



VENEZUELA'S NATIONAL LIBRARY AS THE NUCLEUS OF A
NATIONAL LIBRARY SYSTEM (IABNSB) IN THE 20TH CENTURY
AND ITS GRADUAL DISMANTLING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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A Prologue of Sorts

In late 2010, I prepared the following text about Venezuela's Instituto Autónomo Biblioteca Nacional y Servicios de Bibliotecas (IABNSB). I was deeply concerned about what I had heard, read and confirmed from various sources, regarding the way in which a once flourishing Library and Information System was being dismantled. I called then for the creation of a *Group of Friends of Venezuela's IABNSB*, consisting of concerned, qualified individuals and organisations the world over. This call has now become even more urgent.

The floods in or around Caracas between December 2010 and January 2011, their effects continuing into the present month of July, have made even more devastating the situation of the Venezuelan National Library, nucleus of the IABNSB library and information system. The same holds true for museums and other public institutions dedicated to the enjoyment and preservation of the country's heritage. They all face the peril of disappearing in their original format, depending on what other floods or unforeseen national tragedies come up!

Since December, and until the present time, President Chávez has deemed it fit to close parts of the National Library and the Alejandro Otero Contemporary Art Museum, among others, their collections frenziedly dislodged in order to shelter flood victims! President Chávez has had their permanent collections stored and makeshift homes are now lodged directly inside various State institutions (I enclose two articles appearing in the local press: one about the Simón Rodríguez Metropolitan Library, and one about the Museum; I supply my own translation of these two articles).

It was impossible to get photographs revealing the current state of the building formerly lodging IABNSB's information and technology area. If such photographs could be obtained, you might see the crude divisions fashioned with rags and other debris, and how their occupants idle away the time inside them, often resorting to drug or alcohol abuse while waiting for the government's promised housing, which is to be provided on some future, yet unspecified, date. Flood victims, or people claiming to be flood victims, are now living inside the Library and the Museum until further notice! The Theatre Alberto de la Paz and the cellar of the Presidential Palace at Miraflores also house flood victims. It has not been possible to ascertain the amount of national treasures 'in storage', and much less the conditions under which they are being stored. Confidential sources deem the number of books removed from the IABNSB alone to be much higher than the 11.000 quoted.

There is very little else to add. I urge you to read this, to become informed by any other means you possibly can, and to act. Flood victims have our sympathy, no doubt, but books and paintings should not become collateral damage, after they have survived the floods. A nation's human heritage should stay around for its generations to come.

Anabel Torres, Palma de Mallorca, 4th of July 2011

The Transformation of the National Library of Venezuela
Into the IABNSB in the 20TH Century
And its Gradual Dismantling in the 21ST Century
(Instituto Autónomo Biblioteca Nacional y Servicios de Bibliotecas)

The transformation of Venezuela's National Library (VNL) started in 1974, culminating in the creation and consolidation of the IABNSB (Instituto Autónomo Biblioteca Nacional y Servicios de Bibliotecas). It was a successful and far-reaching process, at the time recognised by UNESCO, IFLA and the Conference of National Library Directors. In Latin America, its model inspired and supported the hands-on transformation of other National Libraries. This chronicle provides reference points that will illustrate the extent to which Venezuela's once effective and comprehensive library and information system is being dismantled.

This chronicle is based on my own experience as Sub-Director of Colombia's National Library between 1983 and 1987, during which time I paid two visits to IABNSB, coming away a better-equipped person for my post; my M.A. thesis in Women and Development studies, at ISS in The Hague, dealing with Women, Information and IABNSB (1988), and information abstracted from official IABNSB reports, summarised with the help of Ms Virginia Betancourt Valverde, who directed the VNL between 1974 and 1998.

I have remained a personal friend of Ms. Betancourt. I write in awe of achievements that she catalysed in her country and that I witnessed personally, but flattery is not my purpose. I write this account, based on evidence anyone can confirm, because I am concerned about the grievous situation of libraries and information science in Venezuela. I am a writer and as a writer, this time I write a painful kind of prose, seeking awareness, solidarity and support for Venezuela's library system, and for the people it benefits or stops benefitting.

Virginia Betancourt was capable of rallying support from the State, private individuals, national and international organizations alike, in order to develop IABNSB. This was vital in order to carry out the huge task of creating a mature National Information System, which Venezuela did: the most modern, efficient, thorough and advanced Library and Information System of its kind, ever, in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Democracy returned to Venezuela in 1958, with the overthrow of military dictator Pérez Jimenez, but only in 1974 did the country embark on the systematic recovery of its bibliographical and non-bibliographical stock, enhancing both its conservation and public access to it. A number of fortunate coincidences paved the way for the transformation of the VNL into the strong and independent body it became. Using spearhead librarianship, IABNSB, headed by the VNL, managed to collect the nation's bibliographical and non-

bibliographical stock, organize it and make it available. It centralized the acquisitions and technical processes, eliminating duplication and thus freeing librarians all over the country, so that they might become more active in the promotion of reading, and in developing community information services in their own local libraries.

Between 1974 and 1998, with Ms. Betancourt as IABNSB Director, the political will and passion for public service of a large and competent group of individuals allowed Venezuela's information system to flourish in nearly ideal conditions. It was no one-woman show, which, to my mind, is the most valuable aspect of the entire process, in a continent prone, as ours is, to personality cults, and which has always been affected, and continues to be affected, by the many reckless, individual decisions taken by unqualified leaders.

The process began in 1974, when the Ministry of Education approached President C.A. Pérez, who had recently been elected, about the alarming situation of the VNL, and the serious threats posed to its collection and services. President Pérez consulted an assorted group of experts, which included Ms. Betancourt, then Director of the Bank Book (Banco del Libro), which she had founded, and Architects Tomás Sanabria and Julián Ferri. The group recommended the construction of a new building in the vicinity of the National Pantheon. This proposal was accepted and the Public Works Ministry began to clear the area and draft the project. Building the new VNL 80.000 m² site began in January 1981 and continued throughout the Presidencies of Herrera Campins and Jaime Luschini. Its first services opened to the public in 1988.

In October 1974, President Pérez appointed Ms. Betancourt Director of the National Library, and she set about gathering a work force. The Book Bank, the Central University's School of Librarianship, the Librarian Association, the Ministry of Public Works and some independent experts were recruited to help draft a diagnosis of the old VNL building, books and services. The results of their evaluation were extremely discouraging.

By a fortunate coincidence, UNESCO's XVII General Assembly had launched the structural framework NATIS (*National Information Services*) in September 1974. NATIS was a model for the organization of scientific, humanistic and technological information, intended to help Third World countries maximise the national resources essential for their development, as well as to facilitate a free flow of the cultural, scientific and technological expertise being generated in the First World.

Based on the NATIS guidelines, in November 1974 Ms. Betancourt requested the President to appoint a *National Commission for the Establishment of a National Information System*, with representatives from all the country's documentation, library and archive services. Its aim was to draft objectives, policies and actions that would guarantee the creation of a national information system, and of the infrastructure needed.

Taking into account the Library's institutional fragility, the Foundation for the Rescue of Venezuela's Documentation (*Fundación para el Rescate del Acervo Documental de*

Venezuela. FUNRES) was created in 1975. Its first achievement was to purchase a stock of books and serial publications from the 20th Century. Its second achievement was the successful transfer of the knowledge and know-how needed to carry out the technical processing of all VNL stock.

In September 1976 and after intense consultations, both in Caracas and the provinces, the *National Commission* presented its *Final Report*. It highlighted the huge shortage of infrastructure needed to make scientific, humanistic and technical information available to the citizenry, a condition deemed essential to promote democracy and the country's modernization.

The report led to the creation of a permanent commission to serve as a consultative organ for the Executive Office, and responsible for the gradual introduction and maintenance of three interconnected information systems: a scientific and technical one, a humanistic one and an archival one. These were to be under the aegis of the Council for Scientific and Technical Development (CONICIT), the VNL and the General National Archive.

The computer system elected to process VNL stock was NOTIS, designed by North Western University in the U.S. The VNL had engaged the University to do a bibliographical search in the U.S., tracing the monographs and serial publications produced in, or about, Venezuela. The University designed a computer programme to relay the search results (it was found that the VNL already owned most of the material, but it had simply never been organised). NOTIS was deemed so useful, that North Western University was engaged to develop and maintain the system annually. Thus, Venezuela created, implemented and maintained the only wholly-computerized information system, from the acquisition process on, specifically designed for the needs and evolution of a National Library, a unique model that not even the Library of Congress could boast of at the time. IBM supported the innovation by donating a main-frame computer. These tools and the expertise to use them constituted a *quantum leap* for libraries and librarianship in Latin America.

Broad participation from many sectors in the process of transforming the VNL created a climate favourable to the approval, in 1977, of the *Law of the Autonomous National Library and Library Service Institute (Ley del Instituto Autónomo Biblioteca Nacional y de Servicios de Bibliotecas)* The Law was supported by 15 independent Senators, members of different political parties. The new Law declared that the main function of Venezuela's IABNSB, to be headed by the VNL, was *to be the repository for all bibliographical and non-bibliographical documentation of, or about, Venezuela, as a permanent source of information intended to support research about the country and peoples of Venezuela.*

VNL was also allocated new tasks, among which may be highlighted:

- Managing the *Collection of Serial Publications*, the *National Map Collection* and the *Audiovisual Archive of Venezuela*.
- Drafting technical guidelines and procedures for the various types of libraries in the country, and actively participating in the training of their human resources.
- Coordinating the creation of public-library and school-library service subsystems and assisting them.

In consequence, during the period of development and consolidation of the IABSNB, the infrastructure available to house books, newspapers and magazines was much improved. An Audiovisual Archive came into being, the first one of its kind in Latin America. It paid particular attention to the recording of oral history, in the provinces, and to interviewing experts in various areas: the arts, history, anthropology, etc. Innovative techniques to preserve documents were introduced.

The continuity of this complex and dynamic VNL was guaranteed through the strategy of creating and fostering alliances with State, private, national and international bodies, for example:

- The National Congress approved the request to modify the Law of Legal Deposit, so as to include audiovisual stock. This was the first case of its kind in the world.
- The Presidential Office issued a series of decrees facilitating the enforcement of the Law, throughout consecutive legislative periods.
- VNL received unconditional support from UNESCO, when appealing for technical assistance to the local United Nations Fund for Development Program (UNDP), by virtue of the fact that Venezuela was the first country in the world to adopt its NATIS model for the development of libraries and services. This support was provided by 30 specialists, whose substantial contribution facilitated the best possible planning of the VNL headquarters, as well as training of the geographers, photographers, musicians, film makers and graphic designers responsible, in turn, for creating and running the Audiovisual Archive and the Conservation Centre for Documentation.
- The responsibility for Caracas' seven public libraries was transferred from the National Institute of Culture and the Arts (Instituto Nacional de la Cultura y Bellas Artes INICIBA) to IABSNB, to modernise their infrastructure and services.

PRIORITIES BETWEEN 1974-1998

The first priority of IABNSB was the recovery and organization of, and access to, the national printed memory in all known formats. The search was channelled into a national campaign, also supported by individuals. The greatest achievements of this initiative were:

- Organization, for the first time since Venezuela was founded, of a comprehensive collection of official publications, retrieved from all State institutions.
- Transfer to the VNL of audiovisual stock scattered among all State institutions, including stock under threat of destruction, such as collections of documentary films, rare and curious maps, and musical scores from the colonial period.
- Acquisition of important libraries and archives, graphic works and photographs, donated by their authors or other individuals, and of musical scores, donated by musicians or their descendants.
- Adoption and adaptation of spearhead technology, which made it possible to install and update the technical processing of the VNL stock. These tools were shared by the country's 17 academic libraries. ABNSB created the country's *bibliographical and serial publication database*, consisting of over a million publications. Access to this database was guaranteed to all VNL users.
- Improvement of the libraries at Ministries, and the technical normalization of specialised libraries.
- Training and updating of staff, at all levels, inside the country and abroad, including VNL support for the creation of a Graduate Programme in Information Management at Simon Bolívar University, which was financed by UNFPA.

The second priority was the conservation of the VNL collections, implemented as follows:

- Special attention was allocated to the planning, design and construction of the new 80.000 m² IABNSB headquarters, the largest and most modern National Library Building in Hispanic America. Its storage rooms were fitted with the newest technology available, regulating light, humidity etc., in order to better preserve the stock. This was particularly important due to Caracas' hot and humid climate.
- Microfilming of XIX Century periodicals, the National Library's most valuable collection, and microfilming of the Official State Gazette collection, previously tracked down.

- Creation of the Document Conservation Centre (*Centro de conservación documental*), designated as the Regional Centre for the PAC-IFLA Programme in 1988, as part of IFLA's Preservation and Conservation Programme. In 1993 it became the focal centre for UNESCO's 'Memory of the World Programme'.

The third priority was the gradual establishment of a National System of Public Library Services (*Sistema Nacional de Servicios de Bibliotecas Públicas*). This decentralized centre, divided into one central public library and 22 State networks, was the first of its kind in Hispanic America. Its networks succeeded in covering 78% of the country's districts, with a total of 695 library services: the Simón Rodríguez Metropolitan Library in Caracas, 22 Central Public Libraries in the State capitals, 264 libraries, 297 reading rooms, 74 book loan points and 37 mobile services. Its creation was grounded on the State's obligation to defend the right of the population as a whole to have access to all sorts of printed information, with emphasis on the needs of specific sectors i.e. the visually impaired, indigenous peoples, etc. Public libraries also promoted reading among children and teenagers, supporting their growth as individuals and citizens.

IABNSB introduced a *Community Information Service* which operated inside the libraries, providing information about all sorts of procedures: how to take out a marriage license, make a property transaction, bury a dog, etc. This service was of great practical value and also supported deeper political transformations, by making citizens aware of their rights and empowering them to expect to be able to use them, or even demand them.

This overview of the years of activities prior to the approval of the IABNSB Law, and after this Law came into effect, demonstrates that the system facilitated public access to information and knowledge in an unprecedented fashion. It also shows that Venezuela's former presidential regimes, which were democratically elected and of various political tendencies, had the capacity to detect problems at the national level, and to choose ways of solving them – in consultation with specialists in libraries, documentation, preservation and information: specialists who were recruited locally, nationally and internationally. VNL staff was chosen according to their capacity, expertise and public vocation, and they were provided with the crucial tools of motivation, recognition and continued education and training in three chief areas: information, documentation and librarianship. These areas were undergoing quantitative and qualitative leaps throughout the world, with the advent of Information Technology, and at that time Venezuela did not take a back seat to any of these developments.

Last, but not least, the IABNSB had a tremendous effect on the development of library sciences and on the profession of librarians in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as on upgrading librarianship and its related professions. It supported the creation of the first

Latin American Postgraduate Programme in Information Management, as we have mentioned elsewhere. Its pilot conservation programme in Caracas – presently abolished – trained staff from countries all over South, Central America and the Caribbean, where collections were also at great peril, due to neglect, lack of expertise and climatic conditions.

The VNL was able to change from being an opaque and rather useless institution, into becoming a dynamic, multi-site service, just as easily catering to the needs of its target users, i.e. researchers, specialists, historians, academics and politicians, as well as to those of the general public, through its Metropolitan Library, 22 public library networks and the rest of its specialized libraries. Its database was once directly linked to the Supreme Court of Justice and to 16 universities and research centres, extending IABNSB's scope and demonstrating, in a practical way, the usefulness of providing information and documentation to a broad spectrum of population sectors.

Although Venezuela's elite had had little awareness about the indispensable role of information services in national development, between 1974 and 1998 the VNL enjoyed a steady, well-charted development. Its library practices were adopted once they were first thoroughly tested out by the *Banco del Libro*, and only then were they implemented in public and school libraries. Library practices from specialized First World libraries were also adopted after being examined, if and when they were found suitable.

Initially, the magnitude of the task that the 1977 Law allocated to IABNSB was incompatible with the weak infrastructure of the VNL, its poor initial collection and the lack of resources to undertake its overhaul. But two significant factors – its broad legal mandate and the fact that IABNSB rallied the political will of three successive governments between 1974 and 1998, guaranteeing its continuity – allowed IABNSB to fulfil many of its commitments. To put it very plainly, in 25 years Venezuela's library and information system became thoroughly but also comfortably embedded into the end of the Twentieth Century.

PRESENT STATE OF VNL AND IABNSB IN VENEZUELA

The present regime has denied the VNL its former rank as an independent body, thus making it impossible for the Library to obtain additional resources by closing agreements with third parties, both at national and international levels, as it so successfully did before. Given the traditional lack of resources for culture and education in developing lands, these agreements were the only way to guarantee the harmonious development of the Library's stock and services, as the IABNSB system became more and more complex and it was necessary to remain abreast of the knowledge and know-how generated during the last five decades, find ways to preserve these and make them available to the public.

The VNL has now been forced to abandon its role as the normative and coordinating nucleus of a National System of Library Services, one of its greatest achievements of all. Its database, once enormous, no longer exists, and the Library is not authorised at present to chart the course of IABNSB's development. It is no longer allowed to make use of the knowledge and know-how that once formed its identity and its rightful mandate.

The VNL no longer functions under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, nor was it able to keep the direct link it had gradually forged with the Presidential Office's Planning Division. It has been transferred to the recently created Ministry of Culture, which is politicized and in disarray. This Ministry has drastically reduced the VNL budget. The VNL's 80.000 m² headquarters, designed by Tomás Sanabria, recipient of the *National Architecture Award*, has been modified without his consent. Currently, besides the flood refugees mentioned, part of its structure houses the State television station. Another building, formerly owned by the VNL and located in *La Trinidad* industrial zone, in Caracas, has been converted into the National Centre for the Record Industry – whose products remain yet to be heard.

The National Library of Venezuela's core collections, which are one of a kind in the country, as is the case of any National Library in the world, are at serious risk, due to the fact that the climatic conditions essential to store and preserve them are not being met. The Conservation Centre is no longer run by qualified human resources, its laboratory has been shut down and it is not assigned funds to meet even its most basic material needs.

A most deplorable decision is that the National Library, intended to cater to researchers all over the world (or at least in countries with adequate National Libraries and Public Library services, where they do not overlap), has decided to 'democratically' open its doors to all types of public. This also implies the loan of unique manuscripts without due surveillance to anyone on demand, a horrifying scenario for any National Library (*El Nacional de Caracas* 2009)! Furthermore, it is obvious that if the VNL caters to users who, under normal circumstances, would seek the services of the main central library, local, school or university libraries, its scarce human and material resources are stretched far beyond the Library's capacity, making it impossible for it to continue fulfilling its 1977 mandate: "to be

the repository for all bibliographical and non-bibliographical documentation of, or about, Venezuela, as a permanent source of information intended to support research about the country and peoples of Venezuela”.

The VNL and the network of public libraries are currently forbidden to acquire foreign books or periodical publications. Many of the most recent books, magazines and specialised journals are simply not available, fostering the logical impoverishment of the general population, who simply cannot afford to import, or purchase, foreign books and periodicals.

Several public libraries throughout the country are currently in the process of being transformed into political activity centres. Their warehouses are being emptied in order to make room for the immense production of publications containing the new versions of history proposed by the regime. Unofficial but reliable information indicates that attendance by ordinary library users has dropped by 40%. In the present political context, however, it is not feasible to undertake open in-depth studies on reader needs, trends and satisfaction.

In Caracas, two public libraries once located in parks have been closed (the *Mariano Picón-Salas* and *Parque del Este* branches), as well as three neighbourhood reading rooms. Many titles about, or published between 1958 and 1998, including those of world-acclaimed authors, such as Rómulo Gallegos, have been withdrawn or are being withdrawn from circulation, then thrashed and sold as waste (private interview with a former President of IABNSB in the State of Miranda, who was dismissed and later sued by the State for speaking out in public denouncing this situation).

Venezuela's National Library is not complying with its international commitment to act as the training nucleus for the technical preservation of collections supported on paper. Thus conservation staff from the Andean Region, Central America and the Caribbean, continue to be left without sorely-needed training. It has cancelled its membership in the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), one of its recent Directors decrying it for being an 'imperialist organisation'.

The three directors succeeding Ms. Betancourt after she was pensioned in 1998 had belonged to IABNSB's top management. They were able to guarantee the continuity of VNL guidelines, policies and procedures, based on prevalent international standards, as far as it was possible. The greatest loss that the National Library has suffered is in its human capital, which had been trained to carry out the Library's special functions. This loss took place after Historian Aristides Medina Rubio was appointed Director of the National Library in 2003. From this time on, a co-management model with members of the Trade Union of Workers has been implemented (*Tal Cual*, Caracas 4/11/2003). These union members have been avid to occupy executive positions, although they lack the necessary knowledge or know-how (*El Nacional* reporters Milagros Socorro 24/7/2003; Ildemaro Torres 6/12/2003 and Antonio López Ortega 7/12/2003). All former managers and most qualified staff, trained in the running of the Conservation Centre, have been fired (VBV).

The deterioration of a once unique and highly efficient national library and information system with strong, working international links guaranteeing its global presence, increases gradually but surely, as the rule of ideology is superimposed on the rules of librarianship. As an example of this, the Director who followed Historian Medina Rubio, during what has generally become known as the *Period of terror*, was always accompanied by an armed group of civilians from *La Piedrita*, whose members acted as bodyguards to the Director, and simultaneously acted as Human Resource Managers!

All is not lost, by far. The VNL's legal foundations continue to exist, even if they are only partially complied with at the moment. Its infrastructure is standing, although its upkeep is severely restricted, and its destination, which was to house IABSNB, is partially still being honoured, although less and less since the collateral effects of the floods. The Library's guidelines and technical procedures are timidly being followed, and the Library's valuable collections have not been dismantled, although they are not being adequately preserved and may become damaged beyond repair. The few members of the staff from the former period maintain their service mystique and the staff. Prematurely retired, many would most likely be willing to return, on a voluntary basis, if recalled, in order to adequately train their substitutes before they left again.

Libraries are essential in the development of people's lives and careers, far beyond the mere politics of labour. The library and information resources of Venezuela should not be left to languish under the duress of the present regime's very authoritarian decisions, which are quite unauthorised and decidedly negative, in the light of librarianship, library practices and services. I propose the creation of an international group of volunteers and peers, *the Friends of the National Library of Venezuela*, whose objective would be to explore the state of the *Instituto Autónomo Biblioteca Nacional y Servicios de Bibliotecas* and support the restoration and/or broadening of its functions. I am appealing to public opinion and to competent cultural, educational and human rights organisations all over the world. It is crucial to find a way to fully diagnose the situation, and, based on the evidence compiled, to find the ensuing means to undertake international, diplomatic or lobbying actions as a pressure group, so that some damper, however symbolic it may seem, can be placed on the present regime's overzealous attempt to erode the VNL's public service roles.

I fully understand that this may be a politically-sensitive issue, but, once in a while, librarians and book lovers must move to the front-line urgently, leaving the comfort of our receptions desks, offices and sofas. I entreat your help because I believe in librarians and in libraries. I also believe that simply being a book reader, a book lover and a lover of people, qualifies me to raise this cry for help, even if I am not from Venezuela.

If ever there was a case for international solidarity, and for the rallying of any and all people dedicated to the uplifting, at times ungrateful, chore of caring about books, and caring about readers who will care about books, this is it. Although, fortunately, we are not, by any

means, witnessing the same *scale* of destruction, in essence we are witnessing the same *type* of persecution aimed against culture, education, information and knowledge, which characterised the waging of the Second World War. Seventy years ago, during Europe's darkest times, Europe's museums, libraries and centres of learning also needed the helping hands of many courageous and caring individuals to safeguard their book collections and other treasures. We, the people of the world, must also try to help safeguard Venezuela's printed and non-printed stock before it is too late!

Anabel Torres. Text updated in Palma de Mallorca, July 2011. An earlier version of this same text was presented to IFLA, at their headquarters in The Hague, on October 2010.