

# REGIONAL AND CROSS-SECTORAL APPROACHES TO LIBRARY PROVISION

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*The organisation of libraries and their suppliers fails to recognize the cross-sectoral and regional approaches to information provision by many of their users. Co-operation between sectors is the inescapable way forward.*

## **Introduction**

The libraries of the public sector are both caste conscious and hierarchical in their view of each other. This consciousness bears little relationship to the reality of how users manage their library affairs and is inimical to developing truly cross-sectoral and regional approaches to information provision. Regrettably this pigeon-holing of users and their habits has spread to suppliers and reinforces the difficulty in moving to new models. Vague notions of charging, or knock for knock arrangements are bandied about, when all too little seems to be known about reciprocal usage of libraries. In recent years only the People-flows<sup>1</sup> project based at the University of Central England seems to have explored this issue. By categorising users into exclusive sectoral groups we over-simplify and underestimate the complexity of their information seeking behaviour.

## **The cross-sectoral nature of users**

To illustrate the point, one might consider the mythical character of Sheila, the Staff Nurse from Sheffield. Sheila uses the nursing library in her own Hallamshire Hospital. However as nursing moves to become a graduate profession, she acts as a tutor to undergraduate nursing students; this requires her to use Sheffield University Medical Library. She is also a user of her local branch of the city's public library service and an avid reader of historical fiction. A tireless and ambitious worker she is studying for a distance MBA and makes use of the Strathclyde Business School Library. Even with these resources she cannot always find what she needs and so uses the Document Supply Centre and the Royal College of Nursing Library to fulfil her inter-library lending

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needs. And finally she has an AOL account to keep in touch with colleagues, students and friends and to gain access to relevant medical information.

Sheila illustrates the point that library users tend to be serial library users. If someone uses one library they are liable to use other libraries. Users act cross-sectorally (horizontally) and use different libraries and resources as they go about different parts of their lives. A postgraduate student studying for an NVQ in order to improve the hourly pay rate of a part-time job; a school librarian who is an avid movie buff; an estate agent fascinated by Egyptology who uses the British Library. All of these are recognisable examples of people who have multiple, legitimate and "normal" information needs. It is librarians who act sectorally (vertically) and who compartmentalise users into single and non-overlapping groups. It is librarians who worry about issues such as reciprocal access without considering how many of their users already enjoy reciprocal access as of right.

This understanding is about to become even more complicated as lifelong learning, continuous professional development and learning cities move up the political agenda. Higher education is moving to the point where half the population will expect to undertake university level studies. Learn direct (aka the University for Industry) claims to offer half a million courses. There is a growing assumption that one's expectation should be to move through several careers in a professional lifetime. Government has promised broadband to the home. Despite this there remain huge pockets of social deprivation where learning remains an abnormal activity and we have as yet little idea of how the learning agenda will affect learning cities, or even learning villages.

### **The Myths of Library Use**

The reality of cross-sectoral use is further obscured to us professionals by a set of dearly held professional myths owned by each library sector. There is a widely held view that university libraries see themselves as exclusive organisations which keep the public out. While it might be true that universities do not encourage public use, it has long been the general rule that anyone with a specific need to use university library collections

(as opposed to a general need to use a library) is welcomed. Again it is generally true that university alumni may use their libraries fairly readily and as the general population becomes increasingly a graduate one, those who can use university libraries as of right will grow steadily. It is also often felt that even where access is permitted borrowing rights are denied. While there is some element of truth in this, so much library stock is held for reference only that in practice this is not a huge penalty.

Conversely there is a myth that public libraries are open and welcoming places where students form a significant and increasing group of users which public libraries welcome out of the goodness of their hearts. The fact that a growing portion of these students are local residents and/or ratepayers entitled to use the library is often neglected. Equally the newcomer to a city may find that the requirement for appropriate paperwork makes joining the library more difficult than opening a bank account. Such newcomers will not possess the utility bills, rent books or other identification which offers the bureaucratic proof of residence required to join. And anyone who thinks public libraries are free has clearly not tried to use the whole range of services offered.

Further Education Colleges are popularly supposed not to have libraries worth the name, to be tiny one man bands, closed more often than open. Yet surprisingly these institutions manage to turn out literate and effective students.

Nor is the British Library exempt from such myths. One strong body of opinion holds that the BL should not have moved from the Round Reading Room. A single visit to the magnificent new St Pancras site will dispel that view immediately. But, sadly, we prefer our myths and prejudices to be untainted by facts.

### **Co-operation, Funding and Charging**

All of this leads to the very obvious conclusion that co-operation between sectors is the inescapable way forward. Such working is not, of course new. For many years Local Information Plans (LIPs)<sup>2</sup> have played a much neglected part in trying to foster co-operation. But they have perhaps proved rather static and need increasingly to look at much deeper levels of

resource sharing as well as sharing information about resources. Yet over much of the country, shared and publicised access at least for reference use would represent a significant step forward in local co-operation. New technologies have made some ambitions simpler and more accessible than hitherto. For example local websites linking OPACs are now a realistic possibility. This can operate either at the simple but effective level of the M25 Consortium<sup>3</sup> linking higher education libraries in the London area, or at the deeper level of the CAIRNS Project<sup>4</sup> in Scotland, which allows cross-platform searching.

Co-operative acquisition and shared purchase are two other somewhat traditional and perhaps neglected activities to be considered. In higher education the practice for a decade now has been to seek national site licence deals, a practice begun by CHEST on behalf of the Funding Councils and latterly carried out by NESLI<sup>5</sup> (National Electronic Site Licence Initiative). At the same time as NESLI deals have become less and less attractive - for a variety of reasons - there has been a separate growth of interest in regional cross-sectoral deals based on the MAN (Metropolitan Area Network) structure. Areas as disparate as the West of Scotland and the West Midlands have begun discussions with publishers on deals of this nature. Most of the agreements to purchase specialised material, whether organised by subject or date, seem to have fallen into desuetude. However projects such as the Glasgow University based GAELS<sup>6</sup> project seem to imply a renewed interest in deep resource sharing.

National deals have been characteristic of the 1990's, but their acceptability appears to be diminishing. In essence they offered publishers little but reduced income in return for reduced sales and administrative overheads. Major publishers are beginning to approach regional deals rather more eagerly, since these open up the possibility of increasing income by adding new groups, such as schools, to a consortium, thus getting at least some income from sectors where full price sales would prove impossible.

Perhaps one desirable funding model for national negotiating agencies would be to provide national templates for regional deals. There seems little merit in each region of the UK spending large amounts of time negotiating individual contracts given that information on terms and

conditions will quickly spread round the system. It seems at least theoretically possible that pricing based on a formulaic model could be negotiated nationally, allowing regional consortia to determine which constituent groups will accept a deal and using the formula to calculate the cost without the need of protracted and expensive negotiations. ICOLC<sup>7</sup> - the International Coalition of Library Consortia - has emerged as a force which offers the sort of information exchange forum and body to tackle publishers which encourages the belief that a regional approach in a national context could flourish.

Regional trading companies and consortia are beginning to emerge based on the Metropolitan Area Networks. Hitherto the MAN structure has been dominated by technical considerations. However as they become settled structures there is much more interest in how they can be used effectively. The cross-sectoral state-wide consortia common in the United States is beginning to be looked at with interest.

Local digital libraries are the most interesting way of bringing together a range of cross-sectoral resources. The Glasgow Digital Library<sup>8</sup> is one such model. Although funded by the Research Support Libraries Programme of the Funding Councils, it is a cross-sectoral project which has set out to create a completely new library in Glasgow with access to new resources of relevance to the entire local population. Other such libraries are being planned and there is as yet no single standard model which is emerging - although the concept of collections free at the point of use does appear to be an important basic requirement.

The nature of what to include may be eased by the more relaxed attitude of publishers to intellectual property rights. Organisations as varied as the British Medical Journal, Elsevier and the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers<sup>9</sup> have all eased restrictions on authors, broadly allowing them to post individual articles on local websites. It does not take much thought to see the output of local authors as a key building block of local digital libraries.

## Conclusion

Managing the solutions which will allow us to operate cross-sectorally then requires us to address three separate areas.

Firstly we need to consider the management of things. We need to build coherent access to our collections so that the user can seamlessly access multiple collections with a single search, identify appropriate resources and then acquire them either on screen or through an electronic ordering or reservation process.

We need to manage the relationships of groups not used to working together at any deep level. This will rest on creating trust between sectors, a trust that will dispel the damaging myths of the past and show a more sophisticated understanding of how users really behave.

This will not be a cheap or easy process so perhaps most of all we need to undertake the management of perceptions. We have to demonstrate that libraries continue to be relevant in an information society and that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. We need to demonstrate that properly managed, filtered and quality assured information is superior to the chaos of unfettered access to the Internet. Above all we need to demonstrate that our possession

of information management skills provides access to and unlocks all of the resources which a user wants at the time and place convenient to them and not the time and place convenient to us.

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