate ourselves to what we like most, unconcerned about everything else. And I wonder what kind of "carefree" life is that they're trying to sell us: replaced by machines, interacting with machines, and watching life go through a screen, virtually.

And when I finish wasting my time wondering all that, I go back to work in the garden. Tomatoes will not harvest themselves (at least, not for the time being).

A matter of resources
Critical notes (11)

Anyone with money is quite capable of designing, building and carrying out a huge library. One with a modern design, amazing collections, hyper-connection, abundant and well-paid staff, technological resources...

The fact is that that library, placed in a country without resources, would stop working. Automatically.

I understand that in a resourceful society, such libraries (and, as I speak of libraries, I could be referring to many other institutions as well) are useful. But I do not think they are a model to be exhibited, or that they can be proposed as an example, as a "good practice".

Simply because they are projects fed with money. And money can only be used as fuel for such institutions in a handful of countries around the world. The rest is not so lucky.

And yet, international congresses are plagued by this almost obscene exhibitionism. Sometimes they seem to want us to be jealous, showing themselves as they do. Sometimes it seems that they were in a kind of competition, a foolish race of expenses and investments.

Honestly speaking, achieving something simply by having the resources to do so is not something to be proud of. "With good soil, plenty of water and a yoke, any fool is a farmer," says the old (and well-aimed) Castilian saying.

Allow me to make a silly suggestion. What if we design and elaborate library models whose success does not depend strictly (I stress "strictly") on budget, so that their principles can be exported? What if we put as an example and as reference only those models that are really replicable, sustainable in time, feasible...? What if we encourage our students and our researchers to work on building this kind of models, with the challenge of doing more with less?

And what if, for once, we stop feeding with our admiration and our applause the ego of that herd of poor devils with money that keep going around the world showing "their beautiful libraries"? Don't you think that's a good idea?

On the reasons behind
Critical notes (12)

We know (more or less) the "what": what do librarians do. Although sometimes that is dictated by some superior (and usually invisible, and totally library-unrelated) policy-maker.

We know (quite well) the "how": how we do whatever we do. Those are the techniques, methods and tools filling the 90% of LIS schools' curricula all around the world.

We assume the "who". And I say "we assume" because we generally do not have too much time to know as well as we should those "who" we work for/with. Or we do not care to know them.

But we are unclear (or completely ignorant) about the "why" and the "what for". And no, the answer is not in our institutional policies, in the trendy LIS handbook, in a certain IFLA manifesto, in a particular ALA guideline, or in the words of the enlightened LIS guru on duty.

We are not always clear about why and what we work for. We do not always know our reasons, our motives, our ultimate goals: those that should "move" us, push us into action, make us fall in love with our profession, get ourselves up every morning with a new idea. Those that should make us cry and laugh. Those without which we feel a little

empty — an emptiness we try to fill (usually unsuccessfully) in this congress, in that update seminar, reading this magazine, or learning that new technology.

There is much to discuss. Much to discover, to learn and unlearn. Much to correct, and so much to propose. And much to think about. Because, as Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano put it in "Los hijos de los días" (2012), "free are those who think, not those who comply".

What are we waiting for?

Humanizing libraries
Critical notes (13)

Let's face it: we live in increasingly dehumanized societies.

In them we have less and less time to behave as social beings. Or directly as human beings. And instead of doing something to solve the problem, we put patches that look like "creative solutions" to us.

We no longer have time to cut some lettuce leaves and prepare a healthy and well-cooked meal. The supermarket offers us a "salad" in a plastic tray. We no longer have time to get to know a person that interests us, to make love or to spend a life with her. But we have cell phones that allow us even "cyber-sex". We no longer have time to talk to people we are interested in, or whose projects we are interested in participating in, or whose views we are interested in discussing. But, yes, we have software that "connects" us.

We no longer have time to read, to learn, to study, so the Internet gives us everything done: chewed and pre-digested. We no longer have time to walk, to look around, to take some time for us. We have GoogleEarth to walk around our neighborhood, and gyms where we run on a machine half an hour so the heart will not forget how it was to speed up.

We do not have much time to be human anymore. And the system, attentive to everything, continues to turn us into amoebas that soon will not need to move from their seats. Because they will be "connected" to the world...

...and disconnected from themselves, perhaps?

In societies whose fabrics are being slowly torn apart like that, libraries actively work to reverse that trend. They try to build a community feeling, providing spaces where people can interact, and reminding those people that there are many reasons to do so...

...which maybe is not a very "trendy" kind of work to do nowadays. But it is an important one: a sort of rebellion against an unbalanced panorama. Yes: a rebellion. Because after all, as Argentinean writer Alejandro Dolina said once, "it is always advisable to drive through life in reverse, especially if one suspects who has put the traffic arrows."

Planned obsolescence
Critical notes (14)

Recently, Greenpeace, along with iFixit (a collaborative web of electronic product repair manuals), published the results of a study which noted that Apple, Samsung and Microsoft are the champions of planned obsolescence.

Companies design products that are difficult or impossible to repair, with short lifetimes, or dependent on software that is never updated, among many other things. This way, they guarantee the continuity of the production & sales chain: durable products are not good for business. It is necessary that the wheel keeps moving, that people continue buying and throwing away stuff, so that there is employment, so that there is growth, so that there is development...

Old and well-known words...

...to which we may add "so that there is waste in every corner of the planet, so that there is unmanageable pollution, so that there are slaves working in half the world, so that humanity consumes increasingly scarce resources to make a small percentage of human beings feel 'happy'". Important reasons that are usually left out commercial ads (because it is necessary that the wheel keeps moving, that people keep buying and throwing away stuff, and all the rest).

Do we consider planned obsolescence in our libraries? Do we buy materials that we will soon have to discard, or do we focus on more sustainable, repairable, reusable elements? Do we opt for creative solutions, or we just go for the packages sold by advertising? Are we one more link in the chain of consumption & discard, or are we trying to slow down or break this chain, thinking about our future and the future of our planet?

Are we really committed to our "sustainability" discourse and statements? Or are those just... words?

The others' perspective
Critical notes (15)

The first time that the inexperienced young man I once was entered that indigenous community in northeastern Argentina —a community whose name I don't need to remember right now— and announced that he was bringing them "the library" (with the same tone with which a preacher announces to a group of poor sinners that he brings them the salvation of their souls), that young man received intrigued looks and a single answer:

—We do not need a library.

Everything I had learnt (or believed to learn) at the university was burnt in seconds by that statement. And I left the place eaten by doubts. How could anyone not want something as wonderful as a library?

The fact is that what the inhabitants of that community —and many others, as I would find out over the months— did not want, even if they could not express it too well, was the *library model* that I offered them. *Our* library. A library that had systematically left them off its shelves. One that, in some cases, prohibited them from entering its rooms. Because they were "indians." They were dirty, thieves, they could not behave properly, like educated people...

(Back then I thought this problem to be limited to Argentina. Then I started traveling and I found it in the rest of Latin America. And the world).

I solved the reticence of that community by creating a library model adapted to their needs (a number of small mobile sound libraries). But it was something I had to discover by force: nobody taught me that. Many of us were not taught that there is not a unique library model. Many of us were not taught that to be successful, any project (including a library) must be adapted to the needs and, above all, to the ideas and realities of its final users, even if we have to destroy all our preconceived structures and swallow up a bunch of our prejudices.

In short, many of us were never taught that a library is a place where a person (or a community) and knowledge meet. And that such a space and such an encounter can assume —what a wonderful thing!— thousands of different forms. As many as different perspectives exist in this diverse world of ours.

With voice, without voice
Critical notes (16)

For many years I have been working with oral tradition and with endangered sounds: languages and music.

It all started one night in north-eastern Argentina, when I sat down in front of an old man of the Qom indigenous people, ready to record a couple of legends. Instead, he kept me up all night, telling me the complete mythology of his people.

The next morning, I realized that I had just witnessed a unique spectacle, and that I wanted to dedicate my career and my efforts to prevent memories as those of that old man to be lost in oblivion.

Since then, I have been working in a very rich field. And, at the same time, in one full of conflicts and biases.

There are many who pick up the voices of indigenous peoples and other "minority" groups: groups that have been punished and massacred or, at best, ignored and invisible. And there are many who, when gathering the stories, the memories, the complaints and the struggles of those peoples, ensure that they are "giving voice to the voiceless."

Such an assertion is terribly arrogant.

It assumes that these peoples —all those men and women— have no voice, when in fact they do. A very strong one. A different thing is that there are not many ears interested in hearing it.

Or it assumes that the only "voice" that can be considered as such is the one reaching the greatest number of ears: the voice of the media, the dominant voice. This is equivalent to accepting that there is no life outside the media, and endorsing an unfair and degrading status quo, which gives and takes "the voice" according to their interests — and which often requires intermediaries for certain stories to be told.

I was once one of those arrogant ones who thought to give voice to those who did not have it.

Over the years I ended up understanding that it was not necessary to give them a voice: it was necessary to remove their gags.

And we (especially those of us who work as librarians, managers of human memory) need to remove the blinders that keep us in our comfortable reality, and take a look around us. Trust me: what you will find will amaze you.

Academics only
Critical notes (17)

Memory preservation institutions are concerned with preserving fragments of the intangible heritage of our species. Some of them have specialized in specific fragments: for example, in the threatened sounds (languages and music) of certain indigenous societies.

There are many institutions of this type that work from an "external" position, i.e. without the direct participation of the owners of the knowledge and the memories that they intend to safeguard. The (sometimes self-proclaimed) "saviors" often have no other contact with the "saved" (who sometimes do not want or need to be saved, by the way) than the one necessary to "extract" the information that feeds their projects.

Projects that are usually academic, linked to universities or similar institutions and open only (or partially) to academics. This betrays the motives and intentions of these institutions and their managers.

Is it possible that the son of the man who appears in the record X of an oral archive cannot access it because he is not an academic researcher? Is it possible that, in order to access his knowledge, the family of the (already deceased) musician who appears in the record Y of a sound-based library has to fill an official request stating their reasons? How is it possible that human memory —a part of our heritage as a species, and a

supposedly threatened part, which would theoretically need more visibility— is owned (virtually or really) by a few, and that those few, instead of divulgating it, become their rabid guard dogs, limiting its access?

It is often argued that those who provided their testimonies and allowed those records to be collected gave their consent to such uses. Those of us who have been working on these issues for a long time know very well how little informed "informed consent" are, and how much they can hide behind the phrase "this recording will be used for academic purposes."

And those of us who have been dealing with the Academia for the same time also know of the interest of scholars and thesis-writers in finding a "rare" culture that allows them to do "interesting" work; of the fights over projects that can give some return (economic... or the other); of the many "collectors" of orality and memory who end up becoming the "authors" of such memory (and believing they have rights over it) simply because they have been one more link in the chain and have collected it; and how the hierarchy and the status quo of the Academia are perpetuated, and its exclusive values...

Fortunately, digital humanities are changing the landscape. And the day will come when all those records, kept under seven keys for doctors and university professors in the libraries, museums and universities of the world, will be open for everyone's use.

Because that's what they are: everyone's heritage.

Doing with what is left
Critical notes (18)

The story tells that the violinist Itzhak Perlman, in one of his concerts, broke a string of his instrument. A very noticeable break. The conductor stopped the accompanying orchestra and looked at him, waiting for his decision: to follow or to stop. Perlman closed his eyes for a moment, then made a gesture, asking him to go on.

The concert was majestic. Sublime. The audience applauded in rage at the end. After the applause, Perlman said: "Sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left."

The anecdote —probably an urban legend— is used by many psychologists today as a parable against envy. But there are many librarians (especially in the so-called "developing" countries) for whom the phrase is not a parable, but a daily reality. There are many who know about this "artistic" task of discovering how much can be done with the little they have, with whatever they have left.

Anyone who has visited the school libraries in the south of the Chaco province or the Sierras Grandes in the province of Cordoba in Argentina (not to mention those of the dry forests of Santiago del Estero, the Andean highlands in Salta or the steppe in Neuquén) knows that those teachers/librarians do miracles with the few resources at

their disposal. Daily miracles that require a lot of effort, a lot of commitment, a lot of sacrifice... A little known and unrecognized work.

A work replicated by mobile and rural and public and popular libraries throughout Latin America. An invisible work, hidden from the great magazines and the great congresses, the great international organizations and the great libraries, but the one forming the base on which the continent's librarian system is grounded.

It would be advisable for those librarians not to be forced to work under such conditions, struggling to do a lot with nothing. It would be advisable for the relevant authorities to deal with these problems, and for libraries with more resources to show their solidarity.

And in any case, until that help arrives —and anyone who has lived in Latin America knows well enough that it may take a long time— it would be decent to show all the respect and admiration for those who do all they can with the little they have left.

Precari-brarians Anonymous
Critical notes (19)

The man stands up and addresses the rest of the participants of the meeting, who sit in a circle around him.

— Hello. My name is John, and I am a librarian.

— Hi, John — answer the others in chorus.

And John then starts to share all his problems, all his bitterness, all the inconveniences he faces in his daily work as a librarian. Or as a "precari-brarian", as he and his colleagues have begun to call themselves, due to the alarming precariousness of their jobs. The assistants nod, regretfully: more or less, all of them identify with that colleague and with his tribulations. That is why they meet there, in the Association of Precari-brians Anonymous: to share their sorrows, support and encourage each other, share hopes, strategies and solutions...

Fantasy? Yes, indeed. But it is enough to teach a course or a seminar, or lecture on social librarianship to more than twenty librarians to find that the final time for questions turns into a kind of meeting of "Precari-brians Anonymous": librarians who take advantage of the time and the space to complain about their working conditions.

Working conditions, that are in fact increasingly regrettable, and over which, apparently, no professional association, trade union or college has control. There seems to be little left for the Association of Precari-brians Anonymous to go from being a fantasy to become a reality.

Books and magic
Critical notes (20)

"Liber est lumen cordis, speculum corporis" (The book is light of the heart / mirror of the body), says the famous fragment "Quid est liber?" included in the *Codex Miscellaneus* (fol 26v), a text of the eleventh century kept in Toledo (Spain).

A beautiful definition. Although, sometimes, I like to explore others beyond the classics. Or even invent them.

The problem is that, in the latter case, I get more questions than answers.

If, as the Colombian poet Jairo Aníbal Niño says, "a cat is a drop of tiger" (and a tiger is a downpour of cats?), a book is a drop of what? Of knowledge and creativity? Of memories and dreams? Of experiences, good and bad? Of all of the above (and much more)? Of anything of that?

And a library is a downpour of books (and other things)? Or could it also be a drop of something (a tangible drop of our intangible collective memory, for example)?

Be that as it may, the possibility that the book (and other documents) and the houses, containers and spaces that shelter them (whatever they are called) allow this type of

games speaks clearly of their value. It is a pity that the world seems to advance, in fits and starts, towards a reality that turns its back on knowledge and memories.

And that we seem to be becoming, as the Spanish philosopher Julián Marías bluntly put it, primitive beings with too much information.

Using three planets
Critical notes (21)

The topic was addressed by American researchers Jennie Moore and William E. Rees in 2013, in the fourth chapter of *The Worldwatch Institute*'s already-famous "State of the World" report entitled "Is Sustainability Still Possible?"

Measuring the ecological footprint of the current human population, it is possible to detect that approximately one fifth of the world's population lives in high-income societies (most of North America, Europe, Japan and Australia, plus the consumer elites of the low-income countries). To maintain their standard of living, that fifth part takes over four fifths of the world's natural resources, and generates most of the harmful waste (including greenhouse gases).

Grosso modo, that fifth part, that sector of humanity, lives as if they had the resources and the assimilative capacity of three planets Earth.

And, of course, few of the members of that sector are willing to give up their way of life. Many prefer not to look around, others do not care (as long as their privileges are not touched), and others opt for a utopian *wishful thinking* ("in the near future we will all go to Mars", "in the near future, Science will solve all our problems", etc.)

It happens that, at the rate we are moving, there will be no near future. And science is still far from solving our problems.

Meanwhile... do we librarians do something about that? Are we part of the problem? Of the solution? Do we even have a minimal idea of what is going on and what may be our role in this situation? Or are we, too, partakers of the *wishful thinking*?

Foundations
Critical notes (22)

Daniel González Linacero, a Spanish Republican teacher (murdered by Falangist gunmen on August 8, 1936), was the author of a school textbook entitled "My first history book".

In the last paragraph of the text, the author points out to his potential readers that the two great virtues on which life is based are cooperation and solidarity.

In today's society, in which market values weigh much more than many social values, those two foundations of life, those two "virtues" that González Linacero identified so well, seem doomed to be lost.

What does the library do about it?

On commitment and defeat
Critical notes (23)

In his book *A Darwinian Left* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), the Australian philosopher Peter Singer comments on his meeting with the Belgian-American Henry Spira, a famous activist for human and animal rights:

"When I asked him why he has spent more than half a century working for the causes I have mentioned, he said simply that he is on the side of the weak, not the powerful; of the oppressed, not the oppressor; of the ridden, not the rider. And he talks of the vast quantity of pain and suffering that exists in our universe, and of his desire to do something to reduce it."

Many times, such a commitment does not obtain the desired results — days and days of struggle, effort and sacrifice that, in the end, end up leading nowhere. In those cases, when the spirits decline, it is necessary to remember what the Spanish Claudio Rodríguez wrote in his poem "Lo que no es sueño" ["What is not dream"] (included in *Alianza y condena*, Madrid: Ediciones de la Revista de Occidente, 1965):

"We are being defeated, but never tamed."

Technological somnambulism
Critical notes (24)

The American political theorist Langdom Winner (1944) works on the social and political aspects that come with modern technological changes.

In *The Whale and the Reactor* (1986), Winner poses what he calls "a revealing notion": that of technological somnambulism. According to the author, we walk voluntarily asleep through the process of reconstruction of the conditions of human existence by contemporary technology.

A technology that strongly affects knowledge, its forms of production, distribution and socialization, and the spaces in which this knowledge is managed. Including libraries.

Could not it be said, of many current information professionals, that they are true "technological sleepwalkers"? Have we evaluated the consequences of such somnambulism for our profession, the goods we protect, and the users we serve?

And, above all... is there a way to wake up?

The need for rebellion
Critical notes (25)

It's okay to work in community.

[Not in flock, and with a shepherd. In community, I say: horizontal, egalitarian, balanced...].

But it is also good that there is at least one of us walking beyond the limits of our world, far from the group.

Because the community is going to need that vision from outside and from far away.

For those walking beyond the limits of our world it is easy to pioneer, to explore new roads, to get lost walking them, and to return to tell adventures and misadventures, recommendations and warnings...

It's okay to work in community, yes. Together, united as part of the same fabric that takes care of all its strands because it knows (or should know) that if one of them fails, the entire thing falls apart.

But it is also necessary that there are those rebel fringes that, barely clinging to the fabric at one end and with the rest floating in the wind, without major ties, explore reality and tell it from their own perspective.

Rebels are necessary. Their vision is unique. They are the critical voices which do not stick to the expected or stipulated lines. They are the scouts who look beyond the horizon and come back to tell about what they saw. They are the ones who know the limits, the ones who open new trails in the jungle of ideas and actions, the ones who watch from the edge of the world...

It is not an easy task, though. Because when they return from their travels (external and internal), the rebels are usually rejected: the community perceives them as misfits, people who walk those rough paths because they dislike the company of their fellow men. It is not always the case: actually, it almost never is. The rebels like solitude and adventure, searching for other roads and skies... But they also like to return somewhere they may call home.

Every time they come back, they have a lot to tell. Why not welcome them, lend them a chair and listen to what they have to say?

"Ethnic" contents
Critical notes (26)

Recently I was invited to the National Congress of Public Libraries of Colombia, to participate, among other things, in a roundtable in which the topic of "ethnic contents" was discussed. And there I was, being part of a meeting with colleagues from different backgrounds and different cultures, including Afro-Colombians and members of the so-called "native" or "indigenous" societies.

And although I already had my objections and my doubts about the topic to be debated, it was there, in that professional meeting, when the gaps and the shadows of the matter became bigger and deeper for me.

What do we talk about when we refer to "ethnic contents"? In general, about contents belonging to "other" cultures, cultures labeled as "ethnic" — which are never the official, the standard one, "ours." The adjective "ethnic" itself has certain exotic and exoticist connotations, even folkloric ones: colorful rural minorities or communities far from "civilization", with other languages, other music, other everything. It is very difficult to perceive these "others" as part of "us", of our national and regional Abya Yala societies (plural and diverse, although it is difficult for us, Latin Americans, to see and accept it).

According to the etymology of the word, "ethnic" contents are contents that represent a particular "ethnos", and that also should include those of the "dominant" and majority

society, those of the national and official culture. But those are not usually included under the "ethnic" label: at least in Latin America, "ethnic" is usually used with "Indians" and "Blacks" (and "Mulattos" and "Mestizos", by derivation). The different, the "minority" ones.

Personally, I have the feeling that as long as we continue using this kind of labels (or any other, in fact, no matter how empowered their users are) we will continue to create ideological and social "ghettos", we will continue to put entire groups of people inside boxes clearly marked. Boxes that are not "ours", boxes that are not and will not be "us": unless they become something that they are not (nor do they want to be), they will remain being "the others".

And, rather than solving the problem of the gigantic social gaps that our continent still suffers, I think that by talking about "ethnic" we are recognizing, naturalizing and maintaining them. We continue to perpetuate the imperialist colonialism that put the "other" in that subordinate, abused position. And we move away from a solution that may bridge gaps and reduce distances.

Wikipedia limits
Critical notes (27)

In one of the last issues of *New Scientist* (02/08/2020), the article "Making history" (pp. 46-47) mentions the problems that British physicist Jess Wade has struggled with when making contributions on Wikipedia. Aware of the absence of influential women or scientists of color in the encyclopedia, Wade created numerous pages describing the work of those professionals. Such pages have been systematically overridden by the editors of Wikipedia: an elite who, often from the shadows and hidden behind an impersonal username, wield the threads of the largest organized source of information in human history.

Wade has publicly denounced the fact, which has raised a stir in the United Kingdom, although anyone who has edited Wikipedia for some time (and many of us librarians are, at the same time, Wikipedians) is aware of the many problems, biases, manipulations, censorship and arbitrariness that exist on the part of the editors, as well as of the impossibility of taking any action against them.

To override Wade's content, the editors shielded themselves behind Wikipedia's publication rules, which seek to only include relevant characters on their pages and, therefore, establish conditions and selection criteria: memberships, publications, visibility, history, etc.

The problem is that those criteria —certainly necessary to keep Wikipedia free of informational noise, irrelevant characters and unnecessary information— perpetuate at the same time the academic *statu quo*. One that makes certain sectors invisible (women, minority ethnic and social groups...) and gives voice to others: in general, white, male, dominant-culture and privileged-position characters.

And so, those who have the greatest possibilities of positioning themselves within the Academy and the hegemonic social scheme are those who have all the possibilities of appearing on Wikipedia. Which gives them more visibility and relevance, and greater possibilities of positioning within the Academy.

Are the creators and editors of Wikipedia aware of this vicious circle — and that their rules perpetuate it?

Let's not give them a voice: let's get out of their way
Critical notes (28)

The "others", those who are on the other side of the many gaps that mark and cut our society (those gaps that Boaventura de Sousa Santos ended up baptizing as "abyssal lines"), do not need us to give them a voice.

They have it, clear and strong. They have had it for a long time. For generations.

If that voice is not heard, it is not because they do not know how to speak or express themselves, or because they do not know how to make it heard. Nor is it because they need translators, or intermediaries to collect and explain —from structuralism to Epistemologies of the South, cultural studies or whatever...— their words. Or their ideas, experiences and opinions.

They do need that we do not look the other way when they talk to us, as if they did not exist. That we stop neglecting them, minimizing them, taking away their spaces, closing doors to them... That we stop putting sticks on their wheels, even if we do it unconsciously.

In short, they need us to get out of their way.

In a library, that means that we stop putting barriers to them: those walls that are usually based on their skin color, the way they dress or speak, their origin... Those barriers that sometimes are not expressed openly, and others are not even concealed.

It means that we open the collections to whatever they have to say — even if what they want to tell is not endorsed by a university, a recognized publishing house, an interesting review or the scholar on duty. Even if what they want to transmit is not written, and it has to be collected —if it is necessary to collect it...— in audiovisual or sound format, because it moves with oral wings. It means that we stop making them invisible every time we think that what they know, do, narrate, believe or express has no place on our shelves, for it is not good enough...

It means that we ask publishers —especially those that depend on public funds, such as those of many universities— to include their stories, memories and claims in their collections (on paper, digital, or audiovisual). But not their stories told by others, illustrated by others, documented by third parties and explained by some great authority on the subject. Their stories. Their memories. Their claims. Theirs. By them.

It means that we abandon the labels that classify them into "special" spaces and categories. They are not special: they are different only by the fact that they have been placed on the other side of a thousand gaps, and kept there by the desire of a few and the passivity of many. And by instruments such as many documentary languages: those that shape knowledge management and that speak, even today, of "underdeveloped peoples" or "poor minorities". And by labels that are nothing more than euphemisms to

hide domination, such as that of "women's literature" in a small library section, which complies with leaving testimony that "women also write" while the main, massive library collection continues to show male, white, scholar authors belonging to the dominant culture...

It means that we stop creating spaces "for them" when what they need is for us to open our spaces to everyone, with everyone, for everyone... They don't need —we don't need— "indigenous libraries" or "afro libraries": we needed public libraries where everyone may come in and where all cultures, languages, knowledge and memories are represented on equal terms... They do not need —we do not need— "workers' libraries" or "feminist libraries": we need committed, solidary, inclusive and respectful libraries, supporting everyone's rights, offering help for all problems, and standing by the side of all struggles...

Getting out of their way means trying to avoid that our stereotypes continue making damage, that our mental barriers continue to be present, that the many prejudices that we still carry with us (sometimes without being aware of it) continue to affect our reality... It means to stop deepening, with our daily actions and inactions, those many gaps that make many human beings invisible in all aspects.

Let's get out of their way, then.

And then, if we stop seeing those "others" as strange objects, or as non-human beings far from our reality, or as mere "subjects of study" to exploit, or as poor devils who just

deserve our pity, perhaps we can collaborate with them in their searches and struggles, contribute our grain of sand, and learn a lot about our own reality, our gaps, our defects, and all those struggles that we have not yet begun to fight.