European Documentation Centres – the arrival of the electronic library

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In the thirty years since the UK joined what is now the European Union the need for information about all aspects of European law and policy has become ever more pressing. This is particularly true in schools, colleges and universities where a 'European dimension' is now being introduced into a wide range of courses.

When the UK first joined the European Community, many British universities applied to set up European Documentation Centres to provide specialist research material and information for new courses. First established by the European Commission in 1963, EDCs are the oldest of a number of 'information relays' whose purpose is to provide reliable information about the law and policies of the European institutions, primarily to students and researchers in higher education. The network now has over 500 members around the world, 43 of which are in the UK.

The terms of the original agreement with the Commission promised free supply of the main official publications of the different European institutions, together with privileged access to Community databases. In return the host institution agreed to provide the necessary staff and premises to maintain and promote the collection. Although the collections include all the major publications relating to European law and institutions, particularly the Official Journal and the reports of the European Court of Justice, they also cover most other areas of European policy. Over the last thirty years EDCs have had to adapt to considerable changes, both in their relationship with the European Commission and in the ways in which documentation has been delivered.[1]

The European institutions have always been at the forefront of technological advances in information, partly because of the extra demands placed by producing multilingual versions of the major documentation. The European Community's legal database, Celex, was inaugurated in 1965 and has been joined over the years by a range of other specialist databases, including RAPID, for press releases; ECLAS, the European Commission Library catalogue and SCAD, a bibliographic database of articles on European affairs. All were originally developed as in-house services for the European institutions and only later made available to outsiders like the EDC network because of the amount of training required to use them.

In 1995 the launch of the European Commission web server Europa made an immediate impact on the European information world. For the first time basic information on all aspects of the EU was readily available in all eleven official languages and large numbers of documents were quickly added: the site now contains over a million documents. Web versions of all the major databases were gradually produced and, except for Celex, made freely available to everyone. In 1999 a new general legal service called Eur-Lex was launched: designed initially as a means of making all European legislation freely available it has now overtaken Celex in the range of material offered and the two databases are gradually being merged. Both will be free from July 2004.

For a long time EDCs were the only source of specialised information on Europe in the regions, dealing with enquiries from students, business and the general public. In 1987 a network of Euro Info Centres was established specifically for business enquiries, and other networks have followed to cater for a wider audience. In the 1990s the UK Representation of the European Commission investigated the most effective way of informing the wider British public about Europe. It concluded that public libraries were most trusted as a source of impartial information and as a result the EPIC network (European Public Information Centres) was launched. Despite this, public opinion polls consistently show that many people feel they are not well enough informed about the role of the European Union in everyday life.

Because the field of European information is so specialised, EDC librarians have taken the lead in sharing their expertise, whether through training sessions organised by the European Information Association and other professional groups or in more informal ways, such as mail lists or regional conferences.

Although a large proportion of official information is now publicly available via the internet, it is important for students and researchers to be aware of the gaps between printed and electronic resources. While some early documents have been converted selectively to electronic formats through commercial and academic projects only major collections like those in European Documentation Centres are able to provide comprehensive resources for academic study. Increasingly the role of EDCs is to help their clientele to identify appropriate websites and databases as well as to trace documents which may have only been published online or which may also exist in electronic form. Few EDCs have the resources or manpower to catalogue available resources in detail but collaborative projects have begun to fill the gaps and the European Union's publishing house, EUR-OP (Office for Official Publications of the European Union), is planning to offer an online bookshop facility later this year.

1   A consultation paper on information policy (An information and communication strategy for the Union (COM(2002)350) at http:// europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/cnc/2002/ com2002_0350en02.pdf