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## How Super-Consortia Saved Our Libraries from the Forces of Evil ... and Themselves

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## How Super-Consortia Saved Our Libraries from the Forces of Evil...and Themselves

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*"Academic isolation has long been impractical; in today's world it is impossible. At a time when yesterday's bright new fact becomes today's doubt and tomorrow's myth, no single institution has the resources in faculty or facilities to go it alone. A university must do more than just stand guard over the nation's heritage; it must illuminate the present and help shape the future. This demands cooperation – not a diversity of weaknesses but a union of strengths."*

Herman B. Wells, President of Indiana University, 1932-68

Dedication on the occasion of the founding of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) in 1958

When President Wells made the above statement in the late 1950s, America was apparently experiencing an uptick of faith in the power of collaboration. DC Comic superheroes of the day, like Batman, Green Lantern, Superman and Wonder Woman, combined forces to form the Justice League of America (JLA), and a number of large research libraries in the Midwest and Southeast likewise formed voluntary associations to enhance their potency. Superheroes, university presidents, and library directors of that era all seemed to agree that collective action could ward off hardship and defeat evil by leveraging the talents, strengths and do-gooder zeal of the individual members. The Justice League (JL) reinforced the idea that there is strength in numbers – that alliances among superheroes could leverage their complementary competencies, and overcome individual vulnerabilities (e.g. kryptonite). As for academic and library consortia, campus leaders sought to combine forces to combat their vulnerabilities of rising prices, declining budgets, and waning regional influence.

Whether in the real world or a fantasy world, believing that the 'whole is greater than the sum

of the parts' requires a leap of faith. It's easy enough to embrace the general sentiment of collaboration, but more often than not, cooperative instincts are undermined by the crosscurrents of specific circumstances. When exactly should Wonder Woman confront an evildoer on her own, and when should she invoke the collective powers of the JLA? And since her super-peers have plenty of challenges of their own to combat, under what circumstances should they alter course when the alarm sounds and address whatever problem is most concerning to Wonder Woman? After all, even in the world of superheroes, time, attention, energy, and commitment are all finite resources, while threats to their wellbeing are infinite. It takes time and energy to rally a group to a cause, so if you can stop speeding bullets and leap tall buildings all by your lonesome, it will often seem easier to get on with the task at hand than to put out a call for reinforcements.

In the real world of academic and library consortia, we seem to take for granted the notion that cooperation is empowering. Most library consortia tell us that through the miracle of collaboration they can:

- Save member libraries money by leveraging increased market clout
- Foster innovation by facilitating the sharing of best practices, expertise, and building and reinforcing peer networks
- Amplify the voice of an individual library director by surrounding it with an accompanying choir
- Provide professional development opportunities for library personnel
- Share resources, such as books, services, and expertise, to expand learning and research opportunities for library constituents



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- Streamline library operations by consolidating duplicative tasks

Exactly how collaboration can change the fate of libraries is often glossed over. For some, joining a consortium is like strapping on a jet pack that empowers mere mortals to emulate the super powers of action heroes. For others, it's more like the choreographed gangs of *West Side Story*; you can count on the Jets to have your back when you're about to get pummeled by the Sharks...or vendors. And for some subset of consortium participants, affiliation is probably less about gaining power or strategic advantage than it is about gaining the acceptance of an in-crowd. How then do consortia prove the maxim that there is strength in numbers, or that by orchestrating collaboration they can deliver the expected returns on member investments?

Some might say that, "library consortia are only as smart as the sum total of their member intellect." The underlying assumption of that view is that consortium members provide the vision, goals, and strategies that fuel the collaborative engines of their group. The contributions of consortia staff are largely relegated to the supporting roles of facilitation, logistical support, and communication. For better or worse, most consortia are funded and governed by their members. The 'better' aspect of this structure is that it prevents consortia from spiraling out of control, either programmatically or fiscally. The 'worse' side is that it constrains what can be achieved through collaboration; member control often being the kryptonite of collaborative strength.

Saving money is an oft-cited motivation for library participation in consortial activity, but that doesn't mean that member libraries are trying to reduce their base budgets or expenditures. Rather, they are more commonly seeking to gain some flexibility within their existing budgets. In the parlance of consortia, we'd say they are seeking to make their money go further. For a provost, a board, a school administrator, or a taxpayer however, absolute cost reduction might be the preferred goal of interlibrary cooperation. If consortia could deliver such cost reductions, would library directors or member libraries support it? I think the answer is 'no,'

and not because these directors aren't smart, but because they are.

Consider the following fable:

Once upon a time, in an enchanted kingdom, ten libraries with a collective spend of \$100 million were linked together by a consortium. Each member library agreed to commit 10% of its budget (\$1 million each) for investments in collaboration. With \$10 million in fees, the consortium was able to merge and centralize operations to an extent that the members can now cover their local costs with \$5 million each, plus the \$1 million they each invested at the consortium level. So in our cooperative utopia, the resources and services that used to cost \$100 million can now be delivered for \$60 million through the magic sauce of collaboration, scale, or business rationalization.

Obviously, our fable is just a figment of our imagination. We don't know if \$10 million is the amount of money a consortium would need to scale up to tackle library operations. Nor do we know if \$5 million is the level of funding needed for a local library to sustain its necessary services. Specifics aside, the point of our fable is that while consortial collaboration has the potential to deliver fundamentally transformative results, its member libraries would never ratify such an aggressive strategy.

### Shifting the Locus of Control

Integration and savings at the level contemplated in our fable would immediately be recognized by local administrators as a threat to their autonomy, and likely open the door to further reductions at the local library level. Such a profound reallocation from local investment to central investment would turn the consortium/member relationship on its head; in essence, the members no longer running the consortium but the consortium running the members. Member library directors would certainly reject that upside-down model, and they would have the resounding support of library professionals everywhere. In the mind of the library community, empowered and effective consortia just might be antithetical to their idealized view of



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successful libraries. If the full superpower of consortial collaboration were unleashed, it would for many portend the undoing of much that libraries hold dear — i.e., big budgets, big collections, big staffs, and a stranglehold on controlling local practice.

So, what's good for the consortium goose might not necessarily be good for the member gander. And speaking of geese, let's consider another fable, *The Goose that Laid the Golden Eggs*. In that fable, a farm couple imprudently slaughtered their egg laying goose; just as a number of consortia have been axed by their membership. Perhaps these ritual slaughters were justified as acts of mercy, as in "let's put them out of their misery," or socially sanctioned executions as in "they deserved to die." While there is no doubt dysfunction among library consortia, the truth is that we don't really know what a well-funded consortium could accomplish.

Some of the more effective consortia in the U.S., Canada, and Europe are funded by sources beyond the library membership, such as a ministry, council, state legislature, governor, university president or group of provosts. Even in these cases of relatively well-funded consortia, their budgets are but a tiny fraction of the overall member budgets (maybe .01% of the member total), and we expect that their relative power and effectiveness are a function of their budgets. Getting back to our goosey metaphor, consortia may or may not be capable of laying golden eggs, but most of them aren't working with a functioning goose. Rather, they're trying to assemble a Frankengoose from the contributed body parts of member libraries — a wing here, a leg there, a neck and a tail, but no breasts or thighs. The goose doesn't look or function quite right, but we keep hoping for the eggs nonetheless.

### Imagining the Future of Library Consortia

Let's place our library super-consortium in the Jetson's hometown of Orbit City. The Orbit City Consortium runs ten university libraries in ten regionally proximate cites. By 'runs' we mean manages, in much the same way that a corporate headquarters manages a chain of franchised restaurants — think Kentucky Fried Libraries. Dig-

itized scholarly resources are licensed, processed, and served to the ten campuses by the consortium. Legacy print collections are stored in a central facility managed by the consortium and delivered by George Jetson's flying car on the scarce occasions when such historic resources are requested. Minimizing operational redundancy is the highest back-office priority of the Orbit City Consortium, while creating a consistent and predictable user experience is the highest customer-facing priority.

Across the ten universities, the consortium manages all content selection, acquisition, processing, organizing/discovery, dissemination, preservation, analysis, and weeding. Locally, each university maintains a modest library facility that provides a variety of academic services to address the scholarly aspirations of students, instructors, or researchers. The local site managers meet regularly with each other, as well as with consortium staff, to assure ongoing coordination of content, systems, and services, and to reinforce standards across the consortium's local service points. These local onsite facilities and services, primarily oriented toward providing students and researchers with access to expert educators and research consultants, will remain a significant investment for the member universities of the consortium. The bulk of library funding, however, would be centrally controlled by the consortium to support administrative oversight of the entire library system, including central management of content acquisition, technical infrastructure, network management, systems integration, quality assurance, and marketing.

This model is no doubt a dystopian future for most of today's academic librarians; something profoundly evil conjured by the Joker, Lex Luthor, or the Duke of Deception. Nonetheless, it just might have a certain utopian appeal to campus administrators, if such a scaled up and integrated structure could indeed deliver needed scholarly goods and services at a substantially reduced cost. In fact, the underlying vision here is less the stuff of fantastic superheroes, and more a mundane instance of the economic forces that inevitably drive toward business consolidation. Idiosyncratic library management is a luxury that someday might not seem worth the cost



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to funders, nor would the inconvenience to users. When push comes to shove, we fully expect librarians to protect their local prerogatives ahead of the collectivist ambitions of a super-consortium. That's not a bad or cynical thing; it's a prudent strategy from the perspective of those charged with stewarding existing resources.

Under the watchful eye of librarians and library administrators, library consortia are unlikely to flourish, instead, slowly withering over time from a lack of sustenance. In an effort to combat this, expect that consortia leaders will continually refine and amplify their messaging, but to no avail. Without the superpowers of Aquaman, swimming upstream against a current of library self-interest would prove both exhausting and futile. A more promising strategy for library consortia – especially those with an expansive vision of their future role – is to redirect their messaging beyond library directors to win the support of library funders and library users. By painting a compelling picture of a better information future – a scaled up, cooperative future like the Justice League of America – consortia could potentially attract substantial funding and substantial powers. If it is indeed true that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, then a managed network of libraries should be in a position to realize President Wells' vision, quoted in the header to this article, of "a union of strengths," capable of delivering greater value at lower costs. For library funders and library users, that would be *super*.

