

This editorial introduces the third special issue of *Information Technology and Libraries* dedicated to library consortia, and the second primarily aimed at surveying consortial activities outside the United States.<sup>1</sup> The concept of a special consortial issue began in 1997 as an outgrowth of a sporadic and wide-ranging discussion with Jim Kopp, editor of *ITAL* 1996–98. At the time, Jim and I were involved in the creation and maturation of the Orbis consortium in Oregon and Washington. Jim was a member and later chair of the governing council and I was chief volunteer staff person and finding myself increasingly absorbed by consortial work. Our discussions lasted more than a year and were sustained by many e-mail messages and several enjoyable conversations over bottles of Nut Brown Ale.

In the mid-1990s it seemed obvious that we were witnessing the beginning of a renaissance in library consortia. Consortia had been around for many years but now established groups were showing renewed vigor and new groups seemed to be forming every day. Why was this happening? What were all these consortia doing? Jim and I discussed these questions and speculated on future roles for library consortia and their impact on member libraries. Library consortia seemed an ideal topic for a special issue of *ITAL*.

My initial goal as guest editor of *ITAL* was to take a snapshot of a variety of consortia and begin to better understand the implications of the explosive growth we were witnessing. While assembling the March 1998 issue I soon realized that consortia were all over the map, both figuratively and literally. A small amount of study revealed a tremendous variety of consortia and a truly worldwide distribution. Although American consortia were starting to receive attention in the professional literature, a great deal of important work was occurring abroad. This realization gave rise to the September 1999 issue and the present issue dedicated to consortia from around the world.

In addition to six articles from the United States, these three special issues of *ITAL* include contributions from South Africa, Canada, Israel, Spain, Australia, Brazil,

China, Italy, Micronesia, and the United Kingdom. Taken together these groups represent a dizzying array of organizing principles, membership models, governance structures, and funding models. Although most are geographically defined, the type of library they serve also defines many. Virtually all license electronic resources for their membership but many offer a wide variety of other services including shared catalogs, union catalogs, patron-initiated borrowing systems, authentication systems, cooperative collection development, digitizing, instruction, preservation, courier systems, and shared human resources.

Each consortium is formed by unique political and cultural circumstances, but a few themes are common to all. It is clear that the technology of the Web, the increasing importance of electronic resources, and advances in resource-sharing systems have created new opportunities for consortia. Beyond these technological and economic motivations, I believe that in consortia we see the librarian's instinct for collaboration being brought to bear at a time of great uncertainty and rapid change. Librarians often forget that as a profession we collaborate and cooperate with an ease seldom seen in other endeavors. There is safety in numbers and in uncertain times it helps to confer with others, spread risk over a larger group, and speak with a collective voice. Library consortia fulfill these functions very well and their future continues to look bright.

As I conclude my duties as guest editor I would like to thank Jim Kopp for sparking my interest in this project and for several years of stimulating conversation. Special thanks are due to managing editors Ann Jones and Judith Carter as well as the helpful and professional staff at ALA Production Services. Obstacles of language and time differences make composing and editing a publication such as this unusually challenging. The quality and cohesive-

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ness of these issues of *ITAL* are due in large measure to the efforts of these individuals.

In *Inhaling the Spore*, the editorial introduction to the first special consortial issue, I compared a librarian's involvement in consortia to the Cameroonian stink ant's inhalation of a contagious spore. The effect of this spore is featured in *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, Lawrence Weschler's remarkable history of the Museum of Jurassic Technology.<sup>2</sup> Weschler explains that, once inhaled, the spore lodges in the brain and "immediately begins to grow, quickly fomenting bizarre behavioral changes in its ant host." Although the concept of a consortial spore is somewhat extreme (or "icky" according to my nine-year-old daughter) the editorial was an accurate reflection of my own sense of being inexorably drawn into a consortium—drawn not so much against my will but as a willing crazed participant. At the time I was nominally working for the University of Oregon Library System and vainly trying to keep consortial work in perspective.

By the time of my second editorial, *Epidemiology of the Consortial Spore*, I was exploring consortia around the world but still laboring under the illusion that I could keep my own consortium at arm's length. I must have failed since, as of this writing, I have left my position at the UO and now serve as the executive director of the Orbis Library Consortium. Like the Cameroonian stink ant, I have inhaled the spore and am now happily laboring under its influence.

### References and Notes

1. See *ITAL* 17, no. 1 (Mar. 1998) and *ITAL* 18, no. 3 (Sept. 1999).
2. Lawrence Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). The Museum of Jurassic Technology ([www.mjt.org](http://www.mjt.org)) is located in Culver City, Calif. See [www.mjt.org/exhibits/stinkant.html](http://www.mjt.org/exhibits/stinkant.html) for more on the Cameroonian stink ant.