THE EXTRAORDINARY GROWTH OF INITIATIVES and programmes of co-operation at both the local and international levels is surely one of the most significant developments in the field of library science of the past few years. We know that such co-operation is not a recent practice and that precedents can be found in library history. For instance, supposedly there were even exchanges of documents between the two most famous libraries of the ancient world, Pergamum and the legendary Alexandria, thus demonstrating how a spirit of cooperation could prevail even between two institutions often cited as the epitome of rivalry between libraries. Leaving aside its basis in historical fact, this anecdote exemplifies library behaviour in the century that has recently ended: continual oscillation between collaboration and competition, openness and isolation, with the latter often predominant (especially at certain latitudes, where ideological control or simply bureaucratic inertia has often overcome the needs of cultural development and access to information).

Episodes of collaboration, like the one mentioned above, are not often found in the centuries-old library history and in any case represent the exception rather than the rule. We should not undervalue the extraordinary progress made by library services in the last thirty years; nevertheless, we must admit that the organisational culture and structural model of the library that we have inherited from the twentieth century still appears to be focused more on self-sufficiency than co-operation. The forms of structured co-operation made a noteworthy leap forward in quality starting in the 1970’s with the establishment of library networks based on a large-scale use of information and computing technology. Thanks to these developments the libraries of the more advanced countries were particularly well positioned for the arrival of the Internet, which brought with it an extraordinary acceleration of initiatives and techniques for interlibrary co-operation on a global scale.

If, until just a few years ago, co-operation could still be considered optional—an integrative activity for many libraries—today instead it is the basis for guaranteeing an acceptable level of access. Indeed, we can say that co-operation is an essential part of library work as well as a decisive factor for change, which is realised through the sharing of content, know-how, infrastructure, and financing. In turn, it sets in motion an interactive and collaborative relation between the library, users and other agents of the knowledge transfer process. These changes, today happening before our eyes, mark the definitive transition from the traditional self-sufficient library to the collaborative and distributive model.

The increase in the prices of published products and the lower priority given to public services in governments’ agendas (as witnessed by cuts in funding for research and cultural programmes and through a more restrictive application of copyright laws) place libraries in a highly critical situation. The so-called “resurgence” of library consortia begun in the US and that subsequently extended to Europe and other parts of the globe can be interpreted as the attempt on the part of libraries to respond in an orderly way to the challenges mentioned above. This is accomplished by uniting their forces to negotiate better conditions for access to electronic resources and to manage the tran-
transition to digital formats. The existing state of antago-
nism with the large publishing conglomerates that
dominate the information market forces libraries to
seek out more efficient, alternative models of commu-
nication based on technologies and approaches orient-
ed to open access and on the distributed management
of functions and resources.

The role of libraries and their function as interme-
diaries and disseminators of knowledge is not the only
thing at stake. In a more general sense, these develop-
ments affect the cultural heritage and growth of many
countries. This issue is felt particularly strongly in Eu-
rope, where great cultural wealth and variety are not
always reconciled with the merciless logic of the in-
formation market. Additionally, the risk of seeing na-
tional production suffocated by the dominant cultural
industry is more than real. The inadequacy of access
models (licensing contracts) imposed by the interna-
tional publishing industry appears self-evident, espe-
cially since this industry is particularly insensitive to
the attitudes of diverse linguistic areas and to the needs
of diverse educational systems.

It is obvious that these challenges cannot be ad-
dressed sporadically and in isolation. The libraries of
Europe are increasingly more aware of the necessity of
working together and of developing efficient systems
of communication. Nor are we dealing with only a part
of Europe, the North, which traditionally has had a
better-developed field of library science. The flow-
ering of initiatives for the development of library con-
sortia extends throughout the 25 countries of the EU,
and beyond. We can foresee a vast laboratory of ideas,
projects, and exchanges of experience, as well as a
search for original models more suitable to the varied
and complex reality of the new Europe.

In this light, the consortia developed and consoli-
dated in Spain in recent years merit particular atten-
tion, not only for the concrete results they have at-
tained at the level of user services, but also for their
commitment to finding original, efficient models
which adhere to the specific social, cultural, and insti-
tutional realities in which they were developed.
Thanks to these experiences, in recent years signifi-
cant contributions have arrived from our colleagues in
Spain concerning the debate on consortia, providing
useful references to analogous initiatives in other Eu-
ropean countries. In Europe today, together with a va-
riety of approaches there is also an emerging common
ground of norms, orientations, and experiences which
is increasingly more consistent and which constitutes
for the libraries of EU countries an effective base for
developing more advanced forms of co-operation and
for sharing, not only resources, but also a common
perspective and vision.

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