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The Real Costs and Financial Challenges of Library Networking: Part 2*

ABSTRACT

The development of the virtual electronic library and the resulting shift in emphasis from ownership to access raise questions about the responsibility for local collection development. However, access depends on ownership; a network does not create new resources, it facilitates the sharing of existing resources. This sharing has resulted in burdensome levels of interlibrary loan activity. In addition to the financial costs that result from this activity, convenience costs to local users at the lending library and increased preservation costs must be considered. Finally, research libraries will not only be measured by ownership statistics but by access criteria as well, and they will also have to deal with the politics of virtual libraries and networking.

THE VIRTUAL (OR LOGICAL) LIBRARY AND NETWORKING

One of the most dangerous ideas to confront research librarianship in recent years is the notion of the virtual electronic library. This is the library represented in part by the OCLC and Research Libraries

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Information Network (RLIN), plus the online public access catalogs (OPACs) of individual libraries, plus a vast array of commercial databases. So what is so dangerous about this idea? The danger is that it relieves libraries, in the minds of campus decision makers, of the responsibility to build local collections, to request more space for old-fashioned, paper-based collections, and to engage in all of the labor-intensive inventory control activities that are required by print collections. The so-called library without walls, however, continues to be very much a series of physical places housed within some very real walls. For it is these institutions that supply a great deal of the information requested via the networks.

The recent shift in emphasis from ownership to access—thinking that seems to have pervaded even our own field without much challenge—leads one to ask why any library should buy any print material at all. In fact, why even have a library? Would not an office equipped with fax machines, text-digitizing equipment, scholarly workstations, and other electronic telecommunication devices suffice? But what would such a center be providing access to? The answer rests heavily upon collections and other resources identified, selected, purchased, cataloged, processed, shelved, and made available for use by some library, somewhere, which invested in the ownership of scholarly material. In the last analysis, access depends on ownership.

Some have tried to compare research libraries to supercomputing centers. A relatively small number of supercomputers are sufficient to meet the needs of most academic researchers. Most of the university-based supercomputers have excess capacity, and consequently time on these machines is being sold to the private sector. But there are no "superlibraries." Most research libraries are able to acquire less than one-tenth of the world's publications each year (estimated by UNESCO to be some 850,000 titles).

It is also important to remember a statement that Dick DeGennaro made about networks: by itself, a network creates no new resources; it merely facilitates the sharing of existing resources. To build on DeGennaro's insight, one can compare the relationship between networks and libraries to the relationship between the musicians in an orchestra and their conductor: Networks, like batons, make no sound. The sounds that bring us to the concert hall and elevate our spirits are those made by the individual instrumentalists and virtuosos. We need to value and reinvest in our virtuoso library collections and move away from a situation in which we seem to know the cost or price of everything and the value of nothing.

USE OF NETWORKS—RESOURCE SHARING

The second topic briefly addressed here is one of the specific uses made of networks: resource sharing. In the past three years, interlibrary loan lending among the ten largest public academic research libraries increased by 16 percent, while borrowing increased by 25 percent. Reasons for less interlibrary loan activity among the largest are (a) overload, (b) internal tactics by staff to reduce workload, (c) fees, and (d) saying "no." Among all (large and small) Association of Research Libraries (ARL) university libraries, lending activity increased by 25.6 percent (1987-90), while borrowing increased by 30.5 percent. These one hundred or so university libraries loaned or borrowed more than 4.2 million items in 1989-90. If this rate of increase persists, by 1995-96, interlibrary transactions will increase to 6.3 million items. According to Rowland Brown, OCLC's former CEO, U.S. ARL libraries provide approximately 22 percent of the loans on OCLC but account for only 2.5 percent of the membership.

Tom Waldhart (1985), in his review article on interlibrary loan, postulates that if the volume of interlibrary loan activity were to approach just 5 percent of every library's total circulation, "it is highly unlikely...that the nation's libraries, or its interlibrary loan system, could effectively deal with numbers of this magnitude without a major breakdown in operation" (p. 217).

But the fact is that many of our libraries are already finding it impossible to keep up with existing levels of interlibrary loan traffic. As George Keller (1983) noted in his book, *Academic Strategy,* where pressures are in charge, the present gets attention, not the future; fighting brush fires and improvisation take precedence, not planning; defense is the game, not offense (p. 75).

Many of us believe that there are two driving forces behind the rising demand for resource sharing: the increased bibliographic access provided by OPACs and CD-ROMs and the use of resource sharing networks to borrow not just esoteric or seldom-used material but basic, curriculum-related undergraduate books and journals. We know this is happening in Minnesota, and it is probably occurring in other states as well. Because all of Minnesota's public colleges have converted their bibliographic records, it is possible to determine the age of library collections based on date of publication. Twenty-seven percent of the titles owned by these libraries were published before 1960; 26 percent were published in the 1960s; 27 percent in the 1970s; and 19 percent in the 1980s. One of these state university libraries currently has a listing of 450 journals from which it has requested the maximum number of photocopies allowable under the copyright law. A large and growing proportion of the 600 items that the University of Minnesota libraries lend each day is not research material. Not long ago, at a meeting similar to this one, Sheila Dowd, who was then head of collection development at Berkeley, said that the jury is still out on how far we can go in sharing materials that are central to our respective universities' missions.

COSTS OF NETWORKING/RESOURCE SHARING

Strange as it may sound, it is very difficult to get a handle on the costs of resource sharing. The Research Libraries Group (RLG) tried to conduct a study of these costs in five libraries in 1988 and came up with these figures: borrowing costs ranged from $13 to $20 per item; lending costs ranged from $5 to $15. If we were to assume that the average cost of an interlibrary loan transaction in 1990 was $15, then the ARL university libraries spent $63.6 million on this activity in 1989-90. This is almost three times the amount these libraries spent on binding and is 87 percent of the amount they spent for part-time student assistants. In just five or six years, if present trends continue, ARL university libraries could be spending 100 million dollars on interlibrary lending and borrowing.

There are obviously other costs in addition to financial ones. These include convenience costs to local users (to what extent is access like justice: is access delayed or denied?) and preservation costs (to what extent is the life span of library collections—particularly bound journals—being shortened due to repeated photocopying?). To the best of the author's knowledge, these costs have never been factored into the real costs (mushy as they are) of resource sharing.

MEASUREMENTS, STANDARDS, AND POLITICS

A few words about each of these. Measurement: We all bemoan the fact that research libraries continue to be measured according to ownership statistics—that bigger is necessarily better—and that quantity is synonymous with quality. Library volume counts; volumes added and serials subscribed to are simply inputs to the library organization. We need these measures, but we also need to measure "units of access." But as the ARL Committee on Statistics learned, trying to measure access is like trying to climb a very slippery slope. And while we may criticize the ARL statistics, they remain the best in the library world and continue to be relied upon by library administrators and other campus decision makers. Our challenge is to come up with valid access measures that focus on user outcomes, measures that balance our traditional measures of library inputs or throughputs.

With regard to standards, many librarians are far more interested in standards such as Z39.50 than they are in ACRL standards that state the responsibility of all academic libraries to develop collections that support the curriculum. There is no substitute for basic, up-to-date collections available on site. We would not think of borrowing basic laboratory equipment such as microscopes and Bunsen burners from another institution. Certain library collections are just as basic.

Finally, the politics of virtual libraries and networking must be considered. In many ways, the problems faced by libraries are similar to those of the health industry. In both areas, costs are escalating beyond our ability to keep pace, and questions of institutional responsibility are being raised—along with questions of access, the quality of services rendered, and the need for cost containment. One writer has suggested that research libraries are imprisoned by the book, and were they able to eliminate entirely the need to acquire and manage large print collections, up to 80 percent of the cost of operating these libraries might be saved or redirected. But the challenge that we face is managing our libraries over a fairly extended transition period. We are caught between two very different worlds. Many library administrators are trying to move towards a library without walls as they deal with resources that are very much placebound. But in the last analysis, most of us would acknowledge that Jim Penrod was right when he said that in the world in which we now live, capital and/or human resources or book collections can no longer guarantee success. Rather, he said, service quality, speed of response, and innovation are now the determinants of success in information organizations.

We need, therefore, to appreciate the fact that a great deal of the world's information continues to exist in print and paper. Consequently, for quite a few more years we will continue to need *real* libraries, not virtual ones.

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