Forms of cooperation in the library information network of Finnish academic libraries

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1. Foreword

In the period 1988-1993 the academic libraries in Finland carried out an extensive automation project. As a result of that effort all university libraries, the library of Parliament and the National Repository Library, 22 libraries in all, now comprise the Library information network for Finnish research libraries (LINNEA).

The concept of LINNEA is twofold: on the one hand it means a logical data communication network connecting libraries and on the other hand may be perceived as a database service available within the Finnish university and research network (FUNET). In addition, LINNEA is a substantial challenge in cooperation facing the Finnish academic libraries.

The formation of LINNEA was influenced by the fact that a multitude of foreign library automation vendors began to gain a foothold in Europe at the beginning of the 1980's. There was a danger that many different library automation solutions would be implemented in Finland and hence the established national library cooperation might be threatened. In 1984 the Ministry of Education, responsible among other things for all academic libraries in Finland, set up a project, the goal of which was to plan how the operations of the academic libraries should be automated.

The three basic results of the project were as follows: firstly, a unified integrated library

automation system should be installed for each university library, secondly, a central system should be established to provide various services and thirdly, the libraries and the central system should be connected by FUNET to form a logical data communication network. Virginia Tech Library Systems (VTLS), running on Hewlett Packard 3000 Series computers, was chosen as the integrated automation system. The Automation Unit of Finnish University Libraries (TKAY) was placed in charge of planning and maintaining the central system, as well as helping libraries to implement their VTLS software. Libraries themselves had the responsibility to connect their local system to the FUNET network.

The Automation Unit of Finnish University Libraries started in the 1970's as a project organised under the Ministry of Education but in March 1993 it was placed under the administration of the Helsinki University Library.

This paper introduces the different forms of cooperation in LINNEA. Furthermore, reasons for their existence and some prospects for their future are presented.

2. The concept of cooperation and LINNEA

Developing further a categorisation outlined by Wilson, Masterson and Edmonds, MacDougall (1) divides the concept of cooperation into three, somewhat overlapping, categories viewed through forms of activity:

- Exchange, e.g. of materials and information
- Coalition, i.e. working together
- Entrepreneurial and one-way marketing, e.g. British Library Supply Centre.

As a logical data communication network, or as a database service, LINNEA could first and foremost be included under the heading 'exchange'. Some of the basic tasks performed in LINNEA are copy cataloguing and bibliographical verifications of records made in remote databases.

It is obvious, that the goals of cooperation in LINNEA, and the possible benefits derived from it in the category of exchange, are fairly clear: standardization in cataloguing, reduction in duplication of work and avoidance of unnecessary double acquisitions, that is to say, savings in time and money. However, as MacDougall points out, research on the economics of cooperation is extremely scant.

Observing the planned central system services of LINNEA, the most topical one of which at present is the union database called LINDA, one could say that they come close to the cooperation category 'entrepreneurial'. The copyright of the union database LINDA belongs to the Automation Unit. According to the agreement signed by LINNEA libraries, the use of LINDA is free of charge to them because of the free copy of their database they have given to LINDA. Other users, like municipal libraries and individual end-users, have to pay for the use of LINDA.

At the moment, it is difficult to foresee how the entrepreneurial-type cooperation in LINNEA affects the whole library field in Finland because LINDA and other central system services are still under construction.

The third form of cooperation, coalition, may be characterised after MacDougall by the phrases 'partnership' and 'joint venture'. Coalition-type cooperation is close to the everyday meaning of cooperation, i.e. working together. In fact, coalition may be said to be the most crucial form of cooperation, the engine of the "cooperation car", the hiccups of which makes the whole vehicle to tremble.

3. Working together

There are three forms of practical cooperation in LINNEA: the official VTLS Users' Group of Finland, with working groups subordinate to it, groups promoting informal cooperation between libraries, and special cooperation strategies between technical university libraries.

3.1. Official working groups

VTLS Users' Group of Finland

The written goal of the Users' Group of Finland is, to contribute to the cooperation between users of VTLS software in Finland by organising meetings, disseminating information and collecting enhancement requests to be forwarded to VTLS European Users' Group and to VTLS, Inc.

Concerning the administration of the Users' Group, the responsibility for the organisation of it lies with the Ministry of Education and, for practical arrangements, with the Automation Unit. The representatives of Hewlett-Packard and the country office of VTLS, Inc., called VTLS of Finland, are allowed to participate in the meetings as well.

Furthermore, the Group may arrange other activities promoting the interest of users of VTLS software in Finland. One example of these activities are the working groups under the Users' Group. As a matter of convenience and efficiency working groups have been established around the different modules of VTLS software.

Working groups

There are five working groups operating to date: cataloguing, circulation, serials control, subject control and VTLS management. Suggestions have also been made that search and acquisition should have their respective groups established.

There are no specific rules formulated upon which the working groups should arrange their forms of operation. Although the working groups provide a fairly informal forum for cooperation, they have to accomplish two tasks for the mutual interest: they make an annual report of their operation and prepare enhancement requests from their own field.

Not surprisingly, all the five working groups have set up very similar forms of operati to conduct their meetings and to maintain communication between them. For arranging further meetings all groups except one have chosen a committee of 3-6 members. Meetings are usually held 2-3 times a year, in the meantime, contact is kept by telephone, telefax and electronic mail. Each working group has its own electronic mailing list on some mainframe computer connected to the FUNET network. Mails ser to the address of the list - e.g. to the mailing list of VTLS-managers, vtlsmgr@hut.fi, Helsinki University of Technology - are distributed automatically to all members on th list. Messages are not archived in any form, nor is there any moderator.

Contents of cooperation

From the definition of both the Users' Group and the working groups, one might anticipate that enhancement requests for the VTLS software have a central position in operation of the groups. In fact, requests have taken a far bigger role in the operation than was probably expected.

There are at least two reasons for this situation: firstly, since VTLS as library softwar has not fulfilled all the expectations libraries have had, it has resulted in numerous enhancement requests. Secondly, the latest release of the software, named VTLS-93, which was installed at most LINNEA libraries at the end of 1992, was found to suffer from so many programming errors that the release can be said to have been installed c half completed.

Due to the amount of enhancement requests made each year, it is quite clear that to handle them democratically is a cumbersome task, even in one country alone. VTLS Users' Group of Finland is a member of the VTLS European Users' Group. Finland, like other European countries belonging to the European Group, has to arrange yearly internal vote on its own requests. Those requests which have gained most of the votes are then incorporated into the all-European list of requests. This list then goes on a voting tour to every member country. Finally, the top of the all-European requests are presented to VTLS, Inc. One would sincerely hope that the amount of enhancement

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requests will either be severely restricted or the whole process of voting and re-voting reorganized from the beginning. There is a unanimous, though not officially expressed, agreement on this issue.

From the software users' point of view, any errors in the program code are, of course, unacceptable. Unfortunately, usually all there is to do is to wait for the corrections to come. However, if there are unknown errors in the software, or if the timetable for corrections is missing, the situation is problematic. Mailing lists have proved to be useful tools for keeping LINNEA libraries on alert for potential risks in the VTLS software. When something unexpected is detected, an urgent e-mail message is sent around to prevent further damage. Getting information from VTLS, Inc. on timetables for corrections is also expected to improve fairly soon by using electronic mail.

To summarize, work carried out in the numerous VTLS working groups has proved to be both necessary and useful. Cooperation as a mechanism for gaining mutual interest, or maintaining an acceptable standard, is a powerful tool when used properly.

3.2. Informal cooperation

VTLS managers in the Helsinki area

In 1992, at the request of the Ministry of Education, the computing centres of the universities situated in the capital area surveyed their performance, in order to find out sectors requiring rationalizing measures. One of the sectors was the management of the local VTLS installations.

There are, within the radius of ten kilometers from the centre of Helsinki, seven LINNEA libraries like the University of Helsinki, the Helsinki School of Economics and the Helsinki University of Technology to mention some of them. All universities have a central processing unit (CPU) of their own, dedicated to the VTLS software and installed at the computing centre of the university. The management of the CPU is carried out

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either by the computing centre alone or, more commonly, by cooperation between the computing centre and the library.

As the VTLS managers pointed out in their survey, monetary savings gained by purchasing a joint CPU would not be so much as finding forms of cooperation on the VTLS management level. There are, for example, certain management tasks which only come into practice once or twice a year, so to maintain the knowledge of them by everyone is uneconomical. Some of the new cooperation forms worth trying could be the establishment of a commercial enterprise offering centralized VTLS management services to universities and the formation of a system of alternates, like babysitters, for VTLS managers.

Subsequently the idea of the system of alternates has been developed. The VTLS managers working in the capital area have made a common list on central topics concerning their respective VTLS environment. With the help of this list a "babysitting" VTLS manager should be able to cope with problem situations. However, the actual system for alternates has not been put into practice yet.

Survival groups

The importance of personal contacts in the LINNEA network cannot be overestimated. Metaphorically speaking, they may even be a matter of life and death.

Only a few academic libraries in Finland employ computing specialists of their own; computing tasks are carried out mainly by librarians themselves, although local area networks are maintained by computing centres. Nevertheless, LINNEA has been the first library automation project on a large scale in Finland where academic libraries and computing centres have worked together as equal partners.

Unfortunately, computer expertise has a tendency to wrap itself up in terminology which sometimes is hard to approach. In this regard it has been of utmost importance to librarians that they have the opportunity to discuss common problems and share

knowledge with colleagues in other libraries. Small informal survival groups, dealing with computing issues on a semi-professional level, are perhaps one of the most valuable novelties LINNEA has brought about.

3.3. The technical university libraries

Copy cataloguing is carried out between the libraries in the LINNEA network and soon also between libraries and the LINDA union database. The biggest benefits derived from copy cataloguing are standardization of catalogues and savings in primary cataloguing work. A more comprehensive standardization will be achieved by closely-related principles of cataloguing and subject control, so that bibliographic records copied can be accepted almost as they are without any substantial changes.

However, standardization of subject control is not easily achieved and perhaps is not even needed among libraries in different branches of science. On the other hand, it is obvious that the technical university libraries have more in common in this respect, one sign of which is that the level of cataloguing and classification is being readjusted in these libraries.

A prerequisite for copy cataloguing to be efficient and meaningful is, of course, that there are records worth copying from another database. For that reason, the technical university libraries have made an agreement to have the serials published by their respective universities catalogued in the local database, as quickly as possible.

With regular meetings, where various topics concerning bibliograhic control in general, as well as VTLS and LINNEA in particular, are dealt with, technical university libraries believe that mutual interests would be served.

4. Conclusions

As appropiate as it is to view cooperation from the standpoint of the activity, it is essential to look at the environment in which cooperation is functioning.

As MacDougall points out, instead of all participants of cooperation being fully convinced of the value of it, there should rather be room for an open-minded evaluation of cooperation. Likewise, seeing from a member organisation's economic point of view, if cooperation seems to take more than it gives, can further efforts be considered nothing more than altruistic unless cooperation is functioning under a sound political umbrella?

In addition to financially hard times, academic libraries in Finland are also facing increasing demands to evaluate the cost efficiency and quality of their functions. Although the foundations of LINNEA have been accepted by the libraries participating in it, the basic operations in LINNEA need to be frequently re-examined and re-evaluated. Open dialogue on policy matters has been scarce to date, partly due to the lack of a suitable forum for it. An electronic mailing list, dedicated to general discussion, would be a quick, inexpensive and easy-to-use solution.

The LINNEA network is a major achievement and building LINNEA has been an amazingly painless project considering the scope of it. Credit has to be given both to the academic libraries and the computing centres for their willingness to cooperate, as well as to the Automation Unit for its tireless efforts. From now on all there is left to do in LINNEA is to work for it.

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