Thirty years of SBN[1]

Thirty years ago a succinct and isolated statement was published in *BIT: Biblioteche in Toscana*, the newsletter of the Tuscany chapter of AIB (the Italian Library Association): «on 2 January 1986 SBN activities were officially started at the National Library in Florence»[2].

It is, of course, a conventional date. The trial period of the National Library Service had been going on for a long time: «The beginning of SBN [it is pointed out at the end of the article] takes place – to borrow from Formula 1 a phrase already used in much more authoritative pages – with warm engines and after a remarkable number of "warm-up laps"»[3]. Different kinds of institutions had contributed at the time to the test: the European University Institute, the CNR (National Research Council) Documentation center, the University of Florence and their respective IT services, and of course BNCF (National Central Library of Florence), which had developed the prototype.

Since that time of experimentation the AIB has played a major political and cultural role, supporting the project from the start and managing to involve the whole library community and to encourage and foster the expansion of the network.

At the National library conference "Per l'attuazione del Sistema bibliotecario nazionale"[4], held in Rome in 1979, Angela Vinay, who had been appointed head of ICCU (Central Institute for the Union Catalogue) on the first of July 1976, actually chose to react to the fragmentation of the numerous services offered by many library institutions which, since the decentralization of 1972, had been entrusted to the Regions. The danger was to inhibit the development of projects at national level, therefore Angela Vinay used cooperation to build up a technologically advanced system, capable of interaction at an international level and involving all of the Italian libraries, regardless of the sort of institutions they belonged to.

«Cooperation [said Angela Vinay years later, confirming that strategic choice] does not mean getting together to do good deeds. It is a specialized term, now part of the librarians' jargon, which denotes an organization where everyone shares with everyone else human resources, facilities, experience and competences in order to improve the services offered by everyone else within that community»[5].

Cooperation is a major value for the Italian libraries, and has represented their DNA since the start. The article by Francesco Barberi in the first issue of the AIB newsletter published in 1955 – after the association had been re-founded on democratic bases – was entitled

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1 SBN stands for Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale, literally translated as National Library Service [translator's note, t/n].

2 Anna Corinna Citernesi, *Il Servizio bibliotecario nazionale e la Biblioteca nazionale centrale di Firenze*, «Bit», 1985/1986, n. 8/9, p. 20-22: p. 20.

3 *Ivi*, p. 22.

4 "The realization of the National Library System" [t/n].

5 Angela Vinay, *Introduzione al Convegno*. In: *Per lo sviluppo della cooperazione tra le biblioteche: 1976-1986: dieci anni di attività dell' Istituto centrale per il catalogo unico delle biblioteche italiane e per le informazioni bibliografiche, atti del Convegno, Roma 19-20 marzo 1986*, edited by Maria Cecilia Cuturi. Roma: ICCU, 1986, p. 17.

Translated by Matilde Fontanin

Cooperare e normalizzare[6]. It pointed in no uncertain terms at the two pillars for the future of Italian libraries: «It is only on the basis of an achieved and universally accepted standard that new ideas can emerge and be brought into being and the progress can take place»[7].

After all, "La cooperazione: il Servizio bibliotecario nazionale"[8] was the title and subtitle for the 30° AIB Conference which took place in Giardini Naxos in 1982, the first one with Luigi Crocetti as president. During the conference the Italian community of librarians was confronted with a real revolution: the idea of a service to the citizens based on the common creation of data and the sharing of the task. Since then SBN and cooperation have built up an inseparable pair.

Those years had actually marked the passage to the 'distributed computing architecture', a phrase that was to become fashionable in the following decade in opposition to the centralized approach. The latter was based on the merging of the bibliographic data sent by the Italian libraries and the attempt by the former Centro nazionale per il catalogo unico, presided by Aldo Ferrabino, had failed.

There was no real option, the keyword was the same, both from an organizational and a technological point of view: «Cooperation is not an activity libraries may or may not choose to engage in – it is the element in which they live and prosper. Cooperation is as essential to a library as is water to a fish or air to a mammal. Taking this proposition further leads me, inexorably, to another conclusion: there is no longer such a thing as a library, there is only 'The Library' – the fusion of all libraries through cooperation»[9], wrote Michael Gorman.

SBN is a very ambitious project which amounts nowadays to 97 'poles' and almost 6.000 Italian libraries belonging to different administrations: the largest cooperative initiative ever realized in Italy which boasts 83 millions' searches every year.

The initial partnership with Regions and local authorities led, as years went by, to a larger community including also the Ministry for education and University (MIUR) which contributed to the management of data by making GARR network available. Apart for the MIUR, the community included also the National Office for Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage of the Italian Episcopal Conference and a lot of diverse cultural institutions, foundations and many other public and private bodies.

SBN was the first network to be based on programs capable of working on hardware and operative systems produced by multiple producers: from the point of view of the computer science it represents one of the most advanced innovations, long before the Internet protocols. The structure of SBN data is still extraordinarily actual because it anticipated the FRBR model, which now constitutes a pattern for Semantic Web and linked data.

But thirty years are a long time, also for a robust and enduring system.

In our present context, where means of communication multiply, a reflection on the development of SBN is due both for those who saw it start and those who joined the community when things were done, contributing with the expectations and needs of a community of users who had in the meantime evolved their information, knowledge and research habits.

The two beacons that have shown the way to Italian librarians for the past thirty years, namely cooperation among libraries and services to citizens, need now to be empowered and projected into the future.

6 *To cooperate and to normalize* [t/n].

7 Francesco Barberi, *Cooperare e normalizzare*, «Notizie AIB», 1 (1955), n. 1, p. 2-6: p. 2.

8 "Cooperation: the National library service" [t/n].

9 Michael Gorman, *Laying siege to the 'fortress library': a vibrant technological web connecting resources and users will spell its end*, «American libraries», 17 (1986), p. 325, <https://www.questia.com/magazine/1G1-4226305/laying-siege-to-the-fortress-library-a-vibrant>.

If we wish to avoid the risk that SBN be perceived as a mere cataloguing system, if we wish – coherently with the initial plans – that it evolves more and more into a service enabling access to the document itself we need to offer users efficient access to information and services in line with the needs of the diverse communities served.

In the last months about 700.000 existing digital resources, mostly ancient books, have been linked to catalogue records: it is but the beginning, and it demonstrates the huge potential of the digital resources dispersed in thousands of institutional websites and therefore difficult to retrieve.

A campaign to raise awareness on the necessity to increase the number of digital resources in the SBN Catalogue would show all the Italian citizens the richness and variety of our cultural heritage, widespread over the whole national territory.

Attention should be turned also to the most recent documentation in public domain – be it produced in digital format or digitalized by libraries and other public bodies (ministries, municipalities, research and documentation institutes...) so that the catalogue can become a portal to access all kinds of documents.

Another important issue for the future of SBN is the opening of the catalogue to new types of materials: recently the documents owned by the Istituto centrale per i beni sonori e audiovisivi (1.5 millions titles and 300.000 authors) have been migrated to the SBN catalogue, and a dedicated SBN group is dealing with the cataloguing of unpublished music material.

As regards the interoperability among different systems, the process for the creation of links to Edit16 is complete and the linking process to Manus OnLine and – outside the bibliographic context – to the archives participating to SAN, was initiated.

The new frontier for information and knowledge is represented by the process of favouring the integration of the catalogue of the Italian libraries with the other catalogues describing cultural assets on the basis of different specialized models and with Web-based digital resources.

Many are already at work on these themes which typify but a few of the imperative and urgent goals that the SBN community needs to enact in a short time.

In order to move on to the future we need to revitalize the energies acting in SBN, to study and analyse social change and guarantee vitality and development to the forward-looking project which we inherited thirty years ago.

New working groups, established by ICCU together with the Regions, local administrations and universities are elaborating a strategic large-scale vision to develop the informative capacity of SBN, to improve its management infrastructures and to define new guidelines for the access policy to services for the whole country.

Nowadays revitalizing the community does not merely imply a relaunch of the existing cooperative system. The different areas need to get together to promote the participation to SBN, to involve the many important cultural bodies which every day produce, preserve and spread all sorts of documents that could be used by all citizens and that help promote literacy as well as fostering progress in research and knowledge.

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