

The Future of Consortia among Indian Libraries - FORSA Consortium as Forerunner?

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Abstract. The phenomenon of consortia or group of libraries buying e-information together has become very important in the last few years. This new scenario, along with new forms of purchasing and selling e-information, has led to new pricing models that have not yet been fixed. Publishers and vendors find it convenient to communicate to a group collectively rather than transacting with individual libraries.

In this paper we discuss the various offers from different publishers for access to electronic journals. We also attempt to analyze the suitability of these offers for the future of consortia arrangement in libraries in India based on the requirement and usage of digital information. Some of the challenges could be sorted out with the help of governments' participation in bridging the Digital Divide within the country more economically.

1. Introduction

With more and more library users turning to their desktop computers for information, the libraries are also redefining their role by adapting to state-of-the-art technology. The need for electronic journals has created the necessity for the librarians to change their role of keeper of the library documents to that of a navigator of information.

The transformed electronic information, loaded with numerous advantages, has to be taken more seriously at the government level to overcome the technology barriers within a country and facilitate easy access. It is a debatable issue in a developing country like India as to whether electronic journals are a necessity or luxury. Even if they are considered to be a necessity, the few academic research libraries in India that have managed to access electronic journals find it difficult to sustain them due to the exorbitant cost and the fluctuating license models offered by different publishers. It is necessary to standardize procedures and establish policies to govern e-information at the national level. 'Consortia Licensing' could be considered a solution to these problems.

Consortia in India are still in their infancy and there is a need to study these models and establish guidelines and methodologies. It is felt that the concept of 'Consortia' can work well among similar organizations having similar situations such as sufficient additional funds available for the libraries of the consortia

members and above all the committed mindsets of the library administrators. However, in reality the idea of consortia is still far fetched as many university libraries have yet to experience the power of information technology applications. In India it is the right time to develop models for consortia, so that when the information technology applications are introduced in university libraries they can be prepared for participating in consortia which are already in practice in other libraries. The few case studies, where some special libraries have made attempts to establish consortia among themselves in India, are typical examples which demonstrate both the merits and shortcomings of consortia licensing and serve as guidelines.

2. Access to E-Journals: Indian Scenario

2.1. University libraries:

In the 21st century, access to information and knowledge is a critical determinant of the success and sustainability of a nation. For developing countries, it is a challenge to access the new information and communication technologies amidst the lack of basic infrastructure and facilities. According to a survey conducted by the University Grants Commission in India in the year 2001, (INFLIBNET, 2001) 142 university libraries are equipped with computers and internet facilities, and they are interlinked within the INFLIBNET. But the libraries having internet access do not all necessarily subscribe to electronic journals primarily due to the enormous fees for access. The allocated yearly budget is utilized mainly to subscribe to the printed journals and to sustain the subscriptions without cutting down the essential journals. Due to this, many university libraries feel that the transformed electronic format is a burden for them and even if considered to be a necessity, not a need they can satisfy. Probably, a consortium model, which facilitates the sharing of resources without requiring additional fees to access the electronic journals, will be an ideal solution. But is such a solution feasible? Will the publishers encourage such a 'library-friendly-budget' idea?

2.2. Special Libraries:

The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in India has 40 scientific laboratories involved in basic and applied research in various disciplines. Many of the laboratories have well-equipped libraries, and some of them act as the main information centers in different subjects, functioning as consultant libraries at the national level. Access to electronic journals through the use of state-of-the-art technology is possible in many of the libraries belonging to these laboratories. There is already a move to establish a consortium among the 40 laboratories and a few consortia licensing models have been worked out between some of the members and a few major publishers.

The best academic science library in India, the Indian Institute of Science (IISC) at Bangalore, receives 2000 serials. Out of these, 1382 are accessed electronically. The fact that 66% of the journals are accessed electronically within the IISC library is an indication that electronic access to many journals is cer-

tainly a necessity for the faculty and the students.

The Indian Institute of Astrophysics (IIA) Library caters to astronomers and astrophysicists exclusively. It subscribes to 210 journals in astronomy, physics and computer science. Out of these, 104 journals are accessed electronically. The in-house usage statistics have been collected over the past few years. The usage of print journals has proved to be useful in making the decision to obtain electronic access to many journals in the IIA library (Jismi et al. 2001). The economics of subscribing to these electronic journals is an important aspect, which has been vigorously worked out in the last year at these research libraries. The libraries now have the apparently contradictory, dual responsibility of not only trying to satisfy changing requirements that are often more expensive to the users, but also of representing the interests of the institutions in the judicious management of limited budgets.

3. Working Together:

Establishing a consortium between homogenous groups of members is slightly easier than bringing a heterogeneous group of members together. The Indian Astrophysics Consortium is a typical example of a homogenous group of members joined together in order to negotiate consortium licensing for astronomy and astrophysics journals. This consortium is an upshot of an informal network of eight astronomy libraries called FORSA (Forum for Resource Sharing in Astronomy) in India (Vagiswari & Louis, 1999). The homogeneity is based upon the specialized subject area.

4. Existing Consortia Models in India:

a) Model 1: Homogeneity of subject

The Indian Astrophysics Consortium grew out of the efforts of handful of librarians from institutions specializing in astronomy and astrophysics in India. This consortium, also known as FORSA, consists of five members (from the initial eight members only five joined the consortium for negotiating licensing for astronomy journals) and has identified a subscription agent as a supplier of journals. Subscriptions for both paper and electronic format are paid through this supplier. The agreement is meant for only astronomy journals published by a particular publisher. The entire negotiation was based on the number of the print journals and hence the sales volume will dictate the price paid for the titles. As the the number of titles increases, the price paid per title decreases by a few percentage points. This supplier has agreed to be a negotiator between the members and the publisher to provide access to the licensed materials. It is a win-win situation for both the members and the publisher in terms of the decreased cost for electronic access to members and an increased volume of sales for the publisher.

4.1. The Salient features of FORSA Consortium:

- The journal titles for which the consortium license is negotiated are subject focused.
- The publishers find it convenient to negotiate with the members through the agent since the individual invoicing is handled by the agent for the individual members.
- The model is worked out for cross – e-access to the print journals subscribed to by the members of the consortium and hence gives equal access for all the members.
- No additional requirement of budget for the members in terms of subscription to new print journals is required since the currently subscribed titles will be maintained (subject to the normal increase in subscription).
- The most important feature is that the members are not burdened with subscribing to peripheral and less important journals, which is a standard feature of ‘bundling-together’ by publishers.

4.2. Problems:

The FORSA consortium is not devoid of problems now that it is in operation. Since the consortium concept is still new in India, there are neither defined guidelines nor established models to help the librarians establish a formal consortium where the members are legally bound and their decisions protected. Secondly, the combined subscription to the print and electronic format through the same agent has created some confusion among the members since at least one member was subscribing to the printed journal through another agent. This member could not join the consortium in time to process the combined payment through the agent who is the negotiator. Even among a fairly homogenous consortium, there are differences that stem from institution size, funding, location in the same city, and differences in institutional culture and approach in management. At this juncture it has become very essential for the FORSA members to formalize the formation and functioning of the consortium before future consortia negotiations with other publishers are concluded. The idea of foregoing individual gain for greater overall benefit can be realised only if the consortium operates in a formal, coordinated manner.

b) Model 2: Common title subscription

The same FORSA consortium has concluded a consortium deal recently, to access the journal *Nature*. The boundaries of the FORSA group have opened up in this case in order to include a few other libraries with mutual interests and, at the same time, not to increase the size of the consortium beyond a certain number. At present there are six members who have formally committed to share the license fee to access *Nature* electronically.

4.3. A few interesting observations about this negotiation are:

- There is no predetermined condition of the print subscription by the members.

- Independent invoicing to the members of the consortium will come directly from the publisher.
- The consortium negotiation is based on the total number of users.
- The calculation of the base price for the electronic access and the per site access fee is a standard offer made by the publisher worldwide in all the consortia negotiations.
- The more members in the consortium deal, the less the individual members will pay for the electronic access.

4.4. Problems:

Since the publisher expects the members all to join at the same time, it is essential for them to start their subscriptions at the same time. The members are not free to join at any time of the year to access the e-journal, even if they already have active subscriptions to the same journal in print. When libraries commit institutional funds to participate in a consortium they not only expect their consortium to make intelligent use of their funds but also have flexible options to make use of the consortium negotiations.

c) Model 3: Payment by a Parent organization:

Tata Institute of Fundamental Research is a premier scientific research organization which has five branches in the country. This is an ideal situation to work out a simple consortium model among the branches. They have negotiated with one of the major publishers for licensing a part of the serial collections. The main library of TIFR, at Mumbai, has acted as the parent organization for making payment on behalf of the branches. Initially, the agreement was signed for one year and later it was extended to the second year since the consortium is functioning smoothly. The members as well as the users are satisfied with the arrangement for accessing the essential set of e-journals among themselves. Since the negotiation was not based on print subscriptions by the members, one of the branch libraries has the benefit of accessing the entire group of journals in spite of not subscribing to a single print journal in the contract (Louis et al., 2001).

5. Learning from experiences:

As more and more models evolve, it will be a challenging situation for the group of libraries to choose the model suitable for its environment. Publishers provide different offers beneficial to both libraries and themselves. In the absence of standardized rules, every single offer has to be evaluated by a group of responsible and committed individuals who will be part of the committees making policy decisions in the country.

From the few models discussed above, it is seen that there are some uncertainties at different levels:

5.1. *Uncertainty at the library professional level:*

- Absence of consensus among members of the consortium .
- Absence of awareness about the legal points relating to the access, ownership, and preservation of electronic material.
- Absence of professional librarians to govern the administrative procedures in libraries.

5.2. *Uncertainty at the government level:*

- Many of the developing countries are unable to provide the necessary infrastructure to access the electronic media in academic and university systems.
- Non-cooperative policy between the governments of different countries has an adverse effect when working out cooperative models between the members and the publishers.
- Absence of well defined national laws dictating the access and archival procedures of electronic information within the country.

5.3. *Uncertainty at the publisher/vendor level:*

- The merging and splitting of publishers often has resulted in the postponement of implementing the negotiated agreements between the consortium members and the original publishers' offers.
- The base price quoted for calculation of the consortium deal often is worked out for developed countries, and publishers should not quote the same price structure for developing countries.
- The absence of representatives of many of the publishers within the country causes serious difficulties while negotiating any consortium deal.

6. Towards a solution:

The concept of a National Site License (NSL) started in the UK (Turner 1999) and can be worked out in India. It is a single license, which is operative across the content of many publishers, negotiated on behalf of many institutes and academic organizations. It is a cost-effective mechanism if worked out at the government level. Most of the scientific and research organizations in India are funded by the government. It will be worthwhile for the government to work out a single license for all the scientific and research organizations, making one payment and adjustments while allocating their individual budgets.

Government should also make attempts to provide the necessary infrastructure such as high-speed links and a stable network to access the e-journals. Policymakers, both at the national and international levels, together with service providers and other entities operating the internet have a shared obligation to seek ways to achieve the wide spread use of the internet in developing countries.

There is a need for professional training for the librarians in the country. The government should make arrangements to conduct some workshops to include these upcoming topics as part of the workshop training. They should start a forum to bring the librarians and the publishers/vendors together for better communication and interaction.

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, the instinct of the librarians to work together at a time of uncertainty is very essential at all levels. Combining this approach and support from the government will certainly enhance the chances of forming more consortia models.

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