

European survey of national on-line data banks and Internet services of interest to young people

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Development in the field of new technology has been extremely rapid during the last few years. The launch of the World-Wide Web in 1993, in particular, brought new opportunities for information providers and multiplied the number of potential users. There is no indication that this development will not continue in the near future. While the number of people having access to these services increases rapidly, it is clear that young people are using the new technologies far more than their elders. This is due partly to their growing technological and linguistic abilities and interests. In addition, in many countries, young people have easy access to these services eg in schools and universities.

In 1992, the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA) conducted a study, "European Census of Computer-assisted Youth Information Services", which presented a total of 165 services in 13 countries. Not many of these services exist today, at least in the format in which they were running at that time, which illustrates the rapid rate of evolution in this field, which may also happen in relation to Internet-based services.

- **Methodology of the survey**

The aim of this survey is to identify and promote the services which exist in different countries today, and to make recommendations for co-operation and networking between these services. The collation of the information was based on the following criteria.

- a) The services included are either on-line databases, websites or other services accessible via Internet (no off-line data-banks, CD Roms, etc were included).
- b) The content of the service is of interest to young people.
- c) The information in the service is national in scope (ie not limited to local or regional information).

- d) The service is aimed primarily at young people and/or at people working with/for young people (intermediaries).

In some cases, it was not easy to ascertain, from the information available, whether a service met the criteria mentioned above or not. Consequently, some of the services included in the survey do not meet the criteria 100%. On the other hand, there are hundreds of others which would fulfil the criteria mentioned but which may be too narrow in scope to be included. For example, the home pages of national youth organisations in several countries could not be included not only because there were so many, but also because they usually only present the activities of the organisation. However, many national services presented in this survey provide links to these pages.

The survey questionnaire was sent to all the CDEJ members (representatives of the Ministries responsible for Youth) in all the Council of Europe member countries, and also to all the ERYICA member organisations, or organisations co-operating with ERYICA. For the most part, the information contained in this survey was collected during the latter part of 1997 and the first months of 1998.

• **Results of the survey**

The following observations have been made on the basis of the questionnaires received, hands-on use of the services, and discussions with various service providers. First of all, it was obvious that, in most countries, the need for information by young people/intermediaries through an on-line electronic service was clear. It was seen as a very useful tool for youth information providers to inform certain segments of their target groups, on certain subjects. Having said that, it should not be used as the only way to inform young people, and more traditional ways of information provision should not be neglected when planning these services.

• **The technology**

Most of the services presented in the survey have been established since the arrival of the World-Wide Web, in particular during the last two years. Even the services that existed before the Internet boom have, in most cases, been changed into WWW format.

According to the experiences in different countries there are several factors that advocate the use of the WWW:

- it is relatively cheap to put up and maintain a service compared to other possibilities
- it is relatively easy to update the information
- it is usually possible to make the layout more attractive
- it is easy to build links to other external services
- the potential user group is much larger
- the use of Internet facilitates other services (mailing lists, etc).

As recently as two or three years ago, the technology available for the WWW was not sophisticated enough to allow all the functions possible with other applications, but these problems have more or less been solved. Therefore, when planning new services or even when considering the future of existing services (other than Internet), it is best to use applications with Internet compatibility. Even if the information is on the WWW, it is still possible to have closed sections (Intranet) or services that are not free of charge.

Current technological developments, eg the arrival of digital television and radio and the affect of Internet to traditional media (TV, radio, press), will make it possible for those services using Internet technology to take advantage of these changes and the new opportunities which will be available in two or three years time. As the technological development during the last two or three years has been extremely rapid, it is rather venturous to try to predict what will happen in the next years in this field, but the arrival of such developments as the portable electronic book or the electronic ID-card may once more change everything.

- **Information content**

Regardless of the technology chosen, the most difficult task for any information provider is the content and the updating of the information. The WWW has made it technically very easy to build links to other servers, and the tendency seems to be that more and more information is given this way. The advantages are very clear; the service providers do not have to produce and update the information themselves, and the information given is very versatile and up-to-date. This had made it possible to start services with fewer resources than before when all the data had to be produced (or at least transferred) by the youth information structures and the layout, updating, etc was their responsibility too.

However, this method of providing links to other information services has brought some problems, or at least raised questions, for youth information structures. According to the principles of youth information, the information given should be impartial, written in a language that young people understand, presented in an attractive layout, etc. This may not always be true when abrogating responsibility for that information to another organisation. The youth information structure should always at least make it clear to the user that he/she is entering another source of information. They should also check regularly that the links are working and the information given is correct and updated.

When planning information services, it is very important to take into consideration the target groups of the service. The information aimed primarily at youth workers will not be the same as information aimed at directly at young people. Representatives of target group(s) should be involved in all phases of the project; planning the content, producing the texts and layout, etc. The possibility to give feedback, the existence of interactive services, the fact that there is always something new to be found out, etc. are also vital factors to the success of a service. All service providers should be constantly evaluating their service. The statistical data (who are the users, which files are popular and which are not, etc.), and the feedback received from the users, should always be available and used to improve the services.

- **Access to information**

No matter how good the information is, it is naturally most important that the potential users have access to the service. This of course depends on several different factors. The technological solution chosen should be as widespread, inexpensive and user-friendly as possible. However, very often these questions are too difficult to be solved only by the youth information structures. In many countries, there are governmental policies on new information technologies, eg to equip all the schools with Internet. Even if the political realities in different countries vary a lot, to ensure access to information of young people, it is essential that all the actors in the youth field (youth information structures, youth organisations, ministries responsible for youth) work together to make it possible to have as wide network of public places as possible where young people may use the information services.

Even in the countries where a majority of young people have access, in theory, to the information services, these services are not always used as much as their providers would hope them to be. There are a number of possible reasons for this.

1. The services are not known to young people (or other target groups). The promotion of the service is an important task for any service provider. Advertising on the net with commercial services that young people use is one of the best ways, although it may prove too expensive for many organisations. On the other hand, in some countries, there are some good examples of co-operation with commercial radio channels, youth magazines, TV programmes, etc. that are aimed at young people. It may be more realistic financially to advertise the service through various channels of the youth work and schools networks, especially if the service is primarily aimed at intermediaries. Co-operation with governmental agencies, youth organisations, youth cards, youth clubs, schools and/or teachers may be best option if financial resources are limited. The web address of the service should be printed in all possible places. In the long run, if the service is used a lot, it will be possible to attract advertisers which, in turn, would bring more financial resources to run the service.
2. The content of the information provided is not interesting enough for the target group. With this question we come back to the issues of defining of the target group carefully and the constant evaluation of the service. Sometimes the content of the information is made from the point of view of the service provider, and the needs of the users are forgotten. Governmental decisions on youth policy matters may be important for the service provider or even a youth worker, but maybe not so much for young people.
3. The information provided is not presented in a language or layout that young people find interesting. One of the most difficult challenges for a service provider is to make the service appealing for the user. Layout of the pages is important, text should be concise and jargon should be avoided. One of the key questions of

getting the user to come back to the service time after time, is that there should always be something new. Competitions, quizzes, "news of the week", and special offers are some successful examples used in different countries. Involvement of the target group in producing and evaluating the service will contribute to its success.

- **Training**

There is a clear lack of training within the structures involved in youth information on the matters of new technology. It may be slightly easier to find technical experts or to arrange training for youth information workers in matters related purely to technological aspects in each country. On the contrary, issues like content of information, data management, etc. require knowledge and experience that are only gained through practical experience and unfortunately often by trial and error.

However, around Europe, there are a number of people who are willing to share their know-how with others. ERYICA has arranged some seminars on new technology, but there is a great need for more in-depth training in this field eg in the framework of the Council of Europe. The Youth Centres of the Council of Europe should be equipped with state-of-the-art computer classes.

- **Networking**

There should be more co-operation between information providers in different countries. The best way to learn is to see and hear what others have done, what kind of problems they have faced, and how they have solved these problems. Many service providers admitted openly that some of the good ideas they had included in their service had been "stolen" from other partners. Especially for those who are just planning to start up a service, it is very useful to compare different solutions and to take the best parts of each and adapt them to their own realities. Seminars, training courses, and study visits are some examples of this co-operation.

In most countries, the information services are naturally meant for their own citizens. However, in Europe where young people are more and more mobile, it is important, to some extent, to take into consideration possible foreign users. Many of the services presented in this survey have some parts of their information also in another language (usually English/French). The "Guide for Young Visitors" type of information like the Infomobil project of ERYICA has been very useful for young people who plan to travel, work or study in another country.

Some services still miss the European information for their own young people. The minimum thing that can be done quite easily is to build links to youth information service providers in other countries. There are some attempts to collect a wide range of links related to young people and youth work into one service. The "Pro Youth International" site in Finland has sections for each country with links to different youth organisations, youth information services, youth exchange organisations, etc. This kind of work should

be done on a more holistic basis with partners collecting useful links in their own country.

- **Recommendations**

1. There should be generalist or specialised youth information on-line services in each country.
2. To maximise the use of the services they should be on Internet or at least be have Internet compatibility.
3. If the service refers users to other services this should be indicated to the user, and the service provider should ensure that the links are valid and that the information is correct and updated.
4. The target group(s) should be clearly defined, the representatives of the target groups should be involved in planning, producing, developing and maintaining the service, and the information given should be based on the needs of the users.
5. There should be interactive services and the possibility to give feedback, and the service providers should do a constant follow-up of the service.
6. The services should be user-friendly, easily accessible and inexpensive.
7. There should be a common policy of all the actors in the youth field to ensure the accessibility to the services in public places.
8. The existence of the services should be made known to young people (or other target groups).
9. The information should be given in the language that young people understand and in a layout attractive to young people.
10. There should be more training in the field of new technology for youth information workers, eg in the framework of the Council of Europe, and more opportunities for service providers in different countries to exchange experiences.
11. The services should also provide some information in another language/other languages for foreign users, there should be European information and links to services in other countries in each service.
12. Resources should be given to gather all the relevant links in the field of youth work onto one European site.

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