

Modernizing Mycroft: The Future of the Area Librarian

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It is a pleasure and an honor to have the opportunity to address such a distinguished group. I have given a number of talks on related topics, though never on this particular subject, which is of special and enduring interest to me. What makes this opportunity even more welcome is the fact that my audience is largely composed of experienced, well-informed, intelligent, overworked, overcommitted, bruised, and embattled fellow area librarians. In these remarks I wish to share with you some perceptions that derive from my own experience in a variety of spheres -- as bibliographer, as department head or "team leader," and as a Title VI center director. I hope they will assist us in designing a strategy to clarify, redefine, and advance the role of the area librarian. I look forward to the discussion that will follow.

During the 1960s and 1970s, when the idea of hiring subject specialists in academic libraries in response to the growth of area studies programs within universities was still new, the topic generated a modest body of literature. As attention has turned in the 1980s toward more general collection management issues, writing on subject librarians has dwindled. There are a few potentially relevant articles here and there, which fall fairly neatly into several groups, covering the standard topics: the full-time/part-time bibliographer dilemma; the question of credentials, i.e., whether bibliographers need a second master's degree or a PhD; academic status and publishing or perishing among librarians; self-image and leadership qualities. There is an as-yet unpublished article co-authored by my Latin Americanist colleague Mark Grover from Brigham Young University, with Susan Fales and Larry Ostler, on "Reference and Collection Development: Are They Compatible?" which takes head-on yet another of "the issues" for bibliographers; namely, whether or not collection development and reference work blend naturally and should be combined in the same positions, and analyzes the personality differences between bibliographers and reference librarians. There is an excellent article by Allen Veaner, entitled "Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Regained? A Persistent Personnel Issue in Academic Librarianship, II," in which the author contends, among many other things, that librarians' intellectual and programmatic responsibilities are undelegatable, and, hence, that research librarians like us are indispensable. This is a rather different view from that expressed in 1978 at a meeting of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) by Dennis Dickinson, who presented a paper entitled, "Subject Specialists in Academic Libraries: The Once and Future Dinosaurs," claiming that the prevailing economic conditions in research libraries have "rendered obsolete" many of the original justifications for the subject specialist: "It may very well be, then, that subject specialists are, at this point, at least as much a part of the problem as they are the solution, insofar as they require, in order to be effective, very substantial book funds on which to draw, and their relatively high salaries come from money which could otherwise be used directly for acquisitions, restoration, preservation, etc."

What does the scarcity of contemporary publications about area librarians indicate? That it is not an interesting topic? That it is a hot potato? That it is perceived as tangential? It certainly is a good time to address it. Universities are rapidly "internationalizing," area studies faculty are radically shifting their approaches to scholarship, turning to more cross-national analysis, and foundations and other funding agencies are changing the way they support "area studies." Although the Department of Education, under Title VI, continues to define programs strictly in regional terms, other funding sources have blurred or erased those firm "area" lines as scholarly

work moves freely across them. In addition, the "bag of tricks" that librarians must manage has grown increasingly larger and heavier with the advent and rapid expansion of access worldwide to resources in new formats. Budgets have been shrinking, or remaining static at best, with the concomitant implications for acquisitions, especially of foreign-language materials, with which we are all painfully familiar. Library issues have been highlighted in plenary and discussion sessions at the last two Title VI Center Directors' meetings in Washington, demonstrating heightened awareness of the complexity of the role of the area librarian. Area librarians are not dinosaurs; they are evolving, and entering a new phase.

The importance of this topic also has been underscored by the work of the Task Force on the Acquisition and Distribution of Foreign Language and Area Studies Materials, jointly sponsored by the Association of American Universities (AAU) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). The Task Force concluded its work last year and issued a report which, along with those of the other two task forces (on intellectual property rights in an electronic environment, and managing scientific and technological information), has now defined the direction for much of ARL's present and future activity. The most significant feature of that activity is a set of three pilot projects -- on Germany, Japan, and Latin America -- that will establish new, cooperative, and distributed models for acquiring and making accessible area studies collections. Paradoxically, at a time when many indicators would lead us to conclude that librarians with language and area expertise are more necessary than ever, in some circles such bibliographers are perceived as merely a luxury for libraries. Is specialization a luxury? Or is specialization a necessity?

In this presentation I would like first to focus on the image of the area librarian and to suggest some ways to change that image, before moving into a more specific discussion of the four areas of emphasis of this conference: training, continuing education, and the impact of electronic resources and cooperative programs on area librarianship. I am convinced that at the root of the "endangered" status of area librarians is a misconception about what they do, what they are capable of doing, and what they should be doing in the modern research library.

The area librarian does not enjoy a positive image in all circles. One important reason for this is that the work of the area librarian is not widely understood, or easily quantifiable in these days of justifying FTEs based on their productivity. Let's face it: the terms that come to some minds within libraries, in connection with area bibliographers, are far from complimentary:

"elitist," "arrogant," "print-bound," "faculty wanna-be," "idiosyncratic," "expensive," "pompous," "privileged," "prima donna," "traditional." "What do they do all day?" "They must have a lot of time on their hands." "Can't we put them on the reference desk?" And yet, this view is unfair, and destructive. It is, ironically, precisely the successful fulfillment of the most positive requirements of the area librarian's job -- the rapport with faculty, the close association with and dedication to academic programs, part and parcel of the job, the broad subject knowledge and an intensity of engagement with the field -- that create the paradox. Doing these things well both allows the librarian to support the mission of the institution, to satisfy "the customers," enjoying personal satisfaction and intellectual stimulation along the way, and yet also provokes the development or the perpetuation of the negative image. Why this paradox?

I began to give this topic some serious thought when, several years ago, a library administrator commented to me offhandedly, as if stating a basic, objective fact, "You know, you'll always be suspect among other librarians because you have an academic PhD." "What a liability!" I thought at the time. "What an interesting choice of words; 'suspected' of what?" Later, as I reflected on the conversation, and on what would make me -- and others in my

situation -- "suspect" among library colleagues (after all, some of my best friends are suspect!). I tried to determine how things have come to this, and how we can move beyond the combination of professional insecurity and professional envy that must be to blame. How we can change our image. The flames may even be fed by some librarians with doctorates who, due perhaps to their own insecurities (at not being regular faculty, for example), behave in ways that exacerbate the tensions. Some are prima donnas. The bibliographer's job, did, after all, start out, at least in part, as a faculty job, back when faculty were responsible for book selection. Bibliographers do want to serve as communication channels between the library and the faculty; after all, we do seek to understand their resource needs; we do want them to alert us to new trends in their work and in their fields; all this is written into our job descriptions. Isn't it a goal of every librarian to serve the faculty well, to help students, and to be respected and valued for that service? But if we do it too well, we run the risk of being perceived as colluding, as identifying with them too much. We become "suspect."

This "us and them" mentality is unsettling at best. All librarians are critical resources, partners with faculty. We need faculty and they need us. We do not want to be them; we want to facilitate their work, and that of their students. We want to build deep, coherent collections. In many cases, because of area librarians' working partnerships with faculty, we are in the best position to explain the library to them, and to solicit their input on a wide variety of library issues that may affect them, in other words, to serve as a conduit for information in both directions. The area librarian, PhD or not, can play a wide variety of roles within the university, and thus achieve a higher profile than many others. This fact, though positive, can unfortunately become misconstrued as negative.

The job of the area librarian is not well understood largely because it has evolved as a highly independent role, and is not always well-defined. Area librarians are often left alone to define and fulfill their duties, and evaluation may be difficult (as is evaluation of bibliographers in general) precisely because of the highly subjective nature of the work. Who knows if I am ordering the right books? We may spend X thousands of dollars in a given fiscal year, or order X hundreds of books, and manage ten approval plans, but those are just numbers. What do they tell us? They certainly don't give an accurate picture of the value of the area librarian. Ours is essentially work that must be evaluated qualitatively. I believe that it is time to move from relative isolation into a new role that still recognizes the value of specialization. The future of area librarians depends on our adapting and modernizing, integrating our skills into the library in new ways, and therefore changing our image. Unless we do so, redefining our core responsibilities, we will continue to be misperceived and undervalued, and hence, endangered.

For example, many libraries are now scurrying to hire "electronic access librarians," whose sole responsibility will be to assist users in satisfying their information needs electronically. Does this really make sense? Should we not all be electronic access librarians? Area librarians should certainly be responsible for managing access to electronic resources that are relevant to their fields, many of which are increasingly originating outside the US. If we are to change the image of the area librarian, we must break the format barrier. We should be as comfortable with electronic resources as with print sources. The users do not differentiate; why should we? We should work more closely with other departments within the library, especially reference, special collections, and public documents, and with branch and independent libraries, such as law and business (especially becoming involved in the programs of the CIBERS, the Centers for International Business Education and Research), to develop and share our knowledge and skills, and simply to learn more about what they offer. Other collaborative activities -- team-

taught classes, jointly developed bibliographic tools, shared committee work, and proposal writing -- these are all logical possibilities for the better integration of area librarians. Far from suggesting that we all become generic public service librarians, I am advocating our interdependence. We should seek, in Veaner's words, not to build a "team" but "to develop a style of cooperative independence uniting diverse interests into the achievement of common goals...."

At Duke the area librarians have been organized since 1991 into the International and Area Studies Team. We chose this structure, which is similar to that in some other libraries, because it makes sense, given the peculiarities of collection development for our areas, and because it has been a very useful mechanism for involving the library as a player in the university's internationalization efforts. We also have "affiliated" members, whose home base is in another team but who have collecting responsibilities with some international focus, e.g., the art and music librarians. We have recently created the Center for International Library Programs (a concept, not a place) as an umbrella to foster collaboration in program development and to encourage closer coordination of efforts between IAS and the professional school libraries. This also has raised the library's visibility within the university, allowing us, for example, to emphasize the importance of including a library component in grant proposals that will have an impact on collections and services. IAS bibliographers are regular members of our respective area faculty committees, and of subcommittees as well (such as those responsible for allocating Foreign Language and Area Studies, or FLAS, fellowships). This helps us move from the traditional image of the isolated scholar-bibliographer into the realm of fund raising, collaborative projects, teaching, format-indifferent public service, and enhanced participation in university affairs. This increased versatility and visibility, and the development of complementary relationships within the library, will also go far to enhance the image of the area librarian and, in fact, of the library itself. It helps keep the university from taking us for granted.

Appropriate training for area specialists, beyond the obvious need for language skills, was much discussed in the '60s and '70s. The participants at the 30th Annual Conference of the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago, held in 1965 and devoted to the theme of "Area Studies and the Library," complained about the lack of qualified people to fill the newly created positions of bibliographers. According to one participant, in 1964 there were 74 open positions but only 28 could be filled (Winger 1965, p. 362). Another speaker said: "We compete with each other scandalously for such people, and we import them from the remote areas of the world." (Wagman 1965, p. 351) According to a 1994 study on the demographics of research librarianship conducted at ARL, librarians are, as a group and on average, considerably older than individuals in other professions: 53.3% of subject specialists in ARL libraries are age 50 or older; 12.8% are 65 or older. The study showed dramatically the need to refresh the pool, to bring in new, young blood; there is every reason to believe that this is as true of area librarians (included in the category of "subject specialists") as it is of academic librarians in general.

Area librarians are a hybrid. They require a layer of specialized skills in addition to a basic understanding of the functioning of research libraries. The kind of knowledge that distinguishes area specialists from other librarians is not imparted in library school, nor is the core of library expertise they need taught in disciplinary graduate school programs. Library school courses on collection development tend to be general and theoretical, in part because, like the broader curriculum, they must address public, school, and special libraries in addition to college and university libraries. By necessity, given the language and subject skills the job requires, the area librarian has had other training or experience prior to becoming a librarian.

Many area librarians entered libraries through the academic door, by earning a graduate degree in a subject first, and later finding research librarianship to be a satisfying and stimulating outlet for their talents. Some have library degrees, some do not. Some area librarians have had previous incarnations as Peace Corps volunteers. Others may have been raised abroad, within families engaged in international business, education, or missionary work. Some people think that an academic graduate degree and having done one's own research is prerequisite enough to become a librarian; I believe that some additional training is necessary. I also believe that the solid core of area skills is the heavier component of the area librarian's expertise, and that library knowledge must be built upon that core, not the other way around.

What skills should the new area librarian have, in addition to area and disciplinary knowledge and language ability? A preliminary list would include: an engagement with issues for research libraries on the national level; a basic understanding of the internal functioning of the library, and the interrelationships among departments; how the collections budget is allocated and managed; interpersonal skills; a basic understanding of technical services (What is an authority record? What is a uniform title?); an understanding of the book trade; and very strong writing skills. Provided that potential employers will accept "equivalent experience" to take the place of the ALA-accredited MLS, future area librarians might acquire this knowledge through alternative means, for example, in an internship or apprenticeship program.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of close cooperation between library schools and university departments was advocated. At Chicago and the University of Texas, for a relatively brief period, joint programs were offered between the library school and the area studies centers.

The number of students enrolling in those programs was, however, small. Other models that have been successful over the years include a Mellon program at Stanford University Libraries that assigned "graduate student bibliographers" from various disciplines serious projects of collection analysis. This was helpful to both the students and the library. Participating in that program was an important formative experience for me. Another possibility is for the library to strike up an agreement with the graduate school, for example, as at Duke, where a graduate student in History receives a fellowship to work in the Special Collections Library.

Several other creative new approaches to the training of area librarians that combine "basic training" in librarianship with the area studies "layer" have recently emerged. One of them is Indiana's joint degree between area studies programs and the library school. Another is a new post-doctoral program through Duke University's Center for International Library Programs, which recently received funding for three years from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The program will bring two recent Latin Americanist PhDs to Duke for a one-year, hands-on internship, in collaboration with UNC-Chapel Hill, which is our partner in a Title VI Latin American program and has an excellent library school. Mentoring will be a critical element of this program, and the fellows will spend time in other libraries on campus, including those of the professional schools. There is a program at the University of Illinois, the Visiting Research Associate in the Slavic and East European Library, designed to introduce young librarians to reference work in Slavic librarianship. It is often very difficult for new librarians to move into area librarian positions, since most require some experience. The Illinois program addresses that problem, at least for the Slavic field. These programs, though different in approach, share a goal: to make research librarianship a respectable and attractive alternative career path, rather than a second choice, merely a consolation prize for having suffered the vicissitudes of the academic job market. I have counseled graduate students from a variety of areas who sheepishly admit to being inclined toward a career in area librarianship, and are fearful

of confessing this apparent "failure" to their advisors. This is unfortunate, since area librarianship can be at least as intellectually rewarding as a career in teaching, and even broader, in fact. That's what I tell them.

Area librarians should be confident that they play a critical role. For those who come from an academic background, and have been steeped in that environment, their first-hand understanding of the academic culture can help as they form relationships with faculty. But we must keep it in perspective; when I discussed with a History faculty member what elements should go into the Latin Americanist post-doctoral research library fellowship just described, he suggested, absolutely seriously, that a course of psychoanalysis might be in order to "re-socialize" an individual to counteract the negatives of the academic environment. A drastic approach to re-tooling indeed!

The next generation of area librarians will not face the same exaggerated dichotomy between print and other formats that we do, nor will they suffer from the negative image discussed earlier. Among job descriptions for collection development librarians, those solid area curatorships that tended to emphasize the "pure" selection of materials have been giving way steadily to creative combinations of responsibilities. Most of us would agree that general reference duties do not lend themselves well to combination with area specialization; in fact, this seems to be one of the great fears of area specialists: that they will be put on the reference desk. It does require a different kind of broad knowledge than most area librarians possess. But what about specialized public service, much more broadly conceived? User education, bibliographic and research methods instruction, service on university committees, orientation sessions on Internet and World Wide Web resources for specialized clienteles of faculty, graduate students, and visiting international scholars -- all of these are components of the job of the area librarian. To become more than conversant with these tools, i.e., to become true area resource/research librarians, a solid course of continuing education may be necessary, depending on the institution. In some libraries, cross-training between departments and with branch libraries may be the appropriate approach; for others, a more formal curriculum may be in order.

Buying trips abroad -- now not as common as they once were -- are of course a valuable means of keeping up with the field. Travel to conferences and, when relevant, pre-conferences, is a form of staff development, and for the area librarian it is critical. It is a way both to learn about trends in the field and to find out how other libraries are confronting change. It is also a way, increasingly, for bibliographers to get together to work out details of cooperative and consortial relationships, so it can serve a very practical purpose. When possible, sabbaticals and externally funded fellowships are another way for area librarians to renew their skills.

Not long ago, it was possible for many area librarians to tune out talk about digitizing and producing electronic resources for "our" countries. I am myself guilty, I confess, as recently as about five years ago, of stating with absolute confidence that, "books from Bolivia aren't going to be available in CD-ROM anytime soon," only to have to eat my words as I have watched, through SALALM, efforts to carry out such projects. The Bolivian case may not be too advanced yet, but many other countries of Latin America certainly are in the vanguard in this area. UT-LANIC, the University of Texas Latin American Networked Information Center, is in the top ten of most-accessed Web pages, and much of that access comes from Latin America itself. This is clearly one of the areas in which area librarians will be developing familiarity and more sophisticated skills -- in evaluating electronic products and assisting library patrons in their use.

It has become very clear to me through my work on the AAU/ARL Task Force on the Acquisition and Distribution of Foreign Language and Area Studies Materials and as chair of the

advisory committee of ARL's Latin Americanist Research Resources Pilot Project that cooperative, distributed models for developing and managing area studies collections are likely to continue to be the most productive approach to the crisis we face. Far from obviating the need for area librarians, these models will depend for their success on our knowledge of each region and its publishing, our familiarity with our respective universities' academic programs, and our ability to communicate well with faculty. In the initial phase of the three pilots, for example, they rely heavily on both clerical support and an intellectual framework. For the Latin American project, which is currently the most advanced (thanks in large part to a funding from the participating libraries and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation), the former is provided by a project coordinator and the latter is supplied by the bibliographers of the 31 participating institutions.

The goal of these pilots, which will soon, we hope, evolve from "special projects" into a way of life for many areas of foreign acquisitions, is to expand the availability of foreign materials on our campuses, to make accessible to faculty and students more research materials, many of which are presently simply not being acquired. To do this will mean, in many areas, changing our acquisition patterns. Like any cooperative approach, it will mean fostering interdependencies among institutions, and providing expedited access to the materials needed by researchers. This will require crafting organic collection development policies, coordinating the expansion of the model over time, and publicizing widely among faculty its advantages. Responsibility for this will rest firmly on the shoulders of the area librarians. Specialization will be a necessity.

When I talked with my fellow area bibliographers at Duke about this conference, and about our future, the Slavic studies bibliographer referred me to a lesser-known character in the literature of Sherlock Holmes. In The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans, it is November of 1895 and Holmes is restless. He asks Watson if he has seen anything of criminal interest in his perusal of the newspaper. He hasn't. But soon the maid arrives with a telegram, which brings some news: Holmes's brother Mycroft is coming to visit. Holmes is astonished, since his brother is such a creature of habit, to whom change does not come easily.

"It is as if you met a tram-car coming down a country lane. Mycroft has his rails and he runs on them. His Pall Mall lodgings, the Diogenes Club, Whitehall -- that is his cycle...What upheaval can possibly have derailed him?... A planet might as well leave its orbit. By the way," he says to Watson, "do you know what Mycroft is?"

..."You told me that he had some small office under the British government." Holmes chuckled. "You are right in thinking that he is under the British government. You would also be right in a sense if you said that occasionally he is the British government."

"My dear Holmes!"

"I thought I might surprise you. Mycroft draws four hundred and fifty pounds a year, remains a subordinate, has no ambitions of any kind, will receive neither honour nor title, but remains the most indispensable man in the country."

"But how?"

"Well, his position is unique. He has made it for himself. There has never been anything like it before, nor will be again. He has the tidiest and most orderly brain, with the greatest capacity for storing facts, of any man living. The same great powers which I have turned to the detection of crime he has used for this particular business. The conclusions of every department

are passed to him, and he is the central exchange, the clearing-house, which makes out the balance. All other men are specialists, but his specialism is omniscience. We will suppose that a minister needs information as to a point which involves the Navy, India, Canada, and the bimetallic question; he could get his separate advices from various departments upon each but only Mycroft can focus them all, and say offhand how each factor would affect the other. They began by using him as a short-cut, a convenience; now he has made himself an essential. In that great brain of his everything is pigeon-holed and can be handed out in an instant...."

Area librarians have always had one of the most rewarding jobs within libraries, and the conditions are propitious for our corner of the profession to play an expanded role within the library, within the university, nationally and internationally. I believe that the "golden age of area librarianship" to which Jim Neal referred in his opening remarks will be a reality. We are not the dinosaurs that Dickinson criticized; we're like Mycroft, in many ways, but with a more modern face: an essential resource.

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