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Bottling the “Collaboration Thing”

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Many years ago, I was speaking to a group of insurance executives about how libraries handle the aftermath of disasters like floods or fires. I talked about the various collaborative arrangements that exist among libraries, how we back each one another up in times of trouble, the long history of interlibrary loan, cooperative agencies, and the myriad ways we’ve devised to cooperate. After a few minutes, it seemed that I’d suddenly begun speaking in Sanskrit, because I realized I’d lost my audience. They asked me questions like, “If one library has a fire, the other libraries don’t use that as leverage to try to snag their employees or attract the best researchers?” but they simply couldn’t (or wouldn’t) believe my response: “No.” In the coffee break that followed my talk, one of the executives buttonholed me and said, “If you librarians could bottle this collaboration thing, you’d all be rich, because we all need this and we don’t have a clue about how to get there.”

Validation from an outside source is generally welcomed, and learning that our profession had a “secret” ingredient was rewarding. But as time has passed, I’ve realized that we need to *super-size* our collaborations to provide the best possible service to our communities and to ensure our long term viability.

It’s been said that librarians have collaboration as part of their professional DNA. The first U. S. Interlibrary Loan Code was published in 1917, and was adopted by the American Library Association in 1919.¹ We share our riches not only through ILL but in shared print collections and via reciprocal borrowing agreements. We organize reference collectives that share specialized, expensive research services across multiple institutions and time zones. We create hundreds

of organizations to manage our sharing efforts then devote countless hours on committees and boards to make certain they work. We developed MARC as a way to facilitate electronic sharing across different systems, foreshadowing the Internet protocols that drive the web today. Although we may have worked for academic institutions or political subdivisions that actively competed with one another, we subversively crafted ways to support the work and the aspirations of our communities, sometimes by flying under the administrative radar.

On a personal note, I bore that DNA from the very beginning of my career. As a public librarian, I chaired the board of my regional library network and helped create an automation consortium that’s still around 25 years later. As a state librarian, in 1995, I moved operations of the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) away from funding dozens of small, isolated grants and directed it into one of the first statewide database access projects. From there I joined OCLC, an organization whose roots, goals, and future are all based on helping libraries share resources freely.

In 1999, OCLC adopted the strategy, “Weaving Libraries into the Web and the Web into Libraries.” Undergirding this strategy was thirty years of work by librarians who had cooperatively built the WorldCat database, and from this strategy came services like WorldCat.org, the first open, public-facing view of the materials housed in multiple libraries; QuestionPoint, a virtual reference service allowing librarians to serve patrons any time of day or night; and WorldShare Management Services, the cloud-based library management system based on the institution’s holdings as indicated in WorldCat.



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Once the rest of the world finally caught onto this concept so firmly held by librarians, the explosion of web-based information dwarfed anything even we could have imagined. Almost overnight, unlimited text, pictures, and video were as close as our desktops or our smartphones. Information that was once scarce and expensive became as ubiquitous as oxygen. International collaborations among scholars and researchers that would have taken months using traditional communications were happening in real time.² This tsunami of information was made possible by the rapid adoption of Internet protocols that allow discrete networks to work together, delivering results to users around the world. Libraries were suddenly being outpaced by commercial organizations. While airlines, publishers, insurance companies, and so many others were conforming to common standards that allowed them to communicate across any platform, we continued to tend our walled garden of information, perpetuating formats that are unintelligible to the rest of the web. Efforts like BIBFRAME³ attempt to catch up with the rest of the online world and expose library riches more effectively, but progress has been slow.

What should we learn from this? Do we throw up our hands, and say if we can't do it as well as Google or Amazon, why do it at all? Do we join our benighted funders who think everything is on the web, or join with libraries surviving merely as relics of a pre-Internet era? Do we hunker down and hope to be offered an early retirement buyout?

I have too much faith in my fellow librarians to give up this easily. The information revolution has taught us that we were on the right track all the way back in 1917: collaboration is the best way forward. But as noted earlier, if we're going to prove our long-term value to the communities we serve, we need to *supersize* the way we approach collaboration. And we need to do it in Internet time, not library time.

James G. Neal, Columbia University's Vice President for Information Services and University Librarian, made this point forcefully several years ago when he called for “radical collaboration” in research libraries.⁴ He encouraged research librarians to develop ways to revolutionize backroom operations, create centers of excellence, rethink physical space, and collaboratively fund experimentation, all with a goal of improving productivity and sparking innovation.

We can't afford for radical collaboration to be limited to research libraries. Whether we work in public libraries, community colleges, smaller colleges and universities, corporations, government agencies, or schools, all our users will benefit when libraries work together effectively. We owe our communities no less than this. So how do we get there?

- There's simply no excuse anymore for duplicating work among libraries. Anything that *can* be done collaboratively *should* be done. Dozens, even hundreds, of library workers making tiny revisions to the same catalog entries as the people on the next campus or in the next county, compiling bibliographies and pathfinders on the same topics, managing the same knowledge bases: all of this busy work represents an unconscionable opportunity cost, a waste of time that could be put to better use creating and promoting unique materials and projects.
- We need to support innovation in our field, and not just with positive tweets: we need to be willing to pool our resources to invest in the technology that can point us in new directions.
- We must fight repressive copyright legislation and rapacious licensing agreements that limit reasonable fair use of electronic and print materials, reducing our ability to collaborate. The only way to do this ef-



fectively is with a clear, united, and loud voice.

- It’s time to expand our field of vision to include other potential collaborators; interesting opportunities may be found in unexpected places. We’re generally comfortable collaborating with other librarians, but what about collaborating with officials from hospitals, school districts, the business community, public broadcasting, faith communities, or unions?
- Empower the library consortia we’ve already created to facilitate radical collaboration in new and creative ways, even if this was not the original mission of those consortia. A healthy organization is driven by a mission that reflects current reality and future aspirations, not what it did well in the past.

It’s the responsibility of each librarian to understand how his or her library uniquely adds value to the community it serves, and then focus on that to the exclusion of nearly everything else. While recognizing that the missions of our various institutions may differ, there are always economies of scale that can be achieved across library types and political boundaries. Libraries figured out long ago that we do better when working together. After all, while our differences matter, our common goals matter more. Lorcan Dempsey, OCLC’s Vice President for Research and Chief Strategist, sums it up nicely: “Do locally what creates the most distinctive value. Share what makes sense for efficiency and impact. Buy the rest.”⁵

If I had been thinking more clearly at that long ago insurance meeting, I might have told that executive “We *have* bottled this collaboration thing, and what’s gotten rich is our communities!”

Endnotes

- ¹ “Interlibrary Loan Code for the United States Explanatory Supplement,” (Chicago, IL: Reference and User Services Association, n.d.) <http://www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/interlibraryloancode>.
- ² Joe Palca, “Why Some Scientific Collaborations Are More Beneficial Than Others.” News feature on NPR *Weekend Edition*, December 15, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/2014/12/15/370878827/why-some-scientific-collaborations-are-more-beneficial-than-others>.
- ³ BIBFRAME is a proposed successor to the MARC format. It uses linked data principles to create bibliographic records that are exposed easily on the open web. Wikipedia has a good basic article on BIBFRAME at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BIBFRAME>. See also <http://www.loc.gov/bibframe/>, or, for a more technical approach, <http://bibframe.org/>.
- ⁴ James G. Neal, “Advancing from Kumbaya to Radical Collaboration: Redefining the Future Reference Library.” (*Journal of Library Administration*, 51:66-76, 2011.) http://www.carl-abrc.ca/uploads/library_articles/Neal.pdf.
- ⁵ Lorcan Dempsey, “Infrastructure, Engagement, Innovation: Library Directions.” Slide show presented at Montana Library Association Offline Conference, February 7-8, 2014. <http://www.slideshare.net/lisld/infrastructure-engagement-innovation>.

