

The Rise and Demise of the United States Information Agency Libraries

Introduction

Cultural diplomacy is a mechanism nations use to disseminate information about their culture, people, heritage, and political ideologies around the world in order to increase understanding and solidarity, and ultimately to advance their national interests. The United States, like other nations, has always engaged in actions of cultural diplomacy, but began intensifying them programmatically after World War II in light of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. In 1953 the United States Information Agency (USIA) was established and eventually assumed responsibilities for television and radio broadcasts (Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Radio Marti), the Fulbright scholarships and other educational exchanges, foreign language publications about the United States, and American exhibits and participation in World Fairs. USIA also became the supervising agency for an existing nucleus of overseas libraries which eventually expanded into 160 foreign cities. By 1993 these libraries were visited by nearly six million people annually who used the 1.3 million books, 21,000 periodicals, and an online database as a resource center on American culture, history and politics, as well as recreational reading (Stoltz, 1993). But the agency was plagued by management challenges from its inception, and converging events in the early 1990s precipitated a major governmental review and overhaul of international operations, priorities, and activities. Programs sponsored by USIA and under their authority were drastically reduced and the libraries closed. The agency itself was abolished in 1999 under the Foreign Affairs and Restructuring Act, which folded its information and exchange functions (except broadcasts) into the State Department's Bureau of Public Affairs.

This paper will examine the historical development of this institution with a specific emphasis on the USIA library system. A pattern of challenges and conflicts facing the agency

including issues of censorship, changing leadership and policy directions, difficulties securing financial appropriations, external political circumstances, and “selling” itself and the value of its accomplishments emerges, which ultimately precipitated its demise. The structure of the institution within the theoretical model of W. Richard Scott in his book “Institutions and Organizations” is also discussed.

Overseas libraries prior to USIA

The first systemized venture by the United States into cultural diplomacy using a library-type institution was a group of seven reading rooms opened in various cities in Mexico during World War I by the Creel Committee on Public Information (CIP). These reading rooms operated from 1917-1919 as part of an effort to counteract German propaganda in the overall effort to “fight for the minds of men.” The operation also included classes in French, English, and bookkeeping for the local populace (Hausrath, 1981, pp 73-74). After the close of the war, however, the House of Representatives voted on a drastically reduced appropriation for the committee’s operations, and in June 1919 the CIP was abolished.

Bi-national libraries were established in several Latin American countries beginning with the Institute Cultural Argentino-Norteamericano in Buenos Aires in 1927. The centers were autonomous units offering a variety of cultural programs and usually included library lending services to their members. Beginning in 1941 they received some assistance from the State Department’s Office of Inter-American Affairs.

One of several agencies created by President Franklin Roosevelt to counteract the effects of German and Italian propaganda in Mexico and Latin America during World War II was the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA). Nelson Rockefeller, as head of CIAA, worked with the American Library Association (ALA) to open several cooperative libraries throughout the region, the first being the Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin in Mexico City in 1942. Other libraries in Nicaragua, Uruguay, and Argentina soon followed. The purposes of the Mexico City program were to promote friendly relations between the two

nations; provide publications and library materials about the United States to scholars throughout Mexico; to serve as a resource for American citizens living in Mexico; and to encourage and strengthen cultural and informational exchanges. In the process of reorganizing American libraries abroad after World War II, ALA ceded its management obligations of these facilities to the State Department.

By the time the United States officially entered World War II efforts were being made in the State Department to consolidate the various governmental information programs into one comprehensive agency. This became the Office of War Information (OWI) by presidential order, and prominent news commentator Elmer Davis was appointed director. OWI was authorized to “formulate and carry out, through the use of press, radio, motion picture, and other facilities, information programs designed to provide an intelligent understanding, at home and abroad, of the status and process of the war effort and of the war policies, activities, and aims of the U.S. government” (Manning, 2001, p. 268).

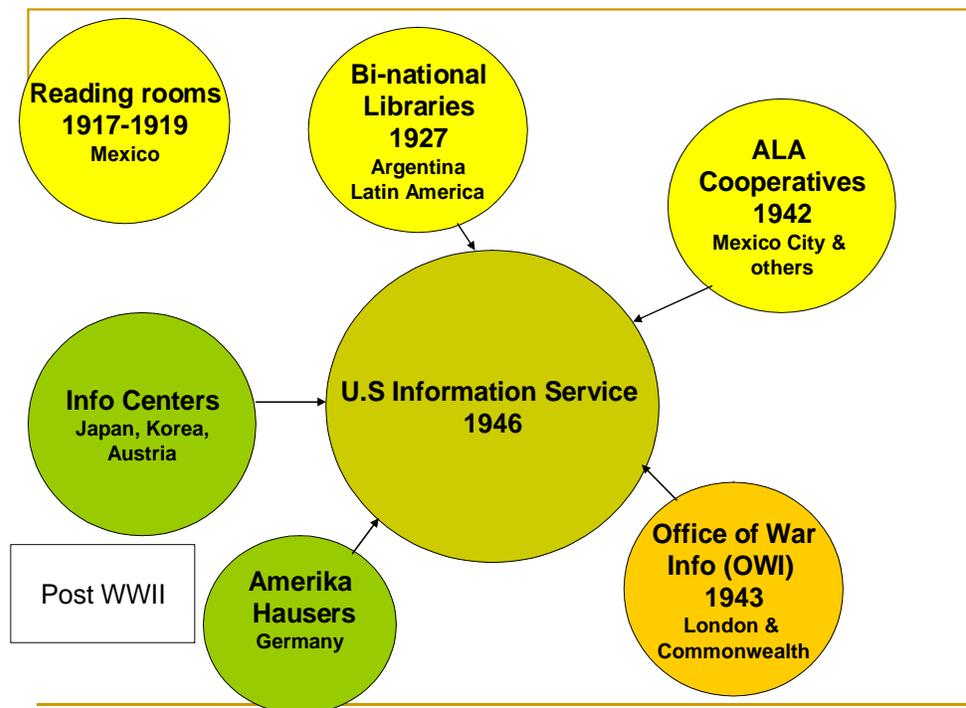
The first American governmental library outside the Western Hemisphere was opened through OWI in London in 1943, and subsequent libraries were quickly established in Sydney, Melbourne, Wellington, Johannesburg, Bombay, and Cairo. Chester S. Williams, the developer of the OWI library program later stated that “the original idea was *not* to plant *lending* libraries in foreign cities for direct service to general users. The aim was to provide small reference centers to help staffs of U.S. embassies and consulates interpret our country, and as a basic resource for local leaders to draw upon U.S. materials in communicating through their own media, both mass and specialized” (Hausrath, 1981, p. 77). This reflects the original mission for these libraries as described by the State Department “Bulletin” of October 3, 1942 which states, “They are not lending libraries for casual readers, nor are they in any sense propaganda centers or distributors of pamphlets. A small, highly selective library containing reference material produced in the U.S. provides information which can best reach the masses of people in an allied country through the media of the press, the radio and

educational institutions...” (Hausrath, 1981, p. 77). These were designed as reference libraries in contrast to the ALA cooperative institutions, which were modeled on the American public library operational system. Criticisms of the materials acquired in these centers mirror the confusion of the OWI library mission by congressmen, journalists and other leaders, who felt that government sponsored libraries should consist of America’s ‘best’ writing. They did not grasp that the resources were selected to meet the specific needs of a specialized clientele for problem-solving purposes rather than an exhibit of national literary or scholarly achievement.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, more branch libraries opened under the auspices the American military government in occupied territories. These included several ‘Amerika Hauser’ libraries throughout western Germany, and major centers in Japan, Korea, and Austria. By this time, OWI and other wartime information agencies had been abolished and all their activities supervised by the Interim International Information Service (IIIS) in the State Department. Figure 1 below shows the various overseas library programs that were consolidated into the post World War II United States Information Service.

President Truman and his staff recognized the need for the continued efforts of information programs as the effects of the Soviet Union’s ideological forces became more apparent. Who, where and how the programs should continue was the subject of several debates and reorganization plans. Senator Alexander Smith and Representative Karl Mundt created legislation in 1948, called the Smith-Mundt Act, which formed the base for following information programs. Assistant Secretaries of State William Benton and George V. Allen, and journalist Edward Barrett, were instrumental in formulating the philosophical foundations of a U.S. Information Service as ammunition on the “battlefield of ideologies” in postwar Europe. In the 1952 presidential campaign, this need was an issue of prominent discussion. Finally, on August 1, 1953 in the early months of President Eisenhower’s administration, the United States Information Agency (USIA) was established under Reorganization Plan No. 8.

Figure 1: Overseas library programs that became part of the U.S. Information Service.



Structure and Management of USIA

The United States Information Agency was thus created as an autonomous agency of the Executive Branch to be funded through legislative appropriations. Its director was a presidential appointee who reported back to the president through the National Security Council. The first director, Theodore C. Streibert, was well known in the broadcasting business for his tough and efficient management style, and mobilized all of the agency's programs to support its mission "to help achieve the foreign policy objectives of the United States by using the tools of information and persuasion to build understanding abroad of the United States, its institutions, culture and policies" (Hausrath, 1981, p. 81). Programs inherited by USIA from the agency's predecessors included Voice of America, 196 information centers and reading rooms in 53 countries and 34 binational centers for a total of 230 centers

in 75 countries. Later inclusions to USIA were cultural and education exchange programs, Fulbright Scholarships, and English and foreign language publications about the United States.

Within the agency in Washington DC, the director was joined by his administrative staff, the offices of Policy & Research; Inspector General; and Public Information, and the media services branches including broadcasting, information, motion picture and television, and press and publications. Six assistant directors were responsible for each major geographic region and the overseas operations and posts within them. Because of the extreme variations of circumstances and conditions between regions and countries, the USIA libraries and their mission activities within these countries had to reflect their respective staff resources and national interests, and thus each developed a unique countrywide approach. A public affairs officer (PAO) at each embassy directed the USIA activities, was responsible for the appropriate allocation of resources, and supervised the country library officer. Over a dozen regional library consultants provided advice and training, and were supervised in turn by a Library Program Staff of five to six field librarians. They were the planning and coordinating center for the library program. A cultural affairs officer, usually an early career position in the Foreign Service, was responsible for a local library. This officer was transferred from one country post to another every two to four years thus stymieing long term impact upon the library by individual actors.

Library collections

Beginning in 1948 under the Smith-Mundt Act, initial book selection criteria were outlined to include publications and works that provided either descriptions of the United States, examples of American achievements in humanities, natural & social sciences, or were consistent and supportive of U.S. foreign policy. As the Cold war intensified, the latter criteria became most influential.

Details of individual library collections varied post to post by the host country's economic situation, position within the American sphere of influence, relationship to the United States government, and internal politics and society over time. Nations who were rising out of the ashes just after World War II looked to the American libraries for information on practical applications such as the acquisition of skills or job qualifications, or supplementary reading material for studies and schooling that their own systems could not yet support. In the 1950's, many centers included children's collections and activities, while others were more like research centers for local political leaders, journalists, and students of American culture. Most libraries were open shelf and allowed free access to the local community like public libraries in the States. Some centers were English language only, but most carried translations of American works into local foreign languages. As populations recovered and developed socially, economically, and educationally, they were able to build and rely more on their own library institutions. Many regimes, of course, were opposed to the free exchange of ideas and information, and the USIA libraries had to adapt their country plans to meet these challenges as best as possible.

Historical developments: 1960-1999

Throughout the agency's existence its budget, prestige and influence waxed and waned with the various internal and external political developments. One particular highlight in its history however was when the Kennedy administration appointed Edward R. Murrow as USIA director. Murrow was by then a famous broadcaster and television personality who was well respected for his integrity and honesty, and is credited with increasing the self-confidence of the agency and its staff. He enjoyed an especially close relationship with President Kennedy, and though not an official member of his cabinet, did experience *de facto* Cabinet status.

In 1978 under President Carter USIA was combined with the State Department Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and renamed the United States Internal Communication

Agency (USICA). A new mission statement was crafted which declared its purpose was “to reduce the degree to which misperceptions and misunderstandings complicate relations between the US and other nations...that Americans have the opportunity to understand the histories, cultures, and problems of others, so that we can come to understand their hopes, perceptions, and aspirations” (Hausrath, 1981). This is an interesting contrast to the original mission that was formulated as Cold War tensions were on the rise. The post-Vietnam era statement reflects a desire for two way communication and dialog, rather than a one-way pushing of information from and about the United States.

By the 1990's, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and fall of the iron curtain, a new political environment appeared. There was the realization that the United States no longer had the need to expend so much economic and human capital on battling communist ideology. The emergence of online information systems and advanced communication technology made it easier to reach a much broader audience, and easier for the public to access government and other information from multiple entry points, including personal computers in their homes and workplaces. Developed nations were prospering economically and their citizens were less dependent on USIA institutions for library and supplementary educational services. Many within the U.S. government questioned the economic feasibility of maintaining the USIA libraries as physical institutions. Soon after the Clinton administration took office in 1993, a call was made for the ‘re-invention of government’ under the guidance of Vice President Al Gore. He proceeded with the National Performance Review which initiated actions designed to streamline and cut waste. Shortly afterwards, a number of USIA libraries were selected for closure and budgetary constrictions. Under the 1999 Foreign Affairs and Restructuring Act the United States Information Agency was abolished; most of its remaining programs were folded into the State Department’s Bureau of Public Affairs, and its libraries were either closed or restructured as Information Resource Centers whose primary mission was to serve and influence local political and cultural leaders, not the general public. This is

reflected in the agency's last mission statement from 1998: "To understand, inform and influence foreign publics in promotion of the national interest, to broaden the dialog between Americans and US institutions and their counterparts abroad, and to foster exchanges of students, professors, and diverse categories of citizens between the US and foreign societies" (United States State Department, 1999).

Example of a country library

The USIA library in Tel-Aviv opened its doors in 1949 one year after the State of Israel was established. The country was facing deep economic and social hardships because of the constant strain of war and the challenges of absorbing hundreds of thousands of immigrants from scores of countries. Books were scarce. The American center was the country's first free lending library and set a precedent and example of a modern open shelf public library. By 1990 it held about two thousand English language books with an emphasis on American literature, government, culture and travel. According to a report in the Jerusalem Post, "Knesset members use the library to research US laws and congressional records. Local ballet companies and theaters...leaf through its cultural offerings. Students research term papers, journalists use its New York Times Index, teachers bring in their classes to watch videos about life in America" (Fishkoff, 1995). Six local professional librarians and three support staff manned the facility. Israelis were greatly saddened when the Tel-Aviv center was closed to the public in December 1995 because of budget restrictions.

Censorship challenges: The McCarthy era

Even before USIA was created, precursor agencies and information programs had to grapple with censorship issues and the narrow or conflicting visions of various national leaders. They challenged the ideas of what material best reflected American values and society and which should therefore be collected and distributed through the various centers. As USIA was in the organizational process, the collections and collection policies of the

libraries being gathered into the agency came under the scrutiny and investigation of Senator Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy was chairman of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigation, and, among other things, charged that the State Department libraries contained some 30,000 communist books. His assistants Roy Cohn and David Schine were sent to a number of American libraries in Europe from which they removed some 300 volumes by authors suspected of communist sympathies. Librarians were appalled by the actions. In May 1953 a rumor was reported that some of the removed books that had been burned. This prompted a government directive that "books withdrawn...will not (repeat NOT) be destroyed, but stored pending further instructions" (Robbins, 2001, p. 30). The ensuing bedlam prompted alarm among the leadership of the American Library Association who feared that if such government interference in the overseas libraries continued unabated, the next logical step would be inquiry into U.S. libraries and their holdings. Actions and conferences were held which culminated in the ALA's statement titled 'The Freedom to Read.' President Eisenhower and others leaders expressed support for their position, and in the face of overwhelming opposition McCarthy was forced to retreat from his library inquiries. By July 1953 many of the banned books were restored to the information centers abroad as part of a new policy directive that was intended to end the confusion over which books and authors can and cannot be held in the overseas libraries.

Conflicts, challenges and Scott's model of institutions

Unfortunately, the USIA as an institution was plagued by conflicts throughout its existence. Subjected to every political whim and wind that crossed Washington, it could never maintain a satisfactory level of consistency or continuity of ideals and support at the highest levels. Even at its inception it faced "a 36 percent budget reduction in operating funds from fiscal 1953, requiring cuts in all activities...libraries were reduced from 184 in sixty-five countries to 158 in sixty-three countries..." (Henderson, 1969, p.54). In 1956, Arthur Larson was appointed as the agency's second director but was unpopular in Congress. Unable to

develop support for his leadership and programs, he resigned a year later leaving much animosity and ill-will. A report from the Advisory Commission on Information in February 1966 provides a summary of the agency's problems:

“From its inception, the information program faced difficult problems in management and organization, policy and program, facilities and construction, personnel and evaluation, and the evolution of its role in the government's structure. Compounding these problems have been the difficulty of establishing an adequate financial and appropriations base and the domestic political controversies concerning its activities which have periodically raged in Congress and in the press. A succession of six directors in the past 12 years – each with a different idea of the mission – did not provide continuity and stability to the Agency's direction and leadership...” (Henderson, 1969, p. 60).

In my opinion the difficulties and challenges the USIA libraries faced were characteristic in the extreme of the kinds of challenges all library and information institutions face. Many of these challenges centered on collection development and institutional control such as the questions:

- What material best supports American interests abroad?
- What best reflects American values?
- Shouldn't the collection reflect the diversity of the general population comprised of a multitude of opinions and values?
- What is the line between reflecting America “at her best” and propaganda?
- The agency is a government institution funded through legislative appropriations – should its materials be government approved? If so, who is the government? Who within the government has the right to sanction or ban material?
- Should materials that criticize and question the U.S. administration, official policies, and societal realities be permitted?
- Who is the primary target audience for the information and services?

Another major issue is the effective assessment of programs; how can influence or success be measured? As the former director of the USIA library in Tel-Aviv stated: “It's hard to show [Washington] how we ‘influence’ fifty schoolchildren who come in to watch a video of

'We Shall Overcome,' and much easier to say we've influenced the foreign policy of a particular decision-maker" (Fishkoff, 1995). How can administrators effectively justify their programs to their critics and those who appropriate the budget?

W. Richard Scott, in his book 'Institutions and Organizations' outlines three pillars of institutional functions: regulative, which emphasizes rule setting; normative, which provides moral influence and role-modeling; and cultural/cognitive, which promote and perpetuate the agreed practices of a social or institutional unit. The USIA libraries primary function fell into the third category of cultural/cognitive order. Even as the institutional mission statement evolved and changed to reflect the most current political climate, the goal of providing information in a multitude of formats about the United States, its ideologies, society, and culture remained consistent. Though critics often accused it of being an appendage of the government's propaganda machine, honest efforts to combat that role surfaced throughout its history. It did not fulfill any regulative function, and was obligated by federal regulations. In some ways, however, it did set a normative order, whether intentionally or not. For many countries, the USIA libraries set an example of a modern open-shelf library in which the free exchange of ideas and information was encouraged. While it is difficult to prove conclusively, this policy of providing a holistic treatment of information – including both positive and critical expressions of opinions and allowing the public unhindered access to it, may have been a powerful influence on the host countries as they developed their own library systems and modern societies.

Challenges of researching USIA libraries

Finding information about the USIA libraries has presented several challenges. The agency underwent a variety of name changes, which forces the use of creative logic when devising search strategies for catalog and database searching. There were a vast number of programs under the umbrella of the agency, and information on well-known entities like the

Voice of America and Fulbright Scholarship exchanges seem to be more abundant than the library program. And a wide variety of types of information sources had to be used because no one source was found to be inclusive enough or exhaustive. The sources listed below include newspaper, journal and encyclopedia articles, books and a website. Government reports and congressional hearings were also consulted but not used in this paper. USIA was responsible for a myriad of activities, of which their libraries were but one part. The impression created by the paucity of literature about them is that they were not considered a particularly important part by either policy makers or scholars.

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