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Resource sharing: academic library consortia in the digital age

A literature review

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RESOURCE SHARING: ACADEMIC LIBRARY CONSORTIA IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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1. Introduction

The creation and development of new academic library consortia - or the "resurgence of library consortia" (Kopp 1998, p. 12) - has characterized the last 10 years, involving the libraries worldwide. The development of library consortia happens in a very complex phase of the academic library life, as:

"the decisions libraries face are becoming more complex, the risks are greater, and the resources – both human and fiscal – are becoming more scarce" (Hirshon 1999, p. 124)

Today libraries have to face change management, and they are seeking tools to cope with it, developing strategic alliances with other libraries (Hirshon 1995 p. 37 - 38). Cooperation seems to be the key for libraries to survive. Cooperation efforts vary, depending on geographic areas and on different cultural traditions, but they seem present throughout the world: on one side, nations with libraries used to strong practice in cooperation and sharing have seen a flourishing of new cooperative initiatives and formal consortia; on the other side, nations where this collaborative practice was not within its culture have received a boast towards it.

In Europe the phenomenon of library academic consortia is relatively new: the same specialised literature has paid particular attention to its development in Europe starting from 1998, also reflecting the literature developed on the topic in the US context. The phenomenon has involved even most of the Italian academic libraries, which have assumed different attitudes depending on the different contexts.

1.1 The purpose of the research

Within the new context in which academic libraries live, and starting with the consideration that "there is no single best model for a library consortium" (Helmer 1999, p. 119), the purpose of the research is:

- to analyse the origins and development of which academic library consortia in different contexts
- to evaluate which have been the advantages and disadvantages of working in cooperative form
- to provide an overview of library academic consortia models in U.S. and Europe, where the phenomenon of consortia creation and development is more recent
- to identify new trends and models, based on the needs of the market (represented by the various stakeholders)

The research takes into consideration the different stakeholders involved in the process of scholarly communication, and dwells on the impact that consortia activities have in the wider context, represented by institutions, libraries, publishers and users.

1.2 The focus of the research

To fully understand the phenomenon of academic library consortia it is essential to focus the research on the following points:

- to explore the reasons for its development
- to see the emerging organizational models
- to investigate the reasons for success and the weak points
- to analyse advantages and disadvantages
- to identify the stakeholders, the parts involved in this process
- to evaluate the present situation in order to find out future trends

2 Historical background

2.1 Cooperation and resource sharing

Cooperation between academic libraries has always been at the basis of library activities. Both Bostick and Alexander report how this concept is strongly rooted in the US tradition, emphasizing how since 1880 this topic has been alive in professional literature (Alexander 2000, p. 2; Bostick 2001, p. 128). Many cooperative programs were developed during the past century (Weber 1976); cultural reasons and traditions caused its development particularly in the US area, where many cooperative activities were linked to the Library of Congress (distribution of bibliographic card catalogues; publication of LC subject headings), and where already in 1933 one of the still now most alive academic library consortia arose, the Triangle Research Libraries Network (Bostick 2000, p.16).

During the eighties the concept of cooperation, that is "how [libraries] can achieve their objective better by working together" (Sewell 1981, p. 9) has shifted towards the resource sharing concept. Resource sharing is a richer term, which encompasses also the strategic aspect to link users with the required information or material:

"The new term appears ... to assume a range of physical, intellectual and conceptual resources on the one hand and a body of people on the other, and covers the activities involved in organizing the one into a set of optimum relationships to meet the needs of the other" (Sewell 1981, p. 9).

The concepts of cooperation and resource sharing have underpinned Interlibrary loan arrangements, cooperative acquisition policies within groups of libraries, shared

cataloguing projects, also through the organization and administration of national and international programs (Smith 1993, p. 717).

Nowadays the term "resource sharing" best describes also cooperative efforts in managing e-resources (Evans 2002a, p. 213).

2.2 From library cooperation to library consortia

In analysing the US situation as regards the history of library cooperative initiatives, James Kopp emphasizes the passage from the "cooperation" phase to the "consortium" phase and observes how the term "consortium" begins to appear in the library literature during the 1950s and the 1960s, period in which in the US most of the academic library consortia were created (Kopp 1998).

The debate on the term "consortium" in library science literature is rich. As Giordano points out, the term encompasses a great number of cooperative activities and experiences depending on the contexts and times in which they grew (Giordano 2003, p. 1613). In trying to motivate the use of the term, Reinhardt points out how in Germany "consortium", which originally was linked mainly to legal context, was derived from an Anglo-American background and now assumes a broader meaning than it had, meaning more "partnership", "association" and referring to joint actions of libraries (Reinhardt and Boekhorts 2001, p. 67) .

2.3 The origins and development of library consortia

Kopp, founding his investigation on a series of studies, in particular Patrick's *Guidelines for library cooperation: development of academic library consortia* (Patrick 1972), stresses how during the 1960s the first important projects in library automations developed, and how consortia supported their activities sharing expertise in this field. Moreover, he reports how, according the *Guidelines*, the 125 US consortia analysed can be grouped in four main categories (Kopp 1998, p. 9):

- large consortia primarily concerned with computerized large scale technical processing
- small consortia concerned with user services and everyday problems
- limited-purpose consortia cooperating with respect to limited special subject areas
- limited-purpose consortia concerned primarily with interlibrary loan or reference network operations

As Bostick points out, in this period cooperation library focuses more on access than on ownership to materials (Bostick 2001, p. 129).

Consortia increase rapidly until the 1970s, focussing their activity in:

- Shared acquisition plans

- Resource sharing (interlibrary loan, document delivery)
- Cost reduction

but their activity shrinks between 1970s and 1980s, when a new phenomenon occurs: the development of "megaconsortia" such as OCLC and RLG , which offer to participating libraries bibliographic utilities: they are catalogue card production and interlibrary loan activities, but, most important and innovative, machine-readable records to be loaded into local systems.

Moreover, during the 1980s libraries concentrate their energies in implementing local integrated library systems and pioneering the use of technology, such as CD-ROMs installed in local networks, thus giving lower priority to consortial activities (Kopp 1998, pp. 10-11).

In Europe, with the exception of few countries with strong interlibrary cooperation traditions, mostly of the northern area, cooperative activities among libraries begin to bring shape during the seventies and are mainly based on the automation of catalogues processes. The phenomenon of the rise of library academic consortia is relatively new: the same specialised literature pays particular attention to its development in Europe starting from 1998: Spain: (Barrionuevo 2000), Catalonia: (Anglada and Comellas 2000), France (Berard 2001; Chartron 2001; Schmitt 2001), Greece (Xenidou-Dervou 2001; Xenidou-Dervou 2003); UK (Friend 1999; Auckland 2000; Ball and Pye 2000; Bley 2000), Finland (Hakli 2000), Germany (Reinhardt and Boekhorts 2001), Finland (Hakli 2000), Poland (Nikisch 2002), Netherlands (Klugkist 2001), Switzerland (Neubauer and Piguet 2001).

The phenomenon involves even most of the Italian academic libraries, and it assumes different attitudes depending on the different contexts (Giordano 2000; Giordano 2002). As in the other European countries, during these years the first interesting cooperative initiatives are linked to the automation of public library catalogues, through a national automation program, the "Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale"; to this program most of the academic libraries adhere after the promulgation of Act 168/89, with which the MURST (Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca Scientifica) is constituted and the financial and administrative autonomy of the University are established (Galluzzi 2001); this new context creates the premises for the organization of the academic library systems from which at the end of the nineties some of the academic library consortial alliances find the basis (e.g. the consortial groups CIPE and CIBER).

2.4 Consortia: the evolution of cooperation

"Resource sharing has been one of the fundamental principles for supporting library services, but the object of the sharing has changed over the years" (Morgan 1998, p. 40). The literature highlights how the nineties are the period in which cooperative academic library activities require the support of formal consortia, passing from a model of organizational self-sufficiency to a collaborative survival mode (Allen and

Hirshon 1998, p. 36). The reasons for the creation of new library consortia are summarized in three main points (Allen and Hirshon 1998, p. 37):

- To exploit resources by sharing existing collections or resources through virtual union catalogues
- To reduce the costs of member library operations by achieving better group purchase prices for information products
- To condition commercial publishers, with the aim to reduce the rate of rise in the cost of information

The need for libraries to reinforce mutual cooperation and to establish new kinds of consortia is provoked also by a number of factors (Hirshon 1995, p. 383-384):

- Economic reasons that cause less funding to higher education
- Quality improvement on customer services, which require to libraries to reduce operating costs and use savings to better satisfy users' needs
- Quantity and costs of scholarly publications
- Growth of costly information technology

According to Okerson, several factors make both possible and desirable the cooperative activity in the world of electronic information purchasing and provision (Okerson 2000):

- Quantity of new materials and electronic forms of old materials available
- Library users' expectations on the availability and access to that material
- Funding guaranteed by the U.S. state government and other national governments to support broad-based consortia to improve access to high-quality electronic information to a wide range of citizenry
- Willingness on publishers to negotiate with consortia rather than single institutions

Potter, in explaining the origins of five statewide US academic library consortia, points out how libraries are establishing alliances to identify and focus on common needs caused by the development of information technology, particularly the Internet and the World Wide Web (Potter 1997, p. 416). The debate on this issue is fierce: the decision to adhere to a consortium involves manifold aspects and is complex: libraries have to reflect on starting and belonging to consortia, since "… libraries have a tendency to proliferate partnerships, with the attendant risk of forming many not dissimilar affiliations, losing focus or dissipating their energies on the process" (Okerson 1996), and "overlap and competition among consortia for e-resource agreements seem to be increasing" (Peters 2001a).

3. Consortia organizational models

During the last decades different organisational cooperative models develop. In studying consortia models, Hirshon groups library consortia in four main categories, depending on the level of organizational decentralization / centralization. These models are based on different values and objectives, and also on the political realities of its membership (Hirshon 1995, p. 37 - 38):

- Loosely knit federations: the looser the model, the little risk and investment of time and the higher the flexibility, but also the lowest level of return
- Multi-type / multi-state network: this model, which may gather different types of libraries, benefits from a central staff; this consortium rarely obtains good discounts from vendors, and it lacks in cooperation among members, which is purely voluntary. This network often has no further sharing program, nor shares tools as virtual union catalogues
- Tightly-knight consortium: this model is rather flexible and may have a focused membership profile (e.g. research libraries) or heterogeneous profile (e.g. statewide); dedicated staff usually co-ordinate the development of the programme; the organisation may receive institutional funding for its management, or it may be supported also by external funding; this model of consortium often shares a virtual union or online catalogue, and a strategic vision of the services development; vendors are likely to offer higher discounts than the ones offered to the two previous models
- Centrally-funded statewide consortium: it has a sponsoring agency, and probably a separate source of funds; it is possible to obtain contracts and make available resources that each campus could not afford alone. Sometimes the central authority may operate inefficiently, but with a central source of dedicated funds, member libraries are more induced to collaborate than in the other models

In Europe organizational models emerging in the last decade have been identified and analysed by Giordano (Giordano 2002a, p. 48 - 49):

- National centralized model: a model based on the authoritative role of the national library, often within the context of a national or long-term project of electronic resources management, in which the management of electronic licenses is a part. Libraries (academic and non-academic) join the programme through an agreement with the central office (often a department of the national library), and take part in decisions through a structured system of governance, in which each member is represented (model defined as the "Nordic approach", since in this area it is best represented)

- National decentralized model: a model mostly developed in a University context, which may be not formalized in a legal structure (Italy ; France); University library administrators may play an important part in the policy of this structure, which generally has a main reference point, a board nominated by the members of the consortium. The main activity of this type of consortium is to negotiate licenses for e-resources, which are acquired by the different institutions, without central state funding. (Italy, France)
- Regional model: a form of cooperation structured in a regional or interregional context, with legal basis and administrative autonomy, that aims also to develop shared library services and technologies (Spain)

The main difference between the US and the European consortia is represented by the objectives of the consortia: while in US they tend to have a multiple-function role and to encompass a wide range of library services, in Europe it is generally limited to the management of electronic licenses (Rowse 2003, p. 3).

4. Library consortia : advantages, disadvantages and reasons for success

The debate on pros and cons of the reasons for the existence and activity of consortia is very rich and covers manifold aspects. On this issue, a study conducted by Ashcroft and Langdon has investigated with the aim to identify benefits and barriers to the purchase of electronic journals in UK and US (Ashcroft and Langdon 1999), and Thornton has analysed the impact of electronic resources on collection development, the roles of librarians and library consortia (Thornton 2000).
Helmer emphasizes how advantages may rise for all the parts involve: through consortia, vendors may introduce products to a new market but they can be also threatened in their profits; they may simplify or complicate communication, negotiation and licensing activities, payment activities. Through consortia the same libraries may gain from sharing expertise and accessing new resources, receiving new funds and developing professional skills; but they can lose local control, handicap decision making, reduce staff time, complicate administration relationship (Helmer 1999, p. 119).

4.1 Advantages

In his overview on the management issues of U.S co-operative initiatives, Evans points out that co-operation produces general benefits for libraries (Evans 2002a, p. 215 - 216):

- Improved access of information
- Stretch of limited resources
- Some gains provoked by sharing results
- More services advertising to patrons' advantage

- Improvement in the working relationships among the cooperating libraries

Even if not all the activities of consortia focus on joint purchasing of e-resources, this represents a large part of their tasks in consortia worldwide, and in this sector a number of positive issues arises from the development of consortia. Among the most evident advantages there are (Morgan 1998, p. 41) :

- Best price
- Wider, consistent access to resources
- More cooperative development with vendors and publishers
- Funding more easily coming from both internal and external sources

Also Stevens underlines advantages for libraries in collaborative purchasing (Stevens 2003) : higher quality content, economies of scale, lower costs, increased electronic access, higher stability in budget planning, less individual deals in a time of human resources constraints.

A wide research project commissioned by the Ingenta Institute, an independent organisation funded by Ingenta plc, and reported by Rowse (Rowse 2003) points out how the major benefits of consortial licensing has been fast and widespread penetration of electronic content, with "an increased return on library investment in research resources, and an increased institutional capacity for research output". Besides, the library community have had budgetary stability against inflation, since often the agreements for the online licenses include the "price-cap" solution for print holdings, which guarantees that the increases do not go over the 6 − 7%, where the average increases are 16 − 22%. Evidence in cost savings for document delivery is pointed out. On average, consortial licensing seems to advantage mostly small libraries.

The research evidences also that, in effect, benefits of working with consortia may create advantages not only for libraries but also for publishers: additional income; stable revenues guaranteed for succeeding three/five years; non-cancellation policies. Advantages for vendors have been described also by Sloan (Sloan 2000) and Stevens, who lists some of publishers and suppliers advantages: expanded readership, with consequent expanded visibility; greater and faster market penetration; theoretically less administration; incomes guaranteed with multi-year deals (Stevens 2003).

4.2 Disadvantages

Among the disadvantages of consortia for library members: (Morgan 1998, p. 41):

- It is not always possible to obtain the best price
- Decisions are delayed
- Enforcement of licensing agreement is more difficult

Also Stevens lists a series of disadvantages concerning libraries taking part in consortia: administration costs, less control in collection policy development, limits of mass purchases ("Big Deals") that impede selectivity, budget pressure, slow times in decision-making (Stevens 2003). Moreover, even publishers or aggregators may be subjected to disadvantages: overlapping and multi-consortia licensing that permit libraries to choose the best deal; income margin reductions; request for better prices and services; increase of client power; administration costs; dependency on consortia administration; larger publishers claim for little revenue in offering more content for not much more money.

The debate is intense and there are different positions: some doubt if there is a real economic advantage in using consortia to obtain lower prices for electronic resources (Goodman 2000), others fear that consortia development and activity may have a negative impact on the reforms in the system of scholarly communication (Landesman and Van Reenen 2000). Landesman and Van Reenen point out how consortia are mainly interested in discounts, regardless of costs, quality or pricing histories of the products. Furthermore, they are oriented in making bulk purchases, which encompass popular and desirable titles in the bundle. This choice may be dangerous, since titles not handled by consortia become less visible, and "pressed for staff, individual libraries may fail to purchase the high-quality, low-cost titles from small publishers, [since] they may be easy to afford, but they are labor intensive to add to the collection"(Landesman and Van Reenen 2000).

Peters punctually and effectively analyses the reasons for the inherent discontent within consortia, which may have inner tensions and contrasts (Peters 2003, p. 111 - 112):

- Too many meetings: "action is much more desired and valued than mere conversation…. meetings are very expensive…"
- Time delays: "consortial collaboration takes too long"
- Inefficiency: "consortial collaboration is too inefficient" nevertheless "the lure of consortial activity is not efficiency, but cost avoidance and capitalizing on opportunities that would be difficult or impossible to realize if libraries acted unilaterally"
- Ineffectiveness: "consortial efforts have a high failure rate"
- Ineffability: "sometimes the outputs and outcomes of consortial collaboration are too difficult and complex to express"
- Sustainability issues: "sustaining any consortial initiative is difficult"
- Scalability issues: the number of e-resource agreements established by consortia is limited; consortia should focus on making the best and fast use of the resources obtained by the agreement
- Too many: for an institution to participate to many consortia requires much staff time and efforts to sustain
- Too ossified: from time consortia time they need to be "re-energized" by new activities

- Idea and reality out of whack: "people are attracted to collaboration because of an idea, and they leave… because of reality". "Collaboration is difficult, frustrating work"
- Competition trumps collaboration: "compared to collaboration, competition is the stronger, more natural human drive"
- Surly Alexandrians: the desire to dispose of all the available information makes librarians Alexandrians, the impossibility to obtain it makes them "surly"

Also the research project commissioned by the Ingenta Institute, (Rowse 2003) calls attention also on a number of disadvantages of the purchasing model, which is leased-based, has non-cancellation clauses, is not very flexible (all or nothing packages); there is also concern in the power that big publishers are assuming, and in the threat that small learning society publishers may have in being cut out from this kind of deals. The research emphasizes anyway how the same small publishers acknowledge the truth of this threat, while big publishers consider price-capped deals and high level of market penetration as premises to a limitation in future revenue growth.

4.3 Reasons for success

Even if the literature asserts that there may be risks in managing deals in consortial form, it is undoubted that the phenomenon of the development of consortial activities has been successful: this success can be maintained if consortia from "buying clubs" become "agile innovation clubs"(Peters 2001b); they have to "shift gears and engage in a more deliberate strategic planning, with an eye to positive-long-term outcomes" (Peters 2001b, p. 150).

In presenting the Ohiolink consortium experience, among the reasons for success Hirshon emphasizes inter-institutional cooperation, a shared common vision and mission of each participant, which has to be willing to renounce institutional gain if necessary for the common good, and constant support throughout all levels of the organization, where staff has to be encouraged to generate better results than the ones each institution could reach by itself (Hirshon 1995, p. 386).

Okerson points out that a condition for success is that, within the consortium, members have to trust each other and know each other well enough to benefit from cooperation (Okerson 2000), and Evans sums up: "successful consortia require time to develop, a high level of trust in one's partner, and a willingness to contribute" (Evans 2002b, p. 286).

Reader identifies in organization and governance, policy and decision-making, negotiating and review, financial structure and product cost the issues determining the success of library consortia. Even if "there is no effective mean of [measuring success], according to Reader the winning issues are "the need, the will and the vision of the membership" (Reader 1999).

The debate on the future of library consortia is intense: an interesting viewpoint is presented in the study conducted by Schachf (Shachaf 2003), who studies library consortia development processes from an ecological approach: since consortia are organisms inserted in a context of relationships, they are affected by internal and external forces represented by the different stakeholders, and tend to adapt to the environment; in comparatively analysing eight nationwide library consortia, and with the support of U.S. models studied in literature, Schachf outlines four stages in the life-cycle of library consortia: embryonic, early development, development and maturation. From here two paths are outlined: a fifth disbanding stage, or alternatively Metaconsortia, with the corresponding examples of U.S. Farmington Plan, Canadian CISTI, or international USBE for disbanding, and International Coalition of Library Consortia ICOLC[1] (International Coalition of Library Consortia) or eIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) for metaconsortia.

5. Issues concerning consortium purchases: the "Big Deal" and the need for new models

5.1 Issues concerning consortium purchases: the "Big Deal"

One of the most debated themes in the literature about consortia and purchasing of electronic resources has been the question of the "Big Deal".
In Frazier's words (Frazier 2001):
"… the Big Deal is an online aggregation of journals that publishers offer as a one-price, one size fits all package. In the Big Deal, libraries agree to buy electronic access of all commercial publisher's journals for a price based on current payments to that publisher, plus some increment. Under the terms of the contract, annual price increases are capped for a number of years"
Frazier attacks the big deal, as the contract binds libraries not to cancel active individual journal subscriptions, thus limiting the power of libraries to build their own collection policy development. Libraries risk to create an information distribution system for publishers, which imposes to libraries unwanted titles and "bundles the strongest with the weakest publisher titles, the essential with the non-essential" (Frazier 2001). According to Frazier, three are the main issues linked to the big deal, which he defines as:

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[1] ICOLC is an international group of library consortia, originally called the Consortium of Consortia; since its first informal meeting in 1997, ICOLC has become a strong and huge coalition, grouping more than 160 library consortia from North America, Europe, Australia, Asia and Africa. Two meetings a year in the US, and, since 1999 one meeting a year in Europe (E-ICOLC). Its "Statement of current perspectives and preferred practices for the selection and purchase of electronic information" 1999 and "Update 2001" constitute a milestone for all library consortia dealing with the acquisition of electronic resources . (ICOLC (1998). Statement of current perspective and preferred practices for the selection and purchase of electronic information. http://www.library.yale.edu/consortia/statement.html, ICOLC (2001). International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) statement of current perspective and preferred practices for the selection and purchase of electronic information. Update n. 1: new developments in e-journal licensing (december 2001 update to March 1998 statement). http://www.library.yale.edu/consortia/2001currentpractices.htm).

- Enhanced loyalty: the indispensability of the big packages offered allows publishers and aggregators to add, cancel and modify the contents of the package, without contracting this with libraries
- Disintermediation: largest commercial publishers have the chance to control terms and condition of the information market
- Changing the rules: the academic rewards system is changing; libraries have to support the change, investing in the new emerging systems of scholarly communication

Peters comments on Frazier's article emphasizing how the position articulated by Frazier could be defined "the traditional model of collection development", where it is possible to know beforehand what a group of users wants and needs, and where it is best to choose material at a title level. On the contrary, Peters supports the "untraditional model for electronic collection development": through providing access to a huge quantity of information and analysing usage it becomes possible to determine interests and needs of the community of users (Peters 2001). Moreover Peters points out that the Big Deal has raised three important questions that the academic libraries must face, in consideration of the impact of consortial activities in the development and management of academic library collections:

- librarians are no longer confident to know "*a priori*" the information needs of a community of users
- to select monographic or serial literature at individual title level may be substituted by enabling end-users to exploit digital library collections and, through use, to make many deliberate micro-decisions about what should be relevant and go into the collection
- consortial collection development activities may in future risk to homogenize core collections

5.2 Issues concerning consortium purchases : the need for new models

The cost-benefit analysis of consortia purchasing has to take into account not only financial and economic aspects, since there may be hidden benefits to consider. A hidden benefit, which emerges from the case study conducted by Scigliano, is faculty and students time saving. The author recognizes how other benefits are cost savings associated with handling, processing and shelving print journals, and with saving spaces on the shelves, even if to update the technical infrastructure to provide access to electronic journals is to be considered too (Scigliano 2002).
The necessity to find new pricing models is pointed out by a number of current studies on the topic (Anglada and Comellas 2002). Some professionals believe that, while in the short term the "Big Deal" may have been positive for large and small libraries and for large publishers, in the long term it is necessary to find alternative

purchasing models to guarantee better deals for those parts handicapped by the prevalence of the Big Deal, but it is also important for libraries to have the scaling benefit in negotiation and supply (Friend 2003).

In analysing the concepts of the information value chain in the two worlds of printed and electronic information, Ball and Wright study models of procuring information and evaluate the various emerging models, reporting, among experimentations in new forms of acquisition, a model in which purchasing decisions are made at the level of individual article, as "this model could create more intense competition between publishers on content, prices and terms of use" (Ball and Wright 2000).

Local use data may be determining in finding a fair price policy, based on the real use of information, and established using data such as academic community size, institutional research level, etc. (Stern 2003, p. 154).

According to Kohl, local use data are the key issue to determine how library consortia may develop new models of journal purchase: a research within statistical usage data of OhioLink consortium, one of the biggest and most alive U.S. consortia composed by 79 Ohio higher education libraries, has found that statewide 58% of downloaded articles came from titles previously not present on campus. These data are compared to the data of HEAL-Link, the Greek academic national library consortium, to find similar results (62% of downloads prom titles previously not present on campus). Kohl maintains that it is necessary to obtain more funds to invest in information, and publishers and librarians have to work together "to help construct the kinds of deals which show convincing value received for higher expenditures" (Kohl 2003, p. 52 - 53).

In exploring new models for the provision of electronic information, Peters suggests for the future a scenario where a new figure acts: a freelance alliance broker who does not only deal, but also identifies and introduces different parties to the deal (Peters 2003, p. 256).

6. A wider context: the stakeholders

The discussion on the "Big Deal" is part of a wider discussion that affects also the role of the different stakeholders (libraries, consortia, publishers, aggregators and library services suppliers, patrons themselves) and the same scholarly communication system, the reform of which may be strongly influenced by the behaviour of consortia in purchasing of e-resources (Landesman and Van Reenen 2000).

Kohl emphasizes the importance of continuing cooperation with publishers to find solutions to unresolved problems (Kohl 2003), while Friend asserts that in the new world of information the different stakeholders have opportunities to work and succeed (Friend 2001, p. 42 - 43):

- Librarians must change mentality that considers "information in terms of physical objects linked to a physical location", and go on exploiting the added value represented by their skills in handling information

- Publishers have to offer new business models, adequate to a market that asks for "smaller chunks of information": in fact usage statistics demonstrate that electronic copies are much more heavily used, but in smaller units

6.1 Publishers and subscription agents

From the publishers' side, Karen Hunter, vice president of Elsevier Science, points out how "publishers, consortia and aggregator have barely begun the process of learning how to work together" (Hunter 1999, p. 22) and stresses the common interest of working together and identifying best practices that guarantee "better deals" for both parts. It is interesting to notice how, after a big debate against Open Access initiatives in which big publishers like Elsevier contrasted the new trend, now publishers themselves seem to be changing attitude. Elsevier has recently changed its policy and gives the possibility to authors to deposit post-prints on personal or institutional web pages for articles published on their periodicals (Harnad and Hunter).

The importance of a new role for subscription agents is emphasized by a number of studies (Cox 2000; Fogg 2001; Prior 2001). It is relevant to notice that the same booksellers and subscription agents have been subjected to a transformation within the supply chain: in slowly responding to the changes of the market, depending on the activities of consortia and of big publishers wishing to deal directly with libraries over online journals, they have been in danger of disappearing; the phenomenon of concentration reported by Cox is illuminating:

"The big five (Blackwell, Dawson, EBSCO, Faxon and Swets) have become the big two [EBSCO and Swets], all within eight years" (Cox 2003, p. 142).

6.2 Library users

As Cox stresses, even "the profile of the students population has changed. More adults seek qualifications. The demand for lifelong or continuing education and off-campus studies increases…" (Cox 2000, p. 9). The change in the use of information technology in learning and research that characterizes our age has a direct impact on users. Librarians and publishers have the opportunity to know better their users and the new habits: the use of electronic content, which is reported by usage statistics, can help both librarians and publishers to identify the needs of the other stakeholder, the user. A 18 months research conducted between 1998 and 1999 at OhioLink consortium brings the director of Ohiolink consortium to say that:

"librarians should no longer presume to know exactly what patrons will need in the electronic world based solely on past patron behaviors in the controlled print environment…..To move forward, [librarians] must assume that there is an evolution on information use at work and libraries and their consortia must be enablers rather than gatekeepers" (Sanville 1999, p. 57)

The role of consortia is also to expand information use also creating and making available systems of information access and retrieval "friendly, fluid and flexible", with the aim create "a sustainable economic model of information purchase that maximizes information use by the patron populations" served (Sanville 1999, p. 58). The point of the use of information is particularly relevant, as recent studies emphasize how students and staff members find it difficult to use high-quality electronic publications made available by libraries: in UK a recent evaluation and monitoring framework carried out by JISC, and reported by Wise (Wise 2003) has emphasized how high-quality information resources are relatively under-used, stressing how users (undergraduates, postgraduates and academics) in UK academic context begin their search starting from using free search engines, without passing then to other tools.

6.3 Libraries and institutions

Libraries are themselves actually consortia users (Sloan 2000). They recognize the advantages offered to libraries by participating to consortia, but they have also concerns on the contracts established by consortia (Rowse 2003): in case of purchasing of electronic material, consortia have to contemplate clauses regarding archiving, fair use of information, as far as document Inter library loan and delivery services are concerned, and copyright questions: these, together with cost and access, are the main concerns for libraries (Ashcroft 2002). Institutions willing to guarantee free research have to support open archives initiative (Oliver 2000; Prosser 2004) and offer digital spaces where to preserve the institutional digital scientific production.

7. Conclusion

The development of library consortia has reinforced in academic libraries the spirit of cooperation that is essential in all the library activities, particularly in this period of challenges due to information age and new technologies. This spirit involves for the first time all the stakeholders, who are all concerned owing to the change, but also understand the potentials of the new context, and are trying together to find new models to work together. Disadvantages and difficulties emerge from the different worlds, but the consortial form chosen by academic libraries will help all parts to face the new challenges; it will last in time, owing to the benefits prevailing disadvantages. The explosion of information and the access to e-resources has created new expectations in patrons, which libraries attempt to satisfy creating cooperative alliances that let them share solutions and expertise. It is necessary to find new ways to interpret user needs, which have to remain the main focus of libraries.

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