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How “free” we are: survey of the Italian policy in the document supply service

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years the information landscape has witnessed considerable changes, accompanied by the emergence of a new set of challenges. On the one hand the Internet enables users to search autonomously for information and even, in some cases, to gain immediate access to the full-text of relevant articles; on the other hand the international Open Access movement is leading to major changes in the approach of publishers to the distribution of information and is opening up new frontiers to researchers in their quest for access to documents. As a consequence the library services have also been affected by developments in digital technology and the Internet. Notwithstanding this, the document delivery (DD) service has preserved its role, because large volumes of documents are not freely available online. There is lively debate in the world of libraries on the controversial issue of whether or not this service should be paid for. The scope of this study is to analyse the Italian situation and to evaluate the policies - free or fee-based – that biomedical libraries are pursuing in the provision of the DD service. Above all, the study aims to determine the trend in this service in Italy and how “free” it really is. Special attention is devoted to the Library of the Italian National Institute of Health-*Istituto Superiore di Sanità* (ISS), which is one of the major suppliers of documents in the Italian biomedical field.

THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

Unlike some foreign countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, Italy has no consolidated tradition of cooperation in the library and document delivery spheres and many projects have been carried out without institutional funding. As a consequence, Italian programmes for coordination in these areas are varied and the panorama is somewhat segmented, as can be seen from the following:

a) *Union catalogues*

The promotion and development of these tools has improved the sharing of resources among Italian libraries since the '70s, when the first projects of national union catalogues - such as ACNP and SBN - were launched. The main union catalogues currently used in Italy are the following:

- *SBN-Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale* is the union catalogue of Italian libraries that have joined the National Library Service¹, a network created by the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities in cooperation with the regions and universities. More than 2,700 libraries participate in the SBN network, including those of state, city, university and academic institutions. The catalogue, accessible on the web, currently holds over 8 million² bibliographic descriptions.

¹ <http://www.sbn.it>

² This data refers to SBN databases *Libro antico* and *Libro moderno*

- *ACNP-Archivio Collettivo Nazionale dei Periodici* is the Italian union catalogue of serials, which collects detailed data on the holdings and services of Italian libraries. It is accessible on the web³ and contains 134,985 records of journals held by 2,519 libraries. ACNP is not only a catalogue, but also provides additional services such as links to the ISSN network and electronic journals, access to the table of contents (ToC) of a large number of journals, etc.
- *SBBL-Sistema Bibliotecario Biomedico Lombardo* is the library system of the Lombardia Region and was established in 1994⁴. The core system now comprises 16 libraries belonging to universities, research institutes and IRCCS (Scientific Institutes for Research, Hospitalisation and Health Care). The SBBL union catalogue is freely available on the Internet and is also able to handle document delivery requests online.
- *GIDIF,RBM-Gruppo Italiano Documentalisti dell'Industria Farmaceutica e degli Istituti di Ricerca Biomedica* is the union catalogue of the Italian Group of Documentalists of the Pharmaceutical Industry⁵ and was founded in 1985 to improve professional skills and information resources among biomedical documentalists. This catalogue - which is not accessible to the general public - was created to facilitate the free exchange of documents among participants.

b) Consortia

In Italy there are three main consortia covering different geographical areas, while a project is under way to bring representatives from each consortium together in a nation-wide coordinating committee. The principal objective of these structures is to promote cooperation among libraries in the academic and research fields, in order to improve conditions for the acquisition of electronic resources (databases and e-journals) as well as library automation and services. The three consortia operate under the umbrella of the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research and are the following:

- *CILEA-Consortio Interuniversitario Lombardo per la Elaborazione Automatica* is the Northern Italian library consortium founded in 1974⁶ and currently comprises 10 universities of Lombardy Region.
- *CIPE-Cooperazione Interuniversitaria Periodici Elettronici* is the Central-Northeastern Italian library consortium founded in 1999⁷ and currently embraces 12 universities.
- *CIBER/CASPUR. CIBER–Coordinamento Interuniversitario Basi Dati & Editoria in Rete* is the Central–Southern Italian library consortium founded in 1999 and based in Rome⁸: it currently comprises 27 Italian universities as full members and some affiliated institutions. CIBER uses *CASPUR–Consortio Interuniversitario Applicazioni di SuperCalcolo Università⁹ e Ricerca*, an interuniversity consortium for advanced computing applications, as its technical support for databases and e-journal access and archiving.

³ <http://www.cib.unibo.it/acnp>

⁴ <http://www.sbbl.it>

⁵ <http://www.gidif-rbm.it>

⁶ <http://www.cilea.it>

⁷ <http://www.unicipe.it>

⁸ <http://www.uniciber.it>

⁹ <http://www.caspu.it>

c) *DD cooperative initiatives*

DD policy in Italy is not currently coordinated by any institutional structure, although several isolated initiatives have been launched with the aim of involving libraries at the national level.

For many years the union catalogues were the main tools to identify/locate documents and to promote the DD service among libraries. At the end of the '90s two new library networks were launched, in cooperation with the ACNP catalogue, with the specific aim of promoting and improving the document supply service among participant libraries at the national level:

- *NILDE–Network InterLibrary Document Exchanging* is a web-based document delivery system launched in 2001 by the Bologna Area Library of the Italian National Research Council-*Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche* (CNR)¹⁰. It is a multidisciplinary document transmission network consisting of over 500 libraries and based on Internet technologies and standardized operations. The NILDE system aims to promote cooperation among Italian libraries, to reduce DD management costs and to achieve short turnaround times in satisfying DD requests.
- *BIBLIOSAN* was launched as a project - funded by the Italian Ministry of Health - in early 2003¹¹. It now operates as a cooperative network of 55 libraries and documentation centres of Italian biomedical research institutes and aims to integrate the information resources of the participating institutes. The principal objectives of BIBLIOSAN are: the sharing of journals held by all participants through a collective catalogue accessible via the web; the provision of an efficient document exchange and delivery system; the management of a shared acquisition policy. All the libraries involved in BIBLIOSAN also join the ACNP catalogue and the NILDE network.

THE SURVEY

As can be seen from the above, the DD service in Italy is not homogeneous even within single cooperation initiatives. On the basis of this consideration, the present study aimed to investigate the complexities of the Italian environment. The analysis was carried out on the basis of the union catalogue of serials ACNP, which is the major resource for biomedical libraries in the identification and location of documents as well as in the acquisition of information about library holdings and services. Whenever the ACNP data were either incomplete or not up to date, the libraries' web sites were consulted, where available.

The libraries to be included in the analysis were selected in accordance with the following criteria:

- a) libraries specialized in biology, medicine, public health and related sciences;
- b) only centralized University libraries (inter-departmental and area libraries), which are more representative of the academic environment in Italy;
- c) libraries of pharmaceutical firms whose data were not updated in the ACNP were excluded.

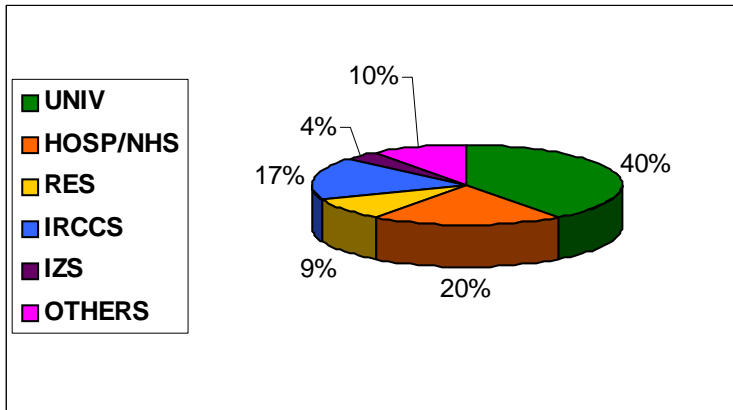
As a result, out of the approximately 900 ACNP libraries covering biomedical and related fields, 253 (nearly 30% of the total) were analysed for the scope of this study.

Figure 1 (*Types of Library*) shows that most of the libraries examined (53%) operate within academic and research environment (universities, research institutes and public veterinary health institutes), while 37% belong to the hospital world (hospitals, National Health Service, IRCCS). The remaining 10% are libraries from other organisations involved in the field of biomedicine.

¹⁰ <http://nilde.bo.cnr.it>

¹¹ <http://www.bibliosan.it>

Figure 1 – Types of Library



LEGENDA	
UNIV	Universities
HOSP/NHS	Hospitals/National Health Service
RES	Research institutes
IRCCS	Scientific institutes for research, hospitalisation and health care
IZS	Public veterinary health institutes
OTHERS	Foundations, Centres, etc.

As shown in Figure 2 (*Library holdings*), most of the libraries examined (48%) holds a medium-small sized collection consisting of between 101 and 500 journals, while 29% hold less than 101 journals. A good number of libraries (23%) holds more than 500 journals, but only 9% of these have a collection consisting of more than 1000 journals. The data relating to collection size in this study refer only to printed journals, as information regarding collections of e-journals is not included in ACNP and is seldom available on the libraries' web-sites. Besides, the size of e-journal collections was considered to be outside the scope of this study, since it does not affect the free or fee-based policies adopted by libraries for their DD service.

Figure 2 – Library holdings

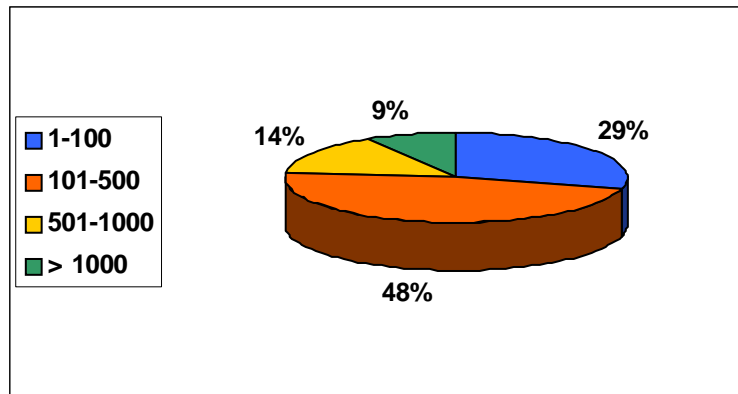


Figure 3 (*DD service*) shows that 45% of biomedical libraries provide DD service on an exchange or free basis, while only 5% provide it exclusively for a fee. It is important to underline that 15% of libraries have adopted a hybrid system (fee or free/exchange basis), albeit of different kinds. It is also remarkable that a large number of libraries (35%) - in spite of their participation in the ACNP union catalogue - appear not to provide any DD service at all (in some cases it is for internal users only). Naturally, the differences between DD policies may depend on more than one factor (individual library rules, holding size, objectives, etc.) and it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the reasons underlying libraries' DD policies.

Figure 3 – DD service

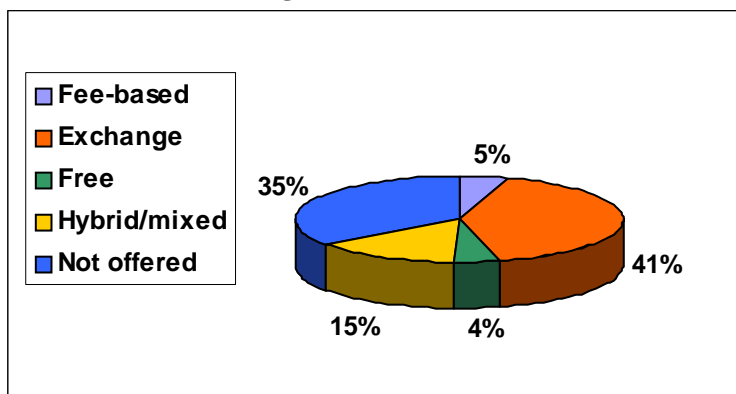
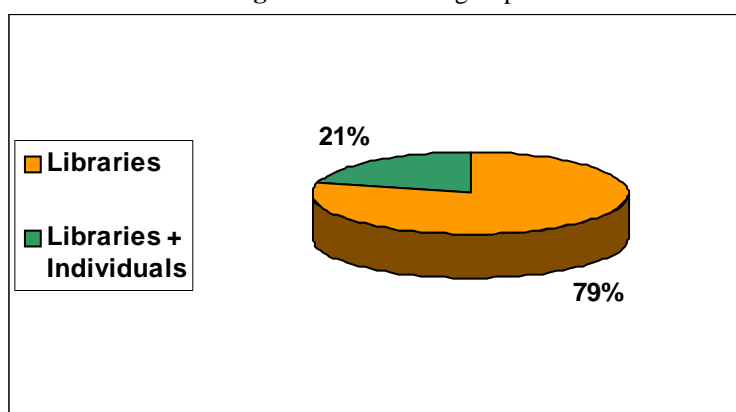


Figure 4 (*DD user groups*) contains data relating to the user groups which the DD service is provided to. Most libraries (79%) provide the service only to other libraries, although a smaller group (21%) also offers it to individuals. As a rule, libraries that supply a fee-based DD service effectively do so to both libraries and end-users: they are generally medium sized or large libraries that are obliged to amortize the considerable costs of subscriptions, staff and facilities.

Figure 4 – DD user groups



DD AT THE ISS LIBRARY

The activities of the ISS Library fall within the context outlined above. The Library specializes in scientific documentation, with special emphasis on the biomedical and public health fields, and supports the general aims of the Institute through its pivotal role in the spreading of information at the local, national and international levels. Its holdings consist mainly of periodicals and include more than 9,000 printed journal titles - almost 2,000 of which are current – and about 4,800 electronic journals. There are also about 200,000 monographs and a special collection of valuable rare books (XVI-XX centuries). On account of its comprehensive collection of documents published by the *World Health Organization* (WHO), the Library also acts as a *de facto* WHO depositary library and since 1991 has been one of two WHO Documentation Centres (WHO/DC) in Italy¹². As a WHO/DC the Library supports the activity of this organisation by promoting in Italy the free distribution of the documents produced by the WHO Headquarters and WHO Europe.

¹² The other Italian WHO Documentation Centre is in Caltanissetta, Sicily

The ISS Library has offered a DD service since its origins¹³, though the policy governing it has seen two phases:

- until May 1998 the DD service was provided free of charge at the national level, within the framework of a policy of cooperation with other biomedical libraries and, in particular, with partners in the Italian National Health Service-*Servizio Sanitario Nazionale* (SSN)
- since June 1998 the DD has been governed by Ministerial Decree (DM) 1/6/1998 (later replaced by DM 6/3/2000), which introduced a fee-based system. The decree provides for the supply of documents by the ISS Library against payment, with the fee being considered as a reimbursement of expenses: the cost of each item, delivery costs included, is calculated on a lump-sum basis according to the number of pages of each document requested and the geographic origins of the request (Italy, EU countries, other countries).

The same decree also provides for documents to be supplied free to authorised institutions and users. The ISS Library thus in effect offers a hybrid service, which is provided free of charge in the following cases:

- whenever the request comes from a developing country;
- whenever users request a WHO publication;
- whenever the request comes from a participant in a library network, with which there is an official document exchange agreement.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of ACNP data clearly shows that about 60% of Italian libraries – regardless of the size of their collections and their individual roles – adopt a policy based above all on the free supply of documents, even though 15% of them adopted a hybrid system. It is nonetheless encouraging to note that only a few (5%) provide a DD service exclusively on a fee basis. The other aspect that emerges clearly is that a substantial percentage of the libraries examined (47% of the total) have joined initiatives launched specifically to promote the exchange of documents, such as NILDE. This is particularly of interest in a country like Italy, where policies of cooperation are still somewhat undeveloped.

The present study also provided an opportunity to examine the DD service offered by the ISS Library within the Italian context. As noted, this Library provides the service on a hybrid basis, although a considerable number of DD transactions are completed free or on an exchange basis: in 2005 these accounted for 56% of the total. The future development of the DD service at the ISS Library depends above all on the policy of the parent institution, although there has always been a tendency to conform with policies adopted by other libraries. The current trend is to continue with the hybrid system with a view to improving the service. Two initiatives are currently under way:

- a) to reduce the cost of the DD service and to simplify invoicing procedures
- b) to introduce a new payment system based on POS technology, which would allow users to pay for the service online with a credit card.

It is hoped that these initiatives will enable the ISS Library to become even more user-friendly, while at the same time meeting the needs of staff.

In conclusion it is possible to say that a more general examination of the future place of the DD service in the library world is necessary. Above all, it is important to evaluate the role of libraries as suppliers of documents in the digital age and to monitor closely the changes taking place in the

¹³ The ISS Library was centralised in 1980. Before this date there were 10 different Laboratory libraries

information world, in order to understand how the DD policy will be affected and how improvements can be made.

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