

# Supporting Heritage and International Scholarship: a pending partnership for research libraries and national libraries

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*James Michalko, President, The Research Libraries Group, Inc.*

## **Supporting Heritage and International Scholarship: a pending partnership for research libraries and national libraries**

Good afternoon. I'm very pleased to be here, in such distinguished company. My thanks to our host, M. Jauslin, for his gracious invitation and the hospitality that he and the staff of the Swiss National Library have shown me.

I trust that your hospitality will extend to any blunders I might make based on my narrow North American experience. They stem from personal ignorance rather than any cultural imperialist tendencies. Finally, I hope you will forgive the fact that my comments will echo the speakers who came before me. It may not be exciting to hear these echoes, but you should be pleased that, without prior coordination, all of us are taking approaches that converge.

The 150 member institutions of the Research Libraries Group extend their congratulations on the centenary of the Swiss National Library and send their best wishes for the future. For my own part, I've read the SNL plans, seen the progress, and believe the Swiss National Library is taking the right steps to position itself for the services Swiss libraries and citizens need and want. I think it all points very positively towards the next 100 years.

I am neither a scholar nor a national librarian. I am with you this afternoon because the organization for which I work may have some experience that is relevant to the role of national libraries and the future.

The organization I head, called the Research Libraries Group, has an unusual and, I think, unique mission and set of capabilities in the landscape of higher education, research support, and scholarship which I must describe briefly since we have neither the history, the visibility nor the mission that my National Library colleagues do.

We do two things: we support collaboration and interinstitutional activities among our members that are designed to expand the

range of information resources available to scholars and those that serve them; and we maintain and provide access to a set of supporting data resources – RLIN, the Research Libraries Information Network, and CitaDel, RLG's citation access and document-delivery service. I won't do a commercial for RLIN,



but we've specifically thought about it as a support tool for a whole variety of information resources that wouldn't otherwise exist or be accessible to the scholarly community without our combined efforts. So RLG works to foster interinstitutional collaboration focused on increasing the range of

information resources that are available, and it runs a production online information service. Both of these activities have some relevance to the issues national libraries must address.

This year, 1995, is an anniversary for RLG as well. We have been managing collaboration among these diverse institutions for twenty years. RLG members include major university libraries, archives, museum libraries, independent research libraries, great public libraries, and national libraries. Despite their self-selected desire to solve problems and their common need to serve scholars and students, this has been a difficult and continuing challenge. I suspect what we experience is not unlike the challenges that M. Jauslin faces in working with his colleagues at other libraries and in other cantons. The opportunities and challenges of federalism present a pattern that repeats itself at many levels including our consortial one.

When I knew I was going to be joining you for this centenary celebration, I asked my board members what research libraries want or expect from a national library. One board member, in a particularly American outburst, replied that "If we had one, I'd surely know the answer to the question...".

I also asked: how can research libraries and the national library divide responsibilities productively? To that another of my board members replied, "This is a very good question. Relationships between the Library of Congress and US research libraries are problematic. I've seen this in other countries. Why is this?" Why indeed?

Are research libraries competitors to national libraries? Sometimes, the two behave as if they were. My view is that the two need one another now more than ever and have opportunities to work together now in new and productive ways. This is partly because economic exigencies are forcing them together and partly because new access and communication technologies make coordinated effort more immediately possible and more immediately beneficial. This is not to say that different libraries do not have different patron needs and different economic problems. Rather, that collaborative effort can and should be based on a common and explicit understanding of these differences. Large academic libraries and the national library should complement one another, not compete.

Consequently, I'd like to talk with you about

- what research libraries expect and hope for from a national library,
- what's changing about the research library world,
- what's changing about the national library world,
- and point to a possible opportunity for collaboration, for a partnership that could be seized at the intersection of these expectations and changes.

Given the uneasy relationship that has often existed between research and national libraries, my comments may resemble the story about the very badly behaved, but very optimistic little boy at Christmas time. This little boy very much wanted to get a pony for his Christmas gift. His father explained that only good children got presents and he was so badly behaved that he wasn't likely to get anything. The little boy persisted in his expectation that he'd get a pony and also persisted in behaving badly. On Christmas morning the

boy rushed into the living room looking for his pony. His father, to teach him a lesson, said his gift was in the cellar and pointed him down the stairs where there was nothing but the old coal bin. A few minutes later the boy came back covered in coal dust with a grin on his face and headed for the back door. His father grabbed him and asked him where he thought he was going. The boy replied, "I'm going outside to get a shovel, there must be a pony down there somewhere."

What I want to do in the remainder of my time is to provide some observations that lead me to believe there is a pony in there somewhere.

What's the nature of the opportunity that I see? Let me say it right now before it gets covered in the dust of my observations. I believe that a properly managed partnership of research and national libraries could

- provide access to a nation's cultural heritage in a way that advances the mission of both types of libraries,
- provide scholars, students, and citizens with an array of information resources that they want and need but have never had,
- and provide both discovery and access on an international scope.

Having said what I think the opportunity is, let me wander away from it for a few minutes in order to point out some conditions in the research library world and the national library world that make me think this is a partnership waiting to happen.

First, what do research libraries expect of their national library? Principally, they expect a very difficult, sometimes contradictory mix of leadership, collaboration, and service. They expect that the national library will be responsible for the documentary cultural heritage of the nation. They expect that the national library will be the primary collecting agency for materials produced by and about the nation and its citizens. They expect the national library to provide information about these collections to them and to make these collections accessible. They expect the national library to be a leader in the provision of bibliographic services; they want cataloging

records and bibliographic descriptions made available for local use. And finally, they want a whole series of roles to be filled by the national library as the first library among the nation's libraries – roles such as a spokesperson for libraries and the library community with the government; a creator of standards – technical and bibliographic; an example of best practices in library service; and a full partner in their own library service efforts. And of course they'd like all these expectations to be filled at little or no cost and after extensive and full consultation with each of them, preferably individually. Is it any wonder that there are tensions between research libraries and the national library?

Next, let me turn to the trends and desires in research libraries that I believe are going to shape their near-term future and, I should emphasize, influence the way they work with national libraries. I think there are four major areas of change in research libraries – bibliographic control, access and delivery tools, the challenges of digital library concepts, and economics.

The trends in *bibliographic description and control* are probably further advanced and clearer than in other areas. There has been significant discussion about outsourcing technical processing and/or drastically reducing the labor costs involved in current practice by complete automation of the process. Based on this discussion services are starting to become available that can deliver cataloging information along with books ready to be put on the shelf. In this area, I think the mutual reliance between national libraries and research libraries is of long duration, well-established, reasonably productive, and can be expanded even further.

Let me digress for a moment to compliment our host on the role that the SNL is taking in its planning for this area. I've read the Proposal for a Swiss Information Network. It has as one of its two principal aims "to rationalize the work necessary to make available such information by working on a national level to improve cooperation among libraries in the fields of cataloging, indexing and provision of user services." It wants to "simplify user access to and searching in existing and future heterogeneous online catalogs inside and out-

side Switzerland by creating an online national union catalogue containing information about documents located in Switzerland, no matter what form they may be in and by introducing centralized authority control." This is a laudable goal, a practical one, and one that would deliver a genuinely valuable service in keeping with the many future shapes of library service.

The trends in *access and delivery* are fuelled by the desire of research libraries to give users more and better tools to accomplish for themselves activities and tasks that the library and library staff have traditionally provided. The corollary to making the user, as far as possible, into his or her own reference librarian is an increasing understanding that the actual information content, in whatever medium presented, is the user's goal and the institution's premier asset.

There is, however, a real tension between the user's goal and the assets that distinguish the institution. What the institution can deliver is ultimately the basis on which a user evaluates its service performance. But what the institution owns and has on the shelf is what distinguishes it as an institution, now and for the future. This, of course, means that any materials that are inaccessible satisfy neither the user nor the institution's reputation. To be real, your assets must be visible.

Then there is the growing concern with *digital library concepts*. Here we are witnessing an overwhelming urge on the part of research libraries to exploit emerging technology and integrate the digitized information object into their library service portfolios. There is an enormous amount of energy, resources, and project effort being directed at this, but exactly how – and how much – libraries will change as a consequence is very uncertain.

Finally, *constrained economic circumstances* are forcing research libraries to redefine themselves as information providers to very particular constituencies – their institutional students, faculty, staff and supporters. Even with internal redirection of finances, say from bibliographic processing to online service or access, this is a struggle – they must still manage within the basic reality that research libraries can't collect everything but are expected to *provide* everything. (If anything,

this tension has gotten more acute with the euphoria surrounding the Internet, which has created expectations of accessibility that can't be met and has created a demand for content that isn't yet there.)

Given the audience, I hesitate to say anything about national libraries, but it seems to me that they are struggling with essentially these same four areas. They have the same challenges regarding bibliographic control; their premier asset is what they collect and can provide, they're feeling the same pressures regarding digitization, and economics is forcing reexaminations of who they serve and in what ways.

It seems to me that national libraries are focusing more and more on the documentary heritage of the nation and aspiring less to be the comprehensive research library of the nation. And national libraries are looking to be service providers to their citizens. Here again I think the efforts of the Swiss National Library reflect these trends. The message to the Swiss Parliament outlining the vision for the SNL says in part, "The national library is specialized in the collection of information about Switzerland, information which, without its work, would not be collected, or would be hard to access. The national library must, using a model in which tasks are distributed and in cooperation with other libraries, contribute to the development and improvement of information distribution in Switzerland." What I want to emphasize is that these plans reflect exactly the trends that I have been highlighting.

So where is the common ground for research libraries and national libraries? At the highest level, both types of institutions must scale their activities and focus on what they do best. They have needs in common but different mandates. How do the defining dynamics of each type of institution present an opportunity for a different and productive partnership?

In an unadorned form, here are the elements that I think intersect to create that opportunity:

- If you have a national library, it is likely to be responsible for national heritage information resources. This makes sense.

National libraries should concentrate on the national heritage.

- Researchers of all sorts – scholars, students, citizens – need more access and better access to these national heritage information resources.
- Research libraries, however, approach their collections from a subject basis that inevitably crosses national boundaries. That complements the national heritage role that national libraries must fulfill.

There is consequently lots of room in the creation of the national bibliographic record and in the future creation of distributed digital collections, to emphasize the complementary roles of the national library and research libraries. The entry point is in the creation of the national bibliographic record to ensure that it supports discovery of these national resources. At RLG we know the excitement of and value to scholars when they discover related collections in one place through our experience with the Archive and Manuscript Control data file that we offer. Discovery comes first. The issues of delivery and access are going to have many solutions that unfold slowly, but all the alternatives depend on knowledge of the existence of the resource.

Let me interject a clarification at this point. I am not suggesting that the national library ought to be taking the lead in planning, financing or building a digital library in partnership with research and other libraries.

I don't believe in digital libraries. It's an unfortunate phrase and a real-world impossibility, as my RLG colleague Walt Crawford has said. His preferred phrase is "extended libraries". I personally favor the phrase "digital research collections". In any event, there are no digital libraries but there might be digital research collections that make enormous sense in some areas. For the national library to put its unique photographs and archival records into digital form and make them available is a real service. For groups of libraries to identify and convert key collections, *that would otherwise not be available*, makes enormous sense. Such collections don't replace print collections but add richness and provide outreach in unique ways.

And the one area that presents the richest opportunity and fills the most pressing need is in the area of the national heritage.

Let me repeat that I believe a properly managed partnership of research and national libraries could

- provide access to a nation's cultural heritage in a way that advances the mission of both types of libraries,
- provide scholars, students and citizens with an array of information resources that they want and need but have never had,
- and provide both discovery and access on an international scope.

I think you can build this partnership with tools that are already available and by emphasizing what each type of library is already doing to meet its local demands and enhance its distinctiveness. For example, if the national library were to announce that it was assuming the role of directing the nation's citizens to the documentary heritage of the nation *wherever* it is located – some of which it collects and maintains but the rest of which is located in other repositories – it would define a mission on which others could rely and provide a service on which every researcher could count.

Such a directory service – a service that shows the way to collections of national importance, that says what is the material of the nation and where it is – would accomplish a number of things. It would allow research

libraries to focus their collecting on what is unique to their institutional mission and their distinctive strengths. It would encourage all libraries to describe their collections of primary sources that have regional and national significance. It would give researchers knowledge of distinctive collections and primary source materials that complement their local collections. It would create feedback between the national, regional, and institutional libraries about what is significant. (That could help focus collecting activities and redirect resources.) It would yield relevance for collections that were distinctive but formerly inaccessible. And it would position the nation for future access to the digital alternate whenever it becomes available. After all, a directory service that points at the collection can be taught to take the researcher to the digitized object if it's available.

In conclusion, let me observe that what is most intriguing about such a complementary, collaborative system is that it scales up from the national to the international. The global economy and society means that each nation will need to have access to the information resources of other people and places. Access and communications technology make the global network a marvelous medium for international partnerships permitting shared collections and shared expertise. On behalf of the member institutions of the Research Libraries Group I can assure you that we would be willing and enthusiastic partners in such an effort. Scholarship and heritage information are our common ground.

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