



From little acorns ... the origins of the European Information Association

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In July 1977, Ian Lovecy and Charlie Hume who were in charge of the European Documentation Centre (EDC) at the John Rylands Library in Manchester published an article entitled 'Subject approach to European Documentation: the possibilities for computer application' (1). As a struggling European Documentation Centre Librarian at Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic, I reckoned it would be useful to meet another EDC Librarian to discuss problems of acquisition and dissemination of European Communities (EC) information as well as providing an opportunity to see another EDC collection. Later that year I visited Manchester and had a fruitful meeting with Ian. Surprise, surprise: we had encountered similar problems regarding the acquisition and dissemination of EC documentation and both felt isolated, despite three years of EDC deposit. There was no contact whatsoever in those early days of UK entry into the EC between EDC Librarians and Commission officials either in the UK or Brussels.

Ian was keen to visit our EDC and we decided to invite any EDC Librarian who could make the journey to Newcastle (and home again) in a day. Thus, on the basis of the British Rail timetable, the Northern Group of EDC Librarians was born. We held our first meeting on 13 January 1978. Fifteen EDC Librarians turned up from an area bounded by Edinburgh, Hull, Sheffield and Liverpool. The agenda was flexible and the 'exchanges of experience' were non-stop. Indeed, the meeting was so successful that we held a second in Newcastle in May. We had so much information to disseminate to colleagues, but it was obvious that we could not continue to meet on such a regular basis. It was decided, therefore, to launch the Northern EDC Newsletter, which we did in October 1978.

During the course of 1978 and 1979 I was contacted by Mike Hopkins at Loughborough University and John Jeffries at the University of Kent at Canterbury who were setting up similar groups in the Midlands and the South of England.

By 1979, the Northern Group was bold enough to invite Eric Gaskell, the Librarian at the Commission in Brussels, to its June meeting. We had our first insight into the life of a Brussels Eurocrat and discovered that his problems of acquisition and dissemination were very similar to our own, but with the added problem of a collection working in six official languages. "So you think you've got problems" was a Gaskell quote!

Also in 1979, an Italian (Sardinian to be precise) arrived at the London office of the Commission. His name was Giancarlo Pau. He was extremely enthusiastic and gave a significant boost to the activities of EDCs in all three regions, and by 1980 things were really beginning to look up. Helen Greer, the EDC Librarian at the Centre for European Agricultural Studies at Wye College in Kent was inspired (with Giancarlo's help) to hold a three day conference in July at Wye College. This was the turning point for EDC Librarians in the UK. Seventeen EDCs were represented. Speakers from the Commission provided the stimulus to draw up a paper containing twenty-one Recommendations to improve communications, information retrieval and the acquisition and exploitation of EC information. The paper was sent to the Commission and to the Library Association Working Party on EC Information which had also been set up.

By November 1980, the Northern EDC Newsletter had become the EDC Newsletter and was circulating to all UK EDCs. Giancarlo was hinting that the London office of the Commission was

interested in supporting efforts to set up a national network in the UK (although the word 'network' was not yet used in this context).

In March 1981 the first national meeting of librarians from European Depository Libraries (DEPs) and EDCs was held in London at the National Liberal Club. It was organised by the London office of the Commission with Mike Hopkins in the Chair. The morning speakers were from the Commission (Messrs Gaskell, Gibb and Perry) and the afternoon session divided the participants into three discussion groups:

Acquisition
Catalogues, indexes and bibliographical control
Exploitation

It was agreed at this meeting to form an association to 'represent the special interests of EDC/DEP Librarians' and a Steering Committee was set up to get the ball rolling. The first meeting of the Steering Group took place in May 1981 in Charing Cross Railway Station buffet. The members were Helen Greer, Mike Hopkins, John Jeffries and myself. We had a lot to discuss and the drinks and sandwiches had to last a long time in case we were evicted from the buffet.

During 1981-82, the first How to... leaflets were published by the Association of EDC Librarians (AEDCL) - as it was agreed we would be called. These were very basic guides to such topics as the Court of Justice, the Official Journal and statistics, which were aimed at inexperienced library staff. In December 1981, the first seminar took place entitled 'How to trace EC legislation'. Run by the Steering Group, the point of these endeavours was to raise money, as the London office of the Commission had promised to support the AEDCL as long as we made efforts to earn income. The seminars were especially successful in doing just this and were repeated many times during the period 1980-1990, mostly in London, but with the occasional airing outside the capital.

By May 1982, the Steering Group had prepared a policy statement to send to the EC Institutions. Entitled 'Recommendations to the institutions of the European Communities concerning the future development of the EDC/DEP system' (2), the document contained eighteen Recommendations, some of which had been put forward at the Wye Conference. They were grouped under the following headings:

Coordination and communication
Role and entitlement of EDCs/DEPs
Exploitation and information retrieval
Bibliographic control

1982 was quite a year! The first EDC Librarians' visit to Brussels took place in September and the first Luxembourg visit was organised at very short notice in November. Both had hectic timetables, but we were able to get to know colleagues during the journeys and over lengthy meals. Twenty-one of us arrived in the late evening at the Brussels hotel. The dining room was full, so we were ushered into the garden where we were served a delicious (if slow) meal by a Basil Fawlty look-alike. Apples were falling off the trees around us in the balmy late summer air. I remember it well... The 'set' was completed when the first group flew to Strasbourg in December 1984.

Some progress on the wider front also took place in November 1982. Mike Hopkins and Helen Greer (as Chairman and Secretary) were invited to attend the first international meeting in Brussels on the implementation of the EDC scheme. German EDC Librarians were especially interested in UK efforts to improve access to EC documentation and it was reported that there was 'an interest in Brussels in the Association and its papers.'

Throughout this period, the Committee had been spending a great deal of time on the drafting of the Constitution. 1983 was an especially busy year as the Committee prepared for the first residential conference entitled 'European Communities information: ten years on'. It was decided to hold it at Exeter College Oxford towards the end of September. Dining in the Great Hall was an experience. There was an impressive list of speakers and a total of sixty participants from a wide range of countries. About half of them were not EDC Librarians, which was particularly stimulating

and forced the Association to look at the problems of access to EC information outside EDC circles.

Very soon after the Conference, the tragic news was circulated that Helen Greer had died. Although to most of us this came as a great shock, Helen must have known at the Conference that she was about to face her last illness. The UK EDC world was shattered and the AEDCL Committee immediately decided to set up the Helen Greer Memorial Fund with an annual prize to be awarded for outstanding contributions to the work of the Association. The Prize is still being awarded annually, although the terms of reference have changed slightly.

By 1984, there had inevitably been a number of changes to the composition of the AEDCL Committee. Mike Hopkins remained as Chairman, I became Secretary and June Neilson was elected as Treasurer with Stephen Richard as editor of the EDC Newsletter. Giancarlo Pau continued as the coopted member representing the London office of the Commission.

A considerable amount of time was spent by June Neilson during 1984-1985 in trying to register the Association as a charity with the Charity Commissioners. This was a tortuous process and involved a redraft of the Constitution, but registration was eventually achieved in 1986. The March 1985 EDC Newsletter included a copy of the quarterly publication *European Access* which was edited by Ian Thomson at Cardiff University EDC. Comments on the value of such a publication were invited from members, with the note 'It may increase the cost of the EDC Newsletter by £1.00 or £1.50 per year...' At the April 1985 AGM, Ian Thomson became the first recipient of the Helen Greer Memorial Prize. The Selection Committee is to be congratulated on its foresight in making such a momentous decision.

Significant changes in Committee membership took place during 1986 when Mike Hopkins stood down as Chairman and I resigned as Secretary. Giancarlo Pau left London at this time for a spell in the Commission office in Tokyo. John Illingworth of Lancaster University EDC had been coopted to the Committee during 1985 to ensure continuity and the Committee structure after the 1986 AGM read: Chairperson June Neilson; Secretary Ian Thomson; Treasurer John Illingworth; Publications Officer Stephen Richard.

Much Committee time was spent during 1986-1987 on the vexed question of 'select subscription' status. This was a euphemism for reduced deposit from Brussels.* The Committee was placed in a difficult position when approached by both the targeted EDCs and the Commission. As Stephen Richard commented in his 1987-1988 Annual Report (Steve had by this time become Chairman as June had moved on) "the Association Committee cannot negotiate on behalf of EDCs, as the contracts are between each EDC and the Commission." The real debate appeared to be whether the recommendation was made by the Commission on the basis of research activity or information activity. During 1987-1988, George Bingham of Loughborough University produced a Union list of EC serials in EDC and DEP libraries in the UK and Eire (3). This was a monumental research project to assist EDC Librarians to identify EC serial titles. It was given enthusiastic support by the Committee.

September 1987 saw the successful residential Conference Industry, government and the European Community: providers and users of Community information. Due to the success of the first Conference in 1983, this too was held at Exeter College Oxford. Once again there was a wide range of speakers and participants. An unscheduled presentation took place at the Conference which had implications for the future of the AEDCL. Kay Sutton from Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and I had recently returned from a Commission training session in Brussels for the new breed of EC information providers - the Euro Info Centres. We briefed the participants on this pilot project. One Commission official commented that he had to learn of a new Commission initiative whilst attending a non-Commission event in the UK!

The significance of this was, of course, that an increasing number of EC information providers wanted to join the AEDCL, but were prevented from doing so by the terms of the Constitution. The Euro Info Centre project significantly increased the number of EC information providers throughout Europe.

At a one day Conference in Birmingham in September 1989 entitled '1992 and all that', discussions took place on widening the remit of the AEDCL. As a consequence, three colleagues (one from a Euro Info Centre and two from National Relays) were coopted onto the AEDCL Committee. It was up to this enlarged Committee under the Chairmanship of firstly John Illingworth and latterly Ian Thomson to 'crystal gaze' in order to envisage the future structure of a much enlarged Association. At the AGM in April 1990 an item on the Agenda read 'A future strategy for the Association'. An Extraordinary Meeting of the AEDCL on 11 September 1990 set up the European Information Association. Membership became 'open to individuals and organisations providing or interested in information services relating to the European Community and related organisations.'

So, under the Chairmanship of Ian Thomson, the EIA was born and the AEDCL was laid to rest.

Inevitably, I have only been able to record a few snapshots of events during the period 1977-1991. There was a lot of hard work and soul-searching and many happy gatherings of EDC Librarians took place in a variety of venues. The group was small enough to get to know everyone and large enough not to fall into the trap of becoming too parochial. With Humphrey Littleton I must say with all sincerity "Well, that was fun."

References

- 1 Journal of Librarianship Vol 9 (3) 1977, p186-198
- 2 Government Publications Review Vol 9 No 5 Sept/Oct 1982, p513-517
- 3 Association of EDC Librarians. 1987

* Editors note: at this time the Commission was seeking ways of reducing the volume of material sent to EDCs. A system of 'reduced deposit' was introduced, whereby institutions were encouraged to opt to receive only material relevant to courses taught. A two-tier structure of EDCs was thus developed, with most being 'comprehensive' and some 'selective'.

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