Revolution and “The Independent Library Project” in Cuba

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The subject of “independent libraries” in Cuba has caused great controversy within the U.S. and international library communities since the inception of “The Independent Library Project” in 1998. Are “independent libraries” agents of intellectual freedom or propaganda? It is the purpose of this paper to address the debate of “independent libraries” within the context of the Revolution.

The period of Revolution in Cuba began on New Year’s Day in 1959 when Fidel Castro and his army entered Havana, overthrew dictator Fulgencio Batista, and established a communist state. The development of the country since then has been guided by the social and cultural values of the Revolution, emphasizing literacy, education, culture and the arts. Upon taking power, Fidel (He is referred to in Cuba by his first name.) initiated a radical restructuring of Cuban society which included a transformation of the library and educational systems. A year before the Revolution one million of Cuba’s 6,700,000 inhabitants was illiterate. (Chepesiuk 1990) With the restructuring of the Ministry of Education, the Cuban government undertook a massive literacy campaign to provide an educated populace for its “new society,” and sent thousands of teachers into the countryside to improve the literacy of the rural population. Today the literacy rate is 97% and Cuba’s population is highly educated and well-read. (Neugebauer 2003)

Integral to the education of the country's citizenry and the cultural reforms of the Revolution, was the expansion of Cuba's library system. Soon after Fidel Castro took power, the Cuban government ordered all the books that had belonged to Fulgencio Batista be transferred to the National Library, Biblioteca Nacional Jose Marti. The collection of the Biblioteca Nacional Jose Marti, which also serves as the head of Cuba’s public library
service, was further fortified with the private collections of members of the island's elite, who fled the country at the start of the Revolution. When the Revolution began there were 30 public libraries in Cuba. (Chepesiuk 1990) Today Cuba has 392 public libraries and thousands of school libraries. (Neugebauer 2003) Special libraries support agriculture, technology and the arts. The Cuban people value their libraries and use them widely.

The first “independent library” was established in March of 1998 by Berta del Carmen Mexidor Vazquez, an economist for the province of Las Tunas, along with her husband, Ramon Humbert Colas. By September 1999 there were 18 “independent libraries” in the country, and by May 2001 the number had increased to 82. (Hamilton, 2002) “Independent libraries,” collections of books displayed in individuals’ homes, are professed by those who support them to provide “uncensored books and materials reflecting perspectives on all sides of issues to the Cuban people.” (Eberhart 2001, p. 2) Such information, it is claimed, is off limits to state libraries and readers in Cuba. (Neugebauer 2003)

The leading proponent for the “independent library” movement is Robert Kent, a New York Public Library reference librarian, who together with Jorge Sanguinetty, a former Cuban government official, founded The Friends of Cuban Libraries, an independent support group. According to Kent "The Friends of Cuban Libraries is an organization concerned exclusively with intellectual freedom issues.” (Eberhart 2001) Seeking support for its cause, in 1999 and 2000 the organization sent a barrage of messages to library organizations and the press announcing that “independent librarians” were being harassed, intimidated and physically harmed because they circulated books banned in Cuba. (Neugebauer 2003)

In March of 2003 the Cuban government arrested and tried over 75 people described as dissidents, including human rights activists, independent journalists, and directors of
“independent libraries,” all of whom were sentenced to long prison terms. A debate ensued about whether the ALA should publicly demand that the Cuban government release the jailed “independent librarians.” In June of 2003 the ALA issued a resolution, *ALA Council Document 18.5*, urging the Cuban government to respect the rights of individuals to freedom of expression and access to information, and to eliminate any policies that infringe on those rights. Further the resolution urged the U.S. government to eliminate any existing policies, including the embargo, that limit the ability of the people of Cuba to access information, and that inhibit professional exchange between the U.S. and Cuba. Finally, the resolution reaffirmed the ALA’s relationship with the Cuban Library Association as a means of supporting the ongoing development of Cuban libraries and librarians, and called for further investigation by the ALA and the IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) of the role of “independent libraries” in Cuba. (Berry 2003) The resolution did not, as some had hoped it would, demand the release of the jailed “independent librarians.”

The ALA had good reason for not succumbing to the pressure by *Friends of Cuban Libraries* and others to demand the release of the imprisoned “independent librarians,” as they had evidence that the “independent librarians” are not the champions of intellectual freedom they are purported to be. Rather, they are the agents of a dissident movement within Cuba that has its leadership, financial support, and media operations outside the country. (Neugebauer 2003) Rhonda Neugebauer, a bibliographer and specialist in Latin American studies, did extensive research on “independent libraries” with Larry Oberg, a librarian at Willamette University. They visited more than a dozen “independent libraries” in Cuba over a two year period beginning in 2000, and learned that what the “Friends of Cuban Libraries” campaign identified as a “force for intellectual freedom” was actually part of a U.S. foreign
policy strategy that advocates “opening civil society” in Cuba through the funding of
dissident groups. (Neugebauer, 2003) The goal of such activity is the destabilization of the
Cuban government and ultimately a regime change.

What Neugebauer and Oberg found when they visited the “independent libraries” was that
they consisted of a few shelves of books in private residences, and that most of the titles
tended to be typical of what is owned by many Cubans and Cuban libraries. However, the
“independent libraries” also had a small number and seemingly growing collection of
publications from anti-Castro groups and from Cubanet.org, the virtual sponsor of what has
been designated as the “Independent Library Project” by the U.S. Department of State.
(Neugebauer 2003) Neugebauer and Oberg also confirmed that the “librarians” were visited
regularly by personnel from the U.S. Interests Section, the highest level of U.S diplomatic
representation in Cuba, who dropped off packages and money on a regular basis. When
Neugebauer asked a “librarian” what the money was for, the response was, “For services
rendered.” (Neugebauer, 2003, p. 31)

During their visits with the “librarians”, Neugebauer and Oberg asked about the accounts
of repression, intimidation and confiscation of materials widely reported in the U.S. on
library listservs by The Friends of Cuban Libraries. None of the ‘librarians” corroborated the
charges written about in the Friends of Cuban Libraries press releases. In fact, Neugebauer
and Oberg found that no “independent librarians” had served jail time for library activities.
Rather, any incarceration of “librarians” had been a consequence of their work organizing
political operations directed from abroad, which is illegal in Cuba, or the result of engaging
in other illegal activities.
In October of 2003 the ALA’s International Relations and Intellectual Freedom Committees established a six-member task force to assess the situation regarding Cuba’s libraries and “independent libraries,” and the jailing of dissidents in the spring of 2003. The findings by the committee of IRC and IFC members corroborated those of Neugebauer and Oberg, and the committee reported that the “independent librarians” who had been incarcerated had been accused and convicted of collaborating with U.S. diplomats to undermine the state, and of receiving American government funds. (Berry 2003)

The campaign by *The Friends of Cuban Libraries* on behalf of the “Independent Library Project,” though politically motivated and designed to mislead, may in the end serve the libraries and librarians of Cuba. The actions of Robert Kent and other members of the organization precipitated a search for truth by the international library community, which brought its members and Cuban librarians and scholars together. The exchange that resulted appears to have caused a renewed commitment of support for the libraries and librarians of Cuba by the library community beyond its borders.
References


