



# kenchadconsulting Ltd

**See you later aggregator**

*If AbeBooks can reveal the stock of thousands  
of stores why can't libraries do the same?*

*Ken Chad says it's time to create a national lending service.*

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Services such as AbeBooks, Amazon and Google have demonstrated very clearly the value of aggregating data. AbeBooks gives me fast access to the holdings of more than 18,000 bookshops. There is no waiting for a response from a number of Z39.50 servers.

**UK library resources are fragmented. There is a hugely valuable, publicly funded, resource that is not used to its full advantage because it is not aggregated.**

Aggregation has other benefits over distributed access via Z39.50 or other kinds of 'federated/metasearch' techniques. Amazon uses the aggregated 'click-streams' of its users to suggest books I might be interested in. The larger the dataset the more relevant these will be. Furthermore, bibliographic data, and features such as reviews, 'search inside' and book-jacket images, can be loaded once and be available to everyone on a national and even global basis.



In contrast UK library resources are fragmented. There is a hugely valuable, publicly-funded, resource that is not used to its full advantage because it is not aggregated. Isn't it time there was a UK library service? If Amazon.co.uk why not libraries.org.uk? If AbeBooks can aggregate the holdings of 18,000 bookshops why can't libraries do something similar? Libraries certainly claim an ethos of co-operation and over the years there have been several examples of libraries joining together to share resources. Back in the 1990s the Foursite consortium, now LibrariesWest, was a pioneering example, demonstrating how political obstacles, lack of common standards and procedures could be overcome. It established what is now fashionably called a 'shared service'. Research libraries have Copac, and there are other regional academic services (e.g. M25). There are also some notable examples, such as Linc-y-Gogledd in North Wales,<sup>1</sup> of collaboration between academic and public libraries to provide joint access and reciprocal borrowing. The Inspire website lists various collaborations across the UK in all sectors.<sup>2</sup> These services should be saluted in overcoming all manner of political, cultural and technical obstacles but despite all this good work the situation remains patchy. From the end-user's perspective there is little demonstration of the value of aggregation, and union catalogues provide, on the whole, a rather unfulfilling experience. It remains to be seen if the ambitious plans in Scotland and Wales to provide access on a national basis will break the mould.<sup>3</sup>

**From the end-user's perspective there is a little demonstration of the value of aggregation, and union catalogues provide, on the whole, a rather unfulfilling experience.**

1 LINC-y-Gogledd web site: [www.lincygogledd.org.uk](http://www.lincygogledd.org.uk)

2 Inspire web site: [www.inspire.gov.uk](http://www.inspire.gov.uk)

3 'Building on networks: resource sharing in Scotland – an update'. By Elaine Fulton. In Information Scotland. Volume 4 (5). October 2006. [www.slainte.org.uk/publications/serials/infoscot/vol4\(5\)/vol4\(5\)article10.htm](http://www.slainte.org.uk/publications/serials/infoscot/vol4(5)/vol4(5)article10.htm)

In the past it could have been argued that aggregating library holdings into a single online resource discovery service was expensive, technically complex and the results lacked currency. There are still very real issues to resolve, for example over duplication of records. Additionally, UK libraries do not catalogue directly on to Curl, Talis or (in the main) OCLC, so harvesting data for Copac, Talis Source and UnityUK is currently rather 'last century'. Encouragingly there is some evidence of libraries and vendors working together to make this easier and more dynamic.<sup>4</sup>

**...services such as UnityUK and Source have demonstrated genuine progress in terms of a basic aggregating of bibliographical and holdings data on a UK scale.**

Despite these shortcomings, services such as UnityUK and Source have demonstrated genuine progress in terms of a basic aggregating of bibliographical and holdings data on a UK scale. They also benefit substantially from reducing hardware costs and the increasing use of free, open source, software. You don't need to buy expensive servers or an Oracle licence to run these systems. Therefore the cost to libraries of participating should drop over time. Resource discovery on Talis Source is already free. From the OCLC perspective, the marginal cost of adding UK holdings to the global WorldCat service ought to be very low. And it should not be forgotten that these aggregated services, once established with a critical mass of participating libraries, provide the vendor with a basis for added-value products. OCLC for example has already announced its WorldCat 'local' which could ultimately displace any LMS-provided Opac with a 'local' WorldCat. This could provide an important new revenue stream and it's no surprise Talis has similar ambitions.



However, neither UnityUK nor Talis Source are presently aimed at the public. Talis has a public 'demonstrator' called Cenote, based on the same underlying 'platform' as Source, but it doesn't exactly send the blood racing in terms of a user experience. From the end-user perspective what these services lack, compared to their commercial competitors, is a fulfilment mechanism: the ability to place a request for an item easily and have it met efficiently. Until this is added, any union catalogue, however initially engaging, is ultimately just an invitation to disappointment. In my view what we need is a library fulfilment mechanism ('borrow this book') integrated with the commercial (purchase) options. For example, why not have the ability to go on to Amazon and AbeBooks and see an additional 'borrow this from a library' (for free) option. Personally I think users would love that. I think AbeBooks and Amazon might go along with it too. I'm just not so sure about librarians.

**...what these services lack, compared to their commercial competitors, is a fulfilment mechanism.**

<sup>4</sup> Talis Source Blog entry 11 May 2006 [www.talis.com/source/blog/2006/05/holding\\_data\\_hostage.html](http://www.talis.com/source/blog/2006/05/holding_data_hostage.html)

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**Works with organisations such as government, local authorities, schools, colleges and universities, to help make better use of their technology to realise the full potential of their library and information function.**

Phrases like 'Web 2.0' (and even now 'Web 3.0'), the 'semantic web' and 'Library 2.0' have become common currency. Innovative business models driven by new, web based technologies have profoundly and permanently changed the way many users interact with the increasingly global world of information. Google and Amazon have redefined the way we search for information and acquire books, digital content and other resources. Libraries in all organizations face stiff competition but have huge potential to deliver new services more effectively and efficiently. Libraries already have significant IT investments that can almost certainly be operated better. In addition, there is a new generation of technologies to be exploited.

## **Why we do it**

We are committed to libraries and want to contribute to their success. We believe the library function is often seriously undervalued. A library can, not only play a larger role in the communities it serves, but also contribute more to meeting the strategic goals of its parent organisation.

## **Why use Ken Chad Consulting?**

Few organisations have the expertise or capacity to get to grips with the library automation industry as well as the complex and strategic nature of the wider information industry and the Web.



We provide that additional capacity and expertise to enable service improvement and efficiencies to be gained more quickly and at lower cost. Unlike generic consulting companies we have in-depth experience and understanding of the library and information sector. We combine that with a detailed, strategic and business understanding of the related technologies. These assets mean we can work with you to transform your library and information services while delivering major efficiencies.

## **How we can help**

Virtually all libraries can use IT more effectively and imaginatively. We are well placed to help. We have an unrivalled combination of practical experience in libraries and their parent organisations, together with a sound understanding of information technology and business. Naturally organisations have their own goals and agendas so we work flexibly, adapting to your requirements.

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