

## Infomedia 98

### Seminar: Information on the European Union

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**Lecture:** Trends in European Union information policy

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## **Text of Lecture**

### **Introduction**

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure and privilege to have been invited to take part in this seminar on *Information in the European Union* as part of *Infomedia'98*. I would like to thank the organisers and, in particular, Jitka Hradilova, for the invitation and to congratulate you for holding this seminar at this important time in the history of the Czech Republic as negotiations begin for your country to join the European Union.

Preparations for membership of the European Union, and subsequently membership, will have profound implications for the Czech Republic. While many will feel that membership is a positive, logical and necessary development for your country, there may well be others with more ambivalent views. Certainly, at times, there will be difficult decisions to face.

What is clear is that there will be a great need for information. A need for information about the European Union is, what are its objectives, what are its Institutions, how it makes policy, what are those policies and how will they affect the Czech Republic. The information that is provided must be timely, factual, accurate, and adapted to the needs of the person or persons who receive or request the information.

The information sources of national governments and international organisations are often complicated in their subject matter, publishing patterns and bibliographical control. The information sources of the European Union are certainly no exception, with the additional challenges associated with a multinational and multilingual organisation of translations and significant use of acronyms and jargon.

This is a great challenge for the information profession of librarians and documentalists. Indeed, I would say by way of introduction to my talk this afternoon that:

*All information professionals in the Czech Republic need to take the European dimension into their work*

That *is* a great challenge, but it is also a great *opportunity*, for librarians and other information professionals in the Czech Republic to play a genuinely significant role in helping your country, and its people, understand and take advantage of what EU membership can offer.

In my talk this afternoon I would like to discuss the following subjects, which I hope you will find of interest and relevance. First of all to look at the role of information in the European Union.. Secondly, to touch upon the debate that has occurred in the 1990s in the EU Member States on the subject of 'openness and transparency'. Thirdly, to see what the practical outcome of that debate has been in terms of new initiatives. And finally, to highlight the ever increasing role of electronic sources of EU information and, in particular, the spectacular rise of the Internet as a significant source of information.

### **The role of information in the European Union**

So, to my first topic this afternoon, the role of information in the European Union.

Other speakers this afternoon will be talking in practical terms of the European information products or the European information services which they can provide. As a prelude to that I would like to stand back a little and look at some of the issues currently affecting the role of information in the European Union.

The last five years have seen much high-level discussion in the European Union of questions relating to information and communication, openness and transparency in the European Union, in the context of the difficulties associated with the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and 1993.

- ***The need to inform***

Why does the EU have an information policy or, at least, an information framework which consists of a multiplicity of initiatives taken by a number of Institutions and departments within Institutions?

Hopefully, of course, all governments and international organisations recognise the need to inform those affected by decisions taken. That is an absolute need and a practical necessity in a democratic society. The European Union goes further than any other international organisation in the *direct impact* its policies and laws have on its Member States, on organisations and individuals within the Member States and, indeed, on other countries as well. .

Thus, the EU has always recognised that it has a responsibility to make known and explain its aims, processes and policies. As a relatively new actor on the world stage the EU has, perhaps, an extra need to explain why it was created and what it is aiming to achieve.

For these reasons the EU has had from its inception, an extensive information apparatus which operates at many levels:

- each EU Institution such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, etc, maintains its own processes for disseminating information about its activities, although there is increasing coordination between the Institutions
- there are special services for the press and other media provided by such bodies as the Spokesman's Service in the European Commission, and equivalents in other Institutions
- the EU has a tradition of close communication with representative organisations such as trade and professional associations, trade unions and other special interest groups
- the EU Institutions have a well-established 'Visitors Programme', whereby large groups of students, business representatives, citizens, and others, or individual academics visit the EU Institutions in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg
- at times the Commission and other EU Institutions will launch further special initiatives to inform particular groups. For example, in the last few years, the Commission has been supporting what has been called *Priority Information Programmes* helping European citizens understand the implications of such issues as the Single European Currency and the Single European Market. One of the big challenges for the European Commission, your own Government, and others, in the next few years will be to create an effective strategy to inform the people of the Czech Republic of the implications of EU membership. I am sure

that this process has already begun. I also hope that this seminar this afternoon will be seen to be a small contribution to this European information challenge in your country.

On top of all those initiatives there are two further manifestations of the EU's information policy that are of most direct relevance to you as librarians:

- the EU maintains an extensive publications programme, ranging from booklets for school children through to large technical documents for specialists, and this programme increasingly extends to electronic formats such as databases, CD-Roms, the Internet and satellite
- the European Commission supports a substantial series of information networks such as European Documentation Centres, Euro Info Centres, Correspondence Centres and Euro Info Points throughout the Member States, and beyond.

Following on from the recognition of the need by the EU Institutions for an information policy what should also be noted is the parallel factor:

- ***The increasing need for people to know of the activities of the EU***

The need for many people to know about the policies of the European Union has increased substantially in the last ten years. This is largely in connection with the Single Market Programme and the impact of the Single European Act, which resulted in a significant increase in legislative action across an expanding number of policy areas. The Maastricht Treaty further increased the policy competences of the EU. More people and more organisations are now directly affected by EU laws and thus need information about those laws. Whether as a lawyer, an accountant, a planner or an official in a local authority there is an increasing European dimension to what people need to know to do their job. Similarly, the European dimension has increased in prominence at most levels of education. In addition, the EU has expanded to include new countries, and has a long list of applicant countries and others who maintain or are developing closer economic and political links with the EU.

Thus, it is clear that there is a big increase in the number of people, in the EU and elsewhere, who need to know of the activities of the EU.

- ***Subsidiarity (Decentralised information provision)***

A third point I would like to mention in this section on *The role of information in the European Union* is how the EU's information policy has been affected by the concept of 'subsidiarity'. Subsidiarity is generally used to mean in an European Union context that the power to make decisions should rest at the lowest appropriate level of government.

In terms of providing information about the European Union the concept of subsidiarity has been used to argue that the EU should not be the only provider of information about the Union: information about the Union should be also the responsibility of the traditional mechanisms for information dissemination in the Member States, and elsewhere, recognising, for example, the different traditions of different countries. So that national, regional and local governments, libraries, chambers of commerce etc. should all accept that they have a role in disseminating information about Europe to the particular groups they serve. And that comes

back to my point that I made in my introduction that all librarians in the Czech Republic need to take on board the European dimension in their work.

It is also important to recognise in this context that the commercial publishing sector also has a vital role in disseminating information about the EU.

All this is not to say that the EU is abdicating its information and communication responsibilities: rather it is recognising the reality, which is, that on its own, it does not have the resources to satisfy all the increasing needs for information from the public and that it should concentrate its resources on:

- helping traditional and new information disseminators in the Member States and elsewhere develop their resources, services and expertise through networks, relays and training
- streamlining and improving existing information products and developing new forms of communication.

### **The debate about openness and transparency**

Turning now to the second topic this afternoon, the debate about openness and transparency:

The late President Mitterand is quoted as saying

We forgot to talk to the people

when asked to explain why very nearly a majority of the electorate in France who voted in the referendum in 1992 voted to reject ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. That event, combined with the shock of the Danish 'No' in their first referendum in June 1992, the long-drawn discussions in the UK Parliament on ratifying the Maastricht Treaty, and the challenge to the ratification in the German Constitutional Court, brought home to European politicians and officials alike the scepticism of the newly 'Unionised' citizens of Europe about further moves towards European union.

The UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair said last year:

The elites of Europe have paid insufficient attention to the people of Europe.  
That cannot continue.... Europe has to explain better what it is doing

The question of how *meaningfully* and *effectively* the citizens of Europe are informed about what is happening in the European Union has been placed firmly on the political agenda. As a result the EU Institutions and the Member States have made a commitment and set a programme to ensure greater openness and transparency of EU activities. Since 1992 there has been a whole series of statements and declarations on this subject, re-organisation of departments responsible for information and communications policies, user groups established, information relay networks developed and expanded, and a substantial amount of material resources devoted to new initiatives. This has all culminated in the insertion in the treaty agreed at Amsterdam of the amendment to Article A of the TEU:

This Treaty marks a new stage in the process of creating an ever closer Union among the peoples of Europe, in which decisions are taken *as openly as possible and* as closely as possible to the citizen.

Is the EU an open organisation: is it possible for all of us to find out in detail and in a timely fashion what each of the EU Institutions is doing. I have already described overall what the EU is doing to inform and communicate. Is that enough?

This is a very big subject and we do not have time to go into detail this afternoon; sufficient to say that there have been a number of legal challenges in the past four years relating, in particular, to questions of *access to documents* from the Council of the European Union and the European Commission.

((One case, involving the civil liberties group Statewatch, is currently being examined by the European Ombudsman. There was a famous case involving the journalist John Carvel and the newspaper *The Guardian* against the Council and there is currently a case involving an association of Swedish journalists. Similarly, in March of 1997 there was a judgment of the Court of First Instance relating to a case brought by the World Wide Fund for Nature against the European Commission for refusal to release certain documents)).

Equally, it is still virtually impossible to find out systematically what is going on in the hundreds of advisory and other committees that exist in the EU; indeed which such committees exist and how can they be contacted. Also, you might well argue that the sheer complexity of the EU policy-making process makes tracing what is going on a considerable challenge.

((Denmark a few years ago established the principle of having 'open' Council meetings, at which the press and public could attend. The idea does continue but one detects no great enthusiasm amongst the Member States, and the feeling is that all the key decision-making is then undertaken in corridors rather than in the main Council meetings. Of course, many key decisions, officially taken by the Council of the European Union are, in reality, taken by the Committee of Permanent Representatives (or 'Coreper'), well out of any public gaze)).

The real challenge in the debate about openness and transparency is to reconcile the needs for democratic openness with the need for operational efficiency in a unique international organisation comprising (at present) fifteen sovereign Member States (and in the future maybe over twenty). Within these countries there are very different traditions relating to these questions.

Nevertheless, I don't want to sound too negative or pessimistic and for the remainder of my talk...

### **Transparency in practice**

I would like to go beyond the fine sounding declarations about the need for openness and transparency and the need to explain, and examine what practical steps have been taken in the last few years to improve access to information about the EU: after all, when in practical terms we are looking for information the mechanics of delivery are as important as the principles of access.

Since 1992 a number of the EU's Institutions have taken some specific initiatives:

- the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament and many other EU Institutions and organisations have adopted rules on access to documents in the last few years. Currently, the Council is negotiating to make available freely on the Internet a register of documents, which will be a very significant step forward in improving access
- there is much greater effort by the Commission to consult organisations and individuals about future policy initiatives: for example, in the autumn of each year the Commission now publishes an annual legislative programme, summarising future priorities and initiatives. Available freely on the Internet (and in various paper versions). In addition there is much greater number of pre-legislative consultation documents known as Green and White Papers issued (many of which are freely available on the Internet)
- moves towards the consolidation, simplification and recasting of existing legislation.
- there have been significant moves to increase the content and user-friendliness of the CELEX, the EU's main legislative database. Traditionally a very difficult online database to use, the EU has made substantial progress in the last few years to make CELEX both much easier to use and also to have far more full-text information. An Internet version of CELEX was launched in August 1997.
- the EU has made freely available on the Internet a number of very useful databases. The key ones to know about are RAPID (containing Press Releases, and thus very useful for up-to-date information); SCAD (bibliographic database to the documents and publications of the EU, plus articles in academic journals); ECLAS (the catalogue to the Commission library in Brussels and Luxembourg); IDEA (a directory of who works in the EU Institutions, with contact addresses); OEIL or Legislative Observatory (shows you at what stage a legislative proposal has reached in the policy-making process)
- there has been many significant new published sources issued in the last few years: examples would include *Panorama of EU Industry*; *Index A-Z of Cases in the Court of Justice*; *Europe's Environment*; *Directory of Interest Groups* etc. All of these fill in information gaps that previously existed
- there has been further substantial development of the networks of information relays. In addition to the European Documentation Centres and Euro Info Centres/Correspondence Centres that I have already mentioned there has been the development of new networks: one called 'Carrefours' or Rural Development Centres' to help rural areas understand more about the opportunities and challenges of the EU; a further network called 'Innovation Relay Centres' set up to help businesses and the academic world get more involved in EU-funded research activities. Above all, there have been initiatives to help the general public, the European citizen, have improved access to EU information. From Brussels has come a network of Euro Info Points to help the general public, while some Member States such as Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Spain and the United Kingdom have actively utilised the existing public library networks in those countries to be the main source of information about the European Union to the general public.

- in a number of the initiatives that I have just outlined I mentioned the Internet, and it is probably the Internet that has been the most significant new development of the past few years, so I would like to spend the last few minutes of my talk concentrating on that.

### **European information on the Internet**

While printed sources of information from and about the European Union will remain important, it is true to say that in the last few years there has been a revolution in the availability of EU information through various electronic means. On-line databases, CD-ROM, diskettes, satellite and, above all, the Internet, through its EUROPA and other servers. The European Union has made a substantial investment in the Internet as a means of communicating information about its policies to its Citizens and others. In a way the technical potential and availability of the Internet came about just at the right time - when the EU needed new ways of communicating with its Citizens.

Three years ago I did not use the Internet for information about the EU. Now, there is hardly a working day that goes by without me making extensive use of the Internet as a major source of such information. Each EU Institution, and many departments within Institutions, maintain very substantial homepages which contain much valuable full-text information. In addition, many EU databases, as we have already noted, have migrated to the Internet such as CELEX, SCAD, RAPID and ECLAS, and new ones such as IDEA and the Legislative Observatory have become available.

Clearly the Internet has become a major method for people to find out what is going on in the EU. In 1997, for example, it was stated that (*European Voice*, Vol.3, No.32, 11.9.97, p32) that over 41,000 individuals visited the EUROPA pages on the Internet containing the papers associated with the Agenda 2000 initiative in the two weeks after its launch. Similarly, it has just been announced (*Press Release* (Commission), IP/98/396) that each month more than 50,000 documents are consulted on the Commission's website on the EURO, while in the week following the Commission's publication of its Convergence Report in March 1998 on which countries were eligible to move towards a Single Currency more than 40,000 copies of the full report were downloaded from the Internet. Of course, one of the big advantages of the Internet is the speed by which the information can become available to those of us who do not live in Brussels.

It is now possible to get a vast amount of EU information on the Internet: this includes legislative information, bibliographical information, information about current developments, statistical information, contact information - and much more.

The latest new service to be launched is called EUR-Lex, which became publicly available in April 1998. This new service has been created in response to a call by EU politicians for a 'Citizen's Celex', that is, that a version of CELEX should be made adapted to the needs of ordinary people and freely available on the Internet. This is a difficult challenge and it remains to be seen whether EUR-Lex succeeds in achieving that objective, but nevertheless you should be aware of its existence, and what it comprises. At present EUR-Lex comprises access to the full text of the following:

- the Treaties of the European Union



- the consolidated secondary legislation of the EU
- the judgments of the European Court of Justice for the most recent twelve months
- the full text of the last twenty days issues of the *Official Journal* L and C series: the main source of legislative information in the EU

In addition, it is promised that in the future, EUR-Lex will also include:

- the text of all adopted legislation
- the text of all proposed legislation

It is claimed that EUR-Lex will be the largest Internet site in the world when it is all operational.

What is also important to mention is that the Internet revolution is not just about having unparalleled access to information produced by the EU itself. There has been a substantial development in access to information on the Internet about the EU from other organisations such as national governments, academic organisations, news organisations, trade associations and other interest groups, etc. Commercial publishers are also increasingly offering, or contemplating offering, Internet products.

As I said this is an information revolution. In any revolution, however, the benefits and the costs are perhaps unevenly distributed. Sometimes in a revolution there is also confusion. Certainly in this Internet revolution there is still much way to go. We must not forget that access to the Internet is not universal and that even where you have access there can still be many frustrations in terms of delays and bad connections.

Above all, the nature of the Internet means that it is still difficult to search for information efficiently. Everyone talks about *surfing the Internet*, but for day-to-day serious use we need to be able to find information quickly and systematically. Slowly, efforts are being made to create methods to search the Internet: at one end of the spectrum you have the massive computer-generated search engines, usually very American biased. At the other end of the spectrum you have lots of librarians and others creating little specialised indexes to useful Internet sites on particular subjects, but without the resources to keep them up-to-date. In between these two extremes you have a number of publicly-funded initiatives to provide access into the Internet on particular subjects and, just beginning, some private or commercial initiatives to do the same, that will be financed either by advertising or subscription. The big challenge in the next few years is to create information tools to allow for efficient access of European information on the Internet.

Another question that has to be resolved about EU information on the Internet is this: should the EU Institutions see the Internet primarily as a means of providing current information or should the Internet be seen as also having a major archive function? Undoubtedly, and understandably, the political motivation behind the use of the Internet for EU information is to use it for providing current information for European citizens. However, for serious information professionals, the two functions (offering rapid access to breaking news *and* organised archive access to substantive information) are equally important. There must be mechanisms established to ensure that information that is accessible on the Internet one day will remain available in the future as well. There is some evidence in the EU that this problem is now being recognised.

## Conclusion

To sum up. I hope that I have set the scene for this afternoon's seminar by stepping back a little and looking at why the EU has an information and communication policy, at the challenges facing the EU in developing that policy and looking at some of the practical initiatives that have been, and are being, taken to improve the ability of people in Europe, and elsewhere, to be able to find out what the EU is doing quickly and efficiently. Not everything is perfect by any means but the Institutions of the EU are generally to be congratulated for rising to the challenge of improving access to information about the Union.

The Czech Republic is entering an exciting time in its history. The librarian has an opportunity to play an important role in helping people in your country understand both the significance and implications of the development. It is a considerable challenge to the information profession and I would encourage you to grasp the opportunity for the good, both of your country, and your own professional and individual development.

Thank you for your attention.

Ian Thomson  
Cardiff, May 1998