

## Editorial

# The status of systems librarians

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### Abstract

Systems librarians are a subspecies on whom everyone in the library world depends. Yet no one who has worked as a systems librarian would recognize themselves as having an exalted status. The problem lies in the dual nature of their work: they must be computer professionals and librarians simultaneously. And that is hard.

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## Introduction

It is the “professional’s professionals” who are of high statu (Abbott, 2001, p. 146).

In a recent article in *D-Lib Magazine*, Marcum (2003) summarized the results of an essay contest about the academic library in 2012:

The prevailing conviction revealed in the essays was that technology serves as the driving force determining change in academic libraries.

This probably surprises no one. Technology has been changing academic libraries in very obvious ways for a long time, as Crawford (2003) noted recently in *American Libraries*. This sustained dependence on technology has created a systems librarian subspecies on whom everyone depends, and that dependence should make them, in Abbott’s terms, the professional’s professional: colleagues to whom the very best specialists turn without the least shame for help and advice.

Yet, no one who has worked as a systems librarian would recognize themselves as having quite so exalted a status. The problem lies in the dual nature of their work: they must be computer professionals and librarians simultaneously. And that is hard.

## Computer professionals

Among computing professionals, systems librarians are often regarded as quasi-amateurs: more like power-users than fellow pros. Systems librarians must work with university information technology staff to accomplish a variety of services, such as registering new domain names, getting better bandwidth, or establishing data feeds from administrative systems. Some systems librarians have the technical skills to do this work themselves, but the chance rarely comes, since giving them access to the right tools and data presents security issues and coordination problems.

Within the library’s own staff, systems librarians may well supervise other computer professionals, but this does not necessarily enhance their status. Respect for them as computer professionals will depend largely on their technical expertise. Computing is a world where success is obvious: things either work or they do not. Those who can make more things



work more often get more respect. Systems librarians simply do not have time to learn all the technical details about the latest computer technology, and keep up with issues in the library world. They also do not have the time to serve both as managers and hands-on technicians. Systems librarians who hope to win respect for their technical competence are struggling against the odds.

### **Non-librarian systems staff**

The status of non-librarian systems staff affects systems librarians because their work integrates so completely. Within libraries these staff may be excluded from governance committees and, with rare exceptions, have no hope of becoming a director or assistant director. Yet they may be paid better than many librarians because their services are in demand in the commercial sector. And systems openings are typically filled as fast as possible, while a bibliographer job may well be left open for years.

Within the university they are outside the central computing structure, and may have no direct access to its tools or information sources. When they need assistance, they may be asked to go through the help desk like any ordinary user.

### **Librarians**

Among librarians, those dealing with systems represent a subspecies whose ecological niche is clear, but whose place within the taxonomic hierarchy has been shifting. Systems librarians exist to handle all things dealing with computers. It is an ecological niche that requires skills that are not taught in most library schools today, and certainly were not taught at the time when most practicing librarians received their degrees. Systems librarians have little or no competition in this niche from opinionated colleagues, unlike collections librarians, who get suggestions from anyone who ever read a book on their subject. Degreed librarians with enough computer experience to take on the challenge (and stress) of making a library's electronic resources work are also few enough that demand remains high.

Twenty years ago the place of systems librarians within the standard divisions of the profession seemed fixed: they belonged to technical services because their automation systems primarily facilitated cataloging, acquisitions, and circulation. Public services cared of course about the online catalog, but generally at a superficial (that is, interface) level. The growth of the Web spurred much greater public services involvement with systems because the online resources grew well beyond those in the standard online catalog. Systems responsibilities changed also as libraries grew more involved with purchased electronic resources and with personal productivity tools. The trend today is for systems librarians to belong to an independent unit with ties to both technical and public services.

Having a unique and essential niche, plus increasing independence within library hierarchies, could confer high status if it were not for the constant reminder of systems problems such as printers not working, disk crashes, installation problems, unexplained system errors. These expose every imperfection in a blatantly public way that, for example, bibliographers rarely face when books they order turn out less brilliant than promised.

Librarian colleagues judge on what they see. A highly competent systems librarian can easily look like a fool when widely used tools very visibly crash. An equally spectacular fix will go relatively unnoticed. Things merely work again. Other librarians cannot judge the skill, only calm and assurance that suggest it.

### **Library schools**

While library schools have taken an active interest in recent years in instilling knowledge about the latest digital technologies, few if any schools currently offer courses in introductory systems librarianship. The focus tends to be on Web-programming and human-computer interaction, rather than the basics of operating system administration, network management, database design, or languages like Java, Perl, or C++. This fits with a trend in library schools to provide a broader and more intellectually-based education, rather than train students to step

immediately into a specific library job like cataloging or reference.

Even if schools wanted to offer systems librarianship courses, finding instructors would be hard, and the number of prerequisite classes would be large, since most incoming students lack any real computer science background. As a profession, we attract more humanists than engineers.

Library schools do offer more and more courses in digitization, however. The skill sets are different, but overlapping. Any substantial digital project must deal with infrastructure issues like database management and the network resources to make large digital objects accessible. Digitization also has considerable cachet, while systems librarianship evokes an image getting called when the online catalog crashes or when the director's desktop printer stops working. Students have no trouble guessing where the higher status lies.

## Conclusion

Systems librarians represent a service profession for a service profession. They are the plumbers

who get called in an emergency, the carpenters who make additions to the house, the roofers whose work is supposed to last for a decade but sometimes leaks. They are absolutely necessary to accomplish what we do in libraries today.

A good systems librarian is in fact more like an expert bibliographer than like a technician. Both should bring scholarly expertise, plus substantial language or methodological training, to the job. Their status is not equal. But in the end, what makes libraries work is the balance of skills. The real professional's professional in the library world can be anyone who provides a set of skills that others need. Systems librarians are certainly among them.

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