
Introduction: What is Special?

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A LIBRARY, in our best professional use of the term, is a *planned* collection of books, manuscripts, and other records, i.e., a collection *selected* and *organized* to meet the reading, study, or research needs of a *specific clientele*. Types of libraries, then, it would seem, may be distinguished by two principal characteristics, the clientele served and the nature of the collection, the former being the primary determinant of the latter.

College libraries, public libraries, and school libraries are types of libraries for which definitions written by different librarians would be in agreement in most respects. For special libraries this is not true, possibly because the generic meaning of the term "special" does not carry over into its specific use. One standard definition obviously does not apply, "special" being defined as "designed for or assigned to a specific purpose; limited or specific in range, aim or purpose." Under this meaning, the college library and the school library are special libraries. In this sense, most libraries are special in greater or lesser degrees.

Twice before, the writer has allowed himself to be caught in the question, "What is special?"^{1, 2} The first attempt at an answer was feeble; and the obscurity of the medium of publication will, fortunately, assure that it will not be widely read. In the decade which elapsed before the second attempt, his thoughts had clarified somewhat; and what was then written appears to be still worth reading. The basis for this probably lies in the fact that the writer had finally caught up with John Cotton Dana, who fathered the special library movement.

What has already been written will not be repeated here; but it is desirable to look briefly at the question as a preface to the papers which follow. The key word in the answer is "service." This is pointed up by the opening sentence in Rose Vormelker's paper on "Special Mr. Henkle is Librarian of The John Crerar Library.

Library Potential in Public Libraries." It is necessary, however, to qualify the term "service," for service is a prime objective of all (or nearly all) libraries and librarians. So we say, "special service"; but what is meant by that? We have quoted before one of the best definitions, which bears repeating. It is Moriarty's definition of the function of a special library. "Typically it is sustained and continued service of securing assessed information, not limited to print, for one group, often in one field of knowledge, but equally often in several fields."³

Stated another way, special library service involves *participation* by the librarian in the seeking and organization of information for specific purposes. As a matter of fact, the librarian in many special libraries is the principal user of the libraries' collections. The ultimate form of such service is completion of the total library research job for the client, be he the officer of a company receiving the exclusive attention of the library or a general reader drawing upon the resources of a public library. Perhaps we can crystallize this line of thought by stating that when any librarian does some of a reader's library work for him, the librarian is giving "special service"; and when a primary part of his job is doing library research for readers, he is a special librarian, regardless of the subject matter of the search or the type of library in which the search is made.

Perhaps for many this discussion has only added to existing confusion of terms. This may be true for those who think of special libraries as being identified primarily with the literature of particular subjects. It may be true, especially, for those who view the special library as being identified primarily with private libraries in business or industrial corporations or other organizations. For these we will try to clarify the position taken, by brief comments on each of the two divergent points of view.

To the first point it can be said that normally there is subject limitation in most special library situations. This is true, especially, for librarians doing the total job of information analysis from library sources. A degree of subject specialization is an inherent requirement of such service. On the other hand, there are many library situations where, although there may be a primary subject field, there are many collateral subjects due to the nature of the clientele interest. Libraries of banks, insurance companies, and advertising firms are good examples.

The very large number of libraries in companies as compared with the number of subject departments in public libraries is undoubtedly

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the reason for the common acceptance of the company library as the *typical* special library. In the sense that typical is determined by the commonest characteristics of that which exists, the company library is the typical special library. Functionally, however, this is not necessarily so. It will be noted in Miss Vormelker's paper that first interest in an association for special librarians sprang from the interest of librarians doing "special work" in public libraries. There are numerous indications that the thesis of Miss Vormelker's paper may indicate a new trend in the interest of public libraries in special library service; in any case we can hope it will serve to incite one. The possibilities of such development are illustrated even more sharply by such institutions as The John Crerar Library, which can be described as a public special library in all connotations of the term.

The other papers in this issue of *Library Trends* throw additional light on the nature of special librarianship and present some of the problems of current importance. Mrs. Strieby's paper on "Organizational Relations of Special Librarians" demonstrates the extent to which principles of modern management have direct application to special libraries in industrial organizations. Of special note are the illustrations of the intimate relation of the company's library to its research activities and the close integration of the library into the total administrative organization of the company.

In Mr. Shera's paper on "Special Librarianship and Documentation" lies the heart of our answer to the question about what is "special"—historical, contemporary, and in future projection. Here we find an analysis of essential elements in the dynamics of library service which should dispel much of the confusion of terms. From this analysis we should be able to extract, more clearly than many of us have heretofore been able to formulate, a philosophy of special librarianship freed from uncertainty of purpose.

Dr. Taube's paper on "Specificity in Subject Headings and Coordinate Indexing" deals with one of the most perplexing technical problems of the special library, namely, the subject analysis of publications. It throws a revealing side light on the problem of applying general principles of library techniques to special library problems, as well as attacking directly the validity of a long accepted principle of subject cataloging.

Of special interest to American librarians is the group of three papers by Messrs. Carter, Collison, and Izant on special librarianship abroad. Mr. Carter portrays the international activities, especially in

the program of Unesco. Mr. Collison relates some of the ways in which British librarians are coming to grips with the present-day problems of disseminating scientific information. And Mr. Izant shows how a special international group is mobilizing library service to the organization and distribution of medical information. It is interesting to note the lack of limiting factors in each of their papers, on the activities of special libraries.

The final paper by Mr. Waters on "Special Library Education" develops most fully the areas of uncertainty in the concepts librarians have of special libraries, especially with respect to the educational requirements of the profession. The most hopeful aspect of the paper is the informal report on studies now in progress about what the special librarian should know in order to perform adequately his full share of responsibility in the intellectual community. This is a trend of great potential significance, and one to whose results our professional educators should be particularly alert.

Closely related to this problem of professional education is the lack of general understanding of the role, potential as well as real, of the *librarian* in dissemination of information. Mrs. Strieby joins Mr. Waters in wondering whether "the term 'special librarian' has been a misnomer from the beginning," and whether some more descriptive title might be substituted. Miss Vormelker, too, makes reference to the same question. The problem is accented with particular sharpness by Mr. Shera in the final paragraph of his discussion of the historic development of special librarianship and documentation, in which he points out the danger that librarianship may "lose control of its very substance" in the divergence of special librarianship and documentation.

Read as a group, these papers can clarify the concept of *special librarianship* and make a constructive and timely contribution to this vital aspect of the profession of librarianship as a whole. Certainly, we special librarians have a vital stake in nurturing our own professional inheritance.

References

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