Thoughts on cooperation among biomedical libraries in Genoa, Italy

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BACKGROUND

The rapid pace of scientific progress and the growing number of medical and scientific publications have made information retrieval and the dissemination of research results crucial aspects of any recognized scientific activity. Indeed, researchers are faced with the never-ending task of keeping abreast of developments in order to update their personal knowledge and understanding in a specific field [1–2].

As part of the effort to contain costs and speed progress, it should be common practice for today’s scientific and health sciences librarians to consult international databases to retrieve bibliographic references. The next step in the online procedure, retrieval of the articles via networks, also should be standard [3–8]. These practices are not universal, however. An examination of Italian libraries reveals various problems stemming from both the lack of a policy aimed at the optimization of national resources and the inattention of authorities potentially able to endorse the establishment of systems that would enable exchange of information among libraries.

This paper describes an evaluation of a union catalog of biomedical journals edited by the IST-National Cancer Research Institute of Genoa and the Clinical and Experimental Oncology Institute, University of Genoa. The catalog (updated in 1992) contains the holdings of thirty-one participating libraries in Genoa and its surroundings.

The two institutes are research facilities specializing in oncology. Established in 1978, they have evolved and grown steadily and currently comprise sixteen experimental laboratories, twenty clinical departments, and nine satellite laboratories. Scientific support services, such as the library and the Scientific Information and Documentation Service, are also available.

OBJECTIVES

The aims of the study were twofold:
- to survey the local situation and evaluate the current state of biomedical journals in Genoa and
- to provide a methodological model for future cooperation by delineating parameters and criteria useful to a coordinated purchasing policy.

METHODS

The catalogers surveyed 146 libraries within the Region of Liguria belonging to university institutes (64, or 43.8%), hospitals and local health units (49, or 33.5%), pharmaceutical firms (25, or 17.2%), and other organizations (8, or 5.5%). Libraries were sent a simple questionnaire. Following two reminders, seventy-seven replies (52.7%) were received, thirty-one of which (21.2% of the total sample and 40.2% of replies) possessed the three prerequisites for inclusion in the catalog: holdings of biomedical interest, public availability, and photocopy service.

The thirty-one libraries were of the following types: twenty-six (84%) were affiliated with universities, two (6.4%) with hospitals, and three (9.6%) with research institutes. Four libraries (13%) had 400 or more journal titles, ten (32%) had between 100 and 400, and fifteen (55%) had fewer than 100 titles. For reasons of space and quality, subscriptions ending prior to 1960 were eliminated.

The information gathered was entered into a database. The study reported in this paper was based on data drawn from the same database. The study addressed the following parameters: availability of telecommunication systems, number of current subscriptions, number of subscriptions included in Science Citation Index (SCI), and cost.

DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis of the data shows that 25.8% of the thirty-one libraries have online links with international databases, 19.3% have CD-ROM for the consultation of computerized files, and 74.1% have telefacsimile for interlibrary exchange. It should be noted that advanced equipment and international linkages are not standard in Genoese libraries; monetary and personnel shortages predispose toward isolated operations.

Table 1 provides data on total number of journal titles, number of current journals, and number of current journals included in the SCI. Only one library (3.2% of the total) has more than 400 current journals. Seven (22.6%) have 100 to 400 current journals, and twenty-three (74.2%) have fewer than 100.

The number of current subscriptions is usually low-
er than the total number of titles held, regardless of journal title changes and serials mergers. This may be a result of increasingly conscientious purchasing practices; on the other hand, it also may reflect economic difficulties leading to unwanted subscription terminations.

A criterion to be kept in mind when considering the renewal of a particular subscription is its inclusion in the SCI [9-10] and, likewise, its relative-impact factor, a measure of the frequency with which the articles in a journal have been cited in a particular year [11]. Although it is difficult to determine to what extent this parameter is considered, seventeen surveyed libraries (55%) maintain subscription lists in which SCI-cited titles amount to less than 70% of total holdings. Less than half of libraries surveyed seem to follow a pattern that implies a qualitative choice.

Cost analysis

The objective of the cost assessment was to formulate a proposal for the containment of costs, starting from the premise that an efficient purchasing policy might entail the acquisition of specialty subscriptions by a single library in a group. For this analysis, the libraries were grouped into four geographic areas, because the present lack of a network for exchange makes the wide circulation of documents logistically difficult. The analysis did not take into account the possibility of specialty subscriptions arriving at libraries free of charge to libraries (this data is currently unavailable).

A fair number of subscriptions (60%) were present only once in each of the four groups of libraries considered. This reflects a good degree of specialization among the libraries in each group and, despite the absence of coordination, a certain targeting of choices. On the other hand, 34.6% of subscriptions are present in more than one library in each group.

The cessation of duplication of titles in these libraries could save roughly $91,000 a year. Costs reflect the cover price of a given journal and do not include any commissions, surcharges (e.g., those of clearinghouses) or additional fees (postage, overheads, etc.). The authors believe such funds could be put to better use (e.g., additional unique titles, more technology).

CONCLUSIONS

Current trends in the publication of documents point to a future replete with innovation. While libraries
await the onset of these changes, however, current cooperative practices need to be rationalized and maximized. Responsible bodies must promote both new organizational methods and the continuing education of personnel in order to set in motion a modernization process in the management of library facilities.

Analysis of local cooperation data does not provide a reassuring picture; it does, however, highlight problems and issues that demand reflection and discussion.

Linkages among libraries are not accepted sufficiently. The inclusion of available technologies in the routine of a given institution frequently meets resistance. Information retrieval still flows through traditional channels, and libraries remain isolated and reluctant to adopt the emerging concept of the "virtual library." Given the meager resources available, both economic and human, innovative policy in this area seems crucial.

Selection of subscriptions should be based predominately on quality, using, for example, SCI. Selection based on quality would make available tools that can satisfy the specific needs and demands of the biomedical research community.

The lack of true linkages among libraries prevents cooperation in decision making. Such cooperation could reduce costs and improve resource sharing. A union of biomedical libraries would improve greatly the overall operating performance of the entire scientific community.

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REFERENCES


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