Is Cooperation a Good Thing?

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*The British Library*
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Introduction

Cooperation between libraries has always been considered a Good Thing, like belief in God and motherhood. However, belief in God is by no means universal, and a great deal more effort is nowadays spent on trying to avoid motherhood than on trying to achieve it. Similarly, library cooperation is something to which much lip-service is paid but which is practised relatively rarely, and when it is practised is rarely effective.

That much lip-service has been paid to cooperation is evidenced by the very large literature on the topic - a literature which has shown a steady increase in recent years. This is largely due to automation, which has not only enabled librarians to aim at, and sometimes attain, dubious objectives in a more 'sophisticated' (i.e. complicated and expensive) way, but also to write extensively about what they are doing - or more often what they hope to do. With both cooperation and automation, it is all too easy to start with an assumption that they are desirable and then to explore how to use them. This is the wrong way round. Librarians must first determine what they want to achieve, then specify alternative methods of achieving it, and then compare their likely costs and effectiveness. Cooperation of one kind or another may well enter into some possible solutions; so may dependence on a central service, or 'going it alone'.

What then are the main functions of libraries? Broadly they can be described as acquiring and supplying information. At present they are concerned with information mainly as it is contained in books, and the main activities involved in this are:

1. acquiring books - selection, ordering and purchase etc.
2. recording books - cataloguing and classification.
3. making them available - their own books by consultation and lending, books not held by them by borrowing from elsewhere.
4. storing books - for present and future use.

I will consider each of these activities with a view to seeing how far cooperation is likely to be helpful.

Acquisition. Items cannot be supplied unless they have been acquired by the local library or some other library from which they can be borrowed. Local
Local selection should be optimised, so that the books most likely to be wanted by or useful to a library's clients are acquired. What is most needed for efficient selection is knowledge first of local users' needs and interests, and then of potentially relevant publications, if possible before they appear, with adequate information on subject, intended audience, price, etc. Cooperation cannot help here. Local users' needs must be ascertained locally; information on publications can be obtained from publishers, from booksellers, or from a central source or sources of bibliographic information.

Availability of items that may be wanted locally but are not acquired locally requires that they are acquired by other libraries and can be obtained quickly from them when necessary. This does not necessarily require that they all be acquired by other libraries in the same country; it may in some circumstances be possible, and even preferable, to obtain an efficient supply from a foreign country.

The idea, incidentally, that much money could somehow be saved if libraries cooperated may still have some currency among those who provide the money, but it is much less popular among librarians than the concept that cooperation can achieve better provision at less extra cost than if libraries did not cooperate. The money-saving argument can be simply dealt with. What users of a library need at all frequently must be provided on the spot, not 5 or even 2 kilometres away. What they do not need on the spot is of little more use to them 5 kilometres away than 20 or 200 kilometres unless they want it urgently. The 'better provision at less cost' case is considered below. The main argument for cooperation is surely not financial at all - it is simply that no library can be self-sufficient.

Assuming for the moment that reasonable national self-sufficiency is an adequate aim, the question then arises as to how this may best be achieved. There are several possible alternatives, ranging from voluntary cooperation between a large number of libraries, through nationally funded support of a limited number of specialised libraries, to a national collection dedicated to the purpose of supplying loans and photocopies to other libraries. Acquisition schemes need not be national: they can be regional, covering a large or moderate area of a country, or local, covering only a city and its immediate neighbourhood. Regional and local schemes may be linked with national schemes; for example, regional schemes may aim at partial self-sufficiency, and be supported by more comprehensive national schemes, which may perhaps be based on cooperative acquisition between the regions.

Which model is best for a particular country must depend partly on individual conditions and circumstances, though perhaps less than might be suspected; in particular, I doubt whether the physical size of a country has much bearing on the matter. There are however some factors that seem likely to apply generally. The first is that so far as speed of access is concerned, local schemes can obviously achieve faster supply or consultation in cases of urgency than regional or national systems. Unless a conurbation has an exceptional number of good libraries, however, there are severe limits to the additional material that can be supplied in this way, and the probability that an item that is wanted and that is not held by the user's own library is available in the locality is rather small. It may be worth finding out whether another library in the locality is acquiring a particular expensive item the purchase of which is in doubt; but this is cooperation with a very small 'c'.

Except in large countries with very bad postal services, and no alternative to them over long distances, regional systems cannot usually achieve faster supply than national systems: outside a range of about 10 kilometres, it does not matter much where in a country a particular item is. Much more important is the efficiency of libraries in supplying wanted items - a matter to which I return later.
A second general factor is that cooperative acquisition schemes are much more complex and costly to administer than centralised acquisition schemes. Ensuring that significant publications are acquired somewhere in the country, and that there is no unnecessary duplication, is not a cheap or easy process. The more libraries that are involved, the more complicated the system. For this reason, cooperative schemes are likely to be most effective where they involve only a few libraries, and if those libraries already specialise in a particular subject field, possibly because they serve a research establishment or specialist institution of higher education.

However, the issue is more fundamental than that. Cooperative acquisition on any scale implies that libraries are buying material they would not otherwise be buying, for the future benefit of users in other libraries. This demands either a degree of altruism that is not likely to be sustained when money is short, as it nearly always is, or national funding to buy the additional material. But if the extra provision is to be nationally funded, the money would be better spent on acquiring it for a central collection; both actual acquisition and control of the system would be much simpler. The best known of all cooperative acquisition schemes, the Farmington Plan, enthusiastically heralded and widely acclaimed, collapsed not many years after its establishment. A further problem is that acquisition for the national good implies a responsibility for retention; these items must be not only bought but specially identified and permanently stored. Storage has its own problems, considered later.

If my analysis is correct, it suggests that the scope for voluntary cooperation in acquisition is very limited, and that for effective national provision the choice lies between centralised acquisition and a national scheme whereby a few specialist libraries are funded by the state to provide comprehensive, or at least extensive, coverage. Whether a scheme of the latter kind can be called cooperation is very doubtful; centralised acquisition certainly cannot.

Recording

A high proportion of staff expenditure in many libraries, particularly academic libraries, goes on cataloguing and classification. Faced with these high costs, most librarians have begun to consider (if they have not already decided) whether they can obtain from other sources cataloguing and classification of at least equal quality to their own, whether in the form of conventional catalogue cards like the old Library of Congress and BNB cards, or by use of the computer, off-line or on-line. This approach assumes that cataloguing and classification of this standard is desirable, and/or that it can be provided more cheaply than local simplified processing. It is at least worth asking whether the required functions - of providing the user with subject access, with bibliographical information, and with an index to the library's collection - can be performed in other ways that may be simpler, cheaper and at least as effective. In my view, it is still far from proved that users are not as well or better served by very simple catalogues, and by broad and simple classifications, as by conventional entries; or that such an alternative cannot be provided more cheaply by local processing than by obtaining entries from elsewhere. Detailed subject and bibliographic access can be provided by national and other bibliographies. Research at present in progress at the University of Bath should shed light on this very important issue.

Let us however assume that acquisition of records from external sources is cost-effective. The question then arises whether they can best be provided direct from national data bases, or cooperatively. Among the possible alternatives are the supply of all records from a national data base (which should also hold records of the output of other countries), and 'sub-national' systems, possibly commercial, which supply records from the national data base and additional records provided by other libraries cooperating in the scheme.
Which is the 'best' system is still a matter for debate, or rather for determination in the light of further practical experience. It seems probable that the best solution will finally involve both national and subnational systems.

In any case, individual libraries will be required or encouraged to provide records of those items that they acquire that are not already on the data base. Even in countries with the most comprehensive and effective legal deposit schemes, the national library will inevitably miss some national imprints, especially locally published items, and it will be a very long time before all countries provide machine readable records of all their own output - even if it were desirable or possible for the national data base of a country to hold or provide direct access to the records of all other countries. To the extent that participating libraries contribute records, these systems are indeed cooperative. The schemes themselves may be cooperatively owned, or managed by a particular centre with some consultative machinery, or entirely commercial. The extent of cooperation obviously varies in each case, but the common feature is that there is an efficient centre from which records are bought.

One other feature worth noting is that distance is almost irrelevant to the supply of records by computer. I say 'almost', because PTT procedures may still favour national rather than international provision, and because libraries involved in a system can exert rather more influence on its development and management if they are close enough to visit the centre and hold meetings of members.

I regard the need for cooperation in bibliographic processing as not proved, and although the provision of records from external sources can involve cooperation, the cooperative element is much less important than the central element.

Availability

Books may be made available both by consultation on the spot and by loan or photocopy. Consultation is of use only to local clients - by 'local' I mean the library's own users and others in the same conurbation. One very simple and cheap form of cooperation that a library can practise is to open its doors to other users in the locality for purposes of consultation. Fears have been expressed that such a policy would somehow result in the decimation of the library's stock or the occupation of all its seating space. I know of no case where the former has happened, and the latter has in the United Kingdom affected public rather than academic libraries. In view of the widespread praise of cooperation, it seems odd that many libraries have been so reluctant to practise its easiest form.

I do not wish to dwell too much on interlibrary lending, partly because I am in danger of spending a disproportionate amount of time on it, partly because I have written on the subject elsewhere; the following remarks therefore represent only a bare outline of a complex and important issue.

Interlibrary cooperation by means of loan and photocopy requires first that the material has been acquired. This I dealt with above, concluding that a central dedicated collection or state funding of a few specialised libraries was the best solution. Both assume substantial state funding, and the extent to which the state is able or willing to provide such funds varies greatly. Shortage of funds does not however entirely rule out such solutions. Analyses of interlibrary loan demands have shown that a high proportion of demand (between half and two-thirds) is for journals, and that most demand for journals can be met by a relatively small number of titles. In the UK, 80% of demand for journals can be satisfied by some 5,500 titles, and 90% by some
9,000 titles. Since most of these are scientific or technical, for which demand tends to be most urgent, the case for providing them centrally is especially strong. Even though many or most of the journals are acquired by other libraries, they are not geared to fast interlibrary supply, they cannot achieve the economies of scale or simplification of procedures attainable in a central collection, and the sheer burden of demand placed on them can prove too much, as has become apparent in the USA. That the USA is the largest foreign user of the British Library Lending Division, making nearly 100,000 requests a year, a third of them for US journals, certainly suggests the superiority of centralised supply. There must be few countries that cannot afford, or justify in strict economic terms, a central core collection.

How much further countries can go in centralised supply depends on the cost of provision in relation to the volume of potential demand, i.e. the unit costs. Where demand is not only low, but unlikely to grow to a high level even in response to a good service, dependence for materials outside the core journal collection must be placed elsewhere. Even then, the more demand that can be concentrated on a small number of libraries, the more efficient the system, because requesting and supplying become much simpler, demand can be monitored more easily and remedial measures taken where necessary, and the costs and problems of union catalogues are minimised. Interlibrary lending, at any rate until fairly recently, was almost synonymous with union catalogues. Indeed, the propensity of librarians to create union catalogues is so great that I have become convinced that it is innate, parallel to the bizarre behaviour of some animals for which no rational explanation has yet been found. Whenever some deficiency in supply is identified, or even when it is not, librarians instinctively start to plan a new union catalogue, without considering its costs, problems, or likely efficiency, without considering the difficulties caused to users by a proliferation of union catalogues, without exploring whether there are other means of remediating the deficiency, and without seeing whether there are not bigger and more serious deficiencies to which priority should be given. The library world is littered with the corpses of union catalogues completed long ago and never revised, and by the torsos of union catalogues that have never been completed because money ran out, editors retired or died, or libraries simply grew tired of cooperating.

Union catalogues have their place, but the more limited it is the better. Even the most centralised system cannot meet all demand, especially for monographs. Some means must be found of knowing what is in other libraries, and the only alternative to union catalogues is intelligent guesswork. This may not always be as bad as it sounds; where there are highly specialised libraries, guesswork, supplemented by the occasional telephone call, may be more cost effective than union catalogues. However, the better the central collection, the more limited union catalogues can be; in the UK, only 70 libraries, identified as having significant intakes of foreign language books, now contribute to the main union catalogue, and even they do not report the bulk of their acquisitions, which are current English language books.

I suggested above that local interlending systems could provide 24-hour access to a limited range of material, but that regional interlending systems could make little contribution to availability. Many of the requests made in a region would have to be passed on to other regions or a national system anyway, and it would seem simpler to send them directly to a national system, or to search a national union catalogue in the first place. There is no great harm in regionalisation of interlending, but no great benefit either.

How far has automation changed the picture? It enables union catalogues to be held and accessed on-line, or printed on COM. Updating is much easier, and with on-line systems so is input. The OCLC system has evidently achieved a high success rate and fast supply of monographs, and it has stimulated a rapid
growth of interlibrary loan demand. By spreading the burden of interlending among many libraries it has largely avoided over-loading a few. OCLC's evident success so far may seem to contradict what I said earlier about the virtues of centralisation or concentration on a few libraries. It must however be remembered first that OCLC's interlending system is a by-product of a cataloguing service, which is itself based on assumptions that I have challenged. Secondly, it handles only monographs, not journals, which account for far more interlending demand in most countries. Thirdly, individual libraries in the USA tend to be better funded than elsewhere, and it is largely this that makes it possible to spread demand and achieve a high success rate. Nevertheless, the OCLC alternative is a real one, which deserves very careful study in the light of the circumstances obtaining in each country.

Storage

The problem of storing large quantities of books, though it is by no means a recent one - an extensive debate on the question began at Harvard University in 1900 and continued in the USA for several years - has become a matter of almost universal concern in the last few years, affecting most academic libraries as higher education and the volume of publication have both grown at a great rate. Although the growth of both has slackened off recently, so has the money for new library buildings. Most academic libraries are reluctant to shed anything, and I do not want here to become involved in the argument whether disposal of little-used material is harmful. Assuming that a library cannot continue to house all its stock, what alternatives does it have?

One is to build, buy or rent a store, probably off campus, solely for the purposes of that individual library. Another is to donate books to a national repository, which will keep everything it does not already hold and make it available subsequently by loan and photocopy. Neither of these solutions is a cooperative one. Between these two extremes are regional and local repositories. These may be integrated - that is, the stocks of the participating libraries are combined and duplicates disposed of - or they may merely house separate collections in one building. In the latter case, no space is saved, though it may be economic and convenient to use a larger building than could be justified for a single library. Integration on the other hand is expensive, and produces relatively little space saving, because the extent of duplication within a locality or region is unlikely to be great.

With both individual and shared stores, delays in supply occur, varying from an hour or two for a store nearby with a frequent van service to several days for a remote store - and a regional store is bound to be remote for most of the participating libraries. It is difficult to see any justification for regional stores, and shared local stores seem to have few if any advantages over individual local stores. A national store can save a lot of space, but if it is not linked to an efficient lending service it becomes a sort of national refuse collection. If on the other hand it is linked with a central lending service, and preferably integrated with a national loan collection, it can achieve both space savings and a reasonably fast supply. Moreover, it can increase national availability by providing access to older books that were never recorded in union catalogues and therefore previously accessible only to the libraries that happened to hold them.

Housekeeping

So-called 'housekeeping' operations like the actual procedures used for acquisition and circulation are considered here rather than under acquisition and availability because they form a group of activities (rather than functions) to which similar considerations apply. Libraries must always have looked at the procedures used in other libraries when designing or amending
their own, but the cost of automation has greatly encouraged them to consider
taking over computer systems designed by other libraries or by commercial
firms for general use. Use of commercial firms is no different in principle
from buying a manual system or for that matter shelving; and use of another
library's system is truly cooperative only if libraries come together to
design a system that will suit them all. They may also use the same
computer, though the days of dispersed access and large main-frame computers
seem to be over; local mini-computers are now in favour and seem likely to
remain so.

Information Services

Information services are not considered last and outside my main framework
because I rate them as of little importance. Rather, the scope for cooperation
in information services is fairly clear and hardly a matter for dispute. At
the lowest level, one library can ring another up to obtain the answer to a
client's query. Such arrangements can be systematically organised; for
example, a selected centre can keep an index of expertise to be found in
libraries in the neighbourhood, or guides of this kind can be printed and
distributed among cooperating libraries. Such schemes are common in conur­
bations in Britain, and no doubt elsewhere. They may be cooperatively
financed by membership fees, or no fees at all may be charged, with each
library playing its part and the centre being provided by a large library—
usually a public library—in the area.

There is no fundamental reason why such schemes should not be national, but the
problems of organising and maintaining a referral network on this scale are
formidable, partly because so much cooperation on the part of so many libraries
is required.

Conclusion

It will be clear that I do not consider cooperation a virtue in itself. It
may or may not contribute to the aims and functions of libraries. Whether it
does or not can be found out by experimentation, but librarians might perhaps
save themselves a lot of time and money by analysing the issues in the sort
of way I have suggested. If I have tended to sound doubtful about coopera­
tion, this is partly because I am indeed doubtful. I would like to hear much
less about how libraries cooperate, and much more about why they cooperate,
and what the costs and benefits are.

In presenting this analysis I have interpreted 'cooperation' rather narrowly,
in the sense of voluntary cooperation between libraries on a non-paying basis.
This interpretation excludes the use of centralised services (whether they are
free or not) and the purchase of library services from elsewhere, because I
do not see that these are truly cooperative. I also exclude coordination,
which is something different. I believe that much talk of 'cooperation' is
not really about cooperation at all. Note that I said 'non-paying' rather
than 'free': it is one of the great fallacies current among librarians that
whatever they do not pay for is 'free', whereas if all the true costs are
calculated it is often found to be more expensive (and often less efficient)
than services that are directly charged for. As librarians are forced to
become more and more cost-conscious, and to justify what they do in economic
terms, any services they render to other libraries will tend to be for payment,
not free. We may regret this, but the signs are clearly visible.

You may find it strange that one who has been so intimately associated with
the IFLA Office for International Lending and IFLA's programme of Universal
Availability of Publications should adopt an apparently critical approach to
cooperation. Are these not cooperative ventures on a worldwide scale? The
The answer is No, they are not. They are activities aimed at improving the
supply of documents throughout the world, and I do not believe there is any chance of significant improvement on the basis of voluntary, non-paying cooperation. The British Library Lending Division could never provide an international photocopy service, now involving nearly half a million requests a year, without recovering the costs; and it is clear that libraries would rather pay for a decent service than receive a poor service ‘free’.

If libraries charge, they have both an incentive and an obligation to provide a good service. One of the main reasons why international availability is so poor is that most countries have very poor interlending systems to serve their own libraries. They need to improve them for reasons of efficiency and economics, and in so doing they would become able to offer a far better service to other countries. This approach seems much more likely to achieve results than heartfelt appeals to the cooperative spirit.

In the last resort, the urge to cooperate is largely psychological: librarians, like other human (and indeed non-human) beings, huddle together for warmth. We cannot of course ignore psychological factors: just as libraries are in peril if librarians ignore the psychology of users, so librarians must be aware of their own psychology, if only to make allowance for it in preferring reason to emotion. Nor would I deride huddling together for warmth.

One of the most valuable forms of cooperation is the meeting or conference at which librarians compare notes, pick up and spread ideas, and gain stimulus. This thought - that a conference on library cooperation may itself be the best form of library cooperation - makes perhaps a fitting conclusion to this paper.

References

(I apologise for the large number of references to my own writings: this is motivated by the desire to avoid repeating myself excessively).


DISCUSSION

Mrs. E. Törnudd: Do the technological university libraries have a large share in the total requests to the BLLD? We call the customer relationship with the BLLD an excellent form of cooperation.

Line: In Britain the technological university libraries are amongst the heaviest users of the BLLD, and the same is probably true for international interlending. Industrial firms are also major users.

Dr. A.H. Helal: It seems to me that there is some confusion between library cooperation and coordination.

Line: I agree that the boundary between these two terms needs clarification. Much of what is called cooperation is, in fact, coordination, which may or may not involve cooperation.

Mr. P.J.C.A. Pinxter: Mr Line, you mentioned a research project at the University of Bath concerned with whether cataloguing and classification need to be detailed, or whether libraries can provide their own simple records more cheaply, in comparison with the costs of obtaining more complex records from a central source. I found this very interesting and would like to hear more about this work.

Line: Research is being carried out both on the optimal size of catalogue entries and on the relative costs and benefits of creating local records, as opposed to taking them from a national database.

Mr. C.G. Wood: From Mr Line's thesis, it would appear that his inclination towards centralisation leaves less support for devolved systems of cooperation. In Britain one sees a mixture of central, regional and local cooperative systems which have stemmed from the policy of the British Library organization. Would you please comment on this.

Line: In the U.K. there are, as you say, central, regional and local systems. It is partly this practical experience that has caused me to analyze the effects of these alternatives. There has been, in interlending, a marked trend towards use of the central system, but this has occurred because of a free choice of libraries, not because of any wish of the British Library to impose centralization.

Dr. N. Fjällbrant: Mr Line, you pointed out the need for the analytical approach to library functions and routines. I think that it is very important to study the needs of the end user. The costs of cataloguing increase enormously with increasing length of entry, and this definitely does not make searching for material easier for end users.

Line: Yes, I am sure you are right. From the user's viewpoint, the concept developed when devising the computerized catalogue at Bath University of "minimal content - maximal access" proved highly effective: short entries with author, title and keyword points of access proved better for the user than detailed records with author UDC access.

Helal: It is quite true that the use of the short-title-catalogue supported by the KWOC catalogue is much more efficient than complete records in catalogues.

Line: Yes, I agree with you.

Mr. M.W. Hill: Is there not both need and merit in constructing, on a cooperative basis, union catalogues for unique research materials, which, in any one field, may be scattered between many libraries?

Line: In certain cases, for example, for manuscripts and incunabula, but there is a limit to the number of such catalogues that should be constructed.
Mr. P. Durey: Mr Line you commented that size of country did not have much bearing on the efficiency of interlibrary lending. On the basis of my experience in New Zealand, as compared with Britain, it is easier to achieve cooperation in a small country than in a large and complex one.

Line: This is probably true, but strong efforts have been made in large countries, such as the USA, where it seems that the main delays in interlending were due to handling procedures and supplying libraries.

Dr. Z. Kovats: I would like to confirm some of Mr Line's statements from a Hungarian point of view. The authorities tried to coordinate acquisition policies without any success. Similarly, the National Library tried to organize a coordinated cataloguing scheme which did not work out well. The most important field for cooperation is the lending and photocopying service. We also use the BLLD and I agree that the user would rather pay for a good service than have a poor free service.

Line: This is true particularly as the "free" service is not really free.

Mr. G.A. Hamel: I would like to stress that it is necessary to consider the objectives carefully, in order to achieve effective cooperation. I would like to thank Mr Line for a stimulating and provocative paper which resulted in this lively discussion.