The cooperative online catalogue: a hydra, or an instrument of change

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As a former student of Byzantine history it is a privilege and a pleasure to be here in the second city of that great empire. In the English language the term Byzantine has come to be used perjoratively - without justification, I should add - to mean tortuously complex and, in that sense, it is very appropriate that I should be talking to you today, in a Byzantine city on a Byzantine theme!

The dream of cooperative cataloguing has been with us for a very long time. We need only go back to the Library of Congress catalogue cards and the associated National Union Catalogue in this century to remind ourselves of the efforts which have been made in the past and, of course, the catalogue card itself is supposed to have come into being when French revolutionaries used playing cards to form a comprehensive record of the holdings of the libraries confiscated from aristocratic and religious leaders.

It is only the advent of automation, however, which has made the prospect of a real cooperative catalogue seem likely. My paper, today, will discuss current British experience of automated union cataloguing and suggest some pointers to the future.

A decade and more ago there were ambitious plans to create a United Kingdom Libraries Database System, incorporating records from many major libraries. At the time the success of at least some of the catalogue cooperatives, such as BLCMP and SLS, in creating a union catalogue - even if used only as a bibliographic file - suggested that a more widespread approach might have an equally bright future. Problems of standards, politics and finance all contrived to make the project still born. Only now, in a revised format, is that early dream beginning to look as if it will be realised.

Development is coming about, not as a separate exercise in catalogue cooperation but as a consequence of the great impetus given to general library cooperation in higher education given by a review in 1993 known as the Follett Review. Following student riots in some of the newer London universities about the inadequacy of library provision (amongst other things), a committee was set up by the Higher Education bodies responsible for universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to look into libraries in higher education. Sir Brian Follett, now Vice-Chancellor at the University of Warwick, was asked to chair the committee which consisted of a group including academics and librarians, as well as some others.

I have no doubt that the subsequent report, published in December 1993, with the action which has stemmed from it, has been the most beneficial event in the history of

British academic librarianship during my working lifetime and for much longer than that. Not only has it led to specific actions, including the funding of some major initiatives in both traditional library activity, such as new building, and innovatory services - led by the eLib programme; it has also fostered a new spirit of purposeful cooperation which may, in the longer term, prove even more fruitful.

Academic libraries have cooperated closely in the United Kingdom for many years but much of that cooperation has been unproductive. Just about everyone has believed in the principle of cooperation but few have been prepared to put substantial resources into activity which did not directly benefit their institutions. A number of the cooperative projects which have been agreed in the past have been formulaic and, in practice, of little value. Follet has shown ways in which cooperation can be funded and supported to produce concrete and practical results.

In the cataloguing area this has been most clearly seen in the development of the CURL Opac. CURL stands for the Consortium of University Research Libraries and, as the name suggests is a grouping of the libraries of the major, research-oriented universities in the United Kingdom.

CURL founding members:

Oxford
Cambridge
Glasgow
Edinburgh
London
Manchester
Leeds

The group consisted originally of seven self-selecting members who started off in the mid 1980s as little more than an occasional dining club to discuss matters of common interest. Over the years, however, CURL has grown, both in numbers - it has now some thirteen members with one or two other obvious candidates (including my own library) waiting to join - and in significance.

CURL present members:

Oxford
Cambridge
Glasgow^
London - Senate House
London - London School of Economics
London - University College
London - Imperial College
Manchester
Leeds
Durham
Sheffield
Warwick

Trinity College Dublin

Its most important role nationally has been the development of the CURL database. Most of the original CURL members had the bulk of their stock recorded in traditional catalogues. It seemed beneficial, therefore, to create a joint database which all could use in retrospective conversion. The database was established in 1987 at Manchester University, which has been extremely supportive over the years in providing staffing for the project, over and above that which was paid for from other members' subscriptions. Although the database was restricted in holdings to CURL members, from an early date its records were made available to other academic libraries in the United Kingdom for cataloguing purposes and many libraries found CURL records to be amongst the cheapest and fastest available.

At the same time a report in June 1995 on the retrospective conversion of library catalogues in institutions of higher education prepared for the Follett Review Group identified some daunting statistics. Although some 10.5 million records, representing some 2 million individual titles had already been converted in UK higher education libraries, some 28 million records remained. It is clear that the bulk of the nations holdings can only be identified by travelling to many different libraries. It will be some time yet before the mountain comes to Mahomet, although one or two of the foothills may be stirring.

With the wider background in mind, the central government funding provided for electronic developments as a consequence of the Follett Report gave CURL the opportunity to bid for a grant to convert its database into a joint online catalogue. The consortium was successful in obtaining funding for this purpose from the JISC (Joint Information Services Committee of the Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Scotland and Wales and the Department of Education in Northern Ireland). JISC funding turned the project from a private initiative by a small group of libraries into a national endeavour. While the database remains the property of the CURL libraries - and a small charge is now levied on other libraries in the higher education community^ wishing to use records from it for cataloguing purposes - the opac which has been built on the database is being managed under the direction of JISC. Initially this caused a degree of confusion but closer relations have been established between the two bodies in recent months and there seems no reason why this hybrid structure should not work perfectly well.

It is assumed that CURL will take the initiative in proposing development and in making bids to JISC for appropriate funding. If JISC considers these developments to be in the national interest and it has the funds available, the project will be funded nationally. If either of these conditions is not met it is still open to CURL to initiate and fund the development at its own expense.

The contract for managing the project was put out to tender and won by Manchester in October 1995 with a bid which, as experience subsequently showed, underestimated some of the complexities involved in creating the catalogue. This has recently been rectified by the grant of additional funding from JISC and there should be a significant improvement in progress towards the original goals. Despite the problems,

considerable progress has been made and the catalogues of Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds and Trinity College, Dublin have been loaded.

The principal reasons for delay in progress have been twofold: technical and legal. The combined opac has to load records from a number of competing commercial opac systems - Geac for Oxford, BLCMP for Manchester and Innopac for Glasgow, for example. The interpretation of the records from these systems has been handled successfully but what was not anticipated was that each time a library upgraded its own system, a complete reload of the records from that library to the combined opac would be required. This has caused considerable delay.

Even more vexing has been the copyright issue with respect to bibliographic records. For those libraries operating independently, such as Edinburgh and Glasgow, the problems have been relatively minor and more or less satisfactory deals have been done with major bibliographic record suppliers such as OCLC. However, two British cooperatives, BLCMP and SLS have been more hesitant to reach an agreement. There have been general expressions of goodwill and a solution is felt to be close at hand but negotiations on copyright clearance have taken a long time. When that solution is agreed, the records of Bimingham, Imperial College London the London School of Economics, Manchester University, University College London and the University of London Library (Senate House) will be loaded. A loading schedule for the records for the newer members of CURL has not yet been agreed and is likely to be some year or years ahead.

At this time, therefore, the COPAC, as the CURL opac was named at its launch in Manchester on 30th April this year, is far from being a complete realisation of the original conception but the ground rules have been laid and sufficient exists for a useful tool to be available to the whole academic community. Already, all academics with access to JANET (the Joint Academic Network which links UK universities) can use a catalogue which contains many of the holdings of six of the major universities of the country. It should be remembered that Oxford and Cambridge are the only universities in Britain to have legal deposit privilege and the original CURL members between them arguably have the bulk of research-related material in their holdings. When the remaining holdings are loaded it will be a very powerful tool indeed.

By January 1996 approximately 8.76 million records had been contributed to the COP AC. It is estimated that at least 600,000 records a year are being added. The coverage of these records by date is as follows:

pre 1900	...........3%
1901-1920	2%
1921-1940	4%
1941-1960	6%
1961-1980	25%
1981-	60%

The date distribution reflects not only the massive increase in publishing output this century but also the fact that the records for many of the older books have not yet been converted.

Language coverage is:

English	73%
German	6%
French	4%
Spanish	3%
Italian	2%
Russian	1%
Polish	0.5%
Latin	0.5%
Portuguese	0.5%

Most of the records are for books but there are an increasing number of records for other materials such as printed and recorded music and video. Records for journals and other periodicals make up some 4% of the database.

Although it is expected that full use of the catalogue will develop slowly, already there are clear signs of demand. From March 22nd to July 22nd this year the number of searches on the Web interface amounted to some 22,000. Of these at least 30% were from non-UK sources while, within the UK, 54% of searches were from non-CURL libraries. Clearly, here is a tool of value to scholars around the world.

The catalogue is already so powerful that there is a strong feeling that it should be exploited more fully than as a mere catalogue. In the contract which was signed with JISC it Was agreed that some form of document delivery provision would be made through the COPAC. Initially this was envisaged as being no more than an e-mail link which would allow users of the catalogue to initiate the request for an item found. However, the catalogue's potential as a vehicle for full scale document delivery has become ever more apparent and major discussions have now begun to determine how most effectively to use it in this way. A report was commissioned from an expert consultant during the summer which was considered at the COP AC Advisory Committee. This report has now been circulated to interested parties for comment and it is intended that progress should follow, taking advantage of some of the work deriving from other projects funded by JISC following the outcome of the Follett Review. In particular, the LAMDA project, looking at ways in which inter-library loan can be handled in a sample group of libraries, and the EDDIS project which is concerned with document delivery are both being considered as likely vehicles for adding to the COPAC.

What remains to be determined are the political considerations. The United Kingdom has been extremely fortunate in relying for much of its inter-library loan traffic on the British Library Document Supply Centre for much of the second half of this century. It seems evident that the British Library ought to be able to compete on price with anything that the Universities can do. Unfortunately, the present government's insistence on the British Library recovering an increasing proportion of its costs by charging and other income generation activities has forced prices up well in advance of inflation. This trend has been exacerbated by the government's refusal to pay the full costs of the transfer of the British Library's London-based operations to the new

St Pancras building. In national and commercial terms these decisions may have some justification but it is a fact that the bulk of the use of the British library in London is by London-based academics and for Universities located outside London it seems doubly unfair that London academics should have such ready access to the finest collection in the country and that the rest of us should be required to pay for their privilege!

It is the desire of JISC to work with, rather than in competition against the British Library but British Universities will feel it imperative to at least keep in reserve the option of an alternative inter-library loan scheme which can come into play if the British library is forced or otherwise chooses to make its prices uncompetitive.

In the meantime, we are proceeding along a more harmonious route, looking at ways in which COP AC document delivery can supplement, rather than compete with the British library. In particular, as the periodicals records on the COP AC are relatively small and incomplete and because the British Library finds the supply of monographs to be more difficult than the supply of journals, we are looking at concentrating on monograph provision from the COPAC as a first step.

After provision of a catalogue and document supply service, the third of the initial aims of the project has been to increase the bibliographic information available, either through the addition of material from non-CURL sources to the database, or by linking the database to others in a manner which enables the searching of distributed bibliographic information from a single interface. To achieve this aim, discussions are continuing with the British Library and the Library of Congress to link to their online catalogues. Consideration is also being given to the catalogue records created as a consequence of another government initiation. Some =A350 million have been distributed to many British Universities for projects related to special collections in the Humanities and although much of this money has been spent on conservation and on digitisation, a high proportion has gone on the retrospective cataloguing of major collections held in libraries not in membership of CURL. Initially it was thought that these records should be included in the CURL database but second thoughts suggest that, at best, they should be linked to COPAC by a common interface.

In the longer term, non-CURL libraries with national quality collection strengths in certain disciplines may be asked to contribute to the COPAC in yet another initiative. The Anderson Report (yet again stemming from the Follett Review) examined the problems of access to major collections and it is possible that future funding may be given to libraries sustaining specific subject-related collections at a national level. If such action is taken7 a logical next step would be to link the records of these collections on the COPAC. Similar initiatives with respect to public libraries and the major research collections of some of the more significant private libraries, such as the London Library may, in the future, bring about a reality not far removed from the dream of the UKLDS project in the 1980s.

The wider messages which may be drawn from the COPAC experience are:

1. additional external funding linked to a strategic plan for information development is a far more effective way of ensuring progress than reliance on voluntary cooperation.

2. the costs associated with such major projects are almost always underestimated. Even if a funding body wishes to limit its contribution initially, it would be well advised to hold a reserve when the almost inevitable request for additional funding comes in.

3. as ever, the best is the enemy of the good! COP AC has succeed so far by setting itself one goal at a time. I have outlined some of the wider possibilities which we are already considering and it is important to bear the longer-term picture in mind to ensure that current activity has a continuing relevance. But there is always the danger of being so seduced by the wider picture that it becomes impossible actually to achieve anything.

I am glad to say that the COP AC project team appear to have learnt these lessons well and that the current success of the project is a credit to their efforts.

URL http://copac.ac.uk/copac/
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