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What Collaboration Means to Me: Library collaboration is hard; effective collaboration is harder

Abstract

In this short piece I argue that library collaboration is very important, so important that it needs to be a more deliberate strategic focus for libraries and the organizations that support them. This is especially so in a network environment, where scale is important in creating efficiencies and impact. Despite this importance, effective collaboration is hard and current arrangements are suboptimal. I discuss various reasons why this is so, and offer some suggestions for how matters might be improved.

Keywords

consortia, library collaboration, scale, collaboration, oclc, jisc

Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to Constance Malpas and Valerie Horton for substantial suggestions on how to improve an earlier draft of this piece.

What Collaboration Means to Me

Library Collaboration is Hard; Effective Collaboration is Harder

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Abstract

In this short piece, I argue that library collaboration is very important, so important that it needs to be a more deliberate strategic focus for libraries and the organizations that support them. This is especially so in a network environment, where scale is important in creating efficiencies and impact. Despite this, effective collaboration is hard and current arrangements are suboptimal. I discuss various reasons why this is so, and offer some suggestions for how matters might be improved.

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Scale

The network has changed how we think about services, how we use them, and how we build them. Take HathiTrust, for example: this relatively new service is designed to work at the network level to create economies of scale in managing the community's digitized materials.¹ It also increases impact by concentrating capacity and creating gravitational attraction on the web. Twenty years or so ago, this would probably have been built as a federated service on top of individual library repositories of digitized materials. This would have been less efficient and probably would have had less impact. The design of HathiTrust represents careful strategic decisions: its creators thought purposefully about how the network creates new opportunities. As did the founders of OCLC, forty or so years earlier. In each case, very deliberate choices were made about reorganizing costly,

institution-scale operations in a shared network environment.

The example of HathiTrust underlines the importance of scale in the network environment. I have a particular interest in scale, as I have worked for two organizations that exist to scale library capacities in different ways. One is OCLC, which supports a network of over 18,000 libraries devoted to collaboration at scale. This network enables libraries to scale infrastructure, community, and expertise around core collection management needs (metadata creation, resource sharing, discoverability). This level of coordinated collaboration is without parallel in the library community. Indeed, it would be a major achievement in any sector. The other is Jisc.² Before I came to OCLC, I was responsible for the overall investment in library and information services by the Jisc in the UK. Jisc also scales capacity, albeit working under a different model.

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It is a national provider of shared network infrastructure, content licensing, and other services, for the higher education community, of which libraries are important stakeholders. Jisc scales to the national level; OCLC scales to the network level, serving libraries around the world.

Libraries and Right-Scaling

Scale is a big driver of library collaboration. It is useful to think about library collaboration as about right-scaling – that is, finding the best level at which to carry out a particular activity. However, this changes over time, particularly as working in a network environment reduces interaction costs and allows different design choices to be made.

Libraries collaborate naturally, which is not to say that all library collaboration is equally effective, efficient, or purposeful. They want to improve the impact and efficiency of their services, and increasingly to accelerate learning and innovation in a complex environment. Any individual library is likely to consort in multiple venues, segmented by the level at which it occurs (a local ILS sharing arrangement, a state-wide resource sharing system, a regional shared print or licensing group, and so on) and by type of activity (negotiation/licensing, advocacy/lobbying, shared infrastructure, shared learning and innovation, and so on).

A regional driver is quite strong for some forms of collaboration. For example, shared print or resource sharing benefit from geographic proximity: they each include a physical logistics element (shared storage, delivery networks). A sometimes-overlooked reason for the strength of local or regional groups is that they facilitate informal learning and innovation through their geographically proximate networks, something that may be less strong at wider scales where face-to-face interaction and relationship building is less easy.

However, other elements of cooperation may be better carried out at different levels – national or wider. I mentioned HathiTrust. Shared print is also interesting here. As noted above, a regional dimension has characterized early shared print initiatives. However, one also wants aspects of this work to scale to the national or network level in the context of collective stewardship of the (national or global) scholarly and cultural print record. We are seeing emerging moves to coordinate between more regional initiatives. The Rosemont Shared Print Alliance has been coordinating some journal initiatives and recently the Partnership for Shared Book Collections was announced.³

This variety of scale and scope is one reason that there is great variation in collaborative structures. The particularities of personalities and group politics are also influential, and should not be underestimated. The level of resourcing of libraries will also have an impact. Fewer resources encourage a pragmatic and strategic approach. Libraries with more resources can afford more affiliations, and to affiliate across more areas. Libraries with fewer resources might need to collaborate to do something that a better-resourced institution could do on its own. Groups are differently constituted. One example is the standalone membership organization (PALNI), another is the state-supported group (e.g. Minitex or OhioLINK), and another again is the group which is part of larger organizational provision (BTAA, CDL).⁴

Nevertheless, it is still striking how much consortia have individually evolved given the long history of library cooperation. It is surprising that we don't have more routine or consensus approaches to library collaboration along particular dimensions. These include general agreement about appropriate levels of individual library investment in shared activity; patterns of when and how to consort; models of successful consortial activity; and critically, a shared view

of the optimum level at which to carry out specific activities. There is also considerable inertia, given the difficulty of setting up new organizations, or of dismantling or reshaping existing ones, and the tolerance for inefficiency is strong. Looking at this variability, and thinking of my Jisc and OCLC experiences, I recently wrote a series of blog entries on library collaboration.⁵ Through some simple schematics, these explored the variety of consortial activity, their different organizational patterns, and library incentives to participate. I was motivated by the observation that while collaborative structures and services are well described in the literature and at conferences, the important political and organizational aspects of library collaboration are less closely observed. I was interested in what drives decisions for shared investment, shared services, and shared organizations. And also in what impedes them. In summary, I described library collaboration along four vectors: scaling capacities (infrastructure, negotiation/licensing, services, etc.), scaling influence (lobbying, advocacy), and scaling both learning and innovation (sharing experiences, pooling uncertainties, discussing directions, convening around issues, formal and informal personal development, etc.). I also spoke about three important areas where organizational design choices are made (scoping, scaling, and sourcing).

I concluded the series with a discussion of some of the challenges faced by libraries and the collaborative organizations which support them.⁶ I want to focus on those challenges here.

The Challenges of Library Collaboration

1. The collective action problem. Library collaboration is both a central value of librarianship and delivers enormous value for libraries. However, it is also both difficult and suboptimal. There are many reasons for this. Parent institutions are focused on local value, and it may sometimes be difficult to justify or explain in-

vestment in cross-institutional activity. Reallocation of resources away from the local to a shared resource may not be easy or locally desirable. Perceived loss of local control may prevent change. Requirements change in ways that don't always align with consortial evolution, meaning that support for particular collaborative needs may not be offered by existing consortia. It can be challenging to take a systemwide view from an individual library perspective. The library's parent institutions may compete with each other, leading to a lack of institutional encouragement for collaboration. In this way, libraries manifest the collective action problem – even though collaboration around certain goals would be beneficial, individual interests and incentives aren't always aligned in ways that promote joint approaches. David Lewis and Cameron Neylon have recently written thoughtfully about the challenges of building shared infrastructure through collective action.⁷

2. Both too much and not enough. Collectively libraries invest significant resources in participating in and maintaining consortial organizations. It may seem that the opportunity costs of participation are sometimes too high, that too much staff time is spent in consortial meetings, that the general lack of planned coherence can be a drag on development, that effort may be diffused across redundant organizations with unclear scope. And that all of this can prevent any one organization from achieving the scale efficiencies or impact that are really possible. At the same time, additional investment in shared capacity may actually be needed to achieve the benefits libraries need most. This creates an inevitable tension: libraries need to collaborate more, and more effectively, and need better organizational frameworks to do so; yet they may find that the current configuration of collaborations is not yielding the desired results. In fact, they need to collaborate more (in new areas, or with more investment to create robust services), and they need to collaborate less (become more

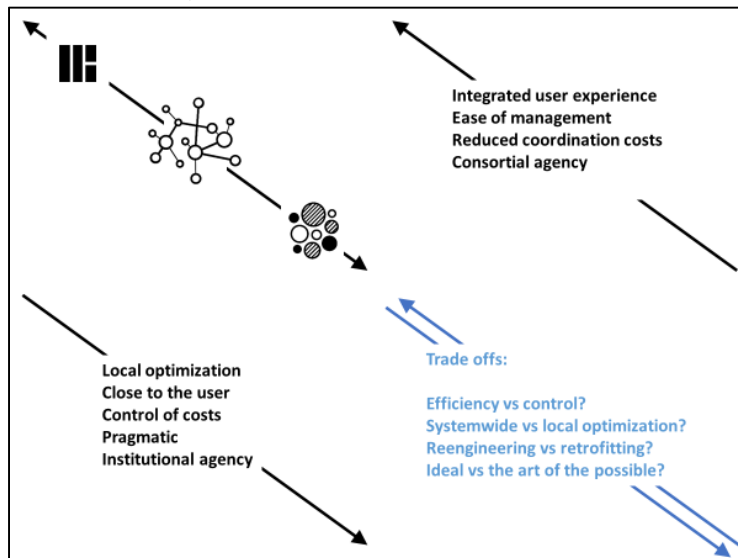
strategic about collaboration partners). Accordingly, there is a feeling that libraries participate in shared activities both too much and not enough.

3. Not just more, but more strategic. However, it is not simply more collaboration that is needed – it is a strategic view of collaboration, especially where there are new infrastructure demands (for example, for shared digital preservation, web archiving, or research data management), increased challenges for advocacy (around value and values), and growing competition between libraries and other network information service providers (for example, for research support services). In these circumstances, libraries must be more purposeful about what can be done collaboratively, what can be done by purchasing a service from a third party, or what might be done locally. If a collaborative approach makes sense, they need to be purposeful about what portion of their budget to earmark for collective activities that advance their mission faster, more cheaply, or otherwise more effectively than going in a different direction, and about ensuring that those dollars are directed to the organizations that can achieve

what is desired. Again, collaboration is a strategic choice about how best to get something done.

4. The trade-off between consolidation and autonomy. Even where libraries theoretically accept the benefits of collaborative activity, practice lags behind. Given a group of libraries and its shared activities there is a spectrum of integration, from less to more, from local autonomy to consolidation (see Figure 1 below). Typically, collaboration lies between these poles, involving progressively stronger coordination as you move to consolidated approaches. The more autonomous library practices are, the higher are the coordination costs of interaction. Take ILL policies: disparate ILL policies impose stronger coordination costs on a resource sharing system, or make the experience less well integrated. Or consider a shared library system. A consolidated system may be more efficient, reducing the overall cost of management and removing the need for interoperability across different local systems. Because management is consolidated, the coordination costs are reduced. However, this is bought at the cost of local customization or responsiveness.

Figure 1: Consolidation vs autonomy: tradeoffs



Collaborative collection development is an interestingly topical example. Retrospective collaborative collection development is well established, and is being extended. Libraries collaborate around resource sharing, digitization, and shared print. In these cases, work is now being done to layer coordinated services or agreements over autonomously developed collections. So, some new infrastructure (consortial borrowing system, for example, or shared storage) is being consolidated, while institutional collection development strategies remain autonomous.⁸

This in turn prompts stronger deliberation about prospective collaborative collection development. However, this would involve giving up some of the local autonomy around collection development in favor of a more coordinated approach, and maybe consolidating some collection development strategy and planning. This proves very hard to do in practice, as local issues around control or faculty resistance may count against the shared perspective.

We see this consolidation/autonomy dynamic strongly at play in library collaborations, acknowledging that degrees of coordination vary. The level of 'deep collaboration' or consolidation found in Scholars Portal, PALNI, or Orbis Cascade Alliance for example is not common. Nor are there very many broad-based collaborations involving significant shared infrastructure (like those facilitated by HathiTrust or OCLC). That this is so, is telling.

Moving between the poles of autonomy and consolidation involves trade-offs, notably between efficiency and control and between systemwide and local optimization. Understanding the trade-offs involved in a particular collaboration and recognizing where the impulse to local control may be a barrier to longer term progress is important.

Conclusion

As libraries work to meet new institutional needs, the collaborative imperative is strong. It makes increasing sense to do things together in a network environment, where scale benefits both efficiency and impact. And yet current approaches will not suffice to meet this need. Collaboration is hard. As I suggest in the title, effective collaboration is harder. It is not simply a given, but is a choice which has to be designed and strategized, and followed up with real commitment.

We have been starkly reminded of this recently as DPN announced its cessation, and as there was a refocusing of DPLA activity.⁹ I spoke to a consortium director recently who argued that we would see some standalone consortia go under if there were another economic downturn. And there is always pressure on publicly supported consortia to show more value or to trim costs.

Change happens gradually and unevenly, rather than by grand plan or fiat. Exemplars emerge; existing organizations evolve; groups recognize new needs; champions mobilize and create support.

Library leaders have particular responsibilities here. They guide institutional decisions about investment, and libraries need to get more purposeful about how best to get their work done. There should be active, informed decision-making about what needs to be done locally and what would benefit from stronger coordination or consolidation within collaborative organizations.

Crucially, library leaders also hold positions of influence and fiduciary responsibility on advisory committees and boards. They have a responsibility to be careful stewards of community resources and expectations. They should carefully consider the scope and role of existing groups as well as their relationships to other

groups, and should exercise caution about setting up new organizations that are not strongly motivated by need or community gaps. This suggests that those organizations in which library leaders confer have a special opportunity to facilitate thinking about coherence and organizational design.

A community which is proud of its collective action should work hard to mitigate the collective action problem, whether this is at the level of the regional group seeking scale efficiencies, or at the network level around new challenges. Libraries are stakeholders in multiple areas where there are such challenges and where scale is important: scholarly communication infrastructure, digital preservation of the scholarly and cultural record, the ebook marketplace, analytics and usage data, collective print collections, and so on. Collaboration is as much about strategic choices as are internal library operations, and should be approached with the same discipline. We must succeed in collaborating successfully and strategically to make each library stronger.

Endnotes

¹ "HathiTrust Digital Library," accessed February 1, 2019, <https://www.hathitrust.org/>.

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⁵ Lorcan Dempsey, "The Powers of Library Consortia 1: How Consortia Scale Capacity, Learning, Innovation and Influence." *Lorcan Dempsey's Weblog*, OCLC, 28 February 2018, <http://orweblog.oclc.org/the-powers-of-library-consortia-1-how-consortia-scale-capacity-learning-innovation-and-influence/>



⁶ Lorcan Dempsey, "The Powers of Library Consortia 4: Scoping, Sourcing and Scaling." *Lorcan Dempsey's Weblog*, OCLC, 20 June 2018, <http://orweblog.oclc.org/the-powers-of-library-consortia-4-scoping-sourcing-and-scaling/>

⁷ David W Lewis, "Reimagining the academic library: What to do next. Review article". *El profesional de la información* 28, no. 1, (2019) <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2019.ene.04>; Cameron Neylon, "Sustaining Scholarly Infrastructures through Collective Action: The lessons that Olson can teach us." *KULA: knowledge creation,*

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⁸ Karla L. Strieb, "Collaboration: The Master Key to Unlocking Twenty-First-Century Library Collections," in ed. Dawn Hale, Chicago: American Library Association, 2015: 3-14.

⁹ "DPN FAQ." The Digital Preservation Network, accessed February 1, 2019, <http://www.dpn.org/news/2018-12-04-dpn-faq>; "DPLA Update." Digital Public Library of America, DPLA, accessed February 1, 2019, <https://dp.la/news/dpla-update>.