
From "Panadol Sandwiches" to a "Cup of Tea and a Lie Down": the Ups and Downs of a Consortia Task Group

Ruth Millard

At its annual conference in 2002 ANZTLA set up a Consortia Task Group to investigate the establishment of a consortium for ANZTLA Libraries to subscribe to the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) Religion Database Online. Prior to this there had been some success in establishing an ATLA Consortium, mainly by Melbourne College of Divinity Libraries, but it was felt that an ANZTLA-based approach would be of great benefit to more theological libraries across Australia and New Zealand.

The ATLA Religion Database is a key resource for theological faculty and students searching for journal articles and essays on particular topics, and for book reviews. However few, if any, libraries in the Association are able to afford the cost of subscribing to ATLA Religion Database Online on their own. Many libraries subscribed to the CD-ROM version of the database, but the online version has the substantial advantage of offering unlimited and off-site access for subscribers.

Members of the Consortium Task Group - Christine Brunton (Queensland), Mark Hangartner (New Zealand), Linda Heald (NSW), Ruth Millard (Victoria), Jocelyn Morris, Convener (SA) and Rosemary Watts (WA) - began work soon after the conference ended.

The ATLA Religion Database Online is not available direct from ATLA, but five major online aggregators (represented by four vendors) each produce their own versions of the database. The Task Group decided to obtain quotes from each of the aggregators. Some trials of the various versions of ATLA were set up to give libraries the opportunity to assess them.

Libraries were contacted via the ANZTLA Forum and individually, and were asked to complete a questionnaire if they were

interested in being part of a possible ATLA Consortium. Although the ATLA consortium was the prime focus of the Task Group, libraries were also invited to express interest in a possible ATLAS (ATLA's full-text database) Consortium. For 2003 interest in ATLAS turned out to be minimal, and in the end just one library subscribed to ATLAS.

The process of gathering the questionnaires was a time-consuming and at times frustrating one, both for libraries and for Task Group members. Incomplete questionnaires had to be followed up, and libraries had many questions, the chief of which - "How much will it cost?" - we could not answer! It was a Catch-22 situation - vendors were not able to give an indication of pricing until they received details of libraries interested in participating in the consortium, and libraries, very understandably, did not want to in any way to commit themselves to a consortium until they knew the costs involved.

Each vendor was supplied with details of interested libraries, and they in turn each had to approach ATLA in order to supply the Task Group with quotations. The quotes that came back showed considerable variation. Asking the question of vendors, "Is this your best price?" resulted in some lower quotes being submitted. After consideration the Task Group decided to eliminate the aggregators with the three highest quotes from the process, and to seek "second-round" quotes from the two aggregators with the best quotes.

So it was back to the libraries to ask for a firmer commitment to the consortium. Again, it was frustrating as we could not give an exact price, because when the number of libraries interested in the consortium changed, the aggregators had to obtain new quotes from ATLA. We asked libraries to commit to the consortium on

the basis that the price would not go above a certain level.

Eventually twenty libraries indicated that they wanted to be part of the ATLA consortium, and so began another protracted round of negotiations between the Task Group, the aggregators and ATLA. The final prices quoted by the two aggregators were almost identical, and so the choice of aggregator was made on the basis of which interface was preferred by the most libraries. We were, we thought, finally set to proceed with Silver Platter, when the "final" list of libraries participating suddenly changed.

Several libraries, for good reasons, withdrew from the consortium, thereby throwing the whole process open again. Thankfully, (and amazingly!) several new libraries emerged almost as suddenly, and the consortium was back on track. The ANZTLA ATLA Religion Database Online Consortium of 20 libraries began on the 15th March, 2003.

The process of establishing the consortium took the Task Group over six months. It was a steep learning curve for Task Group members, with many frustrations and hurdles to overcome along the way. Without email the process may well have been impossible, but even with email, communication was often difficult and slow.

- Emails mysteriously disappeared into cyberspace,
- people's systems went down so they were incommunicado,
- different time zones had to be taken into consideration when trying to make contact,
- and the Christmas holidays came along at a crucial time in proceedings.

There were what seemed like interminable delays in obtaining quotes and information from aggregators and from ATLA, and quite a few misunderstandings along the way. At various times at least some of the Task Group members wanted to retreat under their desks with a good supply of

Panadol sandwiches to take the edge off their pain!! However we are glad that we persevered, because the outcome was good, and the consortium, once established, operated very smoothly.

In the latter part of 2003, as thoughts turned to renewing the ATLA subscription, the Task Group decided to seek quotes only from the two aggregators that had offered to best prices for 2003.

Almost as an aside EBSCO Publishing told me about their Religion and Philosophy Collection (RPC), a full-text online database covering about 300 theological journals. A trial was established, and we decided to seek expressions of interest for this database, as well as for ATLA Religion Database Online and ATLAS.

We had learnt much from our experiences of 2003, and as one consortium was already established, the renewal for 2004 was a more streamlined process. We refined and improved the questionnaire we sent out to libraries, and, perhaps because there were 20 libraries that knew first-hand the benefits of belonging to the consortium, and many others who had observed the initial consortium with interest from the sidelines, most questionnaires were returned within the given time-frame.

There was strong interest in ATLAS and RPC, as well as in ATLA Religion Database Online. Once the quotes came back from the aggregators, libraries were asked to make a firm commitment to the consortium or consortia of their choice, so that final quotes could be obtained.

Mainly due to the high level of interest in RPC, and the seamless interface provided between ATLA and RPC on the EBSCO interface, we decided to subscribe via EBSCO for 2004. Three consortia were established –

- an ATLA Consortium with 26 libraries,
- an ATLAS Consortium with 10 libraries,
- and an RPC Consortium with 17 libraries.

There were a number of hiccups along the way, with libraries dropping in and out, and people not responding to emails and other requests for information, but compared to the previous year, things proceeded relatively smoothly, though more slowly than hoped. As the person who coordinated most of the process for the 2004 consortia, there were only a few times that I felt the need for a "cup of tea and a lie down".

In less than two years ANZTLA has gone from having no consortia to having three consortia involving a total of 30 libraries.

The groundwork has been done and great progress has been made. There are some aspects of how the consortia operate that could be refined. Most notably we need to look at the charging structure, and whether there is a fairer way of distributing subscription costs than simply charging each library the same price, regardless of their size. Maybe we will need those Panadol sandwiches and cups of tea again after all!

Ruth Millard

Convener



VICTORIAN CHAPTER NEWS

Our first meeting for the year was held at CAVAL (Co-operative Action by Victorian Academic Libraries), which is located on the La Trobe University Research and Development Park. It was a well-attended meeting with some 15 members present. We welcomed Joy Healey, the new assistant Librarian at Ridley College to her first meeting.

CAVAL have, since 1978, provided a range of library resource services including consortia facilitation, collaboration and consulting, training and high quality cataloguing in over 70 languages. Sue Henczel (Training and Cataloguing Services Manager) gave us an overview of CAVAL and its services and David Noble (Member and Administration Services Manager) then gave us a tour of the CARM Centre.

The CARM Centre is the CAVAL Archive and Research Materials Centre. It is a last copy repository for low use research materials from all Victorian universities and the State Library of Victoria. It was a very impressive facility which as well as books currently houses records and artwork in controlled atmospheric conditions.

CAVAL were great hosts, providing us with lunch and a take home pack of resource information each. It was a very interesting, informative and successful meeting and I am sure that many members will be contacting CAVAL in days to come to enrol in training courses or to have them provide other services for our libraries.

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