The Plan of Action for Libraries in the European Community

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Introduction

I am delighted to accept the invitation of the European Serials Conference to talk to you about the Commission of the European Communities' Action Plan for Libraries. I am being asked today to talk in only 45 minutes about a programme which represents to date over 6 years' work and which will provide the context for at least 4 years' future actions among libraries in Europe. In this timescale, I can only deal with the main principles and orientations of the Plan. I hope it will leave you with a clear idea of its objectives and its context, as well as its potential for having a real impact on libraries and on the way we, as librarians and information professionals, work.

My presentation today will briefly introduce the Background to the Plan, then talk about the Plan itself, before moving on to discuss current actions of the Libraries Team in DGXIII-B of the Commission. To explain these rather unfriendly numbers, DGXIII is the Directorate General for Telecommunications, Information Industries and Innovation and Directorate B, which is located in Luxembourg, deals with the information industries and market. The Libraries Team is a small, if increasing one: we are presently 5 in all, including 2 external consultants of who I am one. That means that I am not a Commission official: my background is professional and practical and it is the practical, the technical and the professional aspects of the Plan which I will discuss.

Background

However, let me retrace my steps for a moment and give you a brief historical account of the activities which led to the distribution of the draft Plan of Action in 1988. The baseline is the Resolution of the Council of Ministers of Culture in 1985 on collaboration between libraries in the field of data processing. This recognised that libraries were important both:

- as a major force on the information market; and

- as intermediaries to knowledge and culture.

Libraries therefore, have a dual role: they are important not only as repositories of the accumulated knowledge of the past - conserving our cultural and scientific legacy, but also as key providers of access to current information. In both cases, they have a significant role in the information chain between producer and user - and the importance of the user underlies much of the Plan. Libraries also play a significant role in the global information market, in which new technology is of crucial economic importance. These - the information market and new information technologies - are key concerns of DGXIII-B.

The Council noted in its Resolution that, if European libraries were to realise their full potential for their users and increase access to the holdings, certain key objectives had to be met. These were:

- through the proper application of new information and communication technologies, to improve the availability and accessibility of modern library services;

- increased cost-effective co-operation at Community level; greater harmonisation of initiatives in the Member States.

The Resolution accordingly invited the Commission to act in close collaboration with bodies responsible for libraries and with libraries to develop a work programme which would generate actions meeting the objectives listed above. As a result of this invitation, the Commission carried out a 3-year exploratory programme of studies to determine:

- the current status of libraries in Europe;
- the extent of automation;
- and the problems libraries faced.

These pioneering studies were wide-ranging, and were both vertical and horizontal. They included the LIB-2 series and important studies such as those on Library Macroeconomics and on Preservation.

A Hearing with official representatives of the Member States was held in Luxembourg in February 1987 in order to get opinions and information. It became clear that libraries were a visible force on the market. However, there were enormous discrepancies between countries; these were evident in the slow and uneven application of the new information technologies and even in the level of basic library services provided.

The nett result of these activities was the draft Plan of Action which was disseminated in the second half of 1988. It was distributed widely - through formal and informal channels - and supplemented by a series of presentations given by invitation in the majority of the Member States. A slightly revised version was endorsed at the Forum Meeting, which was held in Luxembourg in March 1989.

Since then, the Plan has been undergoing various processes. It is now included in the third Framework Programme for Research & Development: this is a general programme, which runs until the end of 1994, and it has 15 specific programmes, one, of which is entitled: Telematic Systems in Areas of General Interest and the libraries actions form part of this.

Libraries have been included as one of the 6 areas of "general interest" covered by this specific programme. In substance the rationale of the action lines and the specific objectives initially defined for the libraries action remain the same, but are now integrated in a broader logical context. The context is logical because emphasis has from the start been placed on the application of information and communication technology as an enabler to share resources and make the holdings of libraries more easily accessible to users across the Community. It is also logical because the draft plan of action, as conceived, had a major component of applied research: to test out new methods, new services, pilot interconnections.

The Framework Programme was approved at the end of April and work is now progressing on the detail of the specific programmes. It is hoped that the plan will be approved by the Council of Ministers and become effective from mid-1991.

The Plan And Its Objectives

Now I come to the Action Plan itself, which is organized into 5 Action Lines, each of which complements the others logically.

Key concepts in the Plan are: users; cost-effectiveness; co-operation; with the appropriate use of new information technologies underlying all three.

In developing the Plan and in arriving at its framework structure, there were a number of important considerations:

It should address the problem areas identified and its structure in to 5 Action Lines reflects this generic, problem-oriented approach. It does not look at libraries by type, by subject areas etc. - the traditional breakdown of activities - but cuts across these. It allows for the different types of players in the library scene and the different types of development expected.

- It should have a catalytic effect and stimulate actions. Short term visible results are important. Their effects should be strategic and encourage multiplier effects.
- It should help encouraged progress in difficult areas.
- It should allow ideas and projects to emerge from the base. This is an important point. The Plan does not set out to dictate projects: it is there to provide a structure (the FRAMEWORK) for the coordination and channelling of initiatives which MUST COME FROM THE LIBRARY WORLD AND THE MEMBER STATES.

For projects and ideas to have the required catlytic impact, it is important, however, that they are not arbitrary or haphazard. They should be in line with national and international policies and objectives (for instance in use of standards) in order to ensure the longer-term strategic effects.

Before talking about each of the Action Lines in particular, I'd like to mention a general principle of the Plan and that is the notion of co-financing: the Commission will effectively subsidise projects, within varying ranges of percentages and ceilings. However, libraries will be required to find "matching" or "supplementary" funds. These may come as project funding from national agencies, from other bodies, from commercial firms, or could be in part contributions in kind from the libraries (staff, resources, etc).

The Action Lines

The Action Lines have a logical complementary relationship between them. And as I have said above, these lines contribute to a framework for actions.

Action Line 1

The primary key to unlocking the resources of libraries is machine-readable bibliographic information about these resources, i.e. the basic source data. This is the target for Action Line 1 which has two parts:

- The first part is dedicated to library source data projects in the field of machine-readable national bibliographies and union catalogues, and with a main aim to help create new machine-readable national bibliographies where none exist;

- The second part is dedicated to support to retrospective conversion of catalogues of important collections of international interest.

Action Line 2

Action Line 2 looks at modern communications technologies and methods for interconnecting networks and extending the accessibility of the source data. More specifically, Action Line 2 is projects "to further the international linking of systems". Projects here are to be concerned with the pilot interconnection between at least two library utilities or co-operatives using research networks, VANs or other public data services. The objective of this line is to stimulate innovation.

Taken together these lines help to extend the infrastructures on which modern library services may be based.

Action Line 3

Action Line 3 is dedicated to stimulating the provision of innovative services using new information technologies. This might cover areas such as pilot services using optical technology; use of multi-lingual authority lists; OPACs in libraries with remote access; gateway services to other facilities such as e-mail or other libraries' systems; and services for designated client groups.

There is one point of additional significance here: the definition of innovation is flexible and is situation dependent. For example, a service may be innovative in one country which already exists elsewhere - so there is room for replicability of services.

Action Line 4

Action Line 4 complements Action Line 3. It specifies projects to encourage the development and production of commercially available products, services and tools specifically for libraries, or prototypes of such. Examples of areas projects could consider are the development of improved software for integrated library systems; approved software tools for the maintenance/marketing of multilingual subject/authority lists. The objectives here are to stimulate the market - both for supply and for demand of new products.

The fifth area is an envelope one, which provides support for research studies, for dissemination and workshops, and for training and exchange of experience among staff. It also provides for targeted support for the preparation of projects under the other Action Lines. It is now no longer necessary to identify the original Action Line 5 separately, since it is an ongoing background activity which coincides with the general provisions of the Framework Programme.

These then are the broad provisions of the Plan and the areas which projects will be required to address.

Projects will also have to have three basic components if they are to be valid for consideration for funding. These core components are:

- Co-operation
- Innovation
- Use of IT

There are two aspects to be considered re-cooperation: its scope and its nature.

(a) Scope: this should be clearly defined, with the primary emphasis on international (i.e. European) co-operation. However, national (or regional), and wider international (beyond the EC) relationships should also be clearly identified where these exist.

(b) Nature or form of co-operation: this may be direct or indirect and particular forms will be more or less appropriate depending on the Action Line under which the Project is proposed. Direct co-operation will normally take the form of joint projects and proposals from the co-operating partners. Concerning numbers of partners needed, a minimum of two partners from two different Member States will be required.

Co-operation may also exist indirectly if the project can demonstrably serve co-operation through spin-off effects. In this case, projects may originate with a single organisation. such projects may take the form of: an experimental service, which can be duplicated elsewhere in Europe or transferred to a different subject domain.

The definition of innovation is flexible, and will also vary according to local circumstances in order to accommodate the discrepancies in current library

service provision across Europe. It can be technologically innovative e.g.:

- the application of new techniques and methods
- a new use for an existing tool
- a new type of co-operative system

It can also take other forms, referring to partnerships, services etc:

- a new type of service not previously offered, provided it is seen to be cost-effective
- a new form of co-operation (legal arrangement, repartition of tasks etc) - new types of partnership

It must, however, have a wider applicability than the immediate context of the project. For example in a different subject area or across different types of libraries and organisations.

The IT component should normally take the form of direct application of a new information technology, either through new uses of technologies already present in libraries or through the introduction of technologies new to libraries.

The IT component may also, on occasion, take the form of contributions to the groundwork necessary to sustain the use of IT in libraries, in an international context. Examples of such could be the work towards the development of appropriate standards and norms or support for the development of appropriate technical skills among library workers.

Standards is another crucial aspect of the Plan which all projects will have to take into account. It is important, not least because of the impetus it gives to effective economic development and for international co-operation. The application or development of standards must conform to the Community Information Technology Standards policy.

Current Actions

The Commission has, with funding principally under the IMPACT -1 Programme, been carrying out three types of preparatory activities:

1. Consensus building and generation of ideas
2. Studies and pilot projects which can prepare the ground and provide test-bed experience of practical co-operation
3. Implementation issues

Consensus

Consensus building is an activity which has long been related to the Plan and led to ensuring that the draft had widespread acceptance from the library professionals and from governemt organisations responsible for libraries. Today's presentation is part of the process.

It is continuing through the organisation of Workshops to explore the issues connected with individual Action Lines and to stimulate ideas. This was at the request of the Forum. So far, two have taken place this year on Action Line 1. The first one dealt with developments of national bibliographic services; the second workshop was on retrospective data conversion and focussed on conversion methodologies and potential principles for selection of projects to be funded on this Action Line.

Pilot / Demonstration Projects

The Commission is engaged in a number of practically-oriented projects and studies which are designed, each in their own way, to expedite and provide the necessary experience for the implementation of the Community action. The largest are the two pilot/demonstration projects.

The first pilot/demonstration project, which is concerned with CD-ROM, is linked primarily to Action Line 1, dealing with national bibliographies but has elements of Action Line 4 through its potential for development of prototypes. For this project seven national libraries (from Denmark, France, Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Portugal and the UK) have formed a Consortium, which co-operates in order to improve the interchange of bibliographic records. The project, which takes the form of a series of 9 sub-projects, is coordinated by The British Library. The projects investigate the following areas:

- Definition of a retrieval interface
- Multi-lingual interfaces
- Basic European character set
- On-line links
- Links to local library systems
- Tools for MARC conversion
- Menu interface for multiple CD-ROMs
- Pilot CD-ROMs
- Distribution and marketing

The second Pilot/Demonstration project is an Action Line 2 project, concerned with the interlinking and internetworking of systems internationally. It involves three different library networks, either national or regional in character, in the UK, the Netherlands and France. The application chosen for the project is interlibrary lending.

The project will first address requirements for inter-library messaging in an OSI environement, based on X-400 services. A later phase will test the

search and retrieval protocol on conjunction with the identification of items in union catalogues for the purpose of interlending. It should demonstrate the capabilities of OSI, improve efficiency of interlending services and help develop a strong Community service market for interlending services.

Both Pilot demonstration projects are real test-beds in European co-operation beyond their primary technical objectives.

Outside these 2 pilots, we do not yet have the formal mechanisms to start other full scale projects. Nevertheless, the Commission has carried out or is actively preparing for other studies to underpin future projects.

I can only cite a few here very briefly. For instance:

A feasibility study for a European Register of Microfilm Masters has been carried out and may give rise to a proposal for an initial project.

A tutorial on the OSI model for library networking applications has been produced and published and we have an ongoing study to analyse library functions and needs for networking as well as networking requirements.

As a follow on to the LIB-2 studies from 1986 a new LIB-2 update study has just started in all the Member States. The purpose is to provide factual information on key areas related to the use of information technologies in libraries. The aim is to distinguish the major changes in relation to the penetration and take-up of the new technologies and to identify the dominant trends. The key areas to be investigated are:

— machine readable record resources
— network access to these machine readable records
— integrated library housekeeping systems
— new innovative services to the users

We expect the results to be publicly available mid-1991.

Other studies are envisaged such as, for example, in the areas of: standards; digital optical technology; UNIMARC; the feasibility of creating a pilot directory of library collections of international interest etc.

Finally I could mention a test project, which is envisaged to start very soon on EDIFACT (Electronic Data Interchange Format for Commerce, Administration and Transport) between libraries and booksellers. This project will build on German library experiences using the electronic data interchange (EDI) technology. The purpose of the project is to create a platform for development of standards in the area and to examine the feasibility for using EDIFACT and X.400 communication between libraries and booksellers in Europe.

The third category of work we are doing is related to implementation of the Plan. The forum Meeting in 1989 suggested that national focal points be set up to act as interfaces and channels of communication with the decision makers and with the professionals in the Member States. Since then the Commission has been encouraging their establishment. Most countries now have a national focal point. They can take the form of a committee representing the different interests; others are an organisation which has been allocated the role; and others are a composite of the two forms.

That is on the broader level. On the practical, project level we know that preparing good proposals is not easy. It is time-consuming, and it is something in which libraries have had little experience and practice. So we have begun to prepare practical guidelines to help thinking along the right lines for projects: the first of these is the "Guidelines and Criteria for Projects" which was distributed, mainly via the national focal points, in February 1990.

However, all these activities on the Commission's part, however useful - and we hope that they are useful - cannot replace the most essential ingredient for success - the willingness of libraries to co-operate and contribute ideas. You are the players and the doers; the Commission is only the enabler. ❑