

SLA at 100:  
From “Putting Knowledge to Work” to Building the Knowledge Culture

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It all began with an idea, the idea that specialist librarians were different.

The people we today call “information professionals” and “knowledge services professionals”—the people who—in the simplest and most popular definition—“strategically use information in their jobs to advance the mission of the organizations in which they are employed”—the idea was that these people were different.

Here’s why: At the turn of the last century, library practice—as understood by most people (and, indeed, as understood by many people today)—related to the management of libraries with a much different mission than that of what we now call the specialized library.

Their mission was something along the lines of what I generally refer to as the profession’s “missionary” purpose: to educate, to uplift, to make people “better people” if they became readers.

It was all very noble, and very proper, and there’s not a thing wrong with that concept of librarianship.

In fact, it’s part of the fabric of our lives, particularly our lives as Americans, and in many respects that kind of thinking defines us as Americans.

But that wasn’t us. We specialist librarians and information professionals were doing something else, something very different, and it was clear to the people who started the Special Libraries Association that the general tenets of librarianship—what we might refer to as “traditional” librarianship—were not appropriate for the work they did.

Indeed, by 1909, some of them were even beginning to think that a separate branch of the profession might be needed, so in July of that year, some twenty of them decided to take a chance, to do what they could to move the profession—or at least *their branch* of the profession—in a new direction.

They were colleagues, friends, and professional peers, all attending a conference at the Mount Washington Hotel in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire.

They knew that they required a new kind of librarianship, a version of library service geared to meeting the requirements of specialized situations. Just what that new “version” of library service should be they couldn’t say. They even admitted that “it is too soon to say in just what manner this new form of service would be rendered,” as one of them put it, but they knew they had to try to do something.

Why so? What was wrong with librarianship as it was being practiced? It was the focus on reading—the primary method for the formal delivery of information at the time—and with all the grand attention to the value of reading, attention that of course was rightfully directed, these people had learned that reading is not just for the student, or for the reader simply interested in reading.

According to these early specialist librarians (as they thought of themselves) what is read also has to be practical, to be utilitarian. As John Cotton Dana would later put it, reading “must also serve the industrialist, the investigator or scientist...” It must also, he said, serve the businessman, a point made by Dana as he himself struggled to provide library services for business people. Through his professional work, in three different public libraries, Dana had concluded that businessmen were too busy to read, and that was just the point:

“I am not asking the businessman to **read** books,” he said. “I am suggesting that we persuade him to **use** some of them.”

It was a vital distinction, and it would become an important driver as specialized librarianship began its development.

So there they were at the Mount Washington Hotel, and Dana, from the Newark Public Library and F. B. Deberard of the Merchants’ Association of New York... called a group of colleagues to the verandah of the hotel to talk about how they could address the demands of their work.

And even though they weren’t at all sure about what their discussion would lead to since Dana was leading the discussion, they expected to come away from their “Verandah Conference” (as it came to be called) with some direction, some plan to move forward as they grappled with the issues that inhibited their work.

What would it be? What would they come up with?

As they talked, they realized that they needed a new organization, an association of people like themselves, librarians who would lead a “movement” (yes, they used that term, without apology), a new movement that would replace the old library method, which they described this way:

Select the best books, list them elaborately, save them forever—that was the sum of the librarians’ creed of yesterday....

The new library creed must be: select a few of the best books and keep them, as before, but also...

select from the vast flood of print the things your constituency will find useful...

make them available with a minimum of expense

and discard them as soon as their usefulness is past.

So meeting on the verandah of the hotel, these first specialist librarians took matters into their own hands. They wrote a Constitution and on July 2, 1909 they signed it, coming together in an effort they all described, in later years, as a signal act of collaboration, one that, they fully expected, would enable SLA to grow and prosper.

Looking back, Dr. John A. Lapp had his own memories of the day. Later to take on the editorial responsibilities for *Special Libraries* and to become famous as the originator of the specialist librarians’ motto, “Putting knowledge to work,” Lapp wrote in a memoir in 1932:

We cut down the forest or at least blazed the trail for the march of the idea that knowledge stored up in books should be brought into use, that channels should be opened up and kept clear from the library shelf to the user of knowledge, and that knowledge should be focused at the point where it is needed and at the time needed.

By the end of the year, the nascent SLA had held its first meeting in New York City, a meeting at which Dana—SLA's first president—spoke eloquently about the role of specialized libraries in society:

... here in the opening years of the Twentieth Century ... men of affairs are for the first time beginning to see clearly that collections and printed materials are not, as they were long held to be by most, for the use simply of the scholar, the student, the reader, and the devotee of *belles lettres*. ... [They] are useful tools, needing only the care and skill of a curator, of a kind of living index thereto ... to be of the greatest possible help in promoting business efficiency.

From this initial burst of enthusiasm, it did not take long for SLA to prove successful, and the next summer more than 100 members attended the association's second conference. By January of the following year...

Dana was proud to report that it had been

“the announced purpose ... from the beginning to promote cooperation among libraries doing special work. ... During the first year the chief aim has been to put special libraries in touch with each other ... In looking back over the year's work this seems to be the best claim which the association has for credit...

that an unknown field of library and semi-library work has been discovered. ... Special libraries are coming into a vigorous life. Their value is established. They are a business asset to any private or public organization. They are not established and maintained as a matter of sentiment, but as a cold proposition of dollars and cents. They must be useful in every-day practical problems. They have become indispensable ... [and] their spread is rapid....

It was a heady time, these early days, and the special libraries movement was attracting attention throughout North America. By working together—by “promoting cooperation,” as Dana had noted—our early leaders were giving strength to the idea that they had struggled to bring forth at Bretton Woods.

Much of their success, of course, had to be due to their enthusiasm.

And their commitment.

And we must give them credit, for they were just about the most successful time management experts in history. How they did it all we'll never know.

Lapp, for example, was not only the editor of *Special Libraries*—which grew from eight to sixteen pages immediately, with “greatly enlarged editions” for special subject coverage. He put together the *Public Affairs Information Service* for SLA, and he ran the Indiana State Library (just how they found the time to do all that traveling is a mystery to me).

And while we can't describe the work of all of these early volunteers, we can look at one of these truly remarkable SLA leaders, Miss Rebecca Rankin.

Just reading about her tires us out!

In her professional work, Rankin was responsible for service delivery and the management of New York City's Municipal Reference Library, and she later created the New York City Archives.

She served as SLA's president in 1922-23, bringing to her leadership role a program to enhance the association's reputation. In that capacity she contrived a plan to bring local associations of specialist librarians into the larger SLA. Then, still as our president, Rankin initiated and followed through to completion the revision of the association's constitution.

In the 1930s, Rankin served as a special liaison to the city government, the New York Public Library, and, once he came into office and made clear his interest in libraries and making information more available for the citizens, to the famous “people's mayor,” the “little flower” Fiorello H. La Guardia.

But wait for it. There's more.

Later in the decade Rankin produced and participated in radio shows about specialized librarianship, broadcast through the facilities of the New York City Municipal Government. Then, when the association came to Baltimore for its conference in 1939, Rankin expanded on her expertise and served as “interlocutor” (yes, that's the term they used) and held forth with twelve panelists on three evening radio broadcasts presented by the association.

Fondly remembered as New York's unofficial “biographer,” Rankin continued to manage New York City's Municipal Reference Library until her retirement in 1952, and now a recent biography of Rankin gives us even more reason to wonder about the amazing time management skills of our early leaders!

So they worked together, these early specialist librarians, and that working together was a big part of their success. They were totally committed to a level of collaboration that stood out, that pushed them to go that clichéd “extra mile,” because they knew that their contribution would benefit them all.

“It was a period of close-knit unity,” a later SLA president, Edythe Moore, would write, “where both individual and shared responsibilities were highlighted. It was networking at its best—many decades before the concept of networking began to be talked about by more tradition-oriented librarians.”

And it paid off handsomely. By the end of the decade of the 1920s SLA had over one thousand members and its leaders fully expected to continue that growth.

The new decade started with a bang, despite the beginnings of the Great Depression that began to take shape after October, 1929. For one thing, SLA's members continued to enjoy themselves, perhaps relating to the cooperation and collaboration that had been so much a part of the association's early years. What seemed to be new now was an apparent interest in just "having fun."

There was, for example, their theatrical production "Rather Special" which was created for a meeting in New York and performed again at an Annual Conference (and, yes, Rebecca Rankin was involved in this too, producing the show and taking a leading role.) Yes, the show depicted some librarians as drab and dreary and rather stereotypical...

But the rewards came later. Apparently the show had something to do with going to heaven (Rankin's character was called "Peterette"), and the gates of heaven were opened to these good workers (note the built-in halos!)

But there were very serious aspects of SLA at this time as well. As the Great Depression began to take hold, SLA's members responded. They continued with their networking, of course, publishing directories of specialist librarians so they could contact one another directly, just as we do today.

And then there was all that knowledge sharing, the published subject bibliographies, their meetings, their very useful journal. These people were becoming knowledge development and knowledge sharing experts long before we were born, but now there was even more specific knowledge sharing, with the association setting up "emergency exchanges for unemployment relief" and publishing lists of "barter exchanges," where members could barter for goods and services (since there was no money to pay for things).

Then there was the devoted attention of the association's active Employment Committee, seeking to register all specialist librarians in order to have candidates ready and at hand the minute a position became available. It, too, had its challenges, with the chair (Rankin again!) noting in 1935 that "we have been inclined to consider and call it the **Un**employment Committee."

Yet progress kept being made, and the association's membership kept climbing—up to 1,700 members by 1935, with fifteen chapters, ten groups (what later became our subject divisions), and eight national committees, all against the background of the Great Depression.

As for the members' day-to-day activities in the workplace, by the end of the 1930s...

Beaumont Newhall, the librarian of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, was writing that the special libraries idea was well established and that modern librarianship in America truly had moved into the realm of the practical.

For Newhall, putting knowledge to work meant that specialist librarians had a responsibility to take a **militant offensive** (as he called it), to **present** the specialized knowledge stored up in specialized libraries, in order to—as he put it—de-specialize knowledge.

"We can put knowledge to work for other than those specialists we immediately serve," Newhall wrote. "By cooperating with the advertising office, the publicity department, or the instruction division of our respective businesses or institutions, we can spread abroad that special knowledge of which we are the custodians."

Then, as the 1930s moved forward, there were the war clouds, first hanging over Europe and the Pacific and then closer to home. The coming war was much discussed, and association meetings became forums for talking about the threatening global situation, and of course the subject of political isolation was of great interest. Canadian leaders at the SLA conference in Montréal pleaded with its United States neighbors to reconsider its isolationist stance and to take a leadership position.

And then, as we all know, we had no choice.

The war came, with its devastation uprooting everything that SLA's members held dear, both as human beings and as working professionals. The association's very strength was put to the test.

Looking back, it was—we're happy to report—a test SLA would pass with flying colors, for during those awful years the association would take on a number of activities that, in the end, actually reinforced SLA's role as the primary resource for the members' professional needs and those members' indispensability to their employers.

SLA published much advice for its members, about propaganda activities, about how to deal with documentation needed by members' clients, about transportation issues for sharing printed materials, about the lack of European and later Asian scientific writings simply because they could not be shipped due to the breakdown of international transportation.

These and many other activities, such as the work of the association's National Defense Committee, its work to coordinate the services of the library community, its guidance to members in using their organizational skills for the benefit of the larger enterprises where they were employed—all came to characterize the association in a time of great trial.

And our members' efforts were recognized...

On June 17, **1943** President Franklin D. Roosevelt commended SLA's members.

“Your task as special librarians is one relating immediately and exactly to fighting that war to its inevitable successful conclusion,” the President wrote.

“You are the guardians of our technical knowledge. Through you must work the chemists and the engineers, upon whom depends in large measure the ultimate success of our fighting forces...”

You know what it means to work. You know what it means to keep long hours in the research libraries of the plants which are turning out the planes and guns and tanks upon which victory depends.

It is your privilege instantly to give to the men who design these materials of war the information which they must have. A moment's delay on your part in supplying that vital material means a delay in winning the war. ...

You ask for no recognition. You work anonymously and unsung.

But you are doing your job along with the army, the navy, and the air forces on America's front line.

Victory did come, but not without sacrifice, a level of sacrifice unknown to future generations. We have no record of how many of the association's members served in the war, and we do not know how many of them lost their lives in this great effort, but there is no question but that the sacrifices of these professional workers, like those of all Americans, were greater than any we as a people have been called upon to make.

Yet with victory the association was now able to further continue its work, still taking the special libraries movement forward. It wasn't always easy, and it was sometimes unsettling, for now SLA found itself moving beyond its pre-war picture of itself, with its role embraced on a much larger scale. It was a larger, more influential role and it reflected how the association had begun to identify some of the trends in society that supported the growth of specialized librarianship.

Membership growth contributed, too, with association membership growing to more than 4,300 specialist librarians at war's end, a remarkable 150% rate of growth in six years. For it to have occurred despite—indeed, perhaps because of—the war is equally remarkable.

Yet there were challenges, and foremost among them was the rise of the famous information “glut.” Scientists and leading researchers simply could not handle the enormous quantities of information being generated and the management of developed knowledge (to say nothing of sharing) was reaching a crisis point.

For specialist librarians, it was an exceptional opportunity, for they had it in their power to become the leaders of the new—as it would be called—“information age.”

But it didn't happen.

By the 1950s, our much-discussed special libraries “movement” was well established. And we were not shy about telling the world that specialized librarianship could provide the information that industry, cultural, political, and societal leaders needed to answer the questions that continually confronted them.

Indeed, from our perspective today we might see it as something like a new version of that “missionary zeal” of 19<sup>th</sup> century librarianship except that now, with us and with specialized librarianship, our special libraries “movement” had transitioned into a “missionary” role that looked not at the world at large but to bringing the maximum benefits of specialized libraries to the organizations where our members worked. And we weren't subtle about it, for as the decade progressed and the special libraries movement advanced, practitioners spoke with enthusiasm about their role.

And by 1955 we now—finally—had a formal definition of the discipline, put together by the awkwardly named Committee to Formulate Definitions on the Fundamental Characteristics of Special Librarianship. It was a definition that made a certain sense:

The profession of special librarianship and documentation is the science of selecting, evaluating, organizing, and disseminating information in special fields of knowledge and the art of integrating and adapting information resources to the needs of a particular institution or clientele.

It was a new way of describing the profession (or our branch of the profession), and for the first time in specialized librarianship's ongoing efforts to define itself, the specific concept of documentation—the bringing together of useful information on a particular subject (*i.e.*, documenting a subject) without regard to the form or format of that information—was attached to specialized librarianship. And it was an important connection, as historian Robert V. Williams has written, convincingly describing specialist librarians as the first American documentalists.

But for some of SLA's members, there was still a fundamental question to grapple with:

Were we to be “librarians” or were we to be “documentalists”?

Resolving this issue, it turned out, was one of the major challenges we as an association had to deal with, for despite the 1955 approach toward a new definition – one that included linking specialized librarianship and documentalists – it did not turn out to be a comfortable fit. Despite the fact that the service delivery model that drove the documentalists was exactly what specialist librarians did for their parent organizations, there was pressure for specialist librarians to continue to think of themselves as librarians and to continue their tight connections with the firmly established library profession, rather than to see themselves as part of what was emerging as information science.

We wanted to be thought of as librarians first and foremost, and we wanted the documentalists to see themselves as part of general librarianship as well. As for the documentalists, they wanted a new profession, a new discipline.

It turned out to be, sadly, a situation that could not be resolved. And in the end, it was not.

Was it—as some have described—“an opportunity lost”?

Specialist librarians were, after all, the first American information professionals with a service commitment to the success of the organizations that employ them. Did we—by choosing to remain affiliated with general librarianship—lose the opportunity to move into a position of strength, a position of leadership in our organizations? Did we make the right choice?

We can't say, but nevertheless, this attempt to reconsider their work enabled them to continue the advance of the special libraries movement. Their objective was to meet the specific **practical** and **utilitarian** information, knowledge, and strategic learning needs of their parent organizations, and they continued in that direction, with their work now even being recognized in mainstream America.

In the mid-1950s William Marchant's *The Desk Set* opened in New York, with Shirley Booth in the role of Bunny Woods, the role Katherine Hepburn would make famous in the film.

At about this time, professionalism became a major concern for specialist librarians as we tried to figure out whether we were professional librarians or employees. At one SLA convention, for example, a guest speaker defined a profession as “a group of men and women who develop conscious standards of work to which they hold themselves and one another responsible.”



Certainly that defined us, but it wasn't good enough, and just as SLA members had to deal with C.P. Snow's ideas about the two cultures in the librarian-vs.-documentalist debates, so William Whyte tested them as they thought about their role as librarian-vs.-organizational employee.

In 1957, Elizabeth Ferguson interviewed Whyte on the subject. In the interview, Whyte—the author of the best-selling *The Organization Man*—discusses the “inevitable” conflict that, as he put it, comes up when the individual and the organization do not share the same “ends.”

For Whyte, it was a matter of perspective.

“More and more,” he said, “we're finding professionals in every kind in business, and the professional now has two allegiances: one to the organization and the other to his profession. ... This is a real antithesis. It sometimes can be mitigated, but there is often a parting of the ways. The question is—to which allegiance must the professional remain **most** faithful?”

That question of “dual allegiances” led to more discussions about professionalism, and promoting the special library “movement” took many different forms as the decades passed, many of them relating to educating those with little or no understanding of specialized librarianship about our profession.

In one situation we even had to point out to the U.S. Senate that specialized librarianship is not the same as general or traditional librarianship, including in our testimony to that august body these words: “The concept of special libraries or—in better words—the concept of **specialized** libraries is not well known among the general public or even in some segments of the library community itself..” And even as late as 1981, former SLA president Ed Strable was forced to define specialized libraries—for librarians, of all people!—not as safe and secure institutions supported for the public good but as business units characterized by risk and, when no longer of benefit to the sponsoring organization, subject to being done away with. “It's as simple as this,” Strable said. “Specialized libraries spring from and are very much a part of the competitive capitalistic system.”

Well of course. Don't you sometimes wonder why it took so long for others to understand?

Beyond the association, of course, major changes were taking place in the world of information, knowledge, and learning, especially with respect to the availability of increased computing power and the move toward informatics into the realm of specialized librarianship. And SLA was there. By the 1980s our conference exhibits were giving attention to computer-driven technology and computer products.

The world was moving forward, moving into a period in which every day brought news of events and trends affecting the way specialist librarians and information professionals would do their work. All these changes were characterized notably in the work of such people as Tom Peters, Peter Drucker, and Thomas Stewart, with one of Stewart's primary contributions being his identification of enterprise intellectual capital as a critical corporate asset, leading us to knowledge management.

At SLA, we found ourselves moving toward knowledge services, a service-delivery framework in which we would bring together our expertise in information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning.

We begin to give serious thought to how our work was going to be affected, looking at our branch of the profession in studies like that done by the 1991-1993 President's Commission on Professional Recruitment, Ethics, and Professional Standards. Popularly known as "The PREPS Commission," this group's work later led to the publication of *Competencies for Special Librarians of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, possibly the most important publication the association has ever produced.

For SLA, this new focus was both an intellectual and a practical development, creating a "new renaissance" for specialized librarianship, as Judith Field put it in her inaugural address in 1997.

"The information age," Field said, "has matured and we are seeing the rebirth of our profession and of our association."

And it was time, Field said, for the logical next step for us "to focus on what we must do to adapt to the knowledge culture..."

These were the very words the association and its members were ready 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 be a more appropriate connection. The special libraries movement had succeeded, and we now had our mission, our purpose, a mission that defines the very essence of the special libraries movement, to build and, when built, to sustain the organizational knowledge culture.

And thinking about it now, with what we know about ourselves and our strengths, it is such an appropriate and natural role for the SLA's members that it seems almost too obvious.

Why did it take us a hundred years to get here, to bring ourselves to a leadership role in this knowledge culture?

In our knowledge services workplace, we have a working environment in which we, as members of the finest professional association in the world, are positioned to lead.

In very specific terms, we have two opportunities before us, the opportunity to strengthen the relationship between technology and knowledge in the organizations where we are employed, and the opportunity to use our expertise to move into enterprise-wide *knowledge asset management*, the management discipline that takes its roots from asset management, knowledge management, and systems thinking.

In doing so, we transition from librarianship to curating and managing content across the organization. As my friends and colleagues Richard Huffine and Dale Stanley assert, our critical function now is to take **ownership** of the organization's knowledge assets and provide management and service delivery from an enterprise-wide perspective, not from a library or library science perspective.

It's almost a vocation, this leadership role for us, and there is a very real reason why we must go there.

It's because the need is there, a need that today is more compelling than ever.

And to get there we can, if we like, do just as our President-Elect did a year or so ago, and we once again turn to Franklin D. Roosevelt for inspiration...

Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in the summer of 2007, Barack Obama pointed out that when confronted by Hitler and the horrors being perpetrated on humanity, President Roosevelt made it clear that our power for moving forward was based on our strength to work together, to collaborate, to cooperate, to make use of the very strengths that—as we now know—are the critical elements of our special libraries mission.

Or, as President Roosevelt put it, “We are builders.”

For us, as knowledge workers and as leaders in the knowledge culture, how do we build? Where do we start?

We start with knowledge. And with our own expertise in working with knowledge.

And with that, we’ll end this trip down memory lane, this look into the future. Let’s move from information and knowledge and strategic learning over to another subject that’s important to me.

Let’s go to music, back to last September, when Sir Roger Norrington, on the last night of the famous “Proms” concerts at Royal Albert Hall in London, wrapped up the evening by reciting his thoughts about what music does for us.

I heard what he was saying, and I heard (and agree with, of course) how he described the place of music in our lives.

But no, Sir Roger. As I you heard your words, I then thought about it in a different context. I heard something I don’t think you were saying. I heard the word “knowledge” when you said the word “music.”

Here’s what I heard:

Knowledge brings us joy and love  
Knowledge gives us feeling  
Knowledge brings relief and hope  
Knowledge gives us healing  
Knowledge can amaze our minds  
Knowledge can be fun  
Knowledge quickens all our lives

Knowledge makes us one

We—members of SLA after 100 years—are now prepared to be the knowledge leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Our organization has prepared us to lead.

Let us go forth and lead.

Thank you.