To Cooperate or Not to Cooperate

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"to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd."

Shakespeare

A paper written before a Conference, to be presented at the end of that Conference, is likely either to repeat points already and more tellingly made by earlier speakers or to make points already refuted quite devastatingly in previous papers. If this offering suffers the former fate, then perhaps it will serve as a summary of lessons to be learned: if the latter, it nevertheless unrepentantly still advocates caution. Marriage is still easier than divorce; a co-operative venture that has gone sour may be very difficult to unscramble. IATUL librarians are a very friendly, co-operative group of people: I hope none will have cause to reflect in years to come that they co-operated in haste, but repented at leisure.

That said, I would be very hesitant to present a paper on such a theme were it not that both the British Library as a whole and my sector of it, the Science Reference Library, have an unblemished and extensive record of successful cooperation with a wide range of other bodies. Nor, I think, have I personally ever failed to cooperate with my many colleagues on innumerable Boards, Councils, Committees, Working Parties etc.

So why should there be any doubts? Will not cooperation be a way of shielding us from the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that library management is heir to? If cooperation involves only a small group of people, who get on well together and who are not subject to receiving instructions from other authorities, working together for a relatively short period of time, there will be no insuperable problems. But how often is cooperation as simple as that? Can we, for example, guarantee our staffs will work together with the same enthusiasm that we do? Can we guarantee that one of us will not suffer a policy change or a sudden budget cut which will affect the scheme on which we cooperate? Can we guarantee that enthusiasm for cooperation will last among everyone in a venture, especially a long term one, or survive a change of chief librarian?

* The views expressed in this paper are the author's own and are not necessarily those of the British Library.
Professor von Gils\(^1\) has indicated that conceptually, cooperative action is a hazardous undertaking. Nevertheless, we have heard during this conference of examples of successful cooperation. We will have examined why they succeeded and each of us, no doubt, assessed the likelihood that the same combination of circumstances applies in our own cases. For cooperation is, as Maurice Line\(^2\) pointed out, not a universal panacea for solving problems, not even for problems which lie beyond the scope of one's immediate resources. It has to be evaluated against the merits of doing the whole task in-house (even if this means battling for additional resources), or using an agent, or contracting out the work, or buying-in a package (as distinct from a cooperative development project) or even the benefits and drawbacks weighed against the consequences, if any, of doing nothing.

Before undertaking any cooperative project we would all automatically ask ourselves what will be the consequences of the venture if it succeeds and if it fails. But many, I suspect, may be satisfied with answers which reflect the immediate and local outcome. In many cases, for example when undertaking cooperative research, no more than this is necessary but, if one is cooperating on some activity fundamental to the operation of the library or which will be affected in years to come by changes in the general library, information and publishing environment, then a longer term view is necessary. Cooperative ventures on document supply and document copying, for example, have to be seen against a background of national aspirations on the one hand and international copyright questions on the other.

Indeed, it is perhaps appropriate to remind ourselves once again that cooperation can be undertaken in two very different ways in each of which the criteria for success are very different. This paper is primarily concerned with the criteria for cooperation in the undertaking of practical library tasks, acquisition, cataloguing, research, enquiry work and so on. There is the other type of cooperation, that on decision taking, where success is measured largely by whether those involved can work together and whose objectives are very largely to enable cooperation on pragmatic projects to occur. I shall refer to examples of this latter type, e.g., the creation of common standards of the UNISIST programme, but these are not my main concern today.

In a recent\(^3\) paper "International cooperation in information transfer", Wysocki says, "International programmes .... clearly demonstrated that the main control of the literature is now in the hands of governments" and later that, "Government policies .... will determine the pattern for international cooperation for years ahead". Reading this it indeed seemed to me that before entering willingly into cooperative activities, librarians should try to see what lay ahead and to judge what the long-term consequences, if any, would be. I do not think that many librarians would be likely to wish to tread a path of cooperation that led to governmental control of the literature or to acquiesce without qualms in cooperation determined by governmental policy, especially with 1984 not far away!

Of course, Government involvement, in some instances, is both inevitable and desirable. After all, the funds for most (but not all) university libraries are supplied by Government and Government funds the national library and information resources which, despite the bias you will expect me to have, I can genuinely say in the case of the UK are provided for the benefit of scholars and of organisations in the country as a whole, including, therefore, the universities. There is scope, I believe for even more cooperative activity than exists at present between the various libraries in the country and the national library and also between the library systems of different countries but there is a limit somewhere. Imagine the extreme situation of a single, central, computer stored catalogue for all the libraries of the world -
what a marvellous opportunity there would be for effectively censoring "undesirable" publications by simply deleting them from the record. Fortunately, there is now no risk of this happening (the inexpensive nature of mini and micro computers has ensured that much) but at one time it seemed we were heading that way and surely we should always be watchful lest our well meaning actions create an undesirable degree of risk of extensive power being concentrated in the hands of a very few people.

Perhaps there are three broad considerations which should be used when deciding on cooperation as a means of achieving an objective. The first is this question of what will be the consequences of cooperating or, for that matter, of deciding not to cooperate. I have already posed two questions: Can you really guarantee to fulfil your part of the commitment for the whole duration of the project? Can you rely on your partners to do similarly? I should have added a third: Does it matter if one of you fails to meet your commitment? In some instances, it will not. The longer term the project, the less likely that the first two can confidently be answered in the affirmative and the more important it becomes that the third is answered, no! Certain fail safe measures may need to be incorporated.

Still continuing the question of consequences, there are many others that could arise ranging at one extreme from conflicts of national interest via staffing troubles to, at the other extreme, the making, or breaking, of a friendship between two chief librarians.

The second set of considerations is the circumstances which give rise to the desire to cooperate. Is it a genuine belief that cooperation will give rise to an improved service, as one sees in the regional cooperative schemes in the UK such as LADSIRLAC, WESLINK etc, or does it arise from economic necessity (we can't afford our own computerised system) or, and this I suggest verging on a non-reason, is it because one's political masters want a cooperative solution? This last is certainly not impossible, it can and has sometimes worked, but a series of special factors have to be assured if cooperation for political reasons is to be successful. History is the study of broken treaties. Nevertheless, in our own field, if SDIM should be a warning to us all, SCANNET and, hopefully still, EURONET can stand as examples of what is possible through cooperation.

The third broad consideration is what are the relationships between the various organisations wishing to cooperate. Have they some sort of unity either of purpose or location? Unless the organisations are natural partners - and what would be a better way of satisfying this criterion than all the partners being members of IATUL, the members of which have a common purpose - cooperation is bound to suffer from differences of objective and even from difficulties in understanding each other's point of view.

I am sure that before any cooperative venture is embarked upon, a balance sheet should be drawn up of factors under each of these considerations and unless or until, in each of these considerations, the balance lies substantially in favour of success being probable, the venture should not be started.

Let us now look at things from different viewpoints. Four sub-headings might be useful:

- strategic aspects
- methodologies for cooperation
- organisational problems
- human factors
Strategic Aspects

I will not repeat those strategic aspects that I have already mentioned, but merely reiterate that even short term cooperation can have long term effects, particularly on the relationships between the cooperating bodies, beneficial if all goes well, disastrous if otherwise. An important point is that cooperating with another organisation inevitably affects one's future strategy for gaining resources, especially new resources, for pursuing the library's proper objectives. It is not just that resources for the cooperative venture must be assured, perhaps in lean times at the expense of other activities, it is also that, once a successful cooperative venture, which saved money, say, has occurred, one is likely to be pressed to do the same sort of thing for other activities.

Whether this is a good thing or not depends on many factors but in the end a library must be able to serve its own clients properly and not be merely a node in an impersonal network, and it must be able to respond and adapt as the needs of its clients change. Some forms of cooperative activity are wholly beneficial to these objectives, others may be less so.

Having concentrated on some of the dangers lurking in cooperation, let me for a moment dwell on that strategic sector in which cooperation is an essential and entirely beneficial feature, even if often difficult to achieve. It is that of establishing the conditions necessary before cooperation on practical library matters can occur. This is sometimes called establishing a framework for cooperation, sometimes creating an infrastructure. One of the most important aspects is the setting of standards appropriate for the operations on which one may wish to cooperate. Cataloguing standards, alphabetical rules, numbers of frames per microfiche, and so on. WIPO/ICIREPAT has had its greatest success in achieving standards for various aspects of patent documentation which have been beneficial to patent offices and to library and information services alike; yet the attempts to create mechanised data-bases by inter-office cooperation appear to have failed. The European Commission may have been less than successful in getting all member states to set up cooperatively the SDIM data-base, but they have been very successful in getting agreement on the X25 and X75 protocols for links to and between networks.

International programmes which require cooperation for their fulfilment but do not impose it, universal bibliographic control (UBC) and the universal availability of publications (UAP) for example, also set a very helpful framework within which cooperative ventures between a small number of participants can take place. Cooperation to set standards, to raise standards and to help ensure that local authorities accept that certain standards of service or provision are needed should certainly be encouraged.

Methodology of cooperation

Once the decision has been taken that cooperation is the correct path to tread on a particular project, there appears to be a choice of three ways of proceeding:-

- working together as one unit
- sharing the work on some basis between partners
- creating a unit to carry out the cooperative enterprise

Perhaps there are others but all those which occur to me seem to be variants on one of these three. Indeed, when one is, as we are, considering cooperation between widely separated and organisationally distinct entities such as technological university libraries, the first may not be a feasible method, unless one counts such activities as referral networks as belonging to this category.
The second is the most common way of working and is prone to most of the problems, particularly that of one partner not pulling his weight. If one of the aims of cooperating is to help a member partner or is deliberately planned as a means of helping one another through crisis situations, the solution is built in. If, however, the scheme does require each and every partner to contribute his share and failure by one can jeopardise the scheme, ways of minimising the risk should be examined.

One way is that of using a system of payments and credits. Every time a partner draws on the system he makes a payment; every time he contributes to the system he is paid. This would usually in practice involve a system of credits but if it is to be effective, there needs to be an occasional session of summing the pluses and minuses and making balancing payments. There are considerable merits in keeping cooperation on a commercial footing and it will certainly influence the approach to working of the partners. This system of working together is quite well known, particularly in computerised cataloguing and indexing operations, but perhaps merits consideration for wider use.

The third of the three types of cooperative mechanism gives scope for covering against the failure of one partner to pull his weight. If a separate enterprise is set up to undertake the operation, each partner having a share in the funding and in direction (but not in the management), it can acquire both an identity and viability of its own and, even if one of the original partners should withdraw, may be able to continue operating without undue disturbance. Unfortunately, there may be difficulties in the way of achieving a solution of this type if the cooperating organisations have different sources of funds and there are restrictions on pooling funds with those from other bodies. This can so easily arise within one country and may be even more of a problem if the planned cooperation involves partners from several countries. However, that it is feasible to have a cooperative partnership between very different types of organisation is illustrated by the creation in the UK of INFOLINE, the partners in which are two learned societies, one government department, the national library and one commercial company.

In effect, SWALCAP, a circulation control and catalogue system is a cooperative effort of this type. It was jointly set up by three UK Universities with its own management team. Operations such as OCLC and the British Library's BLAISE are not really cooperative schemes because they are managed by one only of the participating bodies but are more akin to agency services which one can buy in or not as one wishes just as one can use an agent for book acquisitions or buy direct, though it must be added that BLAISE is cooperating with the other cooperative cataloguing schemes.

Organisational problems

Inevitably, cooperating on any activity means sacrificing a measure of one's own freedom of action. Short term this is likely to matter little but in the long term serious problems can arise. The sort of problems I have in mind can readily be appreciated if the possible effect of changes in computer technology is considered.

When the only computers with the necessary capacity for library work were large, expensive machines, either libraries had to share one between them or "buy in" services from a bureau - often the central university computer. Under these conditions either there was a considerable hiatus when the computer reached the end of its life and had to be changed or there was a great reluctance to change to a different machine, even when the old one was obsolescent, because all the partners had to adjust to the new one and just one laggard partner could delay everything. Although programming costs are still very high, the new generations of mini and micro computers make it feasible for libraries once again to become self-sufficient and cooperation can take
the form of sharing the load of, say, writing catalogue entries. If cooperation is directed primarily to common standards, so that sharing the results of one's efforts is possible then the result is largely beneficial. One does need, however, to ensure as far as is possible that the terms of a cooperative venture do not bind one to using only the large computer and do not prevent use of new technology as it arrives.

The Commission's achievement of a common protocol (technical specification X25) for linking countries and computers to EURONET and another for interlinking networks (X75) has been a major achievement. There is some loss of freedom of choice of equipment but hopefully this is an acceptable penalty to pay for a considerable benefit.

Libraries of universities, whether technological or not, of course are funded from official sources and there is always a strong temptation on those who grant the funds to state in detail how they shall be used. In the UK, mechanisms exist to prevent too close involvement by government or civil servants in the running of the university libraries, though they must conform to broad policy directives on major matters, for example, where new buildings are concerned. Broadly, however, the librarian is able to operate under the principles of accountable management and, given that he must satisfy the needs of his clientele, may choose within the constraints of his budget how he goes about achieving it. But if any of his basic library operations depend on cooperation with another organisation, one of his options for choice is closed to him.

Dr. Zsidai, in his paper earlier, drew attention to one organisational obstacle to cooperation. He found, you will remember, that though he as librarian wished to cooperate with other libraries, the local university authorities were not always as keen as he was. Those planning to cooperate with another library will, no doubt, want to be assured that the libraries with whom they will be working have the full support of their organisations and may even want this signified in some formal way if there are any doubts.

Human Factors

In considering cooperation, one is considering the very fundamentals of human behaviour. One the one hand, most human beings are gregarious, many are generous to one another, many of our greatest achievements are due to people working as a team (eg climbing Everest or building cathedrals). On the other hand, human beings are individuals, each with his own idiosyncrasies, likes and dislikes which - a factor all too often overlooked in social studies - change with time. The lessons of history must be learnt. History is littered with alliances which did not work at all (usually because one partner could not or would not meet his obligations), or which worked only while there was an immediate objective (a tyrant to be toppled, an aggressive country to be contained) and which fell apart afterwards. Only in a few cases have alliances lasted and are there any which have outlived strife against a common threat into an era where competition between the partners can ensue.

One of our eminent playwrights once said, "Progress depends on the unreasonable man". This is not a universal truth, it is only something said by a playwright, but it does neatly express the fact that in some cases, progress has depended on an individual having the courage to disagree with accepted practice and to be so convinced that he is right that he sticks to his point and eventually proves it. Such people are likely to be very difficult to cooperate with during their creative phase, though once they have proved their point they may then accept cooperation from others, perhaps on their terms.

Dr Urquhart and the NLLST is a case in point. Before he came on the UK scene, cooperative inter-lending schemes and laboriously compiled union lists were
the norm. Why these were being unsuccessful was that librarians cooperated together so wholeheartedly that somehow they managed to keep a most cumbersome edifice in place without realising that its increasing unwieldiness and failure rate was due to the success with which they cooperated. Far too much literature was involved; far too many libraries were cooperating.

If you look at the UK scene, you will not find that union lists and interlending between individual libraries have ceased. Far from it. You will find that such activities flourish but that thanks to the lessons Dr Urquhart taught us, these are kept within a scale on which success is possible. So, perhaps, one lesson is that librarians should be very chary of joining a large scale cooperative scheme or, to put it another way, they should be prepared to cooperate on any major activity only with librarians they know.

Does this perhaps lead to a factor which has to be carefully evaluated before embarking upon a long term cooperative project. Librarians change jobs, some retire, some even die. Will a project survive a change of personnel? Is its success or failure likely to be due very largely to the continued enthusiasm of its originators or will the project develop its own momentum and become independent of them?

Secondly, two or three IATUL librarians can willingly agree to cooperate but can each one convince his staff sufficiently to get the necessary degree of enthusiasm? Has not each of us known in our time a pet project stymied because our staff did not share our enthusiasm? Perhaps the successful projects will be those where the idea of cooperating came from the staff who succeeded in convincing the librarian of the benefits.

Finally, we should not overlook the possibility that even the friendliest librarian may have certain personal ambitions and that these, even if they do not conflict, may shape the course a project takes. A tiger can be very difficult to ride.

Conclusion

Successful cooperation which enhances the library's service to its users is a very satisfying undertaking. But it has to be borne in mind that cooperation poses major problems when the management of the project is concerned, not least because, as the very term cooperation implies, there is no overall management control. Nor have the librarians in all cases the necessary level of authority in their own organisation to shield effectively the project from adverse policy decisions. For many types of cooperative venture such matters impose no insuperable constraints but even in these cases each participating librarian should draw up a balance sheet of pro's and con's and should dispassionately satisfy himself that the balance clearly favours a beneficial outcome before embarking. I wonder, if such does not already exist, if there could usefully be compiled a Guideline for those considering cooperative projects, whether as a separate publication or as at least a chapter in Professor Atherton's excellent UNESCO handbook for those planning a library and information services.

I started with a well-known quotation of our aspirations. Perhaps, even if to my discomfiture, I should end with another quotation from the same source which expresses more effectively than I that too much careful weighing of all the factors may be the death of progress:

"And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;
And enterprises of great pith and moment,
With this regard, their currents turn away,
And lose the name of action".
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