

EARL AND MAGNET: INTERNET ACCESS TO NEWSPAPERS AND JOURNALS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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Paper presented at the UKSG 21st Annual Conference, Exeter, April 1998

New developments in networked resources for public libraries; the work of EARL and the pros and cons of MagNet

Although the subject of this paper is MagNet, I want to say a few words initially about EARL because MagNet is the product of EARL and one cannot fully understand how MagNet has come into being and has developed without knowing something about EARL itself.

EARL stands for **E**lectronic **A**ccess to **R**esources in **L**ibraries and is a consortium for public library networking. It is made up of 140 local authority partners and associate partners such as DCMS, BLRIC, UKOLN etc. Its objective, in the broadest sense, is to facilitate the use of networked resources by public libraries, to make library resources available and in some cases to create that content. The networking infrastructure does not exist for public libraries in the same way as it does in the academic sector. EARL is a collaborative venture to share expertise, build content and lobby to raise awareness. The aims of EARL are related to and reflected in *New Library: the People's Network*. EARL has a small staff providing technical, administrative and development support and provides the server. Much of EARL's work, however, is done by staff drawn from the EARL partners who carry it out in addition to or supplementary to their normal jobs. Examples of this are: EARLweb, a reference tool for key information on the Internet; Ask a Librarian, a national reference enquiry service for the public; *Familia*, a directory of family history resources in public libraries, and MagNet. These and other services are available at www.earl.org.uk/services. These are also examples of EARL Taskgroups, around which EARL is structured. MagNet is the work of the EARL Serials Task Group and it is to how this Taskgroup has gone about its work and the product of that work - MagNet - that is described here.

The Serials Task Group has been in existence since October 1996. Current membership is drawn from Essex, Suffolk, and West Sussex County Libraries and the City of Westminster and reflects either bibliographical or information services rather than a technical. Technical input comes from EARL. Its objective is simply to make

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the magazine, journal and newspaper holdings of all UK public libraries available on the Net and MagNet is the medium for achieving this. The Task Group communicates regularly through e-mail and occasional meetings. Participation in the Group will shortly be extended to all contributors, as MagNet expands. In addition to holdings information, MagNet will also link to other related sites and services, such as OCLC and to other serials Web sites.

MagNet follows the practice of SALSER in using SFGate and FreeWais shareware software. Further information on these is available on the Web at www.earl.org.uk/SFgate/SFgate and www-fog.bio.unipd.it/waishelp/index.

Starting with the holdings of the four original Task Group members, MagNet now shows the holdings of 25 public library authorities and although there is a long way to go to achieve the UK Union list, MagNet is already a functional working tool with some major collections - Birmingham, City Business Library and Westminster - included. MagNet also tries to maximise usefulness through regional groupings - principally London and the West Midlands to date.

MagNet provides searching on keyword in title and by subject with a help page to assist in formulating enquiries. A search leads to a listing of library authorities stocking the required journal. MagNet then lists the branches of that authority which stock that journal and from there MagNet links to a library authority's home page for details of opening hours, access etc.. A new development is the provision of a regional map of the UK which will provide regional searches; a feature which should be of particular value in conurbations such as London or the West Midlands, for example. In

the longer term, development plans for MagNet envisage a requesting service and eventually a full EDD service.

That MagNet has not grown faster than it has, is largely a reflection of the varied nature of public libraries. Quite a few authorities do not have any listing of their magazine holdings. Although some libraries have stated that the existence of MagNet is now a spur for them to do something about it. Other authorities only list the holdings as part of their main computer catalogue and here difficulties in downloading records from these systems have been encountered. Elsewhere budgets cuts have been cited as reasons for not being able to contribute.

MagNet will only ever be as good as its constituent parts, the individual library holdings, but MagNet development also needs funding. The time of the Serials Task Group is limited and development work on a new subject index or the requesting service will need funding, if they are to succeed.

The benefits of MagNet, however, are principally centred on access. A library's journal and magazine holdings are now available at a click of a button at home or in the library, where once the information could only be obtained by visiting the library or at best by telephone.

Contributing to MagNet is straightforward. Data needs to be in machine readable form such as MS Word, Access or WordPerfect. The medium can be disk or tape. EARL does all the rest - and it is free!

Further technical details are obtainable from Frances Blomeley (f.blomeley@ulcc.ac.uk). Data should be sent to Helen Copeman (helen@earl.org.uk) at EARL, 4th.Floor, Gun Court, 70 Wapping Lane, LONDON, E1 9RL.