



International Library Cooperation: We Have Come a Long Way and Have a Long Way to Go

Five years ago (August 1996), I participated in the first China–U.S. Library Conference in Beijing. In August 2001, I participated in the second China–U.S. Library Conference. The second meeting was held in the Flushing (Queens Borough) Public Library in New York. Much progress in library cooperation has occurred in the time between the two meetings. Both conferences were purposefully limited in attendance and highly focused in content. Four themes were addressed at the Flushing conference: information policy, resource-sharing, human resources, and the role of libraries in international developments. Originally signed in 1996, the agreement between the National Library of China and the Queens (N.Y.) Public Library was resigned at the Flushing conference. This agreement includes various joint projects, including the exchange of library staff, exhibits, and technology.

The Global Virtual Library

The dream of developing a global virtual library is becoming closer to reality. Of course, technology is the driving force in the realization of international resource-sharing. The greatest strides in cooperation will occur in the sharing of electronic resources. We in the United States are witnessing more cooperation/resource-sharing in the use of electronic resources than in sharing books. It was only a few years ago that libraries in China would not share books with libraries across the street. Although much of this hostile/competitive attitude has subsided, it still exists in some Asian countries. Because of the difficulty

in getting books cleared through customs, the ability of some countries to share books does not exist. Although database-sharing also presents problems, databases are easier to deal with thanks to advances in telecommunications. Site licenses and other issues requiring legal disentanglements are significant bugbears associated with electronic databases in the U.S. as well as abroad. New digital and telecommunication technologies offer possibilities for improving resource-sharing and for promoting collaborative collection development.

Obstacles/Challenges

One could surmise that the lack of money/technology is the major obstacle in the path of developing a global virtual library. It is true that many countries simply do not have the funds to purchase the necessary computers/telecommunication systems. Unfortunately, the digital divide widens. Some countries do not have the means for effective interconnection with other telecommunication systems. Notwithstanding the lack of money/equipment, however, the greatest obstacle is the lack of policies that either promote or prohibit cooperation. Some countries do not enjoy the freedom to share information with other countries. Overcoming limited experience with the outside world and dealing with limited knowledge of other cultures are challenges that are not given appropriate consideration by planners of library cooperation. The inability to meet required language competencies is certainly a factor that affects international library cooperation.¹ Moreover, copyright

in the electronic era has become even more complex. Copyright laws must be followed and respected throughout the world; this vital issue was addressed during the second China–U.S. Library Cooperation Conference.

Finally, I would be remiss if the information infrastructure were not included as a challenge. Essentially, an information infrastructure consists of four components: software, hardware, human resources, and data/information. Several developing countries cannot participate in international library cooperation because of the lack of one or more of these components.

Opportunities

There are many opportunities to improve international library cooperation, and many more will be on the horizon in the near future based on advancing technology. Several of these obstacles/opportunities will be with us for some time; we should exploit the existing opportunities for improving the sharing and delivery of information throughout the world. A good case in point is the University of Pittsburgh's successful efforts to implement a document delivery system with libraries in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Known as the Gateway Service Center for Chinese Journal Articles, this activity was funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services. An obvi-

ous opportunity that should be exploited is the sharing of human resources. Some librarian exchange programs already are in place; however, some countries have not participated in these exchange programs and should be provided the avenue to do so. Human expertise is one of the library's greatest assets, and it should be continually strengthened. Unlimited opportunities abound in creating and facilitating library cooperation conferences among various countries. Eventually, this will become a common practice throughout the world.

Conclusion

International library cooperation will not—and should not—occur by happenstance. Careful and thoughtful planning with superb organization is required to promote cooperation among the world's libraries. The China–U.S. library conferences could serve as a model for other, similar conferences. The reality of a global virtual library is approaching; however, there are many gaps in the infrastructure that must be filled. The technology of the global virtual library may be realized before some of the human elements (e.g., freedom, cultural differences) are resolved. In time, via international library cooperation we will achieve collectively what no one nation can achieve individually—a classic example of synergy.

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Note

1. Ching-chih Chen, *Planning Global Information Infrastructure* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing, 1995).