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Two steps behind

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Two steps behind

Sitting on a chair in his house's courtyard, with his bandoneon resting on a cloth that covers his lap, Argentinean musician Eustaquio Miño looks shyly at the camera. Like his father, don Eustaquio has been, is, and will be a fanatic player of the most traditional *chamamé*, a musical style very popular on northeastern Argentina, especially in the province of Corrientes. The man makes a chronological review of the great *chamamé* players for a documentary (Canal Encuentro, 2014). He begins with the classics and ends mentioning the latest exponents: those that no longer adhere to the traditional forms and styles that Miño's father knew and that his heir still performs. He closes his speech, full of long, silent intervals, by saying:

There are a lot of new people who... who are making music like... some would say, "advanced", you see...

We [he shrugs]... we're stuck in time a little bit. But to take care of this.

This brief musical digression –in a column mainly aimed at libraries– is aimed at illustrating, by using a fragment of Argentine popular culture, an idea that should be at the very core of the modern disciplines of knowledge management, and that so far is applied just by a minority: to always stay two steps behind.

At the end of the last century, knowledge and information became the axis of a new socio-cultural and technological paradigm: the Information Society. The market and the large industries did not let this promising business opportunity pass by: the model immediately adopted an eminently economic character, dominated by capitalist schemes. Since then, more and more facets of information management are subject to strong commodification, and are governed by the rules of supply and demand, planned obsolescence, excessive consumerism...

Needless to say, libraries are strongly affected by those events. Much has been written –especially from a critical, progressive, social, and radical perspective– about the influence of capitalism and consumerism in the management of human knowledge in general, and in libraries and related institutions in particular: from the articles of John Buschmann and the work of Crawford and Gorman to Postman's *Technopoly* and the lectures of Santiago Alba Rico. The deepest analyses reveal the extent to which knowledge management has been forced into a race towards an uncertain future, and pushed into an excessive consumption of certain services, products, and resources. In such a competition, libraries' traditional missions and functions have been neglected, ignored, or plainly forgotten.

The truth is that libraries have always represented, for the different human societies, a safe harbor – and even a lighthouse providing orientation in troubled times. To achieve such a respected position as a reference, libraries remained two steps behind the novelty and the noise. That never meant that libraries were not updated, that they did not evolve in accordance with the communities they served, that they did not grow

and change to respond to the needs of their users. But those changes were slow, they occurred for a reason and following a method, they deserved reflection and prior critical analysis...

Good habits that, apparently, libraries have been abandoning.

Shelters of our stories, repositories of memories and cultural expressions, guardians of knowledge –strategic or not–, libraries cannot afford not to make a foothold in the turbulent waters that characterize our present times, or letting themselves be carried away by the many siren songs that usually emerge from the fog. Heirs to a long tradition that goes back to the beginning of writing, libraries must maintain a firm and responsible attitude: it is not for nothing that the knowledge, the history, and the identity of entire societies lie in their shelves.

While one librarian eye looks towards the future, attentive to the irruption of new currents, the other must keep sight of the path that remains behind – a path of which our shelves and our databases are part of. Because that, precisely that, is what makes libraries valuable for their communities: not only their ability to organize information, but also their capacity of being a solid reference in contexts as complex, uncertain and volatile as the current ones.

Let libraries explore, experiment, try. Let them keep track of novelties and innovation. But let them be always two steps behind the front line. "To take care of this", as don Eustaquio said.

