

Sounds and silences in libraries

A handful of ideas

Conferencia RIBCA (Rede Intermunicipal de Bibliotecas de Leitura Pública do Cávado)
2023

Terras de Bouro, Portugal, October 13, 2023.

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Introduction

I was originally invited to this event to talk a bit about the role of digital libraries in preserving the sounds of the indigenous peoples of my home continent.

At first, I had trouble talking about it. A problem of representativeness, above all —I am not an Indigenous person— but also a problem of exoticism. The same challenges and inconveniences faced by the distant (and quite unknown) First Nations of my homeland are faced by many peasant and rural communities of the Iberian Peninsula. Why talk about the former, then, when we could talk about the latter? Why, if what I was going to say about the former applies perfectly well to the latter?

Curiously, when I started writing this conference, with the above questions in mind, my reflections led me to unexpected horizons. Why continue talking about digital libraries, if the practices (and what we call "innovation") are also, and have been for a long time, in other places? Why talk only about sound documents, or orality, if documents can also assume many other forms, many of them forgotten or rejected by libraries? Shouldn't we also be talking about colonization, hegemonies and minority groups when we touch on all these issues? Where are we going, or do we want to go, with this conversation? What do we want to achieve by putting these ideas on the table? What is the point of talking about all this?

When I was finally finished writing, I had a ton of scribbles and a handful of halfway salvageable ideas on paper. Those ideas revolved around sounds and silences in libraries and similar spaces, yes, but they also touched on cognitive colonialism and identity resistance. They were ideas applicable in any context: not only with Latin American indigenous groups, where in fact they have been applied for at least two

decades, but also with rural communities and suburbs in Europe, or with "minoritized" groups in North America, to give some easy examples.

These, then, are the ideas that I am going to present. I confess that these are highly personal ideas. They contain more doubts than certainties, and are only intended to invite us to reflect critically on the "why" and "what for" of the disciplines and professions of information management, especially in the field of social memory and sound management.

And of silences. Those silences eternally present in everything we do.

The existence of "other" spaces

The first question that popped up on my "paper of scribbles" was the following: what exactly are we talking about when we talk about "libraries"?

"Library" means "book container." However, when it comes to being and doing, some knowledge and memory management spaces (including libraries, archives, museums, documentation centers and intermediate and mixed places — artificial divisions of cultural heritage caused by hyper-specialized disciplines) have decided to leave aside those dictionary definitions and stereotypes — which end up being true "Procrustean beds." Today, these spaces are no longer a simple physical redoubt, with walls and shelves. Or an ideological space of "civilization and culture." Or a political-administrative space within a regional or national network.

Today, these spaces are places of all kinds, physical or virtual, where knowledge and memories of various forms have the opportunity to connect with a community — a group of people, in its broadest conception.

That definition above, that idea of "library," is broad. Inclusive. And, therefore, it shelters under its roof an overwhelming diversity of professional and socio-cultural experiences. Experiences that are occurring at the hands of library, archive and museum workers, but also of people unrelated to these areas or without any training in these disciplines. These are the people who have developed such rebellious and innovative currents as rogue archives or community museums.

That myriad of diverse experiences exploring opportunities and possibilities happens in practice. In reality, out there. This is what can be seen in the ideas and activities of

numerous popular, public, community, rural, indigenous and school libraries in the world in general and in Latin America in particular: from mobile libraries on the back of donkeys to "houses of knowledge" with "living books." The myriad includes exclusively digital audiovisual and sound collections as well as "word circles" where the past is remembered and the present is thought out in a lively voice. And much, much more: for example, those spaces that go beyond the purely "cultural" perspective and focus on identity resistance, political struggle and social activism.

Despite the existence of such spaces and library practices, many theoretical manuals, educational materials, public policies, international guidelines and discourses within librarianship seem to be far from these realities. They insist on ignoring them. And, in doing so, they condemn them to oblivion or limbo, discredit their advances, and go so far as to harshly criticize any discourse that departs from the hegemonic norm.

This is how invisibilities are created. And silences. Although, in the end, it is equivalent to covering the sun with a finger. For, when our eyes are opened, the diverse, rebellious and creative library reality is still there. Stubborn and sonorous.

The existence of "other" documents

Associated with the previous question, my scribbles sketched a second, directly related one: What do these spaces of encounter between knowledge and communities contain? What do we talk about when we talk about documents?

By "document" is meant any element in which the knowledge and memories of a human society can be codified. Human societies have not always used the written word, much less the printed one, to fulfill such transmission.

There is a little known current within the information sciences, called "documentalism", which maintains that any —I insist: any— element capable of supporting knowledge is a document. This definition allows us to include, in the documentary category, the engraved gourds of the Peruvian Andes, the painted fabrics of the Amazon, the hairstyles and scarifications of African women, the beaded necklaces of the North American plains, the graffiti and urban murals of the whole world, and, above all, orality and gestures — represented, in recent times, by many digital audiovisual media.

Many knowledge and memory management spaces have begun, very gradually, to include these diverse and plural elements in their collections. The inclusion of other media and formats is generally accompanied by the inclusion of other languages, generally underrepresented in libraries, archives and museums, and sometimes threatened. All of them represent the voices and thoughts of many segments of society that have not seen their stories or knowledge reflected in the dominant documentary formats (book, article, thesis, photo...). Or they have seen them reflected, but not through their own codes and words.

Thus, in addition to textual collections, graphic collections (labeled until recently as "special") and audiovisual collections have been added. Sounds and silences have ended up appearing in library catalogs as "documents" with their own value. However, the "documentalist" position is resisted by a considerable part of the institutions and professionals of the information sciences, whose paradigm is insistently centered on books and reading as the main expressions of preservation and transmission of information.

A position that generates many silences and that turns out to be (often in an undesired way) colonized. And colonizing.

Library colonizations

My ramblings and scribblings led me unfailingly to the controversial idea of "colonization." And "decolonization." Traditionally, libraries (and all other spaces of knowledge and memory management) have served as spaces of socialization, acculturation and reference. They hold "culture," understood as the normative (and refined, and recommended, and preferable) form of the (in)tangible cultural heritage of a given society.

In practice, library collections end up including only a small part of this heritage. Generally, the part that has been printed. In a dominant language. With the voice of the victors, generally men in a position of power. And with the hegemonic ideas: the accepted and acceptable ones. The "correct."

Everything else is dodged, or inaccessible, or not recommended. Or it is directly eliminated.

By accepting and following this pattern, libraries end up becoming colonized spaces, heirs to a library / archival / museum history managed by dominant interests. Although in recent times there has been a conscious effort to eliminate these biases from library collections, structures and activities (for example, by including content produced by female authors, or from non-academic spaces, or by indigenous and peasant producers), it is not always possible, for a long series of reasons that highlight, even more strongly, the coloniality of the political, educational and socio-cultural system.

And this coloniality, whether active or passive, is colonizing. For, as with other spaces—for example, schools—the work of libraries in certain places leads to the invisibilization, discrediting or direct elimination of traditional local cultural practices, such as oral history or oral literacy, or the use of certain languages and documentary formats. It is a colonization aided, to a large extent, by a publishing market whose dominant form seeks to preserve the same voices and discourses in the official language, and by governments that elaborate national / regional policies and strategies that, at times, do no more than perpetuate the *statu quo* and that, unflinchingly, respond to their own ideological agendas — which are showing a dangerous drift towards totalitarianisms.

The implementation of libraries, or reading programs, or book collections in standard form, generally from the center to the peripheries and from the top down, forcing models and actions that are not necessarily required, is very common in cultural and educational policy programs at the international level — and is one of the fastest ways to eliminate the cultural diversity, tradition and social memory of a territory. And with it, its identity and history.

And, since we are talking about a framework where the written word is the law, the first to disappear are the sounds. And their necessary silences.

Silences between sounds

And finally my steps led me to the world of sounds.

The colonizing biases more or less present in knowledge and memory management spaces in general, and in libraries in particular, have led them to be places full of sounds and silences. Which can also be understood as presences and absences.

Silences are necessary. However, on many occasions these silences are too abundant, and end up being much more significant than the sounds themselves. They reflect invisible communities, muted languages, silenced histories, discredited thoughts, cultural and social pressures, neglect, systematic oblivion, and even persecution and elimination. They reflect intentions, both conscious and unconscious. They reflect historical debts.

Fortunately, they also reflect possible paths to walk, memories to recover, languages to strengthen, stories to tell, struggles to win, resistances to maintain, ideas to discuss, impositions to criticize...

Human memory is a fabric made up of innumerable strands, all of them necessary. These strands can be an oral story, a painting, the landscape of a neighborhood corner, the knowledge of how to place a seed in a furrow, the weaving of a basket, a memory of migration, the archives of a labor union, a train ticket, the poster of a concert or a rally, a note on a napkin, a love letter, the recording of a radio program, and much, much more. A memory made only of books, institutional archives and museum artifacts belonging to important people is a partial one, manipulated and full of holes: a fabric eaten by moths and ready to fall apart, or one made with so few threads that it does not really look like a fabric. Nor does it function as such.

A community needs its memory —all its memory— to build its identity and to elaborate what we call "history". There have been many hands that, in search of power, have manipulated that memory for their own benefit: they have erased it (even burning archives and libraries, in a phenomenon known as "memoricide") or have significantly altered it, depriving broad ethnic and social sectors of the possibility of being, and condemning them to live a script written by others.

One of the first steps that have been taken, internationally and especially in Latin America, to recover heritages, histories and identities, is to open the library to sounds: to the spoken word, to songs, to music, to soundscapes. Also to silences: to the absence of speech in communities devastated by war, or to the lack of stories in peoples who have forgotten their own language. Sounds and silences are elements present not only in the nature that surrounds us, but also in the cultures of all human societies throughout history; in fact, even in today's more "developed" urban societies, most of the knowledge and memories are still transmitted orally. To handle sounds is to open the door to another epistemic and cognitive conception; it is like taking a "step back" and recovering something we always were — but had forgotten we were.

This has given rise to archives of local oral tradition and history, digital interview channels, programs for the recovery of minority languages, events with traditional storytellers... To these are added all kinds of musical, visual and artistic activities. These types of actions —or reactions, to a dominant paradigm centered on books and reading— make clear the importance of sounds (and of the necessary and complementary silences) when thinking about libraries, archives or museums... And they have thus become the spearhead of a movement that works above all from the margins —a very interesting concept that would need its own conference to explain it— and from there seeks to recover "other" ways of managing knowledge and memories.

This movement advances little by little, because the disciplines of knowledge and memory management, unfortunately, are also colonized. And they do not always have theories, methods or tools to understand, analyze or manage these "other" spaces, these "other" documents, these "other" practices...

All that otherness that, to tell the truth, is the majority.

Collective knowledge

My final scribbling led me to an inescapable reflection, with which I would like to close this conference.

All this epistemic diversity, all this heritage, belongs to everyone.

It is collective. Communitarian. And it must be free of appropriations, without obligations to the publishing industry, and devoid of academic analysts and professional "explainers" — those who are in charge of "translating" the knowledge of a group to the rest of the citizenry, or of "giving voice" to groups that, curiously enough, have never lost it.

Finding traditional knowledge under lock and key in academic archives, where it can only be accessed by authorized professionals, or finding publishing programs in indigenous languages in which the holders of these languages have no direct participation, is nothing more than the umpteenth form of colonization of these human groups.

In these cases, open access and grassroots work are essential tools for developing fair knowledge and memory management processes. Open access enables the barrier-free connection between knowledge and community — which is the original goal of any library, archive or museum. And grassroots work allows the creation and development of activities and services hand in hand with the community. Understanding their characteristics and their needs, their searches and their hopes. And their fears, too. Especially their fears.

And if those concerns and those needs and expectations imply that a library, an archive or a museum are not needed, it is necessary to respect the will of the community. But it could very well be that a human group does not need the library *in its official, standard, hegemonic definition*. In that case, the library will have to evolve: stop adapting reality to its structure, and adapt its structure to reality.

Decolonization? Maybe. Although I prefer to speak of a process of *appropriation* of the spaces of knowledge and memory management. Which always implies one of *subversion*.

At the end of these ideas and these scribbles, I am left with the hope that these paths, rebellious perhaps, innovative maybe, will lead us to a better understanding of the sounds and silences that populate our world, and all those "other" ways of knowing and remembering, and saying, and dreaming.

And lead us to face the "why" and "what for" of what we do. Those questions to which many of us, even today, after so many years of work, do not always find answers.

Some personal references

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