

Procuring Electronic Information through Consortia: Current Trends in India, Maitrayee Ghosh

Abstract:

The tremendous growths as well as diversity of explicit knowledge, increased users' demands, diminished budgets, and galloping prices for subscribing to periodicals in combination with technological advancement have resulted in the development of "shared subscription" or "consortia-based subscription" to journals everywhere in the world. There is a growing trend towards joint purchasing, consortia-based subscription agreements, collaboration and partnerships. Libraries faced with diminishing or at the best static financial allocations have to consider new ways of consolidating global resources amongst themselves in order to maximize their limited financial resources. This article discusses the concepts, the areas and modalities for cooperation through library consortia in a networked information environment & future prospects for library consortia from an Indian perspective.

Key words: **Library Consortia, Electronic Information, Shared- Subscription, Information & Communication Technology, Indian Libraries.**

1. Introduction:

The arrival of electronic books and online journals has made it mandatory for Information Professionals to purchase their resources through consortia. Purchase of information resources through consortia has become a very important feature on the academic library scene. Today libraries are pursuing their old mission of library cooperation with a new face in the name of consortia; those attempting to fulfil their mission in a traditional way un-

der the current circumstances, find themselves confronted with old obstacles i.e. declining budget resources, increasing publication costs, and rising expectations by their clientele. Whereas developed countries are currently pursuing consortia as a cost effective means of securing electronic resources, India is still holed up with the basic method of sharing of book and periodical materials in their hard copies. The only difference being that requests for document delivery are being made either through electronic format or fax other than the usual snail mail.

Currently many libraries in India have setup consortia amongst themselves for purposes of resource sharing. Under the new arrangement, libraries are encountering a different set of difficulties i.e. complex technological requirements, new methods of scholarly communication, and pricing of publications unlike anything seen in the past. Groupings of libraries with similar purposes, interests or need and consortia formation were reinvented and reinvigorated by the opportunities and challenges of ICT. Libraries once again are finding that institutions working together can accomplish far more than they can individually. For instance, because many electronic products are priced out of reach for a single institution; and the general trend towards tight budgets, libraries look towards consortia as a way of reducing costs by subscribing as a group to commonly used databases, relying on the economies of scale to bring prices down. Consortia have facilitated libraries to gain the benefit of wider access to electronic resources at affordable costs and at the best terms of licenses.

For the past two decades, India has witnessed a sharp and persistent decline in the number of subscriptions to research journals by educational and research institutions. This decline has been attributed to increase in the cost of journals, devaluation of rupees against major foreign currencies, static library budgets, etc. As a result, the total research productivity of the country, in terms of number of research articles produced by our researchers has declined by more than 2% in the past one decade. Today, digital databases licensed to a consortium can be made available to everyone in the organization at the same time. The inherent advantages of cooperation in this new technological environment are leading to the resurrection of older consortia and the formation of new ones.

2. Definition, feature & prerequisites of Library Consortia

The term 'consortium' is derived from the field of economics and refers to the grouping together of different independent companies in order to bring together financial or material resources under a single managing body for the joint performance of specific operations. A consortium may comprise an informal group with reciprocal agreements between partners or it may constitute a separate legal entity in itself. A purchasing group may be considered as an example of an informal consortium. Library consortium is "a generic term to indicate any group of libraries that are working together toward a common goal, whether to expend cooperation on traditional library services (such as collection development) or electronic information services." Consortia may be loosely affiliated to "buying clubs"

or highly- organized virtual groups. They may be constructed in a decentralized fashion or in a more centralized manner. Members of consortia may be geographically close, as are those in the Washington Research Library Consortium (WRLC) or separated by physical distance, as is the case in the Consortium for Educational Technology for University Systems (CETUS). Consortia members may be the same type of organization (a group of academic libraries), or they may have another common element (all of the libraries from a particular state).

John .F. Helmer in his article mentioned "Modern library consortia take many forms, from highly centralized, well-staffed, and tightly integrated organizations to loose federations or 'buying clubs' purchasing products that require minimal cooperation and no central staff. There is no single successful model. Some rely on carefully crafted byelaws, memoranda of understanding, and an extensive system of advisory committees while others seem to have given no thought to governance and are completely dependent on the collaborative instincts of a few individuals." Therefore the salient features of library consortia are:

- To meet the thrust of information need of end users.
- To collect all the documents published anywhere in the world.
- To overcome language barriers.
- To eliminate various problems faced by libraries to provide information to the users.

The participating libraries need to come together for electronic resource sharing and cooperate in following areas:

- Developing the collection on shared basis.
- Developing services for exploiting such a collection.
- Promoting the culture of electronic access.

Prerequisites:

Member libraries have agreed to:

- Maintain appropriate levels of library acquisitions funding to support core local needs and contribute to the aggregate collection.
- Implement a cooperative process for selecting and funding shared purchases & assign primary collection development responsibility for specific subject areas to appropriate member libraries.

In order to achieve these goals action plans for the following areas are to be elaborated:

- Consolidation and expansion of the network.
- Education and training.
- Improvement of working conditions in libraries.
- Work for target groups, setting up collections of special library materials, and introducing new information resources.

3. Developments in the information industry:

The scholarly journals and associated services are undergoing significant changes due to the advent of digital publishing technologies and Internet. The emergence of the e-journal has made the most significant impact. Apart from traditional publishers making available electronic versions of their journals on the Internet, new e-journal service providers have surfaced. These include aggregators like Ingenta subscription cum -aggregation agencies like EBSCO, portal -cum -

aggregation services like Biomednet etc. J-gate is one of such initiatives in India; it is an e-journal portal and access gateway that provides access to global literature in scholarly and research journals. In the e-journal environment, libraries need a publisher-independent, single point gateway for accessing the e-journals they subscribe.

4. Consortia Initiatives in India:

In India library networks started with the initiatives of NISSAT (National Information System for Science & Technology; presently named as NISCAIR) in forming CALIBNET (Calcutta Library Network) in 1986, DELNET (Developing Library Network, New-Delhi) in 1988, and other networks subsequently to promote resource sharing among libraries. The UGC set up INFLIBNET in 1988. "Indian Universities and research laboratories spend an estimated Rs.200 a year on subscribing to international scholarly and research journals. This investment brings to the community of Indian Scientists access to about 6000 scholarly and research journals. However, Indian Scientists continue to suffer from information poverty." There are many libraries in India that have set-up consortia amongst themselves. Few of them are summarized as below:

- Indian Digital library of Engineering Sciences and Technology (INDEST) Consortium

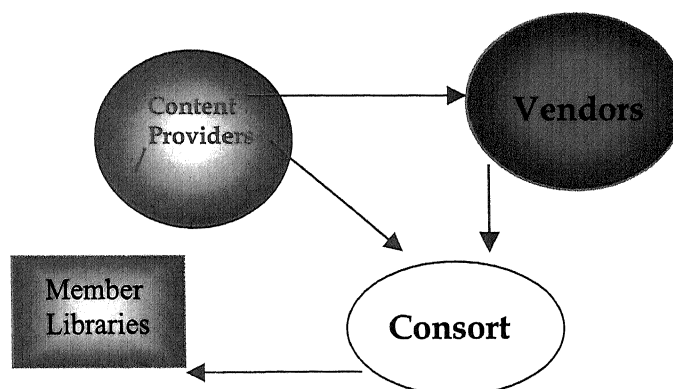


Fig: 1 Library consortia-filling the gap

(INDEST)—Ministry of human Resource development (MHRD) Government of India has set up consortia based subscription to electronic resources for technical education System in India. The consortia is available in three models. All the IITs, IIMs, Regional Engineering Colleges are its members. This is an open ended proposition and any institution can join to share the benefits of lower subscription rate.

b. INFLIBNET: Consortium of E journals among university libraries

Under UGC (University Grant Commission, India) Info-net University libraries in India will form consortium of e-journals. It is being planned to provide this service through higher bandwidth Internet connection, which will be given to the university libraries in a phased manner.

INFLIBNET is providing more services through consortia with the help of the following steps:

a. Access to full text of publication—through international vendors.

b. Organization and access to Internet Resources.

c. Creation of digital libraries.

d. Cat-India-A comprehensive national bibliographic database.

c. Forum for Resource Sharing in Astrophysics and Astronomy (FORSAA)

Member of FORSAA are Indian Institute of Astrophysics (IIA), Inter- University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCCA), National Centre for Radio Astrophysics (NCRA), Physical Research Laboratory (PRL), Raman Research Institute (RRI), Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), subscribing to common database full text Kluwer e-journal on behalf of all member libraries for their use.

d. Forum for Resource Sharing in Astrology (FORSA)

Electronic access to e-journals published by a few publishers with member & branch libraries has been made possible under this forum.

e. Consortium for (CSIR) laboratories for accessing e-journals

CSIR is responsible for research and development in science and technology. The major objective of CSIR consortia is to strengthen CSIR library resources by pooling, sharing and providing electronic access to scholars and scientists and promote the culture of electronic access. A negotiation committee was constituted & subsequently an agreement was signed in June 2002, with E-journal publisher, M/s Elsevier Science for a period of four years for 1200 journals. Under this scheme, CSIR scientists will be able to access these journals and download materials for their use.

f. JCCC@VIC- a NISSAT Funded initiative for networked resource sharing Consortia for journals

Informatics launched formal & organized resource sharing consortium using JCCC (J-Gate Custom Content for Consortia) as the basis, the client is Virtual Information Centre (VIC) at ICICI Knowledge- park (ICICI-KP). The Knowledge Park is a very sophisticated International research infrastructure promoted jointly by Andhra Pradesh Government, ICICI and the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR). "A challenge that confronted ICICI-KP was providing access to its users in the park for research information in several diverse areas from bio-technology to Information Technology. It found a solution to this challenge in the concept of JCCC" [1]. Seven institutions including ICICI-KP that currently participate in this consortium are:

- Virtual Information Centre (Consortium leader)

- Indian Institute of Chemical Technology Hyderabad.

- Centre for Cellular & Molecular Biology, Hyderabad

- National Institute of Nutrition Hyderabad

- ICRISAT Hyderabad

- National Chemical Laboratory, Pune

The consortium selected 500+ journal titles subscribed to by members. JCCC is a central database and gateway for the bibliographic content of these journals upgraded regularly.

g. SNTD University consortia of Library and Information science abstract (LISA) with six other universities.

h. IIM (Indian Institute of Management) consortia:

Sharing 33 Kluwer journals of Management Sciences within six IIM Institutes in India.

i. Chandigarh Libraries consortium (CLC)

A forum representing important institutional & college libraries with its headquarter at Central State Library Chandigarh.

5. Issues related to procurement of Electronic information:

In the print environment, obtaining publications could be as easy as purchasing books and journals and storing them on shelves. In contrast, obtaining electronic publications is much more complex. Access and usage conditions can vary largely for different publications; details typically are specified in separate contracts, so-called license agreements. A number of issues need to be considered:

5.1 Access conditions:

Librarians must be aware that "obtaining electronic publications" usually means leasing access rights for a given time rather than obtaining physical items. At the end of a leasing period, libraries may be left without anything, maybe even without the right to access those volumes published during the leasing period. Future access to electronic publications will depend on the way they are archived and made accessible to users. All solutions currently mentioned in license agreements should be regarded as temporary and ephemeral as it is impossible to predict which solutions may be valid in only a few years time.

It is obvious that institutions should do archiving with long-term commitment to this issue, and librarians should advocate a stable and reliable solution. In case of E-journals, if a particular publisher or aggregator stops a publication or any other situation arises, the library will not have a copy.

5.2 Usage conditions:

The notion of one copyright applicable to all users is no longer true. While readers usually know for which purposes print publications can be used, they are often not aware of certain restrictions that must be adhered to in the electronic environment. To add to the confusion, different rights can apply to users from different institutes, countries, or user groups. With electronic publications, we face disunion of information users. As a consequence, the responsibility of the individual librarian rises considerably. If contract terms are unfavourable or - even worse - unacceptable, we must negotiate with publishers instead of being able to rely on general copyright. In order to not abandon important rights we had with print publications, all clauses of a license agreement should be read carefully before a contract is signed, even though this is a time-consuming task. For instance, attention should be paid to the following:

6. Benefits, Drawbacks and possible solutions:

The following benefits accrue to a library consortia:

- Library consortia enrich the educational, intellectual, informational and social aspirations of users; through the cooperative provision of superior quality library resources and services made available to the users. Many electronic products are priced out of reach for a single institution. The days of building an independent reference library are over and the days of networked information are upon us.

- Formation of library consortia allows gaining competitive

advantage by pooling resources. Mutual interests and complementary skills which develop as a result of consortia, bring with them better solutions and help in bridging the gap between information resources rich and resources deficient libraries.

- A major priority of libraries is cooperative collection development, which aims to increase the scope of information resources available locally to faculty and students of the institutions.

- Consortia link libraries into a solid network of cooperating entities that benefit the users. Every library is liable to send their respective holding to other libraries under a resource sharing program. The ultimate purpose is to improve the ability of libraries to serve their users through interlibrary cooperation. Consortia are ambitious networks of both electronic and non-electronic resources & services.

Probable drawbacks are as follows:

- Membership fees:

Organizing body may charge excessive contribution fees as per their will. There are chances of manipulation of funds.

- Bureaucracy and slow change implementation- Since there is no competition, bureaucracy may arise in a consortium.

- Potential conflict:

Libraries may join more than one consortium to meet various needs; each organization has its own bureaucracy, culture, level of technology, staff size, budgetary constraints, etc.

- User authentication:

Unlike in the print world, electronic information requires validation of the rights of the user. User authentication is regarded as an essential element of electronic resource sharing.

- Preservation and archiving:

Electronic information archiving and preservation has barely surfaced as very complex issue.

What needs to be done:

India should take initiatives to establish National Archival Cen-

tres like the US and a few other countries. The mission of the National Archival Centre would be:

- To build archival collection of important scholarly journal literature.

- To help fill gaps in existing library collections of journal backfiles.

- To reduce long term capital and operating costs associated with storage.

Democracy is the greatest asset and principle for equality. All members of the consortium should be encouraged to take active part in the decision making regarding subscriptions, funding etc. There is a need for regular dialogue among the member libraries. Transparency and trust would facilitate achieving the goals. At the same time it should be strong enough that no one group or part of group utilizes its benefits only for itself.

7. Conclusion:

The traditional library organizations have supported consortia developments, although it is understood that to get maximum benefits new agencies are required to be created with the necessary expertise to undertake these complicated tasks such as negotiating purchases for library consortia. The success of consortia like other cooperative efforts depends on the proper mix of enthusiasm, innovative thinking, caution and skepticism. A successful consortium has to have clear goals, a coherent membership and a structure, which matches its goals and membership. The national and regional library organizations in India should acquire these three complementary qualities to be successful in this effort.

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