

Comment by Erland Kolding Nielsen ,Director General, The Royal Library, Denmark, at CDNL in Berlin 6th of August 2003

NATIONAL LIBRARIES AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

First of all thanks to Peter Lor for a most stimulating paper which says a good deal of what is to be said. Therefore, it is difficult to expand on the lines and perspective of the paper.

In consequence, my contribution shall be a comment and a recommendation on how to overcome the digital divide on the background of the experiences of a small country of no more than 5 mill. inhabitants, normally categorized as one of the more developed ones.

In Denmark ten years ago we foresaw and hence tried to anticipate a possibly digital divide long before the term or phrase seems to have been invented. A group of big research libraries, including the two national libraries, set out already in 1994 to try to overcome the problems of a possible digital divide in terms of technology, infrastructure, access and contents and the means and investments needed for avoiding such a digital divide.

The National Electronic Research Library of Denmark and CultureNet Denmark

From this initiative originated the great joint project of the Danish government, especially the ministries of culture, research and education, called "The National Electronic Research Library of Denmark" (abbreviation: DEF [Danmarks Elektroniske Forskningsbibliotek]), in which all Danish research libraries and some public libraries take part. The National Libraries and The National Library Authority (a national planning and coordinating government body) have all played a crucial role.

You can easily find information about the project on the web, also in English, e.g. through the homepage of the Royal Library > www.kb.dk <.

The project ran from 1998 – 2002 and comprised all aspects of the digital development ranging from building up the technological infrastructure among libraries and universities, over upgrading of library systems, to providing contents in terms of national licenses, digitalization of e.g. scholarly journals, and developing user facilities. 210 mill. DK (c. 30 mill. Euro) were invested by the government and probably just as much from the libraries involved.

From the beginning of this year the National Electronic Research Library of Denmark (DEF) was made permanent and has now got a special government grant annually. It has been characterized as greatest success of the Danish research libraries ever since the opening of the Royal Library to the public in 1793.

Another planned joint government project has also contributed to bridge the digital divide especially between libraries, archives and museums: that is "CultureNet Denmark", also started in the middle of the 1990's. It provided money, incentives, technological infrastructure and services

especially to medium and smaller museums, archives and cultural research institutions. The National Library played an important role, as it for several years provided the technological platform and services to the network. It has become the model of similar networks in other Nordic countries in recent years.

What are the characteristics of these projects?

Both can be characterized as the results of *planned, mutual, and cooperative* initiatives of the library sector, including the national libraries and government authorities. They are *network* based, it is not a central institution set up as such, but the big institutions have – and will have to in the future – played an important, if not a crucial role in planning, performing, coordinating, and securing the building up of the network.

Almost all libraries, i.e. several hundreds, relevant have through different means and methods been persuaded to join and participate. In a way it has been build up by way of a combination of top down and bottom up processes and activities, which, I think, is typical Danish.

So overcoming the digital divide demands, at least seen from our experiences' point of view, the following:

1. Cooperation, cooperation and cooperation.
2. Cooperation requires also the will and ability at least to a certain degree to set a side individual institutions' aspirations or even imperial wishes, also in the case of the national libraries. You do not grow smaller in this process, but you often become more important.
3. It is of the utmost importance that big libraries, including national libraries, take the initiative and the lead, i.e. provide leadership to the library world, otherwise it will not be done or – perhaps even worse - others will do it for you.

Thank you for your attention