COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

Libraries programme

General information

Rationale and background to the Community action

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Directorate-General XIII
Telecommunications, Information Industries
and Innovation

COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

information management

Libraries programme

General information

Rationale and background
to the Community action

Directorate-General
Telecommunications, Information Industries and Innovation

Directorate
Information Industry and Market

1991

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I — BACKGROUND

The origin and rationale for Community action

1. In 1984, the European Parliament drew political attention to the importance of libraries to the Community in a Resolution (known as the Schwencke Resolution) which called for action by the Commission in this sector. [1]

    The Council of Ministers with responsibility for cultural affairs adopted a Resolution of 27 September 1985 on 'collaboration between libraries in the field of data processing'. [2] This Resolution acknowledged the importance of libraries in the European Community, both as a major force on the information market and as intermediaries to knowledge and culture. It invited the Commission to take action to help libraries which should be aimed, *inter alia,* at preparing a work programme in close collaboration with those responsible for libraries in the Member States.

2. The Ministers responsible for cultural affairs confirmed their desire for implementation of the Resolution in their Conclusions of 27 May 1988. [3] At the meeting of 18 May 1989, the Council and the Ministers noted with satisfaction the progress achieved with regard to their Resolution [4] and requested that the Commission submit specific proposals to the Council as soon as possible for study by the competent authorities. [5]

II — THE CONTEXT OF THE COMMUNITY ACTION

The facts

3. Libraries represent a considerable accumulating resource of information and knowledge as well as a very substantial annual investment both in financial and in human terms.

4. In the European Community there are presently 75 000 libraries of all types and sizes, run mainly by public authorities. More than half are public libraries and over 20 000 of the total are medium to large libraries. They carry a stock of about 1.2 billion books, plus many other types of library materials (periodicals, maps, manuscripts, etc.). [1] [6]

5. Current public-sector expenditure on libraries is of the order of ECU 5 to 10 billion per annum in the Community. This expenditure, per head of population, is about ECU 14.8 per annum, but national averages can range from ECU 2 to 56, depending on the country.

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[1] OJ C 117, 30.4.1984, pp. 161-174.
[2] OJ C 271, 23.10.1985, p. 1.
[3] OJ C 197, 27.7.1988, p. 2.
[4] COM(89) 234 final.
[5] OJ C 183, 20.7.1989, p. 3.
[6] References in square brackets are grouped at the end of the text.

6. The library sector employs over 250 000 people (full-time equivalents) and 50% of expenditure is on staff costs.

7. Around one quarter of the total population of the Community are regular library-users (registered borrowers). This is a very general order of magnitude; in some countries this figure reaches 62% of the population.

8. Such orders of magnitude reveal the importance of the libraries sector *per se* and of its potential as a market for suppliers of goods and services.

   However, the figures conceal the complexity and fragmentation of the library world in Europe. This complexity can be explained by:

   (i) the great diversity of types of libraries; [2]

   (ii) the different legal, social and historical contexts in each Community country;

   (iii) the distribution of responsibility for libraries between several ministries and other governmental bodies;

   (iv) the profound discrepancies in library provision and in the pace of library development between the different EC countries.

9. International organizations such as Unesco and the Council of Europe and world-wide non-governmental professional associations (such as IFLA, Iatul and FID) [3] each have their own active roles to play in promoting internationally the work of libraries in the twentieth century, but with a general approach.

Libraries and the information scene

10. Information today permeates all levels and all spheres of activities. The value of information is directly correlated to the ease with which it can be made available.

    The amount of recorded knowledge in the world now doubles approximately every seven years. The electronic revolution of the last decades has provided the indispensable tools for effective manipulation and dissemination of information and knowledge. It has also created a range of new electronic information products.

11. Libraries are the repositories of the accumulated knowledge of the past, of great value to scholars and researchers. They are also institutions whose primary purpose is to collect and make available to users all kinds of information and documents. As such they are one of the major intermediaries to today's information for science, technology, industry, commerce, education and recreation.

12. New telecommunications channels and the availability of advanced information services and products have transformed the information scene. The emergence of an inter-

national electronic information industry has therefore focused attention on the need for libraries to modernize and extend the services they provide to their users.

13. In the performance of their 'bridge' function between the producers/publishers of information and its users and consumers, libraries are involved in the upheavals provoked by the information explosion and by the new technologies — for which most are today still ill-prepared.

Weaknesses, problems and costs

14. The slow pace of adaptation to the changes in the information scene over the last two decades makes libraries a weak element in the information distribution chain.

15. The response of libraries in Europe to the challenge of the information revolution in the last 20 years has clearly not been on the same scale as in other sectors — or on the same level as in North America. This is probably due to the fragmented library scene but also to additional factors such as:

   (a) progressive imbalance between increasing running costs and available resources;

   (b) high start-up costs of automation;

   (c) shortage of skilled personnel in libraries in the use of new technologies;

   (d) difficulties in coping with the exponential increase in the volume of information and publications;

   (e) lack of international standards and insufficient application of existing standards;

   (f) lack of practical experience in collaboration at international level;

   (g) a certain traditional and institutional rigidity which resists change.

16. The market which the whole library sector represents for the new technologies — be it integrated library management systems, optical technologies (e.g. CD-ROM drives), microcomputers, access to commercially-available on-line information services, etc. — is very significant. Producers of systems and services outside the Community are aware of this opportunity; over 50% of the investments in commercial integrated library systems in the EC by 1987 involved systems from non-European suppliers.

17. The level of staff training varies considerably among the Member States. As in other sectors there is a need for bringing new technological and management skills to the library workforce, which will enable libraries to maintain, improve and expand their levels of service.

18. The new technologies have made it easier to publish — and to publish on a variety of media. [4] A simple indicator is the number of titles annually recorded in national biblio-

graphies: there has been a steady increase, on average, by 3 to 6% per annum since 1980. Another example is the growth of publications on a medium such as the compact disc (CD-ROM), which has doubled from 1988 to 1989.

In addition, the rapid progress in research has shortened the life-cycle of the information.

Consequently, libraries have to confront the ever-growing dilemma of more time needed to process a growing number and variety of publications with less time to make these available to their users, in a context of generally increasing costs. They have to cope with exponential growth in the number of transactions to be performed, the increasing unit cost of these transactions and a shrinking time-scale.

Unless action is taken, this is a vicious circle from which libraries can only escape at the expense of their usefulness as a social and educational institution.

International cooperation

19.   No single library, even the richest and the largest, can satisfy all the needs of its users from its own acquisition policies and stocks. As a consequence libraries have to cooperate and use the tools provided by computers and communication networks so that human and budgetary resources can be more efficiently allocated. Furthermore, with the internationalization of information, users increasingly need to access literature from all over the world, which is creating a requirement for libraries to cooperate also on an international scale.

20.   On the North American continent, cooperative developments based on the use of computers and networks as well as the introduction of integrated systems in individual libraries are today well-advanced and have occasioned substantial improvements in cost-efficiency. Four large cooperative organizations (also called 'bibliographic utilities') serve together over 10 000 libraries throughout the USA and Canada with a whole range of sophisticated library-specific services. Together, the North American utilities and the Library of Congress represent an enormous and unmatched reservoir of machine-readable bibliographic records for library cataloguing which are marketed on a variety of electronic media. One of these, OCLC (the On-line Computer Library Centre) has a database which alone already contains well over 18 million individual catalogue items. [5] Sophisticated networking has provided impetus for standardization work in the USA and Canada on OSI (open systems interconnection).

In general, automation has progressed more rapidly in the USA and Canada than in Europe. It has been estimated that by the end of 1985 there were already 1 100 medium-to-large commercial turnkey integrated systems installed in US libraries (excluding the very large number of own library-developed systems) and they are being installed at the rate of well over 200 per year (235 in 1988) — i.e. over four times as many as were installed in the EC at the same period.

21.   Computerized cooperative systems do exist or are planned in some Community countries, often on a regional basis, sometimes on a national basis or by type of library. Because of the way they have developed, however, they frequently encounter policy, tariff and other obstacles to their efficient operation (including conflicts of interest). In addition, transborder cooperative initiatives between libraries in Europe have been few, often bilateral and informal and have to date probably been given insufficient financial and political incentive.

Modernizing libraries — An economic necessity

22.   The process initiated by the information revolution during the last decades is accelerating. Libraries need urgent attention if they are to fulfil the functions and expectations for which they are designed without being a growing — and in the end wasteful — drain on resources.

As economic pressure is making it more and more difficult for libraries to operate in today's world, simple occasional increases in budget can only alleviate the problems temporarily because of the escalating spiral of their costs.

23.   The modernization and improved performance of libraries has to be achieved through a more efficient use, control and management of resources and a dual approach:

(i)   addressing the operational and management problems of libraries through appropriate applied research and technological development which will lead to a rational investment in the new information and telecommunications technologies;

(ii)   improving the relation efficiency/usefulness/costs of library services through international cooperation.

As with other sectors of our society, more efficient libraries will enable better services to be provided to more users. It can also enhance the relations between libraries and the publishing sector.

24.   The stakes are real: if libraries can no longer provide efficiently the services for which they were built and play their role in the information chain, they will in the end become a costly luxury: at best warehouses of our cultural legacy, at worst silos of disintegrating and dying artefacts.

The advantage of a Community contribution to this process

25.   Community action based on international collaboration and focused on the application of information and communication technologies will lead to considerable savings in the medium and long term because of the economies of scale it will generate. Taking into account that over a five-year period the current running costs of libraries amount to ECU

40 to 50 billion, international cooperation initiated by the Community action will strongly reduce the substantial additional investments needed for this modernization.

26.   One of the major tasks in the preparation for European integration is strengthening the economic and social cohesion of the Community. A Community work programme for the benefit of libraries will help alleviate the considerable differences between the Member States in the levels of library developments which, if no action is taken, may even widen in the coming decades.

27.   Community experience in other sectors has shown that there are additional start-up costs of European cooperation which are estimated at about 30%.

Therefore, widening the scope of national projects to cooperative projects at Community level in order to share the resources effectively requires in the short term the incentive of additional external funds.

III — THE PROPOSED COMMUNITY INITIATIVE — THE PLAN OF ACTION

The preparation of the proposal

28.   The preparation of the present Commission initiative has been in two main phases:

(a) an exploratory phase of work concluding with a broad informal consultation on a discussion document which described a possible plan of action;

(b) a series of preparatory activities started in late 1989-90 and using as template this draft plan of action. These have included more in-depth consultations and investigations as well as a small number of test-bed pilot projects.

29.   The exploratory phase of work was started in late 1985 and concentrated on establishing the facts with respect to:

(i) the size and impact of the library sector;

(ii) the areas where libraries experience difficulties in adapting to the new conditions of the information society;

(iii) the areas where cooperative European actions would contribute to a better use of resources,

in order to provide the basis for a plan of action.

The outcome of the studies enabled the Commission to formulate a set of strategic questions. In February 1987 a hearing was organized with high-level representatives of the library world, national authorities from the Member States and observers from international library organizations.

At the hearing there was an overall consensus in the responses of the participants and an explicit request for Community action.

As a consequence a draft plan of action was produced as a discussion document.

30.   This draft plan of action was disseminated as widely as possible in the Member States for the purpose of an informal consultation to 180 organizations, with the request to distribute it further. [6]

During a series of national meetings in the Member States to discuss it, Commission representatives were invited to explain the rationale of the proposed approach and to respond to questions. Over 800 experts were involved in these meetings.

A Forum meeting took place in March 1989 with high-level representatives from the library world, from national authorities as well as observers from relevant international organizations and associations. Its purpose was to provide an opportunity to make known and to evaluate all comments and national viewpoints received on the document and to discuss its implications.

Reactions to both the aims and the structure of the draft plan of action were overwhelmingly favourable and the need for urgent action by the Commission along these lines was unanimously advocated. The main concern expressed was on the level of the budget which would be required to achieve the stated aims and have the desired impact.

THE PLAN OF ACTION

Considerations

31.   The process which will enable libraries to be more efficient in today's and tomorrow's world will be a long one. Therefore this first Community action does not aim to resolve all the long-term issues from the start. To be effective it is designed to initiate this process in a concrete, pragmatic way with more modest objectives. These address pressing problems which can start to catalyse change and trigger the development of better services to library users.

Objectives

32.   The plan of action sets four principal objectives. Whilst respecting national priorities it is designed to promote:

(i) the availability and accessibility of modern library services throughout the Community taking into account existing geographic discrepancies in library provision;

(ii) a more rapid but orderly penetration of new information technologies in libraries in a cost-effective way;

(iii) standardization, because of its practical consequences and economic impact;

(iv) harmonization and convergence of national policies with respect to the above since such Community intervention must be supported by appropriate policies at national and local level.

Expected benefits

33. The action plan should:

(a) provoke more rapid and useful developments in library services throughout the Community;

(b) stimulate cooperation and coordination oriented towards better returns on investments and better exploitation of resources;

(c) stimulate the Community market for the supply of information technology goods and services for libraries, as well as the publishing sector;

(d) support the competitiveness and innovation of industry by better access to the information held in libraries;

(e) generate spin-off effects which will modernize the skills of a large group of professionals and thus facilitate the use of the knowledge-based industries;

(f) contribute to a greater sense of European identity.

The action lines

34. The plan of action is structured in four complementary action lines within the context of which a range of individual shared-cost cooperative projects can be launched in conjunction with national and regional policies for libraries. The projects will be based on applied R&TD in order to support the development of appropriate tools, methods and technical resources that can contribute to achieving the objectives set. The Community financial participation in shared-cost projects will not normally be more than 50%. Ceilings may have to be set according to the category of projects and their rationale. Accompanying measures will be carried out to ensure a good dissemination of results and know-how and to stimulate exchanges of experience. Concerted actions are not foreseen.

35. The action lines are:

Action line I

Computerized bibliographies.

Support to projects to create, enhance and harmonize machine-readable bibliographies (principally national bibliographies used for international bibliographic services) and union catalogues as well as support to the retrospective conversion of catalogues of internationally important collections by developing the necessary tools and methods.

This will increase the number of compatible machine-readable catalogue records in Europe and thus provide a valuable asset which will contribute to the efficiency of libraries and improve resource-sharing between them. It will also enable users to identify and locate information and material they need.

Action line II

Projects to further the international linking of systems holding such source data for specific library functions, and thus foster the development and application of a range of international standards.

New telecommunication services and progress in open system interconnection (OSI) are providing new technical opportunities and facilities but investments needed for library networking are high. The action line will provide a coordinated incentive to test and apply these new opportunities, analyse their cost-effectiveness and ensure compatibility through appropriate standards in order that libraries may be able to set up networked services.

Action line III

Projects to stimulate the provision of innovative library services using information and communication technologies in smaller libraries.

The action line will provide for cost-effective library services that can enable libraries to satisfy user needs more efficiently and more visibly and which will exploit better the resources already available in libraries. It will enhance skills of librarians by providing hands-on experience of the new technologies.

Action line IV

Projects to encourage the development and production of prototypes of new technology-based products, services and tools specifically for libraries and their more efficient management.

Libraries require the assistance of the suppliers for information technology products and services. The action line will stimulate growth by encouraging the private sector to investigate the library market and to implement new products for their cost-benefit and their usefulness to the library community. This will contribute to providing a broader base for developments and exports, easier adoption of information technology standards and higher quality products.

Specific accompanying measures are foreseen, in accordance with Article 4 of the Council Decision on the third framework programme (90/221/Euratom, EEC of 23 April 1990) to stimulate exchanges of experience and dissemination of knowledge between those responsible for libraries in Member States and to maximize the effect of the programme.

These activities are designed — through studies, conferences/workshops, professional exchanges, etc. — to provide the means of generating consensus, disseminating project results, giving some targeted support for the preparation of projects under the action lines and generally contribute to modernizing the skills of the library workforce.

REFERENCES

[1]   Figures in this section are taken from a number of studies carried out for the Commission, for example:

Ramsdale, P., 'A study of library economics in the European Communities' (Commission of the European Communities, Information Management series, 1988. EUR 11546 EN).

The 12 national 'LIB-2' study reports: 'State of the art of the application of new information technologies in libraries and their impact on library functions' (Commission of the European Communities, Information Management series, 1988. EUR 11036/1-12).

Hildreth, C. R., *Library automation in North America. A reassessment of the impact of new technologies on networking.* (K. G. Saur, Munich, New York, London, Paris, 1987. EUR 11092, Commission of the European Communities).

Wilson, A., *Library policy for preservation and conservation in the European Community. Principles, practices and the contribution of new information technologies.* (K.G. Saur, Munich, New York, London, Paris, 1988. EUR 11563, Commission of the European Communities).

[2]   The internationally accepted classification of libraries, adopted by Unesco in 1970, recognizes six major types of libraries: national libraries, other major non-specialized libraries, public libraries, libraries of institutions of higher education (universities etc.), school libraries and specialized libraries. This classification is used by Unesco for library statistics.

[3]   IFLA — International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, founded in 1927. Over 1 200 members in 123 countries.

Iatul — International Association of Technological University Libraries — over 140 members worldwide.

FID — International Federation for Information and Documentation, founded in 1924, works through single national members of 66 countries.

There are also a few European associations, such as:

Liber — Ligue des bibliothèques européennes de recherches (Association of European Research Libraries) founded in 1971, with the assistance of the Council of Europe;

EFLC — The European Foundation for Library Cooperation — a newcomer founded in 1986.

[4]   It is estimated that the global turnover of this sector is at least USD 30 billion in Europe and USD 60 billion in the USA, for conventional (paper) publications, with another USD 6 to 7 billion worldwide for the turnover from on-line services. There are already today about 3 500 unique on-line databases commercially available worldwide on 597 host services. The growth rate is projected to be at 16% in the EC (videotex services excluded).

[5]   The temptation to respond favourably to the offer of cooperation from the US utilities is very great not only because of the resources they can make available, but also because of their long experience in cooperative and networking ventures. By 1987, there were about 42 OCLC users in EC countries — amongst which important library utilities (e.g. PICA, BL, Sunist). By 1989 this figure reached about 69.

[6]   These 180 organizations included national contacts in the different ministries with responsibility for libraries, relevant national and international library associations, individual librarians and other interested parties. It was also distributed to the members of the advisory committees SOAC (the Senior Officials Advisory Committee on the Impact Programme) and CIDST (the Committee for Information and Documentation on Science and Technology which advised on the successive programmes for scientific, technical and specialized information).

This document describes the context in which the Community's Libraries programme has been set up and outlines the proposed Community initiative in favour of libraries. It gives factual information on the importance of the library sector in Europe and analyses its problems. It considers the necessity of a plan of action and defines the major elements of such an action.

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