

To be or not to be together: is there a choice?

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“I am going to talk to you about unity and coöperation... I have always believed and preached coöperation... coöperation means civilisation. Without coöperation there will be no railways, no steamboats, no churches, no schools, no hospitals, no life. Without coöperation a man may live in a cave and dress in the skins of beasts, but there can be nothing more without coöperation, and the man who says he does not believe in coöperation, librarian or whoever he may be, does not believe in civilisation and does not believe in life...” (Dewey, 1905)[1].

Abstract:

The paper aims to reflect on the aims of contemporary regional library co-operation, its reasons, forms and types of co-operation. It introduces the concept of regional co-operation, follows the historical development of its types, forms, models, and complexity. The emphasis is on the essential difference of modern library co-operation from earlier periods, its drivers and inhibitors, main actors and ultimate possibilities that is open as an intermediary level between local and international library work.

Introduction

The words that Melvil Dewey said in 1905 at the ALA meeting (and I have chosen as a motto for this paper) express a basic goal of the modern library co-operation: preserving civilisation and life of society in the modern world.

The organisers of the IATUL conference required a descriptive title for the presentation. I tried hard to meet the requirement and though the one I have created can apply to anything I believe that it describes my aim in the best way. The answer to the question posed in the title “To be or not to be together?” concerning libraries seems obvious – “To be”. But what is meant by this being together, what is the aim of co-operation, why do we conduct this activity, which is neither cheap, nor effortless? The paper’s goal is to reflect on the reasons, ways and ends of regional co-operation of libraries. This will be done by investigating three topics:

- The development of library co-operation levels and forms.
- The incentives and inhibitors of library co-operation in general and regional co-operation in particular. Who are the actors and stakeholders in library co-operation? What are their attitudes towards goals and gains of library co-operation?
- The place and role of regional library co-operation in the overall co-operation activities throughout the library world and society.

The development of library co-operation

There are different levels of co-operation: local, regional, and international. The most ambiguous of all three is the term “regional”. The Oxford English Dictionary provides eight main sets of descriptions of the word region, of which one is of interest in the context of library co-operation:

“Region:

5. a. An administrative division of a city or district.

b. A relatively large subdivision of a country for economic, administrative, or cultural purposes that frequently implies an alternative system to centralized organization

c. An area of the world made up of neighbouring countries that, from an international point of view, are considered socially, economically, or politically interdependent.” [2].

The term “Regional” means “Of, pertaining to, or connected with a region”. When applied to the institutional co-operation the term can include co-operation in a local (or even sub-local) area, in a part of one state, or international co-operation of interdependent and/or geographically close countries. Glancing through the abstracts of papers submitted to this section of the IATUL Conference I have found various types of understanding of “a region” present, but information about co-operation projects and experience within a region of one state dominates. The authors also use several closely related terms to indicate the common activity, mainly three of them:

“Co-operation: The action of co-operating, i.e. of working together towards the same end, purpose, or effect; joint operation.”

“Collaboration: United labour, co-operation; esp. in literary, artistic, or scientific work.”

“Coordination: Harmonious combination of agents or functions towards the production of a result; said esp. in Phys. in reference to the simultaneous and orderly action of a number of muscles in the production of certain complex movements.” [2].

The goals and activities described in the papers on library co-operation cover practically every aspect and item of library life, in the power of which librarians believe.

As a student at Vilnius University in 1970s, I often heard from our Prof. Vladimirovas that libraries are co-operative institutions by nature. Already at the dawn of library history they had to turn to other libraries to get unique manuscripts for creating copies from them. And the libraries of the 21st century will be highly computerised, specialised, and integrated through co-operation [3].

Theoretical issues and research findings support his opinion of libraries as naturally co-operative institutions already at the local level. In the study of the libraries of the city of Sheffield in 1975, the research group has found that there exists the “unplanned (or ecological) library co-ordination” within the community because they serve different library groups with different needs by acquiring different material and providing different services for them. Besides, libraries refer their users to each other or request assistance [4].

This research group made a distinction between different types of planned library co-operation (see Fig. 1): exchange, coalition and cooption. The most usual and wide-spread co-operation type is exchange that includes sharing of materials and information of various forms as well as exchange of staff and users. Coalition includes the commonly undertaken ventures pooling resources for a certain goal, like system development, provision of services, or conducting research. Co-option denotes the participation of library leaders in the bodies of other institutions, like other library (museum, university, archive, etc.) boards or councils, for exchange of information or advancement of further co-operation.

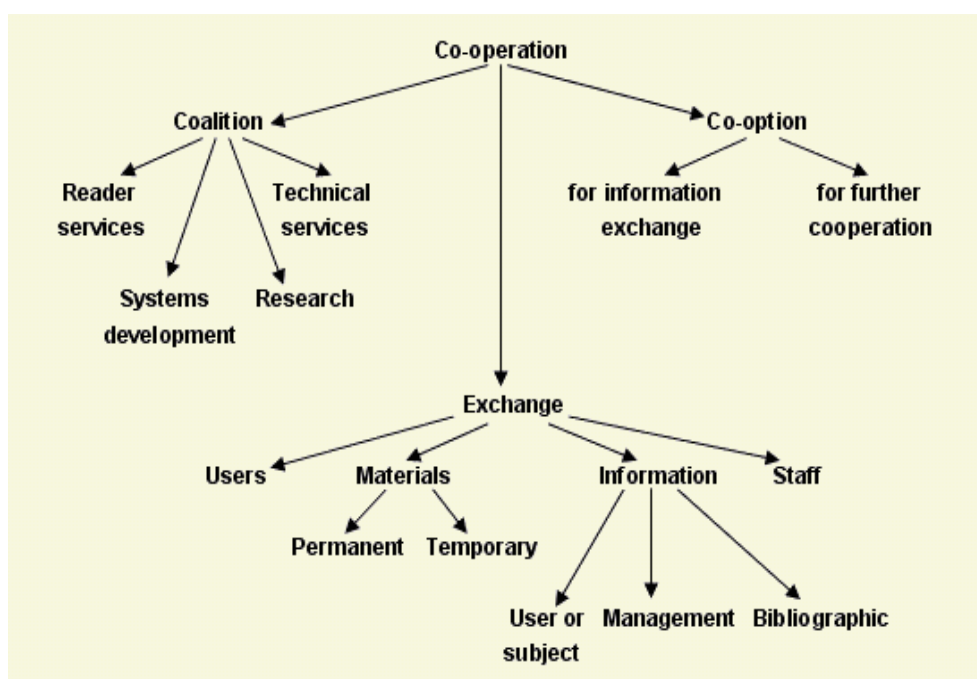


Figure 1. Outline typology of library co-operation [4]

Looking from an historical perspective, one can see that all the types of library co-operation were used during a long historical period. Melvil Dewey wrote the first ever article on library co-operation in 1876 and listed the main areas of co-operation and standardisation, which have not changed since [5]. If there is a change over time, it occurs through more complex and sophisticated forms of co-operation and through information technology making some forms of co-operation more readily achievable.

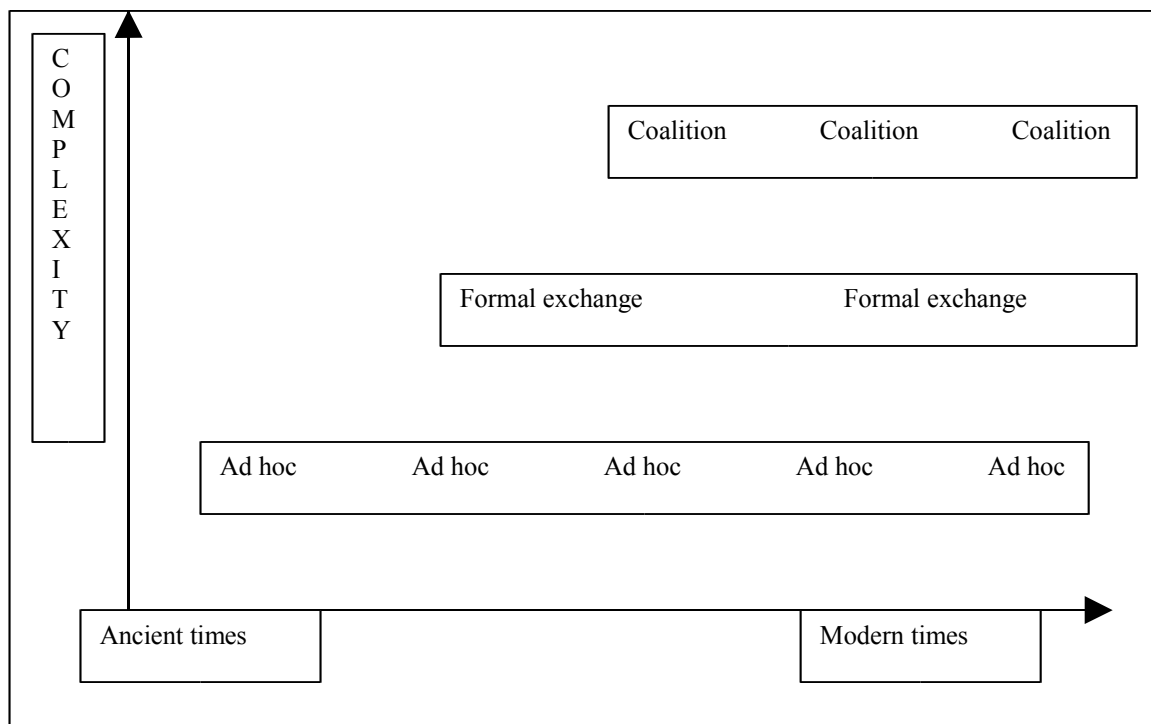


Figure 2. Development of library co-operation

Figure 2 indicates that the more complex types and forms do not exclude simpler ones as well as unplanned co-operation. In fact, libraries are now dealing with co-operation issues almost at each step.

The simplest example of temporary material exchange is interlibrary loan. There is evidence that monastic libraries loaned books to each other mainly between neighbours, "but sometimes between libraries as far apart as France and Greece or England and Austria" [6]. Any exchange of materials helps to overcome the limitations and deficiencies of library collections, permanent transfer of duplicates from one library to another enriches collections and expands a library's possibilities of meeting users' needs. One of the largest schemes for this type of exchange was organised by UNESCO after the Second World War. Exchange of bibliographic or other information, of users, and staff was less frequently encountered, but by now it overlaps with co-operation through coalition.

A coalition usually involves a group of libraries with common aim who formalise their activities through co-operative agreements [7]. At present this type of co-operation becomes most widespread and visible as it is related to developing technical tools, common resources (e.g., union catalogues), standards, training programmes for staff, or research projects). One of the most impressive attempts of this type was the Scandia plan of 1950s – a unique effort to coordinate acquisition among research libraries in four (out of five) Nordic countries (on the international regional scale) [8].

The drivers and inhibitors of modern regional library co-operation

The essential difference that distinguishes the modern library co-operation from that conducted in earlier times lies in the complexity of interactions. However, complexity seems to be secondary and is related to the essential change of the direction in library work, which in its turn depends on the changes in the communication modes of society. The physical objects carrying content in various forms – atoms and molecules - are increasingly replaced by digital bits and electrons [9]. The basic economic model of information services changes from ownership of purchased objects to increasing leasing and renting of usage rights. The conversion of libraries as document stores to user-centred providers of access to information that was taking place during the second half of 20th century is speeded up even more. The libraries and librarians increasingly face the growing greed of the producers on the market. Co-operation provides an economic power that helps to cancel some of the negative effects of our greedy millennium and serve the public in an “old-fashioned” way. Big groups of libraries (consortia) have become major negotiators in the market of information products and can exercise their strength by withstanding suppliers’ demands. On the other hand, the co-operation schemes always have to overcome unexpected difficulties.

The major drivers and inhibitors to the regional library co-operation, in my opinion, at present look as follows:

Drivers	Inhibitors
Technology	Institutional independence
Financial situation	Fragmentation of systems
Ease of access for users to resources	Institutional rivalry
Demands of international organisations	Resistance to change

Both groups of factors influence collaborative development. ‘Technology’ is understood in a widest meaning: new types of production of digital information sources and documents, proliferation of new formats, new possibilities to organise knowledge (portals, integrated systems, etc.), new problems to solve (piracy, security, privacy, etc.). All these new possibilities can be best exploited and problems solved by applying common efforts and sharing the expertise, like within the groups of users of integrated library systems.

‘Financial situation’ mainly means the limited resources that libraries have to spread thinly over various areas and activities to be able to perform their functions and meet diversifying needs. In many cases, libraries also face budget cuts that might be related to the economic situation of a parent organisation, but mainly to the growing competition for information-related funding. If a university allocates funds to the IT centre it expects that most of the information demand will be satisfied through increased access to computer networks and, consequently, cuts the budget for library material. On the other hand, the digital environment privileges sharing and common usage of resources, and provides good opportunities to use pooled finances in a most efficient way. Digitisation projects or consortia for licensing of electronic resources might serve as an illustration for this.

Technological and financial drives together are already significant reasons for co-operation and are easily recognised by fund providers and librarians themselves. The users mainly appreciate the convenience and ease of getting the required information, educational material, or entertainment. In many cases they will not realise or care where it is coming from or even that it is provided by any library. But librarians will care about the satisfaction of users' needs and demands, as it is the foundation of their service.

International organisations have a long history of supporting library co-operation and one can provide a long list, starting with IFLA, UNESCO, and IATUL. But at the moment a specific support to regional co-operation is offered by European Union through its Structural Funds and specifically through its Information Society and Tourism and Culture parts. The regional development in this case is related to the opportunities provided by technological and cultural development:

“For Europe's regions and regional policy, the new technologies are both an opportunity and a challenge. An opportunity because these technologies create new prospects for development, especially in the more isolated regions. And a challenge because of the digital divide between rich and poor regions, urban and rural regions, and even within regions.”

“ The potential of the Structural Funds... should not only be used to preserve cultural heritage but can also support products and industries with a high growth potential, such as in the context of the information society.” [10]

On the right side of the list, the inhibitors definitely seem less important than the drivers. However, when regional or, indeed, any other co-operation fails or gets into trouble usually it happens because of these obstacles. Institutional independence results in different traditions of work and systems. They are imbedded in the organisation and to harmonise them with other institutions requires a considerable investment and will. Together with institutional rivalry, which is not alien to libraries, it might create huge obstacles for a co-operation project.

The fragmentation of systems relates to the fact that libraries within one region belong to different governmental sectors. In this case, they fall under different governing systems using different investment and reporting policies, managerial principles and guided by different goals.

The resistance to change mainly applies to individuals working in the libraries. People rarely like changes and mainly prefer a stable and certain future. Anything that might threaten it in any way (from loss of a job, to learning new skills) may provoke resistance. I have mentioned it the last, but it might be the biggest obstacle and jeopardise any venture. On the other hand, as indicated by Murray Shepherd by citing the Chief Librarian at the University of Guelph: “the most important factor in successful collaboration is human relationships. The biggest investment will not be in hardware or software, but in people” [11]. The resistance to change may become a success factor if the strategic significance of it is acknowledged. The collaborative staff training (another form of co-operation) contributes not only to the development of new competence but also to overcoming resistance to change. Most of the drivers and overcome inhibitors become success factors in library co-operation.

Here is a quite comprehensive list of them:

- a shared vision and philosophy;
- a well-focused organisation;
- perceived cost-effectiveness;
- accessibility of the network's resources through local nodes;
- staff skills, attitudes and commitment;
- the quality of response provided;
- the depth and range of resources available;
- network visibility and the image projected to the outside world.
- an ability to adapt over time [12].

The place and role of regional library co-operation

The experience of libraries in different countries (including Sweden and Lithuania) shows that a successful regional library network becomes a most effective way of pooling resources and providing services to a significant number of users. Despite all problems, compromises, and sacrifices (true or imagined by participants) this mode of work benefits the individual libraries. In most cases, co-operation does not allow one to save any library finances. As a rule it might require more resources to conduct interactions, to support weaker partners, or to acquire new type of media. But it provides a chance to use these resources in a more efficient and effective way, to gain power in the community or country, to attract the attention of funding institutions, to get better bargains from suppliers and to protect the interests of all potential users.

On the other hand, regional co-operation groups or networks of libraries become strong enough to take part in world-wide projects and movements. In addition to higher visibility and growing importance in information provision sphere, librarians develop necessary skills and stamina to defend the interests of this endangered part of the public sphere, to lobby governments and parliaments, to raise important issues through international bodies.

Regional co-operation serves as a mediating link between libraries serving their local communities (whether the staff and students of a university or the population of a city district) and the international world-wide library network. Of course, this global network at the moment does not exist. Just as the global community or global communication it has a status of a vision, a goal that is worth achieving (or sometimes seen as a threat that society should avoid). Libraries as natural co-operative institutions have developed people who are capable of employing the most sophisticated technological instruments, to organise the most complicated production of society – information and knowledge – and to work together on solving problems of global co-operation in the digital environment.

However, all three levels of co-operation have to function in harmony. Through regional co-operation local libraries get access to a better supply of resources and local users get a wider range of quality services. If our wildest dreams come true, we may achieve the ideal implementation of the Dewey's slogan: "The best reading for the largest number at the lowest cost" [13] and by regional library co-operation create a global library for a village.

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