Networking in Special Libraries

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ABSTRACT

The factors to be considered in selecting a network to join are discussed, as well as the steps involved if a special library starts a new network. Examples of networking activities of special libraries are included. Highlights of the report of the NCLIS/SLA Task Force on the role of the special library in National Networks and Cooperative Programs are examined.

INTRODUCTION

Before we start it is necessary to define a term which we will be using frequently at this conference. What is a library network? It is not easy to agree on a definition of networks. In her books on the subject, Martin defines a network as "a group of individuals or organizations that are interconnected to form a system to accomplish some specific goal" (1) such as better service, shared resources, or better communication among members. Patrick noted that "in contrast to the simple and largely informal arrangements for interlibrary loan, ... network arrangements call for members to share system planning and development of resources, as well as operating responsibilities and functions." (2) The Special Libraries Association has also stressed this level of structure in the definition they have used: "a formal arrangement whereby several libraries or other organizations engage in a common pattern of exchange of information, materials, services, or all three for some functional purpose." (3) It is this definition which I will use in this paper.

Why would special librarians want to be involved in networks? Interlibrary loan has been, and continues to be the most popular reason. Many library networks will give members access to other collections, preferred service or lower borrowing fees. Another popular advantage is the time saved by making use of existing cataloging records, either for cataloging or for citation verification. Contact with other librarians for ideas, advice, or just moral support can be an intangible but important advantage.

Some years ago, Shank wrote that "the largest part of the interaction among special libraries...came about through informal or non-systematized contacts, with the libraries operating quite independently and under no obligation to participate in the transactions." (4) It was only with the advent of reduced budgets and increased costs for staff and for collections that formal relationships became important and the word "network" was applied to the groups of libraries. (5) In the last decade, library networks of all sorts have been studied, and the networking activities of special librarians have been of particular interest to some researchers. (6) The papers which we will hear today will add to the growing base of literature on this subject.

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SELECTING A NETWORK

The many types of library networks which can exist, can be classified into three major groups. There are networks based on geographic limits, subject criteria or type of library. The geographical limits may be a city, a region within a state, an entire state, several states or parts of states, a country or even several countries. The subject criteria could be as specific as Canadian fisheries libraries or all-inclusive, such as the OCLC network. Single-type networks of medical libraries or public libraries or research libraries frequently exist, but multitype networks of more than one type of library are becoming increasingly common. The Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies reported an overall increase of 787% in the number of networks from 1976 to 1984. During these same eight years, however, there was an increase of 184% in multitype library networks. (7)

The role of networks may become clearer if we look at the factors involved in a librarian's decision to join a network. In 1977, the Guidelines Subcommittee of the Networking Committee of the Special Libraries Association prepared an SLA state of the art review entitled Getting Into Networking: Guidelines for Special Librarians. Their recommendations were broken down into three phases: 1) Exploration; 2) Planning and Development; and 3) Operation and Evaluation, each with detailed steps to be followed.

The Subcommittee suggested that librarians begin by reading about library networks to understand what has been done already. They should then think about how their library might contribute to a network and what benefits it would derive from such a relationship. They will need to decide what services they need from a network: resource sharing, shared storage, cataloging or reference services; as well as what limits of subject, geography, or type of library they are willing to accept.

Librarians who decide that membership in a network is worth pursuing should next review existing networks to determine if there is one which would be appropriate for their library to join. These existing networks may be identified in publications such as Library Networks, 1986-1987 or the 1984 Report on Cooperation from the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies. Colleagues, professional associations, state libraries and directors of other networks may be additional sources of information. During this review, one or more prospective networks may be identified which might be appropriate for the library to join.

A few networks may be selected to investigate in more detail. The librarian should find out about the network's objectives, its membership, programs and activities, what it costs to become a member as well as any additional fees necessary to take advantage of member services, and whether their particular special library is eligible for membership. Unfortunately, some networks have resisted accepting librarians from for-profit companies or have not permitted special librarians to be represented in network governance. (8) As of 1985, eighteen states still had statutory or administrative provisions for only single-type library networks to be supported by state funds. Such restrictions exclude special libraries. (9) On a related matter, some special librarians have hesitated to join networks in the past because they worried that they would have to add records of cataloging of proprietary materials to bibliographic data bases or union lists. This is not required in most networks, including the very largest networks such as OCLC.

It may be that the librarian's investigation of specific networks will not identify just one network which meets the needs of the library. The best solution may be to join several different net-
works, a solution which has proven successful for many libraries. In fact, the average special library belongs to 1.9 networks, cooperatives, and/or online users groups. (10)

On the other hand, it may be that the library's needs are such that no existing network is appropriate, and the librarian will need to pursue the possibility of starting a new network. It is likely that other librarians with similar networking interests are already known, and a small group can begin to make basic decisions about what the subject and geographical limits of the network will be. A crucial step will be to determine if there is sufficient interest beyond the planning group to justify and support a new network. If the interest is there, the Exploratory Phase of getting into networking ends with the selection of an appropriate name for the new group.

The Planning and Development Phase begins by identifying the objectives of the network, selecting an organizational structure, drafting bylaws and deciding whether a budget, director, and headquarters are necessary. At this stage, plans for programs or services will also be outlined. Patrick, in her classic study of library cooperation, noted that among the most common activities of library networks were reciprocal borrowing privileges, inter-library loan, photocopying, union lists, joint purchasing or cooperative selection of expensive publications, central storage, and joint research projects. (11) Murphy, in her studies of the networking activities of special libraries in the mid-1970's, found that expanded interlibrary loan service was the most common practice of special libraries in networks, followed by photocopying services, union lists and catalogs, reciprocal borrowing privileges, and reference services. It is interesting to note that joint purchasing of materials, mutual notification of purchases, and assignment of subject specialization in acquisitions were found to be much less common among special librarians than they were in networks of academic libraries. (12) Regardless of what services are selected for a new network, the recommendation is to start small and work up to more ambitious goals.

In the final phase described in Getting Into Networking, the steering committee for the new network works out the details of services and specific responsibilities are delegated, either to paid staff or to volunteer members. SLA recommends that each new service be tested before it is offered to the entire membership, so that changes can be made more easily. After evaluating the success of trial programs, wider implementation can begin, and other services can be developed, tested, and implemented.

During these developmental stages, those responsible for planning and testing should keep the rest of the membership informed about what is happening, so that they can follow the progress as well. This will help to maintain their initial level of support and enthusiasm. Newsletters, conference programs or telephone calls are possible means of keeping in touch. (13)

SPECIAL LIBRARIES IN NETWORKS

How successful have special librarians been at becoming involved in networks? In some cases, special libraries are seen to be leaders in the field. Since 1965, the Regional Medical Library Program has been an excellent example of a nationwide, multitype network serving a single subject interest. In this network, which is coordinated by the National Library of Medicine, the United States is divided into regions, each with a major medical library to administer regional programs. Within each region, there are several resource libraries, primarily academic medical libraries, which form a layer between the Regional Medical Library and the basic units. Basic units are local hospitals or other institutions such as special, academic or public libraries, which need health science information. The first service to be offered by this network was document
delivery, which is still the best known aspect of the RML Program. Basic unit libraries which need to borrow an item first turn to other basic unit libraries to fill these needs. Unfilled requests are then sent to another resource which, if it does not have the needed item, will automatically forward the request to another resource library, the regional library or the National Library of Medicine. Fees are charged for loans obtained through the network. Other services in the RML Program have included union lists, training programs, and grants. Regional governance includes representatives from both the resource libraries and the basic unit libraries; and the RML administrators meet with the National Library of Medicine for network policy decisions.

Shirk and Davis have described a network of U.S. and Canadian libraries which support the gas industry. The network is coordinated by the Library Services Committee of the American Gas Association (AGA). The Committee of approximately 30 librarians meets twice a year, and creates subcommittees to work on special projects. Since 1972, members have prepared core lists of publications important to the gas industry, a directory of Gas Industry Librarians, and provided consultants to AGA member companies who were considering starting their own library. They have been so successful that other trade associations have expressed interest in modeling similar groups on this single subject, international network of special libraries. (14)

In Minneapolis, an interesting network of librarians from non-competing libraries has existed for twenty years to provide rapid loan and delivery services, cooperative collection development, and professional support to member librarians. All the librarians work in a complex of office buildings which are inter-connected by pedestrian walkways so that no one has to go outside to get from one building to another. This characteristic led to the name of the network, the Insiders. The only members of the network are the head librarians of each company. They meet monthly to share news, exchange materials, work on current projects such as a union list, or to plan professional development sessions on online services or special sources of information. The Insiders have no officers, dues or contractual agreement with each other, and therefore might not meet the criteria established for "networks," but they can still be considered a good example of a multi-subject cooperative of special libraries in a very limited geographic area. (15)

InCoLSA, the Indiana Cooperative Library Services Authority, was organized in 1974 as a statewide, multitype library network. By 1985, 165 institutions were members of the network, 29 (15.5%) of which were special librarians. Special libraries have had a strong voice in InCoLSA from the beginning, and the Executive Committee requires that at least one of its seven members be from a special library. Among the services offered are statewide access to OCLC and its subsystems, including the Indiana Union List of Serials; group contracts and discounts to systems such as BRS and Dialog; electronic mail service; retrospective conversion, cataloging, and book processing for smaller member libraries; mini computer systems for circulation; and group discounts for purchasing equipment. In addition, InCoLSA supports all of these services by offering continuing education and training course. (16)

**NCLIS/SLA TASK FORCE**

Library networks, including a possible national network, were a central theme of the 1979 White House Conference on Libraries and Information Science. In spite of examples of networking activities of special libraries such as those described above, as the roles of libraries in networks were discussed, it became clear to some that it was commonly perceived "that special libraries...are unavailable for use, and the contents of their collections are not known," a percep-
tion which the President of the Special Libraries Association called "a serious, unfortunate and long-standing error." (17)

In response to these concerns, in 1980 the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, in cooperation with the Special Libraries Association, established a Task Force on the Role of the Special Library in National Networks and Cooperative Programs. The Task Force was to:

"examine ways of making the under-utilized and often inaccessible resources of the Nation's special libraries available to emerging nationwide networks, and making the resources of networks available to the special libraries. By helping to bring this large constituency...into the mainstream of networking and cooperative programs, the Task Force will be making a major contribution to improving the effectiveness of the Nation's use of its knowledge resources." (18)

As part of their study, the Task Force surveyed the membership of the Special Libraries Association about their networking activities. They also requested information from the major bibliographic utilities, the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN), and the Washington Library Network (WLN), as well as seventeen of the largest state and regional networks about the involvement of special libraries in their organizations. These surveys indicated that special libraries are involved in networking and resource sharing activities. OCLC reported that 21% of its members were special libraries and, across the broad spectrum of networks, fully 35% of network members were reported to be special libraries. (19) Looking more closely at IAMSLIC members, Barnett reported in 1984 that 43% of the marine science libraries that she surveyed participated in OCLC or another network for shared cataloging. (20)

Network directors noted that among the contributions which special librarians make to networks are cataloging of unique resources, willingness to loan their resources, and service on governing boards and advisory councils.

Five network directors also noted that special librarians are "advanced thinkers," (21) which is certainly a flattering reputation to have. This level of involvement and recognition was encouraging to special librarians who were concerned about the role of their colleagues in formal cooperatives.

However, the Task Force also reported that 50% of the librarians who responded to their survey stated that they do not belong to any formal networks, either because of lack of interest (35%), lack of knowledge of networks (21%), or lack of funds to support participation (21%). (22) This is consistent with the findings of a similar study of academic libraries, where 52% of the libraries indicated they did not belong to any networks. Of these academic libraries, 58% thought there was no need to belong to a network, and 36% stated that the cost of membership prevented them from joining. (23) In the study of special libraries, a small but potentially significant minority of ten percent felt so strongly opposed to formal cooperation that they were reported to show "resistance to even consider network participation." (24) Unwillingness to include special libraries in networks occurs on both sides, however. The NCLIS Task Force also cites the resistance in some states to fund multitype library networks to which special libraries might belong.

THE FUTURE

What does the future hold for special libraries and networks? At this point, we probably don't know enough about the networking objectives of special libraries to be able to make a
prediction. However, as Martin notes, the "trend hardly indicates that library networking will wither. The finances of most libraries are such that libraries cannot ignore the benefits of cooperative activities." (25) As was indicated earlier, there has been a marked increase in the number of multitype library networks, and it may be that special librarians will be joining these networks. In states where multitype networks have only recently been supported by state funds, special librarians have been instrumental in getting the laws changed. (26) However, multitype networks representing all four types of libraries are still not common. In the past it has been easier for public and academic libraries to participate in such networks, in part because of the restrictions placed on special libraries and school libraries by their parent organizations. (27) Hill wrote that because the academic and public libraries first started the library networks, "they dominate them today, they provide the major funding, and they will see to it that the networks function as they need them to function. (28) This is still a new area for study in librarianship. As more special librarians make the decision to participate in the various types of library networks, as these libraries and networks are studied, and as results of their research are made available, we may be able to draw some conclusions about the best network paths for special librarians to follow.

In 1980, Trezza challenged special librarians to become active in networks, saying:

The unique role of special libraries in providing information services to their clientele offers a dimension to multitype library networking that is not generally available from the other types of libraries...special librarians must not wait to be invited to participate in networks, nor wait to be told what role they should play. You must take the initiative. You have a right to be included in local, state and regional networks. You must participate as full partners in services and governance. (29)

The NCLIS/SLA Task Force Report indicates that special librarians have begun to meet this challenge. The actions of special librarians in the next decade will determine just how well we do succeed.

REFERENCES


(22) Ibid. p. 14.


