

Future Tense — The Library on the Ground: 5 Reasons Why Consortia Matter More than Ever

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Personally, I hate sharing things. I prefer to know what's mine and what's not, and have little patience with the grey areas in between. If I own something, I know where it is and how to take care of it. I can find it and use it at whim — the ultimate demand-driven system. There's no worry that someone else may have it when I want it, or that they're wrecking it or losing it in the bargain. Admittedly, possessiveness of this sort does little to recommend my character, but it does guarantee the integrity of my stuff.

Recently, though, I've had occasion to reconsider my retrograde ways, and to meditate on the many virtues of sharing and working together, in conversation with colleagues at several consortia: the **Orbis Cascade Alliance**; the grimly-named-but-actually-friendly **Committee on Institutional Cooperation** (better known as the **CIC**); and the **Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries**, whose work name is simply **Alliance**. These organizations and their counterparts represent the better angels of our institutional nature, as they seek to help libraries benefit from one another's activities, and to avoid doing the same work over and over. Sometimes it actually works.

The role of collaborative regional organizations differs, of course, according to their size and mission. But in the course of considering these strange creatures more carefully, it strikes me that some types of them may be more important than ever, in part because of what **R2** likes to call "**the tyranny of the tangible.**" May I explain?

Lately, there has been much discussion of taking library services to the "network level", through **OCLC's Web-scale Cooperative Library Management Services** and other techniques. Some of the best minds in our profession are wrestling with how to develop, manage and deliver library services from the "cloud," where transaction costs and infrastructure can be more widely shared. There are potentially enormous benefits to be realized from this "**library in the cloud.**"

But while network-level services lend themselves well to management of metadata and digital content, tangible collections will continue to require attention at the regional, or "sub-network" level. Web-scale services delivered from the cloud may be the Holy Grail, but print, microform, and media collections will stubbornly refuse to ascend. They will have to be dealt with here on earth, and regional library organizations will continue to play a central role — even an expanded role — in that process. Here are five reasons why.

1. Shared workloads will keep transaction costs low. For a variety of reasons, libraries in 2010 will buy fewer print books, print journals, and

microforms. Because routine processes operate most cost-effectively against a high volume of similar items and transactions, workflows for tangible materials in individual libraries will inevitably grow less efficient as their purchasing declines. Amalgamating the diminishing streams from multiple libraries into a single large consortial-level stream will help maintain economies of scale, and perpetuate the low transaction costs that libraries have come to depend on. Consolidation of activity also improves the prospects for standardization, and simplifies the management of shared purchasing, cataloging, processing, binding, and preservation. Consortia are the natural home for this consolidation.

2. A higher percentage of collections will be stored offsite in shared regional facilities. As use of print materials continues to diminish, fewer copies of any given title need to be retained to satisfy user demand and to provide for secure archiving. As library managers seek additional space for users, journal backruns, low-use monographs, and tangible government documents will be increasingly moved offsite. The footprint of library-based collections will shrink. Shared offsite collections can enable massive de-duplication of these formats, achieving significant savings of space and staff time. Similarly, a distributed print repository, operated or coordinated at the consortial level, can enable individual libraries to reduce onsite print collections without loss of access. Both of these strategies presume reasonable delivery or scanning times, services best provided within a manageable geographic area. Similarly, last-copy responsibility for print will in most cases work best as a regional function.

3. Tangible collections require proximity to the items being managed. While management of e-resources can be distributed among staff in discrete locations, tangible collections benefit from co-location of materials and staff. Cataloging, labeling, binding, and digitization all require the item in hand. As a greater percentage of print materials are held offsite, usually in shared facilities, it makes sense to manage those collections regionally, and to locate staff near the collections.

One solution: create a consortium-wide collaborative technical services operation — structured around a re-

gional "storage & distribution center." This would allow a single technical services group to handle most selection, acquisitions, cataloging, and collection maintenance tasks on behalf of the consortium, and to be based where the bulk of the material resides. While there would remain some need for local technical services support on each campus, much redundancy could be eliminated by this hub and spoke model.

4. Shared technology infrastructure reduces costs, improves service and training. IT resources and expertise are expensive, and consortial-level implementation and management can offer major economies of scale. OPACs, link resolvers, ERMS, federated search, resource sharing and other modules can be centrally administered, maintained, and upgraded. With a common infrastructure, training and sharing of staff resources become simpler and more effective. Regional storage and management of tangible collections would also enable shared investment in digitization infrastructure, creation of metadata, and digital archiving. De-duplication of collections would assure that these efforts are focused on unique and locally valuable content.

5. Scarce expertise and staff capacity can be better distributed regionally. Consortia can increasingly deliver expertise to members that not every individual library can afford. Licensing, language skills, advanced report writing, instructional tutorials, and assessment are a few examples of competencies that could be available on an as-needed basis. In an era of lean staffing, most libraries also lack sufficient capacity for large-scale projects, such as collection evaluation, reclamation, inventories, de-selection, transfers, and other tasks. These require not only dedicated project management, but often hundreds of additional hours for record maintenance, re-labeling, materials moves, and the like.

A consortial-level project team (or teams) could ameliorate this. With a number of libraries in need of project work, a team of this nature could be kept busy full-time, rotating its services among members. No individual library would bear the cost of retaining such a staff full-time, but all would be able to draw upon its capacity as needed. A similar approach could be used to

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amortize curation, preservation, and digitization expertise and capacity across the entire shared collection.

Many libraries and consortia, of course, have already recognized and seized these opportunities:

- **The University of California's Shared Cataloging Program** and **California Digital Library** have distributed high-level skills across the entire UC system. Its **Next Generation Technical Services** initiative seeks to bring those operations to the UC network level.
- Shared offsite storage facilities like **Harvard/MIT's**, Colorado **PASCAL** and a host of others have reduced costs and collection redundancies.
- In Florida, both **FCLA** and **CCLA** provide centralized automation support for most of the academic libraries in the state.
- Programs such as **Orbis Cascade's Distributed Print Repository** have enabled libraries to extend their space while providing a secure archiving solution for valuable content.
- The **CIC's Hathi Trust** has pioneered secure digital archiving for millions of book titles.
- The **CONSORT** libraries in Ohio have drastically reduced the overlap in tangible Government Documents in their respective collections.
- The **Colorado Alliance** has implemented a large-scale digitization program for microforms.
- **Colby**, **Bates**, and **Bowdoin Colleges** have initiated a fully shared approval plan, in which weekly shipments alternate among all three campuses.
- **Columbia** and **Cornell** have begun to formally explore closer collaboration between their technical services operations, in a pilot program known as **2CUL**.

This list merely scratches the surface. There are hundreds of similar endeavors that demonstrate the actual and potential benefits of ground-based collaboration within a region. (We'll reserve the drawbacks for another, much more entertaining article.) But there is much more to be done, and well-managed consortia are the organizations best positioned to do it. No matter how fully the library in the cloud is realized, efficient exchange of material, equipment and staff will continue to require these libraries on the ground. And yea, verily, sharing shall sweep the regions...except for the region of my stuff. 🍷