

# Bright Lights Shine at Area Studies Symposium

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A Symposium on Area Studies Librarianship was held July 14-16 at the University of Arizona in Tucson, AZ. This seminar was a true declaration of the diversity in this field. The first night the keynote speaker, Atifa Rawan, opened the symposium with a moving presentation of the work she has done in re-building the academic libraries of Afghanistan. Three multicultural panels presented on a broad range of topics over the next two days. The content was as diverse as the panelists'. As the presentations unfolded two common threads could be heard in the voices of the presenters. First, it was apparent there are a number of commonalities shared by all areas of field. The most significant were repeated by almost every participant; diverse skills sets required, restrictive politics and laws, shortages of specialists, and most importantly, the necessity for promotion of technology in the field. The other obvious variable came as a pleasant surprise. Recently, trends of "multi-skilling" of area librarians and a de-emphasis on specialization have cast a gloomy outlook over area studies librarianship. There were even comments like "the dying of discussion in area librarianship" heard at the symposium. These derogatory views held little weight against the reports of the many inspirational projects taking place in area studies librarianship. With each speaker another bright light was revealed in this growing and vibrant field.

## **The symposium**

The keynote speaker was Atifa Rawan. Rawan is currently the subject librarian for Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Arizona. She spoke at the opening ceremony on Global Librarianship and

the work she has done in re-building the academic libraries of Afghanistan. There were three multicultural panels of speakers. The first panel of lectures was delivered by Olivia Olivares, Midhat Abraham, and Sara Heitshu. Olivia is a subject specialist at the University of Arizona (UA) and her subjects include Latin American Studies (LAS) and Mexican American Studies (MAS). She spoke of collection development in ethnic studies, specifically Mexican and Latin American Studies. Midhat Abraham is the Middle Eastern Studies Librarian at the UA. He discussed his personal experiences in the field and related some of the difficulties area librarians face in the Middle East. Sara Heitshu is also a subject specialist at the UA and her specialties include American Indian Studies. She talked about instruction and reference in Cultural Studies, with emphasis on Native American Studies.

The second panel of speakers was John Munoz, Michael Brewer and Ping Situ. John Munoz is a public librarian from Tucson, AZ and also a member of REFORMA. He gave a presentation on REFORMA, which is an organization that advocates diversity in libraries and collections in languages other than English. Michael Brewer is the Russian/Slavic librarian at the UA, and his subject specialties include German Studies, Media Arts, and Film. He presented his paper on how to become a Slavic librarian, calling attention to the need for librarians in his field. Ping Situ is the Chinese Studies librarian at the UA. Her presentation covered opportunities and challenges facing area librarians who have multiple language responsibilities.

The final panel was made up of two speakers, Simon Samoeil and Christine Dykgraaf. Simon is the Middle Eastern Librarian and Curator of the Near East

Collection at Yale University. He is also the project manager of Online Access to Consolidated Information on Serials (OACIS). OACIS is an online database of serials and journals from and about the Middle East. Christine Dykgraaf is a Philosophy doctoral student at the UA. She is also an instructor in Near East Studies. Christine's presentation introduced the status of e-books in non-English collections. Her efforts as sole organizer and coordinator of this symposium are commendable and appreciated, for it produced a successful and meaningful event. Though attendance was primarily local, this did not diminish the importance of the symposium's content or the far reaching impact of the work being done in area librarianship. There were two significant accomplishments of the symposium. One was the establishment of common trends affecting the field of area studies librarianship. The other was the exposure of the great work being done in this culturally diverse field of study.

## **Themes and trends**

The themes of the lectures were as diverse and multi-cultured as the panelists'. Collection management, copyright restrictions, publishing requirements, advances in electronic resources, and many more topics were discussed. As the symposium progressed four common threads became apparent across the wide range of subjects and geographic areas. First, an area librarian needs a broad knowledge base and a variety of skills to be successful in the field. Another common theme among many of the panelists' was the severe shortages of area librarians in almost every field. Almost every contributor mentioned

political instability and legal standards being the major contributing factors in hindering of area studies collection and technology. Finally, and many believed most importantly, the promotion of technology and digital applications is a necessity for the advancement of area librarianship.

Atifa Rawan opened her presentation with a discussion on the challenges facing area librarians today. She stated "one field will not be sufficient; you need more in area librarianship" (Rawan, 2006). She believes a blend of competencies is required. She said "language and computer skills are a must" (Rawan, 2006). She also mentioned grant writing, legal issues, and even diplomacy being necessary in the knowledge base of an area librarian. Ping Situ held that the skills needed "go way beyond the ability of speaking another language" (Situ, 2006). An area librarian needs "an area studies background, cultural awareness, the ability to catalog materials in that language, knowledge of the book trade in different parts of the world, and information technology skills" (Situ, 2006). She also believed interpersonal skills were crucial. Olivia Olivares concluded a baseline of knowledge is needed beyond the understanding in a specific ethnic area. She mentioned within her field this included knowledge of "publishing trends, relevant legal issues, conferences and book fairs, and bibliographic tools" (Olivares, 2006). She introduced a concept, interdisciplinarity; meaning an area librarian needs to combine a variety of disciplines in their occupation and cannot focus on just one. She went on to suggest "all area and/or studies librarians, regardless of the geographic area they cover, must recognize the interdisciplinary nature of area studies and ethnic studies librarianship. These cover not only history and politics, but culture, arts and humanities, economics and trade, law, and so forth. An area librarian needs to be a generalist nowadays, not just a subject specialist" (Olivares, 2006). The job of an area librarian has become more complex and complicated. It requires an MLS, usually a degree in the area of studies, and additional language skills. Knowing all the extra training and education must have a

negative impact on the recruitment of new talent into this field difficult.

The second common theme throughout the presentations was the shortage of librarians entering the field of area studies. In a personal interview, Simon Samoeil listed "the shortage of area librarians, experts in both librarianship and area studies" (Samoeil, 2006), as one of the major issues facing area librarianship. He stated the field was aging, and in a few years the demand will greatly increase for area studies librarians. Michael Brewer agreed with the "graying of the field" and in his presentation stated the "future trend in Slavic area studies will be the opening up of many library positions" (Brewer, 2006). There are no current statistics in recruitment of area librarians, but many of the panelists' agreed it had been low for more than a decade. Atifa Rawan mentioned one of the issues in the future will be the need for more librarians "to manage, organize, provide access to, and store and retrieve the growing body of data in area studies" (Rawan, 2006). The amount of information continues to grow as more US universities gain access to places previously off limits. Christine Dykgraaf admitted, though there is an influx of information in her department, and it is thriving, there is a "dieing off of discussion in area studies" (Dykgraaf, 2006). She also believed there had "not been enough investments in technology and information infrastructure in the field of area studies" (Dykgraaf, 2006). This lack of enlistment can be attributed to more than the skills sets required. Another major consideration in the occupation of an area librarian is the difficulties faced in collection development. The political instabilities around the world and related legal ramifications make collecting materials difficult and many times impossible. Olivia Olivares remembered the large contributions Venezuela used to make to LAS before the current political administration in power there stopped the flow of information completely. Midhat Abraham admitted "the biggest drawback in area studies collection development since 9/11 is books must be in English as well as the native language so customs can read them, otherwise they are not released" (Abraham, 2006). All this is making

collection development expensive, time consuming, and leading many institutions to question the costs versus benefits of all these hindrances. Simon Samoeil talked of the ever increasing difficulty in the "politics of receiving and transferring of materials." He related a story of being questioned by authorities while he was transporting books and admitted it is "very uncomfortable in this situation" (Samoeil, 2006). He also reported "there is a great desire to share resources through digitization, but again politics and legal issues intercede" (Samoeil, 2006). His sadness was evident when he related that "the next Arab and Middle Eastern Electronic Library (AMEEL) conference had been scheduled to take place at the US University in Beirut, Lebanon, but now who knows what will happen" (Samoeil, 2006). This interview took place on the day the Israelis had started shelling Beirut. Though there was general agreement on the many drawbacks facing area librarianship, every speaker believed, if anything can overcome these issues and advance the field it would be new technologies.

Every presenter, from the keynote speaker to the final presenter, unanimously agreed, the most vital need in area librarianship today is the promotion of technology across all fields. There was a general consensus on the importance of this as everyone reserved part of their presentation to include new technology and its influence. Atifa Rawan when asked what the most important thing needed in the education of an area librarian, replied "technology, technology, technology! We need to promote more exposure to technology and books, not guns. This will change the way the new students think and provide new opportunities everywhere for change" (Rawan, 2006). Midhat Abraham was adamant that technology "really helped, in cataloging, in Romanizing Arabic, but most of all technology will bridge gaps" in cultural and social differences (Abraham, 2006). Sarah Heitshu believed the major element missing in Native American Studies collections was the "voice of the people themselves, the one thing needed to pull it all together was technology. It will provide easy access

to the people's voice" (Heitshu, 2006). To support her argument she went on to describe the work the *Duke Oral History Collection* has done with collecting oral histories. John Munoz was quoted "the web has transformed area librarianship, home web pages are used to promote collections and it is a way to get to wider audiences." This creates further outreach in any and all communities (Munoz, 2006). Ping Situ reiterated the "need for technology to promote cooperation and partnerships in the sharing of collections." She mentioned how partnerships for database sharing with Chinese libraries comes slow and is not forthcoming as of yet. She also stressed "preservation must go digital" to continue the longevity of collections (Situ, 2006). Simon Samoeil stated technology is being used to promote international exchanges of information, "it is making exchanges easier, and can overcome many obstacles, not only geographical, but also social constraints" (Samoeil, 2006). Christine Dykgraaf reported one of the greatest opportunities in ebooks in non-English collections is the development of a technology called mechanical translation. She expressed true excitement when declaring "this could be a real boom in area studies when this is perfected. It could bring access of any material, to any user, translated immediately" (Dykgraaf, 2006). Technology is the gateway to change. It has the ability to circumvent socio-political differences and economic instabilities. It provides the ease of access needed to break down long standing physical barriers of law, copyright, geography, and economics. Technology will open up new opportunities for communication never available before. This could be the basis for understanding one another and ultimately the foundation for an enduring peace between political adversaries.

### **Beacons in the field of area librarianship**

Area studies are the Rodney Dangerfield of librarianship. Midhat Abraham admonished in his presentation "we get no respect, when it is time for budget cuts, area studies is the first to get their money cut. Area

studies are not a priority in US universities" (Abraham, 2006). It is hindered by social, political, and economic instabilities no other discipline in librarianship faces. A search of literature will reveal statements of a "dying field." Yet, as this symposium has proven, there are beacons shining brightly out there and the outlook is not so gloomy. Symbols of hope burning brightly, proving the field is not just alive and well, but growing and making inspirational advances. Olivia Olivares praised the development of the MAS collections at three major US universities, Texas/Austin, UCLA, and UC Berkeley. She also commended the collection held by the UA. She promoted several LAS and MAS electronic databases (HAPI, HLAS, PRISMA, CHICANO database, Latino Lit), and boasted "the holdings in these databases are growing everyday" (Olivares, 2006). Another shining light could be seen in the joy expressed by Midhat Abraham when he described "the most fulfilling aspect of this field is providing access to the collection for students and patrons" (Abraham, 2006). This kind of passion was present in every panelist. These are not characteristics of a dying breed. Sara Heitshu spoke of newly found access to Native American artifacts created by Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). In addition to her admiration for the digitizing of oral history tapes being done by *Duke Oral History Collection*, she also pointed out the new online access to *American Indians Biographies* being produced by Alexander Street Press. Michael Brewer extolled on the huge amounts of information that became available upon the fall of the Soviet regime and the access to all the satellites. Ping Situ talked of the UC San Diego partnership that "integrates automation systems to download MARC records to help students get Chinese information they want." One of the clearest and intense of these shining stars is Simon Samoeil. His establishment of Online Access to Consolidated Information on Serials (OACIS) is a remarkable feat. This is the online union list of Middle Eastern Journals he created with a team of Yale librarians in 2003. He is a true hero in instituting technology applications in area studies. He is

constantly battling copyright issues and politics to make information from the Middle East available to students. His pride was easy to see as he described the advances made through the internship program implemented through OACIS. This program educates Middle East students in digital applications and cataloging. "We introduce these interns to how things work in US libraries. This forms a connection, a networking; it is the way to open these areas up, loosening some restriction on the free flow of information" (Samoeil, 2006). This is forward thinking, not the planning of an outdated profession. These efforts are the way to communication between cultures, a way to become familiar with each other. Simon is an inspirational leader in his field. His endeavors are a gateway to bringing society together. And finally, in a personal interview Christine Dykgraaf revealed this statement about her department; "the UA Near East area studies is growing and vibrant, especially in the medical, optics, and astronomy subject areas" (Dykgraaf, 2006).

Yes, every speaker described some positive aspect that keeps a light burning within area studies. The brightest light of these shining beacons is the work being done by Atifa Rawan. The contributions she has made are more than just award winning, her work is what inspires young people to enter the field. There is nobleness in the accomplishments of this librarian, and bravery above and beyond. Atifa is an Afghan American who has been a librarian at the UA for more than 20 years. She was recently awarded the ALA's Elizabeth Futas Catalyst for Change Award for her work on rebuilding Afghanistan's *Kabul University Library* and her work on creating electronic federal depository libraries (ASU Libraries, 2006). Her presentation at the symposium described her six trips to Afghanistan over the last four years. She has literally rebuilt the academic library at Kabul University from a bombed out pile of rubble. It was moving viewing the pictures of her and her Afghan colleagues shoveling up debris into wheelbarrows to clear out space for book stacks. Another truly encouraging display was the before and

after pictures of the books. The first photo showed the books strewn and piled in crammed closets. The next photo depicted the newly renovated stacks, every shelf neatly rowed with books. By using open source digital library platforms she has established the first digital library in Afghanistan at Kabul University. This was an achievement she was the most proud of. The list of achievements is just too long for listing in this publication. Witnessing this true devotion to an occupation is clear evidence this field is not disappearing. Technology in the field of area studies advances the free flow of information; it crosses borders and boundaries geographically and

socially. The work presented at this symposium needs to be advertised and promoted through more conferences and events on area studies. Another common idea shared by the participants was that conferences and book fairs were very important to the field.

This symposium was enjoyable and a great success. Like the works portrayed here, this symposium was a bright light in the field of area studies librarianship. A 2nd Annual Symposium on Area Studies Librarianship would be greatly appreciated. Let's keep the bright lights shining in area studies.

#### REFERENCE:

Arizona State University (2006), *The Reconstruction of Academic Libraries in Afghanistan: Afghanistan's Higher Education and its Impact on Libraries and Women*, press release found at Fletcher Library web site, available at: <http://library.west.asu.edu/diversity/libraryweek/keynote05.html> (accessed on 20 July 2006).

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