

# The Value of the OCLC Cooperative

**Larry P. Alford**

Chair, OCLC Board of Trustees

and

Dean of University Libraries, Temple University

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I would like to make a few points about the governance and value of the cooperative and discuss with you as representatives of the members of OCLC a matter that I believe impacts membership and the social contract.

## **Sustaining OCLC's public purposes**

Let me start with OCLC's public purposes, which are to further access to the world's information and to reduce the rate of rise of library costs. The OCLC Board of Trustees and management are dedicated to pursuing these purposes. As I have said before, every decision the board and management make is informed by those public purposes and the strengthening of libraries.

As members of the cooperative, we should remind ourselves that much of what OCLC does strengthens libraries and helps reduce our costs. This year the Board and management decided to freeze pricing for libraries and at the same time froze salaries of OCLC staff. Few of the for-profit vendors and publishers who serve libraries froze their prices, and in serials five-percent increases are still common despite the budget problems many of us have faced. I believe that the OCLC cooperative is clearly reducing the rate of rise of costs for libraries, year in and year out, in addition to

the real achievements in library staff efficiencies it has helped create over the last 40 years.

At the same time, we should recognize that while OCLC is financially sound, it is not rich. It operates at essentially break-even. OCLC seeks to maintain a strong financial base by operating in a business-like manner so that it can fund operations and research and development with revenues generated by services provided to member libraries. OCLC does not rely on government appropriations, foundation funding or membership assessments.

## **WorldCat's undeniable impact**

It goes without saying that the OCLC cooperative's most valuable asset is the bibliographic database. The size and diversity of WorldCat are amazing. Through initiatives such as WorldCat.org and partnerships with Google and other search engines, WorldCat exposes the holdings of libraries to the world and through that exposure drives members of our communities, our students, and our faculties to libraries.

An associate director of one of the largest public university research libraries said to me recently that WorldCat is one of the few databases to which her institution subscribes that almost all faculty know

about. That is an indication of its importance to research and learning.

Much of the growth of WorldCat is the result of OCLC seeking partnerships around the world to add the catalogs of the great national libraries to WorldCat. In a truly global world, WorldCat serves to expose the collections of libraries around the world and to provide access to deep research collections in many languages, countries and cultures for everyone. It is a stunning achievement in my view. Which brings me to my concerns for the future of the OCLC cooperative.

### Fred Kilgour's great idea

In keeping with our commitment to consult with members through the new regional councils that are part of our new governance structure, I am going to speak seriously and frankly. More than forty years ago, OCLC Founder Fred Kilgour had a great idea. He wanted to create the ability in one place to discover the accumulated wisdom and mistakes of humankind. WorldCat has become that place, thanks to the efforts of thousands of librarians and libraries since 1971.

In a couple of talks last year, I posed three questions about Mr. Kilgour's great idea.

- **Question number one:** Can we, the library community, agree that WorldCat and the ability to perform and record iterative updates to records so that the intellectual effort of one librarian building on previous intellectual efforts is worth preserving? Few records in WorldCat are actually the work of one, single cataloger. Rather, each record is the result of iterative work in which WorldCat enables catalogers to record and share. It is this sharing and recording of that sharing that was one of Fred Kilgour's great ideas.
- **Question number two:** Is it important for the cooperative to provide a comprehensive international union catalog to support research and teaching with almost instantaneous bibliographic and holdings verification? Is it preferable to do that in one place? Or is it preferable to sequentially search dozens or even hundreds of catalogs around the world to try to find that particular book or article that a researcher needs? Is an international union

catalog of record important for the promotion of research and learning and the support of teaching around the world?

- **Question number three is a series of related questions:** Should the OCLC cooperative create and support software that provides quality control and the ability to make global changes as librarians create new subject headings and revise authority records? Should the cooperative continue to do other WorldCat-sustained initiatives such as CONSER, NACO and BIBCO? Should we continue to maintain the Dewey Decimal Classification system? Should we continue the work in developing and implementing standards for recording and harvesting metadata? Should we keep doing a myriad of other activities that are critical to sustaining cataloging and resource sharing in the United States and around the world?

I am pleased to note that the response of almost everyone to whom I have posed these questions has been a universal and enthusiastic "yes."

### Sustaining WorldCat for future generations

Yes, WorldCat is important. And yes, it is important to preserve Fred Kilgour's great idea. But, how do we, the library community, continue to sustain Mr. Kilgour's great idea as libraries change and as new generations of librarians take charge of our libraries who don't remember the difficulty of getting access to library holdings pre-WorldCat?

This situation concerns me as OCLC Board Chair and as a library dean and OCLC member. I would like to turn to one issue that I believe, we, the members of OCLC need to think about carefully in the next few months.

I am going to speak candidly about my concerns.

As I am sure you know, some alternate service providers have begun offering access to a subset of cataloging records and associated cataloging services, a service I would call "lite cataloging," at a reduced price. At first blush this seems good for libraries—a cheaper source of commonly used records. Innovation is good for libraries, and choice is

good. This option is particularly alluring in light of the serious economic problems and budget cuts we all have faced in the last couple of years.

I certainly don't mean to be disrespectful of those who made hard decisions to use a 'lite cataloging service' and/or to obtain records through Z39.50 search and capture. But, we all, as OCLC members, must recognize that those decisions, if compounded over a number of libraries, could have a profound impact on the future of Mr. Kilgour's great idea. In some ways, I believe this is the equivalent of "skimming the cream off the top without buying the whole bottle of milk." To explain, let me talk briefly about WorldCat as the de facto United States Union Catalog and increasingly, as the Global Union Catalog that provides access to the very deep collections that support research and preserve the record of human achievement and culture around the world, especially in the United States.

Out of 170 million records in WorldCat, perhaps 50 million—and I don't know the exact number—account for much of the revenue that supports the other 120 million records and the more than 1.5 billion holdings registered for libraries around the world. Every library represented in WorldCat has used some of those low-use records and recorded holdings there. Almost every library has used these low-use records and associated holdings to obtain hard-to-find materials for their users.

So comprehensive and important is WorldCat because of these low-use records, that most of the libraries that want to take the cheaper or 'lite cataloging or Z39.50 copy' route to obtain cataloging records still want to participate in the resource sharing made possible by WorldCat. These libraries still want access for research and learning to those millions and millions of low-use records that are supported by the revenue generated by the subset of high-use records. They want the data mining and intelligence that WorldCat enables. In short, they recognize the extraordinary value of WorldCat to their users.

I again understand why libraries want and need to save money in these tough economic times, but to put it bluntly, those libraries want to receive the benefits of a world-class U.S. and global union catalog, but feel they can't help support it in other ways. That raises

an important issue for those who believe the answers to my three earlier questions are, "Yes, WorldCat is indeed worth building and sustaining."

How does the membership cooperative support WorldCat and the associated public purpose activities that make it such a powerful discovery and metadata sharing tool if a large number of libraries choose the 'lite' route, but still want to reap the benefits of the 'full-service' resource sharing and cataloging system?

To be very frank, if enough libraries—not a lot, but enough—choose to consume more value from the cooperative than they return to the cooperative, then we risk losing WorldCat and Mr. Kilgour's great idea. Decisions for short-term benefit or economic relief can be very harmful in the long term to our commons.

### A unique and important resource

I mentioned earlier that WorldCat is the largest single resource for discovery of the record of achievement and culture of much of the world. In many cases WorldCat is a place of last resort for discovery after we look locally and regionally through other systems and use the options available in the marketplace. If its role as a last resort for discovery and as an efficient way for librarians to share metadata is damaged or in the worst case lost, I believe libraries and their users will be the real losers.

I also believe that in the United States, the existence of a national union catalog could be in jeopardy. In other countries at least, national libraries and others still maintain a national union catalog that they can fall back on for access to collections held in those countries if WorldCat were to cease to exist. In the United States, however, we do not have such a fail-safe mechanism for WorldCat, and I seriously doubt that the U.S. Congress would fund the Library of Congress at this point to recreate a United States Union Catalog.

### Asking the critical questions

So my question is, do we as librarians want to make the mistake of walking away from WorldCat, a great United States and global resource, created and maintained over the last 40 years by several generations of hardworking, dedicated librarians for

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some short-term savings? Do we want to turn over our role in sustaining that incomparable resource to the for-profit sector, a sector that has brought us increasing prices in serials while earning them record profits? We who work in the academy made that mistake with the serial literature in the sciences and technology in the 1970s, and ever since, we have been paying for it through the nose.

Do we, as librarians, want to turn over WorldCat and the maintenance of the metadata that provides access to our library collections to companies that operate for the benefit and profit of their shareholders and their owners, or do we want to keep it as a part of the nonprofit membership collaborative governed by a librarian majority?

### We are not in this for the short term

I am talking about this issue in some apocalyptic terms because in fact I do believe that the loss of WorldCat would be apocalyptic for many libraries in the United States and around the world.

It is much cheaper in the short term to provide access to only 30 or 40 million records, rather than 170 million records. It is cheaper in the short term not to continue to load the record of human achievement found in the great national libraries of the world as OCLC has been doing for the last few years. It is cheaper in the short term not to support NACO, CONSER, BIBCO, the Dewey system and the myriad of other add-ons to WorldCat that help reduce the rate of rise of library costs and further access to information.

How do we as a membership collaborative respond to this challenge? We are not in this for the short term.

Ultimately, we must ask ourselves: is WorldCat worth

preserving for libraries and their users, not just for today, but for future generations?

### Guiding the cooperative in a changing environment

In practical terms, the OCLC cooperative is going to have to decide how it will relate to those libraries that want to choose the cheaper Z39.50 capture and/or the 'lite cataloging' route, although I would argue that increased labor costs may well mean it isn't cheaper, but instead is more expensive. But, if those libraries make that choice, then should they also have access to the resource sharing and other value-added activities that those who are full participants and members enjoy? And if they do have access, then at what price? Should they be asked to pay the full freight for that resource sharing?

Yes, we need to be fair to those libraries in terms of pricing and access. Yes, we need to be reasonable and rational in response to the changing environment. Yes, we need to be inclusive in terms of access and membership in order to support the information needs of all users and OCLC's public purpose of increasing access to information. But, at the same time, we also need to be fair to those OCLC members who are participating fully in building, sustaining and enhancing WorldCat for the long term.

The conundrum the OCLC Board and management face is how to do all of that.

We seek your advice and comment. Please write to me at [larry.alford@oclc.org](mailto:larry.alford@oclc.org) with your thoughts.