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International Dateline-From the UK-UK Serials Group Annual Conference, European Federation of Serials Groups

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This year the UK Serials Group Annual Conference was a combined event with the European Federation of Serials Groups, whose current chairman is Claus Vesterager Pedersen of the State and University Library, Aarhus, Denmark. The conference took place on the campus of the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology on 12-14 April, and attracted 525 delegates, making it by far the largest conference in the history of the UKSG. Over 16% of the delegates were from outside of the UK, with a substantial contingent from France. There were also more exhibitors this year, including Project Muse and Science.

One of the innovations this year was that the workshops were run three times over the course of the conference, which gave manageable numbers in each session to facilitate some degree of interactivity. There were the usual product review sessions, timed to exactly seven minutes by a number of competent chairmen. As to the European Quiz, the discos and the dinner, I had better remain silent.

As with any conference this size, views on individual papers vary enormously, but the attendance at all the sessions was high (though the attractions of Manchester are not quite the same as Charlestown) and few delegations were observed falling asleep. Some were very good, including Albert Prior (Swets & Zeitlinger) who gave the results of a small scale survey he had conducted among nearly 40 publishers about their attitudes to electronic journal delivery. What was very interesting about this survey was the extent to which publishers are starting to see pay-per-article as a potential revenue source that is not affecting ongoing subscription revenues. Thirty-seven percent of the publishers in the sample already offered this option, and 14% were considering doing so. Also from the survey came the messages that electronic subscriptions are increasingly being unbundled, and that most publishers are still negotiating subscription packages on a case-by-case basis.

I was also interested in a paper by Diann Rusch-Feja, of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, in which she outlined the various academic consortia that are being set up in Germany. The funding and management of universities in Germany is carried out at a State (Lander) level, and this makes it very difficult to establish anything like the NESLI scheme in the UK. Indeed there are some legal issues around the creation and activities of these consortia that seem quite daunting. On the good news front, a German serials group is in the stages of being formed, but here again there are some legal issues that need to be settled in determining the constitution of the group.

David Pullinger, formerly with Nature, gave a very interesting paper on the differences between the way that science and humanities researchers use electronic journals, and Robert Welham, Royal Society of Chemistry, shed some light on the SPARC initiative. Charles Oppenheim (Loughborough University) was again in excellent form on copyright and other legal issues.

The presentation by Julia Chruszez (University of Manchester) on NESLI was noteworthy for how little she said about the problems that NESLI has experienced in getting the project off the ground. So far only Blackwell Science have signed a full agreement, and although there is a lot of talking going on, it is now getting close to the 99/00 subscription year with not a great deal to show for the first year of effort, though I do know that both Swets (as Managing Agent) and the University of Manchester have put all their best efforts behind the project. However, they are dealing with publishers!

On the exhibitor front, not a great deal to report, though Blackwell Information Services has signed an agreement with Ingenta (ex BIDS) to develop their electronic subscription management systems. All the subscription agents are now providing quite a substantial amount of information to support their customers, relating to licence agreements in particular.

Overall a very good conference (though I am on the Marketing Committee of UKSG, which would not have happened without a huge commitment of time from Jill Tolson (UKSG), Christine Fyfe (University of Warwick), Tony Kidd (University of Glasgow) and Terry Morrow (Ingenta Ltd). The papers will be published in the July and November issues of Serials, and plans are already being made for the 23rd UKSG Annual Conference on 10-12 April 2000 at the University of Keele. There is nowhere near the same amount of room, so do look out for details on the UKSG Web site at http://www.uksg.org.