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Strengthening the Strong: The Cooperative Future of Research Libraries

Douglas W. Bryant

Professor Bryant spoke on 4 April 1975 at the annual Alumnus-in-Residence Program of the School of Library Science of the University of Michigan. Minor changes in the text of his address have been made in order to bring up to date his account of the Research Libraries Group.

ED.

MOST PHRASES can be interpreted in more than one way, and I realize that "strengthening the strong" — even with "cooperative" in the sub-title — may be taken as an elegant variation of that old American proverb: "Them as has, gits." But perhaps the title could not hope to be impervious to misinterpretation when the subject itself — a cooperative project initiated by four libraries calling themselves the Research Libraries Group — has been misinterpreted in highly uncharitable terms. A letter printed in the *Library Journal*¹ dubbed it "the thieves' consortium," denouncing it as a conspiracy to defraud authors and publishers of their legitimate royalties. Crime and conspiracy are exciting subjects, but the truth, disappointing though it may be, is that the Research Libraries Group is a law-abiding organization.

Any comprehensive account of the background of RLG would require an extended series of lectures on research and its development over the past century, on the history of research libraries, and on previous experiments in library cooperation. At the risk of oversimplification I shall mention only a few of the most important points.

If we are going to consider strong research libraries, we ought to keep in mind what these words mean. To estimate the strength of a research library is to estimate how adequately it can respond to the

¹ XCIX:11 (1 June 1974), 1500.

needs of research — that is, to the demands of the scholarly community it serves. The librarian does not decide which fields of research shall be emphasized or which shall be out of bounds for that community. Because collections cannot be assembled overnight, he must try to foresee research needs and prepare to meet them; likewise, he should be aware of damage that can be done by abrupt turning on and off of funds for collecting in a subject. Taking the long view is particularly difficult when funds are very short, but a research library can be expected to last much longer than the individuals who are using and managing it in any particular period.

The growth of research libraries over the past century can be shown in impressive statistics; it can be seen in scores of new buildings and miles of additional shelving. On the other hand, the growth of research needs — which has caused this expansion of libraries — does not lend itself to simple tabulations. But it was only 106 years ago that the first doctorate was awarded by an American university; now more than 30,000 a year are conferred. The subjects of research, now often interdisciplinary, have multiplied, and its geographical scope has extended to every part of the globe. Publications — both those resulting from the research of scholars and those that are potentially useful as research materials — are many times as numerous as they were a generation ago and appear in virtually every known language.

Hence, if capability of responding to research needs is the true criterion of a research library's strength, there is evidence that our research libraries, despite their impressive growth, are becoming weaker. A dozen years ago I said that "Research interests have become so broad and the quantity of printed materials useful to research has increased so greatly that the Harvard University Library today, with its 7,000,000 volumes, is more frequently reminded of its inadequacies than it was sixty years ago when it had only 1,000,000."² We have added to the Harvard Library more than 2,000,000 volumes since 1963, when I made that confession, but the reminders of inadequacy continue to increase in frequency.

Relative to other research libraries, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and the New York Public Library clearly should be characterized as strong. Relative to the demands of research, however, they find themselves

² Douglas W. Bryant, *A University Librarian Looks Ahead* ([Tokyo: Distributed in advance of a series of lectures at twenty Japanese universities], 1963), pp. 6-7.

individually growing weaker. Even before the present recession, there seemed to be no realistic prospect that they could obtain increased financial support sufficient to reverse this trend. The best hope of reversing it — of making these libraries genuinely stronger — seemed to be offered by cooperative effort. This is the basic reason for establishment of the Research Libraries Group, consisting initially of these four major libraries.

Cooperation is neither a new idea nor a new experience, particularly for these four libraries, and we ought not to underestimate how much cooperation is already contributing to the strength of research libraries. Interlibrary lending makes thousands of volumes available to scholars annually, and photocopying in lieu of loan has greatly increased the opportunities of the scholar to draw upon library holdings of institutions other than his own. From 1948 to 1972, the four RLG libraries were among some sixty American libraries participating in the Farmington Plan, a nation-wide scheme for specialization in current foreign acquisitions. All four are members of the Center for Research Libraries, which began in 1951 as a Midwestern institution but is now a national libraries' library and may develop into a genuine national lending library. All four of the RLG libraries have made known their holdings by listing them in the *Union List of Serials*, the *National Union Catalog*, and in numerous published catalogues of individual collections. Indeed, some of their special collections have been reproduced *en bloc* and made available for acquisition in microform by libraries throughout the world. Like other research libraries, they have been taking advantage of Library of Congress cataloguing for many years, and they eagerly anticipate developments in computer technology that will enable them to increase their use of LC catalogue data.

It should be emphasized that closer cooperation within RLG is calculated to increase, rather than diminish, the extent to which these libraries cooperate with others, nationally and internationally. Likewise, it has been anticipated from the start that membership in RLG would not forever be restricted to four libraries. As expected, it is not proving easy to make a start with four institutions; the complications would be multiplied if a larger number were involved at the outset.

In a Program Statement of 5 June 1973, the directors of the four libraries expressed their conviction that "the time has come for radically new approaches to research library operations. Failure of research libraries to take the initiative in making change will result in either

forced and not necessarily wise change or a subtle erosion of library capabilities. Neither course is acceptable."

The same statement outlines some of the specific means by which the directors hoped "to improve the performance of these four libraries, individually and collectively, by creating a permanent affiliation." It announces that, if the necessary funds can be raised, the participants are prepared to follow the MARC format in machine-readable bibliographical records and to accept common authority files. In collecting, the four libraries accepted the proposition that "the building of research collections of distinction can no longer be an independent enterprise but rather must be a group responsibility." They pledged themselves to join together to do this, to share in the acquisition of such materials as government publications, little-used serials, expensive sets, large microform files, and computer-based data archives, specifying that "activities such as these will be carried out in the context of the programs of the Center for Research Libraries and similar organizations."

In order to make their holdings readily available to one another, they planned to "share the cost of a rapid, frequent delivery service among them, and, when technology permits, more rapid communication; *e.g.*, facsimile transmission." Access was to be provided directly to authorized readers as well as by interlibrary loan or photocopy, and access was to be facilitated by the exchange of existing catalogues and other records of retrospective collections.

The next major step, made possible by a grant from the Skerryvore Foundation, was to commission Joseph A. Rosenthal of the University of California Library — in close consultation with the staffs of the four libraries — to make a planning study outlining specific possibilities and priorities for the consortium. Mr. Rosenthal's report was completed in December 1973. Any summary of this thoughtful 160-page report must leave out a great deal and risk over-simplification, but its recommendations can be outlined under two major headings — organizational means and technical means.

The "organizational means" did not call for a large capital investment or extensive technological innovation; recommendations under this heading could be carried out by the four libraries as soon as they agreed upon them. First of all, it was proposed that the Research Libraries Group be incorporated, with each of the libraries represented on a Board of Directors responsible for direction and review of policy,

and that a coordinator be appointed to serve as the chief administrative and planning officer for cooperative programs.

Establishment of a bibliographic center was recommended, to be located in, or in close proximity to, a central reference collection at one of the four libraries; it would have easy access to existing book-form and microform catalogues representing collections held by the four libraries and, upon request, after determining the location of an item, would initiate the fastest and most economical action to provide the user with the material he needed, either in the original or a copy.

In order to facilitate interlibrary use of resources, it was recommended that common procedures be adopted, with guidelines indicating those types of material that would be available for loan and photocopy; that existing policies restricting access to certain collections be modified for members of RLG, with adequate provision for speedy recall on demand; and that uniform rates be established for photocopying done by one library of the consortium for another. Use of existing parcel-delivery services, it was believed, should make it possible to deliver interlibrary loans promptly. Less restrictive policies should facilitate on-site access at any library in the consortium for users from any of the others.

Communications called for particular attention as a means of improving services to readers and, of course, for use in planning, review, and modification of programs. It was recommended that groups of specialists from the staffs of the libraries be organized and meet regularly, that institutional communities be informed of consortium planning and operations, and that administrators and faculties of the institutions participate in planning.

The objective of shared collection development should be to increase resources of the consortium as a whole as economically as possible. Here it was recommended that agreements allocating responsibilities for intensive collecting, based on subject and language categories and on forms of material, should reflect both existing strength and academic programs of instruction and research. Specific suggestions included exchange of information as a means of coordinating the acquisition of expensive items, and a special mechanism for selection of new serial titles to lessen duplication.

"Technical means," as I have indicated, may serve as a broad heading under which to outline the remainder of Mr. Rosenthal's recommendations. The recommendations in this group call for special financing;

moreover, they depend on both technological developments and on the policies and procedures adopted by other research libraries in addition to the four that are initially participating in this consortium.

A common bibliographical system is the first objective under this heading; it is perhaps the most difficult of objectives and — if it can be achieved — the most rewarding. The success of a cooperative program must depend in large part on the body of bibliographical information representing acquisitions records and the holdings of the cooperating libraries. Creation of an integrated system of bibliographical information for future accessions entails adoption of standard bibliographical practices which will allow the merging of records, followed by development of a machine-based system for cooperative cataloguing. It seems evident that such cataloguing should conform to the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules and Library of Congress practice reflecting these rules, that Library of Congress subject headings should be used, and that Library of Congress classification designations should be incorporated and retained in the data base when available. The MARC II format developed by the Library of Congress should be adopted for tagging and formatting all segments of bibliographical records. The system might make it possible to produce a computer-based microform catalogue, which appears at present to be the most economical means of disseminating bibliographical information on the future acquisitions of the four libraries.

Serial publications call for special attention; information on serial holdings is extremely important, and a record system designed for monographs will not serve the purpose adequately. The most promising approach, in Mr. Rosenthal's opinion, was through the emerging plan to build a North American serials data base through an on-line network of major research libraries. In order to participate in this, the RIG libraries must convert data on their serial holdings to machine-readable form and integrate this information within the network's data base.

Conservation and preservation of holdings is a grave problem for all research libraries, and particularly for those as large and old as Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and the New York Public Library. Exchange of information, employment of specialists, and the joint purchase or lease of special equipment were suggested. So also was a collaborative program for preservation of specific items, particularly serials, with assignment of priority to given titles, procedures for

assembling complete files, and guidelines for the production and location of the resultant microforms.

The months that have passed since the Rosenthal report was issued have been active ones. The group has not yet formally incorporated, but a memorandum of understanding has been signed and by-laws have been drafted, and legal counsel are at work on the next steps toward incorporation. During 1974, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation made a grant of \$750,000 to support the RLG for three years. Since that date, a grant of \$350,000 has been received from the Sloan Foundation, and applications for further support are pending. Needless to say, moreover, each of the four libraries has allocated significant money to the enterprise, as well as making very large commitments of staff time and energy.

On 1 August 1974, James E. Skipper began work as Executive Director of RLG (the title was subsequently changed to President). With a *curriculum vitae* that includes positions at Connecticut, Princeton, Berkeley, the Association of Research Libraries, and the Kraus-Thomson Organization, Dr. Skipper brings a great deal of relevant experience to this job. Since May 1975 he has been aided by an Assistant Director for Systems, John F. Knapp, with a background of experience in the Library Systems Office of the Library of Congress, the University of California Library, and the Richard Abel Company.

A Bibliographic Center has been established at Yale; it began operations on 15 September 1974, with Christine Andrew as its head. Work is also under way by a Serials Task Force and five committees—Bibliographic Processes and Control, Collection Development, Preservation, Readers' Services, and Systems and Technology Applications. The membership of the Task Force and of each committee includes the President of RLG and a representative from each of the four libraries. Each of Harvard's representatives is advised by a committee of the Harvard Library staff. In addition, a member of the staff of each library has been designated as RLG coordinator responsible for seeing to it that information on RLG activities is disseminated to colleagues in his own library.

In communications, a teletype network has been installed, and arrangements have been made with United Parcel Service for daily pick-up and delivery. The Collection Development Committee is attempting to identify languages, geographic areas, disciplines, and types of publications which, if collected on an assigned basis by one

library, need not be collected in depth by all; this effort is being related to programs established by the Center for Research Libraries. A program for review of recommendations for new periodical subscriptions which might be shared by one or more members is also being developed. Existing subscriptions will be analyzed to avoid needless duplication, and arrangements are being made with the Library of Congress to extract from the data base for the 1950-1970 cumulation of *New Serial Titles* those titles held by RLG libraries. The review process may be facilitated by adapting an existing computer-based acquisition system. Items costing more than \$300 are also being reviewed systematically.

Closely related to the serials plans of the Collection Development Committee is a plan for establishment of a serial decision file, designed by the Serials Task Force and to be maintained at the Bibliographic Center.

The development of a bibliographic processing system has been the subject of extended discussion; the directors are convinced that it must be computer-based and that RLG members should adopt a common cataloguing code. Review of recommendations made thus far by RLG committees was at the top of the agenda for Mr. Knapp when he took office in May.

Finally, a significant development in facilitating access to materials is the agreement of the Trustees of the New York Public Library to make the collections of its Research Libraries available on interlibrary loan to other RLG libraries. This radical change in policy is an example of the catalytic power of such a consortium as RLG.

This, then, is where RLG stood in 1975. Something has been accomplished — as much, perhaps, as could reasonably have been expected by this date. Much more lies ahead; the major objectives are yet to be achieved, but it has always been evident that they would not be easy and, if we thought we had a reasonable chance of succeeding when we began the discussions that led to formation of RLG, the experience we have shared thus far justifies at least a slight increase in optimism.

A very long list of questions, problems, and doubts could be compiled. I should like to say something about a very few of these — a small sampling of those that might be considered — as examples and as evidence, if any is needed, that RLG, whatever else it may turn out to be, is an interesting experiment.

First, are we on the right track in organization, or will RLG accomplish less and less while producing more and more committee meetings, reports, and discussion? It is easy to damn committees, but it is not easy to do without them if you believe in staff participation in making administrative decisions. Directors of libraries were more dictatorial fifty years ago than they are today, and there are times when it would seem attractive to return to the good old days when agreement by four directors would have been all that was needed to reach decision and to initiate action. There is good reason to believe that, in fact, things were never quite so simple. In any case, this is 1975 and the directors of RLG libraries are well aware that they need the advice of their professional colleagues on the library staffs and elsewhere in their institutions, that staff members ought to be informed of plans and policies, and that there is little hope of reaching objectives unless both ends and means enlist staff support. Uninhibited discussion and communication require time and patience, but the autocratic alternatives, in the long run, are unattractive and simply would not work.

Problems of communication and consultation are particularly evident at Harvard, administratively and financially the most decentralized of American university libraries. The Harvard University Library is itself a consortium of nearly a hundred libraries, some of them large (the Law School has some 1,250,000 volumes), some intensely specialized, and most of them with a tradition of independence, founded upon the University's financial policy of "every tub on its bottom." Coordination must come by persuasion, not by fiat. I have suggested that administration in the "good old days" was less simple than we sometimes think, and one reason for this suspicion is that A. Lawrence Lowell (President of Harvard from 1909 to 1933) and Archibald Cary Coolidge (Director of the Harvard Library from 1910 to 1928) both failed almost completely in such efforts as they made to induce the Harvard Law School Library to do anything that the Dean of the Law School did not want it to do.

The complications arising from decentralization are equally evident when we consider means of developing a standardized bibliographical system that will enable us to merge records of Harvard holdings with those of the other libraries in RLG. There is a great variety of catalogue codes, classification systems, and subject headings at Harvard, many of them admirably designed to fit the needs of the specialized

Harvard library that uses them. Some scholars and librarians are convinced that the classification used in our central research collection in the Widener building is preferable to the Library of Congress system. Moreover, reclassification of three million volumes in Widener is out of the question financially; adoption of the LC system for future acquisitions means that henceforth, in Widener and its new addition, the Pusey Library to be opened in 1976, there will be two collections — one shelved in the old "Widener" classification and one in the LC system — with all the inconvenience for scholars that this will entail. Yet failure to switch would have meant forfeiting many of the advantages, both financial and intellectual, of cooperation in a machine-based system that will enormously facilitate the exchange of bibliographic information between Harvard and other libraries of the world.

While reassured by the experience of Yale, the Andover-Harvard Library of the Harvard Divinity School, and other Harvard libraries that made the change several years ago, the Library Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences was well aware that the change would not be painless. Its decision, on 15 April 1975, was to approve in principle the adoption of LC subject headings and classification for future acquisitions of Widener Library, and it is hoped that the change can go into effect on 1 July 1976. Harvard, it is clear, has committed itself to full participation in the national bibliographic system.

One can expect differences of opinion regarding any innovation that causes inconvenience to users, but facilitating access to the holdings of other libraries did not strike the planners of RLG as one of its controversial features. Perhaps it was inevitable that, with the Williams & Wilkins case in the courts and copyright legislation under consideration by Congress, any proposal involving photocopying would draw fire. At the outset I referred to an attack on RLG as a conspiracy to defraud authors and publishers, and — since questions of copyright have been the issue in such unfavorable publicity as RLG has received thus far — the subject of copyright ought to be considered, even though it seems to us that those who have raised it completely miss the point — or, at least, completely misunderstand RLG and its purposes.

As the directors stated on 31 July 1974, there seems to have been a "mistaken assumption in some quarters that if RLG were not established the participating libraries would somehow have more funds for acquisitions." In fact, however, if money can be saved by cooperative, machine-based cataloguing, such savings may enable them to increase

rather than reduce their purchases of books and journals. They will seek to reduce unnecessary duplication but to increase the number of items unique to RLG that each acquires. Further, "there is nothing in the RLG program that prevents any participating library from buying any publication it wishes in any number of copies considered essential for local demand."³ RLG will operate within the "fair use" doctrine applicable to the Copyright Law; if new legislation is enacted, it will of course make such changes in its procedures as are required.

Copyright is not likely to be the rock on which specialization agreements come to grief; it was not copyright which caused the discontinuance of the Farmington Plan in 1972, at the age of twenty-five. This plan involved sixty libraries scattered over North America, many of which had accepted responsibilities for subjects in which they had little genuine interest; the extra work that it entailed for many libraries was evident, while the benefits were largely theoretical. It was easy to argue - and it would have been almost impossible to disprove - that the Farmington Plan had outlived its usefulness. With four libraries working closely together it may be possible to monitor the results of specialization effectively and to demonstrate its value. Serial publications (which were excluded from the scope of Farmington) appear to be particularly promising, at least as a starting-point. A subscription, since it represents a continuing commitment, demands more careful consideration than an order for the average monograph. Nonetheless, we are well aware that academic programs and interests change, that it is extremely difficult to draft specialization agreements that are not ambiguous, and that — particularly when funds are not plentiful — it is difficult to justify expenditures that are made primarily in the interests of a cooperative undertaking.

In specialization, the RLG has not been deterred by the fact that there was a national plan which has been discontinued. In confronting the acute problem of preserving disintegrating materials, it is not discouraged by the fact that there is a national plan — drafted by Gordon Williams for a committee of the Association of Research Libraries — that has not yet been instituted.⁴ The problem is vast, and anything

³ *Information News and Sources*, VI (1974), 193.

⁴ Gordon R. Williams, "The Preservation of Deteriorating Books," *Library Journal*, XCI:1-2 (1 and 15 January 1966), 51-56, 189-194; cf. Edwin E. Williams, "Deterioration of Library Collections Today," *Library Quarterly*, XI:1 (January 1970), 3-17; and Warren J. Haas, *Preparation of Detailed Specifications for a Na-*

approaching an adequate attack upon it would seem to call for a micro-reproduction program that clearly ought to be a national rather than a local project. Perhaps RLG can make a start.

Perhaps this sampling of questions has been sufficient at least to suggest the diversity of the problems RLG can anticipate. At first glance they might appear to have nothing in common. Yet I believe they are alike in one respect: They must be considered as we make plans for RLG, yet not one of them was created by RLG, and each of them would confront each of our libraries if there were no RLG. —

Organizational and communication problems with the danger of finding ourselves becalmed in a Sargasso Sea of committees? This is hardly a new problem for any of our libraries.

Bibliographical quandaries such as a switch to LC classification? We had to consider this in order to take advantage of national programs; Yale and our own Divinity School Library took the plunge before RLG existed.

Copyright? All research libraries — and scholars in every institution — are now operating under the “fair use” doctrine, and will be affected if Congress or courts change the rules.

Specialization? As the impossibility of self-sufficiency grows more and more evident, some degree of specialization appears to be logically inevitable.

Preservation? Acidity of paper is the villain; RLG is blameless.

The problems are all much older than RLG. The only element of novelty is the idea that a consortium may be helpful to libraries that are seeking to participate more effectively in a much larger community of libraries. No research library in the country can remain strong unless there is a sound national bibliographic system with the Library of Congress at its center. But participation in this system is not a simple matter for large, complicated, and venerable institutions. Four such libraries have established the Research Libraries Group, and the success of RLG will be measured by the extent to which it helps its members to become better citizens of the national and international library community.

tional System for the Preservation of Library Materials (Washington: Association of Research Libraries, 1972), reprinted in *Information, Part 2*, II:1-2 (1973), 17-37.

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