"The future of library cooperation in Southeast Asia"

by

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ABSTRACT:

The promotion of library cooperation in the fields of documentation, bibliographic access, digitization, open access scholarly publishing and related activities would enhance today the networking and linkage capabilities among libraries in developing countries, particularly those in. the disadvantaged regions, such as in Southeast Asia. The strategic development of libraries in this region through collaboration, partnering schemes, and networking can create an information-rich environment, and wide opportunities to benefit from shared information resources. A major part of the success of any library cooperation will largely depend on how well cooperating members can exploit these networking opportunities and contribute to the development and growth of knowledge on a global scale. This paper, while reviewing and expanding on the above points, aims to reawaken the spirit of cooperation among libraries within the region by promoting the development of sustainable projects that are doable and mutually beneficial.

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Introduction[*]

First, I wish to express my appreciation to the organizers for inviting me to speak on a topic that is close to my heart. I strongly believe that the strategic development of libraries, particularly in regions rich in cultural knowledge but sadly disadvantaged by the lack of technical know-how, human resource, and funding sources, should merit considerable concern. Through collaboration, partnering schemes, and networking, I am convinced we can bridge the digital divide, so to speak, and create an information-rich environment, and provide wide opportunities to benefit from shared information resources. A major part of the future success of library cooperation will largely depend on how well libraries in Southeast Asia can exploit collaboration and networking opportunities to contribute to the development and growth of knowledge on a global scale.

Early Attempts at Collaboration

International cooperation has been extremely difficult to achieve because of geographical distance. So for many years, I watched on the sideline how early attempts at collaboration in the Southeast Asian region, wherein my country is closely linked to, would fare. It is sad to say here that, apart from conferences and training seminars and publications of these proceedings, little has been done to accomplish sustainable regional collaboration objectives. Among the more noteworthy projects, however, that deserve to be mentioned here are discussed below:

In 1969, there was a Conference on Research Materials held in Puntjak, Indonesia, focused on sourcing research materials, microfilming, and bibliographical control. An offshoot of this conference was the founding of the Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians (CONSAL) , which held its inaugural meeting in Singapore in 1970, and the first General Conference of Southeast Asian Regional Branch of ICA known as SARBICA, which was held in Manila in 1971. One of the noteworthy projects of the combined efforts of CONSAL and SARBICA involved the establishment of a Regional Microfilm Clearinghouse, which was intended to keep members informed of microfilming activities in the region to avoid duplication of efforts and to fill in the needs and gaps. The Southeast Asian Microfilms Newsletter, which published its maiden issue in December 1972, survived until 1993.

Another cooperative regional project initiated by CONSAL was the Masterlist of SEA Microforms, published in 1978 and updated in 1985. In 2000, the proposal to

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digitize the Masterlist with a total of almost 36,000 entries of holdings from 44 institutions in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand and with the expected cooperation from 16 new institutions (making it a total of 60), was approved at a meeting of an informal grouping known as the Southeast Asia Consortium on Access and Preservation (SEACAP) in Chiang Mai. This project was to be funded by Japan Foundation. Despite some setbacks (mostly on funding requirements, delays in fund approval and releases, unmet deadlines for submission, and so on), the project was successfully launched and partial results are shown on the MSEAM database accessible at http://mseam.seas.edu.sg. Now the project is in limbo because of data transfer nightmares (due to incompatibility of parameters) and suspension of funds.

A number of collaborative projects developed from bilateral and multilateral undertakings has been attributed to CONSAL's indirect involvement, mostly in the areas of documentation, cooperative indexing, and bibliographic access. However, there is one digital initiative, funded by ASEAN-COCI involving 350 rare books from the collection of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Still under CONSAL initiative, nine ASEAN countries were given digitization machines to provide digital contents to their national imprints and facilitate ebook-sharing across ASEAN countries through a regional gateway.

In my own country, I would like to mention a partnership undertaking initiated by our Records Management and Archives Office (RMAO) and the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas (CSIC) on the initiative of our government and the Spanish Embassy, resulting in a turn-over of the catalogues produced by the CSIC of. microfilmed centuries-old documents during the Spanish colonial period of my country.

Speaking of the Philippines, I should mention here that there is a remarkable range of cooperative activities and consortial arrangements that range from the simple to the more complex. A number of them were shaped by varying needs and interests. Many active consortia are still informal and voluntary in nature, borne from institutional linkages of academic libraries within a particular geographical location, and established expressly to engage mainly in interlending activities and bibliographic control. Quite a few were spearheaded by professional associations, and only two were government-sponsored. Recently, the Philippine Association of Academic and Research Librarians, better known as PAARL, recently launched a consortial acquisition arrangement with a favored library vendor, whereby a large group of individual academic and research libraries belonging to PAARL, big and small, will be given separate accounts to purchase titles at publishers list price, with a 5-10 percent discount, delivered door-to-door, and free shipping and handling costs. With a sense of solidarity, this coalition of libraries hopes to achieve better terms from publishers and vendors.

Proposals for New Avenues at Collaboration

It is not my intention here to dwell on the successes and failures of past and present library cooperation initiatives, but to seek new avenues, and perhaps better

alternatives for cooperative activities that are more focused on academic and research materials.

With the increasing use of Internet and electronic resources, digital libraries are now an emerging platform for cooperation. Thanks to the Internet, collaborative programs now extend far beyond the traditional. Much of the information that is available on the Internet is free. And even if some are not free, they are usually low-cost. Once the networking infrastructure is in place, the expense of electronic information becomes minimal. What this means for cooperating institutions which use the Internet as their base of operations, is that the information they are sharing is far less costly than if the same information were printed and shipped thousands of miles. Equity in terms of cooperation, therefore, should not be a major problem. Each institution has its own unique collection that can be offered to the international community of library users, and in the context of free or almost-free.

Unquestionably, the Internet presents one of the most effective means towards networking. However, I believe we must recognize that the value and focus of the Internet is full text rather than a mere catalog of bibliographic information. At this juncture, there is a more urgent need for content on the Internet, and this is something that we need to carefully explore as the focus of cooperative projects.

Although geography was conceded to be one major obstacle to cooperation, it is now of no consequence if the Internet is used as a cooperative medium. The advantages of using the electronic medium to carry out collaborative projects is fairly evident. Large volumes of paper do not have to be transported. In terms of materials exchange, if electronic materials are lost in transit, they can simply be re-transmitted. Fax, telephone, and microform present traditional modes for information transfer, but none can compare with the possibilities that the Internet offers in terms of immediacy, resources conservation, and retrievability.

Joint Electronic Journals

One potentially very commendable area for cooperation concerns the joint publication of electronic journals. Joint electronic journals can open the avenues for increasing access to resources, especially those rare and otherwise inaccessible materials, by encouraging faculty, scholars and researchers at our own academic and research institutions to publish their works in non-subscription electronic journals. By providing the mechanisms for open access publishing through the Internet, the major source of academic information pertaining to Southeast Asia and other remote regions will be available on the Web; and scholars and researchers anywhere in the world will gain access to information that would have been extremely difficult to locate. Open access in a cooperative arrangement would even solve the complex problems of document delivery service.

De La Salle University Library has recently put on trial a few articles online under the journal title, **_Sinupang Lasalyano_**. This journal will provide open access to all of its contents on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge, and such access is associated with increased readership and increased citation of an author's work. The contents are indexed and searchable by OAI engines. This approach uses an open journal system, designed by the Public Knowledge Project, to improve the scholarly and public quality of research, and the software is freely distributed to support the open access publishing of scholarly resources.

If CONSAL facilitates in assembling a group that wants to take immediate collaborative action leading to the establishment of OAI compatible preprint repositories, then this can become one project in library cooperation. Participating members in this project can organize the open archives on a discipline-oriented basis, and then decide who should be the party(ies) responsible for launching, managing, and maintaining the system, whether the universities, scholarly societies, international research centers, or individual volunteers.

Digital Collaboration

For pictures, sound, and other multimedia materials which are storage-intensive, the opportunities for cooperation by establishing as many websites as possible offers a better alternative than a single site. A single site will definitely be burdened with a big storage requirement, while building separate sites will encourage cooperation. The more participants involved, the better for the project to achieve efficiency and effectiveness.

For digital libraries, the innovative use of information technology will enable information to be accessed anywhere anytime by anyone who needs them. However, the need to integrate technology and content is evident. And outside funding and the commitment of volunteers in such digital initiatives are critical to its success.

In my country, the Philippine Library Network (known as the eLib Project) was recently launched. This is a government-sponsored collaborative undertaking of major government libraries, where the core collections belong to The National Library, the Department of Science and Technology (DOST), the Department of Agriculture, and the University of the Philippines Library System. The project envisions making available in digital format the holdings of The National Library (over 1.2 million volumes, including materials considered part of the national heritage), the UP Library System (over one million also), and the holdings of the SciNet libraries of the DOST, and the library networks of the Department of Agriculture. A total of twenty-four million images will be accessible in the world wide web (www.elib.gov.ph).

While the focus is in making available Philippine materials on a global scale, the project also provides cooperative acquisition and sharing of expensive on-line subscriptions. Already, some eleven databases are now available on a free trial, mostly from EBSCO. Its data center, which will house its portal and database mirrors, will be

conveniently located at The National Library, with a data recovery site at UP Diliman. The project will use open source and open-standard tools, which can be replicated by other libraries. For its financial sustainability, the project encourages institutional and individual subscribers to gain access to its specialized databases, and the management of its fee-based services will be administered by the UP Library System.

Our National Archives has also an ongoing project on digitization of archival documents. More than 13 million historic documents have been digitized but not yet accessible in the world wide web. How many more such digital projects are ongoing in developing countries but are not accessible in the web, no one knows. Why? Clearly, there are problems in funding initiatives, technology infrastructure, and technical expertise.

This is in contrast to the digital initiative of the National Archives of Japan, spearheaded by the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR). JACAR provides image data of official documents concerning the relationship between Japan and its Asian neighbors through the Internet. It offers "anyone, anytime, anywhere" access to the records free of charge. Internet users can read a large amount of Asian historical records from the Meiji Restoration in 1868 until the end of the WWII in 1945, download and print it out easily. About six and a half million images have been scanned, and around two million images every year will be added. All the documents were previously microfilmed and converted into digital format.

Another model of collaboration is JARDA, the Japanese American Relocation Digital Archive, which results in a single point of access to digitized materials on the evacuation and internment of thousands of Japanese Americans during WWII. Curatorial and digital collaboration was made possible through California Digital Library's Online Archive of California, which spearheaded the development of digital archives for "thematic collections." Putting all these primary documents in one site made a big contribution to academic research.

Some of these examples might lead us to the conclusion, rightly or wrongly, that developed nations can manage its own website for digital libraries without need of collaboration. Collaboration becomes an attractive alternative only for the poorer nations when better endowed countries take on the initiative to extend assistance by way of providing the required funds, or the needed technical expertise and training, and/or the technology infrastructure or network mechanism that will facilitate access. Here, CONSAL can initiate the launching of a regional network of institutional repositories, matching institutions with common interests, needs and requirements.

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Barriers to Cooperation

It is obvious from the above discussion that geography is not the only obstacle to cooperation. Sustained funding and commitment can make or break cooperative endeavors. The channels of communication among cooperating partners should be kept open and constant, and not merely episodic. Deadlines for submitting inputs have to be

met, or materials exchange will wither and collapse. Also, it is essential for a successful experience in cooperation that participating members feel that they are getting a proper level of benefit. Consortial arrangements need to be flexible, adaptive to changing situations, pragmatic and well-focused in order to be effective. Cooperation in the area of digitization is now a major area attracting multiple consortia, but. sharing of digitized materials is hampered by copyright issues, and the reluctance of major repositories with rich collections to participate.

Several barriers have been cited too, such as rivalry and competition, mistrust and jealousy, politics and personalities, different institutional priorities and indifferent institutional administrators, unequal development and parochialism, and so on. Other challenges to cooperation stem from negative attitudes, such as skepticism, fear of loss, reluctance to take risks, and the pervasive lack of tradition of cooperation.

Copyright Concerns

One of the more serious barriers to building digital libraries and establishing open access journals for materials like faculty publications and theses and dissertations, is related to copyright and intellectual property concerns. With these legal issues, it is may be difficult to develop higher levels of cooperative arrangements, but the problem is not insurmountable. One of the potential solutions is to require waivers from faculty, scholars and other intellectual property right-holders to the digital contents of their works in the spirit of shared scholarship and complementary research.

Certainly, many academic and research institutions can be encouraged to require their waivers, provided the collaborative partners are also willing to do the same and share their valuable resources. At present this willingness is still doubtful, and efforts towards digital collaboration have been focused on historical materials and government works free of copyright concerns. Hopefully we can start with these small beginnings.

Conclusion

It is a constant source of inspiration for me to interact and connect with librarians in conferences and seminars such as this, in the hope that something fruitful and eventful will happen. Holding these annual gatherings is one thing, but doing something in between these meetings and together is another. I am certain that in the very near future, CONSAL, or some such initiative, can exploit collaboration and networking opportunities to promote the development and growth of knowledge on a global scale with its better endowed members leading the way.

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