

Mobile Libraries & Information Needs in Refugee Camps

Allison Easton¹, Katherine Wells²

¹*School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, Email: easton@ualberta.ca*

²*School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, Email: kewells@ualberta.ca*

To Cite:

Easton, A., & Wells, K. (2020). Mobile libraries & information needs in refugee camps. [Special Issue]. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals*, 1(1), 17-25. <https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder16>

Abstract

In this extended abstract, we use a postcolonial lens with a focus on global citizenship to outline some of the information needs experienced by refugees in refugee camps. A postcolonial approach, as it is defined by Vanessa Iwowo, allows us to challenge the ways in which Western ways of knowing advance a Western hegemonic worldview. We note how mobile libraries are used to address information needs and posit them as a useful tool for future work in this area. We suggest that LIS professionals ought to be actively involved in responding to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by considering and working to improve information access in refugee camps.

Keywords: Information behavior, Information needs, Refugee camps, Mobile libraries

Since the formation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1950, international governing bodies have been working to address the issues associated with the global experiences of refugees. According to the UNHCR, refugees are “people fleeing conflict or persecution. They are defined and protected in international law, and must not be expelled or returned to situations where their life and freedom are at risk” (UNHCR, 2020a). Our research focuses on refugees in refugee camps. Refugee camps are defined as “temporary facilities built to provide immediate protection and assistance to people who have been forced to flee due to

conflict, violence or persecution" (UNHCR, 2020b). In examining the role of mobile libraries in addressing information needs in refugee camps, our intention is to advocate for the importance of global citizenship, universal access to information, and the ethical obligation of libraries to consider library service systemically and globally. This abstract is informed by a literature review of information needs in refugee camps, as well as an in-depth search for what programs are currently available to address these information needs. As students pursuing MLIS degrees in the context of an ALA-accredited program, and intent on enacting our global citizenship, we think that it is productive to reflect on international library values, rather than privileging values that seem relevant in our local context.

Postcolonialism & Global Citizenship

We take a critical perspective when considering information needs in refugee camps, and frame our discussion using a postcolonial approach, with a focus on global citizenship. In the context of this presentation, we use Iwowo's definition of postcolonialism:

Post-colonial theory decries the universalizing tendency of Western knowledge as being the negative enduring legacy of an imperialist colonial empire, one that has continued to silence and marginalize non-Western subjectivities. It stresses that rather than assume a totalitarian and universalist orientation, Western intellectualism should not only recognize the legitimacy of other, non-Western world views but, more important, should be positioned as part and parcel of a plurality of knowledges rather than as mainstream. (Iwowo, 2014, p. 6)

We also note the importance of recognizing inherent power dynamics associated with doing research in a global context, as is highlighted by Hesse-Biber's feminist postcolonial theory (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Within this theoretical context, global citizenship informs our understandings of the role we play as information professionals. To paraphrase Paehlke (2014), global citizenship involves locating, contacting, and communicating with each other globally. While global issues are difficult to address, citizens can act with global issues in mind in a variety of ways, and in their day-to-day activities. To further add to the notion of addressing global needs, Christie's arguments in Sidhu (2017) suggest a method to combat indifference to global suffering through an

ethics of engagement. This ethics comprises a responsibility to think through the social conditions that have produced refugees, a commitment to following practices that allow all people to best live together, and a care for the other that asks for nothing in return. This approach complements international library values. For example, The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) endorses the values of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (2019, b). The Article reads as follows: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, n.d.). The next section of this abstract will focus on one library service that supports these values: mobile libraries.

Information Needs in Refugee Camps

Before considering refugees’ information needs, the contexts in which information-seeking takes place ought to be considered. Refugees experience different stages of settlement (Andrade & Doolin, 2019; Lloyd et al., 2013; Martzoukou & Burnett, 2018; Smith, 2008). Lloyd et al. (2013) posit that these are transitioning, settling in, and being settled, while Andrade & Doolin (2019) argue that the stages are comprised of orienting practices, instrumental practices, and expressive practices. Orienting practices involve scanning and monitoring information sources in order to orient to an unfamiliar environment; instrumental practices involve actively seeking and using information to solve a problem, for example seeking employment and local service providers; and expressive practices involve sharing among individuals, groups and networks (Andrade & Doolin, 2019). An understanding of these stages and practices is useful for information professionals who wish to foster connections between refugees and the information they require.

Some of the information needs that we identified include: information regarding daily tasks, security, shelter, health information, information on relocating their families, and information about their country of origin (Mansour, 2018; Martzoukou & Burnett, 2018; Obodoruku, 2014; Redmond & Associates, 2004; Sambo, 2017; Smith, 2008). Access to Information Communication Technology (ICT) is particularly important for refugees seeking information. ICT is "A rapidly growing area that includes

communication devices, applications, and services. Examples range from satellite sensing and communication systems, to network hardware and software, to devices such as radios, televisions, phones, and computers" (Schramm, 2017, p. 87). ICT allows refugees to access information about their home countries, maintain transnational ties to their family and friends in their country of origin (Andrade & Doolin, 2019; Benitez, 2012), and communicate with broader social networks (Lloyd & Wilkinson, 2019; Mansour, 2018).

Mobile Libraries and Refugee Camps

Mobile libraries address information needs on an international scale through the following roles and services: ICTs, childhood literacy, employment help, higher level education, health information, security information, and community-building (Asselin, & Doiron, 2016; Bausells, 2015; Knight, 2009; Lynch, 2017; Virgilio, 2003). We identified a number of examples regarding mobile libraries' operations in refugee camps (Asselin & Doiron, 2013; Bausells, 2015; Knight, 2009; Lynch, 2017); for example, Relief International focuses on promoting childhood literacy with a Library-in-a-Truck in the Kelenterli refugee settlement (Asselin & Doiron, 2013). We also found an example of a nurse who established mobile libraries in Tanzania to help health workers in refugee camps update their medical training; this program was in partnership with UNHCR (Knight, 2009). Engaging with the communities themselves to see the best, if any, role for the libraries is paramount. One resource worthy of highlighting is Libraries Without Borders' Ideas Box, considered to be a mobile library in the context of this research. The box provides satellite internet connection, a digital server, ICT (such as laptops), books, and more (Libraries Without Borders, Ideas Box). Importantly, these boxes are customized through collaboration with the community in order to ensure that the community's needs are being met (Libraries Without Borders, Ideas Box). If we consider Ideas Boxes through the lens of postcolonial feminist theory, we believe that community collaboration is important, but also that anyone doing this work needs to, as Hesse-Biber would suggest, be aware of power dynamics and willing to shift their approaches based on the needs and wants of the community.

Conclusion

To view libraries through a postcolonial lens and to practice our global citizenship, we found that library service to refugees in refugee camps is an important topic to discuss. We see the use of mobile libraries as a meaningful and flexible intervention in addressing the variety of information needs that refugees may have while in refugee camps. The incorporation of ICTs into mobile library service is particularly important for connecting individuals to the information they need. Libraries Without Borders' Ideas Box acts as an example of a creative service that other mobile libraries could model. Questions arise involving the role of libraries in addressing international information needs, what approaches libraries ought to take in addressing information needs, and how power dynamics and Western norms shape current approaches.

References

- ALA. (2017). Bookmobiles: Home. <https://libguides.ala.org/bookmobiles/general>
- ALA. (2019). Access to library resources and services. <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/access>
- Andrade, A., & Doolin, B. (2019). Temporal enactment of resettled refugees' ICT-mediated information practices. *Information Systems Journal*, 29, 145-174. <https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.12189>
- Asselin, M., & Doiron, R. (2016). Mobile libraries as effective solutions to reading access and reading promotion in remote communities. In *Linking literacy and libraries in global communities* (pp. 103-113). Routledge.
- Babalola, Y. T., Sodipe, O. D., Haliso, Y., & Odunlade, R. (2012). Information provision to the disadvantaged: A proposal for extension of library and information services to refugees in Oru Camp, Ogun State, Nigeria. *Global Journal of Human Social Science*, 12(1), 76-80.
- Bausells, M. (2015). Calais migrant camp gets makeshift library – and it needs more books. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/24/calais-migrant-camp-gets-makeshift-library-and-it-needs-more-books>
- Biehl, K. (2015). Governing through uncertainty: Experiences of being a refugee in Turkey as a country for temporary asylum. *The*

- International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice, 59, 57-75.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24718358>
- Bio. (n.d.). <https://mechanicaldolphin.com/about/>
- Bikos, G., & Papadimitriou, P. (2018). Mobile libraries: Defining the phenomenon. *International Journal of Library and Information Science*, 10(3), 35-40. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/be79/0800dc81720ab9b7c59c5416618bfb972f73.pdf>
- Blattner, J., & Bacigalupo, A. (2007). Using emotional intelligence to develop executive leadership and team and organizational development. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 59(3), 209-219. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1065-9293.59.3.209>
- Brathwaite, T. (2007). Refugees and asylum seekers in the Caribbean region: library service implications. *New Issues in Refugee Research*. <https://www.unhcr.org/research/working/46791a622/refugees-asylum-seekers-caribbean-region-library-service-implications-tamara.html>
- Case, D. O., & Given, L. M. (2016). Looking for information : A survey of research on information seeking, needs, and behavior (4th ed.). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Iwowo, V. (2014). Post-colonial theory In Coghlan, D., & Brydon-Miller, M. (Eds.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of action research* (Vols. 1-2). SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446294406>
- epl2go Literacy Vans. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.epl.ca/epl2go/#offe>
- Fisher, K. E., Yafi, E., Xu, Y., & Maitland, C. (2019). AI Osool: Understanding information behavior for community development at Za'atari Syrian refugee camp. *ACM International Conference Proceeding Series*, 273–282. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3328320.3328395>
- Hesse-Biber, S. (2012). Feminist research: exploring, interrogating, and transforming the interconnections of epistemology, methodology, and method. In Hesse-Biber, S. N. *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (pp. 2-26). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483384740>

- IFLA. (n.d.) Libraries, development and the united nations 2030 agenda. <https://www.ifla.org/libraries-development>
- IFLA. (2010). Mobile library guidelines. *International Federation of Library Association and Institutions IFLA Professional Reports*.
<https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/publications/professional-report/123.pdf>
- IFLA. (2017). How do libraries further development? <https://www.ifla.org/node/7408>
- IFLA. (2019a). Access and opportunity for all: How libraries contribute to the United Nations 2030 agenda. <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/10546>
- IFLA. (2019b). More about IFLA. <https://www.ifla.org/about/more>
- Knight, J. (2009). A lifeline for refugees: mobile libraries are enabling healthcare workers in refugee camps to update their nursing and medical knowledge. *Nursing Standard*, 23(33). <https://go-gale-com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/ps/i.do?v=2.1&it=r&sw=w&id=GALE%7CA199461728&prodId=HRCA&sid=googleScholarFullText&userGroupName=gran24258>
- Lamb, A. (2019). Contemporary libraries: 1930s. <https://www.eduscapes.com/history/contemporary/1930.htm>
- Land, Ted. (2016). UW professor studies Syrian refugee children. <https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/uw-professor-studies-syrian-refugee-children/106853150>
- Library Resources. (2018, November 19). Libraries on the go: The relevance of bookmobiles in the modern world. [web log comment]. <https://www.ebsco.com/blog/article/libraries-on-the-go-the-relevance-of-bookmobiles-in-the-modern-world>
- Libraries Without Borders. (n.d.). Ideas box. <https://www.librarieswithoutborders.org/ideasbox/>
- Libraries Without Borders. (n.d.). Our organization. <https://www.librarieswithoutborders.org/about-us/our-organisation/>
- Lloyd, A., Kennan, A., Thompson, K., & Qayyum, A. (2013). Connection with new information landscapes: Information literacy practices of

- refugees. *Journal of Documentation*, 69(1), 121-144.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/00220411311295351>
- Lynch, J. (2017, September 11). The little mobile library in the heart of refugee camps. [web log comment]. <http://www.techsoupforlibraries.org/blog/the-little-mobile-library-in-the-heart-of-refugee-camps>
- Mansour, E. (2018). Profiling information needs and behaviour of Syrian refugees displaced to Egypt: An exploratory study. *Information and Learning Science*, 119, 161-182. <http://doi.org/10.1108/ILS-08-2017-0088>
- Martoukou, K., Burnett, S. (2018). Exploring the everyday life information needs and the socio-cultural adaptation barriers of Syrian refugees in Scotland. *Journal of Documentation*, 74(5), 1104-1132.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-10-2017-0142>
- Nawotka, E. (2019). Sharjah 2019: Libraries Connect Sacramento To Syria.
<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/international/trade-shows/article/81566-sharjah-2019-libraries-connect-sacramento-to-syria.html>
- Non-Governmental Organizations. (2019). <https://www.unhcr.org/non-governmental-organizations.html>
- Obodoruku, B. (2014). *Human information behavior among African refugees in Tanzania: An exploratory study of the Nyarugusu camp* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global: Science & Technology; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global: Social Sciences. (AAT 3670602)
- Paehlke, R. (2014). *Hegemony and global citizenship : transitional governance for the 21st century*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat03710a&AN=alb.7441469&site=eds-live&scpe=site>
- Redmond, D. & Associates. (2004). *Refugee housing information needs: Research conducted in the region of Niagara/prepared for policy and research division, Canada mortgage and housing corporation*. Ottawa: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. Refugees. (2019). <https://www.unhcr.org/refugees.html>
- Sambo, A. (2017). Internal displaced persons and their information needs. *Library*

- Philosophy & Practice*, Jul 2017, 1-15. https://web-a-ebSCOhost-com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=3b68ea57-5491-458a-b888-5c21487b34ec%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWVhc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1z_aXRI#db=lls&AN=127910795
- Schramm, L. (2017). Innovation technology: A dictionary. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Sidhu, R. (2017). Navigating unfreedoms & re-Imagining ethical counter-conducts: Caring about refugees & asylum seekers. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49(3), 294–305. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1130055&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Smith, V. (2008). *The information needs and associated communication behaviors of female afghan refugees in the San Francisco Bay area* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from Dissertation Abstracts International, A: The Humanities and Social Sciences. (AAI3346402)
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2020a). Refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugees.html>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2020b). Refugee camps. <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/camps>
- UNHCR'S STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS 2017–2021. (2017). <https://www.unhcr.org/excom/announce/5894558d4/unhcrs-strategic-directions-2017-2021.html>
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (n.d.). <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>
- Virgilio, Damone. (2003). Service to the international community. *Bookmobiles & Outreach Services*, 6(2), 7-14.
- What is a refugee camp?. (2019). <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/camps/>