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**Electronic Public Information and Europe:
an electronic forum in support of transparency and openness in government**

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Abstract

This article outlines the details of a British Library Research and Development Department funded project on the provision of European Union information in public libraries in the UK. It explains how European Union information is currently being provided to the public in the EU Public Information Relay and emphasises the issues involved in providing European Union information electronically.

The Public Information Relay and European information

Electronic Public Information is all about improving the communication and dissemination of information to the general public. The Public Information Relay, a network of European information services in public libraries, was established as a result of the desire on the part of the Representation of the European Commission in the United Kingdom to get reliable information about Europe, its activities and opportunities, to the general public in an accessible and convenient manner. One of the vehicles for the transmission of that information is via electronic media.

The development of electronic transmission arose initially from the move towards greater transparency and openness in European government, the need for which was first signalled by the Sutherland Report in 1992ⁱ, which found that the major obstacle to achieving consensus lay less in the lack of information rather than in the lack of transparency with which existing information was disseminated to the individual. Similar motivations may lie behind the Clinton administration's opening of electronic communications with the White House, the G-7 On-line PROJECTⁱⁱ and the recent appearance of political parties hosting World Wide Web sitesⁱⁱⁱ.

Some argue^{iv} that electronic media, and in particular interactive electronic media such as the Internet, offer a forum which supports and strengthens democracy and responsive government by encouraging ongoing interactive discourse with the electorate at an individual level, in a manner that was previously only possible by referenda. This is an interesting hypothesis, although it has yet to be tested and its implications are far from clear at present.

The need for the development of mechanisms to improve information flow on Europe to the general public was tested by Gallup via a poll in 1993 (repeated in 1994 and 1995)^v. The interesting result of the first survey was that, although the majority of respondents did not express an active need for European information (greatest interest was manifest in young adults), public libraries were highlighted, along with MPs and MEPs, as a source which the

public would consult in order to find information about Europe and its government. The European Commission saw public libraries as being well placed to provide such a service with “a long-established and well organised public information provision service, mainly based in public libraries”^{vi}. Since 1993 a series of conferences, known as Stoke Rochford, have been held annually to discuss strategies to overcome the information gap between Brussels and the general public. The Public Information Relay is the result of these deliberations.

The Public Information Relay was launched in September 1994. Figures to date show that 154 (from 167) public libraries have joined. Many libraries were in fact providing European information prior to joining: however, as Table 1 shows, membership of the Relay ensures a higher profile for European information services, provides participating libraries with a level of support and imposes upon them certain duties.

Support	Obligations
Free copies of basic texts	To house and staff the collection and promote membership of the Relay
50% discount on EUR-OP publications	To make material available to the general public
50% discount on access to some European databases	To make links and cooperate with other European Relays (e.g. EDCs, EICs)
Provision of EC pamphlet material	To report back annually to the EC on activities and feedback from users
Advice on publications with which to develop the collection	To publicise the existence of the Relay through local events
Training in the use and maintenance of a European collection	

Table 1: Expectations of Relay membership

The research project

A Research Team at the School of Information and Media, the Robert Gordon University, funded by the British Library Research and Development Department, are currently investigating the implementation of the Public Information Relay in public libraries in the United Kingdom. The aims of the project are:

- to examine the provision of European information in public libraries in the light of the implementation of the Public Information Relay;
- to identify the most effective method of supplying European information within the public library;
- to investigate levels of user need for European information.

A number of areas of investigation were identified:

- staffing and training;
- accommodation;
- supplementing the basic free collection;
- IT support;
- promotion;
- coordination of the Relay;
- measuring success;
- user support (user education may be particularly important in enabling exploitation of electronic information by the public);
- providing access across multiple sites;
- delivery of obligations as a member of the Public Information Relay in the light of public libraries' overall service ethos and aims

The project consists of a survey by questionnaire of all participating libraries in the UK; case studies of a sample of libraries; and survey/observational techniques, to gauge present and potential levels of need for and use of European Union information. Finally the views of experts, practitioners and users will be elicited in response to the project results at a seminar to be held on 25 June in London. Presentations will be made by the Research Team, by representatives of the European Commission Office in the United Kingdom, by a member of the National Coordinating Committee and by two senior librarians.

Providing European information electronically

Electronic European information is but one aspect of service under investigation. The survey investigated the use that is being made of electronic sources of European information by libraries, whether online, CD-ROM or via the Internet. The European Commission Office in the United Kingdom are also undertaking a survey of Relay membership to discover precisely which electronic sources are being used.

It will be necessary for library services participating in the Relay to provide or allow access to electronic forms of European information: at present the use made of such resources is limited and this could be a costly area of additional burden for participating libraries, in addition to requiring staff with expertise in online search techniques and familiarity with the content and structure of the various databases available. Membership of the Relay does offer the considerable advantage, however, of discounted access to the databases, available via the EU's two online host services, ECHO and Eurobases.

All of the databases available via ECHO are free, apart from Tenders Electronic Daily (TED), and members of the Relay are given a 50% discount on the databases contained in the Eurobases Catalogue. It should, however, be noted that only one of the European databases, INFO 92, is directed specifically at the general public and few provide information of demonstrable value to the general public; the vast majority would have a very limited interest being geared rather towards the academic, research and business communities. Examples

include EABS, which contains the results of research programmes, CELEX which has the full text of European legislation, Euristote containing bibliographic details of European theses and dissertations, or RTD-Partners which is a European partner search service. A very useful directory^{viii} is available which provides full details of all European Union databases. The major sources of potential interest to the general public are listed in Table 2.

ECHO databases - free access apart from TED (Tenders Electronic Daily)	
CCL Train	Guidance on the use of the Common Command Language
ECU	Daily ECU rates
I&T Magazine	News and articles relating to information and telecommunications (some full-text fact sheets)
EPOQUE	Bibliographical database of European documents and of the collection of the European Parliament Library
CORDIS	Information on research and development
EMIRE	European employment and industrial relations glossary
ELISE	Bibliographical database on unemployment
Eurobases databases - 50% discount on access	
INFO 92	European legislation and its impact on everyday life
RAPID	Press releases and the Spokesman's Service
CELEX	European legislation full-text
SCAD	Bibliographical database of EU activities
ECLAS	Bibliographic database of books, articles, etc. relating to European matters
EUROCRON	General European Union statistics

Table 2: EU databases of interest to the general public

Free or discounted access is highly significant, indeed almost unique in the activities of online hosts and offers an opportunity to, as well as placing an obligation upon, public libraries and their staff to exploit this resource as fully as possible. However, the databases and hosts are not as user friendly nor as accessible as might be wished. Equally, they are not usually aimed at a general level of interest, apart from INFO 92, although they might be useful in support of such interests. Their exploitation does depend upon the library staff's familiarity with the systems and their willingness to turn to online hosts in response to requests. All of these databases require users either to be familiar with Common Command Language (CCL) or to use a simpler, but often frustratingly slow, menu-driven approach. ECHO are at present developing a Windows interface for users, an environment which would be much more approachable for both staff and end users and which might have significant impact on frequency of use. European databases which build upon the official data, such as CELEX,

EC InfoDisk, Spicer's Centre for Europe and SCAD, are available via both CD-ROM and online.

European Union Web servers

In contrast to ECHO and Eurobases, the Europa^{viii} site on the Internet is an easily accessible and approachable electronic source of European information aimed at a general readership. It provides information on the European Union's goals and policies, and is a useful resource for anyone interested in European matters. It was introduced in February 1995 and has still to be further developed, but at present it receives approximately 11,000 visits per day. Europa forms part of the Commission's initiatives in bringing information closer to the citizen, which was reinforced by Mr Marcelino Oreja, Commissioner responsible for Information, Communication and Openness, when he stated in his opening speech at the Seminar on Openness and Transparency, Swedish representation, Brussels 22 November 1995,

“the establishment of EUROPA, the server on the Internet that is to offer information on all European institutions, which is initiated and run by the Commission, represents a revolution for the citizens of Europe”.

There are a number of resources available via Europa, with demonstrable relevance and value for the general public. These cover areas of interest such as: the history and development of the EU; the European Commission: a dictionary of EU policies; a guide to European information sources and services; and pointers to other related Web servers. As an introduction to 'What is the European Union?', information is provided about the 15 Member States, the aims and resources of the Union and the Community institutions and bodies. There is a whole section devoted to 'The European Union and its citizens' which provides a question and answer format on a variety of topics including: 'What does the European Union do for the ordinary citizen?' and 'Why does Europe need a single currency?' Another useful page is 'Europe ABC; A citizens guide to major topics' which at present includes headings for: Europe without frontiers; questions and answers; a Consumer's Guide, focusing on consumer's rights and European Union legislation; information on education, training and youth; European Integration Studies; and 'Euromyths: What is the real story?' From these examples, it is obvious that Europa is aimed more specifically at the general public, and serves as a good source for keeping up-to-date with European issues. One page allows access, for example, to daily updated press releases.

There are three other European Union servers: the CORDIS^{ix} server is directed towards the research and development community: I'M Europe^x has material on telecommunications and the information market in Europe and allows telnet access to ECHO; and ISPO^{xi} contains, or provides links to, documents relating to the Information Society, such as the G7 Information Conference. The Representation of the European Commission in the United Kingdom plans to mount its own server attached to the Europa site which will add to the resources already available, and will provide updates of their information and activities, including their newsletter and publications, such as *The Week in Europe*.

Survey results

The survey undertaken as part of this project sought to investigate specifically the use that is being made at present of electronic sources of European information, whether online, CD-ROM or via the Internet.

Online hosts

Although 48% of the Relay members surveyed have access to online hosts, only 27% indicated that they use them for the purpose of obtaining European information. The top three online hosts used most frequently to access European information are: DIALOG, DataStar and FT Profile. Only 18% of libraries responding stated that they had access to ECHO, while a mere 8% had access to Eurobases. This result would indicate that there is a very low level of awareness of, or perceived value in, the dedicated European hosts in public libraries in the UK.

CD-ROMs

Far more popular were CD-ROMs; 39% of the Relay members surveyed hold CD-ROM titles containing European information. The most commonly held title is *Eurolaw* (stocked by 10% of Relay members) followed by *EC Infodisk* and *Justis Single Market* (each stocked by 9% of Relay members).

Internet use

The current level of public library use of the Internet for the retrieval of European information is decidedly low; only 19% of the Relay members surveyed use the Internet for this purpose. As several respondents pointed out, however, access to the Internet has only recently been established within their particular library authorities and is therefore generally still experimental in nature.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that few libraries (14, i.e. 12% of respondents) have encountered pages on the Internet which they believe to be particularly useful in providing European information. Of these pages, those on the Europa service are the ones most frequently used by public libraries, although they are closely followed by those appearing on the European Commission's I'M-EUROPE service.

Other useful European information Internet pages identified by survey respondents are: those on the European Commission's Community Research and Development Information Service (CORDIS) server; the Commission's Information Society Project Office (ISPO) pages; and those of the Centre for European Union Studies at the University of Hull^{xii}

Only 12% of respondents indicated that their library authority had plans to add its own European information home pages to the Internet, some of them pointed out that such work is already in progress. In fact, on browsing the home pages of the 30 or so public library authorities listed in The UK Public Libraries Page^{xiii}, it can be seen that several make reference to their European collections and Relay membership. Indeed, some authorities are in the process of constructing quite ambitious European pages. Hertfordshire Libraries^{xiv}, for example, provide links to the European Commission's Europa service and to the home page of the Centre for European Union Studies, while the Surrey Libraries' pages^{xv} contain links to the Commission's Europa service and ECHO databases, as well as a form on which users can submit their European information enquiries by email.

In confirmation of the findings detailed above, it is interesting to examine the results of the UKOLN Survey. The UK Office for Library and Information Networking (UKOLN)^{xvi} has completed a survey of use of the Internet by public libraries. The report acknowledges that,

“it is recognised that the Internet and other networks will become central channels for the delivery of learning, leisure and business services... It is crucial that public libraries respond to the challenge that these changes introduce so that they can continue to provide services of relevance to their users' needs.”

The results of the survey showed, however, a low level of connection to the Internet and low use of networked services. It did find that there was great enthusiasm among respondents in relation to the Internet, which most regarded an integral part of future services. Future plans were found to be limited and largely of an exploratory nature. There was little consensus as to how the Internet would affect future development of public library service delivery, or the ways in which public libraries could define a new role or image for themselves with the advent of the Internet and raised public consciousness of its significance.

Networking the Relay

Another area of current debate is whether there will be support for an IT network, linking the public libraries who join the Relay. EBLIDA^{xvii} is lobbying for funds to establish such a network. The present project found that 69% of respondents surveyed felt that such a network would be useful in furthering the development of the Public Information Relay. There are precedents, for a network has existed for a number of years linking European Information Centres (EICs) across member states. Such a network would have a number of benefits: the encouragement of communication between Relay members; the facilitation of referral and exploitation of resources amongst Relay members; the potential avoidance of duplication and the development of strategic initiatives in supplementing and developing collections; the pooling of expertise and the sharing of knowledge and experience; and a means of speedily communicating and consolidating data in feedback from members to the European Commission. Such a network, it might be argued, should be extended to all Relays, encouraging synergy of strategy, policy and its implementation across all sectors.

Conclusions

The provision of European information to the general public is high priority and high profile at present. There are opportunities in the electronic communication of that information via public library services and there are encouraging signs that libraries are enthusiastic about their future use of the Internet. However, at present there is little evidence of use by libraries of those resources which exist, in particular ECHO and Eurobases, and the results of the survey would suggest that there is a need for an awareness raising programme directed towards European hosts and databases. While it is hoped that the Public Information Relay might provide a focus to encourage libraries to promote use of the European Web servers, and other services such as ECHO and Eurobases, by the general public, this will never be achieved unless library staff are comfortable with the services. Training may need to focus specifically on use of the European hosts, in order to ensure that all members of the Relay can take advantage of discounted access to databases. Such training should address not only the retrieval of information from these databases, search language, etc., but also the value of the databases, making it clear how they can be used to provide information in response to realistic enquiries.

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