



For any librarian from a public or academic library background, stepping into a special library for the first time can be a surprisingly disconcerting experience. I liken it to an AFL player scooped up from the MCG mid-disposal and plonked down in the middle of a Rugby scrum. The players' uniforms, boots, and ball look vaguely familiar as the observer's head is pounded into the turf, but the rules of play are clearly very different!

In almost every respect, special libraries are decidedly unlike their public and academic cousins. The most obvious points of difference include fewer colleagues (a professional staff of one is common), smaller and more focused collections, greater professional isolation, and acute vulnerability to the prosperity or otherwise of parent organisations. We've all heard the apocryphal tales of mining companies opening, closing, and re-opening corporate libraries on the basis of metals prices. There is sometimes a grain of truth in such stories.

Special libraries are also commonly the least understood and appreciated by the library profession as a whole; and the library sector most often overlooked in advocacy campaigns. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, special libraries remain exciting and innovative workplaces, with much to teach the wider library profession about corporate politics, customer service, return on investment, and responding positively to change.

In fact, I would be so bold as to suggest that special libraries may actually provide us with a litmus test for the future of libraries generally. When the political and corporate acumen of special libraries is tested in extremis, we should all take notice.

And here's why.

Special libraries, I believe, represent the oldest and most authentic expression of library practice. To forget why we came into being historically is to lose sight of how we can set about providing meaningful value to customers and clients in a *Google-ised* world.

In its purest form, a special library is established by an organisation for the explicit purpose of meeting the information needs of the members or clients of that entity. How the 'meeting of member information needs' is actually achieved differs widely according to the nature of the organisation and its members, but therein lies the real art and adventure of special librarianship. There are no rules. No two working days are the same and professional mettle is tested at every turn.

In historical terms, special libraries predate academic and public libraries. If we take a moment to consider our professional lineage, they are where we all served our apprenticeship and learned our trade. Three elements dominated then and remain with us now, in order of importance: users, the information needs of those users, and the collections developed to meet the information needs of those users. Everything else, including arguments about digital versus print, is humbug – the trappings of 'professionalism' that few if any library users care much about.

In Australia, the first recorded library was a special library - formed in Sydney in 1821 by the Philosophical Society of Australasia.<sup>1</sup> Arguably Australia's first 'public' library opened a few years later in Hobart in 1825. Free public libraries run along the lines familiar to us now were not to emerge for another 120 years. Our first academic library did not follow its special library progenitor until after the founding of the University of Sydney in 1850.

For over a century the growth of special libraries in Australia was phenomenal; particularly in the economic boom decades following the Second World War. In the four decades from 1952 (the 1st edition of the *Directory of Special Libraries in Australia*) to 1991 (the 8th edition), the number of recorded

special libraries increased threefold from 384 to 1218.<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, just as things started to get interesting during the recession of the 1990s, the Directory ceased publication after its 10th edition in 1999. True, there is *Australian Libraries: The Essential Directory (ALED)*, now in its 9th edition, but experience of that directory leads me to question whether it is providing a comprehensive picture of the special library sector. Not all special libraries respond to the publisher's questionnaire and restructuring of libraries within government agencies seems to occur at such furious speed that any publisher could be forgiven for being several iterations behind reality.

Anecdotal evidence from within the broader special library sector suggests a net decline in the numbers of health, law, government, and corporate special libraries. A quantifiable measure of losses in the sector over the last decade is anyone's guess though. And that should be a concern to every library professional in this country!

Despite workforce modelling projects such as Nexus and Nexus2, finding useful, never mind comprehensive, contemporary statistics on special libraries in Australia is nigh impossible. Nexus2 only attracted a very small sample (n=34) – hardly representative of a sector with more than 1200 libraries a decade earlier.<sup>3</sup> ALIA recognises 258 institutional members identifying as special libraries and 692 personal members identified as working in special libraries.

Without a more comprehensive picture of the sector, mounting a national case for public and private sector support of special libraries would be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

This is not a new issue however.

The April 1998 issue of *inCite* was dedicated to Corporate Libraries, and, incidentally, featured a senior minister of the Howard government on the cover promoting Australian Library and Information Week. In an opinion piece entitled "Change and competition challenge special libraries", then National President of the ALIA Special Libraries Section, Deanne Barrett highlighted the "need for more research into Australian special libraries"; focusing in particular on "performance measurement and value-adding" as means by which to ensure their survival. Barrett noted but did not provide details of an ALIA project from that year, *The Value of Corporate Libraries*.

Where I wonder are the results of that project now? Who indeed remembers it? Has the time come to reprise its work?

I say yes, it is!

At very least I contend we are overdue for a comprehensive census of special libraries in Australia and New Zealand. For as long as special libraries continue to be soft targets for governments and companies seeking to cut costs and boost their bottom lines, our profession needs to respond with good and useful data. We need to support our colleagues in special libraries by helping them to quantify and demonstrate their return on investment to parent organisations and the nation as a whole.

I believe our goal longer term must be a set of common benchmarks and meaningful ROI measures for special libraries. Without compelling data, our profession's senior sector may be the first to succumb to the new world information order; despite best efforts to the contrary. And like the canary in the coal mine, the demise of special libraries will be a warning to us all. The critical question is this though: will it be too late for the rest of us?

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Biskup (1994) *Libraries in Australia*, Wagga Wagga, NSW: Charles Sturt University, p 279

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.alia.org.au/employment/workforce/nexus2\\_FinalReport1.pdf](http://www.alia.org.au/employment/workforce/nexus2_FinalReport1.pdf)