

**EBLIDA****EBLIDA response at the hearing on the impact of  
new technologies in publishing****European Parliament: Committee on Culture, Youth, Education and the  
Media,  
4 June 1996****Item 3: The communication space**

Libraries are an efficient instrument of the public sector to ensure dissemination of and access to information or knowledge and culture. They are fundamental tools in maintaining democratic conditions and in preventing the widening of information gaps among different social or ethnic groups within the population. The strengths of public libraries are among others their relative independence, the voluntary use, the easy access, their offer of professional assistance and their presence in the local community. They are part of a national system, but based on local conditions with close connections to location and the local interface. In the Nordic countries, where public libraries are well-developed, they play an important role in government plans concerning the upcoming of the electronic information society. The tight cooperation between public libraries and research/special libraries secures both the element of efficiency and the element of democracy.

There is no doubt that the new technologies themselves will facilitate the dissemination of information. The information traffic will be eased and continues to grow. The question is how this traffic will be regulated. What are the rules? What are the prices? A major threat to public interest in this development might be the copyright issue. It still remains an unsolved problem how to handle the immanent conflict between authors/producers rights and those of the consumer. The author of course has a right to protect his or her creative works that are published and thus influence public life in society.

Libraries are traditionally defined as physical collection of materials, mainly books and other printed matters. The virtual world of the electronic media has changed this concept. If you imagine that libraries did not exist, but had to be invented in the world of today, they would hardly be given the same tight connection to the book. The basic aim of public libraries is to give the each citizen equal access to information, which promotes social mobility, democratic development, stimulates the general level of education and smooths transformation or changes of society. The aim of research and special libraries are naturally to facilitate research and preserve knowledge. The content of the media (knowledge or information) is the main issue, not the form of distribution. Libraries played an important role in the transformation from a society based on agriculture to the one based on industry.

Now society faces a new challenge: the information society. It is certain that the ability to handle knowledge, information and education will be very important parameters for the ability of societies to develop, succeed and survive in the years to come. A practical measure to encourage equal access to information could be to give financial support to libraries for developing electronic services.

*The Hague, June 1996*