

THE DAWNING OF THE KNOWLEDGE CULTURE

SLA: 1990-1999

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SLA had moved very successfully into the much-heralded “information age.” Indeed, the association found itself in a surprisingly influential role, as business and research turned to its members for assistance and guidance in keeping up with all the changes brought about in this new epoch. As for SLA’s operational framework, the desire to move to a virtual association was not in question. By the middle of the previous decade, the association’s leadership, staff, and the membership at large were ready for and expecting a virtual association. As such, SLA would provide services to its members, its supporters, its vendors and suppliers, and to its wider public regardless of where they were located. By 1990, it was obvious that the association’s members and SLA leadership wanted the organization to be virtual. The only concerns had to do with what resources could be expended in building the infrastructure, how the move to a virtual association might provide enhanced methodologies for service provision for members, and how quickly it could all be accomplished.

The groundwork for the virtual SLA had been laid over many years, looking back to the beginnings of documentation in the 1930s. Under President Molholt’s direction in the mid-1980s, the advantages of a virtual association began to become clear to all. Several years later, writing just before she assumed the presidency of the association in 1996, Sylvia E.A. Piggott described what service delivery in the specialized library would be and by implication what SLA would be: “a seamless, borderless service, a place where information can be sought from wherever it exists and can be used immediately by local or remote customers.” In his own report at the same time, Executive Director Bender also talked about the move in this direction, predicting that as the association moved into its future, becoming a virtual association would result in strengthened staff skills, a strengthened relationship with members, a strengthened global infrastructure, and a strengthened financial position for SLA.

And why not aspire to the same level of service delivery for the association's "customers," its members and all the other stakeholders affiliated with or attached to specialized librarianship? After all, "virtual" simply refers to the fact that something without a physical connection can, by imitating a physical connection, provide whatever is being sought. In the 1980s, it had become clear that the electronic delivery of information would become the norm; by the 1990s, it was equally clear that the cumbersome physical requirements of earlier times would give way to an electronic and faster service delivery. It was also becoming clear, according to most of the association's leaders and senior staff, that SLA as a virtual association would be empowered to provide better and higher-level services for its membership and, at the same time, play a more substantial role in the knowledge services policy arena, a role that, for a variety of reasons, had not been as strong in times past as it might have been.

There is no doubt but that the convenience, ease of transmission, and speed of virtual service provision were required. As SLA moved further and further into the international knowledge services arena, the old ways of doing business were not sufficient. An immediate example was the difficulty of servicing international members, for no matter how strongly some of the leadership felt about bringing networking and the opportunities for professional advancement to the global workplace, the costs and other difficulties of servicing those members continued to escalate. These barriers, combined with the difficulties of financing their membership for many in the international community (especially potential members in developing countries), seemed to provide just the ideal framework for moving the association to a more virtual structure.

Certainly the times were right, for if any single frame of reference could be said to characterize the 1990s, it would be the ever-present and continuing obligation, on the part of almost every citizen of most Western countries, to pay attention to global issues, and certainly that was the case for practitioners of a discipline as all-embracing as knowledge services. Every day, events were taking place that seemed to shock and at the same time to propel people to look to the future. In the waning days of the previous decade, the upheavals in the countries that had made up the Soviet sphere became more and more intense, and with the resignation of the East German government on November 6, 1989, the way was open for a new era in world history. In fact, the image of the opening of the flood gates is often invoked, and certainly by four days later, the mass of humanity pouring through the opened Berlin Wall made it clear that regardless of the goals that had been put forward for Communism, they were not going to be achieved. Commenting on the elections that were beginning in the former Communist countries in February, 1990, historian Martin Gilbert stated simply that "changes inconceivable a year earlier were taking place." Surely that was the viewpoint of most people. The unexpected had suddenly happened. Events fell into a continuing pattern: the disintegration of the U.S.S.R., the fall of Communism, the

freeing of Nelson Mandela from prison, the first Gulf War, the attempted coup in Moscow, the first treaty banning chemical weapons, the Oslo Accords. It was an amazing period of history, and SLA in its leadership role and in its services to its membership—growing more global all the time—was required to respond.

Indeed, SLA could not afford not to respond. A quick overview of some of the advances in information technology sets the scene: in 1990, Microsoft Windows was introduced, and within three years, the U.S. Government officially went online, a fact that had serious implications for the association now that its headquarters was in Washington and its daily interactions necessarily coincided with those of the Federal government's information planning and service delivery. Two years later, e-commerce was introduced and by the end of the decade, some 90 million users in the United States and Canada were estimated to be "online," the descriptor which had now become standard in describing how people dealt with information transfer. Resonating strongly with SLA's membership—simply because of their role in the business and research environment—Thomas Stewart's seminal cover story about intellectual capital in the June 3, 1991 issue of *Fortune* set the stage for the transition from the focus on information in the information age to the coming focus on *managing* knowledge. "Intellectual capital," Stewart wrote, "[is] the sum of everything everybody in your company knows that gives you a competitive edge in the marketplace." And who knew better in 1991 what everybody in their organizations knew, what they were working on? For specialist librarians, the promising framework for connecting information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning was being built. SLA's members were ready to take on their leadership role in the process of delivering knowledge services to their clients.

At the association, the decade had begun with the establishment of SLA's Information Services department (although as noted in the previous chapter, there had been for a while a manager of information services, with responsibility for running the association's own special library). In 1993, the association itself was online, with its first connection to the Internet (the address was sla@capcon.net). Two years later, an online discussion list was set up for SLA members, and the next year, in 1996, SLA went "live" (as the expression went) with its own World Wide Web site (www.sla.org).

In the larger management community, and naturally affecting the approach which managers of specialized libraries and knowledge centers took in carrying out their duties, the running theme in the decade emphasized quality management, proceeding from the emphasis on quality in the previous decade and bringing TQM, re-engineering, and related subjects to a high level of interest and concern with organizational leaders. Closely related—and connecting with events playing out at the international level—was change management and change implementation, a subject much studied and given attention in

the association's publications (both in its serial publications and in the books SLA published) and in the many professional development seminars and workshops that were provided for members.

There really is no way to describe adequately the impact of technology and the continuing development—almost an *onslaught*, if that word isn't overly dramatic—of products designed to take advantage of the advances in information technology. All librarians and information professionals were seriously affected, and while some resisted (one of the association's former leaders made it famously clear that he was not about to use electronic mail), this monumental change in information delivery was not only destined to affect librarianship at every level, advances in information management would, in fact, make librarians' lives easier and, particularly important in specialized librarianship, more productive. So the changes were embraced, sometimes enthusiastically and occasionally reluctantly, but within SLA, the move toward a virtual association was a move that would only, when all is said and done, benefit the association and its provision of services to its members.

As the decade opened, authors writing for *Special Libraries* were enthusiastic about exploring what they would soon begin to think of as the virtual management of information, just as they had been in the previous decade when the move to advanced information technology had begun. Important articles appeared almost immediately, describing such subjects as the viability of CD-ROM technology for libraries, computer viruses, and the role of the Internet in the work of specialist librarians. That such knowledge development and knowledge sharing was taking place is not surprising, considering how the development and utilization of technology in the previous two decades had so impacted the association and its members. In its own way, the decade of the 1990s was equally energetic, technologically speaking. Software tools created in the decade now enabled not only online searching and document sharing, but learning and the ability to customize online services specifically designed to the needs of individuals. Utilizing information technology, specialist librarians and their clients could now work together, and the librarians could be part of the research team. Part of the success was due to the development and dissemination of tools that enabled the integration of internal and external sources of information, a state of affairs that had been a dream of specialist librarians for a very long time. Scientists, engineers, and other clients could access both in-house and external materials in a seamless information transfer process, one that both Miriam Drake and Sylvia Piggot (both to be presidents of the association) wrote about. Organizational leadership, too, became welcome customers of specialized libraries as they learned that, using the information technology available to their specialist librarians, they could compare internal information with external information, thus seriously enhancing their own process for critical decision-making. By the end of the decade, digitization of hard-copy documents and access to documents "born" digital meant

that a great mass of information was now available to all special libraries clients, and SLA's members took to their new role in information mediation with much enthusiasm.

By the middle of the decade, the concept of virtualization in the management of the specialized library had become so ingrained that an entire issue of *Special Libraries* was devoted to how information professionals might take advantage of this move to a new way of conducting a library's business. James M. Matarazzo, Associate Dean at Simmons College, edited the issue, and such articles as "The Journey from Vision to Reality of a Virtual Library," "The Realities of the Virtual Library," "Management Models and Measurement in the Virtual Library," and "Business Sources on the Net: A Virtual Library Product" all extolled the virtues of virtualization for specialized libraries, with the clear suggestion—for the association's staff and leaders—that such advances in information technology could be equally practical in association management.

So as change came to all other levels of society and to the professions, so it came to the association, and particularly in the 1990s. This change in specialized librarianship continued throughout the decade (one leader—describing the findings of the President's Task Force on the Value of the Information Professional—characterized the change as a "transcendence"). By 1997, Bender was able to demonstrate that the work of SLA's members had moved in a very different direction, one that was, in a way, a direction back to what had been envisioned when the association was formed some eighty-eight years earlier. By 1997, though, that delivery of information was moving in exactly the direction society (and the employers of SLA's members) required. Specifically, according to Bender, information delivery was and would more so in the future be "focused on the customer."

Of course we try to focus on the customer now. In fact, we always have, but we haven't always succeeded. Now we'll succeed. Do you know why?

Think about where we are. Think about the classic definition of the special librarian, the one we all learned years ago, that the special librarian is the person who manages a special collection for special clientele with a special need. And do you remember how, in special libraries, we led the way in moving from offering information services that were "just-in-case" information services, when we tried to acquire and shelve everything we could get our hands on, so we would have it "just in case" someone asked for it? ... Then we went forward with something we're all very proud of, the now-famous "just-in-time" information delivery, in which we special librarians became information consultants and information explorers, listening to the clients describe what they need, and then providing it "just in time."

Well, we're moving even further ahead now, [and] that's where I think we're going to be as we begin the 21st century. We're always listening to the information customers, of course, and hearing what they need, but now in addition to mediating and consulting, we're analyzing and interpreting, and customizing, and providing information that I like to characterize as "just-for-you." It's a powerful, very powerful paradigm we're dealing with here, and that, in a nutshell, is the history (so far!) of special librarianship. We've gone from 'just-in-case' to 'just-in-time' to 'just-for-you.'

Experiencing such change would, naturally enough, have considerable influence on the way specialist librarians would think of themselves, and it was not long before attention to leadership, empowerment, and similar subjects were being written about for the members of the association. Equally important was the emergence of a new focus on the specialist librarian's authority and strength in the parent organization, and there was considerable emphasis on such topics in SLA's publications and professional development offerings. In fact, interest in these kinds of subjects was widely generated, and when it was not automatically part of the new specialist librarians' way of performing, the association's leaders made it clear that it should be. Susan DiMattia, for example, writing in an issue of *Special Libraries* focusing on leadership and empowerment, described how the new attention to these skills paid valuable dividends not only to the information professionals employed in the specialized library, but to their organizations as well. The emphasis on the specialized library as a corporate or organizational information center began again to be a new focus—as had been the case a couple of decades earlier—but now there was a new twist, as the librarian role evolved into that of corporate intelligence professional (as Jane C. Linder wrote about it in *Special Libraries* for the Summer, 1992 issue) and competitive intelligence made its first appearance in the association's roster of affiliated subject areas.

These new directions for specialized librarianship were discussed often within the association, and SLA's various units—its chapters, divisions, and, now, its caucuses, as well its committees and leadership—all put forth efforts to support the membership as similar changed responsibilities were identified in the organizations where the association's members were employed. One of the most productive activities for these discussion was the association's annual conference, of which the 88th Annual Conference, held in Seattle WA in 1997 is a good example. Attended by 6,395 members, the conference was the association's second largest conference to date. In an important presentation, Bill Gates, the founder and chairman of Microsoft, provided valuable insight into how the industry was changing and how those changes impact the leadership role of specialist librarians in their parent organizations.

"It's no exaggeration," Gates said, "to say that in most industries, the basis of competition will be on how a company deals with information. Now as we talk about this being the information age, there's no doubt that libraries will play a much more central role than they ever have before."

Then, in a smoothly orchestrated transition, Gates called upon the Microsoft Library's Intranet Specialist, Amy Dunn Stevenson, to join him at the podium to describe the company's recently developed MSWeb. This internal tool had been created with the specific goal of enabling all company employees, regardless of where in the world they are located, to interact with the library's specialists in finding information solutions. It was an impressive demonstration, and having Dunn join him in his presentation was a subtle acknowledgement to the association's members (and one not lost on the attendees) that—for Gates—the specialist librarians' function in the corporate environment is critical and significant.

At another session SLA member Eugenie Prime, in a splendid change of pace, delivered a dynamic keynote address urging colleagues to position themselves at the forefront of organizational efforts for success. She focused on giving critical examples of how knowledge workers and information professionals think about themselves in their professional capacities and she urged SLA's members to identify and build on their own professional strengths. Her presentation, entitled "A Practitioner's Perspective: The Fault, dear Brutus" and her rousing enthusiasm for her colleagues' role in their organizations had conference attendees standing and cheering, sending them out from the conference inspired to approach their professional work from a new perspective.

Within specialized librarianship, and especially within SLA, one result of the new attention to the authority and professional strengths of the specialist librarian was a renewed focus on marketing, promotion, and public relations. It was not necessarily a new subject of interest, for "getting the word out" had been a goal of specialist librarians for many years. Indeed, the association had long given serious attention to the marketing of specialized libraries within the organizations where they were to be found. Concurrently, the association leadership's own interests in marketing the specialized library had led to considerable effort in marketing and public relations for SLA itself. So the idea of marketing was not alien to the membership or to the association's leaders and staff. By the 1990s, though, one could discern an interesting range of activities, a trend that would affect the association's operations and relations with its members for the next twenty years or so, for now semantics entered the picture, and (as was emphasized by the many different job titles assigned to the information professionals who worked in specialized librarianship) there began to be concern about the effect of the word "librarian" in the professional lexicon.

Certainly part of the problem was simply one of ignorance. As access to information became not simply easier and faster but, as had been seen in the previous decade, such an entrenched part of the daily life of most people (especially people who before the information age would have known about libraries and what they were for, and who had made use of them), so the lay-person's understanding of what happened in a "library" and the work of the "librarian" changed drastically. This general lack of understanding quickly, as the decade of the 1990s approached, became a real misunderstanding, probably for a number of reasons. Certainly the connections to education and the role of the authoritative librarian, like that of the authoritative teacher, contributed. Since the 1960s, as society in general encouraged students to think for themselves and to rely less on the authority of such people in their lives as parents and teachers (and presumably librarians), and as education itself began to be thought of as not as rigorous as it perhaps should be, a general perception of laxity in intellectual discipline began to manifest itself, and not surprisingly, the societal urge to find blame focused on the parents and teachers.

For information professionals working in specialized libraries, the implications were serious. These were information specialists—with skills in the effective and efficient management and delivery of knowledge services—who could not rely on the notion of the "preeminent good" (as referred to dismissively in the report of the Task Force on the Value of the Information Professional) of the library or information center to ensure its continued support. Neither could specialist librarians, as one professional leader put it, count on their organizational managements to accept the belief of some in society that libraries are "innately good." In most cases, specialized libraries were supported by private and not public funds, and the concept of the specialized library as a "library"—as "libraries" were perceived by the general lay public—simply did not hold up in the mission-critical world in which specialized libraries were to be found. Thus the "image issue" that had so concerned some of SLA's leaders (and many others) was not simply an image issue. It was a semantics issue, a descriptive issue, for until those with management responsibility for specialized libraries could change the way *their* managers thought about, determined the role of, and provided support for the organization's specialized library, that role would be seriously compromised. Specialized libraries were not like other libraries, and the seriousness of the issue became in the 1990s a particularly difficult and divisive one for the SLA membership. SLA's much-praised diversity and its broad standards of inclusion also contributed to considerable confusion among its members and, it must be recognized, no small amount of awkwardness. As its members (and particularly its leadership and staff) attempted to relate their work on the one hand with the larger library and information science profession and on the other with the specific requirements of this branch of the profession's "competitive and capitalistic" connection for its members, the picture presented was not clear at all.

Obviously there was no easy solution, because what we are describing here was a societal change, an effort to re-frame a long-held perception and one that linked directly with society's perceptions of itself in moralistic, good-and-bad terms. Nevertheless, there was quite naturally much agonizing and discussion, especially by specialist librarians with management responsibility for the delivery of knowledge services in those organizations where "librarianship" and "return on investment" were required to co-exist. Many attempts to influence the thinking of others who lived and worked outside specialized librarianship were made, and some were particularly effective, primarily because the association's staff and leaders recognized the significance of the issue. They directed or helped direct a great deal of attention to such concepts as the marketing of the specialized library, the achievement of excellence and quality in specialized librarianship and the demonstration of that quality in the larger organization, and the importance of change management and the ability to accept and implement change. Similarly, the role of the information audit (later the knowledge or knowledge services audit), with its emphasis on the value judgment implied in the use of the term, and other management-focused tools such as strategic planning and client relationship management (CRM) with its attendant user surveys and focus groups, all came to play an important part in changing the perception of the specialized library (which in many organizations was referred to as almost anything *but* a "library"). Attention to these subjects was an important service to the association's members, particularly as the operational function (the "special library" or whatever it was called in the parent organization) itself was pared down due to the increasing availability of electronic information delivery. In fact, during the decade, in an attempt to move toward the much-written-about "paperless office," many organizations re-framed their specialized libraries so that the information professionals could telecommute from wherever they were located, and the rising trend toward libraries as a source of information and not necessarily as a physical space was given much attention, just as Piggott had predicted.

The development of the association's attention to—and ultimate focus on—the role of the specialist librarian as the organizational knowledge thought leader can be seen to have evolved during this confluence of influences. The concerns of SLA leadership and staff with the value of the information professional; leadership interest in the application of accepted management practices as the association's administrative framework; the fact that the majority of SLA's members were employed in business and research organizations for which the strength and support of the specialized library connected directly with its contribution to the success of the organizational mission all came together at a time when the association was ready to move from its earlier role as a traditional library association to one of leadership in the now firmly established information age. The virtualization of the association and its services, in this context, was only a natural and reasonable application of

service delivery practices that were being adopted in all service agencies, in greater and lesser degree and with different levels of success.

When she became president in 1989, Muriel B. Regan's interest in changing the public perception of specialized librarianship and in working with the profession's practitioners in helping them change their perceptions of themselves positioned the association for the changes that needed to take place. As the findings of the Task Force on the Value of the Information Professional and changes in the management community began to be discussed and analyzed among the association's membership, leaders, and staff, the association found itself in the happy position of enabling what appeared to be a serious growth in productivity among its members at their jobs. Regan was succeeded as president by Ruth K. Seidman, whose career had been in the military and in the scientific and technical research field, and she, too, was interested in having the association move forward in embracing quality management practices for ensuring that SLA's services for its members were the best they could be. Seidman continued the good partnership with Executive Director Bender that Regan had wisely developed (for he, too, had embarked upon a serious and noteworthy commitment to building management strength for SLA, particularly through his involvement with the Greater Washington Society of Association Executives). As the last decade of the century progressed, it became clear that the management of the association was in good hands, in terms of developing and providing services of benefit to its singular customer base, the association's members.

During the decade, the role of specialist librarians and the services they provided became something of a central focus for much of the association's effort, and once again qualification management and the organizational role of the specialist librarian were given attention. In early 1991, a new commission was appointed by President-Elect Guy St. Clair. The President's Commission on Professional Recruitment, Ethics, and Professional Standards, popularly known as "The PREPS Commission," had a specific charge, to focus on how the association and its members could encourage the best, the brightest, and most qualified people to enter the field of specialized librarianship. Emphasis was to be given to the unique role that specialist librarians play in information management, with the study commission looking at the issues of recruitment into specialized librarianship, ethics and the place of a code of ethics for specialized librarianship, and standards and basic competencies for the discipline. The commission's work built on, as its chair Mary Dickerson described, "...the premise that special librarianship is a unique branch of the profession of librarianship; that despite the great diversity within special librarianship itself, special libraries nonetheless have different missions, focuses, and purposes than libraries in other branches of the profession."

The members of the commission worked diligently to pursue their objective, and they never lost sight of their goal of gathering and disseminating background information that would enable the selection of “the best and the brightest” for careers in specialized librarianship. Under Dickerson’s able leadership, the commission (Andrew Berner, Bill Fisher, Jennifer Jones, Muriel Regan, and Lou Parris) was able to present to the Board of Directors in June, 1992 a set of recommendations designed to serve as guidelines for moving the association in the direction SLA’s members seemed to want it to go. After the commission’s report was received and discussed by the board, it turned out that more work was called for and President Catherine “Kitty” Scott extended the commission’s term for another year, to report at the June, 1993 meeting of the board.

The work and influence of the commission was a major step forward for the association, as it sought to codify some of the concerns associated with information services and the management and delivery of information by practitioners who had been educated as librarians. For the year the commission was appointed, the chosen presidential theme had been “Special Librarians—Preparing for Tomorrow Today” and that theme of emphasizing the recruitment of “the best and the brightest” for specialized librarianship was a formidable challenge for the association. Indeed, four years later it was picked up again, this time by Judith J. Field who during her presidency described her vision of SLA as an organization that “will incubate the best information professionals for the 21st century.” Such goals were certainly the motivation for the appointment of the PREPS Commission and perhaps even for the development of the SLA competencies statement, described below. In identifying how SLA’s members could recruit the brightest and best people into this branch of the profession, the PREPS Commission was also issuing a challenge, asking SLA’s members to recognize that the difference between specialized librarianship and other types of librarianship was a very real difference, asking them to contemplate “if perhaps the time has not come to separate ourselves from others in the profession and promote that we are, in fact, an entirely different branch of the profession?” Of particular concern—as had been the case throughout SLA’s history—was the fact that graduate programs in library and information studies did not provide sufficient particular attention to the skills and competencies required for success in specialized librarianship. In its findings, the commission noted that professional learning for specialist librarians could be expected to be provided in the future through another avenue, presumably through training, continuous education, and professional learning offered through professional organizations like SLA or through commercial learning providers.

Thus the face of specialized librarianship continued to change, and as it did, perceptions about this branch of the profession began to change as well. By the mid-1990s, it was clear that specialist librarians and information professionals—the very people who made up the membership of the association—were indeed thinking about themselves very differently

than they had in earlier times. In fact, the focus shifted from themselves and their own perceptions of themselves to the influence that they brought to their professional workplace, and it was time now to change the way management and organizational leaders thought about specialized librarianship and information management. Scott was succeeded by Miriam A. Drake, and she and the other elected presidents (Edwina “Didi” Pancake in 1994-1995, Jane Dysart in 1995-1996, Piggott in 1996-1997, Field in 1997-1998, L. Susan Hayes in 1998-1999, and leading into the new century, DiMattia in 1999-2000) took seriously their responsibilities to ensure not only that the role of specialized librarianship was recognized for what it contributed to business, research, and society at large, but that the practitioners were also recognized for the valuable skills and competencies they brought to their work.

Following the work of the PREPS Commission, those competencies became the subject of the association’s next major effort, to devise and deliver to the business and research community a standardized framework for establishing criteria for successful performance in the information profession. When she was the association’s president in 1994-1995, Pancake named a Special Committee on Competencies for Special Librarians. In May, 1996, this committee presented to the SLA Board of Directors a document titled, *Competencies for Special Librarians of the 21st Century*, which identified and described key competencies required for the successful management and delivery of excellent information services.

The publication of the report of the Special Committee on Competencies for Special Librarians—together with the publication, slightly later, of the monograph—might arguably be characterized as one of the most important events described in this history. For the first time, the emphasis was on the people who work as information professionals and not on facilities, collections, services, or products. Indeed, the significance of the work was well understood by all involved, including not just the special committee but the association’s leaders, members, and many with whom they came in contact in the broader information management community. Wide distribution of the committee’s report was in order, and a handsome executive summary was printed and distributed to the Human Resources departments of Fortune 500 companies, to all members, library schools, and the American Library Association’s Committee on Accreditation (which had accreditation responsibility for library and information science graduate programs in the United States).

Yet broader distribution was called for, and since the association’s new role in the global information arena was now well established, the document was translated into French, Spanish, German, and Japanese and these and other copies of the document were distributed throughout the world. An electronic version of the document was available at the association’s now established website, leading one Australian information manager to publish an imperative to all with whom she came in contact: “If you download no other

document from the World Wide Web, this is the document you should download, read, and distribute to everyone who has anything to do with hiring and evaluating special librarians.”

As demonstrated by this kind of activity, the decade of the 1990s might be considered (and is so considered by many) the time when the association came into its own as a global organization. In his State-of-the-Association address in June, 1990, a presentation entitled “Changemakers in a New World: An Unparalleled Responsibility,” Bender commented on what was happening in the world with a dramatic reference: “The year that has passed since our last annual meeting has been one of tumultuous political change. When we met one year ago, Vaclav Havel, a poet and playwright, sat in a prison cell. Today that once imprisoned playwright is the President of Czechoslovakia....”

At that same annual meeting, Ruth Seidman in her inaugural address spoke about “The Information Professional and the International Arena,” setting out her theme for her presidency. Commenting on the trend toward globalization, particularly as it affects information professionals in both the private sector and in the non-profit sector, Seidman asked: “What is SLA’s role in all of this? I believe that we are uniquely positioned to provide leadership in this increasingly global picture. SLA is an international organization, with strong chapters throughout the U.S. and Canada, and with a European chapter. Our Hawaiian-Pacific and Western Canada Chapters, as well as those on the West Coast of the U.S., have contacts throughout the Pacific Rim. Arizona Chapter members have been working with special librarians in Mexico, who are very interested in our activities.”

President Seidman’s commitment to studying and understanding the association’s global role was further demonstrated in a paper prepared for the membership (“Information Rich, Knowledge-Poor: The Challenge of the Information Society,” published in the Winter, 1991 issue of *Special Libraries*) and in her own book on the subject *Building Global Partnerships for Library Cooperation*, published in 1993. Of note, also, is the emphasis on international information matters that was conveyed through the association’s journal with Donna Scheeder, to be an SLA president in the next decade, editing an issue of *Special Libraries* (Winter, 1990) on the subject.

Picking up on the importance of the association’s international role, Bender’s 1993 address to the members linked the SLA’s activities in this direction directly to what was going on in the world at large. He began with a reference to President Bill Clinton, “not for partisan purposes, for that is not the purpose of the Association, but rather because many of the issues he summons us to review and rethink with an urgent intensity are issues that will profoundly affect the future course of the Special Libraries Association.... issues that, to my view, are paramount to the future direction of the association....”

The Executive Director continued, leading up to a forceful challenge to the association and its members:

President Clinton observed that ‘by now we are woven inextricably into the fabric of a global economy ... nearly three-quarters of the things we make in America are subject to competition from foreign producers and foreign providers of services.’ Whether we see it or not, our daily lives are touched everywhere by the flow of commerce that crosses national borders as inexorably as the weather. Thus President Clinton set the stage—‘service, capital, and products have become global.’

But, most important to the association and its membership, President Clinton stated that: ‘Information has become global, indeed it has become king of the global economy.’ Finally, concluded the President, ‘Today the principal measure of our wealth is information—its quality, its quantity, and the speed with which we acquire it, and adapt to it....’

Consider that last statement. Is that not a significant summing up of what each of us does in our way in our own workplace each day? Of course it is. We are the information generators and managers. This is the core of our professional being....

The association continued its commitment to strengthening its global role, and the list of achievements during the 1990s in this area is indeed impressive, beginning with the subjects of several of the association’s famous State-of-the-Art Institutes (“Information in Eastern and Central Europe—Coming in from the Cold” in 1991, “The European Single Market: Implications for Information Managers” in 1992, “Latin America: The Emerging Information Power” in 1993, and “Southeast Asia—The Information Age” in 1995).

Structurally, too, the association advanced, with the establishment of SLA’s Arabian Gulf Chapter in 1993, and at the end of the decade, in 1999, the formation of the Asian Chapter. At the same time, SLA was particularly strong in creating strategic alliances with other organizations, some already successful in their work (such as IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations) and others which were just beginning to develop their programs and frame their influence, such as FORO, the Transborder Library Forum (El Foro Transfronterizo de Bibliotecas). Officers and leaders attended conferences of organizations such as the International Agricultural Librarians and similar groups, and further work was done in Moscow with the Parliamentary Library and other specialized libraries as participants sought to evaluate the potential for further collaboration between the association and specialist librarians in Russia. Serious efforts, ultimately successful, were

made to strengthen the association's European Chapter and to bring forward at the end of the decade the association's next specifically designated international congress, in Brighton, England. SLA's conferences, too, began to take on an international flavor, and the 1992 SLA conference in San Francisco is a good example. Although the conference did not have a particular international focus, a look at the list of programs available to members at the conference makes it clear that the development and sharing of information and knowledge at a global level had become the "hot button" for the association and its members, with 16 substantive programs directly related to the subject.

While attention to a role for the association in the international information community was a driving force in the efforts of the leadership, there were many other issues that also required focus as SLA moved into its role as a virtual association. One such area was government relations and public policy having to do with library and information science issues. At the association, senior staff led the effort to identify strategies for public information policy, particularly as it related to specialized librarianship, and the opportunity for an important contribution from the association came with the second White House Conference on Library and Information Services held in Washington, DC July 9-13, 1991. Specialized librarianship was well represented, with several of the association's leaders having taken organizational roles at the state level to lead in the preparation for the conference and several attending as official delegates or delegates-at-large. At the conference leadership level, Beth Duston (later Beth Fitzsimmons) served on the WHCLIS Advisory Committee with particular responsibility for technical information issues, and it was Fitzsimmons, appointed in the next decade to chair the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, who took the particular concerns of specialized librarianship to the conference. She felt honored, she later said, to be on the WHCLIS Advisory Committee because it had long been her concern that the extreme interest of conference delegates in giving so much attention to societal matters would be at the expense of information management issues of concern to the scientific, technical, and business spheres.

The White House Conference was structured to look at three conference themes: library and information services for literacy, democracy, and productivity. In an attempt to ensure that all parties were informed about SLA's concerns, a special issue of *Special Libraries* was published prior to the conference. A number of papers were published, in order to provide background from the perspective of specialized librarianship for delegates to the conference, and to describe pertinent issues for association members. That attention at the conference was expected to be given to the non-traditional world of libraries and librarianship was evident in the choice of the three themes, and certainly productivity as a subject to connect with specialized librarianship was an appropriate one. In fact, one of the speakers at the conference, from the business world, commented that at his company, the

specialist librarians were referred to as “information counselors,” a remark complimenting a similar description put forward by SLA President Frank Spaulding several years earlier.

As conference preparations got underway and as SLA’s leaders and staff participated in the conference, relevance seemed to have evolved as a general theme. Indeed, from some perspectives relevance could have been the theme for the decade of the 1990s for the association. Special efforts were made for providing membership services and programs that would enable specialist librarians to achieve recognition as leaders in their parent organizations. At the same time, there was growing attention to positioning SLA as a leading organization in the developing knowledge society. Specialized librarianship—like other forms of librarianship but arguably even more so—was required to be relevant to the people whose success was based on the services provided by specialized libraries, and for the association at large, relevance became more important than process. There was not, during the decade of the 1990s, so much emphasis or focus on the association or on management issues and the like because these were well under control. The association, through the cooperation and commitment of the elected leadership and the strength and professionalism of the staff was driven to excel in moving toward relevance. And the development of relevance was not a chance occurrence, as Piggott noted in her inaugural address, which she titled “Keeping Ourselves Relevant in the New Information Age.”

Not unexpectedly, throughout the decade there were objections from some segments of the association membership about the move toward this new perspective. For one thing, the very diversity of the association meant that many (and depending on how they were counted, sometimes most) members were employed in business and STM research. Still, there were pockets of the membership base with allegiance to the philosophies and management approaches of public or academic librarianship, and when those philosophies conflicted with the now well-understood special libraries idea, the association’s leadership naturally sought compromise. Often, as a result, what would appear to be very simple and businesslike solutions in the management world would take a great deal of time, energy, and political maneuvering to accomplish. In this environment, as in all membership organizations, there were complaints about the association’s moving toward a “staff-driven” as opposed to a “member-driven” model, but this did not become a particularly divisive issue. The larger success of the association in the decade was obviously connected to the satisfactory and results-oriented direction that was chosen by the leadership and implemented to everyone’s benefit.

Membership numbers tell the story. At the beginning of the decade, the association had 13,053 members, located throughout the world but mostly in the United States and in Canada. By the end of 1997, membership peaked at 14,727 members worldwide. Then, for a variety of reasons, the numbers began to drop. It would be easy to speculate that the

primary cause for the drop was the decline of the economy, particularly in those areas where information specialists were particularly required to support organizational growth, but there are no firm statistics to support that idea. In any case, by the end of the decade (and the century), the size of the SLA membership was at 13,779, not far from where it had been at the beginning of the decade.

During those busy years, much was accomplished, and it was clear that the association's leaders had been moving in the right direction when they undertook to utilize what Bender characterized in 1989 as "two new tools of broad, futuristic appeal ... to aid us in our move forward." One of those tools was a mandate to increase membership, and the second "roadmap" for guiding the association, Bender said, "is the SLA Strategic Plan adopted by the Board ... [taking] a careful look at our mission and the environment in which special librarians operate."

The strategies chosen in 1989 served the association well, but by 1996 the strategic plan required some re-thinking and a review. This process was greatly aided with a massive data-gathering activity which became known as the "Super Survey." With the results of the Super Survey in hand, and after much discussion, a new plan was adopted in 1997, concentrating, as President Piggott reported, on three broad areas: (1) developing professionals for the 21st century, (2) promoting the value of the information professional, and (3) building the virtual association.

Striving for relevance continued to be a challenge, and it was not an easy or simple task. Whether the reference was to specialized librarians and the leadership role they played in their jobs, or to the products, services, and relationships that the association was seeking to provide to members, there was continually a need to think about how good the future could be, and for the membership to use their virtual association to accomplish that good. To this end, Bender "appropriated" (his term) concepts from CEO Jack Welch of General Electric and applied them to the guidance and governance of the association. For Bender, the challenges were obvious, and they would be met successfully if SLA's members and leaders could:

- Have a passion for intelligence
- Be open to ideas from anywhere
- Have the self-confidence to involve everyone in decision making and leadership
- Create clear and simple visions... and communicate them to all
- Have enormous energy and the ability to energize others
- Stretch... set aggressive goals, reward progress... yet understand accountability and commitment
- See change as an opportunity... not a threat!

These visionary goals, as they were often referred to, provided an important backdrop for the association's accomplishments in the 1990s, particularly in the management, implementation, and role of the SLA Professional Development Program during the decade. The 1990s had begun with high levels of concern—on the part of both members and association leaders—about the role of the association as an educational organization. Of course continuous education was the mainstay of the program. A wide variety of subjects were undertaken and offered as members recognized that change and change management required new and not necessarily readily available skills (or skills they had learned in other branches of the profession as they began their careers outside of specialized librarianship, which was typical for many specialist librarians). At the same time, the focus on competencies provided an enormous stimulus to professional development programming. Several distance education programs—building on the professional development “tours” at the end of the last decade and the beginning of the 1990s—were very popular (in one president's report, these were acknowledged as having been “more wildly successful than our grandest dreams”). By 1998, to much success, the association was able to implement self-paced online courses, an educational benefit for members that was much requested and the foundation for more sophisticated such offerings in the next decade.

In addition to this different focus in the association's professional development offerings for its members, there was another very specific change in the association's framework that was singularly important, demonstrating that the members of the association did, indeed, see themselves as working professionals and not as academic or scholarly researchers. This was in the area of the association's publications, and specifically with respect to its journal, *Special Libraries* (now a quarterly), and *The SpecialList*, the newsletter-type monthly publication intended to bring association news and less scholarly information to its readers.

These, too, had run their course, and David Bender described their demise to the membership in June, 1997:

Special Libraries and *SpeciaList* completed their final year of publication in 1996. The interest expressed by the membership to receive more timely information management coverage coupled with increased advertiser interest prompted the Board of Directors to discontinue the two existing serial publications and create a new monthly magazine to take their place. The last issue of *Special Libraries* (Fall 1996) was a special retrospective edition that featured articles and advertisements that were printed in the publication since its birth in 1910.

In January 1997, *Special Libraries* and *SpeciaList* were officially retired, welcoming a new four-color monthly magazine—*Information Outlook*. The new official publication of the Association provides members and subscribers with even more timely, cutting-edge, and in-depth coverage of issues pertinent to information professionals working in a global environment.

So by the middle of the decade it was beginning to appear that the SLA's connection with knowledge, as in its famous "putting knowledge to work" motto from the association's earliest days, was now vastly different from its connection with data and information, and certainly very different from what had gone before. This was a new era in using knowledge, in *managing* knowledge. The new discipline of knowledge management was being given serious attention in a number of scientific, business, and technology environments, positioning the association and its members for developing a knowledge services focus. When it came, as it did in the very near future, the new focus would be based on providing association members and the organizations they worked for with information management (including librarianship, and particularly including specialized librarianship), knowledge management, and strategic learning that met their specific needs and those of their employers.

For SLA, this new focus was both an intellectual and a practical development, and it was evoked by Judith Field when she was inaugurated as the association's president in 1997. This new attention to knowledge was creating a "new renaissance" for specialized librarianship. Field characterized the change as moving the discipline from a role as "gatekeeper" to opening "gateways" for those who used the services of the association's members. It was an important distinction and one that—at this particular time in the association's history—would resonate both with the membership and in the larger society:

We are at the crest of a new renaissance and we are seeing the rebirth of our profession and our association. We can now identify emerging evidence of this long-anticipated and very promising future. Our members are assuming roles of Chief Knowledge Officer, Chief Information Officer, Webmaster, and Knowledge Manager. Some members have become very successful as entrepreneurs and others have been able to justify the insourcing of their services. Most interesting is that some of our members are now being asked to serve as internal consultants to their organizations. The time has come for us to start praising ourselves for our accomplishments.

To praise ourselves, Field said, because the members of SLA have the competencies, skills, and talents to take on the leadership of the new renaissance. “The information age has matured,” she said, and she challenged her colleagues to move forward with the logical next step: “It is time to focus on what we need to do to adapt to the knowledge culture...”

These were the very words the association and its members needed to hear—to hear and to heed. The knowledge culture was ready, waiting for SLA’s leadership. Building and sustaining the knowledge culture was the role SLA and its members were born to play, and it could not have been a more appropriate connection. Indeed, it was such an appropriate and natural role for the association that it seemed almost too obvious. The information age was indeed mature, and so was SLA. The association was ready to take its leadership into the new century and into a new knowledge age for the members and their parent organizations. The association was ready—and prepared—to realize its founders’ vision. It would have made them proud.