Experience of international cooperation
Towards a collective and global catalogue of National Bibliographies

In a world where information is increasingly heterogeneous, fragmented, large-scale and not always subject to control, national libraries still have a key role in the processing of authoritative data, just as they remain responsible for ensuring that the national bibliographic production for their respective territories and/or languages is both exhaustive and timely. This role is played in continuity with the past but also in a completely new context, that of the wider web made up of non-traditional players, often acting far from the authority that has always been recognized by national agencies. Still, national agencies need to develop discussions and interoperate with these players.

The need to adopt global languages for the expression of local content and to support users that are less and less enclosed into specific linguistic, cultural and geographical domains, relaunches the traditional conflict between the principles of universal standardization and of user convenience. This has always provided crucial food for thought to national libraries, as it has also influenced the actions that they undertake to overcome this conflict. The Share Virtual Discovery Environment (Share-VDE) project, with the larger initiative called Share Family, commits to supporting libraries in this new and complex transition process. The Explanation of Position outlining Share-VDE’s role in Library Linked Open Data was approved by its Advisory Council in September 2021. By adopting the philosophy and technologies of Linked Open Data that the Share Family of initiatives relies upon, national libraries can extend and increase the visibility of their catalogues, contribute to the creation of a collective and global catalogue of national bibliographies, and share their experience and their own data in a network of institutions of varying nature and vocation, while maintaining their specificity, their autonomy and their role.

1 The concept of this initiative has been presented by Tiziana Possemato at the National Libraries Now 2021 conference on September 16, 2021 as part of the National Bibliographies panel.
https://lnn2021conference.wordpress.com
2 https://wiki.svde.org
This scenario can be supported by a flexible technological infrastructure, designed to enable the sharing of information across the network of participating libraries, while ensuring that each institution has the possibility to manage its own data independently.

Considering the important presence of several national libraries in the Share-VDE community and in the broader network of institutions that follow the progress of this initiative and other Linked Open Data projects, a new working group was launched in order to study and address the needs of national libraries and of institutions that hold national bibliographies, in the framework of a shared entity discovery environment such as the Share Family of initiatives.

The working group was extended to stakeholders representing authoritative organizations, such as a formal liason with IFLA Bibliographic Section Standing Committee in the person of Maud Henry of the Royal Library of Belgium, or institutions that are not yet part of the Share initiative. The National Bibliographies Working Group (NBWG)⁴, chaired by Andrew MacEvan, Head of Metadata at the British Library, held its kickoff meeting on September 1st, 2021. The group identified as a starting point for its analysis the IFLA Common Practices for National Bibliographies in the Electronic Age⁵.

Some topics proposed as discussion themes within the NBWG are:

- the role of national libraries in authoritative services: which services are still expected in the new open environment?
- the responsibilities of a national bibliographic agency in such an extended and broader environment;
- how the main features of a national bibliography (completeness, accuracy and timeliness) can be met in a linked open data environment;
- the ontologies and formats to model a global national bibliography;
- how a commons initiative like SVDE, with its architecture, its tools and its human heritage and richness, can help national libraries to meet the above requirements;

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⁴ Overview of NBWG members: [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1v0gYrJfKPF42EOQNkl7ZmWhnMETlwBRfxWzPlyxVSxQ/edit#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1v0gYrJfKPF42EOQNkl7ZmWhnMETlwBRfxWzPlyxVSxQ/edit#gid=0)

how the architecture of the SVDE tenants can help in managing the special exigencies and collections (special/private collections...) of national libraries: the definition of a practical model as a common starting point;

how national bibliographies and collections managed by national libraries can be published on a common portal, such as the SVDE Portal, acknowledging and responding to the needs of users that we can imagine extend well beyond national borders;

the IFLA National Bibliographic Register (NBR): how to create a bridge between different but compliant initiatives.

So, the watchword that can inspire and guide the group is certainly: *Open borders for wider data sharing* taken advantage of the universal bibliographic control in the semantic web.

The focus of the entire data production chain returns to being the real and essential information power of the data, which is structured in a way that allows it to be universally understood, shared and used. In this context, aspects such as record format are marginalized to express local choices and needs, without limiting the ability of the data to convey a global, shareable message. Authoritative institutions, both local and global, reaffirm their role and their centrality, provided they are able to adapt themselves and their services to the runaway evolution of the times: this also strongly depends on the power and strength (including economic means) that a national library has in pursuing such an innovative strategy as opening and sharing its bibliographies, bibliographies that give a voice to the intellectual production of each region in its language of origin. National bibliographies represent an entire community in the world and their users are by no means confined to national borders.

In addition, national libraries almost always have a role and a function that go beyond the horizon of the library itself. In many countries (almost all) national libraries provide a point of connection and support for a whole series of libraries and institutions that reside in the territory but that have less visibility and strength. This role of coordination and support towards other institutions must be encouraged and strengthened. Joining the Share library driven initiative can be an opportunity to fostering this support, thus strengthening national libraries as facilitators for smaller institutions.

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The British Library is the first library that will move its national bibliography portal on to the Share Family infrastructure. The Library of Congress, the National Library of Norway, the National Library of Finland are among the institutions also already involved in the Share Family initiatives.

A collective catalogue of National Bibliographies has the ultimate goal to give ‘democratic’ visibility and access worldwide to the intellectual and research production of each single country, adopting a common Linked Open Data approach and maintaining, at the same time, the specificities that are essential testimonies to the different nature, vocation and cultural vitality of each country, its language and its culture.

In this context, a project to help the national libraries of countries that otherwise – for economic, organizational, or other reasons – could not afford to be involved in this international cooperation will also be crucial and should be encouraged.

Never as in this area has it been truer that no one can succeed alone in the goal: collaboration, the sharing of skills and energy, and the sharing of the relative economic support are all necessary, in order to achieve a common, global target.

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For further references:
wiki.svde.org
natbib-lod.org (beta version)
info@svde.org

https://data.gov.uk/dataset/6fa6a421-e515-4ab7-bbd6-1e60c2b60706/the-linked-open-british-national-bibliography