

## **A pioneer of international librarianship: Guido Biagi and his vision of libraries cooperation**

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### **Abstract**

The idea of the international dimension of the profession has been originated since the beginning of Library Associations in 1876 in the United States and in 1877 in the United Kingdom. In the first phase of international librarianship, the international Conferences spread enthusiasm for a newly organised profession. Guido Biagi participated to some of these International Conferences and affirmed the vision of a library international profession. The paper explains his idea of the internationalisation, in which the cooperation of libraries is needed for document supply, bibliographic standards, preservation and other technical application areas, as photographic and phonographic reproduction of books. Biagi internationalisation idea has had a strong impact abroad, more than in Italy. The international librarianship idea is still based on the same motivations indicated by Biagi, but it is now more important in a global library world and is extended to innovation and education.

### **Introduction**

The debate if the library and information profession is an international profession is becoming more and more actual in a global world, where information and documentation are spread and diffused in every part of the world. However the idea of the international dimension of the profession has been originated since the beginning of it, when the modern library profession became organised by Library Associations in 1876 in the United States and in 1877 in the United Kingdom. In this first phase of international librarianship, the international Conferences spread enthusiasm for a newly organised profession. The participation to these International Conferences was important for sharing knowledge and experiences and also a tool for internationalising the profession. The program of the International Conferences was of always of international interest, especially focused on the presentation of the most important library topics.

In Europe International Conferences were held in London in 1877, in combination of the birth of UK Library Association and again in 1897 for celebrating the twentieth years of the British Library Association. An other International Conference was held in Paris in 1900 in coincidence with the Universal Exposition. International Conferences were held also in the United States: a World's Congress of Librarians was organised in Chicago in 1893 and in San Francisco in 1904, with a pre-Conference in Saint Louis. In the same period "*Library Journal*", the oldest professional journal, started the publication (1897); the Cutter cataloguing rules were developed (1876) and the Dewey decimal classification was diffused (1876). Dewey founded the first institution in the United States for the instruction of librarians in 1884: the "Columbia School of Library Economy". These events brought American librarianship at the forefront of the field and attracted the notice of many interested colleagues around the world. In 1900 ALA started the Committee for International Relations, which produced the first Guidelines for regulating relations between countries and institutions in 1947. It was not easy for European librarians to face the journey across the Atlantic Ocean, the delegation to American Conferences was

however representative. Guido Biagi was one of the first Italian librarian who participated to these International Conferences. He took part in the second International Librarians Congress held in London in 1897, in the one held in Paris in 1900 and in the one held in St. Louis in 1904. He was chosen by the Government as Italian representative, due to his knowledge of English language and for his great competencies and knowledge (Petrucciani 2002).

### **1. Guido Biagi**

Guido Biagi was born in Florence on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1855 and died in Florence on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1925. He began his career as librarian in 1880 at the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence, and over his life he was Director of some of the most important Italian libraries such as Biblioteca Marucelliana, Biblioteca Laurenziana and Biblioteca Riccardiana.

Biagi studied filology at the university, he was a student of the famous Bartoli, who taught the historical method. His education was also on the history of the book and publishing. Among his works we can remember *Indici delle voci di soggetto del Mare Magnum di Marucelli*, that was brought out during his direction of the Biblioteca Marucelliana and was published with an historical essay of Biagi himself; an another work, *Giunte e correzioni alla Bibliografia Dantesca di Colomb de Batines*, published in the series Sansoni (see facsimile 3 voll. with introduction by Stefano Zamponi and collaboration of Mauro Guerrini and Rossano De Laurentiis, Salerno editrice). Both works offer a completion and supplement for important bibliographic monuments of the past. He also founded the "*Rivista delle biblioteche e degli archivi*" that was his creature until his death in 1925. The journal outlived him just by one year. In fact, in 1926 a government review was published, "*Accademie e biblioteche d'Italia*", a sort of passing of the baton in order to confirm that Biagi and his activity of professional literature – with his journal and his works published also in other not specific journals such as *Il Marzocco*, *Nuova Antologia*, ect. - was of great importance for a reflection and growth of the professional community.

In the history of Italian librarianship, Biagi can be remembered for his precious ability to catch a novelty abroad and to take it to Italy very skillfully, at a level of a debate or press promotion.

He was the person that during his direction (as Prefetto) of the Biblioteca Marucelliana realized big changes for the institute as heating, re-organization of reading rooms and introduction of the first tape writing machines (around 1905, a discovery coming from America).

After the Italian union, Biagi had also a politic role for the first reforms in library field as advisor and later as Deputy-minister under Minister Coppino and Minister Martini.

Biagi cooperated with Sansoni, the known publisher, and, in order to internazionalize the profession, Biagi encouraged the translation of important foreign works for Sansoni. Biagi himself translated *On the Construction of Catalogues of Libraries and of a General Catalogue, and Their Publication By Means of Separate Stereotype Titles; With Rules and Exemples* (Jewett 1890), a Jewett's work. Then he promised to translate some Cutter's cataloguing rules but he never did it.

:: cfr. mio intervento in atti di convegno di Rovereto, "Navigare nei mari dell'umano sapere"

Moreover, Biagi was also co-founder of the Italian Bibliographic Society, that collected both librarians and scholars in order to promote bibliographic studies. However, the Italian Bibliographic Society was not able to gather all the Italian librarians. To have a society collecting all the librarians we had to wait 1926, where we had the constitution of the new General Direction of the Accademies and Libraries.

CULTURAL PROMOTE (Roxas 1976) that made him organize associations (the Leonardo da Vinci, with Orvieto Brothers) and conferences (Casa di Dante and Lectura Dantis) almost constantly (see: proposito Laura Cerasi, Firenze: l'Atene d'Italia, Angeli), in a period full of ideas and cultural proposals in Florence.

(De Gregori and Buttò 1999)

(Fornaciari 1925)

(Sorani 1925)

Photo taken from the *Almanacco dei bibliotecari italiani*, thanks to authorization of Fratelli Palombi, Rome



## ***2. The first vision of international librarianship***

Biagi proposed his idea about international librarianship at the International Congress in St. Louis exposition in 1904. Among the participants in this International Congress there were famous American librarians as Dewey, Cutter, Jesse, together with English and German librarians.

Guido Biagi was convinced of a library international profession and affirmed the first vision of international librarianship, which was based on libraries cooperation:

*One of the special characteristics of the library of the future will be co-operation, and internationalism applied to the division of labor.*

In his presentation "The library: its past and future" Biagi expressed his idea of the international cooperation libraries will need in the future for document supply, bibliographic standards, preservation and other technical areas.

### 2.1 Bibliographic standards

According to Biagi, the first goal of librarian cooperation is to promote knowledge of works and their connections. The objectives to achieve this goal include the sharing of bibliographic standards for cataloguing:

*In the library of the future, classified on the Decimal system, or Cutter's expansive, every section should contain a sheaf of cards on which should be collected, arranged, verified and even translated this ancient material, which may throw light on new studies and on new experiments; for the empirical methods of our forefathers, like tradition and legend, have a basis of truth which is not to be despised.*

.....

*We may already see premonitory symptoms of this in the "Catalogue of scientific literature" now being compiled by the Royal Society of London, in the Concilium Bibliographicum of Zurich, in the Institut de Bibliographic of Brussels, and in the card catalog printed and distributed by the Library of Congress at Washington.*

According to Biagi, scholars, most of all, would appreciate the scientific importance of a card catalog, because armed with cards they passed days and nights in pressing from the old books the juice of wisdom and of knowledge and in collecting and condensing it in their miscellanies, in those vast bibliographical collections compared with which the catalog of the British Museum is the work of a novice.

The idea of quality selection combined with bibliographical cooperation. Biagi complained about the huge quantity of publications without quality that lessened the importance of libraries.

### 2.2 Access to publications

The role of librarian cooperation was especially to improve the access to publications through interlibrary loan:

*This cooperation, however, will have to be more widely extended and must assert itself not only by exchanges of cards and of indices but also by means of the lending of books and manuscripts, of the reproductions of codices or of rare and precious works.*

...

*But internationalism and co-operation will save the future library from the danger of losing altogether its true character by becoming, as it were, a deposit of memories or of embalmed residua of life, among which the librarian must walk like a hearer of the dead.*

### 2.3 Technologies and the future of libraries cooperation

In his anticipations of the future of the library, Biagi voiced the opinion of all interested in library matters when he dwelt upon the results to be obtained from co-operation and interchange, and the photographic reproduction of famous books and with audio-books, in consideration of the technologies at that time already under way.

*And so the day will come when the libraries of Europe and of America and of all the states in the Postal Union will form, as it were, one single collection, and the old books, printed when America was but a myth, will enter new worlds bearing with them to far off students the benefit of their ancient wisdom.*

*The electric post of the airships will have then shortened distances, the telephone will make it possible to hear at Melbourne a graphophone disc asked for, a few minutes earlier\* from the British Museum.*

But some of his hearers were taken by surprise when he predicted the use of the graphophone in the library of the future. Biagi foresaw some possible negative consequences: the same that libraries experience today due to access to resources via Internet:

*There will be few readers, but an infinite number of hearers, who will listen from their own homes to the spoken paper, to the spoken book. University students will listen to their lectures while they lie in bed, and, as now with us, will not know their professors even by sight.*

.....

*.... And then some patron who from being a multi-millionaire, as was his far-off ancestor, will have become at least a multi- billionaire, will provide here in America for the founding of libraries, not of manuscripts, which will no longer be for sale, but of re- production of codices in black or in colors; and we shall have libraries of facsimiles most useful for the study of the classics, just as we now have museums of casts for the study of the plastic arts.*

*The application of photography and of photogravure to the reproduction of texts which are unique rather than rare, makes it possible for us not only to have several examples of a precious codex or manuscript, but to fix the invisible deterioration which began in it at a certain date so that, as regards its state of*

*preservation, the facsimile represents an anterior stage to the future state of the original.*

*Think how vast a field of work:*

*to seek through all nations the autographs or archetypes to which have been entrusted*

*the thought of great men of every age and of every race, and to reproduce them in the*

*worthiest way and to explain them so as to render them accessible to modern readers.*

*Thus should we form the true library of the nations, which, with the facsimiles, would*

*bring together the critical editions of their authors and the translations and the texts*

*made for the explanation of the works.*

..

Biagi was really aware of the important advantages that would result from this international cooperation for the libraries scholars:

*To be able to compare the various texts and to have the various readings of them under one's eye is an inestimable benefit ; but the true philologist will never be contented with simply studying these facsimiles, however perfect they may be; he will want to examine for himself the ancient parchments, the time-yellowed papers, to study the slight differences between the inks, the varieties in the handwritings, the evanescent glosses in the margins.*

This would be an immense advantage to its scholars, and the internationalism of science, of whose certain advent I have spoken to you, would find in this first exchange, in this fertile importation, its immediate application.

According to Biagi, two aspects of international cooperation obtain a strategic importance: professional education and the international associations.

## 2.4 Education of librarians

An international library school was in the vision of Guido Biagi in which he said,

.....

The idea of international education was certainly too early in 1904. Biagi himself was not able to open a librarianship school in Italy, and we had to wait until 1926 to obtain a university education.

However, now it's possible to start again with the plan of university international education for a new role of the library in a global society.

(Davis 1987)

(Davis 2005)

(Bramley 1981)

The International dimension of library education is one of the pillar of internationalisation, still to be enforced and realised. The other pillar, following Biagi discourse is the International Library Association.

## 2.5 International organisations

*There are many international questions which cannot be resolved in these rare congresses, and which deserve a continuous preparation and care. Such a federation would*

*constitute a strong and powerful organization, worthy of consideration and respect. There are leagues of tradesmen, why not a league of learned men,*

IFLA began in 1927 with the establishment of the International Committee. The first core programmes of IFLA were realising the lines of activity indicated by Biagi for internationalisation as

UAP,

UBC,

### 3. International librarianship today

International cooperation in respect of document supply, bibliographic standards, preservation and other technical areas will undoubtedly remain an important motivation to internationalisation. In the years since 1904 when Biagi offered his vision, many individual libraries have contributed to the sharing of resources with those in other countries.

In the present definition of internationalisation, cooperation is the first concept to be combined:

“I define international librarianship as cooperative activity in the field of librarianship done for the benefit of the individual librarian in the whole of the world, and done frequently by the likes of you and me” (Havard-Williams 1972:170).

International relationships is another concept. According to Stueart (Stueart 2007), international librarianship can be defined as:

*Connotes development of various kinds of relationships, intellectual, cultural and professional, among individuals and groups from more than one country.*

Today the idea of internationalisation is – of course – much extensive than the idea of cooperation and international relationships. The application of the Information and Communication Technologies ICT has extended the complexity and the role of the librarian till it included the access to all the available resources. This implies more importance of the International Associations and of the international dimension of library education as Biagi had already foreseen. Carroll and Harvey (2001:ix) suggests that innovation is a new motive for internationalisation:

International librarianship is about the new ideas in libraries being developed in the twentieth

Century

Lor (Lor 2008) defines international librarianship as:



*First, it refers loosely to the international activities categorised above, regardless of how systematically or scientifically they are pursued or described. Secondly, international librarianship as a field of study or an academic sub-discipline, refers to, in a narrower sense (Lor 2008):*

- *the systematic study of similarities and differences between countries and their causes;*
- *international relations and influences; and*
- *international cooperation and the role of international organisations*

It should also be remembered that, although North America academic libraries are the driving force behind much innovation in the LIS field and are the source of much new thinking in the discipline, librarians in other countries have sometimes to deal with certain issues before they become critical in the United States or Canada; hence there will be times that the flow of information will travel in the other direction (Calvert & Cullen, 2001:394).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we can use the words of Wedgeworth, IFLA President in ...:

(Wedgeworth 1994)

Providing the means for many more libraries and librarians to actively participate in the "virtual reality" of Biagi's vision will bring benefits to all members of the IFLA community. Remaining steadfast in support of the principles that guide IFLA and in our commitment to assist in the development of libraries and librarianship worldwide will replace the present uncertainty with a renewed sense of purpose within the federation.

(Carroll and Harvey 1987)

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