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The pattern of provision of European Union information in France and the United Kingdom: a comparative study of services

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Abstract

Compares the selective European information services in France and the UK, stating that whereas France gathers information from official documentation and its representations in the EC in Paris and Marseille, the UK got its European information from three surveys, including two degree surveys. Maintains that French academic librarians are Civil Servants employed by central government and have limited access to European Documentation Centres (EDC), unlike their British counterparts whose libraries, over hundreds of years, have evolved into a self-governing institution, much better funded and able to provide information at local authority level where European responsibility has been significantly added to since the signing of the Single European Act in 1986.

Keywords: European Union, France, Information services, Public libraries, United Kingdom

Information services and agencies providing access to European information have developed very differently in France and the UK. This paper outlines the different patterns of provision for the major user groups targeted by European Relay and Network Policy, including: the academic and research community; those involved in government and political administration; the business community; those living or working in rural areas; and the general public. The paper concludes by identifying some of the factors which may have affected the development of European information delivery in France and the UK respectively. These factors may continue to influence information policy implementation and should, therefore, be considered in any future implementation strategies.

The information contained in this paper was gathered in a variety of ways from research undertaken by the authors:

- Data about the UK provision of European information in public libraries, European Documentation Centres (EDC) and European Information Centres (EIC) were drawn from three surveys: the first which was undertaken for a BLR&IC-funded project; and two surveys which were conducted as part of the research towards a higher degree.
- Data about UK local authority European information dissemination were drawn from an undergraduate dissertation.
- Data about European information provision in France were gathered from contact with the various service providers, from official documentation, from the published literature and from the two French Representations of the European Commission (EC), in Paris and Marseille.

The material thus gathered is synthesized in the discussion that follows.

Much of the preliminary contact information was gathered from the Directory of Networks and Other European Union Information Sources (1995). Although no existing study has compared the provision of European information services in France and the UK, there are many articles on the individual relays and networks, particularly in the UK, such as: Thomson (1990, 1992, 1994 and 1995) and Caddell (1991 and 1993) on EDCs; Hopkins (1986) on European information for the business community; Keery (1994) on European information and communication policy; and Marcella, Baxter and Parker (1997) on the development of the public information relay in public libraries in the UK. All these have informed the present study. Fewer articles were found from the French perspective, but works by Lupovici (1990), Fisher (1992) and Rince (1994), and the Proceedings of the Access to European Information Seminar (1996), were consulted.

European information for the academic and research community

The academic community of the European Union (EU) member states, and indeed, nonmember states, is a major user of European information. To meet this need, EDCs were established by the EC in 1963, and these were the first centres to be created in response to the particular need to specifically support the teaching and research needs of a university. The role of EDCs has evolved and they now serve the information needs of the wider European community, in addition to staff and students of each host institution. There are over 400 EDCs worldwide, and of these approximately 300 can be found in EU member states. Presently, responsibility for EDCs comes under a newly-created section of Directorate-General X (Information, Communication, Culture and Audiovisual Media), namely: section A4 Information Relays and Networks. The creation of this new unit is in response to the EC's new approach to information and communication policy, and its emphasis on the decentralization of information via information relays and networks.

There are 45 EDCs in the UK, the majority of which are based in university libraries. EDCs receive almost all publicly available EU documentation, in addition to having privileged access to many EC databases. There are four main categories of documentation to be found in an EDC:

- legislation;
- documentation of the legislative and judicial processes;
- research studies, reports and statistical titles; and
- explanatory and background documentation.

In the UK the national representative for EDCs is an EDC librarian who is also a member of the National Co-ordinating Committee of the UK Network of European Relays. This committee seeks to co-ordinate the activities of all relays in the UK, and its membership consists of representation from EDCs, EICs, etc., sectoral relays such as the Law Society and the Trades Union Congress; in addition to the European Parliament Office and the UK Representation of the EC.

Contact between EDC librarians has a long-established tradition in the UK. As the number of EDCs grew in the 1970s through the accession of the UK to the European Community in 1973, EDC librarians felt that there was a need to meet as a group on a formal basis, as a result of which the Association of EDC Librarians was established:

In 1981 the Association of EDC Librarians was set up to help Irish and UK librarians with the aim to promote effective exploitation of Community publications and to act as a channel of communication between EDC/DEP [Depository] librarians and Community institutions on matters relating to information and publications policy (Thomson, 1992).

However, from the late 1980s the UK witnessed the creation of new relays to meet other specific needs, such as EICs for the business community. Thus, in 1991 the Association of EDC Librarians changed its name to the European Information Association (EIA), and expanded its membership

criteria to include anyone working in or who may have an interest in the field of European information.

Presently, EDC librarians are in contact with one another via an E-mail network, called "Eurodoc", which is used to discuss issues affecting EDCs and also to help with answering enquiries and tracing documentation. An AGM for EDC librarians is also organized by and held at the UK Representation Office of the EC in London. In addition to this, the EIA run seminars and training workshops on a national and regional basis. This allows EDC librarians to share experiences, problems and solutions collectively.

In France the situation is quite different. The term "EDC personnel" is used here for university librarians in France who, unlike university librarians in the UK, are Civil Servants. The national contact for EDC personnel is the Head of Documentation at Source d'Europe which is based in Paris. She became responsible for documentation at Source d'Europe in 1991 and from that time has been trying to improve the level of contact between EDCs in France. Previous to this there was very little contact between EDCs. Visits have been made to almost all of the EDCs in France, which have helped in terms of improving communication between EDCs and with Brussels. Annual meetings are being arranged to bring EDC personnel together (the most recent meeting to be held was in April 1996). Although there is no formal training for EDC personnel, many have had the opportunity to attend the three-day training programme for EDCs, hosted by the EC in Brussels. Feedback from those who have attended the training programme has been very positive. When the training programme for EDC librarians has been completed, all 400 "librarians" from all of the EDCs will have attended the course in Brussels. This recent development is a great step forward in terms of contact and communication between centres which have a common function but operate under different circumstances trans-nationally.

Unlike British academic libraries, which have evolved as self-governing institutions over many hundreds of years, French university libraries, after being disbanded during the Revolution, were reinstated by the State only towards the end of the nineteenth century. They are smaller and less well-funded than are university libraries in the UK and most collections are closed-access, including the EDC collections, thus limiting access not only among academics and researchers but also reducing the potential for wider access to the communities around the EDCs' physical sites.

In France, academic librarians are Civil Servants, employed by central government, not by the institutions themselves, as in the UK. If the relevant ministry (Education, Culture or Research, according to the regime in place) does not see provision of EU information as part of its responsibility, it would not consider appointing a librarian for that purpose.

European information provision to those working in local government

In the UK, provision of European information services to local government employees has been largely at the discrete local authority level, where the multitude of legislative measures that accompanied the signing of the Single European Act in 1986, and the partnership-and programme-based approaches that were encouraged in the 1988 reform of the EC's Structural Funds have added significantly to local government officers' European responsibilities. As well as co-ordinating applications for European funds that will benefit its local community, each local authority has become increasingly obliged to implement, enforce and monitor European legislation, and has had to assist the local economy in responding to the opportunities (and, of course, the risks) of the single market.

In order to provide and disseminate the information required to perform these tasks, each UK local authority has adopted one of two basic strategies, they have either:

(1) appointed a European officer (or, in larger authorities, a corporate European unit) with a remit to serve all of the authority's departments and officers, as well as the wider community, and local businesses in particular; or

(2) they have decided on a more decentralized approach, where responsibility for disseminating information, both to internal and external users, is apportioned throughout various departments.

In addition, a number of UK authorities have established a permanent presence in Brussels. Indeed, there are now around 20 offices in Brussels representing the interests of individual UK authorities or consortia. Although a Brussels office is an expensive option (in 1991 the Audit Commission (1991) estimated a minimum annual cost of £100,000), proponents argue that they allow easy access to key EU officials, and can act as early warning systems which provide valuable intelligence on forthcoming legislation, grants and tenders. For example, the recently disbanded Strathclyde Regional Council, which was one of the first UK authorities to establish a Brussels outpost, believed that it had been a major factor in the region's receipt of around £70 million a year from the EC (Vize, 1994). Around one-third of the money received by Strathclyde has gone towards business development initiatives, which have provided grants and loans to small businesses, and established employment and vocational training programmes. Another third has gone towards infrastructure projects, such as improving the area's road and rail links; while the remainder has gone on tourism initiatives and developing some of the region's more deprived areas.

In France, there has been a greater emphasis on co-operation than on competition in funding Brussels representation, particularly in the east and the south of the country. The Grand Est Brussels office, for example, represents the interests of the Lorraine, Alsace, Bourgogne, Champagne-Ardenne and Franche-Comté regions; while the Grand Sud office serves the Aquitaine, Corse, Languedoc-Roussillon, Midi-Pyrénées and Provence-

Alpes-Côte d'Azur regions. Given the high costs involved, this might be the better option. There is even an example of Anglo-French co-operation: the geographical proximity, the similar economic and social profiles, and the common development problems of the Picardie region and Essex County Council led them to establish a joint Brussels office in 1991.

Access to European information is the concern also of those working at the lower levels of French local government such as the département and the commune. The Conseil des Communes et Régions d'Europe (CCRE) is an independent association, funded by membership only, which promotes the awareness of the EU among local authorities throughout Europe. In France, they serve ten regions, 60 départements and 3,000 communes. Among its wide variety of services, the CCRE publishes information on the EU and updated news on European programmes. These publications can be obtained on request by the local authorities, which means that they, in turn, are in a position to inform the general public if there is a demand for it. Additionally, the CCRE assists in twinnings between communes and in the preparation of applications for EC projects and funds.

In a recent European initiative, eight Local Urban Initiative Centres (LUIC) have been established in town halls, urban institutes and non-profit organizations as part of an experimental network across EU member states. The centres are aimed at a broad cross-section defined as "socio-economic actors and city dwellers: in order to demonstrate how information and communication can be transformed into a tool to serve sustainable development in cities" (Directory of Networks, 1995). The objectives of LUICs are to:

- keep different sectors in the population aware of EU policies and initiatives in order that these might be built on and exploited;
- encourage interaction and co-operation between the various sectors within a city; and
- facilitate the exchange between cities of information on problems and solutions.

LUICs will be entitled to receive European documentation, and will have privileged access to European databases and support for attendance at meetings in Brussels. LUICs may provide a forum for communication and interchange between local authorities, the business communities, educational institutions and the general public in the cities. They are, at such an early stage developmentally, however, that it is impossible to comment critically on their implementation to date.

European information for the business community

While businesses can and do approach their local authority European Unit for information, there is also a network across Europe of more than 200 EICs that are aimed more specifically at the business community. All UK EICs adopt a national mission statement:

to provide a comprehensive, high quality European information and business support service to UK firms, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, thereby equipping them to compete effectively in international markets and stimulating overall economic growth.

The role of the EICs is to assist businesses in a number of ways to:

- compete in Europe;
- take advantage of European funds, via a variety of programmes; and
- be aware of and potentially in a position to exploit opportunities in Europe, such as the publicly available contracts advertised on Tenders Electronic Daily (TED).

The EIC is required, by the terms of their contract:

to meet the needs of enterprises, and in particular of SMEs, concerning Community activities and matters as a whole, as well as national provision for implementation; to activate and promote the Euro Info Centre; to assist and direct SMEs in their transactions with Community Institutions; to provide feedback to enable the Commission to improve the service offered to EICs; and to contribute to [EIC] network actions "Euro Info Centres: contract between the Commission and the contractor" (unpublished document).

EICs receive funding of ECU 20,000 per annum, free publications from Brussels and have access to ECHO and Eurobases, the two European online host systems. In return each EIC must staff, accommodate and provide equipment and machinery to support the service. EICs' physical collections tend to be limited in comparison with those of the EDCs which are repositories of the greater proportion of European official publications.

Originally established after a pilot study in 1987, EICs, of which there are now 28 in the UK (including satellite offices), are located mainly in major city centres, such as London, Glasgow and Liverpool. The smallest cities thus served in the UK are Hove, Slough and Telford. There are, however, major cities like Edinburgh, Coventry and Sunderland with no EIC. Many EICs therefore serve a huge business community covering an extensive geographic region. EICs are based in a host organization which already has links with the business community, and the significance of the host is emphasized in the EIC contract where it is dictated that the EIC must integrate administratively and financially with the structure and activities of the host organization as a whole. The host is fairly frequently a Chamber of Commerce, but by no means in every case, as is illustrated in Table I: many others are placed in university libraries or in Business Links offices.

Host	Number
Unspecified European/Business Information Centre	10
Chamber of Commerce	5
Enterprise Agency	1
Business Link	5
University library	5
Public library	2

EICs in the UK were set up with the intention that they become self-financing within a period of years. Charges are imposed for services and there is, therefore, a certain degree of competition between EICs for market share. It is the policy of EICs not to respond to enquiries from students and to charge for any enquiry that requires staff input beyond an immediate response. For this reason, EICs are very aware of the need for promotion and marketing of their services and have developed a much more commercial ethos and philosophy in comparison with other European information relays. The EICs have developed excellent relations with other business support agencies which frequently guide or direct clients to the local EIC. However, there is evidence from a study carried out at The Robert Gordon University (Marcella, Moore, Seton and McConnell, 1996) that, in general, businesses are not aware of the agencies which provide European information. This project, which surveyed 2,000 businesses in rural areas of the north-east of Scotland where there is no EIC, found that the great majority of companies (90.5 per cent) had never approached an EIC or EDC. However, 26 per cent of companies required access to European legislation, 13.2 per cent wanted information about future European developments and 10.3 per cent were interested in European programmes. There was evidence of demand, but also of uncertainty among companies about which organization to approach: companies had approached public libraries for European information, and it is likely that with the launch of the Public Information Relay, and the promotional activities associated with that launch, more companies will approach public libraries. Among the conclusions of the Business Information Plan for Scotland, was the finding that a significant proportion of companies encountered difficulties in sourcing European legislation, and it was recommended that the provision of European information to businesses merited further investigation.

There are 32 EICs spread geographically throughout France, where the emphasis is very much on the Chambres de Commerce as host organization, with 68.7 per cent of EICs placed in Chambres (Table II). This fact may be explained by their greater significance in France than in the UK: in France the Chambre de Commerce is a public institution, with membership compulsory for local businesses: in the UK Chambers are private companies for which promotion and marketing to encourage membership are necessities. French Chambres are larger scale and

wealthier organizations than their UK counterparts. The Paris Chambre is “the biggest in the world with 4,000 employees” (Fischer, 1992) and houses an EIC, as well as a World Trade Centre. In the UK, the support that is given by central government to the network of Enterprise Agencies and associated Business Link agencies, and their remit to stimulate economic development locally, has ensured that they are as, if not more, attractive as hosts for EICs. The Enterprise Agencies, as a national network, may have fewer international links than do the Chambers of Commerce. The Chambre de Commerce in Toulouse, for example, is responsible also for the airport, while the Brest Chambre runs the commercial port. It is interesting to note that at least one unsuccessful bid is known of on the part of a well-established UK public library service’s European Unit to host an EIC.

Host	Number
Chamber of Commerce	22
Unspecified EIC	4
Various business organisations	5
Ministry of Industry and Commerce	1

An E-mail network, linking all EICs and facilitating communication and co-operation among EICs across member states, has been established in an acknowledgement of the need for information about other geographic areas and their business communities.

European information for those living or working in rural areas

Springing from the concept of the meeting place at a crossroads where rural communities might meet to interchange ideas, discuss issues and collaborate on projects, 50 Carrefours or Rural Information Centres supported by Directorate-General X, were set up in the early 1990s, following the publication of the Future of the Rural World (European Commission, 1988) and as a result of the MIRIAM Project. They were designed specifically to support the information and development needs of rural areas. Originally six Carrefours were established in the UK: two in England, two in Scotland, one in Wales and one in Northern Ireland. Their locations are broadly spread geographically, Carrefours being located primarily in county towns with a predominantly rural hinterland. Now only five remain: the Carrefour at Auchincruive in Scotland closed in October 1995 through lack of funding and resources, with enquiries being diverted to the EIC in Glasgow. There have been some indications recently that the role of the Carrefours is being reconsidered by the Commission. Given the small number of Carrefours and their wide geographic dispersal across member states, there are signs of a lack of identity and cohesion among the Carrefours, as well as, and perhaps more seriously, a lack of common purpose. Their user group is equally amorphous: their role is “to stimulate discussion and encourage partnerships between different groups in rural areas”, consisting of businesses, members of the agricultural community, social, cultural or even ethnic groups. Such an amorphous target client

base does not facilitate the development of uniform strategies for the identification of user needs, promotion and delivery of services. It might be argued that they are in a position very similar to that of the LUICs: their remit being to serve any target group in a type of demographic area, where such a user group may be united only by the accident of geography rather than by another, more meaningful, factor.

There are today five Carrefours in the UK and seven in France. In France two Carrefours are hosted by Chambres d'Agriculture, akin to Chambres de Commerce but for the support of the agricultural community. Use of such a host is unknown in the UK, where three of the Carrefours are housed by business support organizations, agencies with which the agricultural community may feel that it has little in common (two French Carrefours have similar enterprise-oriented hosts). One UK Carrefour is housed in a local planning department, while the remaining two are with more appropriate organizations, the Rural Communities Charity and the Clogher Valley Rural Centre. (Interestingly, the defunct UK Carrefour had the most apparently appropriate home of all, the Scottish Agricultural College at Auchincruive.) In France, it is often the responsibility of local cooperatives, such as the Maison du Vin and Maison du Fromage, to inform farmers and wholesalers on European matters.

To assume that seven meeting places spread across the huge geographic mass of France are sufficient to enable a real forum for interchange to develop, is highly optimistic. The lack of public discussion of the success, strategically or even operationally, of the Carrefour network, would suggest that the concept, however attractive metaphorically, has failed in functional terms to live up to early expectations. It may be that the idea of a crossroads has greater merit in a "virtual" rather than a physical environment. The whole point of a meeting place at a crossroads relates to the fact that those who meet have real reasons, relating to their everyday lives, for passing that way.

European information for the general public

The Public Information Relay (PIR) for the provision of EU information to the general public was launched in the UK in September 1994. The UK is the first member state to implement such a system in response to the desire on the part of the EC to get reliable information about Europe, its activities and opportunities, to the general public in an accessible and convenient manner, in support of the move towards greater transparency and openness in European government, the need for which was signalled first by the Sutherland report (Sutherland, 1992). Sutherland found that the major obstacle to achieving consensus lay less in the lack of information than in the lack of transparency with which existing information was disseminated to the individual.

The EC saw public libraries in the UK as being well-placed to provide such a service, noting the "long-established and well-organized public information provision service, mainly based in public libraries" (European

Commission, 1994). Public libraries have professional and experienced staff, easily accessed premises, equipment, and a long tradition of public service in information service delivery. They may also have very considerable existing resources which complement and build on the material provided by the EC to libraries participating in the PIR. Since 1993 an annual conference, known as Stoke Rochford, has been held to discuss strategies to overcome the information gap between Brussels and the general public. The PIR is one result of these deliberations.

The UK has responded enthusiastically to the initiative. The criterion for membership of the relay was that all members should already be competently providing some form of European information service to the general public on a non-profit basis. Figures show that by 1996, 154 (of the, then, 167) public library authorities had joined. Many libraries were in fact providing European information prior to joining: however, membership of the relay ensures a higher profile for European information services, provides participating libraries with a level of support and imposes on them certain duties.

The PIR has yet to be implemented in any other member state. France's public library service is less immediately ready to take on the role of PIR member, because while public libraries in France see themselves as community services, this function is regarded as a primarily cultural one. This is why they are not bound to offer a reference service to their readers. As explained later in the paper, there is no legislation to regulate public library services.

The absence of such an institutional service, able to act as an information centre for the ordinary citizen, may explain why France has not developed a national strategy for the dissemination of information on the EU. This situation has given way to the creation of a multitude of associations engaged in the provision of EU information aimed at the general public. They are the result of local initiatives and their services vary according to the amount of support they receive from their local authority and according to local priorities. However, their actions may be limited and short-lived because they do not enjoy any institutional backing. These services can be found in organizations which are already offering a community service, such as youth and job centres, and even in a small number of municipal libraries (e.g. in Lyon, Nantes and Rennes). Furthermore, EU information seems to be unevenly distributed. Certain areas, such as south-west France, appear to be more dynamic than are others. The Institut Européen of Montpellier, for example, plays an active role, not only in the provision of EU information, but also in organizing seminars, conferences and exhibitions, and in publishing a whole range of material on European topics. The Fédération Française des Maisons de l'Europe comprises 28 member associations across France, some of which have operated for as long as 30 years, and, according to the information supplied, the creation of new centres is gathering pace.

To compensate for the lack of European information policy at national level, an attempt at centralization has been made with the creation in Paris of Sources d'Europe, a major information centre jointly funded by

the EC and the French Government. Its creators saw this centre as being the major destination in France for any request on European information whether it comes from businesses, professional bodies, individuals and even the already-mentioned associations providing information at a local level, including the EIC and EDC. In terms of abundance of information and originality of presentation, this centre is unique, but its accessibility to the general public is limited to Paris and its suburbs. It is located inside one of the most recent "monuments" of Paris, la Grande Arche, in the prestigious business district of La Défense. Facilities include a library, a news room, a video room, an exhibition hall, a conference room, book shops and a coffee shop. The centre hosts conferences, workshops, training sessions, guided tours for the general public, professional associations and clubs, and tours specially designed for schools and colleges.

The Minitel, as a medium of EU information for the general public in France merits special mention. This video-text service has been very successful due to the price-control policy of the Ministry of Telecommunications and the dynamic marketing of its creator, France Telecom. Originally intended to be an online telephone directory, the Minitel now offers more than 20,000 services on line, some of which, for example travel bookings, bank transactions, etc., are interactive. It has become a familiar part of French life, with more than 16 million terminals installed so far. It can be consulted at home, at work and in public places, such as hotels and shopping malls.

The European Parliament (EP) office in Paris has produced a Minitel service in conjunction with the Commission's Information Office. It contains information concerning EC institutions, as well as the Maastricht Treaty, the single market, the common agricultural policy and other Community policies. The Minitel system contains also the EP's plenary session agendas and information relating to parliamentary committees and delegations. European elections are held via the system, as also is information for those wishing to address petitions to the EP. The service is comparable to the recent initiative of the London Representation of the European Commission in the UK in developing an Internet Worldwide Web site.

Factors which may have affected the development of European information delivery in France and the UK

This study has sought to highlight the areas where France and the UK differ in providing EU information to the professional and the non-professional public in a non-political environment. The national Civil Service, the academic, business and rural communities have access to EU information in a manner which reflects the institutional structures of each country as well as their business and academic culture. However, the major difference is that France has not devised a means of information dissemination at street level, through which ordinary citizens can have easy and free access to EU information.

This could be explained by the fact that French people as individuals do not perceive a need to inquire about the EU. France was one of the first countries to join the European Community. Being "European" is a long-established reality for the French, and education on the importance of a united Europe was a priority in the early days of the Community's existence, focusing initially on reconciliation with Germany. This reality has translated itself into a wide range of European activities, such as twinning between local authorities, even in the smallest communes of a few hundred inhabitants, and in all sorts of cultural and academic exchanges. The French have been aware also, from the very beginning, of the political importance of European integration and have therefore relied on their central and local administrations to process the information published by the Community and to act accordingly in their interests. The French have a very "corporate" attitude, especially among the business and farming communities, unlike the UK which has a more "liberal" and individualistic approach based on the free market tradition. French people rely heavily on their representatives to deal with matters affecting their lives; either in their local elected government (the smallest unit being the commune, of which there are 36,000 for the whole country) or in their professional organizations, such as co-operatives, Chambres de Commerce and unions. These professional bodies are authorized by law to act individually: they have duties and obligations towards their members in placing them in a strong position in the EU competitive market. Furthermore, it is possible to argue that without institutional support, such as the UK's public library system, it is difficult to develop a comprehensive strategy for EU information provision at the street level. Given the nature of the existing French public library system, it is unlikely that this situation can be changed.

When comparing the UK and France, one must understand that there are two ways of interpreting the "public library". In the Anglo-Saxon world, it refers to "any library", whatever its origin, which has as an objective the provision of a direct service to all members of the general public. In the UK such libraries have been given a legal status through the Museums and Public Libraries Act of 1964 for England and Wales and the Local Government (Scotland) Act of 1973 which make clear that each local authority becomes a library authority with a duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library and information service for everyone living within its boundaries. In France, the term "public library" refers only to the fact that the library depends on an administrative authority. However, the idea of a public library system serving the general public at large is fairly recent; it has been developed only since the Second World War with the creation of a department in the Ministry of Culture – Direction du Livre et de la Lecture (DLL) – concerned with promoting a reading public. This mission was handed over to the existing municipal libraries (Bibliothèque Municipale (BM)), to ensure that all the population has access to its printed heritage. This service was supplemented by the creation of a network of Bibliothèques Centrales de Prêt (BCP) which act as depots of collections for lending purposes. A fleet of mobile libraries (bibliobuses) reach out to communities of less than 10,000 inhabitants. One might assume that the BMs would be the centres best-suited to provide such a service as the dissemination of European information.

However, the mission of the BM has long been geared towards conservation as a direct result of the large-scale confiscation of private collections that took place during the French Revolution. Suddenly a huge cultural heritage was made available to the community, and the main objectives of library staff have always been to catalogue and preserve their ancient and precious collections. As a result, public needs have long been overlooked. Furthermore, although each BM depends on its commune for funding, this authority is not obliged by law to provide a reference service as it is the case in the UK. Reference services in France are loosely regulated by the DLL which sends inspectors and funds the libraries according to the extent to which they have followed its guidelines. These guidelines do not specify a reference service, and this is reflected in the number of opening hours: an average of 19 hours per week spread over four opening days. Although BMs have successfully evolved from addressing the needs of an elite of researchers to serving the general public, they see their role as primarily cultural, not social. This structure does not lend itself to the creation of a general information service in the municipal libraries.

As can be seen from the discussion above, the EIC and EDC networks in France, with some minor variations, serve a population similar to that in the UK, but spread over a much larger territory. Huge areas (as large as Scotland) in the centre and the south-west of France are without a recognized EU information centre. The pattern reflects the administrative structure of France. The EIC is to be found in the main city of each région. The région is the largest unit of local government in France: 22 régions were created in the early 1980s as part of the policy of political and administrative decentralization. Artificially created, they do not necessarily reflect cultural identity, their main role being to promote and co-ordinate the local economy, free from the constraints of government bureaucracy. They are in direct contact with the relevant "directorates" in Brussels and therefore escape national/state intervention. Major regional projects, such as civil engineering works, are the result of direct bilateral collaboration between a région and the relevant directorate in Brussels, a collaboration that is outside of the traditional administrative framework. Access to European information is therefore an important asset in the competition for European funding, and this is why French EICs are often located in the head office of the région's administration.

Conclusions

This study has identified a number of ways in which the implementation of European information policy via relays and networks differs as between France and the UK. Yet Marcelino Oreja stated in the Preface to the Directory of Networks (1995) that the Commission "is particularly concerned to make sure there is consistency between centres and to ensure regional balance in their distribution". However, from this brief discussion of European information provision in two member states it can be argued that a remotely imposed consistency across all member states may not be a desirable or a feasible solution. A sound structure that works well in the UK may face operational and cultural barriers in another

national environment. Rather, for each member state a careful appraisal must be made of the options for service delivery to a particular target group of the populace; and it should take into account such factors as:

- national administrative structures; •
- patterns of study, degree-course content and research in higher education;
- the historical development of the public library and perceptions of its present role in society;
- business community's attitudes to information and the established role of business support services; and
- the nature of its rural communities – their extent, population, economy and culture.

To focus on one example: in the UK, the implementation of the PIR has been successful and is likely to provide an accessible point of contact for the majority of the general public, although there must remain some concern about the needs of those who are not members of the public library services. The PIR thus joins an existing network of relays, and its success must be gauged as part of this overall provision and in the light of the long-established tradition of public library service provision in the UK. In France, European Community information is being seen increasingly as part of information for the community or citizen. Local authorities presently are considering the full range of existing publicly-funded services at the authority level in terms of their capacity and potential in the provision of access to information about the European Community to the general public. In three instances local libraries have been identified as the appropriate point. However, there is a long way still to go before there is an acceptance generally in France of the potential of public libraries in providing information for the citizen of Europe. To adopt such an approach without critical thought and without a careful consideration of its likely impact would be of little benefit.

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