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Consortia at the Crossroads: Interpreting the Signs:
Some thoughts on where we've been and where we may be headed

Eleanor I. Cook, Serials Specialist and Professor, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC

Introduction

When Peter Boyce asked me to serve on this preconference panel, I was eager to contribute something I could discuss confidently. What do I know about library consortia? Having worked within several library consortia over the span of my career, I live and breathe consensus, cooperation, collaboration, networking, and all those other values that go along with the collective thought process of consortia.

My goals today are two-fold:

1. Not to bore you silly: Like some of you, I am suffering jetlag so I will try to stay engaging and brief. Having participated in this retreat in the past, I am keenly aware of the hardness of the chairs in this room. So please do get up and stretch or shift if you feel the need.

2. More importantly, my goal is to touch upon the most recent trends concerning issues with library consortia, blending my own experience with quoted material from many of our colleagues. Library consortia are like tall ships in the wind; can they weather the storms, and control their own fate? Let us see where they have been, and where they might go next. I'll cover

background, current and future trends, including the pros and cons of

consortia.

Because of the consortial arrangements in which my library participates, I had at

my fingertips articles I was able to obtain through an array of sources. I was

delighted to find that a majority of them could be found via a full-text database on

library literature to which my library subscribes. I also was able to obtain copies

of articles through the local consortial van delivery service, through faxes

delivered from an international document delivery source, as well as through

traditional interlibrary loan. This all happened within the span of three business

days. I also pulled articles from my personal collection of professional literature

as well as retrieved and photocopied articles from my library's print collection. I

also found a few articles free on the Internet. So, my preparation for this

presentation is a perfect example for how library consortia can serve

researchers.

Background

I have not read *all* the history that is available, but several authors' key

contributions did a good job of summing up important details, and these

reference most of the older works. William Potter's article from 1997 details the

rise of several statewide consortia in the U.S. I also read Adrian Alexander's and

Sharon Bostick's overviews, Alexander's being the more thorough of the two.

Without going into laborious detail, let's sum up why libraries feel the urge to collaborate:

1. To "enhance the quality of services that a library provides to its clientele;"

2. Because of the "altruistic nature of the library profession: 'sharing is good and working together seems to be the professionally right thing to do'" and

3. Because "'librarians strongly believe in resource-sharing as a means to reduce libraries' costs.'" (Alexander, 5-6)

This quickly sums up as "service, economics and technology," (Becker in Alexander, 6) Several articles repeat these themes.

For the five consortia Potter describes, "The common element in all … situations was that a case for the benefits of increased cooperation was made to a central authority, and this case was presented by a united group of libraries. Speaking with one voice appears to be a key in securing funding." (Potter, 432)

Besides making a case to funding agencies as a united front, what are traits that successful consortia must have to succeed? " Allen and Hirshon identify several factors that are essential to the success of library cooperatives. 'Above all else, [the consortium's] members must have a high degree of respect for, and deep-seated recognition of, the value of increased collaboration. There must also be a willingness to 'compromise individual institutional goals to help advance the

common good.' The third key is 'constant support throughout all levels of the organization. A collaborative atmosphere must be developed and encouraged that permeates each member library, because directors by themselves cannot make a consortium successful.'" (Alexander, 7-8)

I know these observations to be true from my own experience. For over twenty-five years I have worked in two North Carolina consortia, the Triangle Research Libraries Network (TRLN) and a lesser known, smaller, yet seemingly successful consortia called the Western North Carolina Library Network (WNCLN). Through this experience, I am intimately aware of what makes a consortia work well and what causes dysfunction.

"Good consortia have a clear agenda and commitment to that agenda from member institutions." (Friend, 19) and:

"The best consortia build on shared values while furthering the unique strengths of each member library." (Helmer, 21)

In addition: "According to Rayward, 'Networks … are a phenomenon of relative affluence. They cannot be created unless each member at the local level has sufficient resources of time, staff, materials, and basic equipment and supplies to participate.'" (Evans, 214)

In essence, "…The question is not whether to collaborate, but how to collaborate and with whom." (Peters, Consortia and their discontents, 111)

"Perhaps to a greater extent than an average organization, consortia are governed and defined by relationships." (Peters, Agile innovation clubs, 150)

"As Herman Wells pointed out over three decades ago, cooperation should be a union of strength, not a diversity of weaknesses." (Peters, Agile… 150)

Older, more established consortia enjoy expanded services such as shared online catalogs, local or regional document delivery systems, and licensing of electronic databases. In fact, within a relatively short time frame, consortial purchasing has become the norm of many institutions. (Rowse, 4)

The Upside

There are a number of positive outcomes that have occurred from the rise of consortia. A few of these include:

"…Consortia can assist in change management in that '[they can] help members manage change collectively in a way that is more productive than what the individual member libraries could achieve separately.' " (Hirshon, 125)

I have seen this happen firsthand. Because my library is part of WNCLN, we were able to make significant changes in our technical services procedures when we implemented a shared integrated library system. Some of these changes may

have never been realized, or would have happened far more slowly if our consortial partners had not been there to influence and support us.

Another plus is that [those who manage] "Individual libraries often feel powerless as they face up to the increasing cost and complexity of electronic information provision. They may be able to do very little on their own, but in working with others through a consortium they can achieve a great deal. … The best type of consortium involves its members in solving … problems." (Friend, 18)

Libraries that cannot operate on the cutting edge often find that their consortial memberships aid them in keeping up with current trends and technologies, and enable them to tackle new initiatives that they could never face alone.

Another plus is that "co-operative programs force libraries to have better knowledge of their collections." (Evans, 216) Consortial relations require libraries to focus with greater intensity on their collection development practices. Shared online catalogs similarly offer consortium members a higher level of cataloging quality control through shared authority control processes, memorandums of agreement, and frankly, peer pressure.

The Downside

But is all well in consortia land? Surely there are drawbacks to all this lovely cooperation. Indeed, there's the old saying that "cooperation is an unnatural act;"

this is even the tag line one of my consortial colleagues uses with her email signature.

"Civilization exists within the context of … irresolvable tension born of compromise. To reap the benefits of a civilized existence, we need to curb certain natural [aggressive] tendencies. Library consortial activities, the half-acre of civilization we tend … embody and reveal several irresolvable tensions."

(Peters, Consortia and their discontents, 111)

We teeter constantly between consensus and conflict. And yet, in the last few years especially, there has been a rush towards the formation of more and more consortia.

There are tensions that draw us apart when attempting to function as part of a consortium. "The sanctity and independence of individual library autonomy and budgets are obstacles … [and] annual changes in budgets are rarely coordinated across the group." (Sanville, 124)

Tom Peters, in his highly readable and thought-provoking columns in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, gives us plenty of fodder for considering the negative features of library consortia. He names a few factors that cause us discontent:

- Too many meetings
- Time delays
- Inefficiency

- Ineffectiveness

- Ineffability

- Sustainability issues

- Scalability issues

- Too many consortia

- Ossification

- Idea and reality out of whack

- Competition trumping collaboration

- Provincialism, which Peters refers to as being "Surly Alexandrians" (which refers to everything important seeming local, and does not refer to our colleague Adrian) (Peters, Consortia and their discontents, 111-112)

And yet, the cry to "Get thee to a consortium and go forth and license [persists.] Why? Ann Okerson said, [Because] 'it offers the opportunity to shape a better information future to those who believe that future is vitally important.' There is no question that consortia are playing a more dynamic role in the delivery of information. But for all its inherent advantages, consortium-based licensing is not a panacea. It has prerequisite underpinnings, which, if not met, will lead to limited benefits if not outright dissatisfaction." (Sanville, 122)

"Whilst U.S. consortia tend often to have a multiple-function role, those arising more recently in Europe were predominantly developed for the purpose of electronic site licensing." (Rowse, 3)

Consortia are also being formed in many other parts of the world besides the U.S and Europe. In my research I found articles describing the formation of library consortium in Africa, Canada, China, and Mexico, for example. We have heard about the efforts here in Italy and in other European countries by several speakers at earlier retreats.

"Most academic libraries belong to more than one consortium. Boundaries intersect and overlap. It is rumored that the Venn diagram of consortial relationships in the United States has unnerved more than one cartographer." (Peters, Graduated consortia memberships…254)

This is another truth I live with. Besides our local WNCLN consortium already mentioned, my library participates in consortial buying opportunities through SOLINET, benefits from our statewide NCLive initiative, and also negotiates for database purchases through the University of North Carolina system.

More than one author I read is of the opinion that no library can sanely maintain more than two or three consortial alliances effectively.

Currently, in most cases, "geography matters." (Peters, Graduated…254) However,

graduated membership categories may be offered and in some cases deals may

stretch beyond expected geographical boundaries.

All of these factors have to be acknowledged. Cooperation, let's face it,

sometimes takes far more time than we'd like to admit. And the whole licensing

process for electronic products has been, just itself, a black hole that goes

beyond anything consortia ever tackled previously.

"In the print-based world, selecting, receiving and processing the printed works

were the complex, labor-intensive process. In the world of consortial e-resource

deals, consummating the agreement is the labor-intensive, time-consuming

process." (Peters, Consortia and their discontents, 112)

Recent Trends

Some consortia have attempted to use their clout to work more closely with book

vendors. The OhioLink experience comes to mind, and has been documented in

the literature. However, not everyone considers that experience a total success,

as has been noted by John Secor and Barry Fast in several articles. Still, there

are ways that consortia and book vendors can work together for mutual benefit,

as long as steep discounts aren't expected to be part of the deal.

Speaking of deals, we have to consider the advent of the "Big Deal." A major

trend that consortia have had to grapple with is what is commonly referred to as

the "Big Deal." This is the practice of large publishers offering their whole list or a large portion of their journal holdings to a group of libraries in exchange for a locked-in agreement to not cancel any of the titles for a certain period of time, plus other varying provisions for the term.

David Goodman predicted some of the trends that are occurring today in the year 2000, even before Ken Frazier delivered his well-known piece about the "Big Deal" in *D-Lib Magazine* in 2001.

Goodman said, "Most large libraries recognize the disadvantage of dealing through consortia for any reason other than discount. Rather than simplifying purchases, it adds another layer of negotiation." (Goodman, 48)

Goodman also derides publishers who attempt to convince consortia that their laborious negotiations result in any special, or secret deals. He says, "My experience leads me to suspect that in many cases the confidential special provisions are either very minimal or essentially standard and just serve to make each group think it is special." (Goodman, 48)

Two other important points Goodman makes that Frazier and others do also have to do with the value of some of the journals that get thrown into the "Big Deal."

"I know faculty and librarians, not to mention administrators, who think that the academic world, at least in the sciences, would benefit from fewer marginal journals, not better access to them." and:

"Bundling increases the relative sales of the less important and most expensive titles and decreases the funds available for better ones. At some point research libraries and large consortia likely will have a few large contracts absorbing all the available financial resources. As libraries progressively drop out of the system for lack of funds, the publishers will raise the rates. "(Goodman, 50)

Fred Friend notes that the "Big Deal" … "creates a self-perpetuating group of 'must-have' titles issued by the major publishers. All the blame for this vicious cycle cannot be placed at the door of library consortia … but it is fair criticism to say that they have done little to break the power of the major commercial publishers and may well have entrenched it more deeply." (Friend, 21)

He also suggests that, "Libraries should not have to enter into long-term deals in order to achieve good consortial discounts." (Friend, 20)

By the end of 2003, several major research institutions and/or U.S. consortia have indeed decided that they no longer wish to participate in these "Big Deals."

Frazier observes, "There is no loyalty like enhanced loyalty, and nothing enhances customer loyalty quite like *indispensability*." (Frazier, 4) And yet, this very notion is what scares some libraries away from the lure of the "Big Deal."

Simply put, we are beginning to realize that "one size does not fit all, and … different forms of purchasing deals suit different libraries." (Friend, 23)

Trends for the Future

Examining the past, our colleagues once lauded the rise of consortia and applauded the formation of big deals. Today, however, we seem to be looking for new models. Licensing in general is not the headache it once was; it sometimes still takes forever, but not because we are learning how to do it. In some cases we actually are already covered by an existing license or else the publisher simply states "terms and conditions" which feature none of the dreaded illegal clauses that our state institutions disallow. Packages in some cases are still quite attractive. For example, libraries continue to flock to JSTOR and Project Muse because they get good value for the money, flexible choices of content, easy to understand license terms, interlibrary loan provisions, and suppliers who understand their market – because librarians are part of their enterprises.

In my opinion, if all major publishers would hire resident librarians who understand bibliographic control and collection development issues, and then

listened to them, they might have fewer librarian customers hanging up on them when they call.

A trend that repeatedly is pointed to is that of consolidation. "…Consortia can revitalize themselves … through strategic inter-consortial partnerships that may eventually lead to consolidation. [Paula] Kaufman predicted that in the future there [would] be fewer consortia, but that the remaining consortia will be larger and more powerful." (Peters, Consortia and their discontents, 113) A recent example of such consolidation is the merger of the Orbis and Cascade networks in the Pacific Northwest.

Landesman and van Reenen "suggest that consortia should transition from being buying clubs to becoming innovation clubs." (Peters, Agile innovation clubs, 150)

To really stretch one's imagination, consider the following: "A radically new type of organizational structure and vision for consortia will be needed to foster, facilitate, manage, and exploit a shifting matrix of interlibrary alliances. One scenario would be one where freelance alliance brokers work for one or more libraries to look for likely, worthwhile partners for the client libraries to hitch up with to meet a specific identified need or a time-sensitive opportunity. The freelance alliance broker would not only do the deal, but also identify and introduce the multiple parties to the deal." (Peters, Graduated consortial membership …256)

No discussion of library consortia would be complete without mentioning the formation of International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) in 1997. Clearly, ICOLC continues to provide a forum for consortial leaders and suppliers of resources to come together and grapple with the issues.

In 2002, the Ingenta Institute "commissioned a programme of independent and original research which set out to determine what the main strategic and operational issues of consortial licensing have been for all stakeholders." (Rowse, 2)

Using research results from three studies conducted by Don King in the U.S., Key Perspectives in the U.K., and the Centre for Information Behaviour and the Analysis of Research (CiBER) in Europe, a number of trends were determined.

"Early findings would appear to suggest that, despite widespread adoption, key stakeholders within the information community doubt whether the consortia site license will endure in its current form. … Both publishers and librarians alike consider this to be a temporary state of affairs." (Rowse, 3)

Further, "…After a period of rapid adoption, the market is now evolving. Although the majority of consortial deals are still in the middle of their contracted license periods, librarians and publishers alike think it highly unlikely that things will remain as they are and that consortia licenses will experience adaptation and development at the next stage of renewal." (Rowse, 8)

"Some libraries have suggested that journals bundled by subject would be attractive and more appropriate to their users' requirements. It is likely that consortia will be attracted to more flexible purchasing models that enable them to combine subscriptions to core collections of relevant content, with transactional-based payments for more occasionally used titles." (Rowse, 9)

Another trend has to do with the emergence of smaller publishers entering the consortia scene. Up until recently, they could not compete with the larger publishers. "New initiatives are now seeking to redress this imbalance and help the small and society publisher to participate. The U.K. Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP) is considering the development of a multi-publisher consortium that would help bring clusters of smaller society-publisher journal lists to market." (Rowse, 9) PCG's Consortia*link*, is another similar service recently launched.

Additionally, "Some foresee a scenario in which hybrid purchasing models will emerge, combining consortial licenses with 'by-the-drink' and useage-based systems. The introduction of new transactional models could also help publishers to reach out beyond the academic market." (Rowse, 9)

Another question that gets asks over and over is "Are consortial collection development activities making core collections more homogeneous?" (Hulbert, 181)

And will traditional title-by-title selection be replaced by packages of content? Only further studies of these possible trends can tell us.

Undoubtedly, consortia are here to stay, but their roles are evolving. A concern that has been raised in the past and continues to be voiced has to do with how vendors can play a part in the process. "Some librarians believe there could be more of a role for intermediaries in the future, with the subscription agent playing a critical role in selecting and clustering publishers' content on consortia's behalf. If the pattern of direct negotiation between publisher and library continues, however, there could be serious implications for subscription agents, who could eventually be disintermediated." (Rowse, 9) (i.e.- cut out of the loop altogether!)

Conclusion

For better or worse, consortia have changed the lives of those of us who work within the scholarly information chain. My attempt today was to give you a broad overview of the background, the pros and cons, and recent and future trends concerning library consortia. Though I barely scratched the surface, since the topic is vast, I hope that I have succeeded in providing a context for further discussion and I welcome your further thoughts and any obvious points that I may have missed.

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