



**The new LIS professional from the interdisciplinarity and Colombian context perspective**

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**Abstract:**

*The Library and Information Science (LIS) professional endeavor has been shaped by the fast-paced growth of the scientific and academic information which, together with globalization (envisioning the political, economic, and cultural aspects), provided this professional with a leading role in the discourse and dynamics of the information society, given the current relevance of information storage, search, and decoding. On this regard, the paper deepens the importance of appreciating this professional not only for his/her skills in managing information, but also for the ability to propose interdisciplinary communication bridges and open and participate in debates of a political, historic, cultural and social nature, which generate development for the society based on access to knowledge.*

*In the Colombian case, a major difference is evident in terms of academic education and job perspective of the information professionals with respect to the reality of the country. The Colombian socio-economic and political context must be considered in the frame of an enormous cultural diversity, the armed conflict, drug trafficking, and social inequality. In face of these conditions, the professional must adjust and refocus a significant part of his/her knowledge and experience new practices that help him/her overcome such challenges as the linguistic and cultural pluralism of the ethnic communities and their particular relation to the western culture, thus providing for the intercultural experiences that enrich communities both socially and culturally. Consequently, this research profiles the information professional in the framework of the issues and opportunities offered by the Colombian scenario, considering the possible interaction with other knowledge fields, and showing a big difference in terms of curriculum and approach of the information science in these countries versus developed countries.*

**Key words:** violence and information, new information professionals, armed conflict, intercultural public library

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Globalization has provided significant opportunities: world culture integration, technologies as a productivity source, development of global telecommunication networks, and above all, strengthening of data binary coding and transmission systems which have sped-up the transfer of scientific, cultural, statistical, and mainly economic information, which in turn has boosted up the intangible, particularly financial and technological, markets (Castells, 1999). Nonetheless, both the States and the large transnational corporations are the main users and beneficiaries of the globalizing dynamics, as they have the power and technology required to get hold of natural resources and in many cases create threatening monopolies with the connivance of political and insurgent groups. In present times, the land is not intended for food production but it is rather the means to make a few agricultural multinationals richer (Vega, 2007) out of the excessive seizing of lands from peasants and indigenous communities as well as from the constant cultural extermination particularly in regions such as Latin America (Baez, 2008).

Accordingly, globalization is a no-return process posing some risks and bringing responsibilities on the academic world. The disappearance of indigenous cultures, the growth of social inequality, and the economic decline of developing countries constitute ever-growing problems. In contrast, some movements are emerging from the fight for the land, debates are held on inequality, and movements are born to reignite ethnic and cultural traditions (Martins, 2009), as observed in countries such as Colombia, with an enormous cultural and ethnic diversity and problems related to violence and drug trafficking. It is critical to point out that globalization invites to study new social and cultural identities and new types of conflicts and fights in a context of historic and political uncertainties offering a scenario to be addressed from the social and human sciences. The impact of this scenario is directly proportional to the way those elements interact with each other for solving each problem that arises in zones remote from the cities.

In this context, this argument intends to open the discussion on the responsibility of the Information Professional to the Colombian armed conflict. Likewise, it shapes his/her job in the communities in resistance and highlights his/her social and humanistic profile. This way, he/she is enabled to establish intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogues based on critical thinking and an active status in the regional problems, by considering the library as an institution with multiple possibilities and opportunities committed to building social fabric and to contribute to the path towards peace.

### **Interdisciplinarity**

The new horizons of the Information Science epistemology and the intrinsic nature of science suggest a cross-area dialogue among knowledge areas about which new paradigms are proposed as suggested by Capurro (2003): physical, social, and cognitive. This paper intends to highlight certain Information Science approaches, insofar as new cognitive schemes are addressed through postulates and issues, and mainly by ending the isolation from other disciplines (Moran, 2004). A paradigm works under the sovereign concepts and their logical relation, which govern specific

theories in a domain. However, a cognitive paradigm is currently emerging, which sets up bridges between sciences and disciplines and may be characterized by the task of the new information professionals. Regarding this subject, in addition to the tight Technology-Information Science relation, we propose an intercultural dialogue addressing social and political discussions, seeking that the professional takes on an active, proposing, and critical role in face of the complexity of postmodern societies.

Consequently, it is necessary to analyze Information Science programs and schools, and possibly reformulate their curriculum including concurrent technological, social, and humanistic courses, which are not significantly deep but may provide guidance on interests and opportunities for the new professionals. Father Alfonso Borrero (2004) proposes interdisciplinarity as an alternative for problem solution and education of future leaders of the country. He asserts that social phenomena may be addressed from the standpoint of the inter-relationship of several knowledge areas which have conceptual elements in common, and the convergence and feedback among professionals of different areas.

### **1. FIGHTING LIBRARY DESTROY: POLICY AND INFORMATION**

A major task of the information professional is to custody and preserve knowledge produced by humanity, with the purpose of saving the memory and safeguarding the identity of the peoples. However, it appears that under military attacks the professional can do little to prevent the destruction of information units. Nevertheless, Dosa & Sigo (as quoted by Valencia, 2002) contends that library scientists have always been related to politics despite the intent to show them as neutral. For example, during the Nazi regime, even though the librarians were not organized in any kind of movement, they actually supported the regime and were crucial to the development of a totalitarian society by allowing the censorship of information and the disappearance of certain types of literature.

According to Baez (2008), it is well known that there is no culture without memory and it is acknowledged that there is no identity without memory; therefore, whoever erases the adversary memory intends to implant his own memory and thus archives, museums, and libraries become strategic military targets. Likewise, the book is the means to preserve human memory. Libraries and archives transcend the concept of individual (wise men, tribes, or clans) memory to constitute a collective memory, i.e. a place rather than a person, and turn information units into sensitive places that are vital to the recognition of actual cultures and to the peoples' economic, social, and cultural development. Therefore, the information professional is committed to safeguard collections and cultural heritage, by warning the authorities of possible threats and working with the community to prevent attacks on cultural property (Valencia, 2002) which in turn calls for their being informed and immersed in the region political arena and building communication ties with their users which reach beyond the library.

Throughout history, archives and libraries have been the object of pillage, fires or military attacks; world wars were most tragic for books (Baez, 2004) when most of the European cultural heritage was destroyed and the progress of human thinking stopped. However, transcendent events have occurred also in the 21st century such as in the United States of America, 2001 or in Iraq, 2003, which show how information and the way it is provided, managed, and removed, became a strategic

fort for armies and countries, and a direct factor in historic and political events of the world.

During the Nazi "*bibliocaust*" of the World War II, more than 15 million books disappeared in Poland between 1938 and 1945 to bombings and fires promoted by the German army. In Italy, around 2 million books and 39 thousand manuscripts were destroyed during World War II by bombings that devastated libraries in Milan, Naples, and Turin. In like manner, 100 thousand books disappeared in England in 1940 and 1942; Central Holding library in Liverpool and Inner Temple Library in London were the object of German aerial attacks.

In the 21st century, infamous tragedies have happened such as the attack on the World Trade Center (September 11, 2001) where huge economic bases of archives, documents, and books were destroyed. Likewise, valuable works such as those by Joan Miro or Louise Nevelson were reduced to ashes and the Citigroup lost 1,113 arts works and paintings in that attack (Baez, 2004).

Similarly, during the confrontations in Iraq 2003, their National Library and National Archive were set in fire and more than 10 million documents disappeared including the first clay tablets. More than one million books disappeared in the looting carried out by locals with the passive and conniving attitude of the American army which did not abide by the Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

Colombian history has not lacked attacks on the collective memory and the cultural knowledge. A most relevant event in the Colombian history was the Justice Palace siege on November 6, 1985 by the guerrilla group "April 19 movement" (M-19), the center of the judicial branch in the country. The group took approximately 350 hostages including Supreme Court Justices, Council of State members, judicial officers, employees and visitors of the Justice Palace.

Nevertheless, the army and police reaction was excessive, and the merciless military assault on the Palace left a balance of 200 killed, including Supreme Court Justices, guerrillas, and civilians. During the Justice Palace seize, the library floor was completely destroyed by fire, and innumerable legal files and archives including legal actions against drug traffickers and politicians burnt away. More than 20 years later, the legal actions have not concluded and disappearances have not been punished. According to Valencia (2002), the destruction of evidence and files hinders the succeeding reparation and punishment tasks, and conceals the path to justice.



*The Justica Palace burning<sup>1</sup>*

Notwithstanding the constant targeting of information in military confrontations, today the information professional faces a historical opportunity provided by the information technologies, because he/she may lead document digitalization and preserve electronic backups. Hence, national institutions and guilds should work towards studies aimed at locating sensitive information likely to be a target in military attacks and should watch over the management of (technical, economic, and human) resources with the purpose of converting information into digital format, organizing and distributing it onto digital repositories, thus preventing its disappearance and saving the peoples' memory.

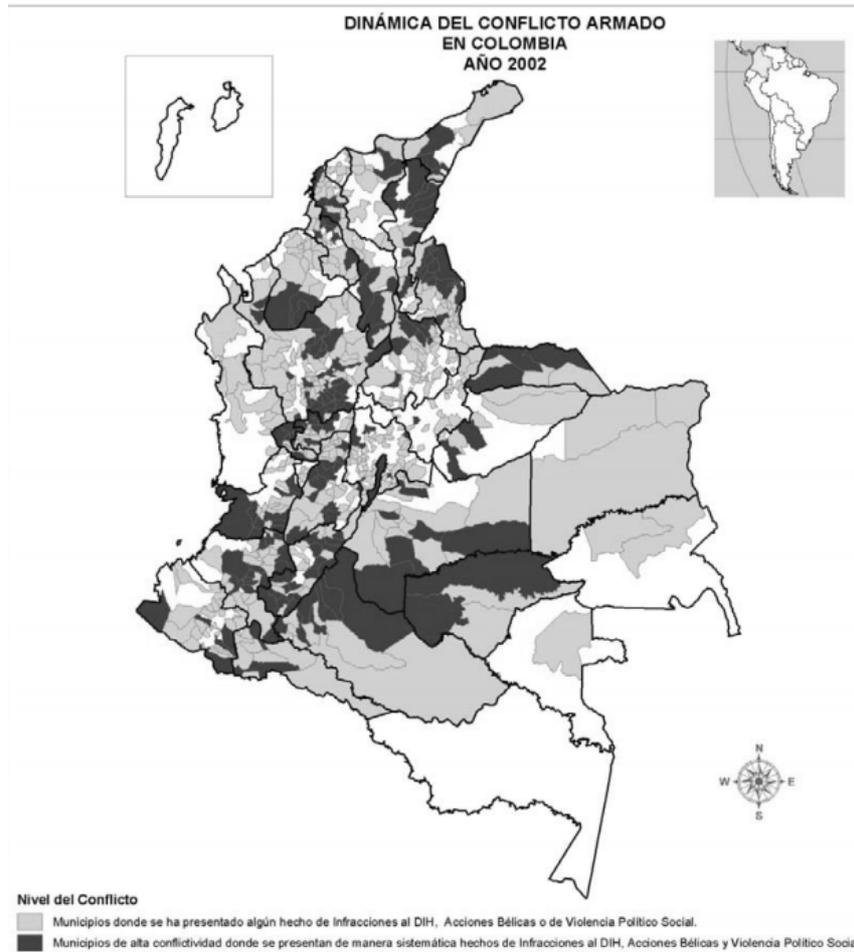
## **2. PUBLIC LIBRARY AND COMMUNITIES**

A study aimed at identifying the zones where documents are exposed entails a social and geographical analysis of the regions at issue, which becomes a bit more difficult when most of the territory in countries such as Colombia is rural. It is also worth noting that there has been an armed conflict in Colombia since the late 1950s, when the liberal guerrilla groups were born as self-defense against the political parties' violence, and became the current Revolutionary armed forces of Colombia (FARC - Spanish initials) responsible for many kidnappings, massacres, and crimes against humanity. Furthermore, in the late 1990s, the so-called United self-defense forces of Colombia (AUC - Spanish initials) emerged as an illegal extreme-right-wing paramilitary organization with the purpose to fight the FARC but also tightly related to drug trafficking and politicians. Therefore, Colombia is a country where the term "violence" is associated with the daily life. Even the cities have been affected by the growth of the presence of gangs and common crime. These conditions are contradictory in respect of the country's wealth in natural resources. However, while several sectors have fostered proposals of dialogues and achievement of the peace built on an agreement (whereas the State focus is on ending the conflict fighting), the libraries, particularly the professional guilds, have not voiced a firm opinion although they have explicit responsibilities.

In face of these issues, the information professional may not remain indifferent, least of all if he/she is in charge of managing Cultural and Information Units such as libraries, museums, and archives, which subject to proper direction can become powerful educational and cohesive instruments.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://manuelcepeda.atarraya.org>



*Provinces / Departments affected by the violence in the Colombian territory<sup>2</sup>*

## **Enormity of Colombian territory and culture**

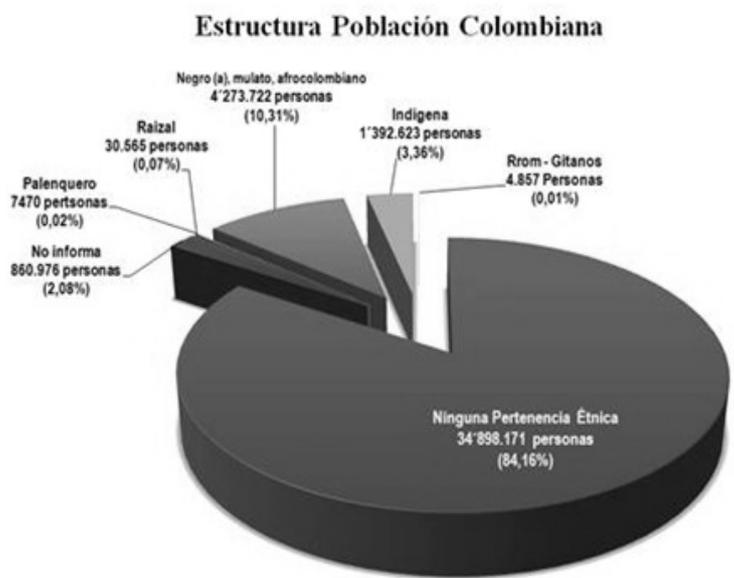
Due to the different geographic and historic conditions, Colombia is a deeply diverse country with Indigenous Communities, Afro-descendant Communities, Peasant Communities, Settlers, and Citizens.

All this cultural blend flows in various social and community dynamics used to try to explain the world and give it a new order. It is clear that the strength of the globalizing phenomenon forced the cultural evolution of the Colombian population at different levels, resulting in complex, hybrid, and confused societies and communities without a definite identity or an actual purpose, often immersed in national political and social phenomena such as the armed conflict, drug trafficking, territorial conflicts, and extreme poverty, among others.

The lack of Government attention to a large portion of the territory is quite evident, particularly to rural and ethnic territories which are precisely the most affected by political and social conflicts because of their geographic location (*see map*) and to the cultural shock of their cultural traditions and imagery in face of the force of globalization. According to the census performed by the DANE (National

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.alboan.org/>

administrative department of statistics) in 2005, some ethnic groups represent 13.77% of the total Colombian population, out of which the majority is Afro-descendant with 10.40%, followed by indigenous groups with 3.36%, and the Roma or Gypsies with 0.01%. These results call for policies to protect them, safeguard their knowledge and cultural traditions, and avoid their extinction.



*Ethnic population in Colombia<sup>3</sup>*

<b>Población Indígena</b>	1.392.623
<b>Negro, Mulato, Afrocolombiano</b>	4.273.722
<b>Raizal de San Andrés y Providencia</b>	30.565
<b>Palenquero</b>	7.470
<b>Rrom - Gitanos</b>	4.857

### **Intercultural Public Library**

In face of this large cultural framework, public libraries stand in front of a scenario full of possibilities, challenges, and difficulties. In the Colombian context, the information professional is facing a dilemma. Either he/she manages information cultural processes based on the universal knowledge and thus helps forget the ancestral cultural practices and constructions originated in the deepest cultural roots of the population, or otherwise he/she promotes the development of an identity, the respect to and understanding of local knowledge and memory, with the aim of proposing

<sup>3</sup> [www.mincultura.gov.co](http://www.mincultura.gov.co)

cultural practices and dynamics aligned with the feelings, thoughts, and actions of the population.

This does not mean that the globalizing phenomenon is denied but rather that based on the respect and the understanding of the cultural roots, a synergy between local cultures and the rest of universal knowledge and information is pursued to obtain results consistent with the country reality. The library is determinant in this situation, since the collective imagination contemplates that the library together with institutions such as the academic world are scenarios that validate, acknowledge, respect, and promote information and knowledge.

Therefore, an *Intercultural Public Library* would constitute a project of community construction of collections based on local information, cultural management services and activities focused on the local world rather than other worlds, and hence the Public Library would be transparently representing the community where it belongs.

Based on a public library with these features, the intercultural dialogues with the so-called "*western culture*" may be effective and enrich both the users and the community in general, because self-knowledge, self-respect, and self-understanding would modify the dynamics of cultural uprooting suffered by Colombian populations, mainly the rural and ethnic communities (García, 2001).

Therefore, such a project requires an interdisciplinary work to address the issues from different standpoints and thus carry out a better-chosen construction based on knowledge areas such as Anthropology and Sociology, and to conduct studies aimed at acquiring a more specific knowledge of the communities and an integrated proposal that contemplates people, not only as potential users of the information unit but also as citizens and human beings with economic, social, political, and cultural rights.

In conclusion, an intercultural public library in the Colombian context would be a very valuable mechanism to recognize indigenous, afro, and peasant populations by means of cultural practices of equality based on an intercultural dialogue that provides for the respect, acknowledgement, and understanding of the others, both locally and universally.

### **3. THE NEW INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS**

Research projects such as Chamin Zins (2007) consolidate and compare the viewpoints of subject matter experts in Information Science, who propose a knowledge map of this science, which takes into account the development of other disciplines and the opportunities and responsibilities that the new LIS professionals should take on in face of the complex globalization scenario.

This document perfectly illustrates the influence of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the orientation and perspective of the Information Science as an essential discipline in the knowledge society. In this regard, most academicians agree that this science should address fields such as knowledge organization, information industry, information technology, information systems development, information economy, etc. Furthermore, there are fields like democracy and the ethical and social sides of information that are less frequent but

exist. This evidences new profile and horizons of the profession, which tend towards its relationship to mediums, mechanisms, and formats in which information is available and not towards socio-cultural management, democracy and social equality.

Based on the context formulated throughout this article, the information society is envisioned as a new phase of the free-market capitalist system with a fast growth due to a new production factor: knowledge; which joins the classical three inputs, labor, land, and capital which benefit a group that decreases as poverty and violence increase. We are currently watching the birth of new sources of inequality and the building of borders that did not use to exist for people affected by a low education level, low purchasing power, or lack of natural skills that render them unable to catch up with the technological complexity (Brey, 2009). In addition, they do not have means to access information sources, thus showing that the extent of the problem goes beyond the digital divide.

Consequently, despite the evident technological advances which offer enormous possibilities as long as everyone has access to technology, the new LIS professionals should not ignore the social issues that surround them. It is important that they do not become simple means of information transfer, inasmuch as in the new world there is a spread belief which considers that technology can actually influence the social and economic development in a direct and positive way. From the perspective of this reasoning, ICTs may help reach better levels of efficiency and the information professional should use other human sciences to detect those variables and work with them, all the more in a country with such a great cultural diversity as Colombia is.

Edgar Morin (2004) suggests that some complex research processes resort to very different disciplines as well as to the researcher's multicompetence. Accordingly, it is necessary to remove any trace of technological determinism and address the issue of the conflict in Colombia and in the world with a holistic view that provides for the social and the political, and also integrates different knowledge areas. The new professional must be able to build communication bridges with social workers, anthropologists, sociologists, cultural managers, historians, engineers, etc., who contribute to the preparation of proposals that require political will, and transcend and mediate in the different conflict dynamics that the Colombian society is living, which could be replicable in countries of similar characteristics.

The whole interdisciplinarity/interculturality proposal cannot be conceived without the communities, i.e. it cannot be structured, formulated and carried out without direct participation of Colombians from the different geographic regions of the country. Indigenous groups, afros-descendants, gypsies, and/or citizens are collectively responsible for communicating their cultural needs and interests. Therefore, we have a collective construction project where the LIS Professional guides transcendental processes of cultural mediation focused on respect, understanding, and bond strengthening amongst cultures.

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