

2.9 Iran

Iranian Library Landscape: The Humanware Dilemma

Nader D. Naghshineh

“Who are you?” “What do you want?” Two simple questions I put to my graduate students at the commencement session of my course on applied information technology. While having the usual emphasis on various aspects of information and communication technology as it pertains to libraries, the course is essentially focused on how to deploy these technologies as mind tools (Maleki and Naghshineh 2006). Self-awareness is a pre-requisite of fostering the ability to sense the matrix of ambitions, aspirations and demands of customers or clients. To know what one wants is a compass by which to understand the needs of the client. This approach is unique and tailor-made to Iran. For only in Iran may you travel for half a day and find yourself in an area where people still use the local Ghahve-khaneh or coffee shop as their primary information exchange point. You may be working with the latest state of the art technology at ISL in Tehran today, and the next day you would be required to run a library on horseback for the nomadic tribes in the Central Plains. So essentially when we talk and teach technologies for use in libraries to students, what we really look for is to internalize this knowledge to the point that a student would find solutions beyond the usual gadgetry (Naghshineh 1998).

This is a necessary step in order to overcome the effects of nearly four decades of neglect in public library development. While Iran maintains a global role for itself and claims to have the fastest growth in science and technology among Muslim countries, it is still a developing country. As such it suffers from the predicaments common to such countries, such as inefficient bureaucracy and resources allocation. While boasting a culture that spans nearly 3,000 years, in recent memory humanities have been neglected in favor of engineering and technology. Thus while the library and information science – in its American interpretation – has been taught here for more than four decades (Hayati and Fattahi 2005), it has failed to bear the promised fruit. One reason is that it never built on the library and information skills of the past. Failing to do so led to the lack of bridging theories that could have reconciled the idea with practice. Thus while many boast about Iran’s ancient heritage and culture, readership in its libraries has steadily declined over the past four decades (Farhangi 2009).

But why do we start a discussion on library technology with a mixture of sociology, pedagogy, and history with a dash of psychology? Perhaps one