

## **Challenges and Changes in US Embassy Libraries**

The original version of this paper by Wendy A. Simmons, IRO, US Embassy, Bangkok, Thailand, was first published in *Advances in Librarianship*, vol. 29, Elsevier, 2005. The paper was abridged by Barbara Conaty, IRO, Washington, DC, in January, 2009.

### **I. Introduction**

US relations with other peoples of the world was coined “public diplomacy” by the Kennedy administration. Since the terror attacks of 9/11, the American public has become more aware of the image of the US overseas. In the analysis that took place after the attacks, criticisms were leveled at our government’s failure to conduct effective public diplomacy. This paper briefly examines the role libraries can play against terror and in providing accurate information about the USA to counteract extremist views.

In foreign countries, US embassy libraries or Information Resource Centers (IRCs) provide access to current and authoritative information about the US. To a limited degree, this service mirrors what Americans take for granted at home: well-stocked libraries to support communities of every sort and to provide a foundation for democracy.

IRCs provide a service that is a unique in a mission’s profile. IRCs respond to queries for information needed for work, professional, or personal goals. It is the creativity and dedication of the IRC staff, adapting to change and making the best use of resources, that makes the program successful. IRC staff use electronic and print resources to answer complex queries and up-to-date technologies to distribute information. They prepare outreach products that are highly regarded by host country users.

US embassy libraries have had their critics over the years. Conservatives accused the libraries of the United States Information Service (USIS), the overseas name for the United States Information Agency (USIA), of harboring materials in their collections that did not properly support the policy viewpoint of the administration particularly during the Cold War. Academics complained that USIS libraries in the 1960s in India had bland collections. On the left, the libraries were criticized as propaganda tools for US imperialist policies overseas.

The reality is more benign. According to the Foreign Affairs Manual (10FAM360), the primary purpose of IRCs is “to direct timely, authoritative information to targeted foreign audiences in support of US policy goals. IRCs also serve as a resource for selected host country contacts, who use a variety of reference services within the IRC (e.g., automated catalog systems, supervised Internet access, print collections, and online services) to find information about the United States, its policies and values.”

In a closed society, the IRC may be a refuge where readers have free and open access to a diversity of opinion. In developing countries, an IRC may be the only or one of few locations that provide access to current information, in print and electronically.

### **II. Libraries in the US Department of State**

The network of more than 180 IRCs forms one of the largest networks of US libraries. IRCs were established to provide citizens in each country with authoritative, balanced,

current information on US politics, government, law, economics, society, culture and the arts. Each IRC responds to local conditions, local needs, and local expectations within local capabilities, while at the same time conforming to State Department initiatives and goals.

IRC staffers are hired as permanent employees of a US embassy or consulate. They are usually trained and experienced English-speaking librarians, but in countries without formal library education, the embassy hires qualified people in related disciplines with English language abilities and provides on-the-job training. The Public Affairs Officer (PAO) who is assigned to the country for several years directs all the public diplomacy activities and supervises the library. The PAO and the local staff are assisted and counseled by a small corps of professional American librarians who are Foreign Service officers specializing in library work, the Information Resource Officers (IROs).

IROs live in countries that are regional hubs and advise from four and 12 countries in a region, depending on the size of the program and the ease of travel. IROs visit each country about twice a year to train IRC staff, and assist with administrative and personnel issues. They may take a role in public programming during their regional visits. IROs conduct training workshops.

IRC staffers integrate their work with their cultural affairs and press office colleagues. Cultural sections engage a variety of local audiences by organizing tours of US speakers, administering educational exchange programs, nominating local professionals for visitor programs to the US, holding art exhibits, musical tours, and much more. Press sections work with local and international media to inform the public about official US activities and policies.

In Washington, the Bureaus of International Information Programs (IIP) and Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) assist public diplomacy programs in US embassies through products and services. Day-to-day operations are funded through public diplomacy sections in each regional bureau of the State Department. IRC funding in each country is part of the general budget for public diplomacy operations.

IRC staffers make heavy use of technology and are usually among the most progressive and innovative professionals in their country. In many developing countries US embassy librarians are far ahead of their local counterparts in all aspects of using information technology. Internet is still unavailable in poor countries, even at the professional level. In this context, US embassy librarians are models of sound library practice to their colleagues.

Modern American library practice goes beyond the use of information technology. American librarians' standards for high quality service, for open access to shelves and resources, for development of programs, and for proactive marketing of library services are also aspects of US library training and practice which are not common to many countries.

### **III. Early History**

The State Department's Office of War Information established 28 libraries as well as press operations and cultural exchange programs during World War II. USIA was established in the Eisenhower Administration by consolidating the Division of Cultural Cooperation, the International Information Division and the Central Translation Bureau of

the State Department into one operation. Part of the legislation establishing USIA was a section called Smith-Mundt which forbids dissemination of information by USIA to domestic audiences to safeguard against the government propagandizing its citizens.

USIA attracted many talented journalists, academics, and artists to join the US Foreign Service, especially under the tenure of Edward R. Murrow during the Kennedy Administration. They were inspired by his phrase, "Telling America's Story to the World" and his concept that reaching across "the last three feet" to make person-to-person contact is the greatest challenge of public diplomacy.

Up to the 1980s, embassy libraries generally grew and expanded around the world in the context of the Cold War. In European countries with long-standing, mature diplomatic relations with the US, embassy libraries offered readers modest but good collections on the US, suitable for university-level readers doing serious research on American topics. The use of American fee-paid databases and the introduction of library automation software occurred more or less at the same time in embassy libraries as in other libraries of the developed world. Internet use naturally followed from earlier use of information technology.

Through the 1950s, 1960s and into the 1970s, multiple libraries in major cities in many countries were established as part of USIS operations. In Latin America, Germany and elsewhere, USIS officers often worked closely with a network of local institutions, loosely called binational centers that taught English and/or served as American cultural centers. These centers had libraries that received support from USIS librarians and donations of American books and periodicals.

In the developing world, in countries with friendly relations to the US, embassy libraries were often model public libraries catering to all but particularly favored by secondary school and university students. The concept of reaching the successor generation was a common theme in USIS library services. Library staff was trained by IROs to use US resources and appreciate US theories of reference services and open access to library shelves. Many developing countries could not afford to provide such services. USIS libraries frequently offered the most up-to-date source of information available in the country.

Congress funded the US embassy library program. Although the relationship was mostly straightforward, there have been occasional rocky moments. The definition of balance in the collections was tested during the McCarthy era when USIS libraries in Europe were accused of having books in their collections that were not sufficiently supportive of US policy in the Cold War or that even supported Communism. President Eisenhower may be the only US president ever to wade into a debate on the content of USIS libraries, joining in squarely on the side of holding a variety of informative and responsible points of view in balanced collections.

USIS libraries suffered as a result of their open, public access services. As the most visible official American presence in many countries, whenever local populations were upset with US policy, the libraries were easy targets of anger. From 1947 to 1964, 75 incidents took place in 33 countries around the globe. In Jakarta and Surabaya, Indonesia, USIS libraries were sacked and books burned by angry students in 1964. In 1984, 73 students peacefully occupied the USIS library in Kwangju, South Korea for five days. A bomb damaged the USIS library in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1952. Students

attacked the USIS library in Accra, Ghana in 1965 to protest US policy in the Congo and Southeast Asia. According to a retired Foreign Service Officer, USIS workers in that era joked that their library was just a stone's throw away from the local university.

Over the years, USIS libraries have had a major impact on the library communities in many countries. USIS Singapore established that country's first free public library in 1950. An IRO introduced CD-ROM technology to many Central American countries. The USIS library in Ecuador played an influential role in upgrading the quality of library education in that country in the late 1980s through the establishment of a professional library education curriculum. USIS libraries of Germany developed a variety of sophisticated business information products in the mid-1990s.

From 1987 to 1998, USIA developed the Library Fellow Program for librarians with the American Library Association. American librarians went overseas to work in local institutions and foreign librarians came to the US for periods of three to nine months. The program was extremely popular and the USIA was criticized when the program ceased.

#### **IV. The Recent Past**

A great shock to the US embassy library program was the passage of the Stark Amendment. At the height of the 1980s and early 1990s when local governments were downsizing libraries due to lack of funds, Congressman Pete Stark (R-CA) criticized the generous funding of USIS libraries in affluent member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The 102nd Congress agreed and in 1992 cut USIA's budget by \$15.2 million, specifically reducing the funding for embassy libraries in Western Europe, Japan and Canada. Staff was laid off and a number of USIS libraries closed.

Overall, the 1990s saw USIA's budget cut by almost one third. Even operations in developing countries, which were not the targets of the Stark Amendment, saw staffing and budgets under severe threat. In countries that had multiple libraries in different cities, usually one library or IRC was left open—the one within the US embassy. This facility was also under pressure to downsize due to budgetary restrictions.

While Public Affairs Sections in embassies serving the new countries followed the new minimalist model for IRCs, some embassies with established libraries maintained open libraries in separate buildings called American Cultural Centers. Due to funding problems, US consulates in Western European countries were also cut drastically or closed entirely. US diplomatic missions in other countries, specifically public diplomacy sections and libraries throughout Africa and Asia, were also curtailed or closed.

Collections shrank and focused more on bilateral issues with each country. IRC collection formats and services now included electronic resources to provide proactive and significant research within as well as beyond US missions. Materials on US literature, society, and culture were withdrawn and donated to local libraries. A transformation to the Information Resource Center concept as developed by local staffs and IROs took hold.

In Latin America, American Cultural Center closings often involved turning many assets, including library collections, over to the binational centers and thereafter ties to them

dwindled. Patrons around the world lamented the closing of the USIS libraries in their countries.

Many IRC staff members embraced the change. Innovative IRC librarians often led their USIS colleagues in the use of information technology, and frequently established the first Web presence for the embassy on the Internet. The IRCs produced current awareness services, in print and online, which were highly regarded by the local library community, academics and researchers. Proactive outreach and reaching within the US Mission to sections outside of USIS became a new mantra. In 1999, the USIA was merged into the State Department.

The events of 9/11 that stunned the world affected public diplomacy operations. Many writers now lament the cuts to these operations, especially library closings. A new program of establishing partnerships with local institutions that agree to receive a collection on the US and Internet-connected computers in exchange for use of the facility and staff to help host public diplomacy programs, especially outside capital cities, is called American Corners. Establishing these Corners is a high priority for many Public Affairs Officers around the world. There are now about 400 such partnerships operating worldwide particularly where the local Information Society is not yet well developed.

## **V. Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP)**

IIP began in the 1960s as a bureau of USIA responsible for a newswire operation provided to embassy missions overseas. During the final years of USIA, it became a laboratory for the "Reinvention of Government" program directed by Vice President Gore during the second term of the Clinton Administration. The reorganization was undertaken to address the call for smaller budgets and more products, for flattening the hierarchy, and getting maximum return from technology investments. Among the changes was a new "home" for the IRO corps and IRC support services, from the education and cultural side of the USIA house, to the I Bureau, home of press and information programs.

IROs in Washington and overseas landed in the new IIP Bureau, distributed among geographical units along with an office called IIP/IR intended to set policy and serve IROs and IRCs in the worldwide program. Of particular importance to IRC operations are products provided by IIP, including funding for translations, print and online publications, electronic journals, an information portal website now called America.gov, and an article alert service. IIP/IR supports IRCs worldwide through collection development assistance, tracking, reporting and record keeping for IRCs, and worldwide contracts with database vendors.

IROs developed an unusual product in the late 1990s specifically to alleviate the resource gap caused by closing down of USIS libraries. A CD-ROM called *InfoUSA* was developed for use in IRCs and is now in its second edition with a print run of 250,000 copies. *InfoUSA* has extensive, full-text documentation on all aspects of US domestic issues. It is widely donated to media, educational institutions, and other contacts. It has been loaded on hundreds of university library network servers around the world.

The IROs resident in Washington also develop training programs for IRC staff and for IROs. As an ad hoc team, they administer the travel budgets of IROs worldwide and insure that IRCs are conforming to State Department policy and guidelines in all aspects

of their operations. The IROs in Washington are routinely requested by other sections of the State Department, the Executive Branch and Congress, to report on IRC effectiveness, activities and often are called upon to justify the IRC program.

## **VI. Conclusions**

The challenge for IRCs is to stay ahead of the curve by analyzing and anticipating future needs of the Department of State and trends in US public diplomacy and by making the best use of the tools available, both technological and managerial, from American librarianship. If past is prologue, the IRCs will perform well, as long as resources are not again drastically reduced. Americans can be assured that they are well served by a community of dedicated professionals who represent the profession and the country in all corners of the globe.

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