Library Consortia in Croatia

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INTRODUCTION

Croatia is a Middle-European, Mediterranean country with 4 universities (Zagreb, Osijek, Rijeka and Split) with about 85,000 students and about 4,5 million population.

Apart from the biggest and the oldest library, The National and University Library in Zagreb (founded in 1607), which is at the same time the central academic library for the whole country, there are central university libraries at the other three universities, too. Apart from those, there are also 102 faculty libraries and 56 institute libraries. The main financier of this library system is the Ministry of Science and Technology. It has a huge role in making decisions on founding a consortium of academic and research libraries.

Required for functioning of library consortia is a good telecommunication and information system, provided in Croatia by CARNet - The Croatian Academic and Research Network. Basic objectives of CARNet are development and support to computer and information infrastructure of the scientific and academic community, and implementation and support to the latest computer communication and information technologies (IT).

The problem of the increasing number of information sources and their costs as well as more demanding users on the one side, and limited financial resources on the other, has not avoided Croatia. One of the attempts to deal with this state of affairs is associating libraries into consortia. A consortium could, through cooperative cataloguing, help optimise the processing of library material, it could help in solving the problem of rational ways of continuous education of staff and users and coordinate acquisition policy through common purchasing of information resources, from bibliographic databases to electronic journals under various licensing conditions. This last aspect of cooperation in a consortium will be dealt with in detail in the text that follows.

Arnold Hirshon says on the role of a consortium: „For any library that is trying to develop a customer (user!) service program - and for consortia that are trying to assist in that effort - it is important to understand the trends that

are affecting the client base, the component parts of the customer service plan, the process to be followed to develop and implement that plan, and where consortia can provide added value."[1] He additionally explains the need for the consortium: „One of the most complex issues facing libraries today is change management. The decisions libraries face are becoming complex, the risks are greater, and the resources - both human and fiscal - are becoming more scarce. There are many key issues facing libraries today that relate to the ability of the library to allocate and make maximum use of the scarce resources."[2]

Information services and databases vendors or aggregators are continually offering new possibilities of access and using the databases. While the prevailing way of using the databases several years ago was on the CD-ROM, today it is an online access via Internet to important information sources; there is an increasing number in full-text documents as well. This especially refers to electronic journals in increasing numbers, and which have print equivalents. Research libraries, which could include university, faculty and institute libraries, spend the largest part of their financial resources on scientific and scientific-professional journals. With the electronic version, publishers offer the print version as well, for now for another 15% of the original price. The additional sum of 15% is not insignificant, particularly if taking into account that there is an annual price increase of journals of 10%.[3]

This state of affairs at the journals market is one of the key factors that makes libraries sign less and less individual contracts with providers of information resources and services. The problem is for the time being solved by associating into consortia and the so-called consortial acquisition conditions. Expenditures of services are either shared or covered directly by the libraries' financiers or with the help of donators. In any case, consortial conditions are the best way of access to information for a larger number of users.[4]

CRITERIA FOR ORGANISING A CONSORTIUM

So far we have been talking about only one reason for organising a library consortium. According to McDonald[5], one can determine a total of nine different reasons why libraries cooperate: financial construction, cost sharing, availability of funds, pressure from numbers, resource improvement, service improvement, management improvement, image enhancement, and technological development.

In order to make consortia really function, certain criteria need to be fulfilled. These are: information infrastructure, i. e. technological support, li-

censing conditions, access control, reliability, cost, ways of access to information, archiving, education and help in informing the users.

- information infrastructure, i. e. technological support - without a suitable technical and computer support, one can not at all talk about founding consortia in their present meaning. This involves software and hardware, networking, telecommunication system and a suitable support of computer science professionals. Improvements of online data accessibility via Internet make special services and human resources unnecessary for maintaining and updating library systems (e. g. CD-ROM databases), which is of a multiple importance. This trend of development will probably continue.

- licensing conditions, the control of access and cost - when a contract is made, conditions of using certain information sources are important. The cost of a service often depends on the number of users, both real and potential. In order to control access to information and services, vendors mainly offer either a password or an IP address option. Using a password is a more user-friendly method because users can access the information source independently of a location. However, if there are several different information services of different vendors or libraries, there is a problem of remembering of the growing number of passwords. Another downside to this method is that after a certain time passwords need to be changed, and that means more work with maintenance. On the other side, an IP address or an IP domain limits the user to certain computers, but for the vendor or the host it is a better way because of a better control of using the system. Since the cost of network versions is not insignificant, it is very important to control the usage and limit it to authorised users. When choosing a control system, one needs to choose the one which is most acceptable to us. One of the decisive factors in making licensing contracts is the service cost. The cost depends on the conditions of founding a consortium. The fact is that the cost of electronic resources available to the members of the consortium is lower than it would be if libraries would individually be buying electronic resources, but at the same time this price could be a very limiting factor. When making a decision on choosing a particular information source, it is necessary to conduct a research on users' needs and potential using. For small countries such as Croatia, which is at the same time a transitional country with all its specific characteristics, it is not easy to reach a decision on buying a database (with a high percentage of full-text articles), e. g. for a consortium with 8 members, 10,000 potential users and at the cost of about 100,000 US-$. It is very important to observe usage of the bought source and users' satisfaction, i. e. to justify the value of the bought information source.

- the ways of access to information sources - to electronic information sources one can access by signing a contract either directly with the vendor of e. g. a database, or electronic journals publisher, or the so-called aggregators. Databases vendors such as for example APA (American Psychological Association) offer a bibliographic database, PsycINFO, with about 30% full-text, under a significantly lower cost than it can be bought from an intermediary, i. e. aggregator. But the difference in cost is not unexplainable. Acquiring the database from the vendor one usually does not get a user-friendly software for searching which is offered by an aggregator. It matters for the user whether he or she will, while searching several different information sources, have one software or he or she will have to be acquainted with several different searching interfaces.

- archiving - this is one of the problems that is troubling librarians more and more. How to solve the problem of a journal that a library has, for example, been receiving for 30 years in print form, and now buys it under licensing conditions only in the electronic form? What happens if in the following year there won't be enough money for the acquisition of that magazine? On the other hand, the question arises who should archive electronic resources - publishers or libraries? Apart from that, there is a problem of potential out-of-dating of technology on which library material is archived. One of the solutions offered by aggregators is a back-up copy of an online database on CD-ROM or DVD, e. g. Bell & Howell offers the database ABI/INFORM Global that is accessible online over the Internet, and offers at a satisfactory additional cost a CD-ROM version as well.

- education and help in providing information to users - the way in which users will get acquainted with possibilities offered by an electronic source is very important. Usually seminars are organised in which users learn about possibilities of the system and methods of retrieval. Today searching interfaces are user-friendly and it is very easy to learn searching techniques. What remains the biggest problem is the user competency to estimate which information is relevant, and it is solved through professional education. Up to the present, users in Croatia have been acquainted with an electronic information source and its ways of retrieval through organised seminars in libraries, and CARNet web pages.

CONSORTIA MODELS IN CROATIA

As we know, libraries have been organising cooperative projects on automated systems and information technology for almost 40 years now, but the 1990s may prove to be the decade in which these efforts reached a new ex-

citing level of richness, complexity, and importance. This milestone can be linked directly to the maturation and ubiquity of the Internet and World Wide Web.[6]

Library consortia can be organised at the national level, at a university or faculty level, or at a special interest group level. In Croatia there are at the moment consortia at the national level and at the level of related academic institutions.

a) National Level

Some authors[4] claim that for small countries organising consortia at the national level is the optimal solution. Such is the example of Slovenia which has with the COBISS system, of which most of the libraries are part, solved the problem of accessibility to a large number of relevant electronic sources of information.

In Croatia CARnet (Croatian Academic and Research network) started in project acquisition of databases offered in software by OVID. These are: Medline, Current Contents, Ovid Core Medical Collection, Evidence Based Medicine Review, INSPEC, Agricola and ERIC. Apart from the Ovid Core Medical Collection, other databases are bibliographic databases with summaries.

OVID system with its belonging databases has been installed at a local server at the Ru•er Boškovi• Institute and it is potentially accessible over CARNet to all members of the academic and research community in Croatia. The acquisition and maintenance of this service is paid by the Ministry of Science and Technology.

Another information source available at the national level is EBSCO host, with the following electronic resources: Academic Search Elite, Business Source Premier, MasterFILE Premier, Newpaper Source, Clinical Reference Systems, Health Source Plus i Business Wire News. Although the host claims that those are full-text databases, the real state of affairs is different. The access to the sources is online via Internet with a password subscription. The financial aspect has been realised by the Ministry of Science and Technology with a support of a donator, OSI (Open Society Institute).

b) Consortia of Libraries of Interest Groups

At the moment in Croatia there is only one consortium of an interest group related to the University of Zagreb, and that is at the Faculty of Agronomy. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has for the needs of its users bought

CAB databases (from 1973 to 2000), Pestbank and Biological Abstracts (year 2000) on the software of SilverPlatter, installed at the Faculty of Agronomy in Zagreb. According to the licence, only four users can access each of the databases simultaneously. Access to databases over the web interface is available exclusively by using browsers Netscape Navigator version 4.0 or higher, or MS Internet Explorer version 4.0 or higher.

For the year 2001 there are negotiations going on for establishing a consortium whose members would be seven faculties of economics and related faculties - Zagreb, Osijek, Rijeka, Pula, Opatija, Split, Dubrovnik and Varazdin, and the National and University Library (NUL). The NUL would be the holder of the consortium, and it is being negotiated that the ABI/ INFORM Global database of the host (Proquest) Bell & Howell will be bought, which has a big number of full-text articles. It is accessible via the Internet.

Negotiations are in the progress as well for the year 2001 on buying the PsycINFO database, which has about 30% full-text documents. The reason for the decision for this database is a huge need for retrievals. The access would be ensured at the National and University Library, at the Department for Psychology of The Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb, Rijeka and Zadar, and to users of Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation in Zagreb. A CD-ROM version will probably be taken, and it will be archived on a server at CARNet. The acquisition of this database is also being negotiated directly with the APA because it is more accessible in price, but the searching possibilities are less user-friendly.

CONCLUSION

Associating of libraries in order to more easily solve their problems from processing and interlibrary loan to acquisition, with the aim of being as much as possible available to their users, is today simply a necessity.

When the initiative on associating libraries into a consortium is a common acquisition of electronic resources, and one of the basic reasons is the cost of using, it is necessary, prior to reaching a decision, to conduct thorough research on users' needs, using the existing information sources, work on the ways of library services marketing, organise user education and informing on the possibilities offered by certain services.

If a secondary full-text information source is being bought, and its costs are fairly high, it is important for the members of the consortium to decide what they would do with print versions of journals to which they had been subscribed.

Croatia could solve the problem of growing costs of electronic information resources at the level of consortium, under the condition of a more intensive cooperation of the Ministry of Science and Technology, as the main financier, with the National and University Library in Zagreb and with CARNet that provides technical support.

In addition to the conditions mentioned for a good functioning of the consortium, with the aim of availability of key electronic information resources to users, a more intensive cooperation of scientific (academic and institute) libraries with formed programmes of development is necessary.

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