

## **REVISING THE GERMAN SPECIAL LIBRARY STATISTICS: A QUANTITY-TO-QUALITY INITIATIVE\***

**By Eberhard Janke**

**Abstract:** In times of economic turbulence, library statistics are an important and powerful management tool - provided these data are representative and consistent. Considering the special libraries' response to statistical surveys they are far from that in many countries, as has been verified for Germany and the UK. Consequently, special libraries as a whole risk becoming an "invisible segment" in the library world. In view of this "alarming" situation, Germany has started an initiative to revise the relevant part of the national library statistics. The revision strategy developed by a recently instituted expert group is described, and first work results are presented. The necessity of permanent statistics marketing for special libraries is pointed out and initial activities are reported. The paper concludes with an invitation to the library community to comment on the revision approach and to exchange experience and expertise.

### **Everything in order in the "world of statistics"?**

In times of economic turbulence, library statistics are an important and powerful management tool allowing us to present, compare, and analyse the work results of information units. Without statistical data, no controlling, benchmarking or performance measurement can be conducted. And, more generally, without statistical data, no substantial library policy is conceivable.

Comparison of the statistical data from different types of libraries or from different countries presupposes the existence of international standards [1] and data collection of national scope. In Germany, the collection of national library statistics [2] is organised by DBI, the German Libraries Institute, in separate parts for public, academic and special libraries. All parts are published together annually separately and, additionally, in an integrated edition, and the data on research libraries are also available on diskette (dBase format).

Hence, superficially at least, the "world of library statistics" seems to be in due and proper order, the proviso being that the data concerned are representative and consistent. As a matter of fact, that is not the case for the most divergent segment of the library world.

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\* Based on a discussion paper for the European Workshop for Suppliers and Users of Library Statistics in Luxembourg, 9 and 10 December 1997, organised by the European Commission DG XIII-E4

## **Response rate to statistics "alarming"**

The picture is much the same in many countries: the percentage response to statistical surveys from *special libraries* is much smaller than that from other library types. Why is that so? Perhaps some of the following characteristics may serve as an explanation:

- small (often one-person) units have little time for administrative work,
- private sector units do not like forms that look "official",
- subject community involvement is obstructive to standardised statistics,
- special libraries run special services not covered by statistical formats,
- untrained staff know little or nothing about national library statistics,
- staff fluctuation is too frequent for statistics expertise to be acquired,
- feedback is weak due to unattractive presentation, delays in publication etc.,
- scattered, and sometimes "hidden", libraries cannot be addressed,
- effort-benefit ratio for collecting and providing data is not clear,
- quantity-dominated data doesn't reflect quality of services and performance.

In Germany, the response of (a total of about 3,000 known) special libraries to their national library statistics questionnaire, DBS, has never exceeded 35 % - compared to about 98 % in the case of public and academic universal libraries [3]. Moreover, the data collected has been persistently incomplete and inconsistent. This concurs with the situation in Britain, where the returns were less than 25 % (1994) and 20 % (1996) from approximately 4,000 institutions surveyed bi-annually [4].

What does that mean, and what are the consequences? Special libraries as a whole risk becoming a *quantité négligeable*, an invisible sector in the library world and, with more serious effects, becoming invisible to politicians and the media. They risk not being represented adequately in library associations, in library education, in library literature, on library conferences etc.

## **Expert group agreed on revision strategy**

In view of this (in a way "alarming") situation, ASpB, the German Special Libraries Association, has initiated a revision of the relevant part of the German Library Statistics. An expert group for this task has been set up by DBI, the German Libraries Institute. The group comprises four special libraries' practitioners who represent diverse background in terms of subject and nature of their parent institution. Both private and public sector libraries are involved.

In its initial round of discussions, the expert group agreed on a revision strategy that includes the whole statistics' chain, i.e. input, processing of data, and output. Particular emphasis was laid on the importance of permanent statistics marketing, appropriate timing, and electronic access. Two of the main findings as regards the scope of statistics concerned the need to

- limit data collection in these (mostly small) units to a small set of core data,
- to back up sheer statistical figures, i.e. quantity, by selected quality information in order to motivate this special kind of library and promote identification with their "own" statistics.

### **First work results are available**

Owing to the pressure from the annual publication schedule for national statistics, the first results have been produced within a few weeks and will - it is hoped - be found agreeably brief. These results are now available as:

- promotional press release (1 page),
- appeal for rescue of special libraries' statistics (1 page),
- explanatory circular letter for change in handling (1/2 page),
- draft new questionnaire (2 pages only!),
- design of a sticker/button "LIBRARY STATISTICS - yes, please!".

The presentation of the statistics revision initiative is scheduled for pertinent congresses and conferences, including

- DG XIII-E4, European Commission, Workshop for suppliers and users of library statistics, 9-10 December 1997, Luxembourg,
- DBV, German Libraries Association, Annual conference 1-2 October 1998, Hamburg,
- ASpB, German Special Libraries Association, Bi-annual conference 22-26 February 1999, Leipzig.

In order "to spread the word" and as an initial statistics marketing action, the papers mentioned have recently been distributed to

- all German special libraries known by address to DBI,
- various German LIS journals (Bibliotheksdienst etc.) for publication,
- a number of specialised library working groups for internal distribution,
- the Internet, being accessible at DBI's website at [http://www.dbi-berlin.de/bib\\_wes/zdf/zdf\\_00.htm](http://www.dbi-berlin.de/bib_wes/zdf/zdf_00.htm)
- various internet discussion lists (INETBIB, CAMILE, OPL etc.).

## **What's new, what's better, what's unchanged?**

The draft new questionnaire offers a number of alterations and advantages. The changes that can be recognised at first sight are:

- *shorter*: one A4-leaf only instead of two with extensive explanations,
- *reduced set of questions*: four paragraphs with explicit headings instead of an unstructured sequence of 70 detailed questions,
- *updated contents*: emphasis on services/products and (electronic) resources instead of detailed stock or inter-library loan data,
- *essential background information*: introduction of sector-specific and qualified data instead of simple quantitative data,
- *secure continuity*: 20 basic questions remain instead of interrupting DBS compatibility,
- *attractive presentation*: inviting lay-out/design instead of "official form" appearance.

## **Everybody is invited to comment**

The last (and probably most essential) paragraph in the draft new questionnaire is devoted to suggestions for alteration and improvement, e.g. obsolete and/or missing questions, processing of data, presentation, reason(s) for non-participation in the national library statistics, and general comments. Everybody is invited to respond!

With this paper the expert group would like to inform the international library community and to generate a discussion on the issue of special library statistics from the practitioners/users' point of view. Moreover, the group would like to encourage experts active in the same field to share with us experience and/or information. Please contact the chairman of the *DBI Expert Group for the German Special Library Statistics' Revision* via the author's address at the end of this article.

## **References**

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