

Librarians and Peace¹

by Peter Johan Lor*

Libraries need peace. They originated in settled, peaceful societies; when peace is broken, libraries are threatened. In recent years we have unfortunately seen this demonstrated all too often. Librarians have long been associated with peace movements and organisations devoted to making peace. The question arises: can librarians contribute to preserving and making peace?

A desire to harness the world's scientific knowledge in the furtherance of world peace was a major motive for various late 19th century internationalist initiatives, such as the invention of universal languages (several dozen, of which Esperanto is probably the best known survivor) and the creation of universal bibliographies. The most significant of these was the *Répertoire bibliographique universel* established by two Belgian lawyers, Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine, in 1895. Both Otlet and La Fontaine were deeply

committed to promoting world peace; in fact La Fontaine, a Belgian senator, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1913. The *Répertoire* was but one of several other internationalist components accommodated in their Palais Mondial, later named the Mundaneum, in Brussels. The development of documentation and international librarianship was closely associated with the striving for world peace (Rayward, 2003² 2012³).

Later, after two disastrous world wars, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), founded with the primary motive of promoting peace, embraced libraries as a means to this end. The belief that libraries can contribute significantly to peace underlies the intensive involvement in libraries by UNESCO in its first decade. In UNESCO's first major statement on libraries, the UNESCO *public library manifesto* (UNESCO, 1949)ⁱⁱⁱ the role of libraries in constructing "the defences of peace" is emphasised:

[UNESCO's] aim is to promote peace and social and spiritual welfare by working through the minds of men. The creative power of UNESCO is the force of knowledge and international understanding.

This manifesto, by describing the potentialities of the public library, proclaims UNESCO's belief in the public library as a living force for popular education and for the growth of international understanding, and thereby for the promotion of peace.

Have we lived up to this ideal? I believe that we have contributed, but that we could do much more. To understand what our role might be, we need to understand what peace is. Different dimensions of the concept of peace are expressed by three words in the Roman and Judaeo-Christian traditions. The Latin *pax* refers to a juridical concept, in which conflict is avoided, resolved or suppressed by a legitimate authority. In this concept peace is ensured by maintaining in good condition



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the boundaries that enable people and nations to pursue and protect their separate respective interests. The Greek εἰρήνη (eirēnē) refers to peace based on equitable ethical norms. It implies a sense of community and, if we project it to a world-wide scale, a spirit of tolerance and international solidarity. Going back yet further, the Hebrew שָׁלוֹם (*shalom*) refers to peace as a sense of well-being and spiritual wholeness (Chatfield, 1986)^{iv}. Projected to a world-wide scale this might translate into an awareness of our common humanity, and of humanity's place in the natural world.

We also need to distinguish between “negative” and “positive” peace. Negative peace is the absence of war and direct physical violence. Positive peace refers to a situation where conditions conducive to lasting peace, such as social justice and harmony, are cultivated (Kriesberg, 2000)^v. A further useful distinction is that between a static concept of peace as a state (a condition) and a dynamic concept of peace as a process, or processes. Here we think of the processes of cultivating peace (preventing the emergence of destructive conflicts), making peace (de-escalating and resolving conflicts), and keeping and restoring peace (after conflict has ended).

If we want to work for positive and sustainable peace, we need to see peace as work in progress. Peace is not limited to the absence of war, but concerns itself with such matters as justice, human dignity and well-being, environmental justice, and sustainability. These transcend the boundaries of the nation state. In a time of globalisation peace-building cannot be confined to national boundaries. There can be no lasting international peace if peace is absent from individual states or from regions and localities within states. Local to global conditions form a continuum; perturbations at the local level can and do ripple across national boundaries, with global repercussions.

All this leads to the realisation that peace-building is not simply about preventing and ending conflict, but about creating conditions that are conducive to peace. This has important implications for the role of librarians. I suggest that we can distinguish seven roles for librarians: informing, promoting, educating, creating resources, empowering, healing and advocating. Each requires an article to itself. Here I outline them roughly in an order of increasing engagement or commitment on the part of the librarian.

Informing is an accepted role of librarians. We provide information-bearing materials of various kinds, including networked digital resources which we make available through free public access to the internet. Through our collections we can inform our clientele about others and about peace. It has been widely assumed that the more we know about *other people* – other groups, communities, peoples, nations – the better we will understand them, and that such understanding will generate tolerance and thereby peaceful relations. This involves a lot of assumptions, which are not necessarily valid. For one thing, a great deal of misinformation is conveyed in books and other media. Even well-intended publications about other communities and nations, by portraying them as cute, quaint, and exotic, tend to emphasise their “otherness”. I don't know how many readers of *Focus* remember the “twins” series by Lucy Fitch Perkins, published in the first three decades of the 20th century, and still present in children's libraries when I was a child in the 1950s. Each book featured a set of twins from the country in question: the Dutch twins, the Eskimo twins, the Japanese twins, and so forth. These were intended to convey geographical information and at the same time foster a spirit of international goodwill.² I remember the peculiar feelings which *The Dutch Twins* evoked in me, a little immigrant fresh from Holland, when I read it. I did not recognise myself at all in the quaintly dressed

children depicted there. Arthur Mee's *Children's encyclopaedia* evoked a similar confusion, which at the time I could not put into words.

Selection of library materials calls for cultural sensitivity and efforts are called for to find materials which emphasise our shared humanity rather than our differences. The topic of multicultural librarianship is too vast to broach here, but it is highly relevant at this time when large numbers of dispossessed and traumatised people are on the move. We need to reach out to the migrants, especially children, by providing materials in their own languages. *The Ideas Box*,³ (see *Issue 46 No. 2, p. 74 of Focus on International Library and Information Work July 2015. Ed.*) developed by *Bibliothèques Sans Frontières* (Libraries without Borders) and distributed in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) sets a fine example of services to refugees. We also need to provide our communities with up-to-date and credible information about the migrants and why they are arriving.

In addition to informing about others, librarians can *inform about peace*, for example about the origins, causes, and consequences of war and conflict, peace processes, and preconditions for peace. Books and media about war and conflict, both fiction and non-fiction, are popular among some readers. Materials which emphasise the adventurous aspect of violent conflict, glorify war and present the perspective of only one side in the conflict will not contribute to understanding and tolerance. War and conflict have given rise to some very fine literature. The best of such literature will not gloss over the inhumanity and horror of war, or deny the humanity of participants on both sides. It is important not to paper over conflicting beliefs and attitudes, injustices and conflict. To build peace, we need to understand the roots of conflict. Finding suitable, relevant materials poses a challenge

to selectors.

Promoting is also an accepted role of librarians. Simply acquiring materials and making them accessible is not enough. This also applies to materials relevant to peace. Book exhibitions and book talks are traditional library activities to encourage reading by community members about particular topics.

Educating: The next level of engagement is education. Educational interventions about the peace processes of building, making and restoring peace can be scheduled annually to celebrate the International Day of Peace (21 September). The library's website should be a medium for promoting peace-building resources and activities. International days can be organised to promote understanding of immigrant and refugee groups, but as mentioned earlier, care should be taken that the emphasis is not on their "otherness", but rather on our shared humanity.

Creating resources: Librarians mainly acquire materials that have been produced by other organisations, but in certain situations we also need to create materials where none exist, particularly in certain languages and for particular groups. At the local level, for example in South African townships racked by dissension and unrest, librarians can play a peace-building role by creating channels – as simple as a low-tech bulletin board – for the dissemination of information about local conditions and events: problems in the community, the existence of community groups and initiatives, and decisions by municipal authorities.

Empowering: The seeds of much conflict are to be found in ignorance, deprivation, inequality, and competition for scarce resources. It may well be that the most potent role of the library in promoting peace, is indirect: building stronger,

more resilient, more inclusive and more equitable communities. There are many ways in which libraries can support educational institutions and projects, community health agencies, literacy and numeracy programmes, developmental projects of community-based organisations and non-governmental organisations. It is important to develop the community's own capacity to create and disseminate content so that its voices can be heard, for example by promoting authorship and community publishing. Also important is promoting information and media literacy, through which community members are better empowered to participate in the political process. Participation is more likely than non-participation to lead to the peaceful resolution of problems.

*Healing:*⁴ Healing may be an unusual word to use in the context of library services, although bibliotherapy is by no means unknown in our profession. Many victims of war and violence have experienced horrific suffering, deprivation and loss. Many children spend years in refugee camps. Others, after a long and dangerous journey, find themselves in a strange country where everything is different, including their home, school, the weather, and the languages they hear spoken around them. There is great scope for libraries in affected areas to go beyond the conventional provision of books and media, for example by hosting or offering programmes of storytelling and group activities, with opportunities for self-expression through drawing, music, dance, and acting. Of course, this is not limited to services to people coming from somewhere else, as is illustrated by the work of the Lubuto Library Partnership with street children in Zambia.⁵

Advocating for peace: With notable exceptions – notably in relation to the freedom of access to information and “the right to read” – librarians tend to steer clear of community activism. This is

due to a long tradition of “neutrality”. But neutrality limits our role to “mending walls”, accepting and reinforcing barriers and inequality. Indeed, advocating for peace – breaking down walls of incomprehension and privilege – in conflict-ridden communities carries risks, but it can also position the library more centrally and sustainably in the community. Generally increasing the visibility of the library carries some risk, but it also increases the relevance of the library to the community (Lor, 2014)^{vi}.

The seven categories of roles that I have outlined can be placed on a continuum. At the one end the librarian is detached from the conflict, adopts a (supposedly) neutral position, and is concerned with general information provision. At the other end of the spectrum the librarian is committed, and takes on an activist role with particular attention to the context of the community that is served. This raises questions about our profession, for example about the education of library workers. Are we equipping library science students with some understanding of social conditions in the communities they will serve, of public administration, community politics, and the dynamics of conflict and peace? This is not merely a matter of knowledge. Are we producing librarians who *want* to work for peace? A responsibility lies on the LIS schools and on the library associations to empower the profession to contribute to peace-building.

I started by referring to internationalism and world peace. My conclusion takes me in the opposite direction, to the local level, the “coal face” where the librarian daily faces her/his community. Instead of pinning United Nations or UNESCO peace day posters to the library notice board or showing a video to inform the public about the need for peace and peace-making in general (which is undoubtedly a good thing to do), we see a librarian helping a specific individual or group with

practical issues of survival, coping, and development. These activities may not seem to be about peace at all, but because peace cannot be confined to national boundaries, librarians can contribute to international peace by working at the local level. In the words of Bob McKee (2002)^{vii} speaking in 2002 on the 40th anniversary of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library:

Across the world in all our nations and between our nations there is division, there is disadvantage, there is despair. Libraries and librarians will not, of themselves, achieve greater equality, reduce poverty, protect the environment, promote human rights, engender mutual respect between people of different views and backgrounds. But we can make our contribution – and it can be, I believe, a significant contribution.

In many unobtrusive, unglamorous but practical ways, committed and creative librarians can contribute to world peace.

References

ⁱFor background on Fitch Perkins see Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucy_Fitch_Perkins, accessed 2016-01-09.

²Libraries Without Borders, The Ideas Box, a portable multi-media kit for refugee and vulnerable populations, <http://www.librarieswithoutborders.org/index.php/news-and-events/lwb-news/item/291-the-ideas-box-a-portable-multi-media-kit-for-emergency-humanitarian-situations>, accessed 2016-01-09.

³I am indebted to my wife, Monika Lor, for suggesting this addition to my list of roles.

⁴For more on Lubuto, see <http://www.lubuto.org/lubutolibraries.html>, accessed 2016-01-30.

⁵For more on Lubuto, see <http://www.lubuto.org/lubutolibraries.html>, accessed 2016-01-30.

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^{vii}McKee, B. The role of the library in promoting peace. Presented at the Symposium: “The 40th anniversary of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library: Legacy of a Secretary-General, .” New York, 1 March 2002, Retrieved from https://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/dag/symposium_docs/mckee.pdf