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Autor: Bakker, Trix

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Kontakt/Contact

[Digizeitschriften e.V.](#)
SUB Göttingen
Platz der Göttinger Sieben 1
37073 Göttingen

✉ info@digizeitschriften.de

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The implications of the electronic library for collection development in the Netherlands

TRIX BAKKER

Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague

"An Electronic Library is a library which gives users online access not only to its OPAC for printed library materials, but also to a variety of other electronic resources located both within and outside the library" (Costers, 1994).

Resource sharing in Dutch academic libraries

Resource sharing is not a new phenomenon among academic libraries, but it has received renewed attention for two reasons. First, the rapid progress in digitizing information promises to make resource sharing very fast and easy. Second, the combination of the 'electronic library' and increased resource sharing offers hope for a reduction in the escalating costs of academic libraries. In recent decades the purchasing power of academic libraries in the Netherlands has declined sharply because of stagnant budgets. At the same time the user demand for information resources is increasing and becomes even more

variegated because of an increase in interdisciplinary research and specialisation and new documentary resources; there is an exponential increase in the volume of new publications (complicated by the increase in formats, media, and technology), and the costs of these materials are continuously rising. Libraries can no longer be expected to support research from their own collections. Adequate national collection development, however, is of utmost importance if the Dutch infrastructure for education and research is to be maintained for present and future generations, but this cannot be realized if budgets stay at their present levels. In this critical situation the most obvious solution seems to be *resource sharing*, that is: 1) improved access and document delivery, and 2) coordinated collection development.

The electronic infrastructure to improve access to and delivery of information resources

For the period 1970-1990 the *automation* of the card catalog and of major internal library processes was the *paradigm* of change in research libraries. This processing revolution led to substantially improved efficiency levels in technical services, catalog access, and circulation. PICA, the Centre for Library Automation and Networking in the Netherlands, played an important role in this activities. Especially through its central services such as the Shared Cataloguing System (operational since 1979) in which the new titles of the Library of Congress, the British National Bibliography and the Deutsche Bibliothek are downloaded weekly, while the titles of the Dutch National Bibliography are entered online by the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (National Library of the Netherlands) and are then directly available to the participating libraries. Another central service is the Dutch Union Catalogue which offers interlibrary loan facilities and access to centrally stored reference databases. A second type of service is concerned with the development and exploitation of local library systems. This transformation of processing, however, only had consequences for the retrieval

and availability of the inhouse collections. The use of these facilities depended on the patrons who physically visited the library.

The tools created by this wave of change have been supplemented with access to offline and online databases and to shared utilities such as the Open Library Network (OBN), developed in 1989 by PICA, with the financial support of SURFnet, the scientific research network organization of the Netherlands. The concept of OBN is that systems of various libraries are linked online with each other and with the central PICA-system. This electronic network marked the beginning of a new era. *Access* became the *paradigm* of the 1990s, that is: improvement of the delivery of information resources among libraries with more widespread user self-service. Since 1993 the OBN has been expanded with direct end user access to the PICA Online Contents database with entries of articles from 12.500 most frequently used periodicals in Dutch libraries, which is connected with the document delivery system RAPDOC. Since 1994 the Dutch Union Catalogue, containing the holdings of more than 200 Dutch libraries, with more than 7 million book titles and 455.000 serial titles, has also been accessible by means of the OBN. End users can make a direct loan or document delivery request and pay by deposit account: a copy of an article is delivered within 48 hours at the user-defined (electronic) address, and a book is delivered within 4 days to the library of which the user who ordered the item is a member. This library registers the actual loan in its circulation control system and is responsible for returning the item to the supplying library. So, for the user the combined collections of libraries working together in the OBN function as if they are part of one large collection ('electronic or virtual library') from which the desired publications can be requested for loan or as a copy, thanks to national cooperation and collectively forming a strong distribution network for information (Costers & Koopman, 1995; Klugkist, 1995).

We can say that the infrastructure to share resources, that is: access to bibliographic records, to local collections, to other collections, to the information highway, and so on is very well organized in the Netherlands. But although the infrastructure is very well organized, the *electronic functions* of giving access to data inside or outside the library are *supplementary* to the *traditional functions* of building up and managing a collection. Together they make up the quality of the library service. Being able to see where all kinds of information is stored, but not being able to get this information, does not lead to widespread user satisfaction. The availability of needed information is the most important aspect. The question, however, is: does the sum of the individual research collections make up for an adequate national research collection?

Coordinated collection development

The driving motive behind sharing resources today is the rising cost of library materials (with the additional expenses for technology), against the background of declining library materials budgets and an explosion in the number and variety of publications. This means that all research libraries are acquiring an ever decreasing portion of the world's publications. Since 1970, academic libraries have spent more money for less information in multiple formats. In 1990 the annual number of volumes added to the thirteen university libraries in the Netherlands was 30-50% less compared with 1980, despite the increase of the total acquisition budget by 28%. In spite of many cancellations, serials are claiming more and more of library materials budgets (on average 70%). This means that the level of collection development of books is declining at a fast rate. There will be irrecoverable gaps in the near future. Consequently, coordinated collection development is becoming very necessary.

In 1993 a pragmatic strategy for cooperative collection building, coordinated by the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, was implemented. Instead of a central, overall approach to the whole area of learning and science, the approach is differentiated and directed at discussion groups of collection development librarians, who are responsible for 'their' collections. The instruments for coordinated collection development are the Conspectus method, the Dutch Classification System (NBC) and the Shared Cataloguing System or central database of PICA. Coordinated collection development can only be achieved through cooperative efforts. Albeit on a voluntary basis, there is a commitment to cooperate because the situation is so critical. But before we get this far, there must be made collection and/or collecting profiles of all the participating libraries to get a sound judgement about the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in the Dutch collections. Lesser used or specialist research materials, in particular, are in danger of falling casualty as collections become more and more restricted or are stripped down to their bare essentials ('core' collecting strategy), thus are becoming increasingly homogeneous, owing to the financial straitjacket. This situation is complicated by the growing importance of information resources in new formats which compete for the limited funds. Cooperative collection development aims at efficient deployment of the - meagre-resources for collection development. In other words: broaden the breadth and coverage of research resources by shifting costs by minimalizing any unnecessary overlap of lesser used or very specialist publications. At the local level, collection and collecting profiles are now (being) made by five of the eleven participants. The existing collection strengths and current collecting intensities are being mapped with the Conspectus method and the NBC. With the Conspectus method the libraries rank their collections and collecting intensities by some 2.000 subject headings of the NBC on a scale of 0 to 5. PICA has developed a facility to record the profiles in the central database. Access to the profiles will also

be offered to end users, to inform them where they can find strong collections on subjects of interest.

The shrinking national collection

In 1995 the Koninklijke Bibliotheek has carried out a mainly quantitative study of the level of current collection development in Dutch academic libraries with regard to 22 disciplines. For each of the disciplines the sum total of recently acquired books and current serial subscriptions - which are registered in the central database - was compared with a sample of recently (1991-1993) acquired books (400 à 500 titles) and current serial subscriptions (200 à 250) of a single authoritative German library (a 'Sondersammelgebietenbibliothek'). The quantitative comparison has revealed that the coverage of foreign titles acquired by Dutch libraries as compared with the German academic collections, is a mere 50%. After eliminating those titles considered by collection development librarians to be non-relevant for academic research in the Netherlands, a still unsatisfactory coverage of around 70% is attained. Coverage in a number of humanities disciplines, however, is substantially lower.

The conclusion of this study is that the collections of foreign academic publications in the Netherlands are shrinking. With greater collaboration, improved cooperative collection development and more intensive use of information technology there is a good chance of compensating a part of the backlog. However, the means for achieving this are limited. If the collections become restricted and increasingly homogeneous even less coordination can take place and - despite an efficient inter-library lending network - there will be little left to exchange. To break through the current impasse, additional financial resources are necessary.

From collection development librarian to information specialist

The rapid developments of information technology demand an active role of libraries. There is so much information on offer and the supply is so varied, that the library must guide the user through the 'electronic jungle' to find the specific piece of information which he needs at that precise moment. The very fact that information service is less tied to actually having information in one's own collection makes the quality of service an increasingly important factor. Users want not just access to resources, but also cost-effective delivery: it has to be fast, easy and cheap.

What do those developments mean for the collection development librarian? It means that (s)he has to be well informed about the research and education programmes of the education institution, and about the demand and supply of information. Moreover (s)he must be familiar with computers and computer programmes, with the use of CD-ROMs, online databases and the Internet, and with document delivery services. Continuing education and specialization has become indispensable to re-equip collection development librarians with the skills essential to perform effectively.

The concept of 'collection' is changing in the digital arena. Collections are becoming a combination of traditional library materials (print and non-print) and digital resources ('virtual collection') to which the end user has guaranteed access. This implies that the term 'collection development' gets a broader meaning and that the practice of collection development changes, and also the objectives: to provide end users with efficient access to materials by bibliographic control, fast availability and to provide support services. Just like paper documents, electronic documents are selected, collected, catalogued, stored and will be made available to library users via a standard user-interface. The 'catalog' of the future will be a collection of traditional

bibliographic records, of records of offline electronic documents (CD-ROMs), and a gateway to networked information. Internet and the document-offerings from thousands of servers in the Internet do not form such a controlled environment. It is, however, a challenge for collection development librarians, because of their skills in the identification, selection, evaluation, description, and organization of information resources, to create World Wide Web subject resource collections for an academic audience. In this way they can also expand their own library collections by providing access to networked information which would have otherwise been unavailable (Piontek & Garlock, 1995).

The Internet is becoming very popular in the academic libraries in the Netherlands. In 1993 a Dutch Classification Web (NBW) was set up as a Gopher Service as part of the activities of InfoServices, a national networking information service of which the editorial staff is based in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (Werf, 1994). Early in 1995 it migrated to the World Wide Web (NBW, 1996). The NBW is a system for the retrieval of Internet resources relevant to academic research. The resources are selected and described by collection development librarians and classified according to the Dutch Classification System. At the beginning of 1996 a project was set up to develop the NBW in cooperation with other academic libraries into a national service. One of its main goals is to create an experimental environment for research concerning the selection and indexing of Internet resources. The need is felt for an experimental environment to test new solutions and gain more knowledge and experience in this field. Experiences in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek with the selection, classification and description of Internet resources have given a better understanding of the complexity of the problems related to the development of consistent selection criteria, determination of the level of indexing, instability of Internet resources, identification of documents, the lack of 'metadata',

choice of format for descriptions, etc. Investigation of the issues in a joint venture will prevent libraries from doing the same things all over again. For the collection development librarians this excercition means a considerable extra workload, also because it has to be continuously updated and because of the instability of the Internet resources. This can be frustrating, but on the whole it is an exciting experience to 'surf' the Net and find valuable resources. The NBW-project will be evaluated at the end of 1996.

Conclusion

Information technology has brought about a lot of change in the library community in the Netherlands. Thanks to the improvement of the network and data communication infrastructure, cooperation and library services have been greatly improved, especially with regard to access to collections and outside databases. This process of change is taking place in a climate of static or declining budgets, rising costs for information and new technological possibilities. The crisis has to be seen as an issue of underfunding as much as overpricing, especially with regard to science serials. The use of electronic networks is transforming the user environment and the whole system of scholarly and scientific communication. The library's role as intermediary is becoming more user oriented. The quality of service becomes an increasingly important factor, because competition has risen among other libraries and between various other parties, all of whom are vying for customers. Libraries, however, have to find the right balance between access and ownership, and this balance will shift over time. Article delivery instead of local collections would massively increase the cost of each use. Besides, for many researchers browsing is an essential part of their work. This means that library collection development and maintenance is a fundamental part of research. Libraries need both strong local collections - especially of books - and a

system that delivers 'just-in-time' copiable items such as periodical articles from other sources (Line, 1996).

Or, like Crawford said: "Libraries of today and tomorrow: will increasingly offer services to remote users as well as users in the library, although probably never quite as effectively; must continue to seek innovative ways to provide access to information and materials not locally held, although the physical collection will continue to be a primary tool; need to adapt tools and techniques that will make extended libraries work, and work well. There are many such tools already in existence and many more will evolve in the years to come." (Crawford, 1995, p. 165).

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