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Library Automation in Hungary – the librarians' perspective

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Lyn Robinson has led a series of library automation workshops throughout Eastern Europe, as part of the Open Society Institutes' Regional Library Program (RLP) on behalf of the Soros Foundation. The RLP was established in 1994 to support, promote and advance the information sciences in Central and Eastern Europe. Here she describes thoughts of those professionals she met on her most recent visit to Budapest in April of this year.

Of all the places throughout Eastern Europe that I have visited, this was certainly one of the most technologically sophisticated. My initial encounter came on the first morning when I was confronted with state of the art translation technology – every participant was plugged into headphones and a microphone. Undaunted I gave them my best smile and thumbs up. (Why is the audience always there an hour before the scheduled start time……..?) Two very attractive men introduced themselves as my translators – they would hang on my every word. Good – because that would give me time to think of something to finish my sentences. The furry, hand-held microphone had to go – I picked it up but could not take myself seriously. A brief skirmish with the AV support person provided a clip-on radio microphone powered by a small battery at the end of a short lead. Now you can dance somebody said. No such luck. There were also headphones with yet another battery - and I had no pockets. I perched the batteries on the table next to the OHP skilfully leaving both my hands free to fumble with the flimsies and scribble on the flip chart. Every time I moved too far the batteries clattered off the table and dragged along the floor behind me. Time for audience participation.

Some Background Issues

Hungary, a country of 10.5 million people, has a complex history (Deakz, 1995). Most of us would be familiar with recent events however, starting with the fall of communism's fifty year rule in 1989. This marked an end to the prevalence of centralised state planning, and the country has experienced an ongoing transformation of legislation and public administration, privatisation and re-structuring of education. Recent plans to update university education aim to increase the number of students and courses. These achievements will put pressure on academic libraries to provide more services, including access to a greater range of national and international professional literature, to more people. Co-operation between academic libraries, the National Library, and those within the Hungarian Academy of Sciences is essential if these plans are to be supported. The aim is to reach the long term goals for automated access to library information recommended by the Advisory Board for the RLP, enabling users to identify all relevant national or international materials in any given subject, via a single search. The long term goals underlying the RLP's series of three day library automation workshops are described by Tedd, 1996.

In common with other Eastern European countries, Hungary's system of libraries is a mixture of centrally and de-centrally managed institutions, with several large collections, many smaller collections, and a high degree of overlapping holdings. (Borgman, 1995). This situation strains already scarce resources, and there is a pressing need for national automation projects to facilitate the new information access centred regime of "just in time" rather than "just in case".

Most academic library buildings are unsuitable for modern library functions, and often located some distance away from the main faculties. There is a chronic lack of space, so that only a very limited range of stock can be made available on open shelves, and seating capacity is limited.

Salaries are still small (about $250 per month), and librarianship is not considered to be a high-profile career; no change there then.

Contemporary Library Automation

Participants were keen to tell me that library automation in Hungary is not a new concept, a fact reflected in a recent paper on automation systems in Hungarian academic libraries (Mader, 1995). Computerised cataloguing was introduced in the 1970s and as a result many records already exist in electronic format. This contrasts with many other Eastern European countries, where it is usual to find vast halls of catalogue cards awaiting retrospective conversion. During the 1980s, many libraries used personal computers with the MicroIsis program to produce electronic catalogues. Integrated systems were introduced from the early 1990s, as a result of some state funding being made available. The National Library chose DOBIS/LIBIS. Other systems used in higher education libraries include Dynix Horizon, Aleph, Oracle (OLIB), Voyager and TinLib. The public libraries have stayed with MicroIsis on standalone personal computers. The City Library of Budapest and its six library regions undertook the development of their own LMS in conjunction with a Budapest software company.

No attempt has been made to implement a standard library automation system at a national level, but this should not prevent the integration of holdings and services if a common exchange format can be agreed. There is widespread acknowledgement of the importance of the Internet, and the need to provide access to both local and remote resources via standard interfaces such as Netscape Navigator and Internet Explorer. In common with many other Central and Eastern European countries however, national policies for strategic library networking and co-operative projects have yet to be accepted and funded. The resulting piecemeal approach to systems takes its toll on the realisation of national and international bibliographic and technical standards, and on basic projects such as the creation of the national bibliography. State funding for automation projects is limited, and even the annual library budgets have not been set on time so that staff are uncertain how much money is available to run the library services. However, many libraries now have the chance to apply for grants from foundations such as Soros and Mellon.

Many Hungarian libraries have web sites, with excellent links to other libraries and LIS related sites. All of the ones shown to me could be viewed in either English or Hungarian. Most of the OPACs are accessible via telnet, but take up of the z39.50 application protocol is less evident. This would allow catalogues to be searched from any z39.50 client, or even via a web form (using either a CGI (common gateway interface) script or z39.50 to www gateway).

Automated acquisitions, interlibrary lending and electronic document delivery are still in their infancy. Problems stem from the lack of cohesive organisation within the book trade, which to be fair has undergone some radical upheaval during privatisation processes (Lorincz, 1995), an incomplete national bibliography, and no central document supply centre.

Networks

The Hungarian network infrastructure is already well developed; many initiatives have fallen within the auspices of the National Information Infrastructure Development Program (NIIF). One example is the national backbone network HBONE, which uses international Internet protocols. This network covers all of Hungary, using a star topology where nodes connect back to the centre in Budapest via 64kbps digital leased lines (Mader 1995). Closely related to the NIIF is the Hungarnet Association which comprises all academic, research and not for profit public sites. Almost all Hungarian universities and most collegiate cities have their own web site.

One particular project is the Hungarian Electronic Library (MEK), archiving scientific letters and texts in Hungarian or relating to Hungary and Central Europe.

MEK can be viewed at http://www.mek.iif.hu

Library Policy and Legislation
The current legal framework for libraries was established in 1976 and is still in force, with some minor modifications. A new law on library services has been under discussion for some time and has been agreed in principle. One of the features of the new law will be obligatory continuous professional development for library staff every five years. There are also moves to reduced the current number of copyright depositions required of publishers from 16 to 6.

Professional Organisations
Hungary has two professional organisations relevant to the LIS profession. The Association of Hungarian Librarians has both personal and institutional membership, with regional organisations and subject orientated sections. The Association (Chamber) of Information Institutes and Libraries comprises over 200 institutions with four sections. Its aim is to protect and represent the interests of its member institutions and raise the profile of libraries.

The National Library
The National Library is now housed in the former Royal Palace, an exemplary architectural specimen overlooking the Danube. The site is believed to be that of the famous Corvina library. The current library holds more than 2.2 million books, nearly 300,000 serial publications, and 800,000 manuscripts and employs about 500 staff. Many of its users (over 50%) are university students. Holdings are made available via a card catalogue and an OPAC which was introduced in 1991. Out of a total of 20,000 users, more than half are university students.

The National Library has taken responsibility for the production of a national bibliography but this has not been easy. The initial installation of the integrated system did not have a program to support the production of the bibliography, which was published in a simplified form. A newer version of the software is expected to solve the problems.

The CD-Rom version of the Hungarian National Bibliography (1976-1991) is available in Hungarian (HUNGMARC) MARC format. A new CD with data from 1992-1995 is planned. There is also a disc listing foreign periodical titles held in Hungarian libraries.

The Hungarian National Bibliography is regarded as a vital contribution to the success of the Hungarian shared cataloguing project. This is a recent initiative taken by 15 Hungarian libraries from all sectors. The project has support from a number of Foundations, and the Ministry of Culture and Education to purchase software for the

project, which will be based within the National Information Infrastructure Development Program (NIIF).

Future Issues

Library automation and networks are not per se major issues, as both areas are well developed in Hungary, with most participants being familiar with current automation software and with Internet related activities including electronic mail and web-based information. What most professionals felt to be more relevant were the planning and organisational skills required at a national level to facilitate user-orientated access to information in the face of the global information infrastructure and continuing financial uncertainty.

Mader, 1995 describes the need to co-ordinate common principles including:

• creating union catalogues
• developing common retrieval interfaces for libraries using different integrated systems (to make it unnecessary to log in to library OPACs individually)
• implementing electronic interlibrary lending
• preparing the foundations for an electronic library (full-text databases holding books, journals, articles, newspapers)

One unanimous feeling was that of the value of contact with other professionals and of continuing education. Technology waits for no-one and the need for further workshops considering the development of intranets and associated services were high on the list of priorities.

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