# Ten Years of European Commission Support to European Libraries: Results and Perspectives

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As the title of my contribution indicates I am going to talk about yet another anniversary. It marks the end of only a fraction of the time span that gives rise to the event we are celebrating here and now, and it concerns not a single library but a great many of them.

I am going to talk about what has become known as the *European libraries programme*, an initiative of the European Commission that started some 10 years ago as a *plan for action* and has since 1990 been imbedded in the large multiannual *Framework programmes for research and technological development*.

I shall not talk about individual projects in detail but I shall mention and characterise projects briefly if appropriate in a given context.

By the way, for those of you who really want to go into details there is a Website where you can find them in abundance:

<p style="text-align:center;">http://www.echo.lu/libs</p>

The site also offers sections in French, Spanish, Italian and German.

I intend to focus on two questions which seem crucial to me:

1. What is the *European dimension* of the European libraries programme?

2. Has the European libraries programme helped to advance the *state-of-the-art*?

Thirdly, I would like to try to make a prophecy whether or not there may be another ten years of a European libraries programme.

However, before attempting to answer these questions I should give - for the benefit of those among you who have never heard from us or about us - a brief introduction to the very basics of what we have been doing.

European Commission support for libraries has been instigated in 1985 by a resolution of the Council of Ministers on *improving cooperation between libraries in the area of data processing*. It was recognised that libraries *constitute treasure houses with a great potential for the scientific, technological and hence economic development of our societies* and as such are major players in the information economy. These treasure houses should be opened up and their accessibility should be enhanced, for the benefit of all Europeans, using as keys the systems and tools provided by modern information and communication technologies.

The ensuing Libraries programme of the European Commission, managed by the *Information Market* department of DG XIII, in Luxembourg, evolved in three distinct phases:

- a pre-implementation phase, 1988 - 1991, based on four action lines:

  1. enhancing library related data sets
  2. trans-border networking of library systems
  3. setting up I&CT based services
  4. developing new high-tech products for libraries

- 2 implementation phases under the third (1991 - 1994) and fourth (1994 - 1998) Framework Programmes, as a sector of the Telematics Applications Programme.

While the FP3 libraries programme had still been based on the same four action lines as the pre-implementation phase some adaptation became necessary for its subsequent phase under FP4. It took account of the newly emerging information space of the *Internet* and its *Worldwide Web*. It catered for projects that would

- help individual libraries to get prepared for networking and for the digital era in general;
- support networking existing library services (such as ILL, catalogue search, document delivery, etc.)
- promote a role for libraries as mediators in an expanding information universe.

More than 80 collaborative projects have been funded during these implementation phases, covering a wide range of technologies and technology related issues and all types of libraries, enhancing existing services and giving rise to new ones.

While the main emphasis has been on soliciting RTD projects through various Calls for Proposals there has also always been a policy oriented strand of the programme that became effective through a range of accompanying measures. Some were designed to provide platforms for the discussion of issues such as:

- copyright problems in the library context (ECUP);
- harmonisation of digital library activities at the level of national libraries (CoBRA);
- standards with relevance to the libraries world (EFILA);
- the role of public libraries in an information society (PUBLICA).

Others were meant to facilitate the uptake of project results of general interest:

- the actions acronymed IMPRESS and EXCEL for instance, which help to promote EDI formats developed and tested within project EDILIBE;
- or the recently launched EXPLOIT measure which is supposed to draw attention to the overall results of the Libraries programme, and to encourage their pan-European exploitation.

This is perhaps the right cue for moving on to the main part of this talk which, in the first place, should be a discussion of the *European dimension* of the European libraries programme.

Questions of this type touch upon one of the most sensitive issues underlying the *European process*: subsidiarity. The principle of subsidiarity, codified through the *Maastricht Treaty* as an integral part of the *Treaty establishing the European Community*, requires every measure taken by Community institutions, and particularly those involving massive expenditures, to be justified by a European added value. By implication, this principle also underlies the articles of the treaty that legitimate Commission support of research and technology development on a European scale.

We believe that the Libraries programme as a whole but also its individual projects and actions comply well with this fundamental principle. To a large extent this is due to the contribution of experts from all over Europe who assess project proposals with a view to separating those with a real European dimension from those that only pay lip service to the European cause. (By the way, one of the basic necessary conditions for a proposal to be accepted is the participation of at least two independent partners from at least two EU Member States.)

European added value can take different forms, depending on the project or action. One of the most obvious justifications for embarking on a European (rather than national) project would be to link or complement private or public initiatives at the national level, to share resources and to work out solutions for common problems. There are many projects funded under the European libraries programme that would match this definition. I name but three which emerged from our most recent Call for Proposals in 1996:

- NEDLIB, which involves several national libraries and which looks into ways of collecting and preserving electronic publications;

- MALVINE, which is supposed to develop telematic links between important holdings of modern manuscripts, in large libraries and archives all over Europe;

- EULER, a project that aims to develop a gateway to mathematical resources, unifying access to catalogues, electronic journals, preprints and other resources on the Internet.

I have already mentioned the policy oriented strand of our work. Clearly, platforms such as ECUP, CoBRA and EFILA foster discussion and awareness Europe-wide, of issues that are of concern to the libraries world at large. I may add CAMILE, a concerted action which bundles activities started under four separate projects in the fields of library management and performance measurement. LIBECON2000, a European library statistics gathering exercise, relates to these activities. It will provide reliable figures on library resourcing and usage in Europe, west and east, that will be published as a *Millenium Study* before the year 2000 ends.

There is also ample scope for fruitful pan-European cooperation in the public library sector. Public libraries enjoy increasing

support in the current discussion on equal opportunities for everyone to benefit from the achievements of modern information and communication technology. The situation may differ greatly among Member States of the European Union, due to different traditions, policies and organisational structures. Yet there are common interests which can be pursued jointly, such as narrowing the gap between the information rich and the information poor, such as providing access for everyone to public information and to the intellectual and cultural heritage of Europe and its regions, and such as turning the public library into a veritable centre of learning resources, providing guidance and tutor support.

These public library issues have been explored in depth through a study, *Public libraries in the information society*, financed by our department of DG XIII and available on request. PUBLICA, the concerted action mentioned earlier, offers a platform for European public librarians to voice their interests, to meet and to team up for joint action.

Talking about public libraries brings to mind yet another potential benefit or European added value, gained through collaborative projects: reducing disparities in service provision, for instance. Two striking examples are projects PLAIL and MOBILE, both funded under FP3 from 1994 to 1996 and 1997 respectively:

PLAIL (Public Libraries and Independent Learners) brought together partners from the UK, Portugal and Spain, in an effort to develop models for training librarians to assist patrons in searching and using educational material in the public library.

MOBILE (Extending European Information Access through Mobile Libraries), with partners from the UK, the Netherlands and Greece, indirectly helped Greek colleagues to set up a modern mobile library service in a rural area in northern Greece.

Last but not least on my list of European added values there are our efforts to extend the remit of our programme into central and eastern Europe, involving institutions of those countries that are or will be candidates for accession to the European Union. As a result of an awareness raising campaign started already in 1994, partners from Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slowenia and the Baltic states are now present in several new projects (such as DIEPER, PRIDE and ONE2) as well as in specific CEE-extensions of old ones (DEDICATE, LISTED).

The criterion expressed as *European added value* is on a par with *scientific and/or technical excellence*. Hence my second crucial question:

Has our programme helped to advance the *State-of-the-Art* ?

It would probably be too blunt to say "yes, of course", and it would certainly be too modest if I just said "well, perhaps". There are indeed quite a lot of practical and usable results to show. Retrieving for instance, from our Web site the list of available freeware and shareware will convince you that a number of our projects have indeed done respected work in areas such as Z39.50 implementation and formats conversion. In doing so they have also made substantial contributions to standardisation and/or profiling processes.

Yet, commercial exploitation is not an easy venture for institutions, such as for instance public or academic libraries, who have little or no experience in seriously marketing products or services, and who are not backed by, say, a motivated entrepreneur. As always, the exception proves the rule. There were projects, led by small SMEs, who managed to open up markets for innovative products. As an example I might mention project CANAL/LS (Catalogue Multilingual Natural Language Access/Linguistic Server) and its tool (the *linguistic server*) for improving precision and recall when searching in multilingual catalogues. And even some academic libraries were ambitious

enough to exploit the fruit of their labour on their own: the partners in project [EDUCATE](#) for instance, developed a Web based programme for teaching university students how to search for relevant information on the Web and via the Web. They are now licensing that programme to university libraries worldwide.

Apart from these more profit oriented undertakings all project participants are required to take an active part in disseminating the results of their work. They are present at conferences, workshops and seminars all over the world, and contribute papers galore to technical and less technical journals. And most of them put the reports they are contractually required to produce at regular intervals, on a project Web site. Some of these reports are also available on a CD-ROM which can be obtained from us on request.

Of course, the big question that comes to mind when talking about something like *State-of-the-Art* related to libraries, is the *Digital Library* question:

Can our programme be understood as a *Digital Libraries* programme, comparable to the well-known US initiatives?

The answer is "yes and no". We have to keep in mind that the programme - or at least the first version thereof - has been conceived at a time when notions such as *Information Society*, buzzwords such as *Information Superhighway*, and concepts such as that of a *Digital Library* were definitely not the talk of the town. In the late eighties the Internet still used to be a playground for scientists and engineers; and the WorldWideWeb existed in the minds of a few visionaries, but not much further developed conceptually than Vannevar Bush's Memex machine or Ted Nelson's Xanadu.

In the first instance our programme has been designed to cater for the needs of *traditional* libraries of all types (national, academic, public, etc.) and their users, and to take account of the

diversity and fragmentation of the European library scene. Unlike the US initiatives, it has not been designed primarily as a *digital library* programme (as I have just pointed out, that term had not even been coined when the programme started). So much for the "no" part of my answer.

Yet it is perhaps not surprising that many issues now on the digital libraries research agenda, have been taken up by projects supported under our programme. These range from structuring and accessing repositories of multimedia materials (image and video banks / ELISE, sound archives / JUKEBOX, etc.) via problems of interoperability of library systems to questions of copyright protection in an electronic environment (document delivery / DECOMATE, electronic publishing / LIBERATION, etc.).

Although the term *Digital Library* has initially gained its popularity in the computer science and information engineering communities, its content does indeed have a strong bearing on the world of traditional libraries. Librarians have come to recognise this fact as a challenge and opportunity rather than as a threat to their species.

The digital library may (and, in my opinion, should), after all, be viewed as an extension and enhancement of the traditional library, permitting the improvement of traditional services and the introduction of new ones, often irrespective of the distance between the provider of a service and its recipient.

Libraries are indeed becoming libraries without walls and - as partners in European projects - they are even becoming libraries *sans frontières*. In this regard our programme and the projects supported have made valuable contributions towards the objectives of the grand European design, to the realisation of the dreams of many great Europeans: to remove barriers, to open borders and to bring people together. People who, in spite of many differences in their ways of life, share a common cultural

and intellectual heritage and the responsibility for passing it on to future generations.

This would perhaps be an appropriate note to end this talk on if I had not promised earlier to try and foretell the future of the European libraries programme. Will it go on? For another ten years?

Well, formally the answer is likely to be "no". As the *Fourth Framework Programme* draws to an end the *Telematics for Libraries* sector of its *Telematics Applications Programme* will also be closed. It has been unique insofar as its main target constituency was well defined: the European libraries.

Under the [Fifth Framework Programme](#), now in its final stage of preparation and going to be launched early next year, the situation will be different. All activities related to information and communication technologies will be bundled into one large sub-programme, called IST or *[Information Society Technologies programme](#)*. IST *key action* III, labeled *[Multimedia Content and Tools](#)*, is supposed to invite - inter alia - projects and other activities that would aim to develop, deploy and demonstrate technologies for safeguarding and exploiting Europe's intellectual and cultural heritage. Clearly, this does not only address the libraries community but also other memory institutions, such as museums and archives. We believe, however, that libraries, also due to our efforts during the past ten years, are well prepared to enter into new alliances.

And there is more hope that libraries - and public libraries in particular - will not disappear altogether from the European agenda as a constituency in its own right. About four weeks ago a brief but meaningful [debate](#) took place in the European Parliament in Strasbourg, on the *role of libraries in the Information Society*. A [report](#) with that title had been presented by MEP Mirja Ryynänen on behalf of the Committee on Culture, Youth, Education and the Media. It was adopted almost

unanimously and in his concluding remarks Commissioner Fischler announced that "the Commission now feels confident it can move forward directly to a Communication on the Role of Libraries which will provide a basis for concertation on all the important aspects affecting modern library and information services and our citizens' access to them."

"This will pave the way",  he added, "for future consideration of how we can assist citizens of all ages and all walks of life to benefit from the fruits of electronic information resources and services."

On that note I should really end if it was not for one prediction that has excellent chances to come true: your library has stood the test of  a 150 years and I am confident it will stand another 150 years, more and more open to the world at large. I wish you good luck and all the best for the future.