Chapter IX

Towards the People’s Network: UK Developments and the Work of the EARL Consortium

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This chapter explores Web-based public library networking developments within the context of the United Kingdom. The political context in recent years has led to plans to deliver a national Public Library Network, promising innovative new services to combat social exclusion and facilitate lifelong learning. The road to realizing the vision of a People’s Network is still far from a reality and many of the issues currently facing the sector demand enormous amounts of coordination and cooperation in order to ensure that public libraries remain at the heart of the political agenda. It is suggested that the work of the EARL Consortium, its achievements and approach to library networking present an important model to shape the roll-out of the national network. Once delivered, the United Kingdom will arguably hold a place amongst the world leaders in the global information society.

INTRODUCTION

Until recent years networking developments such as online access to a range of services including data hosts, view data systems, local systems, interlending and document delivery had been the focus of public library research and implementation in the United Kingdom. As such the development of Internet-based technologies has entered...
the scene far later than our counterparts in the academic sector and other countries such as the United States. This chapter explores the shift in focus towards Internet-based technologies within United Kingdom public libraries, which has been largely driven by a huge political movement to ensure that the United Kingdom holds a place on the global information stage. Plans to implement a national Public Library Network and deliver innovative new services to the nation and beyond promise to promote the role of public libraries to previously unimagined levels and arguably place the United Kingdom among the world leaders in the global information society.

In the last 18 months or so, public libraries in the United Kingdom have witnessed unprecedented levels of government support, undoubtedly confirming that this is the most radical and dynamic phase in the entire history of the public library service. The first part of this chapter introduces the political context which led to the publication of several key reports subsumed within the wider political shift towards an “information society.” Dominant themes in these reports, which are central to the public library movement, have highlighted the importance of lifelong learning and social inclusion, and emphasize the role that public libraries will play within the United Kingdom and in the global information society. An overview of the most critical of these reports is used to demonstrate the timeliness of delivering a Public Library Network.

This is followed by an exploration of early experiments in public library Web-based networking that have helped to propagate this defining moment, focussing in particular on the work of the EARL Consortium. It is shown that EARL, the Consortium for Public Library Networking, has played an important and sustained role in lobbying for the network and has contributed towards achieving the vision of the Public Library Network. The work of the Consortium has also developed a showcase of Web services, to demonstrate that public libraries and their valued cultural assets form a fundamental component of the information society and the global information superhighway. Much of the success of the Consortium is attributed to its unique national yet local perspective, drawing upon the collaborative efforts of nearly 75 percent of library authorities in the United Kingdom. An overview of the range of services which aim to show the potential for using the Internet demonstrates an approach to library networking that serves as a model for others to follow.
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