Think Globally – Act Locally: Cooperation and Innovation in the Library Network

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1. Introduction

I should like to begin to thanking the conference organisers for inviting me to speak to you this morning. May I take this opportunity of wishing you every success during this conference and, especially, of welcoming our guests from abroad? I hope that you will have the opportunity of learning something about German libraries and librarianship during your stay in Cologne. Perhaps we will be able to welcome some of you to Germany again next year when the IFLA conference comes to Berlin.

I must confess that the invitation to speak came as something of a surprise, as I have no background in - nor special knowledge of - medical libraries. As the former Head of Early Printed Collections at the British Library, my day-to-day contacts with my colleagues in the BL's Health Care Information Service were frankly quite limited; indeed, my professional contacts with those in the medical library sector outside the BL were largely confined to specialist libraries with historic collections, in which Britain of course is especially rich. Previously, during my time at the BL's Research and Innovation Centre, I had worked quite closely with colleagues in the medical sector, supporting their work in promoting and extending the use of networked information, for example through subject gateways. I was - and remain - impressed by the openness to innovation demonstrated by colleagues in the health care information sector. You have an excellent record in developing services to meet the particular needs of medical professionals and in extending medical information provision to the wider community.

If my period with the Research and Innovation Centre gave me some insight into the needs and aims of health care information specialists, it was not enough, I'm afraid, for me to make a useful contribution to your specialist field in my presentation this morning. I've therefore chosen a more general keynote topic, and one that I hope we can all relate to: the importance of cooperation and its close relationship with innovation in and across the modern library network. I've also assumed, as a British librarian working in Germany, that the conference organisers wanted something about the peculiarities of the German library scheme woven into my paper, so I have tried to present the case as far as possible from a German perspective.

As some of you may know, I've been involved in cross-institutional, cross-sectoral and international cooperation for several years now, not merely because I regard it as worthy in itself but also because of the potential and practical benefits of pooling talent and ideas from different institutions, sectors and countries. One example. A number of projects at both the national and European levels, including those supported by the European Union and the Conference of European National Librarians, have shown that cooperation can pay real dividends in terms of the development of innovative and sustainable services, that the sum of our joint efforts is greater than the parts. So this will be my thesis this morning: that innovation and cross-sectoral and international cooperation are closely, I should say intimately, related. We should cooperate in order to innovate and the need to innovate should drive us to seek collaborative partnerships.

In a recent account of the British character, a German author writes about the proverbial British tendency to understatement: lectures, for example, must be introduced with jokes in which one apologies in advance for wasting the audience's time:

"Langweiligkeit gilt als eine milde Form der Kriminalität"

– A boring lecture is a mild form of criminal activity. So, apologies in advance for not saying anything especially witty, original or profound in this paper. I hope, at least, that something I might say will provoke discussion and debate. Despite my typically British understatement, you'll find I actually feel quite strongly about the real and tangible benefits of library cooperation, and I hope at least that something of that commitment will come through.

2. Cooperation as a Strategic Aim

Cooperation has, of course, become something of a mantra of late. No library strategic plan, appears to omit mention of the need to collaborate closely within the library network. A common motive appears to be resource-sharing. A recent British Library consultation document summed this up succinctly: "The need to work in co-operation with libraries in particular in order to make effective use of resources is paramount". In the Library's published statement of its New Strategic Directions, this is summarised in the following terms:

"In an increasingly networked world, the Library is committed to operating effectively within the international library community to further the aims and interests of the global library network."

The BL identifies the following "key support activities" in its library cooperation strategy:

· Determine those areas of activity likely to benefit most from partnership working;

· Promote joint development of library and information services for the benefit of the researcher and the wider community;

· Build on working relationships already in place and create a small number of in-depth relationships which are crucial both to the success of the Library's new strategic directions and to the success of the partner organisations;

· Use the Library's influence, expertise and experience of partnerships in the global library community to attract more funding from international bodies for library developments which have global relevance;

· Work with our partners to establish and maintain common UK positions on national and international library policies and standards.

Even in the private sector, commercial companies appear increasingly to be pooling research and development activities. Saving costs on R&D is one obvious driver for company mergers; but other forms of working together have emerged in recent years, from science parks to collaborative research consortia involving companies and public research institutions. There is a recognition that, in a world of rapid and profound technological change, few companies – not even some of the largest US corporations – can keep a competitive edge by depending exclusively on their own resources.

A major impetus for cooperation ind the cultural and information sectors comes of course from governments and funding agencies, who at the European and national levels, are strongly encouraging cooperation across sectors and domains as well as national and linguistic boundaries. The reasons for this are obviously complex and have a great deal to do with political and social agendas. European funding agencies, for example, clearly hope for a knowledge transfer from the "information rich" societies of northern and western Europe to the "information poorer" societies in south, central and eastern Europe. In a world in which social inclusion has become a new orthodoxy, it seems an attractive idea for the British government's New Oportunities Fund to require the British Library, as a condition of grant, to collaborate in a digitisation programme with smaller and local cultural institutions. Indeed, both sides can perhaps learn something in the process.

As I see it, this is all in harmony with the theme of this conference, to act locally but think globally. Increasingly, service institutions such as libraries are developing a user-orientated philosophy. If cooperation and innovation are closely interconnected, then we also need to demonstrate that the development of innovative services and collaborative structures will serve the needs of our local or specialist user communities. We need to demonstrate the direct, local benefits for our users of collaborative, global development.

No library organisation, not even a large centralised national library, can now envisage developing in isolation. They all see themselves as nodes in a global information network. It should not surprise us, therefore, that the published plans of library organisations across the world are increasingly linking user orientation, innovation and cooperation and partnership in the library network as major aims or "enabling strategies" for developmental change. The statement of major tasks set out for the British Library by government certainly point in this direction, although the interdependence between the various elements is not made apparent. The BL will support national strategies by:

· providing ready access to the collections;

· satisfying users' needs by drawing on the expertise of its staff and exploiting the latest technology;

· supporting the national library network with appropriate services and cooperation in partnerships;

· taking a leading role in the international library community;

· promoting wider understanding of the collections through public programmes.

The announcement of my own appointment as Director General of the Berlin State Library last year also emphasised the need to develop not only innovative network services but also internationalcollaborative partnerships. When the Berlin State Library publishes a strategic consultation document, as I hope it will later this year, you will find exactly these themes repeated in a Berlin context.

3. Collaborative Networks in Germany

I should probably add some definitions at this point and say something about the importance of library cooperation in Germany. The Berlin State Library, the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, is not of course Germany's national library, that role is played by the Deutsche Bibliothek in Frankfurt and Leipzig, which has had the right of national legal deposit and produces the national bibliography. The Berlin State Library is probably best described as "a national research library"; it is almost certainly the German research library with the widest range of collections in terms in subject, format, language and period.

But no German library, whatever its status or size, works in isolation. Germany's tradition of political and cultural federalism meant that no dominant national library, such as the British Library in London or the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, developed in Berlin or indeed elsewhere. In a close-knit library network, the Staatsbibliothek collaborates with its national and regional partners within a variety of formal frameworks to enable access to a highly distributed research resource. Indeed, in Germany we are dependent on collaborative infrastructures, the glue that makes the whole system work.

The Berlin State Library's claim to be Germany's largest research library, or indeed any claim by a national library institution, therefore needs to be seen in the context of this network. Abroad, we take for granted, for example, that the British Library or Library of Congress holds the "national printed archive", the most comprehensive record of the printed and published output of the nation. Our national library, the Deutsche Bibliothek in Frankfurt and Leipzig, was only founded with the right of national legal deposit in 1913. A retrospective national collection for the centuries before that does not exist in a single location. Instead, since the 1980s, a network of major German research libraries, including the Deutsche Bibliothek and the state libraries in Munich and Berlin, have been working together to form a "virtual" national collection ('Sammlung Deutscher Drucke'), concentrating and coordinating their retrospective collection development activities.

The principle extends to the bibliographic record. If the Deutsche Bibliothek is responsible for the current national bibliography, then the state libraries in Berlin and Munich, working with other major research libraries, have long been associated with large-scale collaborative retrospective bibliographic projects, so far covering the national printed record from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. There are parallel enterprises covering non-print and other special collection materials, for example in the fields of manuscripts, maps and oriental collections. Here the Berlin State Library can and does play a leading role, operating always in a cooperative infrastructure, coordinating its activities with others.

The collaborative principle extends, of course, to current collection building. Recognising the historic lack of a centralised national library, the German Research Council, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), our national funding agency for research resources and programmes, supports a wide range of collection development and access activities across the whole library spectrum. The Berlin State Library is a key partner within this collection development network, building a national resource in fields as diverse as law and Asian studies.

This conference is taking place in another subject-based centre of excellence supported by the DFG, in this case a central library for medicine. The Deutsche Zentralbibliothek für Medizin not only builds and maintains the largest collection of medical materials in Europe, it also provides services improving access to collections, a current contents service and a virtual subject gateway, both supported by the DFG and both typical for the way Germany's subject-based distributed national collection works.

Increasingly, research libraries have also brought together their bibliographic services within a common library network. Instead of developing its own corporate bibliographic system in isolation, the Staatsbibliothek chose some years ago to join a regional grouping, the Gemeinsamer Bibliotheksverbund (GBV), one of a number of its kind in Germany, and one that uses the OCLC PICA system. Other collaborative systems link us to the network, for example, for the purposes of document delivery.

In other words, cooperation in Germany's highly distributed library system is something which not merely has a long tradition, it is a necessity if we are to exploit to the full the national research and information resource and to ensure maximum value is achieved by sharing limited resources.

4. Opportunities for Innovation through Cooperation

If the culture of cooperation exists, at least in Germany, and much of the infrastructure is in place, how can cooperation help specifically to promote innovation? What models can we find? Here I would like to concentrate on two or three aspects, emphasising especially the benefits of cross-sectoral, cross-domain and international collaboration.

4.1 Cross-Sectoral Cooperation

The particular importance of sectorally-based libraries and information services lies, of course, in their closeness to specific users and user communities. Libraries in all sectors have been developing innovative networked services in response to their own clientèle. The benefits of drawing on that experience across the sectors are obvious. Indeed, in an increasingly complex information landscape, it seems obvious that boundaries between different library sectors will increasingly break down. Specialist libraries serving a specialist user community will need to look across sectoral boundaries for sources of information and services.

Health care information seems to me a case in point. In the last ten years, your community has developed a numbered of innovative networked services in response to users' needs, both medical professionals and patients. The plethora of networked information sources meant you were pioneers in developing mediated subject gateways. The special requirements of medical information provision mean you have developed methods to ensure speed, accuracy and quality. In other words, your "local" experience certainly has wider, "global" significance beyond the medical information sector. We can learn from your experience and perhaps apply some of the solutions to generic problems in other sectors.

4.2 Cross-Domain Cooperation

In recent years there has been increasing interest in bringing various kinds of memory institutions together in order to open up access to the total research and information resources in documentary and non-documentary form. Libraries, archives and museums each have long and parallel histories of collection development, description, care and access. Professional disciplines have developed often in considerable isolation from each other. Now digitisation and networking appears to offer the opportunity for improved dialogue and new forms of cooperation.

Users, of course, do not necessarily understand domain boundaries nor do they always wish to work within their narrow confines. We need to enable users to range across them more effectively. The development of common resource discovery tools seems an excellent place to start, and valuable work has already taken place in various countries. A recent Swedish project, for example, decided to start with establishing a thesaurus, a common vacabulary, recognising that the three professions use terms often in very different or even contradictory ways. A glance at some past attempts to describe books as if they were musuem objects (seriously proposed by some msueums professionals in the early 90s) will serve to make the point. The same Swedish project decided very sensibly to start with similar materials held by institutions in all three sectors, for example photographs.

One of the many advantages of Berlin State Library's status is that its umbrella organisation, the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, encompasses the state museums and archives as well as the library, representing a unique institutional opportunity for developing cross-domain structures. We must develop tools to enable access to full range of world heritage materials in our care. I see collection-level description as a key tool in linking disparate collections. The Berlin State Library is also working increasingly as clearing house for information about cross-domain cooperation between memory institutions within Germany as a whole. This should enable us to respond more effectively than before to European Union calls in this field.

We must produce interfaces to our documentary and non-documentary collections that will enable access to the full resources regardless of format or physical location. By opening up access to resources in this way, whether they are analogue or digital, stored locally in libraries, archives or museums, or available over networks, we shall enable users to transform the data in collections into potential information. Only then can we stake a claim to the kind of investment we shall all need in the future.

4.3 International Cooperation

The European dimension is also important, and not only because of the availability of funding at the EU level. By bringing together professionals from a variety of countries in programmes and projects under its calls, the European Union is obviously hoping that creative sparks will fly and that knowledge can be transferred between countries. At the national level, at least in the United Kingdom, the programmes are linked closely to an agenda of preserving a diverse cultural heritage and improving access to information for everybody in the community.

In a recent conference about the EU-funded project TEL ("The European Library") I argued the case for linking national libraries - and other big research libraries in our major metropolitan centres - as essential nodes in the emerging global information network. Weren't we supposed to be devolving power and responsibility, thinking regionally and locally rather than centrally or globally?

It might be argued that TEL or similar enterprises could be seen as securing cultural diversity, a key political aim in the modern Europe. By "pooling" the resources of Europe's libraries, TEL could enable each node within the network to provide access to the resources of the whole. New services could develop to allow resource navigation across national, institutional, linguistic, temporal and format-based boundaries, exploiting to the full the European dimension and adding collective value to our individual efforts.

There have been numerous examples of successful international cooperation in the networked age, ranging from the development of the World Wide Web (invented by a Briton!) to recent work on codes and protocols. If "Dublin Core" refers to Dublin, Ohio, then much of the most important work on this and other metadata standards derives from Europe, and especially from Scandinavia. Much of the most interesting work on digitisation is taking place in Japan; elsewhere in Asia, institutions and individuals are using the new information spaces in unexpected and creative ways, Singapore providing a key example.

5. Structures for Cooperation

Most funding agents will nowadays require collaborating partner organisations to apply project management techniquues to time-limited development activities. These can be cumbersome in themselves, in the case of European funded projects in the past, clearly too cumbersome. But project structures should allow personnel from different sectors and countries to work together with common goals and defined roles. They should ensure accountability in the distribution of resources.

In one of the early web projects I was lucky enough to be involved on in the 90s, people with contrasting and complementary skills and experience were drawn together from five or six countries. We were able to bring together networking and digitisation skills, editing and design skills with project management experience in a highly effective team. Each member was able to deploy particular his or her specialist knowledge, making variety rather than homogeneity a particular virtue. The result was GABRIEL, the information server for Europe's national libraries, a sectoral pioneer. If this was a particularly successful project, then it was so because each member was challenged by the national experience of others. It might have been realised more quickly if based in a single institution, but I doubt whether the result would have been more effective.

Of course this project was successful not least because we shared a common working language, and I don't simple mean English! By the mid-1990s we already had at our disposal a common set of tools and standards for developing web-based services. Networking technologies had made physical location less

and less significant. As more tools, standards and common vocabularies develop, more and more common platforms will emerge.

6. Challenges in Developing Collaborative Structures

I suspect that inter-institutional, cross-sectoral project structures might, in the longer term, begin to challenge traditional, "stand-alone" organisations. The more money is invested in multilateral projects of this kind, the more governments and funding agencies will be questioning existing institutional structures. We need to develop ways of working together that bridge the institutional and sectoral boundaries, not merely in the sense of technical standards and tools but also to enable us to deploy human and financial resources most effectively. If projects are to to develop into sustainable services, then cross-boundary administrative and financial models are needed, models that sometimes need to challenge local financial control systems or rigid national provisions. A successful model could be MALVINE ("Manuscripts and Letters via Integrated Networks in Europe"), an international project led by the Berlin State Library and funded by the European Union. The successful completion of the project, which developed a search engine that discovers relevant resources across national boundaries, was marked by the establishment of a consortium that will enable the lead partner in Berlin to continue to maintain and enhance a sustainable service.

7. Summary and Conclusions

In summing up, I should like to re-emphasise that libraries such as the Berlin State Library are increasingly to be regarded as nodes in a global information network. No single institution, no single country (possibly not even the United States) can provide the investment and the expertise in developing innovative new services and solutions to the kinds of issues I have described. Cooperation is therefore not merely good in itself (in furthering international understanding) it can have the practical effect of bringing together the resources and expertise needed to tackle global problems. Collections, resources and skills are complementary.

We need to work together, not least if the vision of a world-wide information network with great libraries as nodes is to be realised. We need to persuade decision-makers and our communities of the value of institutions that, by accumulating, preserving and making accessible a critical mass of knowledge materials in open environments, enable users to range over barriers of format, time, language, culture and discipline. The political and cultural opportunity, I would say necessity, is obvious and needs to be stated. We must make the case for international cooperative structures as essential building blocks in a new information architecture and promote their significance in the emerging world-wide information market.