

FUTURE TRENDS IN SPECIAL LIBRARY SERVICES*

By Rafael Ball

1. Introduction

Special libraries all over the world today fulfil a whole variety of different services at a wide range of locations. This diversified spectrum of activities is by no means a recent development. At the time that the Special Library Association (SLA) was founded at the 1909 conference of the American Library Association (ALA), special libraries already had little to do with traditional library tasks. The services performed by special libraries in the early 20th century could be regarded as documentation.

At the 1912 meeting of the SLA, the special librarians took stock of their own self-image and came to the conclusion that a special library always has to be concerned with documentation.¹ At that time, no differentiation was made between documentalists and librarians. For special libraries (especially in companies) activities usually comprised the enterprise's entire information management. Functions and tasks went far beyond traditional basic library work. "The special library as an information bureau" was already a topic at the SLA meeting in 1915. Just three years later, the SLA established the "clearing-house concept". This apparently almost postmodern concept of the library as a clearing house for information is not only on everybody's lips with the flood of information on the internet, but has almost become a matter of course in order to cope with the volumes of data involved.

Even this short historical review shows that special libraries and librarians have long had to cover a broad, diversified and interesting range of services going far beyond that of a general library. In order to more closely define future trends in the work of special libraries, the traditional fields of work will first be presented once again in the following section.

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¹ Robert Williams: The Documentation and Special Libraries Movement in the United States, 1910-1960. In: *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 48(9), 1997

2. Traditional Fields of Library Work

Library facilities have existed for thousands of years as collections of literature and knowledge per se, as places of reading and academic investigation of contents, and sometimes as museums in which books of all sorts are collected. The definition of a library as a business and thus the necessity of adequate control and corresponding management is relatively new.

The traditional tasks of a library can be described as the creation, processing, harnessing and maintenance of library holdings for assigned users. In traditional libraries this usually involves collections of monographs, series and journals in a printed (or more rarely handwritten) form. To achieve this central core function, the classical tripartite structure distinguishes between acquisition, cataloguing and user services. The establishment and formation of holdings is the central goal of acquisition, irrespective of whether the literature is acquired by purchase, donation, exchange or in some other form. The tasks arising are essentially identical and are characterized, on the one hand, by the traditional mechanisms of purchase (ordering, procurement) and, on the other hand, accession. In traditional libraries, accession is part of cataloguing thus characterizing the holdings as the library's property, and consequently serves the user as an identification in the catalogue. Cataloguing is therefore an important step at the interface between internal handling of literature and the users' access to the holdings. Cataloguing enables users to retrieve the literature by listing the materials according to subject and topic. How well the holdings of a library are catalogued finally becomes apparent in the user section. At the interface between the library and user it becomes clear whether the literature has been correctly selected and whether the formal and subject cataloguing is adequate and in accordance with the users' needs, and whether the condition of user friendliness has been properly considered. Conventional definitions of a traditional library as a collection and repository for books representing a locally oriented approach² as well as a function-oriented definition of a library, for example in a recommendation by UNESCO³ presumes holdings of traditional (print) media and standard services.

² Evert, Gisela; Umstätter, Walter (1999) Die Definition der Bibliothek. In: Bibliotheksdienst, Vol. 33, No. 6, pp. 957-971

³ Jede geordnete Sammlung gedruckter Bücher und periodische Veröffentlichungen oder andere graphische oder audio-visuelle Medien, sowie Dienstleistungen eines Mitarbeiters, der für die bequeme Nutzung der Materialien sorgt, die der Leser zum Zwecke der Information, Forschung, Bildung oder Entspannung benötigen". ("Any ordered collection of printed books and periodicals or other graphical or audiovisual media, as well as services by a member of staff ensuring the convenient use of the materials which the reader requires for the purpose of information, research, education or leisure"). Empfehlungen zur internationalen Vereinheitlichung der Bibliotheksstatistik. In: Zentralblatt Bibliothekswesen 85 (1971), p.596

2.1 Acquisition

The central processes of acquisition are the selection and ordering of literature as well as its accession after delivery. The actual purchase requisition, catalogue order entry, confirmation of delivery, invoicing and checking delivery are among the detailed steps in this process. Traditional literature such as printed monographs, journals and series is usually acquired in familiar ways. The literature is selected on the basis of printed, traditional selection sources in the form of brochures, announcements and publishers' information. The actual order is usually placed as an order letter or by fax. The media in a digital library are of an electronic nature. They include CD-ROMs, e-journals or other electronic information frequently provided online via the WWW. Selecting and ordering this literature has to break new ground. Orders are often placed electronically by e-mail or directly with the provider on his home page.

Even the actual distribution of electronic digital information is uncharted territory for many libraries. Instead of the familiar delivery by post and then opening the package, incoming inspection, stamping and the (traditional) accession process, delivery is now frequently effected electronically: as an ftp file, e-mail, attachment or even retrieved from the Internet by a password. Nevertheless, acquisition and classical collection building remain a traditional task of general libraries.

2.2 Cataloguing

In order to make holdings available they must first be catalogued formally and with respect to subject in a more or less complicated system. Only then can a library be used in the strict sense.

Traditional media are catalogued by traditional cataloguing departments in traditional card catalogues or in OPACs. The media are thus indexed according to author/title and subject and provided with certain "imprints" as physically identifiable media. The medium is given a shelf mark for a concrete physical location in the stacks or reading room. The formal and subject description and also the location is therefore quite clear. In the case of electronic and digital media, this type of processing becomes blurred. Instead of a physical location there is a server address, a drive specifier or a URL.

2.3 User Services

The traditional activities of the user services consist of satisfying the users' requirements with the aid of traditional holdings in reading rooms and stacks. The new electronic digital documents must also be made available to the user. The concepts for presenting the holdings are still based on traditional media and must

be completely revised. Against the background of the discussion on "holdings versus access", the way in which the holdings are presented will become an issue of the "organization of the information environment". This does not only require reorganization but also rethinking. Completely new strategies must be developed so that the supply of information will also be adequately ensured in future with electronic and digital documents. It is impossible to present holdings of electronic information with traditional literature methods. Instead of a reading room classification system and stack shelf marks, virtual access must be realized via electronic interfaces. The issue of user friendliness is transformed into software ergonomics.

This has an enormous impact on the activities and qualifications of the staff in the user services departments. However, in spite of all innovations user services still remain both a classical and central task of traditional general libraries.

3. Special Library Services in the Business Environment

3.1 Position of (Special) Libraries in Society and Business

Special libraries usually also always fulfil the classical functions of general libraries. Over and above this, special libraries also make a decisive contribution to the respective supporting organization, whether it be a company, a research institute or some other type of organization. The permanent development, adaptation and optimization of the customer- and/or institution-oriented service portfolio is also necessary in order to legitimate the library's work, especially against the background of a still rather poor image of libraries and library work. An IFLA study confirms this negative image⁴. The following quotation concerning the image of libraries and librarians worldwide was taken from a 1995 IFLA study:

"The public's general image of the profession and practice of librarianship is poor. The reputation of the profession is low and as a consequence the status of workers in it is also low. The situation is not exactly the same all over the world but it does exist everywhere to varying degrees, and the picture is a fairly accurate one for most countries."⁵

⁴ The Status, Reputation and Image of the Library and Information Profession. Proceedings of the IFLA Pre-Session Seminar Delhi, 24-28 August 1992. Eds. Russell Bowden and Donald Wijasuriya. Saur, Munich, 1994

⁵ Cf.: Prins, Hans, de Gier, Wilco: The Image of the Library and Information Profession. A report of an empirical study undertaken on behalf of IFLA's Round Table for the Management of Library Associations. Saur: München, 1995, pp.11

The following reasons are given for this situation⁶:

3.1.1 Library Work invisible to Users

The librarians' active work is not concretely visible to the majority of users, nor can they distinguish it from other tasks in the library. A great deal of important work central to the library's tasks, such as collection building and catalogue updating, takes place behind the scenes. In the same way, most users are unaware of management responsibility, for example for the acquisitions budget.

The social and democratic dimension of library work, which may be defined as free access to information and literature, also remains practically hidden from the public.

3.1.2 Economic Dimension of Libraries

Libraries are not assumed to make an economically measurable contribution to society, the company, or the scientific institution. In balance sheets libraries are only mentioned as causing costs and expenditure. An economic contribution by the library to the success of the overall concern is hardly ever found.

Cuts in the acquisitions budget and the comparatively low salaries of library staff further contribute to the poor image of libraries.

3.1.3 Quality of Service

The quality of the various services provided by libraries can neither be perceived nor assessed by the vast majority of users. The quality of library services therefore tends to be assessed as below average. The internal assessment of library quality has too long been oriented to "inside" values, and libraries and librarians (especially in Europe) have ignored the user as the direct recipient of service quality for much too long. The standardization of service quality in libraries has only begun to take shape in the past few years.

3.1.4 Quality of Training

On the whole, training in librarianship has a rather poor image throughout the world. Doubt is cast both on the quality of the training courses and the teachers, as well as on the quality and motivation of the students. Criticism of the traditional syllabus of librarianship courses is particularly widespread. There is generally considered to be a lack of service-oriented training at schools of librarianship worldwide.

⁶ Cf.: Prins, Hans, de Gier, Wilco: *The Image of the Library and Information Profession. A report of an empirical study undertaken on behalf of IFLA's Round Table for the Management of Library Associations.* Saur: München, 1995, pp.21-23

3.1.5 Professional Image

The professional image of a librarian is very diverse and tends to be rather diffuse. The essence of a library profession is difficult to identify. There are too many tasks performed by librarians, which could also be undertaken by other occupational groups. The spectrum of library activity ranges from support work in the stacks up to management and the political representation of a library. It is not possible to clearly define the job profile as is the case for a doctor, lawyer or engineer. This all has a negative impact on the status and image of a librarian.

3.1.6 Fragmentation of Knowledge⁷

Libraries can no longer be regarded as the repository of world knowledge. Due to the pluralistic (knowledge) society, libraries are no longer able to offer all the theories, opinions and ideas that exist in all fields of knowledge. The flood of information and opinions has caused libraries to fall behind and has seriously damaged their image.

3.1.7 Legitimation of Special Libraries

Special libraries have particularly close relationships with their customers and occasionally rather complicated interconnections with their funding bodies. These libraries are rarely prescribed by law so that their existence is not guaranteed by the government. They thus have to legitimate themselves anew each day so that special libraries in particular have to achieve a good standing with users and funding bodies:

- special libraries depend directly on their funding bodies
- conversely, the specific requirements of the funding bodies of special libraries are frequently directly dependent on the performance and quality of the library
- special libraries make a direct contribution to the corporate goal
- special librarians must and can usually work efficiently in small teams
- as a consequence of the new information technologies, special libraries are increasingly exposed to direct competition with other information providers to a much greater extent than general libraries
- special librarians are usually completely responsible for a broad range of activities

⁷ Detemple, Siegfried: Werbung für Wissen. Die Öffentlichkeitsarbeit der wissenschaftlichen Bibliotheken in der postmodernen Situation. In: Bibliotheken, Service für die Zukunft. Ed. V. Hartwig Lohse. Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1994

- special libraries and special librarians have to reestablish their legitimation day by day; only rarely is a special library prescribed by law
- the impacts of work in special libraries are much more directly visible and noticeable for users.

3.2 Fields of Work for Special Libraries Today and Tomorrow: Selected Examples

Special libraries are frequently termed the avant-garde of librarianship. This is correct to the extent that special libraries usually do not merely react to changes in their (information) environment, but already foresee and influence developments in a proactive and anticipatory manner. Such libraries are therefore rarely passive but rather frequently decisive and actively shape trends and developments. Active library work thus continually creates new services for the users. Innovative actions by special libraries and their librarians therefore represent proactive innovations involving imaginativeness but also (conscious) risk taking.

In the following, a few examples are given of other infrastructural services which can be provided in the science sector:

- integration of the translation and language services of a university or research establishment into the organizational and structural responsibility of the library,
- publishing functions performed by a library
- establishment of a proof-reading service for scientific manuscripts,
- organization and permanent installation of exhibitions and lectures on the sole responsibility of scientific libraries,
- establishment of a new acquisition management involving suppliers and document delivery systems,
- outsourcing of functional areas with staff participation,
- establishment of new collection fields such as the integration of software collections into a library's holdings,
- performance of archiving services by the library sector,
- cataloguing of archive materials and making finding books and databases available to users,
- establishing a dossier service for company executives or university management with respect to political and historical issues,
- maintaining a database of publications by an institution's staff,

- undertaking a semi-qualitative and quantitative assessment of lists of publications submitted to appointments committees,
- complete remodelling of a library's legal form depending on their overall legal integration into the corresponding educational system.

4. Summary and Outlook

In future, special libraries will react even more flexibly and will have to provide a service for their funding bodies and users which is not only perfectly tailored but also proactive. They must be prepared to share responsibility or actively shape changes ranging from permanent change management up to reengineering processes. Continual optimization of services as well as sensible information management are required to make an optimum contribution for the company or supporting institution.

In our media society, whoever is uninformed and unable to communicate no longer exists. A presence in the public eye and the propagation of a positive image are basic prerequisites for operating successfully in all sectors of the market. Users and funding bodies are no longer prepared to accept and finance institutions whose performance and efficiency are no longer adequately in evidence. Particular significance is thus attached to image building as a long-term instrument for public relations. Only a positive image will ensure that services remain useful and successful in the long term and will at the same time provide libraries with new opportunities of doing even more for their users.

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