

# NEWS

## Spotlight on regional reference libraries

In 1984 Capital Planning Information reported to the British Library on the role and status of regional reference libraries. The study will now be updated in the light of recent interest in regionalism, recommendations for hyperlibraries in the Aslib Public Library Review, local government reorganisation, and great advances in use of IT in library and information provision. The project is supported by BLRIC and LINC, as a contribution to the latter's work programme on issues relevant to regional development. There will be an article in a future issue of LIRN, but in the meantime, further details are obtainable from David Barton, 91 High Street, Bruton, Somerset BA10 BH (Tel. 01749 812963, email 100767.3316@compuserve.com).

## Coalition for Public Information

There was a good turnout for this meeting, convened way back in May by the IIS in the grand surroundings of the School of Oriental and African Studies Brunei Gallery. Charles Oppenheim spoke about the situation which in many minds has created a need for such a body, a situation where the public's right to information is perceived to be neglected. In an environment where more and more information is being produced and produced electronically to boot, there is a feeling that too many developments towards the Information Society (eg the DTI Information Society Initiative) are being technology rather than policy driven. The proposed Coalition would have a limited life, be non party political, and would work towards an electronic information policy for the advancement of scholarship and citizenship. Charles suggested Terms of Reference (one of which - advising Government - is the province of the Library and Information Commission), targets to work on (eg the privatisation of HMSO), and conditions for membership. Audience reaction was mixed, with some seeing a definite need for such a body but others feeling that the profession could ill afford to create yet another LIS body, especially as the Commission has been created to advise Government and act as single voice from the profession. Others were also dubious about the likelihood of getting 100 corporate members at £500 a throw.

Maurice Line put an end to the debate by suggesting that there was a good basis for going at least one step further. Afterwards there was a good chance to network over drinks and nibbles, until significant numbers of the Great and Good had to rush off to the Dainton Lecture. I understand that the Coalition is to go ahead, with the Institute of Information Scientists providing a *pro tem* secretariat. It will apparently be modelled on the Confederation of British Industry, be a broad church, and will not operate as a campaigning organisation as such (eg the Campaign for Freedom of Information).

## **Further afield...**

Meanwhile, in the United States, where freedom of speech is enshrined in the constitution, there has been a major battle over the future of freedom of speech on the Internet. The American Library Association is a lead plaintiff in the suit, filed by the Citizens Internet Empowerment Coalition, which challenged the constitutionality of the Community Decency Act contained in the new Telecommunications Act of 1996. At the time of writing the Coalition had won through, though their opponents were mounting an appeal to get the reprieve reversed.

Another message on the Internet causing alarm in some quarters was the proposal, out of the blue, to move the US Copyright Office from the Library of Congress to a new agency called the Commission on Intellectual Property. There is alarm in some circles that this change, which would be costly, will not have a full and fair debate, and that the proposal has been put forward for political reasons, given the imminent election. Concerned surfers are urged to contact the instigator of the proposal, Senator Orrin Hatch (135 Russell Senate Office Building, Washington DC 20510-4402). Interesting that no email address was supplied - I was under the impression that most US politicians were now accessible via email.

## **Project FIDDO**

This project otherwise known as Focused Investigation of Document Delivery Options, is part of the Elib Programme and is studying a broad range of managerial issues relating to docdel in the modern academic library and information service. The first phase identified and compared the various available electronic docdel services, including the experimental ones, and developed a General Advice Point on the Internet, where up-to-date information on strategic and operational aspects of docdel management is available- the URL is as follows: <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/dils/research/fiddo/fiddo.html>. FIDDO is based at Loughborough University and further details are a few clicks away from Eric Davies ([j.e.davies@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:j.e.davies@lboro.ac.uk)) or on 01509 223064 using Old Technology.

## **Digital library research magazine**

D-lib, which originates in the States, is a "forum for researchers and developers of advanced digital libraries". It is coordinated by the Corporation for National Research Initiatives for the Information Infrastructure Technology and Applications Working Group of the High Performance Computing and Communications Program (still there?). Its objectives are:

- To stimulate the development of a common infrastructure for digital libraries and to coordinate research enthuse aspects that require consensus
- To provide information exchange about all research and advanced development in digital libraries, particularly federally funded research within the HPCC Program.
- To encourage and assist the transfer of these research efforts into the creation of the national digital library system.

This monthly magazine, which contains news from around the world, including eLib, is available at <http://ukoln.bath.ac.uk/dlib/magazine.html>



## **Another bouquet for Elib**

The Institute of Information Scientists' Jason Farradane Award for 1996 has been awarded to the Electronic Libraries Programme of JISC for innovation in the exploitation of IT in higher education libraries. The Award is presented annually to an individual or organisation for an outstanding contribution to the information field. Lynne Brindley, Chair of Figit, will receive the award (apparently a silver plate) on behalf of JISC. See Kelly Russell's article on the Elib Programme in this issue.

## **Commercial drivers for information policy**

This was the grand title of BLRIC's 13th Information Policy Briefing, to which only the great and the good are usually invited so this must be a sign that I have gone up in the world, I tell myself. Presented by Jacquie Cropley of the law firm Clifford Chance, and chaired by Clive Weeks of Derwent (formerly ICI) it was a stimulating afternoon, with plenty of opportunities for discussion. The main emphasis was on the implications and effects of information and technology on the information manager and their ability to meet the needs of their organisation. A major reorientation has been the shift to customer focus, where customer demands reign supreme, to the extent that these demands often run counter to a preordained company strategy. It is increasingly the case that by the time a strategy has been committed to paper it is out of date, and we were told that strategy is what we actually do, not what documents say we do. (What are the implications here for the many organisations which have written Mission Statements and Strategic Plans lasting five years?!). A key message was the need to turn information into products and markets, and to exploit information contained in formerly separate boxes, harnessing it into useful packages to meet specific needs. Several new-ish terms emerged, such as "dematerialisation" - nothing to do with Paul Daniels but taking out the physical dimension of something to end up with information, "business literacy" and "disintermediation". (The first person to send in correct definitions of these three terms will win a prize from the Editor).

There was discussion of how IT changes the conduct of business, hence becoming a commercial driver, by changing the way research is processed, results disseminated, corporate records used, publications processed, and so on. All this led on to consideration of information policy issues, and realisation of the lack of consensus at national and international level as to how information should be treated. A key issue within National Information Policy discussions is the paradox that we need a valuable knowledge base to exploit, but the information profession is hobbled by a mixture of restrictive contractual arrangements with information providers, copyright regulations, confidentiality issues, and data protection legislation. All these things work against developing competitive advantage.

Altogether an interesting and worthwhile afternoon.

## **National Information Policy in the US**

I also attended the final Information Policy Briefing - a presentation by Professor Toni Carbo (University of Pittsburgh) on "Information policy and the US national information infrastructure" - a somewhat depleted gathering because of the all out Underground strike. Partly because the Library and Information Commission will be addressing NIP issues in the UK, it was even more worthwhile to hear about developments in the States. Toni Carbo talked about the work of the US National Information Infrastructure Advisory Council, which addressed the important issues about information such as universal access and service, the roles of public and private sectors,



intellectual property, privacy, security and freedom of speech, not to mention the question of who pays. Besides producing a number of seminal reports ( available at <http://www.benton.org>) the Council instigated the Kickstart Initiative to connect US communities to the Information Superhighway. Five application areas were regarded as critical to life and work: education and lifelong learning (a category apparently including libraries); electronic commerce; emergency management and public safety; health; and Government information and services.

Although it was clear that the Advisory Council had achieved a great deal, some in the audience wondered what would happen if Bill Clinton was not reelected.

### **School spending on books**

Book Trust has recently published new benchmark figures for school spending on books, based on a needs-based survey of a cross section of primary and secondary schools. Since 1992 Book Trust has been the sole source of such figures, which are becoming increasingly important because of the demands of the National Curriculum and the funding pressures experienced by schools. The recent work was funded by the BL's British National Bibliography Research Fund, and a measure of their usefulness is that they are frequently quoted by journalists and even OFSTED inspectors. For further information please contact Brian Perman at Book Trust, 45 East Hill , London SW18 2QZ (Tel 0181 870 9055).

### **International comparison of public library statistics**

Still on figures, this is one of the latest additions to the LISU (Library and Information Statistics Unit) stable, giving a useful start to the mammoth task, not yet undertaken, of compiling an international league table of public library statistics. This book, which analyses published statistics for public library authorities in 25 countries across the Western world, shows that although there are similarities, the differences are sufficiently marked to suggest that international scale benchmarking could be interesting and fruitful. One difference, identified as a problem at the Luxembourg/public library workshop (see below), is that whereas most of the surveyed countries had central funding this is virtually absent in the UK.

International comparison of public library statistics (ISBN 0 948848 82 0) is available from LISU, Loughborough University, Leics LE11 3TU (Tel. 01509 223071, email: [lisu@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:lisu@lboro.ac.uk)).

### **Public libraries and the information society**

This was the title of a European Commission workshop, held recently in Luxembourg to discuss the results and recommendations of the study funded by DG13. There is much interest in this topic at present, with many several initiatives underway, including the Society of Chief Librarians' work on public library research needs, the work of the Advisory Council on Libraries, the joint consortium of the Library Association and the Library and Information Commission for the Millennium bid connecting public libraries to the Internet, and also the newly established Centre for the Public Library in the Information Society (see below).

It is to be hoped that with so much professional effort going in this direction, the people that really matter - funders and policymakers - will be convinced of the value of these libraries as the potential conduit between the public and the Information Superhighway, and act accordingly. As the current President of the LA has pointed out, now is the time to influence politicians, who are in a more receptive state because of the imminent election.



The Luxembourg workshop identified the following as major obstacles to public libraries' progress: under budget pressure, ill prepared for networking, poor level of technological skills of staff, operating mostly without a supportive national policy framework or professional vision and often in isolation - all of which add up to a bad starting position for successful change.

Recommendations include studies "such as the impact of the public library on society" (such a study is now underway at Sheffield) and on national and regional information policies and strategies in Europe; training and development of professional staff, including training the trainers; pilot projects to exploit IT applications, eg interconnection of public library OPACs; actions to improve cooperation between academic and public libraries; and perhaps most importantly, actions to raise the political profile of public libraries (in the UK the Library and Information Commission is working in this area).

It will be interesting to see what outcomes the workshop has. More information from Monika Segbert (00352 40116 2491) or email: 100344.1225@compuserve.com

### **New Centre for Public Library Research and Consultancy**

Could it be the creme de la creme of performance indicators to set up a new research/consultancy centre? One could be forgiven for thinking so, since, following the examples of the University of Central Lancashire (CERLIM, courtesy of Peter Brophy) and De Montford (the International Centre for Electronic Library Research, c/o Mel Collier), Sheffield has now entered the fray "to provide a sharper focus for its work in the public library sector". The Centre for the Public Library in the Information Society will carry out funded research, manage research degrees, undertake research and consultancy for public library services and other bodies and provide on-site courses. Further details are available from the doyen of public library research, aka Bob Usherwood at the University of Sheffield (Tel. 0114 2825080, email:r.usherwood@sheffield.ac.uk). Naturally there is a Web site: <http://panizzi.shef.ac.uk/cplis>

### **Public and Social Policy**

The British Library has launched this new quarterly journal linking research, policy and practice for researchers, practitioners and policy makers in the social sciences. Potential readers will be interested in the inclusion of briefing on new work from major research institutes and in the claim to uniquely offering a focus on report literature, focusing on current research and practice. Interestingly, in this climate of partnerships and joint ventures, etc. it is published in association with the London Research Centre and sponsored by the Rowntree Foundation. Further details from Tony Antoniou at the BL's Science Reference and Information Service (tel. 0171 412 7471, email: tony.antoniou@bl.uk).

### **Research methods**

We know LIRN readers are interested in research methods and, as such, will be interested in any methodologies which can be imported from other areas. Some ideas may be gleaned from a Web site launched earlier this year by the Scottish Council for Research in Education. It contains information about educational research in Scotland carried out by a variety of organisations, SCORE's newsletter and catalogue, and "briefing papers on research and research methods". May be worth a glance if not a bookmark - <http://www.ed.ac.uk/~webscre>