Cooperation as a Solution to the Problems of European Documentation

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Intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) such as the European Communities, OECD, NATO, the United Nations and its family of specialised agencies are essentially a twentieth century phenomenon largely created as a result of the impetus given to international cooperation by the experience of two world wars. During the postwar period IGOs have proliferated and have played an increasingly prominent part in the day to day life of the international community. Their fields of competence now embrace political, economic, social, military, technical, cultural and other areas of activity. In view of this diversity of interest and the range of the resources at their disposal both within the parent organisation and as a consequence of their privileged position vis-a-vis member governments, the publications that emanate from such organisations form a rich and authoritative source of data for academic specialists, research workers, industrialists and businessmen. However, despite their impeccable credentials it is still too often the case that reports and studies prepared or commissioned by such organisations go unnoticed or fail to attract the attention their contents deserve. This brief paper describes the modest cooperative efforts that are being employed in the United Kingdom in an attempt to stimulate increased and more efficient use of the resources made available by just one such intergovernmental organisation.

The organisation to which I refer is the European Communities, the effective exploitation of whose published output is made all the more necessary by that organisation's unique role in the legislative process of member countries. Typically, IGOs seek to encourage and promote harmonisation and coordination of policy by means of cooperation, the elaboration of international standards and the force of international opinion. They issue recommendations and adopt resolutions but these have no legal binding force. The main institutions of the European Communities, on the other hand, have been invested by the founding treaties with the power to make Community law which can, in defined areas, override and supersede existing national legislation. Membership of this supranational organisation has added a new dimension to the national legislative process in member countries and has generated a fresh body of legal and associated documentation whose bibliographical characteristics and potential as a source of authoritative information are less familiar but no less significant than the various series of publications that emanate from the governments of individual member states. In addition to this legislative documentation the European Communities, in common with most other IGOs, pursue a vigorous publications programme as a means of publicising their work and disseminating information gathered during the course of their activities.

One of the ways in which the European Communities seek to attract a wider audience for their publications is to grant the status of European Documentation Centre (EDC) to institutions of higher education whose teaching and research programmes would benefit from access to extensive collections of Community publications and documents. Since 1964 the Commission of the European Communities has created nearly two hundred EDCs in member countries.
and more than fifty in other parts of the world. These documentation centres receive free of charge and in the official language of their choice, practically the full range of official publications produced by the European Communities together with a significant amount of documentation that would otherwise receive only limited distribution. The general aim is to foster European Studies as a subject in the curriculum of universities and other institutions of higher education on the assumption that this will in turn encourage the intellectual appreciation of the ideals embodied in the Treaty of Rome.

There are forty-five such European Documentation Centres in the United Kingdom almost all situated in either university or polytechnic libraries, all in receipt of essentially the same substantial range of publications, all facing broadly the same series of problems concerning the organisation and effective utilisation of resources. However, the surprising thing is that despite the communality of their interests and objectives there has until recently been virtually no liaison between EDCs, no forum for the exchange of experience or for the coordination of activities. The Commission has made tentative efforts in this direction but with little real commitment or effect. It has, for instance, arranged a number of national meetings of EDC librarians to provide an opportunity for the discussion of matters of mutual concern but these are too infrequent to be of more than passing value. It was resolved at the last meeting in October 1974 that such meetings would be annual; we are still awaiting the next meeting. It was also agreed at that meeting that the Commission would produce a regular newsletter for EDC librarians. Precisely three issues have appeared since 1974, each one shorter than the one before and then produced only with the generous assistance of the University Association for Contemporary European Studies. To date the evidence suggests that the Commission is more interested in the mechanics of distribution and supply than with what happens to the publications when they reach their destination.

Such are the bibliographical characteristics of the publications received from the European Communities, the organisational dilemmas posed by their receipt in large numbers and the traditional reluctance with which library users approach official publications that merely to ensure an uninterrupted supply of material is not enough to guarantee the effective use of EDC resources and the success of the EDC concept. In view of the Commission's reluctance to respond to these problems with positive central leadership, EDC librarians have themselves recently taken the initiative by establishing a framework within which they can work in concert towards improvements in the service they offer. In both the North of England and in the Midlands informal regional groups have been established in the past year or so with membership drawn from the various European Documentation Centres in the area. The Midlands regional group, of which I am convener, consists of librarians from about twelve EDCs and intends to meet about three or four times a year, visiting each constituent EDC in turn. The general aim is to provide a forum for the exchange of information, to facilitate and promote local cooperation and to act as a pressure group in support of improved bibliographical standards in Community publications and in support of the more efficient administration of the EDC scheme. There is already close cooperation between the two existing groups and there are plans for national coverage to be completed by the formation of a similar regional group in the South of England.

Although both regional groups are of very recent origin a number of cooperative projects are in train. A specific example from each of the general areas in which the groups are active will illustrate the ways in which they hope to make a significant, practical contribution to the day to day efficiency of participating EDCs.
Firstly, I will give you an example of group cooperation as a means of alleviating some of the problems associated with the bibliographical characteristics displayed by Community publications. EDC librarians, and indeed librarians who have a more casual acquaintance with Community publications, have long viewed with disquiet the European Communities' rather fickle recognition of generally accepted bibliographical standards in their publications. The tardy and spasmodic use of ISBNs and ISSN; the poor quality and irregularly produced catalogues of publications; the frequent, and at times infuriatingly minor, changes of serial titles; the unannounced death of some serial titles, the divorce or marriage of others and the occasional birth, particularly among Eurostat serials, of what may legitimately be called bastard monographs all pose problems which are not in themselves insuperable but which collectively do nothing to dispel the documentation's reputation for complexity and inadequate bibliographical control.

Of particular concern is the lack of any tradition of adequate subject indexing in Community publications. Such notable titles as the Official Journal of the European Communities and the General report on the activities of the European Communities contain a wealth of detailed information on a multitude of specific aspects of the Communities' work. The former possesses an alphabetical index and methodological table of arguable utility; the latter has a detailed contents list but no index. Convinced that easy access to the information contained in Community publications is equally as important as their original conception, completion and publication, EDC librarians in the Northern group have formed a working party to investigate the feasibility of local cooperative indexing. A thesaurus of terms has been compiled and tests are being conducted to discover its practical suitability. If trials are successful then individual EDCs will assume responsibility for using the thesaurus to index material in allocated subject areas. Taken together their contributions will hopefully provide a useful working tool until such time as the Commission can be persuaded of the absolute necessity for such important publications as the Official Journal to be provided with adequate subject and other indexes.

My second example is to do with cooperation as a tool for improving the routine administration of European Documentation Centres. Although the Office for Official Publications was established in 1969 with nominal responsibility for the sale and distribution of Community publications, institutions within the Community framework retain considerable autonomy with regard to their publications policy and practice. A considerable proportion of material still originates directly from, and is only obtainable from, main institutions such as the Commission of the European Communities and the European Parliament, from other institutions such as the Economic and Social Committee and the European Investment Bank and from departments and offices within these institutions. Consequently, the Commission's Directorate-General for Information, which has overall responsibility for EDC policy, has to depend on the goodwill and cooperation of other Directorates-General and of publishing outlets in other Community institutions for supplies of publications and documents in correct language editions to distribute to almost two hundred and fifty EDCs located throughout the world.

The decentralised nature of Community publishing imposes a tremendous strain on the coordinating resources of the Directorate-General for Information and is the source of many of the frustrations experienced by individual EDC librarians in their relations with the Commission. There have been, for instance, complaints about the fact that the multiplicity of mailing lists used to determine the distribution of material makes it just as likely that a library will receive two or no copies of an item as one and makes it difficult for librarians to decide from which source to claim missing parts. EDC librarians in the Midlands have addressed themselves to a related problem, the lack of regular and comprehensive checklists of material distributed to EDCs. The Commission has made occasional and sometimes contradictory state-
ments concerning the entitlement of EDCs to certain categories of material but always couched in rather general terms. What is required is a regular and detailed consolidated list of publications against which EDC librarians can check the comprehensiveness of their holdings. Consequently, the Midlands regional group is taking steps to compile its own unofficial entitlement list. Lists of serial titles received by each EDC are being compiled and compared so that gaps in the range of titles received by individual libraries can be identified and steps taken to fill them. Consideration is being given to the collation of a definitive list of serial titles and its transformation into a union list containing details of the holdings of participating libraries.

A third example of local cooperation concerns the fundamental organisational problems that designation of EDC status can create in a library whose procedures are not hospitable to the regular receipt of large quantities of official publications. The Commission is very definitely of the opinion that the documentation it makes available to European Documentation Centres is best exploited by its organisation as a separate collection together with associated material on European integration. Although the Commission makes separate treatment a condition of EDC status the reality in the United Kingdom is that librarians have never felt obliged to adhere to the letter of the law, although most do in fact observe its spirit. Despite the existence of a handful of libraries that follow an integrated approach the majority of British libraries recognise that the characteristics of the documentation are such that satisfactory solutions to the administrative and reader service problems they pose can be best found in the context of the special collection. However, there is immense diversity in the detailed arrangements individual libraries have made for handling and exploiting material received from the European Communities. Take cataloguing for instance. Practices vary from the standard application of AACR to generate records for the main library catalogue at one extreme, to the replacement of library catalogues by printed catalogues of publications suitably marked to show local holdings at the other extreme, with numerous variations on the theme of separate catalogues based on simplified local cataloguing rules occupying the more populous middle ground. Equally varied classification policies include the use of general classification schemes, special schemes such as that devised by the Commission for the European Bibliography, local schemes based primarily on the principle of provenance and shelf arrangements that avoid the use of subject classification altogether. Although the priorities and requirements of the local situation must largely determine the nature of arrangements made for both the staffing and organisation of such collections it is safe to assume, I think, that many of the organisational problems encountered by EDC librarians are common to more than one institution and could be solved more effectively and economically by cooperative effort. Regional groups intend to seek optimum ways of handling and organising collections of Community documentation. To this end the Midlands group has decided to hold its meetings in each EDC in turn so that members can see how each library has responded to EDC status and learn from its experience. At some point in the near future it is hoped to consider the possibility of more ambitious projects such as the construction of a special classification scheme for European Documentation Centres.

Finally, as far as regional groups are concerned I should mention the newsletter compiled in the Northern group and circulated to members of both regional groups. An unpretentious newsheet which is the product, like all other regional group activities, of purely voluntary effort, it provides a valuable service as a means of communication between members. It acts as a vehicle for disseminating information about group activities, offers librarians the chance to request advice or pass on information to colleagues
No paper on cooperation in the field of European Communities publications would be complete without brief mention of two other developments that have recently occurred on a national level. The first concerns the actual exploitation of European Communities material in an academic library. I think it would be true to say that EDC librarians have in the past viewed their obligations primarily in terms of organisation rather than of exploitation. This can be clearly illustrated by looking at staffing arrangements made by host institutions to cope with EDC matters. Librarians have typically addressed themselves to organisational requirements, that is to say the staffing implications of handling the material, cataloguing, classifying, and processing it. Few libraries make any specific allocation of senior staff time for reader service activities as such. There is a tendency to forget that the separate collection is only a means to an end, the end being to maximise its use and the means being an arrangement which allows for a specialist to be interposed between reader and documentation.

However, now that most host institutions have given at least rudimentary organisation to their EDC collections there are signs of a shift towards better exploitation of the material, as witnessed by the numerous guides to EDC resources that have been produced in individual libraries. One of the most valuable products of cooperative action in this area has been the production by the University of Salford Library, in collaboration with the Universities of Lancaster and Dundee, of a tape/slide "Guide to European Community documents". This package, produced under the SCONUL programme of modular tape/slide guides to various library services, is an extremely professional production of excellent quality in terms of both content and presentation. It consists of one hundred and forty eight colour slides with a synchronised tape commentary of thirty five minutes length divided into three separate parts. It describes the organisation, aims and activities of the European Communities before presenting a detailed commentary on the various categories of publication and document received in European Documentation Centres. I extol the virtues of this production not because the Librarian of the University of Salford happens to be in the audience but because I think that the widespread purchase of this guide by librarians in the United Kingdom and abroad will give a welcome boost to user education programmes in an area into which readers have been traditionally reluctant to venture without persuasion and expert guidance.

My final comments are to do with a forthcoming development that may, and hopefully will, have a major impact upon the shape of Communities publishing in the future and help ease some of the problems referred to earlier in this paper. The library profession in the United Kingdom is, in common with most professions, conservative and slow-moving. However, it has gradually come to terms with the implications for the profession of the United Kingdom's membership of the European Communities. This awakening of interest has found expression, for example, in the organisation of a continuing series of short courses on Communities publications which have attracted a steady stream of librarians from all sectors of the profession. Indeed, these meetings have been instrumental in focusing the attention of the Library Association on the need for improvements in the standard of publications issued by the European Communities. As a result of opinions expressed at these meetings the Library Association has established a working party to investigate the situation and has invited the Commission to participate in its deliberations. The fact that the Commission, through its Consultative Committee on Publications, has agreed to send representatives from this autumn bodes well for the future. Experience has shown that a similar Library Association/HMSO working party has had a considerable impact on government publishing practices. It is to
be hoped that the new working party will provide the opportunity for meaningful discussions at a level that will allow professional opinion to be taken into account when policy decisions regarding publications are being taken within the Commission of the European Communities.

DISCUSSION

Mr. A.C. Bubb: The Library Association Working Party is aiming at the organization of documents or publications. Problems being dealt with by local groups should not arise in all cases if publications were better controlled.

Hopkins: I agree that local and national activities are complementary.

Mr. M.W. Hill: Is UK experience with the EDC’s unique? What is the situation in the other member countries.

Mr. G.A. Hamel: We have not felt ourselves able to be bound by the rules that the Commission wished to impose.

Dr. D. Shaw: Are the EDC’s supplied with all publications or just a selection in specialist fields?

Hopkins: As far as is known, all distributed literature is sent to all centres.

Shaw: Then, surely, most librarians will weed out those publications outside the broad interests of their institutions! This must apply particularly to research institutions.

Hopkins: There is no plan at present to select publications and send them to a specific centre. All EDC’s are entitled to receive all European Community Documentation which is distributed.

Bubb: European Documentation Centres are set up possibly as information (even propaganda) centres. It was assumed that they would help to encourage European Studies and that documents would be retained.

Hamel: How do you actually operate the documentation centre? Do you obey the implied rules? Who uses the material?

Hopkins: Loughborough integrates the material into the rest of the material at the library. A special collection could help the better exploitation of this special material, and may allow the library to afford to pay a specialist to keep the material in good order.