Library Cooperation: Trends, Possibilities and Conditions

James E. Skipper

Research Libraries Group
COOPERATIVE COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

James E. Skipper

Vice President, Research Libraries Group,
Branford, Connecticut, U.S.A.

1. Cooperative collection development

Cooperative collection development is one of the oldest forms of collaboration between libraries. The objective is quite obvious; if one library will acquire a title or accept primary collecting responsibility in a defined area, other libraries benefit by avoiding duplication in acquiring titles of marginal interest.

There is a variety of forms for what might be called cooperative collection development, depending on a definition of the term. There are instances in which a national library will collect comprehensively in response to national information needs. "Libraries for librarians," either as private corporations, or as a division of a national library, have made significant contributions to improving access to information. The Center for Research Libraries in Chicago acquires periodicals and expensive microform projects to be shared by some one hundred members and, the most successful of all, the British Library Lending Division at Boston Spa, has demonstrated to the world what can be accomplished in facilitating access to the periodical literature, and more recently, to monographs. It is interesting to observe that both institutions were brought into being despite vocal objections from the library community, although today each has achieved a reasonable degree of respectability in library circles.

Beyond the activities of national institutions there are collection development programs such as the SCANDIA plan in Scandinavia, and the program in West Germany which has assigned primary collecting responsibility for Japanese materials to Hanover, African to Frankfurt, Chinese to Marburg, and agriculture to Bonn. In the United States the Association of Research Libraries sponsors a cooperatively financed current foreign newspaper microfilming program, and there are numbers of regional acquisition compacts concerning geographic areas of the world as well as forms of publication, such as serials.

My purpose in being with you today is not to catalog the past, but to attempt an assessment of principles and problems which must be considered in any attempt to develop a cooperative acquisitions program.

I should like to observe first that there are compelling logical reasons to support the concept of cooperative collection development. Secondly, in my experience this is perhaps the most difficult of all library cooperative objectives. And third, that an effective program for cooperation in resource development can achieve its real promise only if it is fully integrated with programs for resource sharing (interlibrary loan) and preservation. A final observation is that each and all of these interdependent elements can be strengthened and made more effective through the availability of a soundly conceived computer-based bibliographic processing system offering a wide variety of services and not being limited just to catalog card production.

In amplifying these observations I will speak in terms of research libraries in general, although it is recognized that certain types of technical libraries have individual characteristics which may not be shared either with each other or with libraries of a more general nature.
One of the dominant characteristics of any library is its individuality — a source of both strength and weakness. The element of strength comes from the application of local skill, initiative and dedication in utilizing available resources most effectively in support of library objectives.

The cult of institutional individuality, however, has also resulted in significant weaknesses or deficiencies, the cumulative effect of which threatens the ability of most libraries to continue the level of support required by their constituents. For many years libraries have acknowledged that for even the greatest and wealthiest it is no longer possible to collect to the level of expectation of their users. This deficiency has been exacerbated in recent years by dramatic declines in purchasing power. Yet, these acknowledgements and economic realities have not been reflected broadly in library policies and practices, especially those concerned with the development of collections. With few exceptions, no viable alternative to attempted self-sufficiency has come forward.

The Research Libraries Group (RLG), a consortium presently comprised of Princeton, Pennsylvania, Stanford, Columbia, Yale, Michigan, and the New York Public Library, was formed in 1974 to create an alternative to local action and was based on the conviction that cooperation would be essential if these institutions were to meet the needs and expectations of future generations of students and faculty. The new consortium was controlled by what has been called the dynamics of the potted plant, or how to remain healthy under conditions of limited growth.

Programs were established for cooperative collection development, resource sharing, preservation, and the creation of a computer-based bibliographic processing system to support these integrated programs as well as library processing and eventually, on-line searching capabilities for students and faculty. The computer system was to be founded on a union catalog of machine-readable information whose quality and uniformity would be assured by members adopting the same cataloging standards, codes, and practices as those used by the Library of Congress, with individual cataloging records being controlled by a mechanized authority control system.

Programs for cooperative collection development were designed to assign responsibility for the acquisition of new serial subscriptions of secondary importance to one member in the interest of the others. Serial cancellations were reviewed to assure that no unique title of scholarly interest was inadvertently dropped and made inaccessible to the other members. In addition, collecting responsibilities for materials unrelated to local primary curricular interests were accepted by members on a coordinated basis. Examples include Latin America, South America, Africa, South and South-East Asia, Baltic languages, East Europe, publications of intergovernmental organizations, technical reports, journalism, library science, forestry, architecture, dance, genealogy and heraldry, and patents. Additional areas are under consideration. RLG also maintains a program for the cooperative acquisition of items costing more than $200.

2. Cooperative resource sharing

I mentioned earlier that resource development is but one of several elements required to improve information access for readers through cooperative action. Cooperative collection development must be accompanied by cooperative resource sharing, or assured access at least to that segment of a collection upon which other institutions rely. The experience of the Research Libraries Group may be useful.
RLG decided that reciprocity of access, so far as possible, should govern relationships among members. An agreement was drafted concerning interlibrary loan borrowing, including photocopy, as well as conditions of direct use by qualified constituents of one library visiting another member. Each member was required to examine existing regulations inhibiting access and either justify them or make exceptions for RLG. It is significant that the Research Libraries of the New York Public Library, formerly limited to reference use within the building, agreed for the first time to lend materials on interlibrary loan to RLG members. On the other hand logical exceptions to extra­mural access must be recognized. Rare books and fragile materials were obviously excepted, and the terms of endowments for specialized collections sometimes limited their access to reference use only.

Acceptance of a shared resources program by readers depends on the reliability of the system in delivering wanted materials within a dependable time schedule and with a high rate of fulfillment. In other words, if students and faculty become convinced that there is a high probability that their requests for materials from other collections will be delivered quickly within a predict­able period of time, they will become supporters of a coordinated collection development program. In meeting this objective, RLG installed telecommunications among member libraries with document delivery being handled by a private contractor who provides much quicker service than the U.S. mail. Members give the highest priority to RLG loan requests and a library officer is responsible for reviewing the reason for each local refusal to lend a requested item. Management data were provided by a special computer program which monitors the performance time as well as the characteristics of the loan traffic. Unusual delays are investigated and remedial action taken.

The profile of the characteristics of the shared resources program among the original four members (Columbia, Yale, Harvard, and the New York Public Library), indicated that 74% of loan requests were filled within RLG; 89% were filled from the first two locations queried; photocopy accounted for 46% of the loan responses; graduate students requested 42% of the loans, faculty accounted for 23%, and undergraduates 8%. Within seven working days after requests responses were received for 82% of loan requests, with actual document delivery taking somewhat longer. It is estimated that the delivery cycle has been reduced by approximately one-half compared with conditions before the RLG system. One very significant figure is that only 2% of loan requests were in use locally – an indication that within RLG membership at least, the shared resources program caused practically no interference with local use of collections even though undergraduates were fully accommodated. It should be recognized that this data is based on access to collections which in the aggregate amounted to some 26 million volumes. Other characteristics can be expected from a different mix of libraries within a consortium.

3. Preservation

In the last half of the 19th century manufacturers began using wood pulp rather than rags. Sizings were added to the pulp to provide a better printing surface for the paper without it being realized at the time that the acids in the mixture would react with changes in temperature, humidity, and atmospheric pollutants, thus causing the paper to deteriorate over time. Today the New York Public Library estimates that fully 30% of its reference collection is in a dangerous state of deterioration and requires immediate attention if this resource is to be available to future generations of readers. The dimension and persistence of this problem requires a cooperative program on at least the national level and should be thought of as an integral component of programs for resource development and resource sharing.
Utilizing available technology, RLG allocated funds for microfilm preservation of collections under policies and procedures which avoided duplication and assured adequate bibliographic control.

4. Savings and Benefits

While it is relatively easy to determine the costs of library operations, it is difficult to quantify benefits or results. The cost savings from the cooperative acquisition of serials can be identified by making estimates of the average life expectancy of a new title and the one-time costs of selection, acquisition, and cataloging, coupled with the continuing costs of binding and storage. It has been calculated that avoiding each new subscription could save between $800 and $1,000 over the assumed fifteen year life span for the title. As the RLG founding members acquired approximately 3,000 new serial subscriptions a year, if 10%, or three hundred subscriptions could be avoided locally through cooperative acquisition, each member would save approximately $240,000 - $300,000 over the anticipated life of these titles. If these savings are multiplied by the number of libraries participating in the program the total becomes very impressive.

In quantifying the benefits from resource sharing, let it be assumed that a given library is meeting an average of 65% of the information needs of its constituents. What will be required to increase the satisfaction rate by 10%-15%? Because of unpredictability in determining which titles might meet the needs of present and future generations, it is necessary in most disciplines to collect great quantities of material, most of which will be lesser used. It is possible that in terms of expenditures for staff, materials, and space, it might be necessary to double the budget in many libraries to improve the satisfaction rate by 10% - 15%, clearly an impossible situation in these times.

However, libraries have another option which is related to the percentage of unique material found in even the smallest library. The union catalog of additions to the collections of the University of California, 1963-1967, listed 10.4 million entries, 72% of which were unique to one of the nine campuses which range in size from very large to rather small. A sampling of the monograph collections of the University of California suggested that within the four northern units, approximately 35% of the book collections existed in but one copy, and within the five southern institutions the incidence of unique items was at the level of 50%.

Within RLG it has been found that 75% of the 12,000 new serial subscriptions added each year by the original four members are unique, with only 25% being duplicated by two or more members. The aggregate serial holdings for Berkeley and Stanford, numbering 100,200 titles contain 53,500 titles (53%) which are not duplicated in the two collections.

The evident lack of duplication between major collections suggests that combining a number of institutions into an effective system for collection development and resource sharing can increase significantly the number of unique titles available to readers at a very nominal cost.

5. Problems in effective cooperation

In view of logic and compelling economic incentives, why has the concept of cooperative resource development and sharing been so slow to find acceptance among libraries?

One problem is that library acquisition policies must reflect academic programs, and as long as parent institutions fail to control duplication among their teaching and research efforts, their libraries will be forced to overlap.
in their collecting activities with opportunities for avoiding duplication being limited largely to languages, geographic areas and topics of marginal interest to institutional objectives.

The development of collection development policy statements themselves are difficult to formulate and apply. They have always reminded me of Lord Coke's characterization of the English common law as being a thin stream of principle meandering through a broad meadow of exception. The problem becomes even more difficult when policies governing more than one library have to be drafted and implemented.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of cooperative activity is one of attitude or perception on the part of library staff and faculty. The individualistic tendencies of parent institutions leads to insular attitudes concerning access to information. The dominant perception is inward-looking, resulting in almost total reliance on local collections rather than attempting to meet reader needs from a larger, cooperative pool of resources. In the absence of effective cooperative arrangements there is no realistic alternative.

Curators and selection officers frequently view coordinated resource development as a threat to their autonomy and resist cooperation in the belief that the existing strengths of their collections will be eroded. They fail to realize that the objective of cooperation is not to diminish quality, but to provide a broader resource base for readers while using savings achieved from the avoidance of unnecessary duplication to strengthen local collections.

Implicit in any plan for cooperative resource development is the need for stability in mutual commitments to collect and provide reciprocal access. Continued reliance on mutual promises over a period of years will result in serious deficiencies in information access if one of the partners subsequently finds it impossible or undesirable to honor original obligations. This situation is vividly illustrated by the library of the American Geographical Society in New York City, whose financial distress resulted in the removal of a great research collection to a new site over a thousand miles distant. Consider what would have happened if a number of other research libraries had placed primary reliance on this collection over a period of fifty years.

Eventually a consortium will be faced with the question of equity: "my library is being called upon to expend a disproportionate share of funds in the cooperative enterprise". The best answer, of course, is to recognize the problem in advance and attempt to distribute the financial responsibility as evenly as possible over a term of years.

There are also mechanical or logistical problems associated with procedures for reviewing and assigning collecting responsibilities for either individual titles or areas. The absence of sound planning can result in a system which is too expensive and inefficient to attract participation.

6. Application of technology to cooperative programs

The application of technology to labor intensive library operations is of obvious importance today, a fact which is reflected in the number of papers being given on the subject at this conference. Computer-based bibliographic processing systems have demonstrated their effectiveness in providing a card catalog service to individual libraries, however, the potential services which can be obtained from a computer system are vastly larger. It is possible to create cooperative resource development and sharing programs without the application of computer technology, but consider the advantages of being able to search electronically the order records and in-process files of other libraries to determine if a given item is being acquired by another institution. If access is assumed, unnecessary duplication can be avoided.
Cooperatively developed machine-readable data bases have also proven to be most effective in equalizing the burden of interlibrary lending. In the absence of location information there is a tendency to concentrate loan requests upon a few larger collections. The experience of OCLC in the United States indicates that the availability of location information in a data base leads to loan requests being sent to smaller collections closer to the site of the requesting library. Manual union catalogs used to locate sources for loan requests have become increasingly expensive and inefficient and many have been abandoned.

Librarianship is on the threshold of a widely expanding use of computer technology to improve services. However, a number of significant problems remain to be resolved, many of which are political, rather than technical in nature.

It is assumed that future library service will be dependent upon the ability to develop cooperatively machine-readable data bases to serve a range of bibliographic needs of participating members, and that these data bases must be linked effectively together so that queries not satisfied by one file will be automatically switched to another.

Within the context of a cooperatively created data base it is unlikely that any one library can accept responsibility for totally comprehensive collecting and cataloging for all areas. This means that an effective data base will depend on the assignment of responsibility for cooperative resource development and cataloging among a group of libraries. And, for the data base to enjoy maximum utility, the bibliographic records contributed should be created under cataloging standards, codes, and practices accepted by institutions involved. Greater bibliographic uniformity can be assured by records having to pass through a mechanized authority control system.

Just as no one library can be responsible for establishing a comprehensive data base, no single data base itself will contain all the information which may be wanted by readers. For this reason the files must be linked by the adoption of communications protocols to facilitate message switching between networks and their data bases, without being inhibited by differences in terminal hardware.

The ultimate objective, for RLG at least, is a computer-based system which can be searched directly, on-line by patrons for specified types of inquiry. It is recognized that for the immediate future the cost of on-line searching for readers will be prohibitive and alternatives to the card catalog such as computer output on microfilm (COM) may be considered.

In North America and Western Europe a number of computer-based bibliographic processing systems have been developed which required a decade or more of effort and the expenditure of several millions of dollars each. RLG decided that it would be unwise to duplicate this effort if an existing system could meet the performance specifications which had been established. After an intensive review of candidate systems by committees and independent consultants, RLG selected the BALLOTS system developed by Stanford University, which has recently been incorporated into the Research Libraries Group as the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN). The objective is to further develop RLIN into a full network capability to meet the needs of research libraries in the United States.

7. The Research Libraries Group

I have referred to the Research Libraries Group several times in an effort to illustrate concepts of principles. RLG itself is not offered as a pattern which can be superimposed on other organizations, although many of its aspirations and objectives will be common to any library consortium devoted to
cooperation. I would, however, like to suggest one essential difference between RLG and other cooperative efforts. Most attempts at library cooperation rely too frequently on professional sentimentality and rhetoric. The programs are accepted without sufficient budget or internal commitment; they are added to on-going library operations and have very low performance priorities. Local policies and procedures which inhibit effective action in the pursuit of common objectives remain unchallenged and unaltered.

The ultimate success of RLG has yet to be established. There are many technical, political, and financial questions to be resolved. But, if there is any unique feature in characterizing the Research Libraries Group, it is the depth of commitment which has been made by members to change local policies and procedures if necessary in achieving cooperative goals and in making the whole of RLG greater than simply the sum of the parts.

DISCUSSION

Mr. M. Hopkins: What administrative machinery enables the RLG to function?

Skipper: Administrative machinery is based on what may be called a 'consensus environment', in which each participatory library agrees, mainly through the medium of various committees, to the methods to be adopted.

Hopkins: How is this paid for, by the member libraries or otherwise?

Skipper: As for costs, each institution contributes staff-time and approximately $6,000 per annum for staff travel. In addition, various foundations have contributed about $3,500,000 since the start of the RLG.

Prof. A.J. Evans: Have you determined the total costs of one inter-loan?

Skipper: Yes, approximately $4 to place the loan and $8 to make a loan. Plus the cost of photocopying. These are total costs.

Mr. M.B. Line: Does the New York Public Library lend, as a last resort, among RLG members?

Skipper: No it takes its normal share.

Line: What is the total volume of interlending traffic?

Skipper: About 12,000 units per annum.

Line: What is the ratio of books to journals requested on inter-library loan?

Skipper: 35 % books; 65 % journals.

Line: What is done with the 26 % of interlibrary requests not met by the RLG?

Skipper: They go to the Library of Congress for checking with the National Union Catalogue. If that fails, other major collections are tried. Some requests end up at the British Library Lending Division.

Line: How are loans and photocopies moved physically round the system?

Skipper: The United Parcels Service.
Dr. N. Fjällbrant: What is the average length of time for an interlibrary lending item reaching the borrower?

Skipper: About 14 days. Messages of availability are returned within 4 to 5 days.

Mr. C.G. Wood: Do you operate a shared cataloguing system? How does this fit in with the New York Public Library System?

Skipper: We are operating a shared cataloguing system. Although the NYPL cataloguing system was acknowledged as being at a very high level of sophistication, it was decided that the end product was directed towards producing a catalogue and print-out facility. As a variety of end products was desired by the RLG, it was decided to develop the more generalised BALLOTS system from Stanford. This system will be 'live' in some four months time.