

## INFORMATION AND DOCUMENT ACCESS: AN ITALIAN EXPERIENCE

By Deonilla Pizzi

**Abstract:** Because of rising prices it is important to foster the cooperation between all the bio-medical libraries in such a way as to assure a sufficient standard in health information. An interesting experience of cooperation devoted to document exchange is presented by the author. One aim of the bio-medical libraries is to organize a coordinated acquisition and a more stringent cooperation at least for all those libraries that are financed by the Italian National Health Service. Another important aim is the establishment of a national photocopy centre at least for bio-medical documentation.

One important aspect of information and document access at least for public institutions seems to be of an economic nature.

Tight Government budget policies are expected to be enforced in the coming years in Italy (but this should be a common feature to all European countries). This will have heavy consequences on the library financial resources, at least in real terms; in a inflationary environment, where publication prices (both books and journals) are increasing in general at a higher rate than the inflation rate, it will be hard, from a quantitative viewpoint, to keep up the same level of acquisitions.

In this situation an improvement of document supply is highly necessary; moreover this problem has grown for those countries like Italy whose currencies depreciated strongly and especially for medical libraries which buy the largest part of publications abroad.

As an example let me show you some figures which are the revised results of a previous study by Senior and myself. This study was based on samples of medical journals published in different countries. It showed that in the period 1980-89 the rate of increase of the subscription prices for Institutions was well above the inflation rate of the countries under consideration. This trend in fact continued

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during the period 1990-93. Taken as a basis 1980=100 for the subscription price index of each sample and comparing it with the consumer price index (1980=100) of the corresponding country we got the following results. The USA subscription price index was 275.2 in 1989 and in 1993 it has reached 498.5 (these results were obtained by considering subscription prices for domestic institutions), while the consumer price index was 143.36 in 1989 and 170.2 in 1992 (for the consumption price index we refer to the previous year for a practical reason, given that the 1993 figure is not still available, however this is a good "proxy" for Italian libraries as the 1993 budget is made at the end of 1992).

For British periodicals the subscription price index passed from 284 in 1989 to 585.4 in 1993 and the consumer price index passed from 159.9. to 207.1. Subscriptions to French journals increased from 194.2 in 1989 to 234.01 in 1993 and the consumption price index rose in the same period from 171.9 to 194.9.

The situation worsened for those countries whose currency devaluated during the eighties. For the Italian libraries the subscription index price, valued in Italian liras, passed during the period 1989-1993 from 440.9 (1980=100) to 905.3 for US journals, from 320.38 to 627.20 for British journals and from 250.7 to 365.4 for French serials.

Even taking into account the fact that prices charged to foreign institutions is higher than those charged to domestic institutions, it is obvious that the main source of these price increases has been the strong devaluation of the Italian lira against the currency of the countries under consideration.

Financial resources for Government institutions, like universities and of course their libraries, decreased drastically in real terms. EgG. the resources of my library passed from 275.8 (1980=100) in 1989 to 327.1 in 1993, while in the same period the Italian consumer price index passed from 228 to 283.7.

It is obvious that in these conditions we are not able to buy new specialized serials, but it is also hard to maintain all current subscriptions. So it is important to foster the cooperation between all the biomedical libraries in such a way as to assure a sufficient standard in health information. A solution to this problem could consist in planning acquisitions, but at present this solution is impossible, at least in the short run, given the different legal status of the various institutions. In fact from a legal viewpoint the Italian bio-medical libraries are part of different bodies: Ministero dei Beni Culturali, Ministero della Universita' e della Ricerca Scientifica, Ministero della Sanita', local and regional Health Service. Of course some of them are also part of private hospitals and of large pharmaceutical companies.

An interesting experience of cooperation devoted to document exchange has been developed by these last ones. They formed a consortium, GIDIF, RMB = Gruppo italiano documentalisti industria farmaceutica e istituti di ricerca biomedica, whose main result has been a union catalogue. This consortium can be joined also by public sector libraries, like University Libraries. The only requirement is the payment of a share in proportion to their serial collection. Unfortunately this Consortium is the only experience in this field in Italy.

Of course the Italian SBN= Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale is obviously our main referent for the problem at hand.

A special SBN working group, coordinated by Mrs. Mandillo, has developed a set of documents about some aspects of the workings of the loan and reproduction services: one of the most striking result of their study was that photocopy delivery is used for internal readers, but its use in the framework of interlibrary loan seems to be negligible. Of course the usual caveats apply to these results; the sample from which they derived these results was in fact formed by 504 libraries, and most of them (382) were university libraries and the authors themselves admitted that probably the same standards do not apply to last mentioned ones, given the strong differences in terms of quantitative consistency between them.

I would add a personal impression to all that: a further bias in these results was introduced by the fact that the largest part of the libraries forming the sample were specialized in Humanities. But at least in the Italian tradition in these fields of study, the finding and/or discovery of information and documents represents a relevant part of the scientific work, and consequently the librarian is not the main reference source of access to information.

But, as we know very well, the problem is reversed in the bio-medical libraries for two main reasons. First of all the results of our search are often the basis to make diagnoses and plan therapies for patients needs. Moreover our researchers tend strictly to cooperate with the librarians in getting information. Then our duties can be summarized as follows:

- a) to furnish doctors with quick replays;
- b) to find the most up to date information in the shortest time;
- c) to get documents efficiently, which are often unknown by the users.

However the SBN works are still in progress, and so, while we are waiting for the SBN loan and document access rules, we found and use many formal and informal ways to get information and document access for our users.

The first problem we deal with is to locate the library where the document we are searching actually is. At present in Italy no complete catalogue of the serials present in all the libraries is available. As a consequence, the first part of our search consists in consulting paper catalogues the most important of which is in our field the *Catalogo collettivo dei periodici-Archivio Isrds/CNR*, Roma, ICCU, 1990. Other catalogues has been published by large Italian bio-medical libraries, e.g. the Trieste Medical Library and the *Biblioteca Pinali* of Padua. As in Italy no central Institution is devoted to supply photocopies, the publication of their catalogues has transformed de facto these Libraries into centres which supply copies to the largest part of the Italian libraries. This situation has created heavy problem to them on the ground of internal organization and of the scarcity of staff as well. Other problems for them arise from the increasing budget constraints. As a consequence each library has to charge a price to cover at least reproduction and delivery costs and, in some cases, also all those costs deriving from hiring extra personell, that in Italy are seldom financed by the Central Body. Recently a more efficient search tool is available: the Italian academic network. By this tool each library is able to access to the catalogues of the other University Libraries, provided that their catalogue is available on-line.

Time has come to reach our aims by the use of the resources online through telematic networks and the use of the E-mail for the correspondence, to shorten waiting times and to reduce costs, given the low price reserved for academics for access to the network.

Unfortunately all this has not yet spread enough, and traditional systems still survive: in my experience, the average waiting time to obtain a copy of a document from a "traditional" library may be longer than 30 days.

Of course sometime the document is not available in any Italian library. In this case the most common source is the British Library Document Supply Centre. (It is worth to say that no similar Institution exists in Italy).

Given its high level of efficiency, the copy demands to BLDSC by Italian libraries are so frequent that recently the Rome British Council started to distribute the BLDSC coupons, the international loan / photocopies requests forms and the units of deposit account. Of course many libraries, especially those offering a more sophisticated Document Supply Service to their users, make their demand directly to British Library by ARTEL.

From what we said above, some conclusions may be drawn. An impelling political aim of the bio-medical libraries is to obtain a coordination of acquisition and a more stringent cooperation at least with all those bodies who are financed by

National Health Service, such as University Medical Schools, public and private hospitals. Another important aim is the establishment of a national photocopy centre at least for bio-medical documentation. In the meantime we will carry on document exchange in an inventive, but satisfactory enough, was, using advanced technology, relying on the cooperation willingness of all the medical librarians.

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