UNIVERSAL AVAILABILITY OF PUBLICATIONS: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Defines Universal Availability of Publications, its evolving conceptions, and its international and national dimensions. Discusses practical problems pertaining to Universal Availability of Publications and provides possible solutions.

INTRODUCTION

It has been man's continual quest to be able to identify, locate and have access to all records published anywhere and in any language, which might be of interest to him. The objective of Universal Availability of Publications (UAP), a concept propounded by Maurice B Line [1], is the widest possible availability of published material to intending users. UAP means 'that every published document, whenever and wherever published should be available to anyone who wants it more or less where he wants it - its presence in a reference collection, a long way from the users, is not enough' [2].

The objective of UAP is the widest possible availability of published material (i.e. recorded knowledge issued for public use) to intending users, wherever and whenever they need it. It is an essential element in economic, social, educational and personal development. The UAP programme aims to improve availability at all levels, from the local to the international, and at all stages, from the publication of new material to retention of last copies, both by positive action and by the removal of barriers. UAP aims at ensuring that existing improved access to information on documents through universal bibliographical control (UBC) [3] is matched by improved access to the documents themselves.

EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT

The concept of UAP, like so many innovations in post-war librarianship, originated with Donald Urquhart, and was in fact stimulated by UBC. Urquhart argued that it was of no use indeed it was positively frustrating - to provide an ever fuller and faster supply of references if the documents to which they referred could not be obtained.

In fact, the need of UAP was recognised in 1973 when IFLA Committee on International Lending put forward a resolution urging the acceptance by each country of responsibility for making its native publications available to other countries [4]. The first formal recognition of the need for UAP came in November 1974 when the IFLA Committee on International Lending and Union Catalogues put before the General Council meeting a resolution in the following terms:

"As an essential element in any programme of national and international library planning, and as a natural concomitant of UBC, efforts should be made both within each country and between countries to improve access to publications, by increasing the availability and speed of interlibrary services and by developing simple and efficient procedures. The ultimate aim should be to ensure that all individuals throughout the world should be able to obtain for personal use any publication, wherever or whenever published, either in original or copy"
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So far, most of the practical responsibility for furthering UAP has rested with IFLA office for International Lending, established at Boston Spa in 1975 with Maurice B. Line as director. The IFLA Congress held at Strbske Pleso, Czechoslovakia, in August/September 1978, had UAP as its theme, and divisions and sections devoted much, if not most, of their effort to UAP. The only major research carried out up to now is a comparative study of National Interlending Systems [5], done by the IFLA office for International Lending on contract to UNESCO, which has expressed its full support of UAP. About 300 copies of this study were distributed by UNESCO to national libraries and UNISIST focal points.

Potentially most significant of all recent developments is the International Congress on UAP held in Paris in May 1982. Problems identified as constraints to the availability of publications were discussed during the congress and effective solutions were sought.

BARRIERS TO UAP

Having discussed the concept and need of UAP let us examine the difficulties in achieving UAP. The term UAP implies two things:

(i) Availability of the world's publications,and
(ii) Availability of publications to all in the world.

The former requires a comprehensive collection of world's publications whereas the latter is responsible for universal lending. Thus there are two sets of problems:

(i) Problems in making a comprehensive collection.
(ii) Problems in universal lending.

Making a comprehensive collection of all world's publications is not simple. It should be the responsibility of each country to document its published output. The legal deposit laws should take care of this problem in each country. But, not all countries have adequate deposit laws. Even if the laws exist their coverage may not be comprehensive and their application may not be thorough. The problem of a comprehensive collection of world's published output becomes more pronounced when one finds that much of the recorded knowledge is semi-published (i.e. appearing in the form of reports, distributed in limited numbers) or is available in non-book form such as sound recordings, films, video tapes, slides and other audio-visual media. UBC aims at ensuring that bibliographical records, in a standard form, are provided for publications all over the world. Much progress has already been made but a great deal is yet to be done. Not only has the output of many developing countries, still to be documented, but even among developed countries it is difficult to claim total coverage of publications, both currently and retrospectively.

Even if the recorded knowledge is comprehensively collected in a given country, yet this does not necessarily result in availability. If single copies of all the country's publications are collected in one place or divided among several libraries, these copies may not be used, off the premises. It means either the needy readers, specially those at distant places, should travel to that place or a copy of the publication be routed to them. If the first method is followed, the problems of cost, distance, inconvenience will prevent the readers to use the materials. The second method is not hundred percent successful even in most developed countries having best lending systems. For example in Great Britain many documents that are not available locally cannot be supplied from elsewhere. The inter-library loan system can claim a satisfaction rate of over 95%, but 4% or 5% of 3m requests a year represents 120,000-150,000 documents - allowing for non-existent items, say 100,000 documents a year [6]. Not only that, a survey of the U.K.'s ability to supply British publications to other countries on inter-library loan showed that about 20% of non-journals (monographs, theses, official publications etc) could not be provided [7]. Some, but by no means all, of these were difficult or obscure items. The situation in the Federal Republic of Germany, another country with a well-developed interlending system, is

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less satisfactory, and in most countries it must be worse. The reasons are not far to seek. In the first place, it is difficult to lend out rare material, available in one or two copies only. Secondly, book materials can be loaned out more easily than audio and/or visual material. It is much easier to provide current publications in this way than publications of the past, whose regulations may not permit lending. It is necessary to emphasise the obvious that no country in the world can claim to make available all its current publications to any individual in any part of the country. National availability is the backbone of the universal availability. Thus, when country-wide availability does not exist, it is impossible to talk about world-wide availability.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The problem of universal availability of publications may be tackled in two steps as given below:

(i) Developing national loan centres

In 1973 IFLA Committee on International Lending put forward a resolution urging the acceptance by each country of a responsibility for making its native publications available to other countries [8]. Organisation of inter-lending system must be a concern of individual countries. However, some of the methods of achieving this kind of access are discussed below:

(a) Comprehensive Collection: There should be a centre in each country which can acquire and loan out all native publications. National libraries or legal deposit libraries may assume the function of such a centre. British Library Lending Division is an example of this type.

(b) Union Catalogue: Another method of national availability of publications is a system depending upon union catalogues. National union catalogues or regional union catalogues of different forms of publications will provide access to the holdings of a large number of libraries throughout the country. There are many examples of such systems. However, the total costs of systems relying on union catalogue can be higher than those of a central loan collection.

(c) Comprehensive Collections cum Union Catalogues: Between the above two extremes, one can have a system relying partly on centralised collections and partly on union catalogues or systems based on the holdings of a few libraries. For example, in U.K., the inter-lending system depends on union catalogues extensively for older publications and foreign-language books; the main national union catalogues are maintained by the lending division, but there are also regional union catalogues, mainly of fairly recent British and other English language books.

(d) Cooperative Acquisition Programmes: Another method for securing availability of national publications comprehensively is to divide the subject or subjects in a group of libraries each of which will assume responsibility for coverage of the subjects assigned to it and any purchasing done by a library in a field chosen by another will be a conscious duplication.

All the four methods mentioned above have some drawbacks. For example, with systems relying on union catalogues and cooperative acquisition schemes, it is difficult to ensure comprehensive coverage whether in the acquisition or retention of material. Moreover, the service provided by these methods will be slow, because the requests have to go through a centre before reaching a library that holds the material. If the material is not available in that library, the request may have to go to another library. Here also the material may be in demand locally and cannot be loaned out. It is only natural that the needs of the library’s local clientele must always have priority over request from other libraries.

In view of the above, the only alternative left is the photo-copying of such rare, hard-to-get or archival materials, provided the borrowing library is ready to bear the cost. This will mean lending the item completely. It will give
rise to the problem of copyright. The copyright legislation may inhibit or completely rule out the possibility of photocopying, meaning thereby that the materials which cannot be loaned out cannot be got at all. Extensive photocopying may damage the material specially the bound books which is against the archival policies. Besides, the items to be photocopied may be in great demand locally also, which will delay the process.

(ii) International Exchange of Publications

However, a national centre with comprehensive collection will be responsible for making its publications available either on loan or by supplying photocopies both inside and outside the country. A national centre will be charged with the following functions:

(a) To screen the requests that are sent from its own country to other countries. This is important, because a particular item requested from abroad may be locally available. It is, therefore, implicit that the National Loan Centre, should not only be comprehensively stocked but also be fully equipped with union catalogues representing total national collection.

(b) To receive the requests of other countries and make available the needed items.

It is the concern of the individual country to decide how it organises and finances its National Loan Centre. The latter may be financed directly by the state, cooperatively by libraries or run by a library association. In order to make the system workable the following suggestions are made:

(A) Establishment of National Loan Centre, changed with the function of making the national collection available to other countries, should be the responsibility of state government of each country. The idea which by now is implicit should be made explicit in the UNESCO’s Charter. Much is yet to be done specially in developing countries in order to achieve UBC and UAP. UNESCO should encourage the establishments of national loan centres by providing financial assistance.

(B) A close cooperation between National Lending Centre and National Library, which is a state funded organisation and is supposed to receive all the native publications under a legal deposit act of that country, is highly desirable. It may be suggested that National Lending Centre may function as one of the important units of the National Library, or the two may function in coordination with one another under a higher body.

(C) National archives should be linked with National Loan Centre. This will help in making available the photocopies of the requested archives. In the case of rare books or manuscripts, it is better to get at least three photocopies of each item. One copy may be kept in the National Loan Centre, another for the use of local clientele and the third may be preserved. It will not only increase the availability of such material but also reduce the physical handling of rare collection, thus making it less susceptible to wear and tear.

OTHER POSSIBLE PROBLEMS IN THE EXECUTION OF UAP PROGRAMME

(i) Service Cost: Quick transmission of information is the backbone of UAP. One of the obstacles in fast international lending is the process of making claim and repayment of costs. It will not be practicable to make this service free of charge. Even, at times, recovery of the cost of lending becomes unavoidable. If transmission is to be fast enough, the items will have to be mailed by air which will entail additional cost. In the case of photocopies, the Copyright Law may compell the recovery of full cost. In any case, such costs must be far smaller than the costs of purchasing the required items and the total cost incurred on any country for a year’s international borrowing must be very small, if not negligible as compared to its total library expenditure.

To simplify the process of recovering the cost of lending, a system of prepay-
ment has been put forward. Libraries, receiving most of the requests, can fix their own charges and sell their own loan forms or coupons which may be brought from them in advance. Requests are accepted only if these forms or coupons are used. However, while talking about UAP it will be useless to presume that the requests will be concentrated to a few libraries, in which case, shifting currency exchange rates throughout the world may make it impossible to establish standard charges and to sell its own loan forms and coupons for all requests. However, these problems may be reduced in future but complete solution seems to be like a wild goose chase.

(ii) Delay in transmission: Two to three months delay in transmission is generally experienced. The reasons are many. When a request is received in a library, the needed item may already be out on loan. The request then has to go to another library holding the same item. Even if the item is available, the library may be reluctant to loan it out because it is likely to be away for about six months or so. If the library lends out the item, other requesting libraries may be kept waiting. Moreover, if the item is sent by surface mail, it is going to take a very long time. The alternative methods such as sending the items by air mail or sending a facsimile, are too expensive. A fast turn-round time may however, be suggested to make the system more feasible.

(iii) International Library Loan Code: For the purpose of international lending, different countries are using different types of request forms which vary in their sizes, contents and layouts. To standardize the procedures of international lending, a set of rules in the form of ‘International Library Loan Code’ must be formulated. It should lay down clearly, the purpose, responsibility of borrowing libraries and that of lending libraries, scope, expenses, method of placement of request, duration of loan, notification and acknowledgement, violation of code and standard format of loan form. Such a code should be widely circulated and strictly followed. A brief Guide to National Centres of International Lending and Photocopying was prepared by IFLA office for International lending. However, such rules need revision and reinforcement.

(iv) Customs: Custom regulations may prove to be another barrier of UAP. Custom officials are more suspicious about Audio and/or Visual materials and other non-book materials. However, this problem may be solved by putting authorized labels from National Loan Centres.

(v) Censorship: Due to some socio-political reasons, certain publications are prohibited within certain countries. Such problems seem to have no remedy.

(vi) Copyright Law: In view of high cost of the production of periodicals, libraries have cut down the subscription of periodicals. This has led to an increased demand for photocopies from elsewhere. However, the publishers are demanding, and rightly too, that some payment should be made to them for photocopies. They are also demanding that some restrictions be imposed on photocopying. In such circumstances, the import of photocopies from other countries may even be restricted if not completely prohibited. Different countries may pass some laws which may restrict the photocopying and require the payment of royalty to the publishers. However, the enforcement of such laws is by far not an easy job, specially when copying library is in another country. Such trends are, however, extremely serious for UAP.

CONCLUSION

The UAP programme aims to improve availability of publications from the local to the international level. Before thinking about the accessibility of items, one should be able to know where a particular publication is available. This
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Universal availability of publications points to the concept of UBC. In fact, both UAP and UBC are complementary to each other. While the former locates a particular item, the latter tries to find the means of its availability. The universal availability depends upon national availability. A national library or any other appropriate institution should be designated as ‘National Centre for Interlending’ which should be made responsible for all requests for document whether by way of loan, photocopy or microform received/sent abroad. National libraries, by powers already vested in them, should be able to assume the role of focal point for the UAP programme and collect and publish relevant statistics without the need for additional legislative or administrative back-up. Underlying all of this, one cannot overemphasise the need for an effective telecommunication and postal system.

The crux of the problem lies in the fact that the idea of UAP though essential for economic, social, educational and personal development, is not cent per cent practicable. As a matter of fact, UAP as Maurice B. Line [10] himself remarks, “... is not an all or nothing concept”. To this author, it is a never ending process and any progress made in the availability of publications will take it a step forward.

REFERENCES

2. Line, Maurice B. Barriers on the road to the universal availability of publications. Library Association Record 1978, 80(11).