The Impact of Electronic Publishing on the Academic Community

Session 5: Digital libraries and archiving of electronic information

Discussion after Session 5

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The first issue is concerned with the question of the nature of the future scientific library. Do we have to share the electronic optimism of those who believe that the days of the traditional library with shelves of books and journals are numbered, and that entering the new era of the virtual library is only a matter of time? As some of the discussants showed, this optimism is certainly not shared by many library users in the arts, humanities and social sciences. It is even doubtful whether all natural scientists want to replace the classical library as soon as possible. Jack Meadows' sober analysis of the varying needs and expectations of library users and of the possibilities of the two types of libraries to meet these needs and expectations points to the conclusion that we will probably move towards the hybrid library, partly consisting of paper material and partly of electronic records. Instead of focusing on the question of when the latter will totally replace the former, it may be wiser to analyse more carefully what users want and which of the two complementary types of library can best satisfy these desires.

Even if the electronic library will not take over the whole of the classical library, there is no doubt that electronic services and electronically stored information will increase. This leads to a two-fold requirement for training. In the first place, for the training of library staff who have the difficult task of remaining familiar with the explosively developing systems of storage, retrieval and scholarly communication. But in the second place, for the training and familiarization of the users of the library. This is not an easy task, given the rapid changes which are taking place in information technology and software. There may be even a limit to the willingness of the user to accept and to digest new systems. One gets the impression that the technologies and system developers do not always realise that ultimately it is the user that determines the acceptance and use of the equipment and the system.

An interesting point of discussion was the problem of the pricing of electronic information, particularly with regard to the research libraries. Some defended the view that in research
libraries (as distinct from commercial libraries) all information should be free without royalties or commercial interests. This would bring a great relief for academic libraries which have been facing considerable financial difficulties of late. A recent Mellon study showed, among other things, that the libraries' percentage of the budget in American universities has shrunk, whereas both the costs of purchasing books, and the number of relevant books and journals available on the market, have increased. The serial price, and specifically the science journal prices, have caused great financial difficulties for the libraries. But free access to all scholarly information as such would not solve all the problems, and may create new ones. It is not clear yet what cost savings can be expected, certainly if one takes into account the hidden costs of producing and distributing such information. Moreover, free, distributed information without screening and quality control may not be what scientists want, and whether one can establish an electronic journal with systematic filtering and classical peer rating are important questions, but as yet difficult to answer. The system of licensing, as described by Ann Okerson, seems to be an interesting and promising model.

With respect to archiving electronic information, lots of problems and issues were discussed. Quality of archiving was acknowledged as important but, according to some, not emphasized enough in the general debate. Both the United States' tradition of decentralizing and the European tradition of centralizing the archiving responsibility have their pros and cons; the preference may also be dependent on the political and administrative context. It has become clear that leaving the archiving of electronic publications to the writer, the user or the publisher is not advisable since it may mean that there will be no archiving at all.

With respect to the European choice for centralization, John Mackenzie Owen defended a role for the national deposit libraries. Some discussants placed question marks against such a task for the national libraries, and wanted to stress more the need for disciplinary selection and depositing, which would better recognize the international dimension of scholarly and scientific production.

Many of the presentations and discussions were concerned with the natural sciences. These sciences have a clear lead in electronic communication and publishing. But, as was shown in a number of interventions, the humanities and (to a lesser extent) the social sciences do not hesitate because of backwardness or conservatism. Some of the intrinsic characteristics of these disciplines, such as the persistence of old knowledge, their hermeneutic reasoning, the complexity and variety of the information sources and the valuable multilinguality bring different challenges to the use of electronic recording. For further discussions it would be interesting to devote more time to the discipline-specific needs and requirements.

Finally I mention and summarize an interesting suggestion by the former Director General of DG XII, Paolo Fasella, which was submitted by mail. He concludes that research on telematics for libraries as a specific sector might not be pursued in the Fifth Framework Programme of the European Commission. This exclusion would have a deleterious effect on the development of technically up-to-date service networks for the large number of library users in Europe. The development from traditional to network-integrated services should be supported by such a telematic programme, aimed at informing and assisting the public, education, research and library (re)building. Libraries will survive as a useful and used asset only if fully integrated into
the information society. Otherwise they will be progressively marginalized and be replaced by commercial services, more attractive but less profound and solid. This would be a serious loss to citizens, to education, to research and to culture. A number of innovative subjects for study and research are suggested by Fasella, so as to emphasize that telematics for libraries in the Fifth Framework Programme would not just continue what has been done up to now, but should represent a qualitative further step.

One of the suggestions is an extension of the work which has been done under the Third and Fourth Framework Programmes, namely the creation of a European Library, a virtual digitized library based on mutual access to national libraries through a telematic network. A particular challenge is the linguistic diversity in Europe, but this could be considered an asset rather than a hurdle.