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NORDINFO: Research and Academic Library Cooperation across National Borders

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NORDINFO

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Scandinavian Concepts of Cooperation

Most English speakers know what the term ‘Scandinavia’ means. Fewer, however, know what the term ‘Nordic’ means. To be precise, Scandinavia is a part of the so-called ‘Norden,’ or the Nordic region which includes five independent countries in Northern Europe plus several semi-autonomous areas. The Nordic region not only includes Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, but also Greenland and the Faeroe Islands, which are politically a part of Denmark, and the Åland Islands, which are a part of Finland.

This is a very large geographical area. There are easily 10 different languages spoken in the region. Culturally and socially there are a lot of differences between living in metropolitan cities such as Copenhagen and Stockholm, which resemble modern European cities, and living in very sparsely populated areas of the region where one must, literally, live off of the land or the sea to survive.

The Inuits in Greenland and the Samis in Sweden, Norway and Finland, for instance, seem to have little in common with the people that live in central Helsinki or Oslo.

In spite of these differences, the Nordic region is famous for its unusually close cooperation in all aspects of life. This cooperation covers matters of culture, politics, education, and research, involving Nordic people from all levels of society.

This close cooperation has its foundation in a long and intertwined history. After each of the five Nordic countries became independent, it was discovered not surprisingly, that much of Nordic region's values were so similar that the informal cooperation that already existed could quite easily be extended on more formal levels.

Professional people were already meeting colleagues in other countries as early as 1839, when Nordic natural scientists had their first common meeting. Other
professional groups soon found that meeting their colleagues in other parts of the region was feasible, too.

The Nordic Folk High School movement was another important cooperative effort. Students from the various Nordic countries started attended schools in a Nordic country other than their own.

Cooperation among the general public started 1919-1924 through the so called Norden Association, which was joined by people who were interested in strengthening cross-national contacts. The present membership of the Norden Associations of about 100,000 is spread throughout 500 chapters in the Nordic region. The members are from all walks of life, with a common interest in strengthening Nordic cooperation, and perhaps creating a balance against too much Anglo-American influence. In practice, Nordic cooperation is like an extension of national activities, without really qualifying as international cooperation. Much of it is informal, based on personal contacts and friendship of people with common interests.

During World War II cooperation was almost impossible since Denmark and Norway were occupied by German forces and Iceland was occupied by British forces. In fact, this situation led to Iceland’s separation from Denmark in 1944. After the war, it seemed a good time to think about and plan the new and optimistic Nordic future. In 1946 the first effort was made to draw up a contract and formalize the cooperation that already existed on the cultural level. That year, the Nordic Cultural Commission was established with the purpose to serve as a joint governmental agency for initiation of new projects, consultation, and research in the cultural field. The Commission consisted of 10 members, two from each country. The Commission operated in three sections, higher education and research, education in general, and other cultural activities. In 1961, the so-called Helsinki Agreement was signed which detailed the areas where Nordic cooperation was feasible. In this historic agreement it was specified that Nordic cooperation could include “juridical, cultural, social and economic fields as well as matters concerning transport and communication, and in the protection of the environment” (Cooperation, 1978). However, efforts to strengthen economic cooperation failed and were abandoned.

The Nordic Council was established in 1952 as a forum for political discussions and coordination. The Council is like a Nordic parliament and the members are elected by the parliament in each country. All Nordic cabinet ministers meet to discuss a common Nordic policy within their respective field, but besides this, each country appoints a minister who is responsible for special Nordic affairs. As an example related to the field of scientific information, one can mention efforts to create a common Nordic policy in the field of information technology. The Nordic Council of Ministers is authorized to make binding decisions within the framework of the cooperative agreements.
Most of the Nordic cooperation is now channeled through 34 institutions that are spread among the five countries and all of them receive a part of their budget from a common Nordic budget based on the population in each contributing country. These institutions include Nordic Institute for Theoretical Physics in Denmark, Nordic Volcanological Institution in Iceland, and Nordic Institute for Asian Studies in Denmark, to name just a few. Among these institutions, also, is NORDINFO, Nordic Council for Scientific Information, which is the main subject of this article.

Each of these institutions functions on a three year contract with the Nordic Council of Ministers, which details the institution’s future strategy and work plans. To control the activities and to follow how that budget has been spent, the director of the institution as well as the chair of the board prepare a report and present it at a meeting in Copenhagen attended by the people there responsible for the institution. In this report the achievements and details about the use of money are discussed, as well as any problem that might be referred to the Nordic Council and its staff.

After the contract period, the institutions are frequently evaluated by outside, independent groups of evaluators, to see how well the institutions have achieved what they set out to do and which they outlined in their respective contracts. Nordic cooperation is, therefore, very much alive. The budget is awarded according to the level of interest in the work plans outlined in the contract. The form of Nordic cooperation is studied regularly and changes reflect the political will among the Nordic parliamentarians at each point in time. Revision and change come into focus as a result of other international developments, such as in connection with the fact that three of the Nordic nations have joined the European Union (EU) when the other two have chosen to remain outside of it.

**Nordic Cooperation Within the Research Library Sector**

Nordic cooperation in the field of libraries and information services is considered to have started in the year 1914 when a journal, *Nordisk tidskrift för bok- och biblioteksväsen* was established with editors from four Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. This journal is still published and is, therefore, the oldest Nordic library journal. In 1926 the first Nordic library conference was held and these conferences have been held every four years with the exception of the war years. The Nordic Association of Research Librarians (NVBF) was founded in 1947 and its main goal has always been to support cooperation among the personnel of Nordic research, academic and special libraries. The Association has been very active most of its 50 years of existence. During its first years the members launched a variety of programs, including exchange of librarians, conferences and round tables on important topics, published a newsletter and sponsored a variety of important publications, including a handbook on interlibrary loan (1967), and a dictionary of library terms (1968).
In the 1950s one Nordic project gained international attention and was considered so important that UNESCO Secretary General wanted to use it as a model for all of Europe, long before plans for a European Union. This project, the Scandia Plan, was a unique effort to coordinate acquisition among research libraries in four of the five Nordic countries. The Scandia Plan was born in Åbo, Finland in 1956 at the 8th Nordic library conference. Shared acquisitions among libraries in different countries had never been tried before and money was truly scarce in post war Europe. The concept of the Scandia Plan was considered of immense value and European librarians were particularly willing to watch and look for alternative solutions to their limited library resources (Hannesdóttir, 1992).

**Structured Research Library Cooperation**

From the beginning, cooperation among the research and special libraries had been based on individual initiatives without much external assistance. This had, inevitably, created problems when cooperative projects were launched that demanded much manpower or financial support. A coordinating agency became a growing necessity if this cooperation was to be successful and there was serious interest within the research library community for cooperation to be strengthened. The first Nordic institution on the governmental level, which had to do with information and documentation, was NORDDOK (Nordic Co-ordination Committee for Scientific and Technical Information and Documentation), which was established by a decree of the Nordic Council in 1970 and received its budget from Nordic funds in 1972. The purpose of this institution was the collection and distribution of information on research in progress, as well as research results. As such, it was considered an important catalyst for all Nordic scientific research cooperation. NORDDOK board consisted of two persons from each country, mainly appointed from the national information councils.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were years of great changes within the research library field all over the world with the advent of computers. From the beginning there were, therefore, problems with this institution, both ideological and structural. Many people, including some of those who were on the board of NORDDOK saw research libraries as old fashioned and slow, and wanted a new vision for distribution of scientific information through speedy information transfer – which in fact meant through automation. The ideological division was visible in the terminology that was used in some of NORDDOK’s papers, where the term “librarianship” was considered to mean “to keep scientific literature available” while the role of “documentation” was to “systematize and register available information sources in different areas of science and provide the user with quick and reliable information on what was available and where” (Nordisk, 1963).
In the 1970s when NORDDOK was founded there were already many library related projects or activities supported by the Nordic research libraries themselves. These included NOSP, a Nordic Union Catalogue of Serials held in libraries in all of the Nordic countries, and the Scandia Plan, mentioned above. The research library community wanted NORDDOK to take over these projects and provide the necessary funding and support to keep them going, but that turned out to be impossible. The reason for this problem was partly structural and partly professional. The board of NORDDOK had decided that all projects that were to receive financial assistance should be voted on unanimously. One opponent could, therefore, use a veto, and that is just what happened. No library projects were included or financed. A critical factor in this case was that NORDDOK had a budget of 665,000 DKK during the first year which was increased to 1,177,000 DKK the following year, which meant that Nordic money was finally coming to the field, but not benefiting the long-lasting library cooperation.

When NORDDOK’s situation came clear, a new Nordic committee was formed in 1972, called the NFBS (Nordic Cooperative Committee for Research Libraries), to assume responsibility of cooperative projects within the research library field. This Cooperative Committee, however, had no official status or budget for projects and it can be assumed that it was set up to increase the pressure on NORDDOK. The Cooperative Committee consisted of the most powerful leaders within the Nordic research library field, and it was clear that they could have a lot of influence of what would happen on the Nordic level.

In 1974, the Cooperative Committee sent a letter to NORDDOK demanding the inclusion of research library projects in its program. Memoranda were prepared both for and against this inclusion and the arguments were presented to the Cultural Secretariat in Copenhagen, the authority on the Nordic level which had to do with this type of cooperation. The Secretariat reacted immediately and set up a working group to study the appropriate forms for effective cooperation among Nordic research libraries, and to make proposals for NORDDOK’s responsibility within this sector. The working group presented its recommendations in 1975 suggesting that a new organization be founded which would combine the activities of both NORDDOK and the Cooperative Committee. The last meeting of NORDDOK was held in December of 1976 and the new organization, NORDINFO, started its operations in 1977. Its foundation was approved by the Nordic Council of Ministers on June 13, 1976 and NORDINFO will therefore celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2001.

NORDINFO

NORDINFO, the Nordic Council for Scientific Information was founded as a bridge between research libraries and the growing information and documentation sector. NORDINFO’s secretariat was set up in Helsinki, Finland, and some permanent staff
was appointed to coordinate the activities. The full name behind the acronym was “The Nordic Cooperative Council for Research Libraries and Scientific Information and Documentation.” To begin with, the board was large, 14 members, with three representatives from the four large countries and two from Iceland, obviously with the intention to cover all the different interests and opinions. The large board made the administration and leadership of this new institution quite cumbersome and soon it was decided that a working group with one representative from each country would be in charge of the main issues and the large plenary would only meet twice a year to make decisions of budget and policy for the institution. A director was appointed for a four-year term to lead the activities and carry out the decisions of the Board.

In the beginning the role of NORDINFO was defined in the following terms:

1. To follow the developments in the Nordic countries as well as internationally and give advice and information to national and Nordic organizations.

2. To promote and coordinate the transfer of recorded information on the national, Nordic and international levels;

3. To initiate and carry out research and projects on the development of methods and systems, as well as on education.

NORDINFO was to guide developments within the Nordic research library and information sector toward a uniform system of scientific libraries and provide guidance within documentation and information services. It can also be read from the first plans that the whole area was to be looked upon as one, including libraries, documentation and information.

During the first years of operation, NORDINFO’s activities included all the projects that had formerly been the responsibility of both NORDDOK and NFBS. During the first year there were 24 projects financed, including NOSP (The Nordic Union Catalogue of Periodicals), and SCANNET, a network, which was to link all Nordic databases, a project which was also to develop Nordic competence within the area of online services which was an important aspect in the 1970s.

The first NORDINFO work plan outlined four broad categories which demonstrated the road for the future. These categories were:

1. Policy development and coordinating activities;
2. Development of basic research material;
3. Database and network activities;
4. Education.
The new board approached their roles as leaders for this new institution with visions and enthusiasm. There is no indication in the minutes from the initial meetings that the board members were bound by previous views, despite the fact that this new institution was to represent two opposite sides of the field that had previously had bitter conflicts. However, different viewpoints needed to be adjusted and adapted to fit the operations of this new institution. It was decided that a proposal could be accepted if nine members (out of 14) of the plenary supported it. Another concept worth noting here, is that the institution was to work from the standpoint of a justice principle which meant that no one country could be favored at the expense of another. The main concept was that NORDINFO should work towards common Nordic values (Svensson, 1991). Each of the four broad categories was managed separately and each had its own budget. The Board functioned as a kind of a research council and reacted to proposals from the Nordic research library community but did not take initiative. For the first years, or until 1985, there was little change in the form of activities. Naturally the character of the financed projects changed in line with the developments in the field.

In 1985 a new program was introduced for 1986-1989 (NORDINFO, 1984), and was published in NORDINFO-nytt, the journal published by NORDINFO. The main changes there were that NORDINFO was to take its own initiatives and furthermore, that a part of the annual project budget was to be reserved for NORDINFO’s own initiatives within limited fields and which the board had prioritized.

Within this new framework NORDINFO’s activities were divided into three types of activities:

1. NORDINFO’s initiative areas: (a) Creation of Nordic location instruments for library material; (b) Information provision to small and middle size businesses, and (c) Information and documentation services in social sciences and humanities.

2. Free project fund: Financial support to (a) policy development; organization and coordination projects; (b) education; (c) development of library technology and technological means of spreading projects’ results.

3. Regular activities: The two large projects which NORDINFO had supported from its initiation, i.e., NOSP (Nordic Union Catalogue of Periodicals) and SCANNET (the network).

Soon after this, the four original categories of activities were widened and changed. The second category, which formerly had included the creation of location instruments was changed into “document ordering and document delivery”, and the fourth area of activities became “education for the information society”. (NORDINFO, 1985). These changes are just an indication of the constant revision of the work of the institution to
better fit the call of time. In the early 1990s the question of cooperation with EU and other internationalization issues came on NORDINFO’s table. At the same time, standardization and information provision concerning new developments within this broad field, got more and more attention.

IANI (Intelligent User Interface for the Nordic Information-systems) was initiated in 1986 and was the largest project financed by NORDINFO in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was partially financed by NORDINFO until 1992 when the project was abandoned. This was a very ambitious project aiming at developing technology which would give an easy access to different databases located on different computers within the Nordic region. A common user interface was to give the users the possibility to use the same search language when searching different databases. IANI was considered very important as a basic tool to facilitate Nordic cooperation within the field and to improve access and stimulate standardization within the database sector. During the project period, 116 databases were adjusted to the IANI search, but the project did not complete its mission and was abandoned. One can claim that it was just ahead of its time and still in the year 2000 people are seeking the ideal solution of how to search many databases using the same search language.

Centers of Excellence

The most extensive of NORDINFOs experiments in the mid 1990s were three Centers of Excellence which NORDINFO supported financially and described in its work plans for 1995-1998. These Centers were the following:

Nordic Center of Excellence for Networked Information Services (or Nordic Net Center) located in Lyngby, Denmark which was a joint venture between Lund University Library in Sweden and the Technical Knowledge Center and Library of Denmark (DTV) in Lyngby.

Nordic Center of Excellence for Electronic Publishing located at Technical Research Center of Finland (VTT), in Esbo, Finland;

Nordic Center of Excellence for Digital Handling of National Library Collections located at the National Library branch at Mo i Rana, Norway.

A common goal for these Centers of Excellence was to contribute actively to the development of the Nordic library and information sector. This was to be accomplished through efficient information activities, courses, seminars, consultancy, developmental projects, and other activities that can promote the Nordic library and information sector (Rinne-Mendes, 1995).
After three years of financing, NORDINFO support was withdrawn and the three Centers of Excellence were all evaluated by external sources. The project was considered to have been of value but the synergy effect and publicity of these three Centers was considered as insufficient. On the other hand, NORDINFO has decided to utilize the knowledge and skills that were built up within these institutions through courses and projects. Without doubt, all of these Centers will continue their developments. But, from now on, they must apply for project money the same way as other institutions do within the Nordic region.

**NORDINFO Strategy 1999-2002**

The strategy 1999-2002 was accepted by the NORDINFO Board and then passed on to the Nordic Council of Ministers for approval in 1998 (Hannesdóttir, 1998). It takes into account former activities and also demonstrates vision towards the future, vision that is in line with the past, but also takes into consideration the changes that are taking place in the field of libraries, documentation and information, and the changes that are likely to take place during the next three to five years. The general objective set for the coming years is to work towards what has been called “The Nordic Electronic Research Library.” This is a concept that builds on the activities that are taking place in each of the Nordic countries and NORDINFO has continued to assume a coordinating role for activities within the region (Hannesdóttir, 2000).

In the new strategy, new stakeholders are defined with the purpose to broaden the focus group for NORDINFO’s activities. The focus groups in the new strategy are altogether six and for each group, some specific goals have been set as to what NORDINFO’s activities should aim at accomplishing.

1. Scientific and technical information community

Objectives: Improve access to electronic information for all Nordic users of scientific and technical information; identify weaknesses in availability, including special research areas or regions within the Nordic Region that need special support.

Planned activities include: Financial support for developmental projects and pilot projects within the field; copyright questions; cooperation with non-library projects for synergy effects, including museums and archives; identification of needs for developmental projects within small research areas as well as marginal areas within the Nordic region; and special support for research and development areas which are recent and have very few researchers.
2. Information technology developers

Objectives: Support developments aiming at improved machine-human interface and improved technical access to electronic information.

Planned activities for this group include: support for projects that aim at implementing the electronic research library on the next generation of Internet and projects that improve access to Internet sources; integration of information and communication technology as well as support for the digitization of special library material that calls for new solutions.

3. Publishers and producers of electronic scientific information

Objective: Follow new developments in the field and pass pertinent information on to Nordic library community; provide opportunity for Nordic publishers to gain insight into the requirements of the library community for easy access to electronic publications.

Proposed activities within this field include: Keep the Nordic library community informed about the rapid developments in the area of electronic publishing, especially concerning standardization and technical aspects; seminars on the use of meta-data; developmental projects in digitization and electronic storage and access of complex multi-media collections; follow different models of principles of contract licensing of electronic data. Within this area, NORDINFO will mainly support state-of-the-art studies, use of experts to write reports or articles for NORDINFO’s publications, as well as seminars on specific issues.

4. Students and future researchers

Objectives: To provide opportunities for teachers, librarians and principals for up to date information on the most recent developments in information literacy, using the Internet for instruction and integration of information into teaching and learning on secondary and tertiary levels.

Activities within this area include: Summer schools or seminars on information handling skills/information literacy as an integral part of education on secondary school level; integration of libraries in problem-based university education and development of instructional material on the Internet.
5. Staff of the research libraries and information centers

Objectives: To provide opportunities for professional growth, performance and efficiency in the user service within the electronic library environment.

Activities for library staff include: Summer school on the virtual library which will build on the results, developments and skills gained through the Centers of Excellence; support for research education for librarians and information professionals; mobility grants for staff of research libraries to spend some time in a similar institution in another country; assist the development of a regular publication of international refereed English language journal on Nordic library research; annual grant for an innovative research project related to the development of the Nordic electronic research library.

6. Policy makers for research libraries and scientific information and decision makers on the ministerial level

Objectives: To facilitate the coordination of national developments in order to create a Nordic policy in access to scientific and technical information. To facilitate a Nordic policy on educational changes expected with added use of the Internet, and the library’s specific role in those changes.

Activities within the area of policy include: Conference for Nordic policy makers with a focus on how to coordinate national developments in order to create the Nordic electronic research library; Conference for Nordic policy makers concerning changes in higher education, more network based, distance education and the effect of these developments on Nordic research library services; Publication of a Newsletter about the most recent developments within the research library and information field, aimed at keeping policy makers up to date on NORDINFO’s activities and developments within the research and academic library’s sector, and provide broadly based, international information on research library developments that have relevance for the Nordic community.

Besides the activities within these six focus groups, NORDINFO also has the obligation to cooperate on three levels; Nordic, European and International with emphasis on the neighboring regions, including the Baltic States and Western Russia. NORDINFO therefore works with Nordic research libraries and Nordic associations of research libraries and related areas for synergy effect. NORDINFO also functions as a contact point with the European Union’s Fifth Framework Program in order to facilitate Nordic participation in EU projects.
NORDINFO also has a considerable publications program, including a journal, *NORDINFO-Nytt*, which is published four times a year, a publication series which often contains proceedings of conferences of importance, as well as a Report series which issues the outcome of some of NORDINFO’s research projects. In 2000 NORDINFO has launched a newsletter, *NORDINFO-Express* for policy makers in the field of research libraries and scientific information, outside the library community.

**Contract with the Nordic Council of Ministers, 2000-2002**

A contract valid for the three-year period 2000-2002 has been signed with the Nordic Council of Ministers and is based on the strategy listed above. The financial framework has already been outlined so the four people that work in NORDINFO’s secretariat know more or less the financial framework for the upcoming three years. A work plan has been developed which cuts across all the defined fields of stakeholders. The work plan contains four categories of activities but also takes into account the objectives for each of the focal groups. The work plan categories are the following:

1. Policy issues and coordination;
2. Research and development;
3. Competency development; and
4. Publication and information activities.

The budget that NORDINFO receives for each of the three years (2000-2002) amounts to 4.1 million Finnish Marks (approx. 720,000 USD) per year. The money will be used for both projects and office expenses. This may not look like a lot of money, but within the library field, it is of great help to have NORDINFO’s seed money to start a project. NORDINFO finances no project fully, and a group of institutions that apply for money, must be ready to put up at least half of the cost of the project. This includes large developmental projects which are of great value to the whole Nordic research library community. NORDINFO also supports up to 20 conferences per year, and the Board gives a fixed sum of about 5000 USD for a conference. This money will be used to pay for the speakers or presenters.

**Conclusions**

During the 25 years of operation NORDINFO has made a considerable contribution to developments within the Nordic library and information sector. NORDINFO has financed many experiments and projects with the aim to promote Nordic cooperation within the field of scientific information and documentation, principally in connection with the research library system. NORDINFO has been evaluated several times. Each and every time the findings of the evaluation committees have been positive. NORDINFO has never been a very noisy institution. It has a small secretariat, now with
four full-time people that take care of the daily functions, the publication program, and all activities that are necessary to realize the new strategy and contract and execute the Board’s decisions.

From the beginning, NORDINFO’s activities have aimed at contributing to the developments of projects that can truly be of use to the Nordic library community as a whole. The main idea with the operations is to support financially projects that give added value to Nordic cooperation and that support cross-national projects. NORDINFO has also supported Nordic interests on the international scene. A decision by the Nordic Council of Ministers has now added the three Baltic States and Western Russia to the portfolio of all Nordic institutions. The so-called neighboring regions also demand contacts and efforts on behalf of the institutions to find viable projects that are of benefit to the region as well as within the budget of the institutions. In the case of NORDINFO this support has been mainly in the form of financing competency developments, seminars, study tours, courses and conferences.

The board of NORDINFO now consists of five members, one from each of the five Nordic countries, appointed for four years at a time with a rotating chairmanship. In the past the institution has had national representatives on the Board that were in a position of power within their home countries and who could lead the activities in the direction most of advantage to the Nordic region as a whole. The board works on the basis of a majority vote for decisions and the veto has been abandoned.

During its years of operations, NORDINFO has had eight directors, four from Finland, three from Sweden and the present one is from Iceland. The position is open for applicants from any of the five countries. Requirements are very high, including comprehensive knowledge of the field, knowledge of at least one of the Scandinavian languages - Danish, Norwegian or Swedish - as well as English, ability to lead an international institution and willingness to travel, to name a few.

When looking at the history of Nordic research library cooperation, it is clear that the members of the committee that suggested the establishment of an institution that would combine librarianship, documentation and information were people that understood what developments were likely in the future. It is also clear that the field is in such a state of rapid change, that without a strong institution that coordinates cooperative activities and finances developments and experiments, Nordic research libraries would not be as advanced as they are. And, as a consequence, the scientist would not have access to such a good information service as they now have.

The new strategy will take NORDINFO into the new millennium. It is expected that the strategy is wide enough to include all the aspects that are connected to the development of the Nordic electronic research library, a concept, based on the developments in each
one of the five participating countries. A work plan is developed for each year and will be adjusted to accommodate new developments and needs. The present contract with the Nordic Council of Ministers offers a financial basis to work from for three years ahead. Therefore, it is possible for the Board and staff of NORDINFO to set priorities and adjust activities so that the financial support comes to the greatest benefit for the Nordic region as a whole.

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