

THE CHANGING ROLE OF SPECIAL LIBRARIES IN DOCUMENT SUPPLY

By Graham P. Cornish

Abstract: The role of special libraries has changed dramatically in document supply over the last few years. The nature of the documents which special libraries handle will also change as their users perceptions of their needs respond to new technological developments. Librarians will become more and more "knowledge scientists". This particular trend leads those in this situation to receive requests for appropriate data, suitable packaged, on a given topic or aspect of a topic.

A changing world

Anyone who is working in the world of information knows that this is a rapidly changing environment. Many concepts which were formerly taken for granted are now questioned and often have to be discarded completely. Anyone preparing a manual for librarians might mark topics such as cooperation, charging, communications, the law and user expectations as headings under which major changes have taken place and where more change is almost certain to occur. Document supply is certainly one aspect of information work which has not been, and will not be, immune from these many changes¹. It is, after all, the one routine in any library which is more involved with non-library procedures than any other² and therefore even more vulnerable to the many changes taking place in the world of communications and economics.

The place of special libraries in document supply

Special libraries occupy a special place in the structure of any document supply mechanism, whether it is in a Third World situation^{3,4} or a highly technological networked environment. Their administrative structure is different from other participants in library cooperation⁵ schemes which are often dominated by public or academic libraries funded by government. Therefore they rarely have the same obligations (or enjoy the same privileges) as these libraries. The use of their collections may be governed by rules decided by the company or society which owns the library, not by public statute. They may have more freedom to make charges or waive

them than their publicly-funded colleagues. Even where a special library is also a government library (for example) different rules from other public libraries will apply.

It is all very well to say that special libraries occupy a special place in the *structure* of interlending and document supply but what is more important is their *function*. Special libraries have always played a major role in document supply arrangements. Even in the early days of this concept, when libraries were still trying to establish just what was meant by cooperation, special libraries were involved as an essential element. In the UK, for example⁶, by 1969 there were over 1,500 special libraries working with the National Central Library out of some 2,400 libraries in total. Figures for the actual numbers of requests involved are not available but it is clear that special libraries occupied a most important place in the users of this vital national (and international) interlending resource.

In the early days of interlending the function of the special library was largely one of contributor to the cooperative network. Special libraries were a resource to turn to when other major general collections failed. They were known to have very rich collections in their specialised fields and it was not thought necessary to have detailed records of their holdings. Rather the general trend was to assume that, if a work on a particular topic could not be found through the more "normal" channels then the request could be sent without further formality to a library specialising in the appropriate topic. Later in the development of library networks and union catalogues special libraries began to add their holdings to the collective records of a region, city or nation.

As the concept of library cooperation for the purposes of interlending grew, so special libraries took a more active part in developing networks. Cooperative arrangements tended to include all libraries in a scheme, not just large public ones. However, there was (and is) still some resistance of the idea of making documents available to users of special libraries, especially if they were (or are) commercial or industrial in nature. Their function was seen primarily as supplying specialised documents which other, more general, libraries did not have in their collections. In order words, they were a useful "back-up" when other sources of supply failed. As special libraries knew the needs of their clientele in more detail than large general collections could do, they often used interlending less than other libraries, relying also on other libraries in their field for specific documents.

Different models, different roles

There are many different models of interlending and document supply, ranging from the highly centralised, through the partially centralised and planned but decentralised to the worst model of all - unplanned decentralisation. The role of the special library in each of these is different and needs to be recognised as such, especially as these models are themselves changing in importance and practicality. In the highly centralised model (often, if wrongly exemplified by the UK situation) there is one major supply source to which all other libraries are encouraged to apply. Only when this central source fails are the resources of other libraries called upon. In this situation the special library becomes far more dependent on the centre than it did formerly although, conversely, the centre has a better knowledge of other collections and can therefore exploit these to support its own services. However, this model discouraged, intentionally or otherwise, the use of one special library by another. The "one stop shopping" mentality tends towards all request being sent to one source. Special libraries become the supplier of the ancient, the obscure to the esoteric! In the partially centralised model there are usually a few major libraries with specialised collections, as in the German model. This is more beneficial for special libraries as they may well be associated with the subject-matter of the major collections and therefore better able to interact with that special centre (for example agricultural libraries will work the national agricultural library of their country). This is also true of the partially decentralised network although the delegated centres will probably be more on a geographical than subject basis which could mean that a particular special library will be known within a region but possibly not so well known nationally, even though it may be the best resource in its subject within the country. Of course in the totally decentralised and unplanned system the special library takes its chance with everyone else. Probably it will attract more requests than in the other models because it will at least be known as a probable source for some documents.

Changing models, changing roles

This is a changing world and the models for document supply are changing as well. Library budgets continue to shrink and this means that large general collections are neither as large nor as general as they were. Libraries once tried to collect everything, at least within the parameters of their responsibilities. This was true of special libraries also who could be relied upon to have virtually everything published in their specialised field. Such is no longer the case, nor, perhaps, should it ever have been. As Michael Wills recently remarked

Almost always, gluttony in libraries is accompanied by constipation: the reluctance, or inability to discard anything. The result is a library that grows ever larger. And, historically, this was, of course, the idea. Size was the measure of quality of a library; fat was beautiful."⁷

Cuts in budgets mean that to achieve the ultimate goals of the UAP programme libraries must cooperate to make as many documents available to as many readers in as many places as possible. Now the dependence of the large general collection on the specialised one is less certain than it formerly was. The virtual certainty of access to a wide range of specialised material can no longer be guaranteed. At the same time the special library is required to depend more and more on the collections of other libraries, some special and some of a general nature. In those countries, such as Finland and Denmark, where libraries in different sectors had little contact for interlending purposes, the independent structures are beginning to break down and there is far more interdependence.

These changes in finances are reflected in the research which many special libraries support. No longer can scientists and academics pursue the lines of investigation which interest them without some financial justification. This means that more research is directed towards producing a meaningful product, whether it is a drug, a plant, an educational theory or a translation of an ancient manuscript. This has a profound effect on patterns of information needs in the clientele of special libraries. Their research is becoming more and more interdisciplinary and therefore their information needs become more diverse. If a special library is serving a truly research community it should never have been able to meet all their needs anyway. Researchers are working at the frontier of their field and so the librarian should never have been able to predict with certainty what their needs would be. As one Australian writer has stated.

"Collections are not built for the sake of growth - they must follow closely the needs of users and increasingly will be influenced by new technology and the increasing volume of information in non-print formats."⁸

Advantages of change

The change to greater interdependence is further reflected in changing models for interlending. Older systems had to rely on a combination of union catalogues which are notorious for their inaccuracy and lack of currency, and professional knowledge of libraries in a country or region. With the development of networking and online databases the models are changing and changing rapidly. In terms of locating materials there is no longer any need for one central record of everything that is held by a group of libraries and certainly no need for a centralised collection. With ever-

increasing numbers of libraries contributing to online systems such as OCLC, the total national resource of a country can be recorded easily and efficiently and documents located in seconds. For special libraries this can mean a complete reversal in their role in the centralised model and probably a considerable change in any other model as well. Instead of being libraries of last resort to which others turn when all other sources have failed to deliver the document required, special libraries become major contributors to the whole document supply network. Their holdings are as readily accessible as those of any large public or academic library; their special collections are more widely known and their approach to efficient library services may earn them a reputation for being highly desirable sources for document supply. On the other hand, it is possible to establish the existence of the document in a smaller library which would not previously have been approached.

At the same time, joining a network gives a special library much more access to documents and information than could formerly be enjoyed. This means that the range of services offered to readers can be considerably expanded to include access to bibliographic records and documents which it may have been difficult to identify in the past. However, there are several drawbacks to this changing model of which special libraries need to be acutely aware. Some are fairly obvious but others are more subtle and need careful monitoring.

Disadvantages of change

Many smaller and specialised libraries have found that, having joined a cooperative cataloguing network, they are now supplying more documents than they request, a complete reversal of their former situation. Whilst this levelling of request traffic may seem a good thing, many libraries do not have the resources to cope with increased document supply requests and may eventually withdraw from supplying altogether⁹.

This latter problem has even more far-reaching effects than had been previously thought. In the USA, where OCLC acts virtually as the national database, many libraries are beginning to withdraw from national networking arrangements, because of the difficulties outlined above. A number of libraries are beginning to set up local or regional networks for their own benefit only. Whilst these networks will link into national ones, such as OCLC, for searching purposes they do not contribute to them but retain online records for carefully-defined local or sector use only. Whilst this may ensure that some document supply requests are dealt with locally, it also means that these libraries will exploit the national resource when necessary but that libraries outside their prescribed circle cannot benefit from their participation. This

not only distorts document supply patterns but also deprives the national database of valuable input from smaller libraries which may have unique records to contribute¹⁰.

Interlending and document supply are activities which consume many resources in terms of time, staff and physical material such as packaging, postal services, and other non-library items. Many smaller libraries do not have the resources to meet these requirements and offer a service which meets basic quality standards. They also have a high commitment to their users which brings into conflict the problems of material being away from the shelves when needed by users. By increasing their role as suppliers rather than users of interlending systems it may become necessary for some of them to withdraw their cooperation altogether or at least limit the part they can usefully play.

In an economic climate where charging is becoming commonplace, the special library has other problems too. On the one hand, many special libraries are not interested in charging outside users: it is often too much administrative work and too complicated to keep accounts for small payments. On the other hand, many libraries see special libraries as often having the funds to pay for document supply whereas many purely publicly-funded libraries do not have this money. In the changing world of today the attitude is changing and libraries in a commercial environment often charge quite high prices for services to outside organisations, many of whom do not have the ability to pay. At the same time the number of requests handled by a special library may be quite small which means that the revenue generated is insufficient to pay for extra resources to offer a really efficient service. Once again the special library may be caught between two different attitudes.

Conclusion

The role of the special library has changed dramatically in document supply over the last few years and this role will certainly continue to evolve as libraries learn to respond to new demands. The nature of the "documents" which special libraries handle will also change as their users' perceptions of their needs respond to new technological developments. Librarians will become more and more "knowledge scientists". A knowledge scientist is not expected to provide information but to interpret it for the customer. This particular trend leads those in this situation to receive requests for appropriate data, suitably packaged, on a given topic or aspect of a topic. The resulting package may be a concoction of statistics, manipulated data, law, company information, economic projections and predictions and some documents. The knowledge scientist will be required to obtain such documents either

locally or from remote sources. The customer in this situation has little interest in where or how the document was procured so long as it supplies the needs of the time. This trend will be particularly noticeable in those areas of information provision where customers ("users") have the economic power to buy the services they perceive as necessary. Many special libraries serve just such customers and will need to respond swiftly and positively to such needs, changing once again the models and roles in document supply.

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Graham P. Cornish
IFLA International Programme for UAP
c/o The British Library
Document Supply Centre
Boston Spa, Wetherby
West Yorkshire LS23 7BQ
United Kingdom