

Consortios bibliotecarios: compartir también criterios y objetivos

Por Tommaso Giordano

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 co-operation 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 predominating (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.

«Parece ser que ya en el mundo antiguo las famosas bibliotecas de Pérgamo y Alejandría compitieron pero también colaboraron»

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



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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.

«De todas formas, después de siglos de más bien intentar la autosuficiencia, ha sido en los últimos 30 años cuando las bibliotecas han empezado realmente a cooperar, gracias en gran parte a la nuevas tecnologías»

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-

sition to digital formats. The existing state of antagonism with the large publishing conglomerates that dominate the information market forces libraries to seek out more efficient, alternative models of communication based on technologies and approaches oriented to open access and on the distributed management of functions and resources.

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

«Es evidente la inadecuación de los contratos de licencia impuestos indiscriminadamente por la industria editorial internacional, insensible a la situación de las diversas áreas lingüísticas y a las necesidades de sistemas educativos diferentes»

It is obvious that these challenges cannot be addressed 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 flowering of initiatives for the development of library consortia 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.

«Las experiencias españolas en consorcios han generado valiosas contribuciones que sirven de referencia a otros países europeos»

In this light, the consortia developed and consolidated in Spain in recent years merit particular attention, not only for the concrete results they have attained at the level of user services, but also for their commitment to finding original, efficient models which adhere to the specific social, cultural, and institutional realities in which they were developed. Thanks to these experiences, in recent years significant contributions have arrived from our colleagues in Spain concerning the debate on consortia, providing useful references to analogous initiatives in other European countries. In Europe today, together with a variety 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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