

Constant Change or Constantly the Same?

A Historical Literature Review of the Subject Librarian Position

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This paper provides a historical literature review of the subject librarian position. The subject librarian position was originally created to support patrons in specific subjects. Since the position's creation, a subject librarian's foundational duties have consisted of collection development, reference, instruction, and liaison. Though liaison work has received increased emphasis, the subject librarian duties have been remarkably consistent through time. "Subject specialist" or "subject librarian" have been the most commonly used titles for the position, though recently "liaison" has become more common. The subject librarian position has persisted because it provides an important human connection to the library and because it is flexible and adaptive to change. Subject librarian positions vary in different libraries because each adapts the position to meet their needs.

Introduction

Traditionally, libraries are the heart, intellectually and physically, of a college or university.¹ A library's prominent location on campus is symbolic of the centrality of the offerings it provides, including both scholarly and human resources that meet faculty and student needs. However, the technological revolution called into question the centrality of the library. Many have predicted the library's demise because many of its resources are available electronically. Budget cuts have put pressure on libraries to demonstrate their value.²

One of the most critical elements of a library is that it provides human expertise to assist its users with its resources.³ For many years, much of the assistance that libraries provide has come in the form of subject librarians,⁴ a position designed to connect the library's users to the library.⁵

Though at least one author identifies the foundations of subject librarianship in the learned librarians of the Renaissance,⁶ most agree with Hay's⁷ claim that the creation of the subject librarian position was the result of area specialist needs during World War II. Since that time, the position has proliferated and has been generally adopted by academic libraries.⁸ Supporters and detractors have written about the benefits and drawbacks of the position of subject librarian.⁹

Over time, library scholars have specified definitions, titles, and duties for the subject librarian position, but there has been no apparent consensus as to what the position is and what

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it should accomplish.¹⁰ Many authors and practitioners have noted a clear shift within subject librarianship from a focus on collection development to a focus on liaison work.¹¹ Another trend in some libraries has been to replace subject librarians with functional teams.¹² These functional teams are specialized groups that handle library tasks (such as collection development) for all subjects rather than having a specific individual handle multiple tasks for one particular subject.

In this literature review, I will examine the definitions and duties of subject librarians through time to show what has changed. I will discuss the historical use of titles used for positions roughly equivalent to the subject librarian position and discuss what these titles mean. I will also highlight some of the central debates of the subject librarian system. This view of the history of subject librarianship will help those in the librarian profession prepare for the future as libraries continue to adapt to ongoing pressures.

In this review, I will answer the following questions:

1. How have the definition, duties, and accompanying role of subject librarians changed over time?
2. How have the titles used for subject librarians changed over time? What might these changes signify?
3. How have changes in budget, technology, and higher education affected subject librarian organizations?

Methods

To answer these questions, I retrieved articles from three major databases and organized my findings into major time periods in library history.

Databases and Articles

A search of the databases Library and Information Technology Abstracts (a major library science database), Gale Information Science Database (another major library science database), and Scopus (a broad database that indexes articles from multiple disciplines) revealed many relevant articles. I used a general keyword search since there was no thesaurus term for “subject librarian” or “liaison librarian.” The search terms included “academic librar*” (for library or libraries or librarian), “subject or liaison and librarian,” “chang*” (for change or changes) “or evolution or history,” and “role or job or position.” I limited the terms “subject” and “liaison librarian” to the title field, which appropriately limited the number of results. I later added the terms “bibliographer” and “reference librarian.” From the initial search efforts, I scanned the titles and abstracts of the articles for those that were most relevant to the topic and selected ninety articles for more detailed evaluation. I organized article citations in Refworks.

Because this paper’s research questions are historical, I retained articles regardless of publication year. I retained articles that included a unique definition of subject or liaison librarianship, or a list of subject librarian duties, regardless of peer-review status. I excluded articles that only cited another established definition of subject librarianship. I also excluded articles that discussed evaluations, changes, or techniques related to subject librarians, but that were about unique library situations or those that were unrelated to the definition or duties of a subject librarian. These criteria eliminated thirty of the articles that appeared in my initial search results. I searched the references in overview articles directly related to the topic as well as highly cited articles as identified by Scopus. This resulted in the inclusion of

sixteen additional articles directly applicable to the topic. Though I carefully reviewed all of the selected articles, I only included the fifty-one articles and books cited in this paper in the references section.

I used a spreadsheet to organize and compare the definitions and duties of subject librarians found in the articles. I also created a coding system to label and sort the articles. This allowed me to tag articles with significant findings. I present the coded articles in this literature review along with summary charts of the definitions and titles of the subject librarian position over time.

Time Periods and Terms

I divided the articles into four time periods, characterized by major changes related to either subject librarians or the environment surrounding them. These time periods are as follows: early years (before 1970), establishment (1970–1999), technology revolution (2000–2010), and recent (2011–2024).

The early years (before 1970) includes the period of time when the idea of subject librarianship was forming. The articles written in this time period discuss creating subject librarian programs and why they would be helpful. In the establishment time period (1970–1999), articles begin to clarify the idea of the subject librarian and discuss the development and expansion of the position in libraries. Articles during this time also discuss problems with the subject librarian structure.

Though the internet was established in the 1990s, the true explosion of information that heavily affected libraries happened in the early 2000s, which period I term technology revolution (2000–2010). The changes that occurred during this time period, along with budgetary pressures, profoundly impacted librarianship and the subject librarian organization. In the recent time period (2011–2024), the internet has become more established, and librarians have started to grapple with new challenges. Many libraries have faced additional budgetary problems and cultural and organizational pressures that have affected the structure and duties of subject librarians.

The literature refers to the concept of a subject librarian as a subject specialist, subject librarian, liaison, or reference librarian.¹³ I will primarily use the term subject librarian in this paper to describe the concept.

Limitations and Further Study

Most assessments of subject librarian programs did not meet the inclusion criteria for this review because they did not specifically discuss the definition and duties of subject librarians. Additional insights could be gained from reviewing these excluded assessments.

Findings

Early Years (Before 1970)

Crossley asserted that the idea of librarian subject experts had its roots in libraries of the Renaissance.¹⁴ He claimed that subject librarians began to form in public libraries after World War I. Hay stated that Harvard began using a subject librarian system before the 1940s.¹⁵ However, Hay and Crossley both argued that the subject librarian system began to be more commonly adopted during and after the 1940s. Hay asserts that World War II was the catalyst for this change because of the need for area-specific knowledge to support the war effort, causing

the US government to support the creation of area-specific studies in universities and their libraries. Prior to this time, libraries primarily organized their duties by function.¹⁶

The subject librarian position was created so that librarians could understand and meet the needs of their patrons who had specialized knowledge in particular disciplines. The idea of helping with collection development in the library was central to the position; however, the subject librarian largely supported and liaised with teaching faculty, who had primary responsibility for selecting materials.¹⁷ The primary duties listed for subject librarians during this period were collection development,¹⁸ cataloging and classification,¹⁹ reference,²⁰ bibliography creation,²¹ liaison duties,²² and instruction facilitation.²³ Hay stated that, "by 1960 most major university libraries had some subject bibliographers,"²⁴ implying that the position had become common in larger libraries by this time.

Titles mentioned for the subject librarian during this period included specialist,²⁵ bibliographer,²⁶ learned librarian,²⁷ subject librarian,²⁸ and subject specialist.²⁹ The terms subject librarian and learned librarian emphasized the need for subject-specific knowledge,³⁰ while the term bibliographer emphasized the role of creating bibliographies for patrons.

Establishment (1970–1999)

In the 1970s and 80s, the subject librarian position was more widely adopted. By the 1990s, changes in the library landscape facilitated discussion around changes to the position. The responsibility for maintaining collections shifted from faculty members to subject librarians, with collection development and management becoming a central feature of the subject librarian position.³¹

As subject librarians became established, concerns related to their position developed. Dickinson provided a relatively comprehensive list of concerns:³²

- Lack of definition for the position
- Poor reasoning for collection responsibilities
- Poor collection choices (in contrast to faculty selectors)
- Cost of employing subject librarians
- False nature of subject assignment (subject librarians were assigned to multiple areas, including those in which they were not experts)
- Elitism caused by the autonomy given to subject librarians

During the establishment period, authors did not explicitly state the benefits of the subject librarian position. This is most likely because they already understood the inherent benefits. Hay argued that the subject specialist position was adaptable to change and that libraries that did not adopt the position would provide lower quality service.³³

During this period, several authors gave definitions of the subject librarian position. Each definition related to having responsibility for subjects, with some definitions mentioning the importance of subject knowledge.³⁴ All articles mentioned collection development as a duty of subject librarians,³⁵ with some stating the duty of helping faculty members maintain collections, while others stated that subject librarians performed this duty themselves. Reference, instruction, liaison, and bibliographic services were also frequently mentioned duties.³⁶

In the establishment years, there were fifteen unique terms used for a subject librarian in the reviewed literature. "Subject specialist" was the most common; however, more than one author mentioned the terms "subject bibliographer," "bibliographer," and "reference bibliographer."³⁷ This proliferation of terms seems to reflect an uncertainty on the part of libraries as

to where and how subject librarians should be placed within the academic library. Each title provided a nuance that meant something different to the respective author.

Technology Revolution (2000–2010)

Though library automation started long before the proliferation of the internet in the late 1990s, libraries began to experience the full effects of the internet and its accompanying knowledge explosion at the beginning of the new millennium. In addition, substantial budget cuts were the norm as libraries were affected by broader trends in the world.³⁸ Libraries during this time period saw a steep decline in reference transactions³⁹ and a decline in the use of print-based resources.⁴⁰

The advent of technology in libraries primarily changed collection development and reference. Subject librarians were now required to select electronic materials,⁴¹ and reference desks became more and more obsolete.⁴² Liaison duties also gradually became more prominent and more frequently mentioned in the literature.⁴³ Though changes were occurring to subject librarian duties, the changes were primarily in how duties were performed, rather than an addition or deletion of duties.⁴⁴

Pinfield argued that the subject librarian position was successful because it was user-focused, which allowed subject librarians to be flexible and to “respond effectively to changing technologies, systems and expectations.”⁴⁵ Gaston noted one benefit of the subject librarian position was that it provided an individual contact for users, and he suggested that the subject librarian organization paralleled the subject organization of the university.⁴⁶ Agyen-Gyasi emphasized the benefits of efficient use of professional expertise, collection development organized by subject, and the increase in librarian job satisfaction.⁴⁷

Challenges listed during this period included changes in technology,⁴⁸ baby boomer retirements,⁴⁹ difficulty in recruiting those with sufficient subject background,⁵⁰ and the uneven performance associated with non-specific job descriptions.⁵¹ The authors who mentioned these challenges believed that they could be overcome and that the subject librarian system was the best option for their libraries.

The subject librarian definition during this time period, offered by Agyen-Gyasi, was heavily focused on subject expertise.⁵² Collection development was still the most frequently mentioned role among authors, though reference, instruction, and liaison were prominent and mentioned almost as frequently as collections.⁵³ Bibliographic services and cataloging were infrequently mentioned and were not as prominent roles during this period.⁵⁴ Though there were eleven unique terms used as titles for the subject librarian position in the articles from this time period, only the terms “subject librarian,” “subject specialist,” and “liaison librarian” were used more than once.⁵⁵

Recent (2011–2024)

The pressures that began during the technology revolution continue through the recent time period. For some libraries, budgetary pressures were magnified in this time period, while for others the changing technology and university environments were more prominent. These pressures lead to changes, or at least discussion about changes, to the subject librarian position in many libraries.

One evidence of this shift was in the titles that authors use for the subject librarian position. In all previous time periods, “subject specialist” or “subject librarian” was most promi-

nent; however, in this period, the term “liaison” was most frequently used.⁵⁶ During, this time period eleven unique terms were used for a subject librarian, with the most common being “subject librarian,” “subject specialist,” “liaison librarian,” “reference librarian,” and “liaison.”

Miller and Pressley identified challenges of the subject librarian position such as contacting faculty members, working with time constraints, and communication.⁵⁷ Other articles list concerns about training subject librarians to understand their role and value. Banfield and Petropoulos identified the key problems of the traditional liaison model as expense, lack of ability to replace those on leave, and lack of understanding about liaison responsibilities.⁵⁸ Miller and Pressley mentioned the benefits of the position as the ability to connect with people, provide a human face to services, and create relationships.⁵⁹

Resnis and Natale provided good definitional clarity between the roles of liaison, subject specialist, and functional liaison.⁶⁰ They described the *liaison* as someone assigned to work with a university group, the *subject specialist* as someone with subject knowledge who was assigned liaison duties as a result, and the *functional liaison* as someone who specializes in a library function. Most other articles in this time period either did not discuss the definition of a subject librarian or focused on a liaison definition similar to Resnis and Natale’s.

Despite the change in focus to liaison work, during this time period most articles leave the subject librarian duties largely unchanged, and almost all articles mentioned the same four duties: collection development, reference, instruction, and liaison work.⁶¹ Kenney discussed a possible growing trend of separating collection development from liaison duties, allowing liaisons to focus on engagement activities.⁶² Other duties the articles listed, such as scholarly communication and electronic guide creation, were simply extensions of the requirement of most subject librarian’s subject assignments.⁶³

The idea of functional specialists was discussed more frequently during this time period, and many libraries reported adopting the model.⁶⁴ In these libraries the subject librarians were replaced by functional teams that took on duties such as collection development, scholarly communication, and research support. Most articles stated that this system was adopted because of budgetary or environmental pressures.⁶⁵ However, Hoodless and Pinfield found that the primary purposes behind the change were consistency, efficiency, and alignment with university strategy.⁶⁶ Johnson claimed that most libraries were sticking with the traditional subject or liaison-based model even after investigating the functional model.⁶⁷

Discussion

The definition of a subject librarian has not fundamentally changed over time. From Humphreys’ original definition in 1967 to Resnis and Natale’s definition in 2017, the consistent definition of a subject librarian is a librarian who has been assigned responsibilities within a specific subject or group of subjects (see Table 1). The main discrepancy over time of the definition of a subject librarian is whether subject knowledge is a critical part of the position. Some authors argue for the importance of subject knowledge,⁶⁸ while others argue that it is not necessary.⁶⁹

Though many subject librarian duties have been included in the position through time, the core duties have remained stable. These duties, explained in more detail in the following paragraphs, include collection development, reference, instruction, and liaison.

Collection development—sometimes termed acquisition,⁸¹ book selection,⁸² collection building,⁸³ and purchasing decisions⁸⁴—was originally the job of teaching faculty.⁸⁵ As the

TABLE 1
Definition of the Term Subject Librarian

Author	Year	Definition
Humphreys	1967	"A member of a library staff appointed to develop one or more aspects of a library's technical or reference service in a particular subject field. Although he would normally already have some experience in this field and would commonly have obtained a first or a research degree in the subject, it is not essential that he should have qualifications in the subject when he is appointed." ⁷⁰
Danton	1967	"An associate of the Library Association, with specialized knowledge of one or more subject fields." ⁷¹
Holbrook	1972	"A subject specialist is a member of the library staff appointed to organise [sic] library services in a particular subject field. This subject field may be fairly narrow, or, more typically, be broad enough to cover an umbrella of related disciplines contained in a faculty/school/departmental structure." ⁷²
Smith	1974	"He is an expert in the bibliographical organization of a field of knowledge, and he utilizes this expertise to provide complex and needed services to a clientele." ⁷³
Feather and Sturges	1997	"A Librarian with special knowledge of, and responsibility for, a particular subject or subjects." ⁷⁴
Agyen-Gyasi	2008	"A professional librarian who has the requisite subject knowledge acquired formally, or has extensive experience working within a particular discipline. In fact, the title is not as important as the associated expertise; the key expertise being in-depth knowledge of a subject area and grounding in the principles of library use and organization." ⁷⁵
Resnis and Natale ⁷⁶	2017	Liaison: "A librarian who is assigned primary engagement responsibility to specific university department(s), program(s), and/or unit(s)." ⁷⁷
Resnis and Natale	2017	Subject specialist: "A librarian with additional knowledge in a specific cognate area, who is assigned liaison duties in-part based on that subject knowledge." ⁷⁸
Resnis and Natale	2017	Functional liaison: "A librarian who oversees a certain function of the Libraries' mission such as scholarly communication, digital scholarship, or student engagement. This involves interaction with a wide range of constituents, and often necessitates collaboration with subject-specialists." ⁷⁹
Palumbo et al.	2021	"Subject specialist is a librarian with specialized knowledge and experience to select materials and provide information literacy instruction and reference services to users in a specific subject area or academic discipline (or subdiscipline)." ⁸⁰

subject librarian position became more established, collection duties were turned over to librarians and eventually became the primary focus of most subject librarians.⁸⁶ However, as budgets shrank and electronic resources proliferated, collection development became a less prominent task for subject librarians.⁸⁷

Reference has also been termed reader services,⁸⁸ assistance,⁸⁹ information service,⁹⁰ and inquiry work.⁹¹ Prior to the 2000s, librarians would sometimes staff a reference desk.⁹² But today the reference desk has become less prominent, and most subject librarians now provide reference services through in-person consultation, email, or phone.⁹³

Library instruction has also been called bibliographic instruction,⁹⁴ user education,⁹⁵ information literacy instruction,⁹⁶ or teaching and learning.⁹⁷ Some articles use the term "one-

shot sessions,”⁹⁸ but library instruction is usually referred to as instruction or user education. Instruction typically differs from reference in that it represents a coordinated effort by a professor to have a librarian provide group instruction for a class.

Liaison work is also referred to as outreach and communication,⁹⁹ developing and fostering communication,¹⁰⁰ and engagement.¹⁰¹ Multiple articles mention liaison work as the main duty of librarians through time.¹⁰² Recently, this duty has become so prominent that some libraries have renamed the “subject librarian” position to “liaison” and centered all duties around the liaison aspect of the position.¹⁰³ Liaison duties have become more prominent as libraries recognized human connection as the most important feature of subject librarianship. Even before the shift to liaison duties in subject librarian positions, Gaston stated the following:

It appears that subject librarians have always performed a liaison role between the library and its client group, the academic departments, and it is this role which distinguishes them from the other functional units within a library organisation [*sic*]. The liaison role may explain why subject librarians have survived a multitude of changes in both their working practices (such as IT) and the environment in which they work (such as changes in higher education). Writers who have defended the subject librarian system on the basis of its user focus (liaison) seem to have come closest to providing the elusive definition of what a subject librarian is.¹⁰⁴

Gaston’s opinion was prophetic: liaison duties have directed the development of the subject librarian position to the present. The liaison portion of the subject librarian job focuses on the benefits of connecting people with the library organization and its resources. Its autonomy and focus on the individual have allowed the subject librarian position to change, persist, and thrive even as budgetary issues, technology, and organizational restructuring have put pressure on libraries.

Other duties that were initially central to subject librarianship are no longer part of most subject librarians’ duties. In the early years, subject librarians would perform cataloging and classification duties.¹⁰⁵ However, during the technology revolution period, cataloging and classifying took on a more consultative role; a subject librarian might work with a cataloger on subject-specific materials but would not typically perform original cataloging.¹⁰⁶ No articles in the recent time period mentioned cataloging as a duty of subject librarians.

Bibliography was another key duty of subject librarians at their origin. Unfortunately, this term is a bit confusing because it is used in many ways within the library literature. Historically, a bibliographer was someone who created bibliographies for patrons on the topics of their research.¹⁰⁷ However, the term was also used for collection development and for instruction.¹⁰⁸ Though making bibliographies is no longer a duty mentioned for subject librarians, the more technologically current duty of creating online guides to library materials has replaced it.¹⁰⁹

Authors in all time periods included many other duties that subject librarians perform. However, these duties were less frequently mentioned, and most are subsets of the core subject librarian duties previously discussed. Recently, authors mentioned duties that relate to research support, such as scholarly communications, helping with disciplinary courses, assistance with data management, and citation analysis.¹¹⁰

One of the most confusing and challenging issues related to the subject librarian position is the large variety of titles by which this position has been—and continues to be—known.

Libraries have used titles to emphasize different parts of the role and how it is implemented in their library. By far, the most common title used has been “subject specialist” (see Table 2). The label “subject librarian” was often used as a companion to this term, though it was primarily used in the 1990s and early 2000s. The title “bibliographer” was used in earlier articles but is not used in recent articles. Liaison duties have become so central to the subject librarian position that many libraries have changed the title to “liaison librarian.”¹¹¹ Overall, there are thirty unique titles (see Appendix) in the consulted literature that refer to a subject librarian or similar position.

Though authors mentioned different problems with subject librarianship, most of these problems were repeated throughout the literature. The concern that the subject specialist organi-

TABLE 2
Subject Librarian Titles

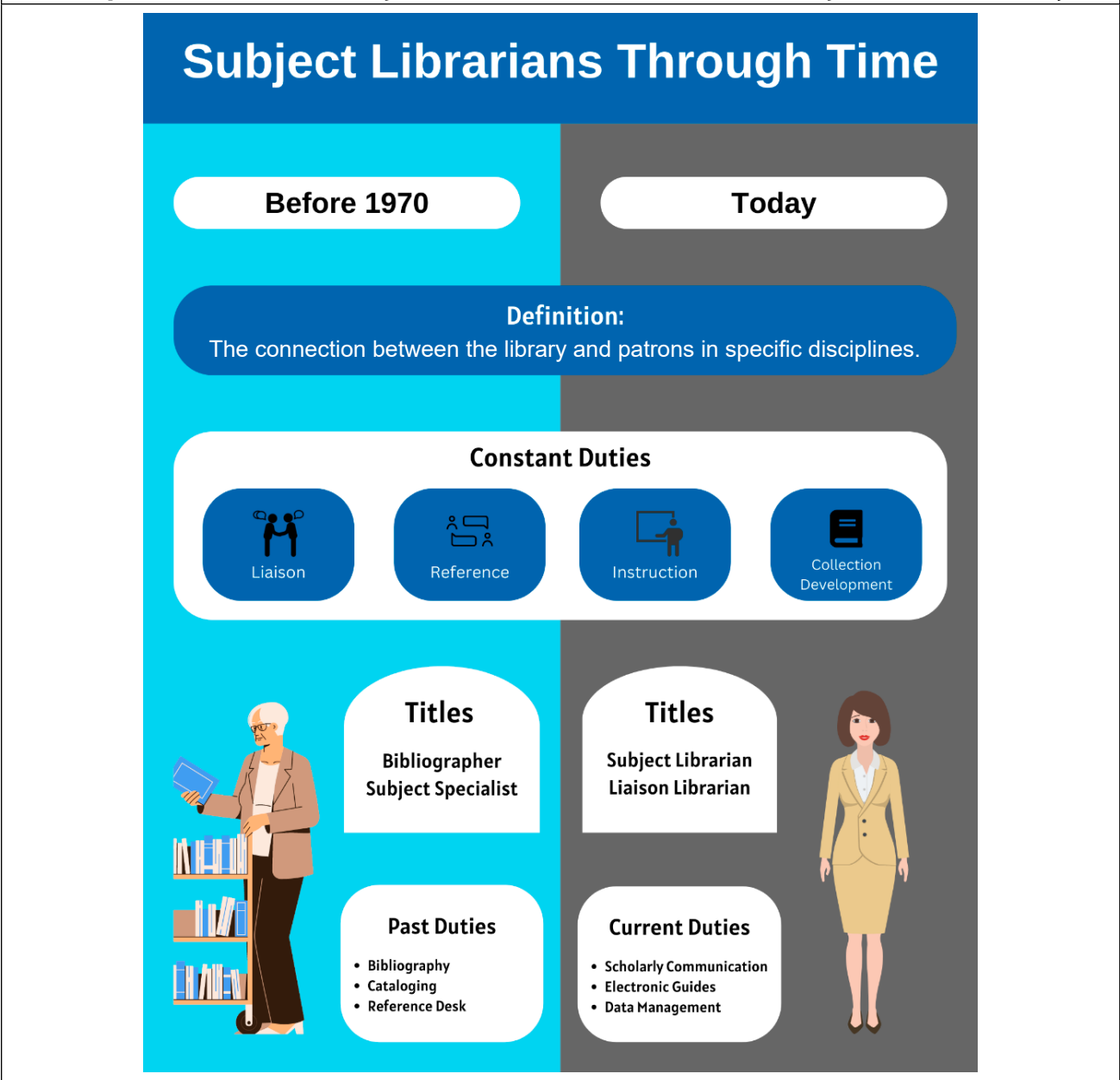
Author	Year	Bibliographer/ Subject bibliographer	Subject specialist	Subject librarian	Liaison/ Liaison librarian	Reference librarian	Scholar- librarian
Downs	1946		x				
Fussler	1949	x					
Byrd	1966		x	x			
Gration	1974		x				
Crossley	1974	x	x				x
Michalak	1976	x	x				
Dickinson	1978	x	x				
Hay	1990	x	x				
Latta	1992	x	x	x	x		
Gaston	2001		x	x			x
Pinfield	2001		x	x			
Rodwell	2001		x		x		
Feldman	2006			x			
Agyen-Gyasi	2008		x	x	x		
Rodwell and Fairbairn	2008		x	x			
Hahn	2009				x	x	
Miller and Pressley	2015				x		
Banfield	2017			x	x		
Resnis and Natale	2017		x		x		
Johnson	2018			x	x	x	
Kranich	2020		x		x		
Hoodless and Pinfield	2018			x			
Johnson	2020			x	x	x	
Chanetsa and Ngulube	2016			x			
Chanetsa and Ngulube	2017		x	x			
Count		6	16	13	10	3	2

This table only represents titles that were included by more than one author. The Appendix contains the full list of titles.

zation was expensive and hard to staff were some of the most frequently mentioned problems.¹¹² Authors discussed the difficulty of hiring subject specialists in certain disciplines that were not library focused.¹¹³ Some authors stated that the subject librarian position provided a great deal of autonomy to the librarian, which made performance uneven between librarians and dependent on individual whims and interests.¹¹⁴ Also, subject specialists often only specialize in one area, even though they are assigned multiple subject areas. Though advocates argue that knowledge in a similar subject is sufficient, detractors say this is evidence that subject knowledge is not needed.¹¹⁵ Subject librarians are sometimes considered by themselves or other library workers as an elite class in the library,¹¹⁶ which can cause conflicts among library staff members.

Most authors from the earlier time periods did not see any need to address the benefits of a subject specialist system. These benefits were obvious to them and seemed inherent in

FIGURE 1
Comparison Between a Subject Librarian Before 1970 and a Subject Librarian Today



the definition of the position. Later authors articulated the key benefit: that a subject specialist could provide a human face and a strong relationship with others in the library.¹¹⁷ The subject librarian system mirrors the disciplinary organization of a university, which provides a natural means for librarians to relate to their constituents. Additional benefits of the subject librarian position from the literature included efficiency in working with faculty, a logical collection development organization, efficient use of staff, efficient reference, and job satisfaction.¹¹⁸

One aspect of the subject librarian analysis that is not well articulated in the literature is the difference in subject librarians based on country, language, and culture. Some articles discuss these differences,¹¹⁹ but no through analysis has been performed. There does seem to have been a delay in the adoption of the subject librarian model in some African countries.¹²⁰ Overall, the trends in English-speaking subject librarian positions are similar regardless of location.

Though library size is occasionally mentioned in subject librarian literature, differences among subject librarian roles between large and small libraries is another area that has not been well explored. It appears that a full subject librarian model, where a large number of subject librarians are assigned a limited number of subjects based on their expertise, is primarily extant in large academic libraries. Medium and small libraries are more likely to make liaison assignments even if subject expertise is not present.

One of the most interesting trends in recent years has been the switch in some libraries to functional teams. As Hoodless and Pinfield point out,¹²¹ this switch represents one of the only major organizational experiments that libraries have attempted recently. All other changes have been small variations of current models that ultimately amount to little more than window dressing. The great irony of this change to functional teams is that libraries were primarily based on function prior to creating the subject specialist model.¹²² The recent movement towards functional teams was usually a reaction to budget problems, a result of organizational changes, or an effort to resolve problems within the subject librarian organization.¹²³ Libraries were typically satisfied when they made these changes. However, Johnson claims that most libraries that investigate functional teams choose to retain the subject-focused organization.¹²⁴

Implications

The fact that the subject librarian position has remained fundamentally the same through time is a key to thinking about the subject librarian position for the future. People feel most comfortable working with a specific individual that they can contact rather than having to understand the entire library organization. This fact has helped make the subject librarian position successful and should remain the focus of the position. Alternative organizations, such as functional teams, eliminate this single contact which eliminates the key human face of the library. Such alternative organizations should be approached cautiously to make sure that patrons aren't intimidated with multiple contacts in the library.

Subject knowledge or assignment has been the key definition of a subject librarian through time. However, the move toward the liaison function being central makes these definitions largely obsolete. The importance of a contact for patrons is more important than subject knowledge. The increasing use of liaison as the title for the position underscores this emphasis. Libraries should consider focusing on the liaison function of the position rather than subject knowledge.

The core duties of subject librarians have remained constant through time, though the emphasis on different duties has changed and there have been subtle changes related to tech-

nology and changing library and campus priorities. In many organizations, this collection of duties has been very successful and libraries should think carefully before removing or experimenting with different subject librarian duties.

To more adequately describe the current subject librarian position, I offer the following definition, which is similar to—but more expansive than—the liaison definition of Resnis and Natale:¹²⁵ *A library employee who is assigned to work in a liaison role with individuals on campus in specific subjects. They should have adequate knowledge to understand and meet the needs of those to whom they have been assigned. They should play a key role in library collections so that they have an in-depth knowledge of library resources and quickly understand and meet the resource needs of those to whom they are assigned. Because of their understanding and expertise, library instruction and reference are a natural outgrowth of their assignment. They should have an understanding of other important library initiatives so that they can assist those to whom they are assigned with those initiatives.*

The subject librarian position has persisted and remained strong through time despite dramatic changes in technology, budget cuts to libraries and the institutions they support,¹²⁶ as well as other shifts in the higher education landscape. It has persisted because it is flexible and adaptive to the needs of both the library and the individuals that it serves.¹²⁷ As a result, the subject librarian organization is prepared to adapt to and meet the needs of the library and its users for many years to come.

When some authors commented on the variety of organizational systems related to subject librarians, they came to the conclusion that libraries should do whatever works best for them.¹²⁸ This conclusion is an acknowledgment that each library is unique. The issues of size, budget, and university organization affect each library differently, and the subject librarian model has been modified to meet library needs. If the subject librarian model was not adaptable, then it would not have been employed by so many libraries. So rather than attempting to create an elusive single standard, the organization of a subject librarian should be adapted and personalized to meet the unique needs of each library.

Conclusion

Through this historical analysis of the literature a clearer picture of the subject librarian emerges. The subject librarian model was created to provide a human face to the library.¹²⁹ It was created because libraries needed to provide services based on subject expertise and because university faculty members needed help with collection development.¹³⁰ More recently, as budgetary pressures emerged and libraries adopted technology, the focus of subject librarians has shifted to focus even more on connecting with patrons. Because of the flexibility and importance of the subject librarian position, it has persisted and thrived despite pressures and changes over time.

Because of the differences in size, budget, collections, and focus among libraries, each library has, and will continue, to use variations on the subject librarian model to meet the needs of its patrons and its university. Most likely, these variations of the model will focus on liaison duties, because human connection is preeminent to the success of libraries. Though some libraries may move towards functional teams as a replacement for the subject librarian model, functional teams create the same problem that the subject librarian position was created to overcome. Especially in larger libraries, having a person who can connect with patrons, especially with professors, is vital to meeting the needs of library constituents.

Appendix: List of Subject Librarian Titles

- Academic librarian
- Area bibliographer
- Area librarian
- Area specialist
- Bibliographer
- Faculty liaison librarian
- Information librarian
- Information specialist
- Learning support librarian
- Liaison
- Liaison librarian
- Librarian
- Librarian selector
- Link librarian
- Personal librarian
- Professional specialist
- Reference bibliographer
- Reference librarian
- Research librarian
- Scholar-librarian
- School librarian
- Selector
- Specialist
- Subject area specialist
- Subject bibliographer
- Subject consultant
- Subject librarian
- Subject selector
- Subject specialist
- Subject support officer

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