
News & Views

*contributed by Ros Cotton,
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Whitehall strategic initiatives

During the last few weeks the Government has been putting its money where its mouth is, concerning investment in information, and has recently unveiled a coherent strategy to help Britain take the lead in the information age. Margaret Beckett, President of the Board of Trade (interesting that she didn't get rid of the appellation inspired by Michael Heseltine) also announced a new Information Age Partnership bringing together leading chief executives from the "information age industries" to work with Government to exploit opportunities. Could this involve information professionals, we ask? - but no, the closest we get is the inclusion of Clive Bradley of CICI (Confederation of Information and Communication Industries).

Our Information Age sets out the range of activity underway or planned within Government based on the goals of:

- harnessing the potential of IT to transform education;
- widening access to new technologies;
- promoting competition and competitiveness;
- fostering high quality new services; *and*
- (underpinning the whole lot) modernising Government.

Our Information Age also sets out plans for the DTI-led programmes *IT for All* and the Information Society Initiative (ISI) *Programme for Business*.

There is obviously a strong relationship between all these initiatives, not only these DTI-led ones but also others initiated by the DfEE (*National Grid for Learning*) and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (*New Library: the People's Network*, etc.) It is to be hoped that the

Government ensures some degree of productive cohesion between the various departments and that all the energy and resources don't disappear between the cracks in the pavement as represented by the different government Departments!

Further details can be gleaned from <<http://www.number-10.gov.uk>>. The text is available in hard copy and summary versions by phoning DTI Publications Order Line on 0870 150 2500.

... and now the European dimension

Meanwhile, the European Commission has published the results of a survey on the use and awareness of Information Society technologies and services within the EU. It is difficult to derive enlightenment from the Web site <<http://www.ispo.ccc.be/infosoc/promo/pubs/measure.html>> - but thankfully there was a helpful conference report in a subsequent issue of *Cordis Focus* (Number 107, 6 April 1998). Apparently nearly all member states have launched national Information Society initiatives, but many of these are isolated with few links to other projects. Almost half are concerned, at least to some extent, with education and training, while electronic commerce is the main thrust of one third of projects. Around 70% have national funding, though only 14% have private funding. The conference concluded that greater efforts should be directed to increasing public awareness and to promoting the development of public/private partnerships.

Threat to People's Network?

Despite the heat generated by the *New Library* concept and the support it is apparently receiving from all quarters, doubts as to its necessity have been expressed by some IT experts - who predict that libraries could be threatened by the advent of WebTV. You might have guessed that Microsoft would be behind this, and they have now teamed up with BT to bring this development to the UK. It was also announced that Microsoft are entering a strategic partnership with ICL to bring a new generation of easy-to-use PCs to the British public.

Whether or not these initiatives are linked, some fear it could spell the end of libraries as skilled intermediaries between IT and the "information poor". Just think, you won't even have to go down the road to the library in the pouring rain - you can just sit (with the requisite pizza and a couple of cans) in front of the telly in your own front room and surf away! But, unlike the New Library, it won't come cheap: making WebTV a reality will mean buying the hardware, a subscription to Web TV and additional phone bills, so maybe that walk in the rain will look more inviting after all...

Yet more funds for public libraries

But who needs Microsoft anyway when we have the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's £3 million *Challenge Fund*, we could ask, not to mention the *New Opportunities Fund*. Since "libraries of the future" is the theme of the former, this will prove a boost for the New Library, as projects have to be "compatible with proposals for developing the network infrastructure set out in the government's response to the Library and Information Commission's report New Library: the People's Network". The rub is getting the 50% matching funding when projects are expected to cost between £100,00 - £500,000 and local authorities are strapped for cash.

The Library and Information Commission will be advising the New Opportunities Fund on priorities for the creation of new electronic resources. £300 million is being made available for ICT training for teachers and librarians and for content creation, and - besides libraries - bids are expected from the museum and education sectors. Further details are available from the DCMS news page - <http://www.culture.gov.uk/WHATSNEW.HTM>

Boost for BLRIC advisory body

The British Library's Advisory Committee for Research and Innovation (ACRI), which meets several times a year to advise the Library's Research and Innovation Centre, has a new man at the helm - Simon Olswang - senior partner of

Olswang Solicitors, described as "one of the UK's leading communications law practices". Mr Olswang recognises that a key issue facing the BL is how it makes its collection accessible to a wide spectrum of users in the digital age. He hopes that ACRI will "play a valuable role in resolving some of the many issues involved".

The appointment of Mr Olswang, to replace former head Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, is the result of a long search for the right person conducted by RIC chief Nigel Macartney.

Good news for contract researchers?

LIS researchers have often expressed concern about lack of a clear career path and the resulting financial uncertainty. It is interesting to note that ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) is introducing measures to help social science researchers, in particular a Concordat on contract research staff which organisations in receipt of ESRC grants are required to adhere to. Other measures include a new web site - Grapevine - to ease recruitment of researchers, a study of career destinations within this group, and the availability of Research Fellowships within the Research Grants Scheme. ESRC - together with the Office of Science and Technology, other research councils and university reps - is contributing to the Concordat Research Careers Initiative which reports in October "on best practice and new developments to ensure that contract researchers are given high priority as a precious staff resource".

Perhaps some of these developments will filter through to the information profession...More details at <http://www.dti.gov.uk/ost.concord.htm>

Business Information Review punctures the hype

The seventh annual survey of the use of business information in UK libraries found, not surprisingly, that the Internet is now a centrally important resource for nearly all business librarians in this country (90% usage now compared with 74% in 1996). But despite the hype in professional journals, Knowledge

Management is still “only a minor activity for both business librarians and their parent companies” and the new “push” services are of little interest. The most popular applications are Electronic Yellow Pages, the FT newspaper site and the corporate Web sites of individual companies. Public libraries watch out - “business reference departments of public libraries are facing a serious threat from the Internet”. But colleagues in organisational libraries are more sanguine - they expect the take-up of end-user services to change the nature of their work but not diminish their role. For further information contact Kate Saunders on 01342 330185.

A new project in digital archiving

Reflecting the main concern of the Electronic Libraries Programme's third phase with digital resources CURL (Consortium of University Research Libraries) is leading a new eLib project called CEDARS. The background is a recognition that in recent years university libraries have included a growing number of digital information resources in their collections but there is no corresponding legal obligation (nor are there formal mechanisms) for ensuring that such digital information is preserved for posterity. This means that, as libraries' reliance upon such resources increases, they become stakeholders (whether they like it or not!) in ensuring that those resources are maintained over the longer term.

CEDARS will address the pressing need to devise strategies for the preservation of all forms of digital information resources. A three year project, it will be based at three sites - Oxford, Leeds and Cambridge. For much more information on methodologies, deliverables, etc., explore the web site: <http://www.curl.ac.uk>

General information about the JISC Electronic Libraries Programme (eLib) can be found at: <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/elib>. If, on the other hand, you want to talk to a human being, contact the CEDARS project manager: Kelly Russell at Edward Boyle Library, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT. tel: (+44) (0)113 233 6386; fax: (+44) (0)113 233 5539; e-mail: k.l.russell@leeds.ac.uk