Special Librarianship and Documentation

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For half a century special librarianship and documentation have coexisted as separate, even disparate, manifestations of general library practice. At times their paths have crossed and recrossed, run parallel, or diverged sharply, yet every attempt to describe or define their relation to each other or to identify their place in the parent discipline of librarianship itself has been conspicuously unsuccessful. In large measure this failure to comprehend the essential unity of documentation and special librarianship as the focus of more general library objectives may be explained in terms of historic development, of nationality of origin, or of excessive restriction in the definition of function.

Admittedly, there have been many who have maintained that documentation was no more than a European term for a form of librarianship that on this side of the Atlantic has been called special librarianship; and there have been a few, like Ernest A. Savage,¹ who have stoutly insisted that the future of the general public library lies in intensive subject specialization and departmentalization. But the great majority of practicing librarians have not as yet grasped the true meaning and importance of this holistic point of view.

Specialization of library collections began at a surprisingly early date. The social libraries that spread so rapidly throughout the eastern half of the United States during the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth, and were the first manifestations of a public library movement in America, had not long been in existence before a degree of specialization of function began to emerge. Certainly among the first to appear were those of the historical societies, the theological libraries, the legal collections for the use of the early bar associations and legislative bodies, and the agricultural libraries supported mainly

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by local agricultural organizations. But perhaps the nearest parallel of the modern special library is to be found in the mechanics' and apprentices' libraries and the mercantile libraries that were so prevalent in the industrial and commercial urban centers during the 1830's and the 1940's. Even Benjamin Franklin's Junto and its descendant, the Philadelphia Library Company, began with the pragmatic need of the young artisans for materials that would improve their technical efficiency. The special library is deeply rooted in American library history.

Furthermore, there is ample evidence that the early advocates of the modern public library regarded bibliography, or more precisely, bibliographic organization, as the central problem of general librarianship even though they did not specifically state that the public library of the future should become a nucleus of integrated specializations. Men of the stature of Edward Everett and George Ticknor, especially the former, though they paid lip service to an assumed demand for "popular" reading materials, clearly envisaged the incipient Boston Public Library as an instrument that would serve the bibliographic needs of contemporary scholarship.²

The Reverend John B. Wight,³ in urging library legislation, argued before the Massachusetts General Court, that one of the primary objectives of the bibliographic resources and services of public libraries was to increase the efficiency of farmers, mechanics, merchants, manufacturers, physicians, teachers, lawyers, and the other professional classes. Charles Coffin Jewett, the first American to lay the groundwork for a great national union library catalog, wanted to make of the newly-founded Smithsonian Institution a great national bibliographic and documentation center; ⁴ and under his leadership the general problems of bibliography and bibliographic organization received a major share of the attention of those present at the first conference of American librarians.⁵ With like earnestness, William F. Poole believed that one of the major tasks of the professional librarian was to develop an adequate subject index to periodical publications; and again, largely through his leadership, when the American Library Association was founded in 1876 the deliberations of the group were dominantly concerned with bibliographic operations.⁶

But by the close of the nineteenth century American librarianship had largely turned away from this original emphasis on the more effective bibliographic organization of its resources and had begun to think of the library as being almost exclusively an agency for popular edu-
cation. This diversion, though unfortunate in its effect upon the future of American librarianship as a profession, was perhaps a natural consequence of the growing belief that in universal education was to be found the key to social progress. But however meritorious the objective, it had the disastrous effect of diverting librarianship from its proper concern with the analysis and organization of recorded knowledge, and instead directed most of its energies into activities which were alien to its institutional nature and could not be effectively translated into successful library operation. This diversion not only weakened the profession of librarianship by splitting it into two opposing factions, it created a barrier between the two that, even to this day, has prevented a common bond of understanding and a unanimity of action that have made it almost impossible for librarians to think clearly about the functions of the library in contemporary society.

At the very time that librarians were beginning to be lured by the will-of-the-wisp of “self-improvement,” or “adult education,” into the marsh-lands of popular culture, important events were taking place on the continent of Europe. In 1892 Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine, both of whom were engaged in assembling documentary materials in the social sciences, laid the foundation in Brussels for the International Institute of Bibliography (now the International Federation for Documentation) with its world bibliography and bibliographic center. Quite naturally they turned to the librarians for their techniques; they adopted, but extensively modified and expanded, the Dewey Decimal System of library classification to create their own Universal Decimal System; they adopted the standard library card for their bibliographic operations; and they turned to the catalogs of the great libraries of the world for the nucleus of their world bibliography.

Apart from these techniques, however, their point of view, their philosophy, had almost nothing in common with the practicing and professionally conscious librarians on this side of the Atlantic. In a real sense the work of these two men and their associates was a reversion to an earlier philosophy of librarianship, but because, in practice, it differed so markedly from the current vogue it came to be known as “documentation.” This “new” discipline of documentation enlisted considerable support in England and on the continent, but for almost half a century American librarians remained largely oblivious to it.

But even in America, during these years, there was some dissension in the library ranks. Early in the twentieth century John Cotton Dana, librarian of the Newark Public Library, and a small group of like-
minded associates, became aware that there was a large group of potential library patrons, mainly among the commercial and industrial interests in society, whose “special” library needs were being neglected. The immediate result of this awareness was the creation of special departments in certain of the larger public library systems to specialize in service to this particular clientele; and in 1909 the Special Libraries Association was formed. It was not Dana’s intent that this should be a schism from the ranks of the American Library Association. At the Mackinac Island Conference of the A.L.A. in 1910 he made a last desperate attempt to secure the incorporation of the Special Libraries Association into the older organization; but his efforts resulted only in keen personal disappointment and he was compelled to report: “My suggestions to the Executive Board in this line were as definitely ignored by the Board as have been many other suggestions from me. That there is a very active library organization, affiliated but not a definite part of the American Library Association is a fact which is not due to me but to shortcomings elsewhere.”

He saw the rise of the special library as an almost inevitable consequence of the fact that the “library idea” had been “more or less academic, monastic, classic” while “the rapid development of special libraries managed by experts... is simply an outward manifestation that the man of affairs has come to realize that printed things form the most useful and most important tools of his business, no matter what that business may be.”

The character of the special interests the new association was intended to serve is best indicated by the seven committees designed to coordinate and promote activities among libraries in the fields of agriculture, commercial associations, insurance, legislative and municipal reference organizations, public utilities, sociology, and technology.

For over thirty years the Special Libraries Association represented the nearest American approach to that kind of library activity and point of view which in Europe had received widespread recognition as documentation, though the elements of documentation are closely discernible in the growth of subject departments in a few of the largest public libraries, and in many of the activities and policies of university libraries. In 1937, American librarians first officially recognized documentation as an important bibliographic discipline by organizing the American Documentation Institute. This organization originated from the activities in documentation that had been carried forward by Science Service, dating from 1926 (especially the work done by Science Service under grants from the Chemical Foundation) and from the
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Bibliofilm Services organized in 1935 at the Library of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This new institute, which was affiliated with the International Federation for Documentation, was designed as an assembly of representatives from leading scientific and scholarly societies, councils, and institutions, both public and private.

It is important to note that in the beginning documentation was very narrowly interpreted by the founding group as being restricted almost entirely to the promotion of new methods of photographic reproduction; and it is significant that almost immediately it began to publish, with the aid of the American Library Association, *The Journal of Documentary Reproduction*, which survived through 1942. This excessive emphasis upon photographic techniques, especially as they relate to the production and use of microfilm, is still strong among American documentalists. But with the revival of interest in the Institute that followed the Second World War, the term began to be much more broadly interpreted and more nearly approximated its use in Europe. The reorganization of the American Documentation Institute, now in progress, to make it a true society of documentalists, should further broaden its scope and expand its activities.

In addition to these three major lines of development presented by general librarianship, special librarianship, and documentation, there have been overlapping and tangential activities. At the present time the Special Libraries Association maintains a national Committee on Documentation. The Committee on Bibliography of the American Library Association has, of recent years, been largely concerned with problems of bibliography and documentation. The American Chemical Society has become extremely active in promoting improvements in the bibliographic organization of the literature of chemistry. The American Standards Association has just recently begun to re-examine the problems of improving bibliographic standards. Finally, even the library schools, which for some time have recognized the growing need for personnel trained to meet the problems of special librarianship, are in a few instances beginning to associate with such preparation some attention to the closely related techniques and procedures of documentation.

From this review one may conclude that bibliographic organization is an historical unity comprising as its major constituents general librarianship, special librarianship, and documentation. One may further conclude that special librarianship and documentation have a common root, and that their divergence has been largely an historical accident,
the results of which were intensified by differences in terminology rather than in kind. Finally, recent history suggests that the present chaotic and uncoordinated proliferation of these related activities will increase rather than diminish unless a persistent and determined effort is made toward reunification. Yet, if the same status quo is allowed to persist, the profession of librarianship will not only lose control of its very substance, but it will deteriorate into a simple custodial operation.

Despite the fact that the practice of special librarianship and documentation is not new, neither term has as yet been adequately defined. Broadly interpreted, the special library is any collection of library materials assembled to meet the needs of a particular group of users. Thus in a general sense, the historical, medical, legal, or theological library is a *special* library. One might even go so far as to maintain that academic, school, or children's libraries could be included in this same general category. But a definition so inclusive contributes little to any real understanding of the nature of the special library and its relation to documentation. John Cotton Dana, in his presidential address before the first convention of the Special Libraries Association characterized the special library as "the library of a modern man of affairs." But he quickly admits to the inadequacy of such a definition and hastens forward to a discussion of the special library in terms of library service to business and industry. This concept, later expanded to include a wide variety of private and public enterprises, has remained today substantially unchanged.

Attempts to define documentation have been no more successful. The most recent, that of Briet, holds that the materials of documentation are all indication, concrete or symbolistic, preserved or transcribed, with the purpose of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving either a physical or intellectual phenomenon. But this definition suffers from the fault of being materialistic rather than functional. In a sense it avoids the question by defining documentation in terms of the materials with which documentalists do their work. By contrast Mortimer Taube has defined documentation in operational terms as "the complex of activities required in the communication of specialized information including the preparation, reproduction, collection, analysis, organization and dissemination of graphic."

Also appropriate to the present discussion would seem to be the definition of Egan and Shera, who made documentation a part of their inclusive concept, bibliographic organization. They defined bibliographic organization as being concerned with "the channeling of
graphic records to all users, for all purposes, and at all levels (of use) in such a way as to maximize the social utilization of recorded human experience.”  

By contrast, documentation, as they have described it, is limited to the world of scholarship, and the objective of documentation is to bring together all the scholarly activities in which graphic records are used and all the intermediary services which transmit this recorded material from the scholar-as-producer to the scholar-as-consumer.

But Egan and Shera do not interpret scholarship in the narrow academic sense, nor do they see the work of the scholar as being confined to pure research. Rather they are following Pierce Butler, who defines scholarship as the total intellectual output of a culture; and they insist that the literature of scholarship is as much concerned with the technological, administrative, and operational activities of society as it is with its investigatory or research accomplishments. Thus one may accurately apply to documentation the time-honored slogan of the Special Libraries Association—“Putting Knowledge to Work.”

Special librarianship developed because of the inability of traditional library techniques to meet the increasingly complex informational needs of business and industry. Similarly, documentation was the outgrowth of the desire of a small group of men to destroy the national barriers to the flow of scientific information, and it received a new vitality when the Second World War brought into existence a need for greater and more efficient access to information than traditional library methods were able to give. Though both special librarianship and documentation, in practice, respond to a wide variety of dissimilar demands, they find a common basic unity in their objective—to facilitate the flow of recorded information to appropriate segments of a complete culture.

The similarities in special librarianship and documentation may be emphasized by a discussion of the operational characteristics of documentation and their application to the work of the special library as well as to the documentation center. Documentation is generally considered to comprise four major activities: acquisition, organization, dissemination, and preparation and publication.

**Acquisition.** The problem of acquisition is so familiar to all aspects of librarianship, in whatever form, that any discussion of it here would seem to be unnecessary. Techniques may differ from agency to agency in accordance with the nature of the material and the needs of the clientele, but the underlying principles are essentially the same. Suffice
it here to point out that the special library and the documentation center are both heavily dependent upon a variety of highly specialized bibliographic tools for effective acquisition; but they, too, have a very great stake in the improvement of national and international enumerative and subject bibliographic services. Such great bibliographic monuments are the very foundation of any effective system of special bibliographic services.

Organization. Organization is composed of three elements: (a) identification, (b) arrangement, and (c) analysis. Again the parallel with traditional library practice is evident. Identification is largely synonymous with descriptive cataloging though it should be pointed out that special librarians and documentalists often employ simplified descriptive techniques, though the procedures are based on, or derived from, accepted library rules. One should emphasize here, too, the frequent similarity between special library and documentation procedures with the techniques customarily employed by the archivist, particularly his techniques for the calendaring of documents, or his preparation of general descriptive summaries for the identification of large blocks of closely related materials.

Arrangement, of course, includes classification, a method of subject arrangement in which both special libraries and documentation centers have done a considerable amount of effective pioneering. Practice here has generally followed one of three patterns: (a) the expansion or elaboration of existing library schematics, such as Dewey, the Universal Decimal Classification, or that of the Library of Congress; (b) the use of a familiar notation employed by one of these three schemes but applied to a completely different array of terms; and (c) schematics with a philosophical orientation completely different from those traditional to librarianship.

The third subdivision, analysis, might well include classification since it, too, is an instrument to facilitate subject access. But analysis is usually understood to be restricted to those operations in which the subject content of the material is extracted or separated from the material itself and hence is freed from the arrangement of physical units. Analysis, then, includes such operations as subject cataloging, indexing, abstracting, annotating, and the preparation of special subject bibliographies for particular purposes. In all of this, one should emphasize that special librarianship and documentation do not differ from traditional librarianship in kind but in degree and intensity of analysis. Many public libraries do some indexing and even abstracting on their
own initiative, usually with reference to materials of particular local interest; and many college and university libraries, especially in their subject departments, prepare special bibliographies and lists. But the special librarians and the documentalists have, in general, carried on these operations more extensively and incorporated them more intimately into their basic procedures.

Dissemination. No special librarian needs to be reminded of the importance of the routing of recent acquisitions to the appropriate members of his clientele. But dissemination involves more than mere routing. It can, and often does, involve the free distribution, or even the actual sale, of materials deposited in the special library or documentation center. The dissemination of book lists, special bibliographies, and the like is familiar enough even to the librarian of the small or medium-sized public library. The dissemination of "primary" material is less common, though even here the Bulletin of the New York Public Library, the Yale University Library Gazette, the Boston Public Library's More Books, and the Harvard Library Bulletin frequently reproduce rare and valuable materials from their own collections.

Dissemination, however, also includes "control," which relates to the limitation of access to certain types of materials to those authorized to use them. The problems raised by "security regulations" were all too familiar to all librarians who were in any way associated with the operations of the information services of the United States government during the Second World War, and this was especially true for the librarians and documentalists of the intelligence agencies. But this barrier to the free flow of information, which is as ancient as the guild system itself, is being increasingly fostered by competition in commerce and industry. This is particularly true for information relating to patentable or potentially patentable processes, or to other varieties of confidential data. Censorship has been traditionally repugnant to librarians, and the profession has opposed it on many occasions, but this is censorship "in reverse." For censorship purports to protect the public from error whereas security is, in effect, a restraint upon truth. But in the latter case the social consequences may be far more serious, and the dangers cannot long be ignored by special librarians and documentalists.

Preparation and publication. The concept of the special library as an agency for the composition, preparation, and publication of primary materials is probably the least familiar to the librarian. Yet there are a number of large special research libraries that have initiated pro-
grams of this sort. The New York Public Library has not limited its publications entirely to bibliographic compilations. The publication of source materials, often in its annual reports, has given to the world of scholarship some conspicuously successful examples of this kind of publication. The preparation of special reports for distribution within the parent organization is not uncommon among special libraries. Certainly there is no good reason why such publication should not be more fully exploited by the special librarian and documentalist, and in many respects the special library or documentation center is particularly well equipped to serve as the logical agent for the preparation and publication of materials drawn from or based upon the wealth of their resources.

In one sense every library may be regarded as a “special” library by virtue of its adaptation to the particular needs and requirements of its patrons. Historically both documentation and special librarianship are rooted in the parent discipline of general librarianship. But general librarianship can hardly be said ever to have existed in a pure state, for specialization of library function was implicit from the beginning. When any group combines to establish a library it is motivated by a particular purpose or objective, and the library which it forms will reflect that purpose or objective in its collection and service. As has truly been said, “Special librarianship is the documentation of an idea.” That idea may be as broad or as narrow as the human mind can conceive, it may be spiritual, it may be humanistic, it may be educational, it may be scientific, sociological, or technological; but whatever its nature and scope the library will be “special” to that purpose.

References

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9. Ibid., p. 88.