Division Early History

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Since the time of its formation over 50 years ago the Science-Technology Division of the Special Libraries Association (SLA) has served to attract members from a wide variety of technical backgrounds and interest, especially appealing in recent years to those who have broad interests in science and engineering and those who wish to associate with people who do. Over the course of these years the division has also served the association as a unit which has nurtured the formation and growth of numerous sections until they reached the point of being strong enough to branch off and form their own divisions. In spite of the dissolution of component parts, the division has remained one of the largest divisions of the SLA, with an ample supply of funds in its coffers. It has sponsored many projects, stimulated the preparation of important monographic and serial publications, and served as a training ground for many association officers.

The division began in 1923 when George W. Lee organized the first meeting of technically oriented librarians at the annual SLA convention, held that year in Atlantic City. The result was the formation of the Technology Group, which gained official recognition from the SLA Executive Board in March 1925. In 1926 it joined some business-oriented members then forming the Science-Technology Group the year. Its first chairman was Louise Griepenstroh.

The Science-Technology Group began its existence with four sections: Chemistry, Petroleum, Public Utilities, and Rubber. In 1936 the Electrical Communication Section was added, which later (1941) changed its name to the Engineering-Aeronautics Section. Two more units were formed in that decade: The Pharmaceutical and Metals Sections, in 1947 and 1949, respectively. The only backward step, organizationally, was the dissolution of the Rubber Section in 1935.

In 1950 all SLA groups were renamed as divisions, so the Science-Technology Division received its present name that year. It began this phase of its life with six sections: Chemistry, Engineering-Aeronautics, Metals, Petroleum, Pharmaceutical, and Public Utilities. The first of the sections to leave the division was the Metals Section, which became a division on its own right in 1953. However, in 1955 the Paper and Textiles Section was formed, so the division once more had six sections.

In early 1960s more and more thought was given by section members to the financial and organizational advantages of seeking divisional status for their sections. However, before any other sections followed the example of the Metals Divisions by breaking away, two more sections were formed within the division in 1964, when the Nuclear Science and the Aerospace Sections were officially recognized. Thus the Science-Technology Division reached what was to be the peak of its organizational strength in that year, having a total of 2,567 members, almost half of the association’s total of 5,697. Then became a period of reduction in the number of its units and in its membership.

Rather unexpectedly, the next section to dissolve and seek division status was one of the newest–the Aerospace unit, which took this step in 1965. In 1966 it was followed by the Engineering, Nuclear Science, and Petroleum Sections; and the Chemistry and Pharmaceutical Sections dissolved to become divisions in the fall of 1966. In 1969 the Public Utilities Section left, and in 1970 the Paper and Textiles Section dissolved for lack of membership support and activity. Thus, in the course of about 6 years, all the eight sections of the division had dissolved, all but one for the purpose of becoming divisions of the SLA.

Lest one suppose that the Science-Technology Division immediately went into a relapse, perhaps never to recover, it should be noted that in 1970 it still had 1,732 members, versus 6,500 in the association as a whole. In 1974, as it began its second half-century, the division still had 1,577 members (making it one of the larger divisions), and it was financially secure. One reason for this was the desire of many members to belong to a division representing all areas of science and technology. Other members who joined the more specialized technical divisions nevertheless frequently retained or obtained membership in the Science-Technology Division in order to keep in touch with a wider group of technically oriented librarians than membership in a more specialized division was apt to permit.

As to the accomplishments of the division, its members have produced many important, useful publications, commencing in the mid-1920s when bibliographies on technical topics were prepared soon after the group was formed. Three union lists of technical serials were issued in the 1930s and 1940s. A valuable publication in 1944 was the Patent Index to Chemical Abstracts, 1907-1936, prepared by the Chemical Section; this was so popular that it had to be reprinted in 1954.

A different kind of publication emanated in 1950, when the Metals Section, in cooperation with the American Society for Metals, issued the ASM-SLA Metallurgical Literature Classification. This was an aid for classifying such literature, with provisions for the use of punched cards if desired.

A full-length book, Technical Libraries: Their Organization and Management (edited by Lucille Jackson), appeared in 1951, following several years of efforts by many division members. Two indexes to government reports (PB series) were published, in 1949 and 1953; they were the work of division members belonging to the Philadelphia Chapter. Two works by division members had the honor of inaugurating two association series. The first was Libraries for Research and Industry, issued in 1955 under the editorship of Margaret P. Hilligan. It was the first SLA Monograph in a new series so entitled. The other was Bibliography of Engineering Abstracting Services, edited by Miriam M. Landuyt, also issued in 1955. It was the first volume in the SLA Bibliography Series. In 1956 a work appeared which represented the work of many division members, especially those in the Chemistry Section: Handbook of Scientific and Technical Awards in the United States and Canada, 1900-1952, edited by Margaret A. Firth.

In regards to serials, one of the most important ones is Sci-Tech News, the official bulletin of the division. Since 1966, this has also been the official bulletin of many of the technically oriented divisions, most of which had once been sections in the division and which for various reasons have preferred to keep relying on this publication for divisional news.

The predecessors of Sci-Tech News were the informal mimeographed Bulletin of the Science-Technology Group, published during the period 1934-1946, and a publication bearing the curious title Ye Alchemical Libraries Almanack (being the Bulletin of the Science-Technology Group Special Libraries Association). The latter began in September 1946 and continued until March 1949, the month Sci-Tech News was first published, under the editorship of Allen G. Ring. This was published, more often than not, on a quarterly basis, although it suffered from long-standing financial problems.

Finally, instead of relying on voluntary payments for subscriptions, it changed to a system whereby a certain sum from each member’s association allocation was set aside for the journal has been self-supporting in recent years.

SciTech News has long had special features, such as book reviews, abstracts of selected periodical articles, and a list of bibliographies of interest. Issuance of citations of articles on automation and computers led to a decision not to compete with the same sort of feature appearing in the official publication of what is now the American Society for Information Sciences (ASIS). This in turn led to the creation of a new indexing and abstracting service, Documentation Abstracts, which commenced in March 1966 under the sponsorship of ASIS, SLA, and other groups. Another feature for many years was “Science-Technology Serials,” edited by Andrew Glick for most of its life (1957-1962). A similar feature, entitled “New Engineering Serials,” began in 1972 under the editorship of Carmela Carbone. Those wanting a detailed history of the journal are referred to the article by Alfred Beltran (1).

Some periodicals prepared by the division are well known throughout the library world, such as the Pharmaceutical Section’s Unlisted Drugs, which began in 1949. Probably the best-known title of general interest in Scientific Meetings, which began in 1957. Most of the early work was done by two division members: Gertrude Bloomer and Joan Hutchinson. By 1963 this publication had become so popular that the tasks were too much for them, so the division transferred the responsibility to the association. The SLA continued to publish this journal until the end of 1976, after which it was taken over by a commercial firm. Interests on the part of several division members in book reviews of scitech books led the association to commence Technical Book Review Index in 1935, which it continued to issue until the end of 1976, when it, too, was turned over to commercial interest.

The division has sponsored several projects, meetings, and workshops. Between 1935 and 1957 it sponsored a pool of bibliographies for members to borrow. The interest of the Engineering-Aeronautics Section in translations led in time to the creation of a large number of records that were transferred to the association around 1950. This was followed in 1953 by the creation of the National Translation Center at the John Crerar Library in Chicago, which the association sponsored for many years.

The division has sponsored several meetings, beginning in the 1950s, on the topic of technical reports and documentation, some sponsored in cooperation with other groups. Other projects included a duplicate periodical exchange, which existed in the 1940s and had a revival in the 1950s. As early as 1950, work on a division-wide survey was carried on, with data published in 1951 (2). In recent years the division has sought out appropriate projects which it can support, and several are being carried on at the present time.

Awards have been given by the division since 1955, although generally in a spasmodic fashion. In 1955 the Division Award was given, for the first time, to E.J. Crane of Chemical Abstracts. In 1957 the Special Division Award for Contributions to Librarianship was made to Margaret P. Hilligan. Two awards were made in 1960: the Award of Merit went to Margaret A. Firth, and the Publication Award, to Gordon Randall. In 1961 the Award of Merit went to Nell Steinmetz, and the Publication Award went to Gertrude Bloomer and Joan Hutchinson. In 1963 the Publication Award was given to Helen Redman and Lois Godfrey as well as to the Rio Grande Chapter.

The Awards Committee was rejuvenated in the 1970s, but no new awards have been made to date. However, since 1972 the division has given monetary awards to students and other members who have written winning papers in a competition, granting travel funds to those who had never attended annual conferences before.

Additional data on the division prior to 1959 can be found in the article written by Betty Joy Cole, included in the association’s 50-year history (3).

REFERENCES  
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2. Sci-Tech News, 5(3), (September 1951); ibid., 5(4), 3-6 (December 1951)  
3. Special Libraries Association, Special Libraries Association-Its First Fifty Years: 1909-1959. The Association, New York, 1959, pp. 99-104.

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