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***Building the Knowledge Culture***

## **SPECIALIZED LIBRARIANSHIP: NOT “QUO VADIS?”**

### **IT’S NOT “WHERE ARE YOU GOING?” — IT’S “WHO ARE WE?”**

**Guy St. Clair**

On November 10, 2015 Guy St. Clair was the guest speaker for the Annual Meeting of the New York Chapter of the Special Libraries Association (SLANY). Discussion resources are posted here.

Greetings to all my colleagues in the SLANY. I’m very grateful that you’ve invited me to come to you. And I’m particularly grateful to Pam Rollo for that very gracious introduction.

Thank you, Pam.

Chapter officers, board members, award recipients, fellow members of SLA’s New York Chapter, friends, and colleagues.

The invitation to speak to you tonight was worded this way:

- The Chapter is fighting very hard to remain relevant, stay fiscally fit, and continues to reach out to members both real and lapsed (even though it sometimes feels like an uphill battle).

I was asked:

- to provide my own view and offer any fresh ideas
- to speak about what the future of SLA has to do with the profession as a whole (does it have an impact?), and
- why continuing to work together (even if in new ways and with new people) may not be a bad thing.

So I came up with a title. I thought about calling this presentation *Quo Vadis*, which was the title of a book for which I wrote the preface in 2005 (also another book from long ago, and a popular film in the 1950s).

Published in Munich, the full title was *Bibliothekswissenschaft — quo vadis?* with the subtitle (I don’t dare try to say it in German) *Library Science — quo vadis?: A Discipline Between Challenges and Opportunities*.

That’s what we were worrying ten years ago, not only in our own society but on the international library management scene as well. And we’re still worrying about it today, aren’t we?

When I wrote that preface, I was already deep into my work in knowledge services, and in the preface I went to special lengths to connect knowledge services and library science:

- Library science (I wrote) has broadened to embrace information science
- But that simple transition is not enough, for the modern seeker of knowledge wants more, to identify not only what has been captured and recorded
- Today’s user wants to know how knowledge has been (or can be) used.
- That expanded and anticipated objective — it seems to me — has brought about an even further broadening, if you will, of library and information science.

- Today we speak of librarianship, information management, knowledge management, and their overarching connection with learning
- We gather this entire realm of knowledge seeking into the discipline of **knowledge services**. This new discipline [so I said in 2005] — this convergence of librarianship, information management, knowledge management, and learning — builds on the basic foundations of library science — as a *science* for the organization of knowledge — to lead the user in his or her quest.

Well, we didn't stop in 2005. Our own quest for what we were — as librarians, as information scientists, as specialist librarians — continued, until we came to the Boston SLA Conference of last June. That experience was described by Jim Hydock, Outsell's VP and Lead Analyst in Germany. Here's what Jim wrote in a post titled SLA: Standing at the Crossroads on July 14 of this year:

- Regardless of the number of attendees at the conference, it's evident that the makeup of SLA as an organization is at a critical juncture
- There has been a decline in revenues of 49% in the past 15 years, and
- A drop in membership enrollment of 43% over the same period, with the numbers continuing to trend downward.

Hydock then mentions the consultants' report, and continues:

- Whether the Board accepts the report's strategic framework is still up in the air; what's not in doubt is that SLA's internal crisis is reflective of the nature of information management, its practitioners, and institutions in 2015.
- As the SLA report points out, the old model of information flowing from a central source, mediated by an info pro, and parceled out to end-users as needed is gone for good.
- End-users, whether they be students or faculty, researchers, marketers, or corporate strategists, are comfortable accessing their own information, using information that comes from myriad sources, and viewing content as dynamic — something to share, dissect, augment, or repurpose — and to be available on multiple platforms simultaneously.
- Not surprisingly, at the Boston conference we noted that several vendors have repositioned themselves as “knowledge management” solutions — an artifact from the 1990s, often maligned, that looks refreshed and, in many ways, reflects a more mature model for how institutions today deal with information — a combination of developing, curating, sharing, and implementing information and expertise from internal and external sources.

Consider that final statement: **“a more mature model for how institutions today deal with information — developing, curating, sharing, and implementing information and expertise from internal and external sources.”**

Isn't that what we're talking about when define knowledge services? When we talk about converging information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning? Knowledge development, knowledge sharing, knowledge utilization? What we like to speak about with the KD/KS/KU acronym?

So perhaps the question I ask (in my pompous Latin phrase) as a possible title for this presentation should **not** be “Quo vadis? Where are you going?” Or, as I would put it, “Where are **we** going?”

Perhaps we should instead be asking (I don't have the Latin phrase at hand): **“Who are we?”**

And that's my purpose this evening. Not to ask where we're going, but to talk a little about who we are. Once we figure that out, then — and not until then — we can start talking about what we want SLA — or whatever association (if any) we want to associate with — to be.

Are we — as specialist librarians (as I choose to call us) and knowledge workers (in Peter Drucker's

phrase) — are we “librarians”? We may think we are but I challenge that designation, for those of us who work in specialized libraries. We may know who we are and what we do, but those who interact with us do not. Others are linked to the classic definitions of librarianship, and no matter how we try to expand that definition and how successful we are in our work as specialist librarians, we are doomed to be chained to that definition, even by the people for whom we work and for whom we provide the highest levels of specialized research services (which I like think of as information and knowledge services).

Am I serious? Well, think about this, even after our association’s efforts of the last fifty years to change how the rest of society thinks about specialized librarianship:

An October 23, 2015 article in *The New York Times*, by the Argentine writer Alberto Manguel — now living in Canada — takes us back to what libraries are considered to be (and it’s a very noble, very important societal role these institutions play):

Since the time of Alexandria (Manguel writes), libraries have held a symbolic function. For the Ptolemaic kings, the library was an emblem of their power; eventually it became the encompassing symbol of an entire society, a numinous place where readers could learn the art of attention which, Hannah Arendt argued, is a *definition of culture*. But since the mid-20th century, libraries no longer seem to carry this symbolic meaning and, as mere storage rooms of a technology deemed defunct, are not considered worthy of proper preservation and funding.

And Manguel writes about what librarians do, as he suggests that as librarians diversify their mandate (as we have been doing for the past half century or so), we must not go too far.

Such restructuring (he writes) must also ensure that the librarians’ primary purpose is not forgotten: *to guide readers to their books*.

Is that **us**? I think not.

We know who we are and what we do, and we found out in very clear terms in a couple of important studies.

The first in 2008 was undertaken by SMR International, an *SMR Special Report Prospects for Specialized Libraries: Comments from Colleagues (2008)*.

The findings of this study are a collection of perceptions about specialized librarianship, observed in a variety of situations and over a period of two decades and, as it turns out, related to the growth of interest in knowledge management and the establishment of knowledge as an organizational asset.

Among these findings, several had to do with management expectations about specialized libraries (matching observations made with client projects), with study participants concluding that specialized libraries are well thought of by users and clients who know about the services provided and who avail themselves of those services. At the same time, for management leaders the specialized library appears often to be nothing more than simply another operational function, a means to an end.

A related and important finding of the study had to do with the working environment in which specialist librarians are or might be employed. The study argues that a different workplace — what we might term the “knowledge services workplace” — was coming into being. The study predicted that the new working environment would be managed by information professionals who see themselves as knowledge thought leaders providing information, knowledge, and strategic learning for non-library affiliated knowledge-centric organizations, businesses, or other types of research-focused environments.

This has happened, with the role of the specialist librarian transitioning — for those who choose to accept

this role — into knowledge leadership as the parent enterprise embraces the knowledge culture demanded in today’s workplace.

Equally important, and perhaps more so, has been the valuable SLA Alignment Project, first started in 2007 (and for some reason that I can’t understand, simply ignored within the association for the past few years and even more disturbing, with no reference the Alignment Project to be found at the SLA website).

According to one description of the project, it was created to focus on “identifying tactics we can use to strategically align ourselves with our organizations....” Three tactics – as Amy Affelt termed them in her paper about the project (also no longer available at the SLA website) – could be used to drive alignment between specialist librarians and their employing organizations:

- Developing language to explain what we do and the variety of services we offer;
- Quantifying the deliverables, value, and intelligence we provide; and
- Cultivating the unique skill set and specialized knowledge that are hallmarks of our profession.

In her report, Affelt noted that project research identified three findings that, as we think about the role of the specialist librarian as the organizational knowledge services strategist, “three mission-critical contributions” are expected of that professional employee:

- Unique knowledge regarding the information sources available and how they can best be used in your organization’s unique setting;
- Assurance that you are aware of the “newest and truest” sources of information and are making that information available to the organization; and
- Best practices in the most efficient use of information resources.

To codify her recommendations to specialist librarians, Affelt produced a list she calls “A Practitioner’s Toolkit,” a list that could, it seems clear, define the role of the specialist librarian as the organization’s knowledge services strategist, knowledge thought leader. You can read the entire list (it’s just seven items) but for our purposes tonight three of her recommendations resonate strongly with what we’re trying to figure out here:

1. Identify who and what you are. The word “knowledge” (Affelt wrote) resonated again and again during interviews with executives — “... it implies a deep understanding of information.” There, in a nutshell, is the call to action for specialist librarians. Their managers and their clients will understand what they do and respect their professional expertise if they are knowledge services strategists or knowledge thought leaders for the organization. They do not necessarily understand what librarians do, even specialist librarians.
2. Seek out champions. SMR International’s Senior Consultant Dale Stanley emphasizes the company’s emphasis on sponsorship. For any knowledge initiative to succeed (and hopefully to exceed expectations), a top-down commitment to the support of the initiative and even — when possible — senior management enthusiasm will ease the way and conjure up support from other organizational leaders.
3. Demonstrate your value. Simply put, “contextualizing” your measurement in a way that is meaningful to your firm’s management tells a powerful story. Use — as Affelt puts it — “confirmed data” to describe and support the value of specialist librarians as knowledge services strategists.

So for us — and especially for those of us who are members of the Special Libraries Association — we are a wildly scattered bunch of people. Indeed, I remember someone back in the late 1992 once attempted to list the job titles that SLA members go by, and he quit when he got to something like 180 titles.

So it’s probably too late to ask where we are going. We need to back up, and ask who we are.

And asking that question raises lots of other questions.

If I were at the mid-point of my career and thinking about the questions Pam raised to me to address tonight, here's what I would do:

I would start with myself, and before I got into thinking about what **profession** I'm part of (because — after all, let's be fair about it — SLA has long had a strong contingent of members who are not graduates of established LIS programs), I would want to ask some questions about myself, about what kind of work I'm doing, whether the research, information management, and knowledge services I provide relate more to a **profession**? Or does my work relate more to the subject area of the business of my employer? Or to me and what I **myself** want to be doing with my career?

And if I'm going to belong to an association, what's that association's purpose? How does it affect me and my success in my own workplace? A professional association should have a mission and a vision, and its values should ensure that the association is member-focused and member-driven? If I'm going to be in an association that benefits me, is my association **member-focused** and **member-driven**? Or does the association exist to support itself as an association? And how does that particular framework support me in my workplace?

So let's take our SLA as an example. At SLA for some years we've identified the organizational mission as a three-fold one. SLA was expected to provide three elements that support our careers: education, networking, and advocacy. But how many of us now turn to SLA for these three elements?

Regardless of the subject specialty of the company or organization where I'm employed, regardless of whether it is a for-profit, non-profit, or not-for-profit organization, my work — in some way — is expected to support the organization as a knowledge culture (just as I outlined that environment in the epilogue to my centenary history of SLA, published in 2009).

What about our organization? Is SLA a "knowledge culture"?

And if we're going to think about the future of SLA and what SLA has to do with the profession (does it have an impact?), and if we're going to think about why continuing to work together (even if in new ways and with new people) may not be a bad thing, let's put it in context.

Everything's changing. SLA is changing. So let's put this whole situation in the context of change management and strategic thinking, one of the very subjects SMR International offers to SLA members in the Certificate Program we have presented for the last ten years, and which Dale Stanley and Deb Hunt and Scott Brown are continuing to present (I've retired from this particular strategic learning activity).

And since change management is Dale's particular area of expertise, I asked him what he would say to SLANY members if he were invited to participate in this discussion. Using Dale's good thoughts, and adding some of mine, this is what I think he and I would offer to you:

- If we look at what's going on in our organization's current situation, our population of resisters to change has a very loud voice right now. Complaining about the process is a symptom of resisting change.
- Keeping the overall desired outcome in mind is difficult; it's easier to look at what's being lost and to just be negative, resist, or give up. Especially when communications have been poor. One lesson for us at this point: "Don't do something permanently stupid because you are temporarily upset"
- Whatever we do, let's not form opinions based on unsubstantiated data and rumors. Of course we wish there were and had been more transparency than there was over the past ten or twelve years, but it is what it is. We can't do anything about that. Decisions on the future of SLA should be based on facts and realistic goals, not emotional reactions to poor communications, and I hope that's how decisions will be made in the future.

- So I'm pretty much of a "fence-sitter" right now. We haven't heard a sufficiently tangible "business case" for what's going to be happening with SLA. But quite frankly, I (and Dale and a whole bunch of other folks I could name) will be willing to embrace what's happening if we need to do so. Since I'm not one of the association's leaders, I'm not sure what's going to happen but that's not my job at this point.
- And, again quite frankly, rather than join the resisters who base their "solutions" on their emotional and negative resistance to changing "their" organization, I'm trying hard to believe (hope?) that SLA will survive and come out stronger and more relevant to today's information professionals. As I think I've indicated, in terms of what we do in the workplace, we're not librarians. We don't really know what we are, so we can't establish a direct path to success at this point. Indeed, perhaps a merger and/or an association management company and perhaps re-chartering (certainly as part of the process) will be necessary. We just have to wait and see.
- And I'm not willing to say, yet, what one SLA member (who has been a member even longer than I have been) said to me the other day: "Well, I guess we're going to be kissing SLA good-bye, aren't we?" I said "No, we aren't. Indeed," I said, "we won't. If we're lucky, we'll be kissing hello to an even stronger SLA. Or something we can proud to belong to in place of SLA."
- And if these don't work, we'll go back to what I suggested to the other past-presidents and other members (and to association leaders) in Boston: We'll start all over and, if we do it right the next time, perhaps starting from scratch without an "SLA" to build on, we'll be a stronger, more reliable, more responsible, and more rewarding professional association. Perhaps not an association of librarians. Or of information professionals. Or even of knowledge services strategists (which — as you can guess — is what I would like to see us become!).
- Whatever we become, we'll learn from this lesson of the past six years. We'll learn from the lessons of the past one hundred years. We might be broke. We might not have conferences. We might not have the 7,000 members we hear we have now. Or even 25, to begin with. But as we try to work it all out, we'll keep learning and this time we'll do it right.

It might take some time, and I might not be here with you, but our principles, our leadership in the knowledge development, knowledge sharing, and knowledge utilization process (led by people like us, remember), indeed our very belief in the value of networking, knowledge-sharing, and strategic learning will take us far. And we and the places where we're employed and — indeed — society at large will be better off because of what we've done and what we've contributed.

Good luck to you all.

Thank you.

**The Speaker.** Guy St. Clair is Lecturer in Knowledge Services, Postbaccalaureate Studies Program, School of Professional Studies, Columbia University in the City of New York. He is also the President and Consulting Specialist for Knowledge Services at [SMR International](#), a New York-based consulting practice focused on change and its impact on people, organizational effectiveness, and the management of intellectual capital within the larger enterprise. Guy St. Clair was president of the Special Libraries Association (SLA) in 1991-1992. He can be contacted at [guystclair@smr-knowledge.com](mailto:guystclair@smr-knowledge.com).