Roles for Special Librarians in the New International Arena

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It is my honor and privilege to address this opening session of the 14th Biennial IATUL Conference. As a member of the MIT Libraries, it is also my great pleasure to welcome all of you to our institution.

This is an exciting time for information professionals. Our ability to access and manipulate information with speed, accuracy, and sophistication puts us in a position to become vital players in this information age. Our ability to communicate across international borders is an equally important skill in today’s environment.

For these reasons, upon assuming the Presidency of Special Libraries Association in June of 1990, I chose as my theme for the year: "The Information Professional in the International Arena". For the past twelve months, this theme has been pursued through my own activities, including lecturing and writing, and through the activities of the association staff, other officers, chapters, subject divisions, and conference programming. This afternoon, I would like to tell you about the background of these interests, the progress that has been made in our endeavors, and some thoughts about the future.

What are the features of the new international arena? Technological, economic, and political developments have given rise to the globalization of information. Technological advances in our generation have covered this planet with what one commentator has called the "information umbrella,"[1] which consists of such features as satellite communication, satellite television, worldwide telephone service, facsimile transmission, the microcomputer, the miniaturized video camera, and the supersonic transport. As an example of rapid communications, the 24-hour-a-day Cable News Network provides a uniform baseline of data worldwide. In such diverse locations as Wall Street, government offices in China, the Soviet Union, the Middle East, and Western Europe, as well as in private homes, at times of crisis the very same programming is received around the globe.

In recent years we have seen how business and scholarly communication have been impacted by facsimile transmission and by the availability of online databases for the storage and retrieval of both bibliographic and full text information.

Political and economic factors are, of course, interrelated. Economics is becoming increasingly internationalized and globally interdependent. Regional economic cooperation in Western Europe, developed over the entire post-World War II period, is about to reach its culmination in 1992. In Eastern Europe, dramatic political developments of the late 1980's and early 1990's created market economies with extensive requirements for international cooperation. The dramatic rise in importance Pacific Rim represents a key shift in the balance of world economic power.

In their introduction to a conference on the "Globalization of Technology," Stever and Muroyama state:

"The effects of technological change on the global economic structure are creating immense transformations in the way that companies and nations organize production, trade goods, invest capital, and develop new products and processes. Sophisticated
information technologies...new materials...advanced manufacturing technologies...[and] improved sea and air transportation...[have] both created and mandated greater independence among firms and nations."[2]

How does all of this apply to Special Libraries Association? The second largest organization of librarians in North America and the third largest in the world, SLA is an international association of 13,000 members who work in special libraries and information centers serving business, industry, government, academic institutions, news organizations, museums, trade and professional associations, research facilities, nonprofits, and all organizations that use or produce specialized information.

We define a special library as "an organization that provides focused, working information to a specialized clientele on an ongoing basis in order to further the mission and goals of the parent company or organization." Special librarians are the information and research professionals who provide this type of information.[3] SLA's mission is to advance the leadership role of special librarians in putting knowledge to work in the information society.

The association includes fifty-five chapters. Fifty-one of these are in the United States, three in Canada, and one in Europe. The European Chapter is currently undergoing a revitalization. Our Hawaiian-Pacific Chapter has members from some Asian countries. Our Arizona Chapter has recently been working with special librarians in Mexico. The association also cooperates with counterpart organizations worldwide. For example, we have an excellent ongoing relationship with the Japan Special Library Association; two years ago our annual conferences were held in conjunction with one another in New York City. SLA is planning a Conference for the Year 2000 to be held in Europe. It also participates actively in the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) which will be meeting in Moscow later this summer, and in the International Federation for Information and Documentation (FID).

As many of you are probably aware, in addition to its local chapters, SLA has 28 divisions representing subject interests or specializations. Examples of Divisions are: Chemistry, Business and Finance, Social Science, Petroleum and Energy, Library Management, and Information Technology. Several of the divisions carry out programs of an international nature. The Social Science Division has an International Affairs Roundtable. The Museum, Arts, and Humanities Division conducts exchange visits with Soviet art museum libraries. The Physics, Astronomy, and Math Division has worked on international conferences for astronomy librarians, and the Geography and Map Division encompasses significant international interests.

What are some specific international information needs of SLA's membership?

- Our members in the for-profit sector find themselves working for multinational corporations, for companies with worldwide production facilities, and for companies involved in developing foreign markets. A company's library is invaluable for obtaining worldwide business information, material on governmental regulations and standards throughout the world, and information on cultural and societal nuances. All of this plays an important part in conducting international business.

- Organizations dealing with the arts and with the media are becoming more and more involved in the international arena. Many museums and performing arts organizations participate extensively in international exchanges. News and publishing organizations also have world-wide concerns and information needs.
Colleges and universities are developing increasingly international and culturally diverse student bodies. Library collections and services must be responsive to the needs of this changing clientele.

As a way of learning more about their counterparts worldwide, and also in an effort to share knowledge and expertise, many of our members participate in international exchanges, conferences, consulting, teaching, and studying.

During the course of my presidency, SLA has made considerable progress in the international area. I conducted an ongoing dialogue with the membership, through association publications and in the course of half a dozen visits to local chapters. In this way I was able to learn of the concerns and interests of the members, as well as to gather information on many international initiatives. I intend to develop some of this information into a publication on international exchanges in the special library field.

The association declared April 18, 1991 - International Special Librarians Day. This was held during National Library Week, and it particularly highlighted the importance of special librarians. The theme was: "Information Beyond Borders: Building Global Partnerships". We developed a Program and Publicity Kit, and made available promotional products such as mugs, pins, notepaper, and pens showing the theme and a specially designed logo.

International Special Librarians Day was a highly successful activity. Members in their own libraries held events such as open houses, demonstrations of online services, and programs geared to promoting the unique ability of librarians to provide international information. Some chapters and student groups conducted special programs as well. A student group at the University of Southern Mississippi, for example, held a full day of workshops and discussions in conjunction with the University's School of Library Science. Topics included: "Third World Connections", "Chinese Character Input Technology", and "An African-American Special Librarian's Perspective." SLA members were also able to contact colleagues worldwide to demonstrate that communication among information professionals creates valuable interpersonal networks.

In Ottawa, Ontario, the Library at the International Development Research Centre, a Canadian government agency, held an open house for agency staff and for other librarians in the area. In preparing for the event, library staff translated the title into French: "International Special Librarians Day" became "Journée Internationale des Bibliothécaires Spécialisés." "Information Beyond Borders: Building Global Partnerships" became "L'information au-delà des Frontières: Créer des Liens Universels."

In Washington, D.C., where SLA has its association offices, a dinner program was held for twenty-one leaders from business, academic, information vendor, government, media, and non-profit communities, in an effort to initiate discussion on international information concerns. Represented were such organizations as the Library of Congress, the Washington Post, Faxon Company, Catholic University of America, and the Overseas Private Investment Corporation. Special guests included two librarians from the Republic of Poland's house of representatives, and the chief librarian of the International Monetary Fund/World Bank Joint Library.

In the interests of communicating the value of the information professional to the larger community, SLA makes a concerted effort to reach out beyond the library world to let professionals from other fields know more about what librarians are capable of doing in today's information society. The International Special Librarians Day program is an example of a successful effort to make our presence felt.
The association carries out many educational programs. These include professional development courses, middle management certification, advanced management workshops, conference programming, and an annual State-of-the-Art Institute. Our educational offerings increasingly reflect an interest in the international flow of information. A very popular full-day course is "European Company Information: Preparing for 1992." This seminar presents a detailed review of the extensive financial information available on European companies, including disclosure requirements. An excellent session offered last month at the annual conference dealt with "Global Links: International Resource Sharing and Networking." Speakers were from the United Kingdom and Japan as well as the US. The program explored opportunities for linking up with existing networks of colleagues, in order to strengthen access to information.

Two future programs of interest include a full day of sessions on the Pacific Rim to be held at our annual conference in June 1992 in San Francisco, and the 1991 State-of-the-Art Institute on "Information in Eastern and Central Europe". The purpose of the latter is to provide pragmatic information and insights for those in the information community who are entering the Eastern and Central European markets. It will include such topics as resources for establishing a business, information access, and how special librarians can get involved in international ventures.

What are some future developments for special librarians in global information partnerships? It is here that I bring out my crystal ball, and try to make some predictions. This is a risky venture at best, especially in the dynamic world that you and I are privileged to inhabit.

We should be watching the relatively new field of the information broker, the provision of information by a private company, as well as consultation services on library technology and library management. This is a growing area in the U.S. and Western Europe, and I think that it has significant international implications. I believe that this field will be important in the future because it provides expertise in a flexible way. Our institutions are often large and cumbersome, and do not respond well to rapidly-changing needs. The information broker can be a change agent by providing an organization with the exact expertise that it needs when it is needed.

Another trend of international importance is that of intertype library cooperation. Particularly with the advent of electronic databases and electronic networking, libraries have entered into cooperative programs of all sorts, including cooperative cataloging, cooperative reference and referral networks, the sharing of information on periodical resources, and in some cases, cooperative acquisitions programs. Due to technological advances in computer technology and such areas as facsimile transmission, different types of libraries are cooperating more. Corporate libraries, academic libraries, and hospital libraries in New York State, for example, share their resources. The technology is such that this activity can easily expand nationally and internationally, and in many cases it already has. Political and institutional considerations, of course, impede the process of establishing cooperative arrangements, but eventually, I believe, this intertype library cooperation will become widespread.

The use of electronic bulletin boards for communication among special librarians is growing. Many have such access within their companies, or through academic and research networks. SLA is currently investigating the sponsorship of a BITNET/Internet listserver for special librarians. This will foster intertype library cooperation, as well as communication with vendors and with library clientele.

In thinking about the future, we should also consider the need to find solutions to the many barriers to transborder information flow. Some of these
barriers are the lack of international standards, the language and translation problems encountered, and governmental policies that limit the publication and the sharing of information both within and among countries. Economic considerations should also be mentioned here; the inability to finance many worthwhile information projects is a very real concern. While full discussion of these particular issues is beyond the scope of my remarks here, I will say that professional associations are working on finding solutions to the many barriers to transborder information flow.[4]

In spite of these barriers, it is clear that the unique information-handling skills of special librarians, combined with their ability to utilize both electronic and interpersonal networks in obtaining material in an expeditious manner, place the special librarian in a key role in today's information society.

I have presented some indications of the concerns and activities of special librarians and the Special Libraries Association in the new international information arena. The opportunities for information sharing are indeed vast, and it is gratifying to be part of this important endeavor.

I wish all of you well in this conference, which is itself a true example of international information sharing.

REFERENCES


