RESOURCES SHARING AMONG LIBRARIES IN DIGITAL ERA:
ROLE OF CONSORTIA

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1 INTRODUCTION

No library, however big it may be, is able to satisfy all the needs of its clientele due to various constraints. It is because of this phenomenon that the concept of resource sharing has developed. Initially the term used for resource sharing activities was library cooperation. Though cooperation theoretically could embrace almost all library activities, practically it was confined to inter-library loan of library documents. But due to physical distance and other reasons even this limited system of cooperation was not being practiced widely. However, with the advent of ICT and its application in library activities, new opportunities opened up for greater cooperation among libraries. At the global level Internet and at the national and local level several library networks came in vogue and databases created for information sharing. In recent years availability of information resources in digital or electronic medium has further facilitated exchange of information resources among libraries, thus creating favorable condition for increased resource sharing. Emergence of library consortia is a very promising development in this direction.

2 RESOURCE SHARING

Before taking up various issues relating to resource sharing in digital era and the role of consortia in this sphere, it is necessary to briefly define the concepts of ‘information resource’, and ‘resource sharing’.

2.1 Information Resource

The concept of information resource is often not defined properly. The documents held by a library provide information sought by users and hence called information sources and more precisely documentary information sources. But such documents are also referred to as information resources. That is, the terms ‘information sources’ and ‘information resources’ are used interchangeably. But it is to be noted that an information source only provides information, but a resource is one, which like capital or labour, gives rise to something new. As a library generates all its services on the basis of the information sources available with it, such sources are called information resources. Libraries have so long been procuring information resources in traditional printed format. But today these resources are available in various other formats, such as audio-visual, digital, etc. However, resources in electronic format i.e. e-resources have become more popular these days, because of their distinct advantages.
2.2 Resource Sharing

Keeping the above in view, if we now try to define resource sharing, it will not merely mean mutual sharing of information sources available in different libraries, it will mean utilizing the information sources of one library for generating services by another library.

2.3 Broader View

However, information resources and library resources may not be taken as synonymous terms. Information resources are only one type of library resources. A library has other resources too, which together with the information resources enable it to serve its users, such as library staff and library equipment. Thus in a broader perspective resource sharing may involve sharing of these resources too. In this sense connotation of the terms ‘library Cooperation’ and ‘Resource Sharing’ will be almost same.

3 DEVELOPMENT OF CONSORTIA

The term ‘consortium’ literally means “temporary cooperation of several powers or large interests to effect some common purpose” [1]. A library consortium is “a community (a cooperative) of two or more information agencies which have formally agreed to coordinate, cooperate in, or consolidate certain functions to achieve mutual objectives” [5]. More specifically, it is “a group of libraries that agree to pool their resources by allowing the users of each institution some type of access to the resources of all other institutions, either through inter-library loan or borrowing privileges” [4]. In fact “library consortium is a community of value creating entities, generating value through an aggregation of library units within and across organizations. The value creation could be enhanced through resource sharing processes, products and service offerings of the participating library units in a consortium” [2]. As indicated, the idea of consortium is not new. There were instances of several libraries coming together voluntarily for the mutual benefit of the respective users just like cooperatives. It was the earliest stage of library cooperation. In the second stage computerized networks came into vogue for sharing of resources. Till this period the library resources were mainly in traditional printed format. The networks created their bibliographical databases. The users of the participating libraries could get the required documents from other libraries through document delivery service. With the advent of e-resources, the concept of consortia has been mooted mainly for acquisition of e-journals. The term was originally being used in commercial and political worlds, which has now been imported in our field. As the resources that are procured today through a consortium are mainly e-resources, it has become possible for the users to access and download the required materials remotely without even going through the elaborate process of inter-library lending. Though library consortia have been created with a narrow purpose, these can be turned into efficient instruments for sharing all types of library resources.

3.1 Types of Consortia

Library consortia function in different ways. During the last three decades, libraries have developed a variety of organizational models. At one end of the spectrum are the loosely
affiliated buying clubs where libraries come together primarily to share a discounted rate on electronic journals and databases, while on the other end are consortia that are tightly integrated organizations sharing a variety of resources which require a long term commitment and collaborative decision making at all levels. [3]. Theoretically, consortia may be of following types depending on their characteristics.

From the point of view of type of libraries forming the consortium there can be two types of consortia:

*Consortia of multi-type libraries:* In this type of consortium participating libraries are of different types, such as public, academic and special.

*Consortia of same type of libraries:* The members of such a consortium are of same type, such as consortium of public libraries, consortium of academic libraries, etc. CSIR E-Journals Consortium is such a consortium.

From the point of view of geographical region of coverage, the consortia may be of following types:

*Local level consortia:* This consists of libraries situated in a particular city, town of district, e.g. BOSLA (Bombay Science Librarians’ Association), which was possibly the first library consortium of the country.

*State level consortia:* In such a consortium libraries of one particular state participate. There is perhaps no such consortium in the country at present.

*National level consortia:* Libraries belonging to a country are its members. INDEST is a national level consortium, but covering only libraries of scientific and technical institutions.

*Regional level consortia:* In such a consortium libraries of a particular region participate.

*International level consortia:* In this consortium libraries belonging to different countries participate. This may be formed either by individual libraries, such as OCLC, or by bringing different national consortia under one umbrella. Such federation of consortia is known as Meta Consortia, such as International Coalition of Library Consortia, which comprises of nearly 150 library consortia from around the world [6].

From the point of view of subject or area of coverage there can be two types of consortia:

*Single discipline oriented consortia:* In such a consortium organizations dealing with same or similar disciplines join hand, such as FORSA (Forum for Resource Sharing in Astronomy and Astrophysics).
Multi-discipline oriented consortia: Such a consortium deals with resources in multiple disciplines. UGC sponsored INFONET is such a consortium, which deals with multiple subjects.

Again from the organizational point of view, there can be two types of consortia:

Loosely knit federation: In such a consortium there is no central body of dedicated staff to look after the consortium activities. Some libraries join hand for some immediate gain for a particular purpose. It is often not of permanent nature.

Tightly knit organization: Such a consortium is of permanent type, having a central body with membership of participating libraries for guiding the activities of the consortium and also some dedicated staff for performing the consortium activities.

Further, from the point of view of basis of formation there are two types of consortia:

Non-sponsored consortia: Such a consortium is formed voluntarily by participating libraries by sharing the expenses. FORSA again is such a consortium.

Sponsored consortia: This type of consortium is sponsored by a central organization and the major expenses are borne by it. Here sometimes the sponsoring body itself carries out the major activities of the consortium. UGC-INFONET is such a consortium.

Obviously, the above categories are not mutually exclusive. Most of the existing consortia naturally fall in more than one category.

4 INDIAN LIBRARY CONSORTIA

Library consortia have come up in many countries of the world. In India too several consortia have been developed such as Forum for Resource Sharing in Astronomy and Astrophysics (FORSA), Indian National Digital Library in Science & Technology (INDEST), INFONET project of UGC, Health Sciences Library & Information Network (HELI.NET), CSIR E-Journals Consortium, Department of Atomic Energy Libraries Consortium and Indian Institutes of Management Library Consortium. Besides, efforts are on to develop consortia by ICAR, ICMR, ICSSR and other government agencies. However, if we look into their functioning it is clear that most of them have been set up with the aim of procuring e-journals at competitive prices and sometimes sharing the e-journal resources. No consortium aims at sharing other resources, specially print resources, which still form the major part of Indian libraries. Thus their functioning is limited.

5 FUNCTIONS OF CONSORTIA

It is obvious that the existing consortia are basically serving as buying clubs than consortia in the real sense. But with little initiatives these can be developed into platforms for sharing valuable resources available in different libraries of the country,
both in print and non-print media. Not only so, these consortia can also take up several other activities for the mutual benefit of the participating libraries.

5.1 **Information Resource Sharing**

A consortium can undertake the following activities for promoting information resource sharing:

- Cooperative collection development among the member libraries
- Cooperative processing of information resources acquired through the consortium
- Creation of virtual digital library covering all the e-information resources available in member libraries by networking of those libraries
- Compilation of bibliographical and/or full-text database of the holdings of the member libraries, both print and non-print
- Sharing of information resources, both traditional and digital, of member libraries through network or document delivery service as the case may be
- Allowing reciprocal borrowing by the members of all libraries of the consortium
- Digitization of valuable and rare collections of member libraries available in printed format and providing access to such materials to the members of all the libraries of the consortium
- Supporting member libraries for setting up institutional repositories, e-print archives, electronic theses collection, etc.
- Developing common interface to catalogues, databases and e-collection by creating portals
- Creating interoperability among the member systems, databases and services

5.2 **Other Resource Sharing**

A consortium may also share other resources in the following manner for their mutual benefit of the participating libraries [3]:

- Sharing the storage facilities, thereby minimizing expenditure on space
- Sharing of human resources at local, regional and national levels
- Pooling of expert manpower and promoting professional development
- Assist member libraries in creating information technology infrastructure
- Facilitating joint preservation and archiving activities for print and digital materials
- Initiating and supporting research projects of common interest
- Collectively promoting, marketing and publicizing the library services

6 **MOBILISATION OF LIBRARY COMMUNITY**

Though consortia approach is beneficial for both the libraries and the users, it is unfortunate that the library community in general is not actively coming forward to adopt
this method in this country. Only a handful of libraries have come forward to form consortia voluntarily, while a few have been induced in joining consortia by the sponsors of the consortia concerned. There are still a large number of libraries, which are out of the ambit of any of the consortia being run in the country. The main reasons for this situation are:

- Lack of awareness among the libraries and/or library authorities about the ultimate benefits of consortia
- Conservative mentality of the library authorities with regard to e-information resources, specially online resources
- Unwillingness of some libraries to share their resources
- Unwillingness of some libraries to share the burden of resource sharing i.e. serving users of libraries other than their own
- Uneven development of libraries of different sectors and slow progress of library automation
- Inability of many libraries in meeting the minimum commitment required to join a consortium due to financial and other infrastructural constraints
- Lack of demand for resource sharing on the part of users
- Poor bibliographical control of the holdings of the libraries
- Lack of sufficient information resources to be shared

To harness the enormous benefits that consortia can bring, specially in the field of resource sharing, it is necessary to mobilize the library community to adopt this approach. The government agencies like UGC and CSIR have come forward to mobilize libraries funded by them. Steps need to be taken to make more and more libraries aware of the benefits that they may derive by joining existing consortia or forming new ones and removing the barriers faced by them.

7 CONCLUSION

In India, resource sharing, in true sense of the term, has not yet developed in a big way. A few decades ago NISSAT came into being and some library networks started with much fanfare, such as CALIBNET, MALIBNET, DELNET, INFLIBNET, etc. Today NISSAT has been dismantled, while none of the networks have been able to become an efficient vehicle of resource sharing for which basically these networks had been established. Only DELNET and INFLIBNET have a better record, but still they will have to go a long way to be worthy of the tasks assigned to them. Happily now some consortia have started functioning. These consortia have started sharing of e-journals. To boost resource sharing activities in the country it is necessary to take up three pronged approach:

- Strengthening and reengineering of existing consortia to make them true vehicles of resource sharing and not merely sharing of e-journals
- Starting of new consortia and networks for resource sharing on suitable basis
- Linking of the consortia based networks to achieve nationwide network of libraries
Implementation of these steps will require some time and many hurdles are to be crossed. But once done, it will be possible to have effective nation wide resource sharing. This will ensure maximum saving with regard to money spent on acquisition of information resources throughout the country and will help expedite research at all levels thereby contributing greatly in national development.

References


