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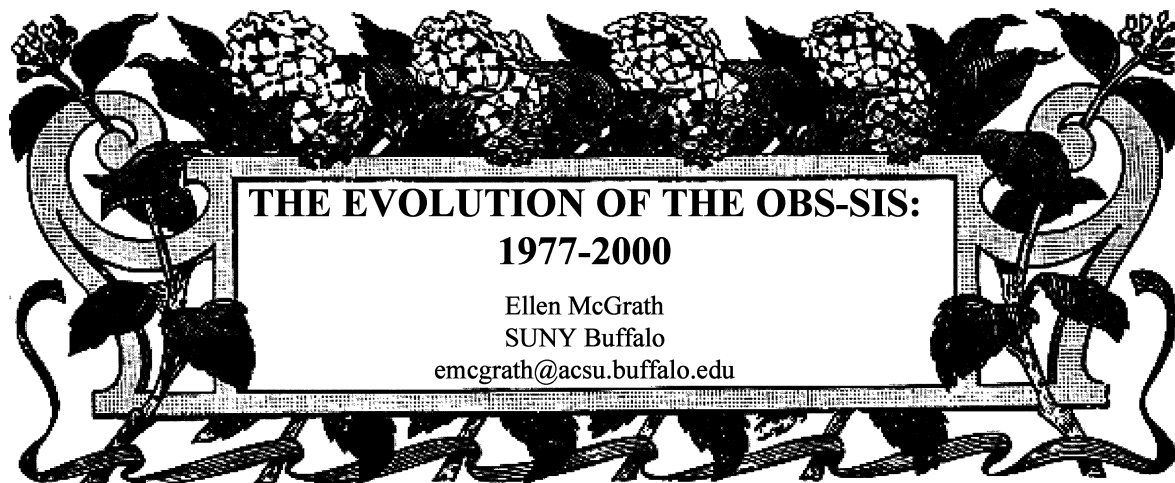
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THE EVOLUTION OF THE OBS-SIS: 1977-2000

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Why a history of OBS and why now? The Online Bibliographic Services Special Interest Section (OBS-SIS) is not quite as old as the *Technical Services Law Librarian* (*TSLL*), now celebrating its 25th anniversary, but OBS is pretty close, at 23 years of age. OBS has been around long enough for some benefit to be gained from reflecting upon activities and trends during its existence. In addition, OBS is now embarking upon strategic planning. History always enters into that process, or at least it should in my opinion. Along the lines of "what goes around, comes around," the possibility of OBS dissolving or merging into the Technical Services (TS) SIS has once again surfaced. As in the past three times when this issue arose, examination of the previous reasons for not merging is essential in order to complete a thorough investigation of all present options.

"Originating in 1977 as the OCLC-SIS, the Online Bibliographic Services Special Interest Section (OBS-SIS) broadened its scope to include all bibliographic utilities and local online systems."

This is the brief, "official" version of OBS' history found in the Section's brochure, in the Section-sponsored publication *Law Library Systems Directory*, and on AALLNET. My hope is to delve a bit deeper, so as to flesh out the important events that have brought the OBS-SIS to where it is today. My approach was very simply to read all the back issues of *The Law*

Cataloger and *TSLL*, moving forward chronologically in time from 1975-1999. A rather daunting prospect indeed, but it provided extremely fascinating reading! Of course, there may have been activities that were not recorded in the newsletter. I would appreciate hearing from readers of this history who can add further to some of these events or correct me in my interpretations of them. I want to take this opportunity to encourage both OBS and TS officers and members to continue to faithfully record the ongoing histories of these Sections and the issues important to them in their newsletter.

Newsletter

In some ways, *The Law Cataloger/ Technical Services Law Librarian* was an early version of a professional discussion/information sharing forum, maybe even sort of a forerunner to today's electronic mail lists. How often nowadays do we complain that we do not want yet another electronic list to keep up with! We want to see the issues important to us handled on the lists to which we already belong, ideally with everything in one place. While this may seem impossible, *TSLL* has been that one place for 25 years! Of course, *TSLL* developed before there was quite so much "everything" with which to keep up. Nevertheless, the reliance upon a joint newsletter for OBS and TS was a smart move and continues to be just that, in my opinion.

One can see the trends of technical services librarianship reflected in the pages of *TSLL*. Technical services law librarians have always been active in the general community of technical services librarians, usually as represented in the American Library Association (ALA). This participation has grown as time has gone by. It is now institutionalized in that official representatives to ALA's CC:DA (Committee on Cataloging: Description and Access), MARBI (Machine-Readable Bibliographic Information Committee), and SAC (Subject Analysis Committee), and to SISAC (Serials Industry Systems Advisory Committee) are maintained by AALL. These liaisons are more closely identified with TS, but the MARBI representative has been recognized as having a responsibility to report directly to OBS too. This makes perfect sense since MARBI has to do with MARC and the MARC formats are standards for the representation and communication of bibliographic and related information in machine-readable form. MARC is at the very core of the bibliographic utilities and local systems that allow us to accomplish our technical services functions.

1970s

The Law Cataloger was created by Phyllis Marion, its founding editor, as a vehicle of communication between law catalogers. It began in August 1975 and was at first underwritten by the AALL Cataloging and Classification

Committee and the University of Minnesota Law Library. When AALL created the special interest section (SIS) structure in 1976, it was suggested that a technical services SIS and an OCLC SIS would be most appropriate, based partially upon the content of this newsletter. Already there were lots of questions though. Should the OCLC group be a smaller group under the TS-SIS? Or should it be its own SIS? Questions also involved the relationship between the existing AALL Cataloging and Classification Committee and the TS-SIS.

At the 1977 AALL annual meeting in Toronto, there was an informal OCLC users group meeting as well as an OCLC workshop on the schedule. So it is quite appropriate that the OCLC-SIS became official in 1977. Its focus was simple: "The exchange of information about OCLC is the major goal of the Section." (*Law Cataloger*, October 1977, p. 5) Christian Boissonnas (Cornell) was the OCLC-SIS's first president, and there was also a vice-president, secretary/treasurer, and three advisory committee members. Some of the officers' titles have undergone changes over the years. At present, the officers are: chair, vice-chair/chair-elect, past chair, secretary/treasurer, and two members-at-large.

The OCLC-SIS jumped right in and planned two programs for the following year's annual meeting in Rochester. I was amused to see that right from the start, the SIS faced those killer scheduling times: its first business meeting on June 26, 1978 was at 7:30 AM! During the Rochester convention, there were many discussions about the new structure and a major reorganization was already under consideration. The idea of creating a unified organization was put forward; one that would include all the interests of the AALL Cataloging and Classification Committee, the TS-SIS, the OCLC-SIS, and a group of BALLOTS (predecessor to the RLIN system) users. The expressed goal was to not duplicate effort, but there was concern that the specific interests of

these various groups not be buried under a new superstructure. As with any library organization worth its salt, a committee was formed to investigate all the options. At the same time, the TS-SIS was still getting organized and Phyllis Marion was its first chairperson. TS adopted *The Law Cataloger* as its newsletter and TS members agreed that the OCLC-SIS could use it for this purpose too. At various points in these early discussions, the OCLC-SIS was referred to in print as the OCLC-BALLOTS SIS and the OCLC-Law SIS. The former variation may have been the result of discussions which suggested the SIS might expand to include BALLOTS and other MARC record users. Luckily the Section was never officially renamed to include the term BALLOTS, since that system itself was soon renamed RLIN in 1978.

The report of the Merger Advisory Group in the May 1979 issue of *The Law Cataloger* focussed mainly on the discontinuation of the AALL Cataloging and Classification Committee, with its areas to be covered instead by the TS-SIS. This was separate from the possible OCLC-SIS merger issue and the new problem of how to recognize RLIN users. But this was all discussed too and the ultimate recommendation was that "there is sufficient distinction in the problems of using automated data bases that a separate SIS is preferable to formation through the Technical Services SIS." (p. 4). It was also decided that this would be discussed at the meetings to be held in San Francisco in 1979, where, incidentally, the OCLC and TS business meetings were held at the same time, representing the first of many conflicts of this sort!

In September 1979, *The Law Cataloger* changed its title to the *Technical Services Law Librarian* to better reflect the memberships of the two SISs that it represents. That issue included big news about the OCLC-SIS from its business

meeting held in San Francisco in 1979. It announced "a broadening of its membership to include RLIN/BALLOTS users (a group previously known as LAWBUG) and a change in name ... to reflect that broader membership ... [to] the On-line Bibliographic Services SIS." (p. 6).

1980s

At the 1980 OBS business meeting in St. Louis, standing committees for OCLC and RLIN were established with the intent to serve as lobbies to the bibliographic utilities. The OBS bylaws were changed to allow for the nomination and election of officers. It had also been decided that the *TSLL* editor position would rotate between being selected by OBS and TS. At the 1981 annual meeting, there was a conscious effort made not to schedule the OBS and TS business meetings at the same time. It also seemed to be the first meeting where OCLC staff attended the OCLC Committee meeting and the first meeting ever of the RLIN Committee, at which there was an RLG representative also. This equal attention to both utilities even resulted in an informal arrangement whereby the OBS chair office rotated between members representing OCLC and RLIN institutions.

Ex Libris

At this point, this is how the "Purposes" article of the OBS bylaws read:

The purposes of the On-line Bibliographic Services Special Interest Section shall be to assist its members in utilizing the capabilities of the various bibliographic systems to the best of their abilities; to communicate their concerns to the management of those systems and provide input in their policy-making processes; to represent the member interest within AALL; to facilitate the exchange of ideas and information among the members; to concern itself with all aspects of bibliographic systems as they will affect users. (TSLL, May 1982, p. 6)

Diane Hillmann, OBS chair, was invited to a special meeting of OCLC users groups in February 1980. Later, Greg Koster, OBS chair, was invited to attend the OCLC Users Council meeting in May 1982. This illustrates the recognition of the SIS in terms of representing law OCLC users to the overall OCLC organization. Things appeared to be going swimmingly for OBS, however another group was appointed to investigate "whether the goals and purposes of both organizations would be advanced by the merger of OBS/SIS into the larger group [TS/SIS]." (*TSLL*, Aug. 1982, p. 1) This group "identified several major issues which would have to be resolved before such a merger could be contemplated:"

I. Program planning: The earlier merger investigation in 1977/1978 concluded that two separate SISs provided more program time for technical services topics. Were two SISs unnecessary now because AALL seemed to be more accepting of programming flexibility? On a related note, would OBS-type concerns be relegated to less frequent programs if subsumed into a super TS-SIS?

II. Finances: With only one SIS, the ability to fund programs and activities would be cut. Taking into consideration the overlap in members between the two SISs, it was clear that combining them would result in fewer monies from dues. Further complicating this question was whether *TSLL* could continue to be separately funded in a manner like no other SIS newsletter.

III. Member participation: And perhaps the bottom line, "it is unclear whether having two separate groups facilitates or inhibits participation of members in the structure and activities of the SISs." (p. 3)

IV. Public services involvement: OBS seemed at the time to be moving towards also involving public services users of the bibliographic utilities. There was a general feeling that this was a good thing, but that a merger would most likely squelch it.

V. Utilities committees: The OCLC and RLIN Committees were still defining their roles with their respective parent organizations, OCLC and RLG. This was particularly true in the case of the RLIN Committee, which was so very new.

These points were discussed at each SIS's business meeting in 1982 at the Detroit convention and each SIS agreed to poll their membership via a merger survey. Unfortunately, the first round of the survey resulted in a poor response rate, so another was distributed. The results of the OBS-conducted survey were published in the May 1983 *TSLL* and included comments, some of which advocated a broadened focus to encompass local systems, readers services, and circulation needs, as well as users of LEXIS, Westlaw, and Dialog. A slight majority of OBS members favored merging with TS. However, the merger was voted down at the 1983 OBS business meeting in Houston by a count of 4 in favor of merging, 21 against, and 1 abstaining. As an aside, 65% of the TS membership surveyed had favored the merger, though TS recognized that it was up to OBS to make this decision.

So with the second bout of merger discussions apparently resolved, OBS turned to a redefinition of its purpose and an ad hoc group was formed to accomplish that goal. Some ideas generated were: establishing its own OBS newsletter, creating a WLN Committee, and reorganizing completely to reflect module use of the bibliographic utilities (e.g. cataloging, acquisitions, ILL, etc.). The report of the Ad Hoc Committee to Study the Future of OBS-SIS was very detailed and it was published in the May 1984 *TSLL* (p. 8-10). The report included suggestions for a new name: On-line Services SIS or On-line Systems SIS. It also laid out a possible committee structure including the following: OCLC, RLIN, WLN, user's services, and publicity. The proposed user's services committee was defined as representing the "interests of public services librarians in using online public catalogs, online circulation systems, automated ILL, LEXIS, Westlaw, Dialog, etc." (p. 9). So interestingly enough, this foreshadowed the local systems theme that would later emerge in OBS, but it did so from a public services perspective. The proposed mission and goals of the SIS were very general in terms of online systems and a reference to "future" standing committees made it clear that the ad hoc committee was well aware of the increasingly evolutionary nature of the OBS-SIS.

At the 1984 OBS business meeting in San Diego: "It was decided to limit the focus of the section to bibliographic databases, rather than include LEXIS and Westlaw. The final decision was that the section should be concerned with local and national on-line bibliographic databases." (*TSLL*, Aug. 1984, p. 11) A name change for the Section was also discussed, but that was voted down. The WLN Committee was established, as was an ad hoc publicity group. But the suggested users' services committee was voted down. It was also decided that OBS should continue to use *TSLL* as its newsletter, rather than creating its own separate one. During the discussion about the newsletter, it was agreed that at least one separate mailing should go to each OBS member. The publicity group got right to work on that and sent a packet

to each member in November 1984. At this time, *TSLL* was still a separate subscription and it was determined that the majority of OBS members not subscribed to *TSLL* were private law librarians. This issue was raised as a question about whether better outreach to the firm librarian OBS members was necessary. Still on the topic of *TSLL*, an editorial board with two representatives from each SIS was established in 1985.

The 1985 business meeting in New York brought about the abolishment of the informal practice of rotating the OBS chair position between representatives from OCLC and RLIN libraries. Another important step was evidenced by the statement that "OBS intends to support local systems level groups and activities." (*TSLL*, Aug. 1985, p. 14) Later a proposal was made to expand the OBS directory to include detailed data on members' online activities. This idea was eventually incorporated into a joint OBS/TS directory mailed to all members of those two sections in 1987. Also in 1987, the OBS chair, Margie Axtmann, expressed concern that OBS had "reached a standstill." She hoped "to revitalize the membership interest" (*TSLL*, Aug. 1987, p. 10) and redefine the Section's goals through the work of the OBS bylaws revision group, which was already underway. The issue of how to deal with local systems issues was again raised as an important topic for discussion. This then resulted in OBS opening a dialogue with the Automation and Scientific Development (ASD) SIS, whose interests might be viewed as overlapping if OBS developed into the area of local systems activities. At the same time, an ad hoc group was appointed to explore the issues of local systems coverage by OBS. This group recommended that a Local Systems Committee be created within OBS:

To function as an umbrella group for the discussion of local systems issues. The [ad hoc] committee does not recommend the formation of specific users groups under the structure of the

SIS, but rather it supports the practice of various vendors to have users meetings in conjunction with the AALL conventions. In this context a permanent Local Systems Committee would be charged with examining more general issues relating to implementation of local systems in libraries, rather than focusing exclusively on particular systems. (*TSLL*, May 1988, p. 6)

This would be a discussion topic during the 1988 Atlanta meeting and a time was scheduled for the first meeting of this new Committee, in case it was approved by the OBS membership.

Atlanta proved to be a very busy convention for OBS! The Local Systems Committee was voted in and its organizational meeting held. The revised bylaws were passed and made the new Committee official, removed the hyphen from the Section's name (now Online Bibliographic Services), and turned members-at-large into officers. Also a new OBS brochure was distributed. No action resulted from the informal discussions with the ASD-SIS. This was fortunate, because another discussion of merging with TS was instigated, this time by the AALL Special Committee on Organizational Structure. That Committee recommended the merger of other SISs too. This topic was discussed at the OBS business meeting and many of the same reasons for not merging in the past were voiced once again. TS also discussed it and adopted a resolution at its business meeting recommending against the merger. The following year, AALL dropped its merger proposal, due partly to insufficient support within either OBS or TS and partly to a recognition on its part that there were indeed valid reasons for the existence of these separate Sections.

The Local Systems Committee proposed to update the library systems profile portion of the joint OBS/TS directory. This idea became a bit more ambitious as time moved on and OBS applied to AALL for funding of a

project to publish this systems information. The possibility of a separate OBS newsletter was raised again in 1989, mainly in response to a suggestion by AALL that all SIS brochures and newsletters originate from its headquarters. At the OBS business meeting in Minneapolis in 1989, it was once again agreed that OBS should stick with *TSLL* as its newsletter. The suggestion was once again made, however, that a title change might be more reflective of OBS' interests. Some of the proposed titles were: TS/OBS Law Librarian, TS/OBS News and Views, TS/OBS Chronicle, TS/OBS Record, and TS/OBS News. Members of both Sections who expressed their views to the editor in 1991 favored the retention of the name *TSLL* by a margin of 2-1, so it remained.

1990s

Meanwhile AALL had moved ahead on the plan for all SIS newsletters to be published by headquarters. As the only SISs to share a newsletter, OBS and TS were quite concerned about the cost of distributing *TSLL* to its combined memberships. So OBS and TS jointly applied for a grant from AALL to cover the publishing cost during the transition period. With this grant and the financial assistance of some vendors, there was no interruption in the publication of *TSLL*. Money became a further concern. The funding for the local systems directory was approved by AALL. But on the other hand, AALL now received half of the dues payment of each OBS member. In 1991, the memberships of both OBS and TS approved another joint project, the creation of the OBS/TS Research Roundtable. Its first meeting took place in 1992 at the San Francisco convention and was coordinated by Brian Striman. OBS' chair was a firm librarian (Elaine Sciolino) for the first time ever in 1992/ 1993 and there was an even bigger push to involve non-academics in the Section's activities. A procedures manual was being worked on, as was a strategic plan, at the urging of the parent organization, AALL. A round table for reference users of local systems was

suggested, and while one meeting may have taken place, it never came to full fruition. The first CONELL (Conference for Newer Law Librarians) marketplace, featuring SIS activity tables, was held at the 1993 convention in Boston and OBS gave out frisbees.

A news release in the Sept. 1993 issue of *TSLL* (p. 5) announced the availability of *The Directory of Law Library Systems*! This had been a huge undertaking within OBS, involving a detailed survey, the compilation of an enormous amount of data, and the eventual publication by AALL/ Rothman. It was well worth the wait and was hailed as an excellent resource for librarians looking for assistance in dealing with their local system or in the market for a new system. Within a year, work on the next edition was well underway by OBS members and the Section bought software to facilitate this effort. The revised edition, the *Law Library Systems Directory*, was published in 1996. Discussions took place at the 1999 convention in Washington, D.C. concerning the next version, perhaps greatly to be revamped and with the survey undertaken on the Web. Only time will tell what develops on this front!

By 1994, the WLN Committee had been languishing for a while, so bylaws revisions were undertaken to dissolve this Committee. In addition, the Education Committee was formalized with the vice-chair/chair-elect officially at its helm. The popular paperback swap at the OBS table in the convention exhibit hall was first held in 1996 in Indianapolis. Food and beverages were also provided for the first time at Committee meetings there, a definite plus for dedicated attendees, especially at those early morning and late afternoon times. The OBS Web page came into existence in 1996 too. At the Baltimore meeting in 1997, a research grant was approved. It is jointly sponsored by OBS with TS and a Joint Research Grant Committee was established. The OBS electronic list was announced in March 1998. The Anaheim convention in 1998 was notable in that only 13 people attended the OBS business meeting, which was held at the same time as the TS business meeting on the very last day of convention.

2000 and Forward

OBS has been very active in program planning for the AALL annual meeting all throughout its history. For the upcoming 2000 meeting in Philadelphia, its sponsorship or co-sponsorship of seven programs reaches a high surpassed only by eight at the 1995 meeting in Pittsburgh and equaled by the 1994 meeting in Seattle.

At this point in time , this is the way the object of the Online Bibliographic Services SIS, as recorded in its bylaws, reads:

1. To provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and information on the use and capabilities of various interactive online bibliographic services, including (but not limited to) OCLC, RLIN, and local systems; and

2. To communicate the concerns of its members to the governing bodies of those systems; and

3. To concern itself with all technical services, public services, and administrative aspects of such bibliographic systems as they affect users; and

4. To represent its members' interests and concerns within the AALL.

The most recent history of OBS revisits old territory. Both the OBS and TS vice-chairs (Brian Striman and Janet McKinney, respectively) included the topic of merging the two SISs on the annual surveys they conducted of their memberships in 1998/1999. At the 1999 OBS business meeting, bylaws revisions were passed to include the Joint Research Grant Committee and the Web Advisory Committee. As I write this in January 2000, parallel OBS and TS strategic planning efforts are underway. So it is evident that history certainly does repeat itself!

A Personal Reflection

From my particular perspective, I compare the OBS-SIS to what I know: cataloging. As a cataloger, I train staff to always look to the bibliographic record for information. After that lesson has been ingrained, the day inevitably comes when they look to the bibliographic record and the information they need is not there. They may have a supplement by a different publisher or a looseleaf release with a different title, you know, all that fun legal publishing stuff! So they come to me, saying the bib record is wrong! I explain that when we cataloged it, we did a good job of creating the bibliographic record with the information we had at the time. Since then, that information has changed and it will probably continue to change. We will keep tweaking the bibliographic record to fit the current information that we have. We do this because it is impossible to know what piece of the data puzzle the users of our record will need to locate it. There is no sense wasting much time trying to predict what will change next. We should simply focus on reacting to the change and incorporating it into our bibliographic record as quickly and as accurately as we can. We should not look at it as righting wrongs, but as assisting evolution.

Now maybe assisting evolution is an ambitious goal for a bibliographic record. But that is sort of the goal I see for the OBS-SIS. We should not try to make it a static structure that will never change. It already has changed, it will continue to change, and, in my eyes, that is its special role. I do not think this means that OBS should not exist. It means that there is an outlet for people interested in this evolution of the impact of automation upon technical services, and by extension, public services and end users of our systems. The number of people interested in OBS membership may well drop and in fact it has somewhat over the years, though not alarmingly. But until there is no core left within the 316 OBS members that will step forward to plan programs,

to run for office, to work on the *Local Systems Directory* or whatever, I believe that OBS will continue to play a vital role in the life of law librarians. For OBS melds traditional technical services functions with automation, just as technical services law librarians do in their daily work life.

As one of those law librarians, I am grateful for this outlet that contributes to what I see as my evolution as a growing professional. I too feel overwhelmed at times by the pace of change. But I sincerely believe that the alternative of staying always in the same place is worse. So what I need is some help in adjusting to change. For me, personally, that is OBS—and TS! The combination works best for me and I would not like to have to choose one over the other or mush then together in some way. In my opinion, the interconnectedness of OBS with TS has been inevitable and valuable. OBS and TS working together on program planning, establishing a joint roundtable and committee, and sharing a newsletter over the years has benefited each of the members of both Sections.

Of course this too may change. That is why this history of OBS, with its constant reinvestigation of the possibility of merging with another SIS, makes perfect sense. If OBS were not committed to the inevitability of evolution, it would not so frequently seek to reexamine its purpose. For even when the merger possibility was raised from outside of OBS, the Section rose to the possibility and conducted a thoughtful and thorough investigation.

I hope that this look back at the OBS-SIS' history can play some small role in the current effort to examine its mission and goals. This OBS history reveals a true willingness on the part of the SIS's leadership to listen to and respond to the needs of its members. I know this will continue in this current initiative, so in my role as current OBS Vice-Chair/Chair-Elect, I implore the members of OBS to speak their minds. After all, with such a distinguished history, it would not do to rush into a decision about the future of OBS!