One Person Libraries and Librarianship: Issues for Theological Librarians

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Introduction

The invitation to speak at your conference *Tradition and Technology: Theological Libraries in an Electronic Age* was one I greeted with some surprise. I expected that many of you were practising one person librarians. What would I possibly have to share with you when you have no doubt experienced it all? Indeed, technology and tradition, the themes of your conference, are usually the bailiwick of the one person librarian: often a little bit of technology with a lot of tradition. Once I had given my paper I could see that while we all shared many common areas of experience and interest, there were new ones to be had by all.

Definitions

The definition of the one person library/librarian has moved over time. Those I have found in the literature include:
* a library managed and operated by a single worker;
* a librarian who works and manages an information centre alone;
* a single staff practitioner;
* a minimal-staff library.

In 1986, Guy St Clair and Joan Williamson stated that: "The one person library is one in which all of the work is done by the librarian." (St Clair & Williamson 1986, p1).
Another definition I came across was "the solo who works alone both as the librarian and library manager."

St Clair and Williamson (1992) document the drift to solo librarianship and the move by the US Special Libraries Association (SLA) to establish a network: "the word solo has the image of featured artists with talents exceeding those of the accompanying group" (Rhine in St Clair & Williamson 1992, p3).

In the second edition of their book on one-person librarianship, St Clair and Williamson recorded the SLA definition of special librarians:

> library and information professionals who provide focussed, working information to
> a specialized clientele on an ongoing basis, to further the mission and goals of the
> particular parent company or organisation. (St Clair & Williamson 1992, p3)

In Australia, in practice, we see "the one person librarian as also encompassing the solo who works alone as the information professional and information manager". If you are looking for information on the one person librarian in the literature it would be useful to not only search under these terms but also under OPL and one man band(s), the latter term used by Aslib in the United Kingdom (UK) and occurring in the UK literature.

Types of OPLs

From your own experience, theological libraries are often of the OPL variety. In the broader sense, OPLs occur more widely than we first might think. They commonly occur in the special library and school library domains. They also occur in the academic library spheres: branch and special subject libraries being two examples. Another example could be in what is called a "resource centre" in academic departments within a tertiary institution. In the public library sphere, and in Western

Australia, we can find OPLs in the smaller country towns, i.e. a library run by one person, though this person is not always a qualified librarian.

There are many scenarios where the OPL might appear in the many spheres of government and business, for example in law firms, environmental consultancies, mining and/or exploration companies, many government departments, church and charity groups, non government organisations (ngos), small to medium enterprises (smes), research groups, learned and professional societies and local councils to name a few.

Professional recognition and networking

Do bodies like the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) recognise OPLs? ALIA as a professional society recognises professional qualification. It also facilitates networking between like groups in the profession loosely known as librarianship, and ALIA groups such as Specials, Schools and the like exist. Late last year a new special interest group was born: OPALS or the One Person Australian Libraries group. This is certainly one to join; they now have a newsletter, launched at the recent ALIA Biennial Conference in Melbourne, called *OPALessence*. They are a very enthusiastic and growing community.

In the US and the UK there are special interest groups. In the US the large SLA supports many divisions and chapters including the Solo Person Libraries Division. This Division maintains a newsletter, *Flying Solo* and an electronic Listserv SOLOLIB on the Internet. [See the editorial note at the end of this paper for information sources.] As mentioned earlier, Aslib in the UK supports a One-Man Band Group.

Statistics

St Clair and Williamson reveal some statistics in the area:

A British Library Research and Development Report reported that in 1972 32% of British library units employed OPLs. A later British 1981 census revealed that this number had increased to 50%.

In 1986, in the US the SLA added the category of one person librarianship to their membership capture and reported that 27% of their American membership and 24% of their Canadian membership were OPLs. By 1991 a later survey revealed 31% of US and 27% of Canadian members had joined the category (St Clair & Williamson 1992, pp8-9).

It would appear that there are no data for Australia. This is about to change as I shall be commencing a statistical analysis in an effort to report an Australian situation.

Educational initiatives

In Australia the issues and educational background to being an OPL ought to be covered in any information and library studies course. My own experience has been that I also needed records management knowledge, but in the early 1980's when I undertook my first professional qualification, this was not available. It is at some institutions now, the Department of Information Studies at Curtin University being one. There does not appear to be any particular educational stream for one person librarianship although at Curtin I offer a module on the strand as well as the occasional workshop and short course. I am unable to speak for other Australian tertiary institutions.

It would appear that consultants like Guy St Clair travel quite extensively in North America delivering lectures, courses and seminars. St Clair has also visited Australia on two occasions.

Qualities of an OPL

In one of his many papers on one person librarianship, St Clair wrote:

".... the one person librarian is required to work harder, more faster (sic), compete, judge, and be judged, in an environment that is probably more demanding than any other situation in the library and information services profession." (St Clair 1992, p42).

There is no doubt that the OPL needs to be an all rounder; a person prepared to tackle difficult as well as the more mundane tasks required when running a small business, and most one person libraries are this. The issues of entrepreneurialism and intrapreneurealism are also important. As with other special library environments, the OPL client group is often in a hurry for information and can be quite pressured from their own job to deliver the goods in an accurate and timely fashion. OPLs need to assist this process. In an entrepreneurial way, the OPL needs to have networked amongst suppliers, colleagues and many others such that if a contact is needed in a hurry, that contact will be available and able to assist.

Similarly too with intrapreneurialism. That is: networking and doing deals within your organisation so that you can gain assistance from any quarter in the tasks and duties you carry out. If you are on a professional or work-related committee, or a member of the organising committee for this conference, why should you type your own business notes and minutes of meetings? Find someone from within your own organisation who would love to help you. Many of our own working colleagues gain a great deal of stimulation from the types of activities we become involved in and those who have some spare time on their hands are often willing to help.

An OPL might be expected to do everything in the information environment in which they work, but commonsense says that this is not always possible. OPLs need to be aware of their shortcomings and seek assistance from outside as and when required. Outsourcing is a term of the moment and it can happen that an OPL will need to outsource such tasks as backlogs in indexing, cataloguing and the like. It is also quite likely that the OPL may not have the required expertise, especially in areas of computing and telecommunications and will need to seek outside assistance here too.

One person librarianship requires dedication and professional motivation. It requires us to be adaptable, keen and enthusiastic. Because they in effect run their own business OPLs have to be prepared to shoulder the responsibility for the undertaking and also to work under their own volition. As the name implies, one person librarianship means mostly working alone, although it is rarely a lonely job.

The positives and negatives of one person librarianship might be seen to cancel each other out. OPLs need to recognise these and realise that for all the negatives they might experience on a bad or overly busy day, there is light at the end of the tunnel. The positive issues tend to speak for themselves:

> Positives: organise own time; autonomy; set own priorities; interesting work; work variety; can try new ideas; often appreciated; very satisfying; learning all the time; closely involved with clients.(St Clair & Williamson 1992, p12)

The negatives, also highlighted by St Clair and Williamson, deserves a little more attention because there is often a tactic the OPL can employ in an effort to overcome them:

> Negatives: lack of time; professional isolation; perceived lack of opportunity for continuing professional development; unreliable management support; difficulty in keeping in touch with organisational direction; physical working conditions; low pay (?); job security; little career advancement; small budgets. (St Clair & Williamson 1992, p12)

The issues of lack of time and professional isolation are usually givens. The excitement of the OPLs work environment is usually that of busyness and being in demand and such a climate tends to go with the job, as does professional isolation. Overcoming professional isolation within the organisation means stepping out beyond it and there are many professional bodies around which enable this. Most professional bodies of which we are members are enthusiastic to gain new committee members and while the OPL might feel exhausted after "a hard day at the office" the

invigoration of meeting with one's colleagues (organising a conference such as this for example) and the rewards gained from such activity far outstrip the hesitancy to join in the first place. Go for it.

It is also often up to the OPL is take charge of their own continuing professional development (cpd). There is no way today that any of us in the information game can expect to keep up to date with the changes and developments in it without seeking further education and/or training. The issue of unreliable management support can hinder this process, but it can also help. Management support may be unreliable because managers, too, suffer the stresses and strains of being under pressure in an ever-changing work environment. It is up to the OPL to choose the opportune moment to broach the subject of cpd and also matters like budgetary increases, and present a plausible and reasonable case. Remember too that OPLs like many of us, may have to dig into their own pockets from time to time and pay for their own cpd. Not even a lecturer (and currently Head of Department) at a large university can wave a magic wand in the money stakes for an academic's cpd.

The issues of difficulties in keeping in touch with organisational direction, possible low pay, physical working conditions, job security and little career advancement are all organisationally based though not necessarily related. It can be particularly true that keeping in touch with organisational direction in the corporate (and often in the government) world can have its challenges. Often the way to do this is completely informal. In an ideal world (and books like Bryson go into this in some detail) the OPL should be a part of the management decision making process, should attend appropriate organisational committee and planning meetings and be involved at every stage in the organisational planning of the corporation. This is not always the case, so informal methods are therefore indicated: chatting to senior staff at work socials, over coffee, and in the corridors are often the most successful ways of keeping informed of the organisation's direction.

Job security, low pay and little career advancement can be issues, but they may not be. In an OPL environment one's job is as secure as the next. Very few of us today would feel always secure in our jobs as the days of tenure and long term employment are not givens. Many of us would want to move on after a while, if only to experience a change of scenery and be re-invigorated by new circumstances. Unless the OPL is considering a career shift, the prospect of advancement in a firm is not high. If the information service grows, then career advancement would go with it, and the OPL would be no longer an OPL.

Low pay is a matter of setting the ground rules from the start and can be an issue in our control. Positions are advertised and if and when we apply we usually accept the salary as mentioned as a starting point, or a point from which we might bargain. If we decide to work for a low rate of pay, then we have made the decision to do so. It can be argued that many organisations, and perhaps theological organisations are in this category, are unable to afford to pay "professional wages" for professional work. We as individuals choose who we work for and we decide to work under these conditions. Perpetuating these situations does not assist our professions though the OPL is not the only guilty party here. That individuals choose to work for nothing is their own affair, but not one to be encouraged in a profession like ours. ALIA has a Statement which covers this issue.

Management of an OPL

The OPL promotes active dissemination of information for the organisation being served and promotes proactive involvement in the information needs of the client group. In so doing, the OPL provides a total information service by gaining information expertise in the subject area of the organisation. This might be already present in the education and interests of the OPL, it might be acquired over time or the acquisition of this interest might be through cpd and education.

I have mentioned that being an OPL is like managing a small business. The OPL is usually totally responsible for all activity within the information service. The methods used by the OPL in information service provision often are less formal and more experimental. Because of this, there is a tendency to use short cuts, adopt novel techniques and work efficiently. I would argue that an OPL would not be able to choose appropriate options unless that person had a sound information and library studies grounding, ideally educationally, and also practically.

The OPL is responsible for the management of the space, budget, information, promotion and marketing of the information service. The OPL might from time to time also be responsible for management of staff. The OPL is responsible for heeding relevant legislation, examples of which are those of copyright and legal deposit, health and safety, equal opportunity, and censorship laws.

Issues of conservation and preservation and the records management of an organisation's records and data have professional responsibilities as well as further legal responsibilities attached to them and the OPL needs to be aware of these and either seek assistance or further education to enable professional treatment in these areas.

The busyness of the OPL environment can lead many of us to re-assess our time management abilities and Andrew Berner is one who has written on this topic. In one of his articles he states that many misconceptions in time management may not necessarily be true, that:

time and energy = results. The more time and energy an OPL spends on a task or opportunity, the better the result. OPLs rarely have the luxury to spend too much time on a given activity in any case, so need to become quite efficient and effective rather than to labour intensely over their duties.

There is *virtue in hard work.* This saying probably comes from the old protestant ethic of all work and no play, and carries with it the baggage that the harder one works the more others will like and respect them. Does the fact that one works hard equate with working sensibly?

work cannot be enjoyable. This may be true for some but is patently not true for many. Most OPLs thoroughly enjoy their work. If work is not enjoyable, perhaps it is time for a change?

neatness counts. Neatness does help others understand your work. But in a job where time is precious, neatness may be one of the many compromises an OPL has to make.

I thrive on pressure. There are those who do, though this is often short lived. But there are many who wilt under it and the stresses and strains of being under pressure soon show up.

TM stifles creativity. If managing one's time is seen to not allow creative thought then perhaps different time mechanisms need to be put in place. Or perhaps the time for our creative thinking must be diverted to other compartments in our lives.

easiest is best. In today's colloquialisms this might equate to "quick and dirty". There is no doubt that there will be some jobs an OPL carries out which will be just this. But the OPL will know that while such a method may provide a quick solution, it may not be the best solution.

it's in my genes (to be disorganized). This is an interesting comment. Some of us are basically disorganised. Why is it that we are an OPL? It would be an unusual OPL who is not an organised OPL.

The future

As with most areas in information service provision there will be an ever increasing use of technology. Once in place, technology does enhance one's ability to provide a more comprehensive information service, particularly in the areas of indexing and database maintenance. Michel Bauwens writes of the development of a cybrarian or cyber librarian, utilising technology to its fullest extend in order to become the centrepiece of an information model. His writings are worth reading. The pervasion of technology will also increase as the OPL is required to manage new and various media on which information is stored.

OPLs have always realised that there is no way they can possibly have on site all material required to gratify the information needs of their client group. Networking has been the normal method employed to borrow off others. Today there are more sophisticated document delivery outlets available to assist librarians obtain much needed material. More and more material is being made

available in full text version on media such as CDROM as well as online, such that the space management decision may be technologically rather than bookshelf driven. The OPL will become more aware of these document delivery suppliers to provide an information service which is just-in-time rather than just-in-case.

The accountability of the service one provides will be more in the spotlight than ever before. The special library literature has recently contained articles on the value of an information service and offers many clues to assist the OPL challenged by a management wanting to know the worth of the information service being provided. Information auditing and/or information needs studies might be techniques adopted if this challenge confronts the OPL.

The OPL is always mindful of the way the organisation is managed and manages. Allied with this is a watching brief on the organisational culture and climate of the organisation. It is a truism that if, at the interview, the applicant is not happy with the organisational vibes then the applicant is unwise to accept the position. Much has been written on the issues of organisational climate and there is a growing literature on the politics of information within an organisation. Attention is drawn to articles by Tom Davenport and others on this latter issue. Survival for the OPL means being a part of the organisational climate, understanding the idiosyncrasies of an organisation and using the climate and making it work for you. Most information professionals are in the business of sharing information and many, including OPLs, will perhaps be surprised to learn that this ethos is not shared by many within an organisation. The challenge is to make it happen.

The oft-heralded information society is a fact in many areas. Professional librarians are at the cutting edge of information service provision and in the OPL environment, if we do our job well, this is well and truly demonstrated. Information service provision is not just about finding and shelving books and switching on a computer. It is about such things as networking - personally and technologically -, organising, seeking, persisting, marketing, managing, promoting and selling. How we go about these tasks is up to us and the opportunities we have and find.

Conclusion

The challenges in the provision of a one person library service will increase as the demand for information service facilitation and provision grows. Unhappily organisations in my experience are very slow to grasp that the provision of any information service is a labour and intellectually intensive exercise. That is, until it is demonstrated to them. Until we can shift this paradigm, we need to be continually presenting ourselves as the confident, self-assured and committed professionals we are.

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Editorial note:
OPAL (One Person Australian Libraries) is a Special Interest Group of ALIA intended as a national forum to discuss topical issues, provide support, share problems and solutions, and exchange ideas unique to library professionals working in one-person libraries. This newly established SIG will develop and maintain a structured network between one-person libraries, and provide forums for discussion, including a newsletter, gatherings, library visits and the Internet.

For further information about membership, the newsletter publication *OPALessence* and LISTSERVS of interest to one-person libraries, visit the OPAL web site on the Internet at: http://www.alia.org.au/sigs/opal/home.html

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A new bibliography has been compiled of materials written by and about staff and volunteers sent to work overseas by the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and the Methodist Church of New Zealand for more than a hundred years. Anyone wishing to research the overseas mission of these New Zealand churches, of their partner churches in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, will find a wealth of resources in this bibliography. This bibliography offers access to a wide range of Christian insight, devotion and scholarship, and provides a good basis for any study of missiology and church history and of the development of the continuing missionary movement.

Copies of the Bibliography are located at the Council for Mission and Ecumenical Cooperation (Christchurch), Hewitson Library (Dunedin), St John's Trinity College Library (Auckland), Methodist Archives (Christchurch) and Presbyterian Archives (Dunedin).

Copies of the bibliography may be obtained from the Council for Mission & Ecumenical Cooperation, P.O. Box 21-395, Christchurch 8001, New Zealand, cost NZ$10.00 plus p&p.

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