Looking Back at the Telematics for Libraries Programme 1990–1998

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Abstract

The 1990s saw a fervour of cooperative R&D activity within the European libraries community as a result of the so-called Telematics for Libraries Programme of the European Commission. Pat Manson was a member of the small team of Commission staff in Luxemburg responsible for initiating and guiding these activities. This article describes the Programme, its importance and the role of Pat Manson and her director Ariane Iljon in its success.

Key Words: Pat Manson; European Commission; libraries

In the early 1980s the European Commission (the executive body of the European Union) realised that information technology was going to have an enormous impact on the economy, and that the United States were gaining a significant competitive edge on Europe. Therefore a specifically IT-oriented R&D programme was set up within the newly established Framework Programme for Research and Technical Development (the large-scale funding system covering all areas of science and technology). This was the so-called ESPRIT Programme, aimed at funding pre-competitive R&D projects in areas such as micro-electronics, software technologies, office systems and computerised manufacturing.

However, the ESPRIT Programme did not mention the importance of information technology for libraries in any way, and this was recognised by the European Parliament as an omission that would require action from the

Commission. The Commission responded by funding a series of ground-clearing studies and projects (e.g. on developing library-oriented IT-based products and services, and trans-border networking of library systems) that resulted in an Action Plan for Libraries. This plan had several broad objectives, including the development of modern library services, cost-effective deployment of information technology, the promotion of standardisation and the harmonisation and convergence of national policies. The Action Plan was implemented under the third (1991–1994) and fourth (1994–1998) Framework Programmes (FP3 and 4) as the 'Telematics for Libraries Programme' within the overall Telematics Applications Programme led by the Commission's Directorate General (DG) XIII in Luxemburg.

The objective of the first (FP3) leg of the Programme was officially described as 'to facilitate user access, by optimum use and development of knowledge held in libraries while reducing the handicaps caused by disparate infrastructures across the Community'. The Programme contained four Action lines for which projects could be proposed: computerised bibliographies, international linking of systems, innovative library services, and the development of prototypes of new technology-based products and services for libraries. There were certain conditions attached to proposals. They had to address one of the Action Lines (and the specific topics identified therein) of the Programme, and there had to be at least two partners from two different member states involved, preferably with additional participation from 'less-favoured' countries. Not all partners had to be from the libraries sector. Funding was on a shared cost basis, requiring in most cases a significant financial contribution from libraries or their parent institutions. Interoperability and multilingual access were important criteria for selection.

After doing two ESPRIT projects as manager at Cap Gemini Innovation I still had little idea of the internal workings of the Commission. That changed when I was asked to spend a fortnight in Luxemburg to evaluate proposals sent in for the first leg of the Telematics for Libraries programme. During the day we were confined within the walls of an EU office on the Kirchberg, not allowed leave the building or to use the telephone, although we were free in the evenings to do whatever we liked - eating and drinking, mostly. It was a strange environment. Everything inside came from the various member states. Keyboards were unusably French (AZERTY…). The toilets were Dutch, they were fine. Many people were extremely busy, others seemed to

be doing absolutely nothing. The Libraries Programme was run by a small staff, including two remarkable ladies whom (together with their kind and competent colleague Ian Pigott) I gradually learnt to appreciate as the driving force behind library innovation in Europe. Ariane Iljon, the memorable head of unit, held a degree from the University of Cape Town and a degree from the Institut National des Techniques de la Documentation in Paris. She started at the European Commission DGXIII in 1974, initially working on automated multilingual thesauri. Multilingual access to information always remained one of her priorities. She then worked in areas such as database policy within the Commission and setting up DGXIII's ECHO online database in the late 1970s. She became responsible for developing the EU initiative on libraries since 1985 and then, from 1990 onwards, for running the Libraries Programme as Head of Unit. It was of great importance to the Libraries Programme to have a director with such a long track record within the Commission and with in-depth knowledge of many aspects of information technology that were relevant to the libraries sector. Ariane was passionate, indefatigable, critical and sharp, extremely knowledgeable, a compulsive smoker, very outspoken and therefore not much liked by some. Pat Manson, her assistant, was quite a different personality. Extremely kind and supportive, highly efficient, good-humoured and humorous (no wonder - she comes from Scotland), always calm in the face of disaster (i.e. always), she was the perfect complement to the often high-strung Ariane. Pat held a useful degree in French studies from the University of Aberdeen. She became a research officer at the University of Westminster and was the editor of VINE, a newsletter on library automation projects. She went on to become a project officer for the Libraries Programme in the early 1990s, the beginning of a long and fine career with the Commission. These two ladies are the unsung heroes of European library innovation at the end of the previous century, and therefore I pay tribute to them here.

The first leg of the Libraries Programme had three calls for proposals which resulted in about 50 projects and 3 'concerted actions' organised by the Commission itself. These actions, aimed at fostering co-operation amongst interested parties in Europe, addressed issues such as computerised bibliographic records, copyright and library automation. The Programme was deemed a success. So towards the end of FP3, Ariane and her team started drawing up plans for the next leg in FP4. In order to develop a work programme, Ariane invited Derek Law, Lorcan Dempsey and me to draft the programme under the

supervision of Pat and herself. Derek was at the time Head Librarian at King's College London and very much involved in all kinds of projects and committees in the UK and elsewhere. (Derek was known to differ from God only in the sense that, whereas God is everywhere, Derek was everywhere too, except at King's College). Lorcan was about to be appointed director of UKOLN in Bath, swiftly making it into a major international contributor to digital library developments. I was at the time a humble private consultant.

It was my unenviable task to make sense of the various notes sent to me almost daily via fax by Lorcan and Derek, and to reconstruct from these a coherent text that would meet the strict but vaguely specified requirements of Ariane and Pat. These notes invariably went far beyond my level of intelligence, notably those from Lorcan who possessed a bewildering knowledge of the most arcane technical details, and flights of imagination worthy of the genius he is. Those from Derek were, fortunately, slightly more comprehensible. Every now and then we came together in Luxemburg, where I arrived after a five hour drive through the night (and over the pitch-dark roads of the Belgian Ardennes) to find there was to be no coffee until ten o'clock. Our conversation would then run as follows. 'Lorcan: this is too vague. John: what should we write then? Lorcan: something more specific. John: can you suggest something? Lorcan: whatever you like. Ariane: John, whatever you write, it has too much repetition.' I would then become somewhat emotional. Luckily, we had Pat. She would save the day with wise and soothing interventions, and her editing skills miraculously made sense of my incoherent and repetitive drafts of a strategy for the new Libraries Programme. And so there emerged, in January 1994, the Libraries Work Programme 1994–1998 that became the basis for the subsequent calls for proposals in FP4.

A rather interesting aspect of our draft programme was that it did not mention the internet. Sometimes we used the plural 'networks', sometimes 'the network', and the internet was always *implied*, e.g. by referring to services (such as WWW, FTP, Gopher and WAIS) that were clearly only available on the internet. Lorcan Dempsey, I believe, was rightly convinced that there were no other future networks than the internet. However, we had explicit instructions from Ariane not to use the word 'internet'. The reason behind this seems rather strange today. Although at the time the internet had been introduced in universities all over Europe, and, for instance, tcp/ip had already been adopted by the Nordic national research networks before 1989, the European Commission regarded the internet as an American affair that

threatened to provide American industry with a competitive advantage over Europe. The Commission's response was to support the so-called OSI model (which used the X.25 standard as an alternative to tcp/ip) in order to allow, as they firmly believed, European industry a chance to compete with American technology. The OSI-model, introduced in 1978, had a huge impact on networking communities. Especially in Europe, the deployment of this complex model dominated (and to a certain extent prevented) the development of all European networks for over a decade. Mentioning the internet and tcp/ip within the Commission was entirely tabu in the early nineties. Even the well-known Bangemann report from 1994, describing how Europe was to move towards an 'information society', barely mentioned the internet. This attitude proved to be unsustainable. OSI was extremely difficult to implement, tcp/ip became the industry standard, the Commission lost the battle and the Europeans were saved from a divide that would have prevented them from competing on a global scale and from benefiting from global services and resources. This already became clear in the course of FP4, as libraries revolted and introduced the internet into their projects in spite of Commission policies. However, it took until the year 2000 for the Commission to formally endorse, at their Lisbon summit, the internet.

Whatever it was allowed to be named, the emerging 'network' became the key issue of the Libraries Programme in FP4. It was based on three Action Lines that moved from internal to external and global networked systems: networked internal library systems, distributed library services, and systems for access to networked information resources. It was this programme that helped libraries to move away from the more local systems developed in FP3 and to enter the new internet era of linked systems and resources.

The Libraries Programme came to an end with the new FP5 Framework Programme in 1998. From FP5 onwards libraries, archives and museums were brought together within the Information Society Technologies (IST) Programme, under the heading of 'multimedia content', with an emphasis on digital cultural heritage. Ariane Iljon eventually took early retirement and Pat Manson became head of the unit responsible for the new programmes. Although there was some disappointment over the loss of a designated libraries programme, the Programme had in fact come to a natural end. European libraries had by now, through the Libraries Programme, developed sufficient skills to carry on the innovative drive that the Programme had initiated. In many cases information technology had become a key component of library

policy and was therefore able to attract relatively more funding from parent institutions and national governments. Besides, the new network-based technologies had made library tools significantly cheaper to develop, with less need for the Commission's support as a result.

An impact study carried out towards the end of FP4 concluded that 'the Libraries Programme is widely acknowledged for contributing to its goal: "The creation of a European Library space"... It does so by contributing to the technological developments in the library field, by improving co-operation amongst libraries in Europe and by improving library services to European citizens'. Looking back, we are now better able to see what the real significance of the Libraries Programme has been. The Programme was not primarily aimed at creating what we have now come to designate as a 'digital' library. Its main emphasis was on helping 'traditional' libraries to adapt to the new networked information environment and to deploy IT-based techniques to enhance their traditional functions. In the end the Programme had an impact in three areas. First, it raised the awareness of the libraries sector by drawing attention to the importance of investing in new technologies. This was important for a sector that had not changed much for a relatively long period, and that was not seen by many as a natural area for deployment of the new information technologies. Second, it created a significant level of cooperation between libraries throughout Europe, and between libraries and the IT-industry and to a lesser extent publishers. Third, it allowed a large number of talented library staff to gain experience with new technology and with running innovative research and implementation projects. Not many of the systems developed through the Programme in the nineties are still alive today. But the awareness, cooperation and experience gained through the Programme were the catalysts for the sophisticated library systems of our time. This article is just a reminder that much of this has its roots in a small office in Luxemburg.

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