

### Technical Services: The Library's Foundation

by Joe Thomas

Sarah, an associate at a medium-sized law firm, asks her firm librarian for information relevant to a specific point of antitrust law for a case that has just dropped into her lap. The harried librarian performs an online search and pulls up a case or two, but Sarah also needs some background and more details. The librarian can't say whether any of the sources in the library address the specific point. Sarah explains that the firm has been increasing its work in the particular area of antitrust law for at least the past couple of months and she had suggested six weeks ago that the library purchase the standard treatise. After searching for some time, the librarian locates the work in another library and initiates an interlibrary loan. Sarah will have what she needs in a week to ten days.

Sue, an associate at a medium-sized law firm on the other side of town, goes to her library and asks for the same antitrust information. The librarian finds two cases online, as well as a record in the catalog for the library's copy of the standard treatise. From the record, she is able to inform Sue that the treatise is updated with an online service that the library subscribes to. After checking out the treatise, Sue goes to the catalog record and links directly to the online update. She will be arguing against Sarah in court—the day after tomorrow.

Sarah's disastrous library experience differs from Sue's successful one because of their libraries' levels of Technical Services. The difference between the embarrassing and unpleasant experience of one librarian and the smooth and satisfying experience of the other is also Technical Services.

#### Enhancing Effective Research

Technical Services professionals see to it that a library's information is first, available, and second, as useful as it can be to the library's clients. Because of the work of Technical Services, patrons can rely on their libraries to select information resources best suited to their specific work, and be confident that those resources will be available when needed.

Whether they serve law school clientele, state court officials, a few practitioners, or a firm of 500 lawyers in four cities, Technical Services librarians make it their business to understand their patrons' needs and know the latest resources appropriate for them. Once they select and acquire the information, Technical Services librarians also organize and catalog information so it is most efficient to use.

Taking the library's selected information and organizing it into a usable system is one of the most beneficial aspects of good Technical Services work. Among the activities of Technical Services is creating "metadata"—information about information—a critical

aspect of most research efforts. In the above example, the catalog record that pointed Sue to the online treatise update made the difference between her using current or outdated information. In the other case, even if Sarah's library had had the resource she was looking for, it might have been lost in the collection without proper records showing how to find it. All the organizational tools that transform mere piles of information into coherent systems of knowledge—the complexities of MARC records, of AACR2 and Library of Congress Subject Headings, the details that go into establishing appropriate authorities for names—are at the heart of the work in Technical Services. This specialty, in short, seeks to bring order to chaos in the service of library users.

When I get together with my Technical Services colleagues, it is not unusual for a certain amount of whining to take place. Yes, I'll admit that. Technical Services librarians feel beleaguered, not only by the dramatic changes in our work but by the pressure to produce more with less. Of course, we're not alone in that. But somehow, as the volume of material coming into our libraries increases and the staffing in Technical Services areas decreases, it is hard not to feel singled out.

My goal in presenting this Members' Briefing is to give an overview of the state of Technical Services law librarianship. Far from being a stagnant function, Technical Services is at the center of today's exciting and rapidly changing library and information environment. The skills of acquiring, organizing, and providing ready access to materials are as critical to a law library's success in the online environment as they were in the print world. We are facing tremendous challenges to perform traditional and fundamental work in new ways, while incorporating the fluid nature of electronic resources. Technical Services law librarians meet those challenges every day with streamlined processes and innovative practices.

Joe Thomas has done a terrific job of describing the scope of Technical Services work, how it enhances legal research, and how new concepts like metadata are changing what we do. AALL's Technical Services librarians have a strong history of planning excellent educational programs, representing our interests in national discussion forums, and helping each other solve problems and create new services.

I thank Joe and all the Technical Services librarians who continue to inspire me with their dedication to the ultimate goal of serving the needs of our users.

Margaret Maes Axtmann  
AALL President 1999-2000

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## How Technical Services Works

“*We understand standards, and run standards-making bodies in our professional organizations. Standards are essential for the electronic library/information system of the future, as the success of the Internet shows. We understand automated systems, how to fit them into workflows, and how to train employees to make the most of them. We understand authority control and controlled vocabulary retrieval systems; these elements, which will probably never be fully automated, I think, will long distinguish the information control provided by library catalogs from the access offered by other types of databases... We understand how technical systems support services to users; our strong service orientation distinguishes us from other types of database maintainers. And we have experience with intellectual control of materials in many formats.*”

— **Rob Richards** (Technical Services Librarian, University of Colorado Law Library)

In many ways, Technical Services work transcends library types. A huge academic research collection and a roomful of books accommodating a few attorneys meet entirely different needs for entirely different groups of patrons. Still, the same basic Technical Services functions, on an appropriate scale for each

library, must be performed. Every library must have some way of identifying and selecting the materials it will offer its patrons, it must secure those selected items, it must organize them and prepare them for use.

Often, smaller firm libraries and small court or public law libraries make do without separate professionals designated to perform some of these functions. Indeed, there are more ways to automate or outsource Technical Services work than most library tasks. But the trade-off between the apparent savings of such outsourcing must be weighed against the loss of in-house expertise and its impact on the library's effective client service.

The Technical Services functions that take place in any law library include:

- **Collection Development.** From all the possibilities in the world of legal information, decisions must be made about which resources are best for a particular library. This responsibility is usually shared with Public Services colleagues and library administrators, and now includes the necessity of evaluating appropriate Web sites and other electronic resources.
- **Acquisitions.** Ordering materials for the library can range from automatic activities (vendors sending materials on approval plans) to complicated arrangements such as contacting third world countries to send government reports. Beyond the more obvious orders placed with book

vendors or with serials subscription agencies, Acquisitions personnel must also arrange for access to Web sites, negotiate licensing agreements, seek out-of-print sources, and generally keep track of the book trade and the Internet market.

- **Serials.** The bulk of most legal collections consists of materials that are in constant need of updating. Keeping track of that has always been a Technical Services function. Electronic journals or more traditional periodicals, court reporters, and legislative updates all need to be monitored and claimed if they don't arrive.
- **Cataloging.** Catalogers organize and describe the information acquired by the library into a coherent system, and make it accessible to patrons. Law catalogers work to ensure consistency in the application of name and subject headings and provide numerous access points to the records, which describe the information sources accessed through the library. Most cataloging work is marked by cooperative arrangements for sharing bibliographic records and other data.
- **Processing.** A final function in Technical Services involves all necessary labeling, barcoding, stamping, and other physical requirements to prepare items for use by patrons.

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#### Metadata?

Metadata is the kind of information Technical Services people have always produced to guide researchers and other library users through the maze of information possibilities. These data about data—such as catalogs, call numbers, check-in and circulation information—help users quickly identify which particular information sources are relevant and accessible. The library catalog is perhaps the most obvious example of metadata, and also one of the finest demonstrations of the necessity for this kind of information. Without the catalog, the patron has no idea about what is locally available, how up-to-date it is, whether or not it is in the ordering process, whether it is circulating or on the shelf. Metadata also tells users whether a particular Web site requires a password, or if it is one that can be accessed by library patrons. Finding information in a large law library without metadata would be the research equivalent of “finding a needle in a haystack”—no catalog, no call numbers, no check-in information—a large pile of information potentially useful but randomly scattered.

#### Value of Services

In law libraries, the Technical Services function combines knowledge of the vast array of legal resources with the specific skills needed to organize them for easy use. While Technical Services librarians have skills that apply in any library setting, work in law libraries requires specialized knowledge. The Technical Services librarian's thorough understanding of legal publishers ensures that the library is receiving a good return on its investment in legal information. As the cost of legal information rises, Technical Services

## Technical Services Law Librarians Look at the Future

Technical Services workers in law libraries have always provided the necessary infrastructure upon which successful library service depends. The advent of new technologies and advances in the electronic dissemination of information have made the work of Technical Services more crucial than ever.

The AALL Professional Development Committee recently sponsored a listserv discussion on the future of Technical Services in the legal library community. While some participants were concerned about the potential displacement of human work in Technical Services by technological advancements, the discussion revealed a high level of confidence about the role of Technical Services people in the law libraries of the future. That confidence is based on what Technical Services librarians do and have always done: bring order to the available array of information.

Some of the remarks from that discussion:

“If the past is any indication of the future, we will see greater potential for handling more complex tasks, but we will also need to train and retrain ourselves in how we deal with the tasks and the methods of handling them...Advances in computer technology have resulted in a need for us to all be intuitive learners...We need to be knowledgeable in the variety of ways we can do our jobs, but we also need to be intuitive and flexible in our thinking processes. By the time we figure it out, the processes will have changed. Our staffs will also need to be flexible in handling programs. There is no room for the person who can only do things one way.”

— *Jim Mumm* (Acquisitions/Serials Librarian, Marquette University Law Library, Milwaukee, Wisconsin)

“A cataloger needs not only to know MARC formats, database structures, but also the html, Java or even the SQL languages, the Web architecture.”

— *Thu-Mai T. Hoang* (Head of Technical Services, Howrey & Simon Law Library, Washington, D.C.)

“Providing dynamic links to catalog records from the library's home page is ... a great example of [how we add] value for the user.”

— *Janet McKinney* (Director of Collection Resources, Leon E. Bloch Law Library, University of Missouri-Kansas City)

“Our users will continue to need resources that exist in tangible, as well as digital, formats, and our expertise in providing bibliographic access to all of these formats will continue to be of value.”

— *Rob Richards* (Technical Services Librarian, University of Colorado Law Library)

“Site architecture is incredibly important and easy to underrate, since it doesn't have the glamour of pretty graphics or the mystery of programming. But who cares if a site is pretty or if it uses the latest Java technology if you can't find what you're looking for? ... The other skills we bring to Web work ... [include] making the plethora of info that's out there more accessible to our users.”

— *Anna Belle Leiserson* (Collection Development Librarian and Webmaster, Vanderbilt University Law School)

librarians must monitor the quality of information available, negotiate for fair prices, and ensure the library's ongoing access to vital resources. Publication patterns of legal material require specialized knowledge to effectively update and maintain a quality collection. Law library catalogers must understand a wide array of legal concepts and practices in order to analyze the works they describe for the library's patrons. The law library that makes use of these specialized skills will be a cost-effective source of relevant and accessible legal information.

The use of the Internet in the law has also changed the nature of Technical Services work. Collection development, part of the Technical Services function, now includes identifying and selecting appropriate Web sites and Internet documents. These responsibilities often include arranging and negotiating license agreements and access rights for online services and electronic information providers, and tracking costs for pay-as-you-go Web sites. Technical Services specialists also are involved in addressing issues such as deciding whether to catalog Web site links

the same way as locally housed information resources, whether to treat free sites differently from sites that incur cost, whether cataloged sites should be linked to the catalog itself, and whether the serials unit should track updates to some sites.

### The Future

A few years ago, any discussion about the future of Technical Services work in law libraries focused on the potential influence of the Internet on both materials and

## AALL and Technical Services

Technical Services Librarians are an important group within the American Association of Law Libraries. In addition to the 600-member Technical Services Special Interest Section (TS-SIS), Technical Services Librarians are active in Special Interest Sections including Online Bibliographic Services (OBS), Computing Services, library type-specific groups, and most others. The Technical Services SIS obviously addresses the needs of law Technical Services librarians most directly. It is also the source of most of the benefits the Association receives from the Technical Services world. Its standing Committees on Cataloging, Acquisitions, Serials, and Preservation help to shape policy and work to disseminate information on developments within the profession.

The TS-SIS has, especially in conjunction with the OBS-SIS, brought a variety of relevant programs to the AALL Annual Meeting—introducing members to cutting-edge Technical Services issues and

important players on the national scene. The TS-SIS also has contributed to the shaping of national Technical Services issues to the advantage of law libraries. The Association's support of law library representatives to important national organizations has ensured that our voices are heard during the formulation of new policies. These include three committees of the American Library Association's main Technical Services division (ALCTS—Association for Library Collections & Technical Services) and the Serials Industry System Advisory Committee. More information about these committees and their work is available on AALLNET (<http://aallhq.org/public/organizations.asp>).

The joint TS-SIS/OBS-SIS newsletter (*Technical Services Law Librarian*, <http://www.aallnet.org/sis/tssis/tsll/tsll.htm>) provides a venue for the dissemination of Technical Services information to the law library community.

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practices. That focus has become clearer in several respects:

- The Internet, or whatever its future incarnation might be, certainly will remain a significant source both of information for library patrons and of tools aiding library work. At present, there doesn't seem to be much evidence that print materials are likely to be eliminated very soon.
- While we can't know what the legal information world will look like in ten years, it is clear that using the Internet and organizing portions of its contents still require the support of Technical Services workers.
- The Internet provides innumerable opportunities for Technical Services Librarians to distribute information by and for other librarians.
- Technical Services Librarians have reacted well to the necessity of adapting to electronic formats. The MARC record has evolved to accommodate descriptions of and access to Internet sites, and online methods for ordering are now widely adopted.

### Conclusion

Our society will always need people to organize information into useable knowledge. Technical Services librarians in law libraries are uniquely capable of gathering and organizing legal information for the benefit of library patrons. The ubiquity of the Internet in the lives of legal professionals and scholars has not changed the basic purposes of Technical Services workers in law libraries: to identify, select, acquire, and organize necessary legal information. It has opened up a whole new world of opportunities for them to apply those necessary functions to the next generation of information sources with the same skill and imagination that have been brought to bear on earlier sources. Whether information comes in electronic bits or in a more traditional package, its first stop in Technical Services will ensure its usefulness for the end user.

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### Featured Representative: CCDA

AALL names a representative to the American Library Association's Committee on Cataloging and Classification: Description and Access (CCDA). This is the ALA committee that recommends changes to the international body that revises the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules. Having a presence from the law library community gives us a voice in the formation of policies that will be adopted by thousands of libraries.

**Ann Sitkin** (Harvard University Law School Library), who served for the last six years as AALL's CCDA representative, says "Over the last six years we have discussed everything from details of punctuation in the rules to major restructuring of the rules. Discussions and task group reports have dealt with such cutting-edge issues as guidelines for cataloging Internet resources, interactive multimedia, electronic journals, the role of metadata and Dublin core, and revision of the entire cataloging code." She points out the other necessary service of our representatives to these bodies:

"Equally important to my role on the committee is the reporting back to the community. My reports to AALL committees on the current activities of CCDA allow members to learn about the latest issues and decisions in cataloging." Although Ann's duties as a member of CCDA have been handed over to this year's representative, William E. Benemann (University of California School of Law Library), her work on the committee has resulted in her appointment to a task group that is preparing a proposal for the revision of Chapter 12: Serials of AACR2. "My specific assignment is to incorporate rules for cataloging looseleaf publications, a form of publication with which law catalogers have considerable experience, into the new Chapter 12, which will cover all continuing resources." Through our representatives, the Technical Services community of law librarians is helping to ensure that issues important to all law library users are properly considered at the national and international level.