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Special Librarians Face the New Technology

As I tried to define the role of the special librarian for these proceedings, I recalled an experience that happened during a recent visit to London. We were walking through the tunnel under Oxford Street to Hyde Park at Marble Arch. As we emerged into the daylight we heard a terrible din, and we saw a busker shuffling along the path with instruments hanging all over him. Cymbals were between his knees, a drum on his back, a harmonica on a wire frame on his chest, and more besides! He was a one-man band. He was the whole show. The sweat was dripping off him, and he was doing his best under his heavy burden and the warm afternoon sun.

The Library Setting

Special librarians have some kinship with the one-man band. Although some special libraries have large staffs of experts in this or that field, most special libraries consist of the librarian who may, with some good fortune, enjoy the assistance of a clerk. Most special libraries are operated by one professional librarian who does the reference work, the cataloging, the book selection and the acquisitions, checks in the journals, answers the phone, tries to secure the return of books from reluctant users—and more, of course. These librarians must provide prompt, reliable, comprehensive, personal service to their users. They must find the answers—no fair pointing to the *Readers' Guide* or asking if they've checked the catalog.

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There is a certain informality about the place and an absence of formal rules. People are dealt with on a personal basis, and the rules (if they exist at all) tend to be quite flexible. The next level of management, to whom the library reports, probably has no background in libraries or information work and therefore is often unable to appreciate the real needs (or triumphs!) of the librarian and the library, or to defend them properly against pressures to cut space, budget or personnel. The librarian often operates in professional isolation with little opportunity to share experience or questions with others, learn from them, or discuss professional matters. The daily give and take in a larger library, which enriches the daily experience, is often missing. Problems are often perceived as unique because there is no interaction with others in similar circumstances to provide the insight that the problems are common to all in these circumstances. The comfort and reassurance that it is not really anybody's fault, but simply the way of the world, is never received.

The coverage of the collections is often narrow in scope, but may be quite exhaustive in a given subject area. Unlike an academic library, the objectives of the institution and its staff are usually well defined, and the library does not have to be all things to all people. In some companies the objectives may change markedly and quickly, and the focus of the library collections must respond to these changes. This may require major changes in the subject content of the library, and major changes in the librarian's subject knowledge as well. The librarian may have to shuffle part of the old collection out the door to make room for the new. These changes cannot lag behind those of the organization if the library is to be an effective contributor to the organization's success in meeting its goals. The library collection may still be inadequate to its needs because of a limited budget, limited space, a limited time over which the collection has been developed, or even limitations in the number of people to identify, acquire and process the needed materials, or limitations in their skills.

A good special library has a certain tension in the air. It is not a passive place, waiting for the next person to happen through the door so that he can be pointed toward the card catalog or the pencil sharpener without disturbing the meditations of the librarian. There are places like that, of course, but we all know that they do their users and their sponsors a disservice.

Requirements of the Job

Special librarians play many roles in their libraries, and within the organizations that they serve. They need the professional skills of information science and librarianship to be self-supporting within the library. Although some feel that these can be learned adequately on the job, it is

difficult to teach oneself these skills especially if one is running the library alone. Professional competence is very important to the special librarian.

Professional Skills

Professional skills in library and information science enable the librarian to identify, acquire, catalog, and retrieve the information needed by the users. These provide the librarian a background of reference resources and searching skills for use in finding answers. The whole framework of bibliographic organization is an important part of the library curriculum. Although some never comprehend it, the formal environment of the school of library or information science is where bibliographic organization is probably best synthesized and communicated.

Background Knowledge

Subject competence in the knowledge area served by the library is especially important. It enables the librarian to establish immediate credibility with the users of the library. It also enables productive communication with them at a level of equality and respect. If users feel that the librarian is simply the custodian of the collection (a clerical function), they will do for themselves and the librarian might just as well be a clerk. While subject competence can be learned in time, the game may well be lost if, by that time, the users pretty much ignore the librarian anyway except for the most trivial requests.

Keyboard Skills

Computer terminals are the order of the day. Every well-trimmed library is supposed to have one at the librarian's desk to bring those powerful databases to its door. Keyboard skills (the current euphemism for being able to type accurately at more than forty words per minute) open the world to the librarian. One of the great handicaps that many managers now have is that they cannot use the computer terminal effectively in their work because they cannot type. Keyboard skills are neither male nor female—they are a simple fact of life in the information age. Some of you may even know of people who are no longer effective in their positions within a library because they are unable or unwilling to learn to use a terminal to assist them in reference work, cataloging, or other library work. ✓

Logical and Analytical Skills

Most of us came to librarianship from the humanities. The logical and analytical skills of science and engineering were not a part of that education. This is unfortunate, because these skills are important to success in library work. They are obviously the key to good cataloging, and to success in defining the reference question—i.e., helping the user to define what it

really is that they are looking for. These logical and analytical skills are useful in developing the library's long-range plan, the budget or moving the collection. They may be coupled with skills in using a pocket calculator to arrive at the unit costs of alternative ways to do the same tasks in the library. They are another important set of skills that the librarian needs.

Searching

Searching is important in every aspect of the library. It follows from the logical and analytical skills which I just mentioned. But it now goes farther than that. Searching means the knowledge of how to use each of several online search systems in the most effective and efficient manner. One must know which system is best for one search, and which for another. Each system may have different operating protocols which must be learned, and each may organize the same information (e.g., *Chemical Abstracts*) in a different way, providing access in a different way on each system. A knowledge of how different files are organized, how different concepts are indexed in different databases, and which one to use for the best answer to the question at hand is vital. Let us not forget the real need for creativity here, so that when one search strategy fails you can come up with the one that *does* work.

Bibliographic Organization

Organizing and retrieving information are central skills in the library. In cataloging it is important to recognize new topics not adequately dealt with in the catalog, treat them correctly, and make them accessible to the users through adequate subject headings and cross references. In some situations, it may be necessary to do local abstracting and indexing to make information available for local needs. This is an expensive and time-consuming undertaking. Done poorly, it is useless. Skill in searching enables the librarian to see whether the subject is really not covered in the available databases, or whether it is merely hidden because the right search terms and strategy were not used. And, before I forget, an important aid to good bibliographic organization is a good memory. Have you ever noticed that some librarians never "see" the materials that come through the library, or the things that they read? But for those who do, isn't it a wonderful feeling to remember where you saw that "lost" fact when you need it? It's a sort of creative awareness. Some people turn off their minds while they are at work, so that they won't waste them or wear them out, I suppose.

Computer Skills

This is truly the computer age. Many of you have an OCLC terminal in your library, or a terminal to enable you to talk with the rest of the world.

Certainly the terminal takes a certain knowing technique, but after you've used it for a while you realize that nothing breaks when you hit the wrong key. There is an exactness about it—like following the rules and planning ahead. When we go further, and consider applying computer technology to the rest of the library, things change. We need to be conversant with the terminology and concepts of data processing just to be able to talk knowledgeably with others. But that is a skill that you need just to get along in today's world with its Apples and PCs and proliferation of other microcomputers. An excursion through a Data Processing 101 course (on a noncredit basis) will help if you don't expect it to cover library applications, and if you can stretch yourself to deal with a few very elementary accounting applications and square roots.

Computers on the Job

Librarians have to be able to deal with decisions about computers in their libraries. Do you need an Apple, a PC, or a computer at all? Who is going to write the programs and make it do the work? What work *can* it do? What work *should* it do, if any? Yes, "if any" because maybe you are better off without it, but need to be analytical, skeptical and perceptive to do the mental work to define all the ramifications of the problem and its solution. There are many useful computer programs for doing useful tasks. Just as you find answers for users of the library, you will have to find your own answers to what is usefully available in your circumstances. The librarian needs to be very sure that the word processing program is really necessary and efficient for the work to be done, that the spread-sheet program is really better than columnar pads and a big, soft, red eraser, and that the super database management system does not require that all authors, titles and subject headings be no more than ten characters long. It sometimes seems that we have a great reluctance, as librarians, to become knowledgeable about the most elementary aspects of computers and data processing. We need to view it as a tool for doing useful work, not as a tool for doing unnecessary work or for making existing tasks more difficult.

Management Skills

There are a group of nonlibrary skills that might be categorized as management skills, although they are somewhat broader than that. They aren't usually taught in library school, and in a larger library they would be the responsibility of the administrator, which is simply another hat that the special librarian wears. One is in the area of fiscal responsibilities—developing the budget by planning ahead, defending the budget, and managing within the budget ultimately assigned. Another is the area of personnel—i.e., planning, interviewing, training, supervising, and counseling are all necessary skills in keeping the library running. The librarian

in this position must be able to get along well with others whether the people that they have to get along with are especially likable or not. Best of all, the librarians should be a practiced and astute politician who can sell the library program and its needs for money, personnel, space, and management support.

The Ultimate Skill

This is a long list of skills. Yet there is one that goes a long way toward overcoming any deficiencies in that list. It is the personality of the person who works in the library. The library reflects that personality to the public. Nobody likes to deal with a frowner or someone with chronic (and vocal) depression. A warm, outgoing personality combined with professional skill and competence can make any library a success.

Where do the New Skills Come From?

Most of the skills that I have been discussing are not new to librarianship, nor are they unique to it. You don't have to look very far to see the human toll that has resulted from the advances in technology in only the last five years. Maybe some of you can even remember when the linotype operators and the railroad telegraphers (among others) thought that they were set for life—they would never have to change and their jobs would always be secure. There have been changes in the library, too. What about AACR2 and the ISBD; can one truly expect to build or use the catalog professionally in any library if these are foreign concepts to them? And there have been people who have not bothered to keep pace with the changes in their profession. They were not convinced of the need to change, and they were not convinced that they could do it. They felt that they could never adapt, learn, or master the new skills.

Where do the new skills come from? They come from reading the professional literature, and keeping up to date with what is going on in librarianship. It takes time to do that reading, but it is a necessary investment in retaining competence. And although some of it may take some thought and reflection, it is important to understand the issues and their implications.

Another source for acquiring new skills for the special librarian is the professional meeting. Professional meetings have a great deal to offer. The papers, seminars and workshops presented during these meetings are usually meant to be helpful in explicating new issues in the profession. The opportunity to converse about job-related topics with peers helps to make up for daily isolation on the job. Even the exhibits of the materials and services available from vendors show the direction in which things are moving, and often disclose a better or easier way to accomplish some task

in the library. Too many of those who are responsible for the management of special libraries view meetings as a bagatelle, when in fact the practical and psychic rewards of attendance are significant. Subject-related workshops and seminars are more sharply focused, and provide similar benefits.

Continuing education was one of the original bases of the library—the working man's university. Many library schools offer continuing education courses at various centers around their state, at places convenient to those who would benefit from them, on topics of current utility, and at times and duration appropriate to the need. Many library schools which are located in metropolitan areas offer their courses during the late afternoon, in the evening or on Saturday, so that it will be convenient for those who already have their degree to update their skills and their minds. Rosary College, where I have taught for many years, is an example of such an institution. By the time most of us abandon the library at the end of a hard day, we are so tired that it is impossible to even *think* of attending a class at the local college, junior college, university extension center, or whatever. But continuing education is the lifeblood of professionalism in any field.

There is no shortage of things for the special librarian to do to keep up to date, current with the new world, and equal to the professional challenges of the library. It would be nice to have super-streamlined workshops, extension courses, seminars, journal articles, and picture books, that tell us just what to do—no thinking required. We would all like easy answers. We would welcome a “knowledge funnel” through which distilled wisdom could be poured into our heads. Whatever happened to sleep learning anyway—it sounded just like what we need, and so pleasant, too. Yet we can see that there is no simple way to keep current, and that everyone has to be a part of the solution. No workshop, book or seminar, no matter how well planned, publicized or presented, will help to bring this knowledge to us if we do not make our best effort to invest our time in professional growth and refreshment. And it is awfully difficult, when you are the one-man band, to quit beating your head against the drum, stop the music and take time to tune your instruments.

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