# Facing the crisis: risk of a collapse or new opportunities?
## The Italian National Health Institute (ISS) Library case study
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## 1. Introduction

The Library of the Italian National Institute of Health (ISS) is the reference library for biomedical research in Italy in the field of scientific documentation on biomedicine and public health. The Library holdings consist mainly of periodicals and include more than 19,000 journal titles in print and/or electronic format. Thousands of monographs and official publications by national and international institutions and organizations complete the collection. Access to some of the main databases such as Web of Science, Journal Citations Report, Clinical Evidence and EBSCOHost are also provided.

Starting from 2009, with the outbreak of economic crisis, the National Health Institute suffered a drastic reduction in public funding and consequently also the library has been involved in a general trend of cuts and budget reductions. In parallel to this situation of cutbacks at the same time it was accompanied by the continuous steady increase in the cost of subscriptions of journals and databases.

Figure 1 shows how starting from a budget of 2.2 million euro in 2009 it has gone, through constant cuts, to 0,938 m euro in 2014, with a decrease of over 50%.
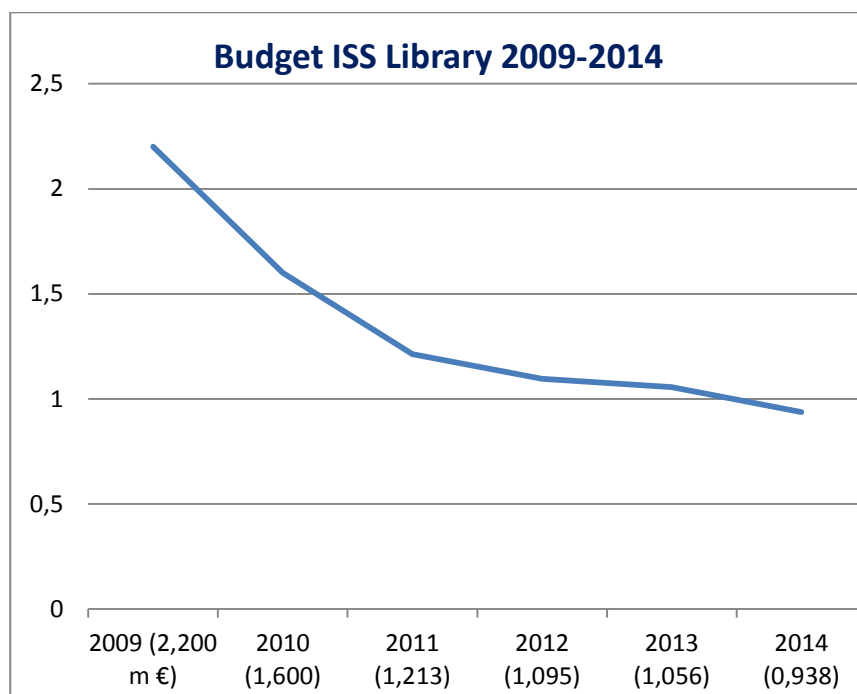


Fig. 1

While Figure 2 shows a table of the Library Journal with the increase in prices from 2009 to 2013 divided into categories according to the Library of Congress subjects. The overall result is an average of 28,16% in the five years analyzed.

| LIBRARY JOURNAL | COST HISTORY BY LC SUBJECT 2009-2014 | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SUBJECT | AVERAGE COST PER TITLE 2009 | % OF CHANGE 2010 | % OF CHANGE 2011 | % OF CHANGE 2012 | % OF CHANGE 2013 | % OF CHANGE 2014 | % TOTAL 2009-2014 |
| AGRICOLTURE | $ 939 | 6 | 11 | 5 | 7 | 6 | 35 |
| BIOLOGY | $ 1917 | 5 | 7 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 27 |
| BOTANY | $ 1552 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 6 | 27 |
| CHEMISTRY | $ 3629 | 4 | 7 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 25 |
| ENGINEERING | $ 1822 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 29 |
| FOOD SCIENCE | $ 1442 | 2 | 7 | 6 | 3 | 7 | 25 |
| GENERAL SCIENCE | $ 1171 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 3 | 6 | 28 |
| HEALTH SCIENCE | $ 1328 | -3 | 14 | 7 | 8 | 7 | 33 |
| PHYSICS | $ 3263 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 4 | 6 | 23 |
| PSYCHOLOGY | $ 651 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 8 | 32 |
| TECHNOLOGY | $ 1226 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 29 |
| ZOOLOGY | $ 1523 | 5 | 3 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 25 |
| | | | | | | | % AVERAGE |
| | | | | | | 338 | 28,16 |

Fig. 2

The combination of these two factors (low budget and high costs) has brought to a significant decline in terms of available resources for users and forced the librarians to redesign their activity in order to find new strategies and solutions able to ensure an acceptable quality level of performance and services offered by the library.

For this purpose the main actions undertaken by management were:

1 Reconsider purchasing policy and existing contracts with the publishers

2 Increase cooperation strategies with others libraries and institutions

3 Strengthen the knowledge of existing resources and encourage their use through a continuous education offers of courses and seminars for users

4 Promote and encourage the use of open access journals and boost the information retrieval and document supply services

5 Open the library to new initiatives encouraging visits of researchers and a redefining new use of spaces and materials

## 2. Reconsider purchasing policy

The cuts in funding firstly involves reconsidering purchasing policy and existing contracts with the main publishers. Up to 2009 the subscription cuts of a journal was decided by a panel of experts on the basis of a number of parameters such as the number of articles downloaded, the relevance and authority of the title in its own field, the impact factor value, the continuity of collections and the presence in other national catalogues. Starting from 2010 the downloads and the cost per download have become the main and almost the only criteria in order to carry out cuts and disposals. The contracts with the three giants of scientific publishing (i.e. Elsevier, Springer and Wiley) were the first and foremost to be interested by this earthquake. The "big deal" model contract with Elsevier was left and from about 2,000 title of 2009 we decreased the amount to the current 139 titles. Springer moved from 63 to 32 while for Wiley the percentage was sensibly higher from 154 to 18. Moreover both for Elsevier and Springer the costs in the new agreements were not calculated title by title but for the whole set of titles with a remarkable saving. The subscription model print+online format was also largely left maintaining only the cheaper format between the two. Even if the bent was generally to favor the passage to the e-only, nevertheless in some cases one must consider the different impact of the Italian VAT that is 22% on the electronic format and only 4% for the paper version. After these reductions the journals directly subscribed to by the Institute decreased from 1147 to 350. However, compared to a reduction of 50% or more of the costs we had a decrease of downloaded articles of just over 20%, with a significant rebalancing of the cost per download. About this aspect the data on Elsevier's downloaded articles are the most relevant, showing a decrease from over 10 €per item in 2009 to 3,2 €in 2014.

## 3. Increase cooperation strategies

This was by far the most important factor in order to maintain a good quality standard in terms of the number of resources available for our researchers and to obtain a consistent reduction of expenditure.

Since 2004 the ISS Library was one of the main partner of the Bibliosan System, the Italian consortium grouping all the biomedical libraries acting under the umbrella of the Ministry of Health. The System is currently composed of 59 different institutions and has an annual budget of about 2,7 million euros, 2 of which is directly funded by the Ministry. Besides providing a range of services, such as a cumulative catalog of journals of all libraries, an interface to access

NILDE, the national document delivery system, Bibliosan above all ensures the acquisition of thousands of electronic journals and some databases through contracts signed with all the most important world publishers and aggregators. Figure 3 shows all existing contracts in 2015.

| BIBLIOSAN | AVAILABLE RESOURCES |
| --- | --- |
| ASM (AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR MICROBIOLOGY) | 11 Journals |
| BMJ | BMJ Journals, Best Practice, Clinical Evidence, BMJ Learning |
| COCHRANE LIBRARY | Database |
| EBSCO HOST | Medline Complete, Cinahl Plus with Full text, Food Science Source, Health Business Elite, Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection, Science & Technology Collection, Agricola |
| ELSEVIER | Science Direct Freedom Collection |
| FACULTY 1000 | Database |
| ISI THOMSON | WOS, Journal Citation Reports |
| JAMA | Jama & 9 Archives Journals |
| MARY ANN LIEBERT | 64 Journals |
| NPG(NATURE PUBLISHING GROUP) | 80 Journals |
| NEJM | The New England Journal of Medicine |
| OUP (OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS) | 126 Journals |
| PROQUEST | British Nursing Index, International Pharmaceutical Abstracts, Proquest International Datasets, Proquest Statistical Abstracts of the World |
| REFWORKS | Database |
| SAGE | 164 Journals |
| WILEY / BLACKWELL | 1300 Journals |

Fig.3

The Bibliosan System has enabled the ISS Library to maintain a relevant part of the resources that it could not directly buy with institutional funds, obtaining two basilar goals: A) a significant saving of money (0,9 m €per year) and B) find an at least partial solution to the issue of responding to researcher's expectations and needs.
At the same time a policy of shared acquisition and exchange of information and documents with other academic and research libraries at a local level was started in order to avoid duplications in purchasing and to have the widest possible coverage.

## 4. Strengthen the knowledge of resources

Often one of the main shortcomings of a library towards its users is that it does not provide a good information about the exploitation of available resources and offered services. Most of the researchers are indeed not be able to handle at their best several databases, platforms and products existing on the editorial market. So in most cases they fall into the so called Google syndrome, that means typing a few keywords in the first string of the interfaces and to receiving back a lot of results that are often not useful or with a low level of accuracy. But of course this is not the best way to achieve scientifically valid results in the biomedical field. Therefore, the in-depth knowledge of products and available resources and their proper use through the application of correct research strategies became the most important factor to achieve the best results. The role of the librarian in this literacy process is crucial. In order to enhance and favor the use of databases and publisher's platforms the ISS Library has promoted a set of continuing education courses and seminars. We have developed two different types of courses, for the internal researchers and for the operators of the national health service. The first, for internal users, was a light and short series of monthly seminars, lasting about two hours, on a specific product available at the library. The second kind, aimed at external physicians, nurses, psychologists, technicians, etc., was a long and detailed three days course about how to learn the correct use of the main databases, catalogues and indexes in the biomedical literature. Users response was very high in both cases and we had

in the last 5 years a total of 37 seminars with 680 attendees and 5 courses with 98 attendees. Surveys results on this topic has been very positive and demonstrates the importance of continuing education and literacy in the Library.

## 5. Promote the use of OA Journals and boost the DD Service

Open access journals play another important role in this match. Encourage and support their use in many cases may represent a valid alternative to the use of subscribed journals, such as resorting to the document delivery service.
The Document Delivery office of the Library and the Documentation Service of ISS supply all the document not freely accessible directly to the researchers of the Institute. We strongly recommend the researchers to use this channel in case of journals  not renewed because of a number of downloaded articles lower to the fixed ceiling. The first investigation is made by the library on a national basis through NILDE, the Italian network for interlibrary document exchange. The average response time of this channel is 0,5 day, so if the article is requested in the morning the researcher receives the full text on his/her desk in the early afternoon of the same day. Otherwise, in the case of a document which cannot be found, the request is switched to the Documentation Service that, through the DOCLINE  System of the American National Library of Medicine or the British Library Document Supply Service, generally provides all the articles within 2/3 days. With the cut to resources this service has strengthened and researchers were invited to turn to it in case of denied access for online documents. A new procedure with a request sent by an electronic form was arranged and the feedback from the researchers was good and considerably higher than in the previous periods. Compared to previous years before the onset of the crisis we had an average increase of about 30% of documents supplied in this way.

## 6. Open the Library to new initiatives

With the advent of the electronic age the daily presence of users in the library has been drastically reduced. The relationship between user and library staff is no longer direct but a remote contact and this changes also the user's practice and the way to use library services with a loss of value in terms of potential importance of the library in a research institute. To counter this trend new initiatives were promoted in order to reconnect users to the library under different perspectives. Two new services in particular were established: the Reading Room Reservation and the Books in Exhibition and Photo on demand. Since January 2015, the Reading Room of the Library is available for reservation. It can be reserved exclusively by internal users for institutional activities of short duration (meetings, seminars etc.) on Tuesday and Friday afternoon. So the library becomes an open space for working and for social and institutional initiatives. LibrinMostra  (Books in Exhibition) is a service both for internal and external users. For the internal users the Library can organize, on request of ISS staff, special exhibitions on occasion of events taking place at ISS (conferences, courses, seminars, workshops, visits by guests etc.). The exhibition can also be introduced by a presentation illustrating the history of the Collection from its origins till today. While for external users the Library organizes guided tours (accompanied by a viewing of selected volumes) and, on request, the visit can be preceded by a presentation of the Collection. Moreover, the Photo on demand  service can supply images from the Rare Books Collection to the ISS staff for work purposes (conference communications, publication of articles, production of leaflets, etc.).

## Conclusions

As shown, the effects of the crisis could lead to a real collapse of the library in terms of performance and quality and quantity of services offered to users. But every cloud has a silver lining and a negative factor can also produce a positive lesson. According to this perspective the budget cuts may also be seen as an opportunity to reassess and analyze the real needs of subscribed resources and to eliminate possible waste found in reconnaissance. New initiatives can be taken to bring users back to the library and to provide a better and more conscious use of available resources. The literacy process becomes one of the main strategic factor to cope with the decrease in resources. But above all, it is important to follow the principle "Union is strength". Faced with the increasingly aggressive pricing policy set by the publishers the only way to counter this trend is giving rise to consortia in order to obtain the best possible purchasing conditions, to share resources and costs and eliminate expensive duplication. Certainly this is not the cure for all ills, but it can serve to contain the damage at a time of serious economic crisis such as the one we are going through.