

SLA at 100:

Chapter 1 Librarianship and Specialized Librarianship

[Originally published, in a slightly different format, in *SLA at 100: From Putting Knowledge to Work to Building the Knowledge Culture* (Alexandria VA: SLA, 2009) by Guy St. Clair.]

For many, the history of librarianship is the history of civilization. It is not difficult to understand the assertion. Until the advent of the very appropriately named “information age” in the latter half of the 20th century, libraries were only about manuscripts and books. While librarians were respected as advisors, educators, and interested champions of the written or printed page who could—and often did—reveal the mysteries of a book’s content to readers, their primary and assumed role was that of caretaker and custodian. The classic definition of a library was usually (and for many continues to be) something along the lines of “a collection of printed or written material,” with the librarian recognized as the person who organizes the materials and makes them ready for the readers who require them.

Specialized librarianship changed all that. While specialized libraries came into being as a branch or subset of librarianship and originated as collections of materials, they have invariably possessed distinctive characteristics. In the “special” or “specialized” library (both terms are accepted and often used interchangeably), the materials collected are acquired for their relationship to the particular subject, discipline, or field of interest of a uniquely identified group of readers. That readership was special as well, special, that is, in the sense that these readers themselves represented a unique or specific subset or category of society at large. They might be members of a particular profession, the employees of a specific company or organization, or simply a group of people with some other common bond. In all cases, it was that bond that identified them as a group and naturally defined the types of materials that would be collected for them.

It was an evolving additional characteristic, though, that dramatically established that specialized libraries are different from other types of libraries. By 1909, when the Special Libraries Association was formed, the many varieties of libraries which had come into existence over the centuries had pretty much settled into four types: school libraries, public libraries, academic libraries, and specialized libraries. The first three were expected to have something to do with the education of those who used these libraries. In most cases, the relationship with the reader had primarily to do with the library supplying the container or artifact (the book) that contained the information the reader needed. Often, though, that interaction also connected to the library’s educational or teaching role. Libraries—as collections of printed or written materials—existed to provide the materials, but an equally essential part of their mission was to support the education of the reader in learning how to find what he needed. The focus on the reader, when such attention entered the picture, related

· Research libraries, which may be considered a fifth type, generally follow an academic management model.

as much to the reader's education in terms of enabling him to understand the arrangement of the materials held by the library (or how to use particular materials) as it did to the storing and arranging of the materials themselves. Quite naturally the management of libraries evolved over the years into a function in which the library acquired, organized, housed, and made available the materials it collected and, as needed, also providing assistance in educating the reader in helping him learn how to use the library to find what was needed. In most cases the interaction between the librarian and the reader came to an end at that point.

Not so with specialized librarianship. The purpose of the specialized library has always been and still is to support the research requirements of that specific and unique group of clients (not "readers") for whom the collection exists. Or, put another way, the specialized library is a library created to contribute to the achievement of the specific mission of the parent organization that supports the library and for which it exists.

When SLA was organized in 1909, such libraries were collections of printed and written materials, but because of their unique and specific connection with the successful achievement of the organizational mission, specialized libraries quickly moved beyond being simply collections. As for the librarians themselves, as employees, special (or specialist) librarians had an obligatory allegiance to their employers. Their professional role was and is to provide the highest levels of library service that could be provided, with those levels defined by the library's users and/or the organization with which the library was affiliated.

In these organizations, there would generally be little interest among the library's users (no longer "readers") in learning how to use the collections. They required the information contained in the materials, information that they would then use to create knowledge, which in turn would be used in the achievement of the parent organization's mission, often with the advice, counsel, and even the interpretative and analytical skills of the specialist librarian. As library users, these fellow employees were not—in most cases—interested in and did not have time to learn about how to find the information. Their interest was in obtaining the information. As negotiated in the interaction between the user and the specialist librarian that initiates the information-delivery transaction, the librarian has generally been expected to provide that information. In addition, the specialist librarian is expected to provide it in the format required by the user, including, when necessary, information that has been evaluated, synthesized, analyzed, interpreted, and manipulated for the specific benefit of the user and to support the specific purpose of the requested transaction.

These three characteristics (particularly focused "special" collections, a unique and "special" body of users, and a collaborative and distinctly "special" relationship between the librarian and the user) continue to define specialized librarianship. Because of these unique characteristics—particularly the establishment of a collaborative relationship between the librarian and the user—there developed and continues to be a division between specialized librarianship and the other types of

librarianship as practiced in the library and information science profession. This is not to say that school, public, and academic libraries do not offer such collaborative relationships with their users. They often do, and their library customers (students in school libraries, patrons of public libraries, and scholars and researchers in the academy) quite often have expectations that such a relationship will be established when they seek assistance from the librarian. In specialized libraries, there is no choice. The specialist librarian cannot effectively provide services without a collaborative bond between librarian and user.

Such distinctions were not particularly obvious in the early history of librarianship, for they only developed as specialized librarianship evolved into its own distinctive branch of the profession. As the larger field of librarianship emerged as a professional discipline, this fundamental distinction—that specialized librarians provide the information while other librarians help the user find the information—evolved as well. Despite this distinction, though, throughout most of the history of librarianship, all librarians were expected to be and were understood to be members of the same profession.

Because of this important difference between specialized libraries and other types of libraries, the history of librarianship and the history of specialized librarianship are not the same. While the latter is a natural outgrowth of the former, these two branches of librarianship have developed as separate disciplines (not always willingly and not always acknowledged as such). Much energy and effort has gone into attempting to ensure that specialized librarianship, while distinct from what might be called “traditional” or “classical” librarianship, has not separated itself from the larger community of librarians. The leaders of the library and information science profession, library managers, students of library and information studies (as well as scholars of library history), groups of library patrons, resource allocation authorities with fiduciary responsibility for library support, and many others have struggled to avoid the separation of what are essentially two distinct approaches to information delivery, with both of them falling under the commonly accepted rubric of “librarianship.”

As a result, there has been and is much confusion about what specialized libraries are and about what they do. In the perceptions of most people who are not connected with librarianship, all libraries are the same. Those who work as specialist librarians are consequently confronted—on an almost continual basis—with misunderstandings about why the work of the specialist librarian is not the same as that of other librarians. As will be seen, such difficulties have arguably been at the root of much of the tension that characterizes some of SLA’s history. These difficulties have also contributed to some of the strain that has arisen from time to time among the various associations that represent professional library workers.

Yet such tension and such distinctions between the larger profession and the particular subset of specialized librarianship have long been a part of librarianship, particularly since the beginning of the 20th century, the time that gave rise to the formation of SLA. Long prior to that, though, the roots of this division between

specialized librarianship and other types of library service can be seen in the larger history of the two disciplines. Many scholars with concentrations in the history of libraries are quite specific in the role of specialized librarianship in the larger library picture. These include Michael H. Harris, who himself offers a definition of libraries that leaves plenty of room for those libraries created for specialized purposes or to serve a specialized clientele. Harris defines a library as “a collection of graphic materials arranged for relatively easy use, cared for by an individual or individuals familiar with that arrangement, and accessible to at least a limited number of persons.” Harris identifies three categories of collections that influenced the development of libraries in its earliest stages: religious collections, the governmental archive, and organized business records. Harris suggests that the third of these—organized business records—might be thought of as the ancestor of today’s industrial or special library.

Public libraries stand a little outside this neat classification, and there are those who would argue that the public library is a particularly American institution, with the parallel argument that it was in America that the public library as a societal imperative came into being. Over time, the mission of the public library moved beyond reading and book borrowing. Public libraries even became social centers for their respective communities, offering such services as continuing education, employment information, and the like in addition to “usual” library services. At the same time, libraries in and of themselves came to be recognized as one element of “the common good” and became established as one of the signs of a community’s success, so much so that by the early years of the twentieth century, a community was judged—in America at least—as “a good place to live” if it had a house of worship, a school, and a library. For Americans, anything less was simply not good enough.

In some ways, this belief in the library’s inherent good benefited all types of libraries, but in other ways it was detrimental. This was particularly true for specialized libraries, which were not well understood by the general public. By the early 20th century, John Cotton Dana—head of the Newark (NJ) Public Library and long a leader in librarianship—had recognized that the distinctions between specialized librarianship and the broader profession were significant, even critical if service delivery in those organizations that required practical and utilitarian information was to meet the needs of the library’s users. Firm in his belief that better service could be provided to library users when these distinctions are invoked, Dana began thinking about how specialized libraries are different, and how these differences might be exploited for the benefit of library users.

The differences were not always immediately apparent. As Dana recognized that changes were demanded in the management of libraries (what he referred to as “library method”), he was able also to recognize that what is read—the primary method for the formal delivery of information in his time—must not be available just for the student, or just for the reader who is simply interested in reading. What is read, Dana wrote, “must also serve the industrialist, the investigator or scientist, and the social service worker.” Even with his ability to recognize that change was taking

place, though, Dana was not quite ready to specify what the change would be: “It is too soon,” he said, “to say in just what manner this new form of service will be rendered.”

But he was willing to try. Indeed, as the Special Libraries Association was being born and was moving from its infancy to its early stages of growth, Dana published his own statement about this new form of library service:

“The proper view of printed things is, that the stream thereof need not be anywhere completely stored behind the dykes and dams formed by the shelves of any library or of any group of libraries: but that from that stream as it rushes by, expert observers should select what is pertinent each to his own constituency, to his own organization, to his own community, hold it as long as it continues to have value to those for whom he selects it, make it easily accessible by some simple process, and then let it go.”

Dana elaborated, as was his very personal style, on how specialist librarians should carry out this charge by putting forth what he called “The New Library Creed”: “Select the best books, list them elaborately, save them forever – that was the sum of the librarians’ creed of yesterday. Tomorrow it 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 helpful, make them available with a minimum of expense, and discard them as soon as their usefulness is past.”

Yet this new rule was difficult to put into practice, for as Dana and his colleagues were quick to point out, this new type of librarianship was different, a field, as they put it, “not yet greatly cultivated.” It was the formation of the Special Libraries Association that would bring order from the chaos of early thinking about specialized librarianship, and it was through conversations, correspondence, and the conference of 1909 that the effort would begin to take shape, an effort that Dana would later, without apology, identify as a “movement” in library service and library management.

Yet while recognizing the “specialness” of what specialist librarians do, Dana was not shy about expressing some discomfort with the term itself:

The name special libraries was chosen with some hesitation, and rather in default of a better; but it has seemed to fit the movement admirably. It may be said, of course, that every library is in a measure special, in its own field, and that state libraries, libraries of colleges and universities, of medicine, law, history, art and other subjects may be called special. But a special library, and the special departments of more general libraries—like the business branch at Newark—are the first and as yet almost the only print-administering institutions which professedly recognize the change in library method that the vast and swiftly mounting bulk of print is demanding; realize how ephemeral, and at the same time how exceedingly useful for the day and hour is much of the present output of things-intended-to-be-read, and frankly

adopt the new library creed as to print management, of careful selection, immediate use, and ready rejection when usefulness is past.

As it turned out, in the business, research, and scientific communities—the very fields for which the print “flood” that Dana had identified required a “new library creed” in 1914—the flow and overwhelming quantity of information in the later part of the 20th century added a new focus to the role of the specialist librarian. The management of information became a major new thrust, and those who had previously been required and expected to manage print materials now found that they were required and expected to manage information in all its formats. Specialized librarianship became aligned with the growing new discipline of information management. This new responsibility so affected the work of specialist librarians that new and unanticipated techniques had to be devised, and those who had become specialist librarians expecting to guide their users through the print world soon found that they had major new challenges confronting them.

By the end of the 20th century—ninety years into SLA’s history and in the very last month of the century—the distinctions between specialist librarianship and other kinds of librarianship were clearly identified by Professor Marion Paris. Addressing the practitioners themselves, Paris was very specific in describing how specialized librarianship is different from other types of library work and her description of specialized librarianship can almost be seen as an update of John Cotton Dana’s “New Library Creed”:

... In searching for the technical, the obscure, the undocumented fugitive report, or the one final detail that will win a new client, special librarians have always been indifferent [to] walls and boundaries. Special librarians networked long before the noun underwent linguistic conversion into a verb.... Whether the context is a corporation or a museum or a military installation or a specialized academic collection or a research and development laboratory, the ethos of special librarianship veers sharply away [from that of other types of libraries]. ... According to the [American Library Association’s] Library Bill of Rights special librarians are heretics. You practice censorship; you do not as a rule educate your customers; you do your clients’ work for them, you acknowledge and admit that all customers of your libraries are not created equal. Summoning the totality of who you are (in possession of intelligence, education, experience, discernment and no small amount of cultivated prescience), you anticipate needs and cater to your customers. Moreover, it is essential to your credibility and to the continuing prosperity of your libraries that you make judgments about information sources and means of locating them. Means, by the way, that may be unconventional, but invariably their ends justify them. You create new information on demand. Knowledge management is merely a fresh take on your expertise: You collect information, organize it, store it, find it, and you repackage it.

In the 21st century, still further evolution is taking place in the role and purpose of the specialized librarianship. That knowledge management to which Paris refers is one of the three elements that provide the foundation of knowledge services, the convergence of information management (which includes information technology, as well as such diagnostic and delivery entities as specialized librarianship), knowledge management, and strategic learning in support of research, contextual decision-making, and innovation in the parent organizations in which specialist librarians are employed. Just as specialized librarianship had always, either formally or informally, acknowledged the role of strategic learning in its success, and had, as the 20th century progressed, moved from library management to information management, so the new attention to managing knowledge describes yet another role that specialist librarians have been doing all along. Understanding and acting upon the value of the parent organization's intellectual capital is not a new function for practitioners in specialized librarianship. As Paris recognized, knowledge management is simply "a fresh take" on the specialist librarian's expertise. When converged with information management and strategic learning into knowledge services, that "fresh take" moves into organizational implementation at a level that provides tangible and measurable service delivery. In so doing, knowledge services defines the very essence of specialized librarianship, positioning the information professional for providing leadership in building the knowledge culture for the parent organization.