

# LA-net and Serials Applications

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The aim of this paper is twofold. LA-net is not just about serials applications. It is a communications system. What I plan to do, therefore, is to describe all the facilities of LA-net and then demonstrate how it can be used by librarians and information workers, by library suppliers and subscription agents in the area of serials and book ordering.

## What is LA-net?

LA-net is the Library Association's electronic mail and information system. It was launched in the latter part of 1988 as the latest addition to the services offered to Library Association members. The aim of the LA in introducing LA-net was to provide a good communications network - and it is a real network - providing a link between members, members and HQ, members and LA branches and special interest groups, HQ and branches and groups, members and providers of information, members and services.

LA-net runs on Telecom Gold, which is part of the public Dialcom System. LA-net users have access to all the facilities available on Gold plus the information and services which are exclusive to LA-net. My colleague, Ray Templeton and I, together with the system operators who are based at Leicester are responsible for the smooth running and development of the system.

## ALANET and ILINET

There are similar systems in the United States and Australia. An agreement was signed last year between ALANET from the USA, ILINET from Australia and LA-net for all three systems to share ideas and for members to be able to read each other's noticeboards. Some of the advantages of collaboration with these two sister networks are in the area of serial and book ordering. This will be described later.

## How do you access it?

To access LA-net you need a terminal of some kind, plus a telephone line and modem. For example, you can use a PC and suitable communications software, a teletype terminal or a

terminal on a network. It can be accessed in the London area by dialling a direct number; via PSS, for users outside London; or via a JANET PSS Gateway.

## What does it contain?

LA-net can be described as being a mixture of three parts:

- a) electronic mail
- b) information
- c) services

### a) Electronic Mail

Electronic mail is a means of sending a message from the sender to a mailbox on a central computer which will hold it until the recipient dials up to collect the mail.

Having an electronic mailbox means that, with the necessary hardware and software, - much easier in these days of portable telephones and lightweight laptop computers - you can send and receive mail from wherever you are in the world.

Members are not limited to sending each other mail as messages can be sent to anyone else on the Dialcom system provided the mailbox numbers are known. Anyone who has a BT Gold mailbox can correspond with LA-net members and vice versa. Dialcom systems are to be found in 23 countries all over the world including: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, New Zealand, and the USA; and recently an agreement has been signed to enable Dialcom users and the French Minitel to communicate with each other.

### Advantages of electronic mail

One can say that electronic mail combines the detail of a letter, with the ease of a phone call - you use less paper, you get quick replies and you don't have to keep hearing: "I am sorry, he/she's in a meeting right now."

Sending mail is fast and relatively cheap. It costs the same to send one letter or several letters provided they are sent in one operation. For frequent mailings, customised distribution lists can be created and saved on the system. Mail is sent instantly, there are no queues as in telex, there are no postal delays or differential postal rates as with the Royal Mail, and you are not kept hanging on the telephone for hours! A message of any length can be sent at any time of day or night.

Mail stays in your mail box until you read it and decide what to do with it. There are several options to take at this stage. You can download it to a disk for editing or inputting into your own computer system; you can download it directly to a printer to read offline; you can save it on the system in your specially allocated file area; your message can be annotated and forwarded to another mailbox; or, you can even reply straightaway; and, when you have finished it, you can delete it. I find that it is extremely useful, especially when conducting important business, to have the facility to act quickly.

There are several ways of sending mail: a basic online method which can be used for brief messages; and more economical methods which involve uploading files prepared offline so saving time and therefore money. There is also a variety of options to use when sending mail: you can send it express, which means that it will go to the top of the recipient's mailbox; you can ask for an immediate reply or an acknowledgement of receipt; and you can send blind copies and courtesy copies to other recipients.

#### b) Information

The information on LA-net is divided into two kinds: the commercial information mounted by BT Gold and the bulletin boards and noticeboards mounted on the LA network. The commercial information attracts an extra usage charge to read it, whereas the LA-net noticeboards cost nothing apart from the standard connect charge.

There are two LA noticeboards. The main noticeboard is called LIBNEWS. This runs on software used in the USA, and is being pioneered in the UK, by LA-net, for British Telecom. LIBNEWS contains a series of categories containing information of all kinds pertaining to professional interests and issues.

These can range from announcements and pronouncements from HQ, activities and events, to publications and contacts. There are virtually no limits. Information is read or scanned by either reading specified categories or using a simple keyword search facility. As with the mail, members can reply to notices, for example, booking a provisional place on a course, either privately to the mailbox of the person who posted the item, or openly, the reply becoming an item in itself on the noticeboard. Facilities are available on LIBNEWS for private conferences - teleconferencing - whereby certain categories are only available to closed user groups.

The other noticeboard is a general, bulletin board type of noticeboard containing systems information including: a facility for ordering documentation on the system; a list of known fax machines in libraries; a list of translators; and an open forum where members can raise issues and pose problems.

Through BT Gold, LA-net has access to many online databases. Members do not need to subscribe to these separately; they are charged on a pay as you use rate. This can work out rather expensive but if they are not used frequently enough to justify subscribing, or if members want to evaluate their usefulness prior to subscribing, then this provides a comparatively economical way of gaining access to them. The databases are accessed through a gateway and full help is given if needed while online. They are mainly business information databases.

For example there is:

**PROFILE**, which provides full text of most of the major daily newspapers and marketing journals, company information and consumer information;

**KOMPASS ONLINE**, which gives access to company and product information;

**AIMS NEWS**, which is a daily bulletin providing news on all aspects of Government and EEC assistance to British business;

**FINTECH** - the electronic edition of the Financial Times Business Information service;

**INFOCHECK**, giving information on limited companies;

**PETROLEUM MONITOR** - information on the oil industry; and many others.

There is also gateway into the Prestel Travel Service giving access to the *OFFICIAL AIRLINES GUIDE*, *ABC INTERNATIONAL* and *HOTELSPACE* thus enabling LA-net users the facility to book holidays, travel and accommodation all from the comfort of their PC.

### c) Services

The third category of functions on LA-net is services. Services such as online book ordering, online periodical ordering and claiming, and MARC record delivery. A number of library suppliers and subscription agents are moving on to the system in order to offer their services to members. Blackwells were already offering online ordering on ILINET in Australia and on ALANET in the USA and the same facility is now being offered on LA-net.

Online ordering whether for books or serials is very simple and "user friendly" using a series of screen prompts for Library name, order number, special instructions, title, publisher, ISBN/ISSN etc. None of the form fields have to be completed, questions can be skipped by pressing a carriage return. At the end of the form you are given the opportunity to review your order prior to giving the OK to transmit to the supplier. At this stage it can be abandoned if you wish.

Because online ordering incurs extra connect time costs, it is more suitable for the occasional orders. For heavy usage it makes more sense economically, to fill in the forms offline and upload files using communications software. Another one of the spin-offs of the collaboration between LA-net, the American ALANET and the Australian ILINET was the offer of the use of special software developed in Australia for the purpose of offline ordering. This software creates the files allowing a library to nominate a supplier, attach a local order and delivery data and then fill in the order forms more or less in the same way as online ordering using screen prompts. Several messages or orders can be created in the same file. The completed file of orders is then ready to be uploaded using the BT Gold PCMAIL option on to the LA-net system, to be sent to the supplier or suppliers specified. This software is available to users on a licence basis for a one off charge of £10.00 and only allowed to be used on the LA-net system and no other. If a user leaves LA-net then the licence is

forfeited. The licence is available from the LA-net system centre at Leicester Polytechnic or from suppliers who are willing to use this method.

### Benefits of ordering serials via LA-net

Using LA-net for ordering serials or books has the advantage over conventional methods in that it is fast, cheap, convenient, direct, and in my experience, reliable. Many serials librarians are already using serials management packages for the control and distribution of journals; using electronic mail for ordering and chasing is another link to the chain.

### Other facilities on BT Gold

In addition, through LA-net, members have access to other communications facilities on BT Gold including an electronic mailbox version of telex. This removes the necessity of having a BT dedicated line telex system and so saves money. The LASER inter-library loan system, VISCOUNT, has recently abandoned its dedicated line telex in favour of the LA-net direct telex service.

Also available through BT Gold is Goldfax. Though there is no way of sending printed articles down the telephone, this is very useful for sending faxed messages to libraries, who are not yet LA-net subscribers, or to those who have not looked at their mailbox for a few days!

### Costs

To join LA-net you have to be a member of the Library Association whether personally or through your organisation. The basic charges are not exorbitant. There is no actual charge to join but you pay a user ID charge per month of £5.00. Connect charges range from 2.0p cheap rate to 6.5p per minute standard rate. When sending mail, there is a small charge for character blocks (512 chrs to a block) ranging from 1 to 4p - the first block is free; and storage of mail and file items is 20p per 2048 characters per month. Obviously it costs a little more to send mail abroad. To post a notice on to the LIBNEWS noticeboard costs 50p per month.

There are many useful ways of keeping costs down: by erasing all incoming mail items as soon as they have been read and acted upon, thus saving on storage charges; where possible, by setting up automatic log on sequences and preparing mail and order forms offline, so saving connect time charges. However it is false economy, once you are on the system, to use it infrequently. Mail boxes should be checked at least once a day. It need not take long.

### Future

From humble beginnings, LA-net has grown from a handful of members to well over 200. A major boost was given to the network when it merged with COPOST which was a similar system for libraries in Polytechnics and other academic institutions including universities. This does tend to make LA-net look somewhat biased towards that sector but other types of library are gaining fast - public libraries, school and college libraries, specialist information units, research centres, consultants, departments of information and library studies, LA groups and branches, library suppliers and so on. And many larger institutions have taken out several mailboxes to use the system for internal communications.

Electronic journal publishing is already here. The American system, ALANET is already offering the first electronic newsletter - the *Newsletter on serials pricing* - which covers news, summaries of research studies, reports of meetings and other material relevant to serials pricing. Who knows whether maybe in the future, LA-net will be used as a gateway to journals in machine readable form.

LA-net is only part of the communications network which is rapidly encompassing the globe. With the development of the X.400 protocol, BT Gold will be able to pass information to and fro not only with other Dialcom systems but to any other system using the X.400 protocol. Thus potentially, the facilities of LA-net will be accessible virtually anywhere in the world. □