



67th IFLA Council and General Conference

August 16-25, 2001

Code Number: 177-164-E
Division Number: I
Professional Group: University Libraries and other General Research Libraries
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 164
Simultaneous Interpretation: Yes

Libraries in Partnership

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Summary

For nearly forty years, the Library of the University of Southampton, Great Britain, has been a major player in "Hatricks: the Southern Information Network". Hatricks is a library and information co-operative having more than 300 member organisations, which include public and academic libraries, health care libraries and the libraries of industrial and commercial enterprises of all sizes, from leading-edge government and industrial research centres to small enterprises with just a handful of employees. The fundamental objective of Hatricks is to improve the accessibility and availability of information among its members. The underlying philosophy is that information is a crucial resource for the commercial, social and cultural vitality of the region and that all organisations in the region will benefit if the commercial, social and cultural vitality of the region is enhanced.

At present, there are two major challenges facing Hatricks. The first arises from the internet. To what extent is a local/regional information network a realistic concept in the age of the World-Wide-Web? The second arises from the demands of a knowledge-based society, and the increasing recognition of the importance of lifelong learning in equipping people to cope with a society which is changing rapidly both in the workplace and in the social environment. What are the implications of this for libraries and does a local/regional libraries co-operative have any special value to add?

This paper will attempt to set university libraries into a wider commercial and social context and will argue that, while the internet is clearly important, local/regional library co-operation still has a useful part to play.

HATRICS was founded in 1962, following a meeting of local people, chaired by a professor of chemistry of the University of Southampton. The acronym originally stood for "Hampshire Technical Research Industrial and Commercial Service", but it has become a brand name in its own right and we now call ourselves "HATRICS: the Southern Information Network". I say "we", although I no longer have any formal association with HATRICS. I was Chair of the HATRICS Executive Committee from 1982 to 2000, but I retired from my post as University Librarian of the University of Southampton at the end of the year 2000 and thus ended 23 years' formal association with the organisation, though I still retain a strong interest in what it does and what it stands for.

HATRICS is a library co-operative, with a membership of over 300 organisations. HATRICS is:

- ⑩ centred on Hampshire, the county at the centre of Britain's south coast
- ⑩ prepared to accept into membership any organisation in a region sharing a border with its current geographical limits (that includes Caen in Normandy (France) which shares the English Channel with Hatrics as a common border)
- ⑩ administered by the public library authority of Hampshire, but governed by an Executive Committee which is responsible to an Annual General Meeting of all members
- ⑩ offering services through other public library service points.

Before I say more about HATRICS, I need to say something about the characteristics of the region in which HATRICS operates, because I believe that library services need to be rooted in the reality of their communities. In population terms it is best described as "dispersed high density". There are a lot of people, well over 2 million, depending on how you define the area, but there is no single large city. The two largest are Portsmouth and Southampton, each with less than 250,000 inhabitants. Both Southampton and Portsmouth have a university and Southampton has a second institution of higher education, Southampton Institute. Southampton University has an outstanding faculty of engineering. It founded a separate Department of Electronic Engineering as early as 1952 and invented the technology of fibre optics, a field in which it is still a world leader. (The erbium doped fibre amplifier, which is a key technology for low cost international fibre optic networks, is a recent Southampton University invention.) It has the second largest centre for marine science research in the world, after Woods Hole in the United States. In commercial and industrial terms, the following factors about the region are relevant:

- ⑩ main industries are transport and defence
- ⑩ Southampton has a large container port and an excellent and large deep sea harbour
- ⑩ Portsmouth is a major Royal Navy base, now probably the most important in the country
- ⑩ Aldershot, in Hampshire, is a major army base and Salisbury Plain, in neighbouring Wiltshire, is much used for military exercises and troop deployment, and has a number of army depots in its vicinity
- ⑩ there are important centres for defence research at Farnborough (aeronautics) and Porton Down (chemical and biological warfare)
- ⑩ there is a need for commercial diversification, as defence is de-emphasised following the end of the cold war.

Hatrics is a membership organisation. It is based on the understanding that everyone who joins contributes to the network as far as their resources make this possible, and takes from it as far as their need requires. But it is also expected that member organisations will not unreasonably exploit their membership status. Subscriptions are kept as low as possible, currently standing at a minimum of about US\$150 per year. The subscriptions are on a sliding scale and are adjusted according to the use made by the network by each subscriber in the preceding year. Hatrics does not attempt to meet all the information

needs of its members which they cannot meet from their own resources, except that, for the smaller ones, it mediates their relationship with the national interlending service through the good offices of the public library system. The strength of Hatrics lies in its record of identifying some of the most important information needs of the majority of its members, especially for standards and patents, but also for other scientific and technological information, and meeting them efficiently and effectively. Hatrics has recently been put under the spotlight by an independent consultant. His report, which reached the relevant department of our national government, characterised Hatrics as a model in British terms of how local library co-operation can work.

When I came to Southampton in 1977, Hatrics had already been in existence for fifteen years with Southampton University Library as a member. I was in favour of continuing membership, but I felt that this required a rationale so that I would be able to defend our commitment to Hatrics if challenged. I developed several strands of argument, of which I will mention just four:

- ⑩ the library should function as a "loss leader" for the University. It should minimise the barriers to access to its collections so as to encourage local activities to use them. Familiarity with the university environment through the library might encourage local enterprises to use other university facilities such as its continuing education provision or its research consultancy services. This approach also rationalised the very real difficulty of establishing an equitable but tolerable tariff scheme for use of the library by non-members of the university
- ⑩ although there are undoubtedly many pressures on the library, many of the books and periodicals can withstand considerably more use than they get. This is true in the sense that many books and periodicals are used relatively little, but it is accepted that the more books and periodicals are used, the shorter their lives are likely to be
- ⑩ the library should encourage continuing education through library use, since it is to the advantage of our local community to ensure that its technically skilled professionals keep their skills up to date. Who wants to have their appendix taken out by a doctor who has learned nothing new for twenty years or more?
- ⑩ the university benefits if the region in which it operates is economically and commercially dynamic. And the dynamism of the local economy is a self-feeding phenomenon - according to the evidence emerging from some of the powerhouse areas of the European economy such as Lombardy in Italy or North-Rhine-Westphalia in Germany. When local enterprises trade vigorously with one another, the local economy prospers more.

At its peak, Hatrics had a membership of about 450 organisations. But this number has declined in recent years and now stands somewhere between 300 and 350. This is still quite a large number; it makes Hatrics much bigger than any other local/regional library co-operative scheme in the UK. But it is only a tiny fraction of the number of enterprises in the region we serve. Even after you have discounted all those enterprises which have little need of information, fast food outlets for example, the community we are failing to reach is still much larger than the one we do reach. But better to do something than bewail the fact that we cannot do everything. The decline in membership is probably a result of the growth of the internet. The accessibility of information over the World-Wide-Web has almost certainly persuaded some people that skilled mediation of information, which is what library staff do, is becoming redundant. We in Hatrics do not agree with this, but we accept that it may be some little time before the downside of internet access to information emerges. By that, I mean the realisation that not all information on the web is equally authoritative and that the web is so poorly indexed that valuable information resources may remain hidden from the search engines most people use. These are downside effects which friendly, familiar library staff can help to remedy.

The fact remains that the internet has abolished the adverse impact of distance on the ease of access to

information. Even if the web page is at the other side of the globe, it can be accessed just as quickly as if it were just round the corner. On the face of it, this undermines the concept of the local information co-operative. Within the last five years, we in Hatrics have confronted this issue. We did consider simply folding our tents and melting away, but not for very long. We decided that we must modernise the interface between the members and the organisation. Of course, we have created a web site and are now attaching to it some of the facilities which the co-operative has always supported. We are finding the website quite hard to fund, because of our deliberately minimalist approach to our subscription levy. We believe in the ideas which underlie Hatrics but we agree that their validity cannot be fairly tested in the new environment of the World-Wide-Web unless we ourselves join the world of the Web. We may have dressed Hatrics in the garb of any modern information centre, but we recognise that we are still under scrutiny in this new environment and there is no guarantee that we shall survive. There are three thoughts that principally sustain us, as we strive to make Hatrics a dynamic force in the new setting:

- ⑩ we have a lot of achievements under our belt already. A major central core of members, Southampton University Library being among them, have travelled a long way in one another's company. There is no substitute for that shared experience. It is a basis for the confidence we continue to place in one another in these times of change
- ⑩ we continue to believe in the model of the dynamic local economy in which enterprises stimulate one another, promote one another's success and ensure our region's continuing prosperity. This belief is one which our major sponsoring local authority, the county of Hampshire, also believes in very strongly.
- ⑩ within the university library, the conviction still persists that we are an essential factor in the local information economy. We would impoverish everyone, including ourselves, in information terms, if we withdrew now.

There is also a wider dimension to this position. The rapid changes in society, and the onward march of scientific research and invention have already prompted a huge change in the attitude politicians take to education. When I went to university, forty years ago, it was assumed that my university career would be the last stage in my formal education and would equip me for a lifetime of fruitful work. Of course, there was a genuine appreciation of the need for on-the-job training and for occasional refresher courses, but it was assumed that this would be a very small factor in the pattern of my life. Now, by contrast, it is assumed that much of the knowledge, and many of the skills, acquired during the classical period for higher education, from 18 to 25 years of age, will become obsolete quite quickly, within ten years most likely, and that people's working lives will have to be regularly punctuated by additional formal education. Also, people will probably change careers several times in the course of their working lives. As a reflection of this, there is also an increasing call for policy and action to become more knowledge-based. Of course, this was always the case. But there was a time when the knowledge base on which our societies ran changed very slowly. Now it changes very quickly and all the time. So we cannot afford any longer to rely on the knowledge we imbibed, almost imperceptibly, through our membership of our society. We must all consciously be re-orientated, and re-orientate ourselves in recognition of this rapid process of change. Being a knowledge based society requires that we become a learning community.

In the UK, and quite likely in other societies as well, libraries are seen as potentially a very important force, a resource which can empower the learning community itself. It is partly because our libraries manage such large information resources. It is partly because we are ubiquitous; in addition to our public and academic libraries, many workplaces also have libraries or information services which could usefully take on this new role if they do not do so already. It is partly because we are viewed very positively, certainly in the UK, by the community at large. No other public service is so widely used as the public library service. It is partly because our positive image is seen as a way of counteracting the negative image which some people have gained of the education system, which did not encourage them or applaud

their success, but seemed to prefer to brand them as failures. And these are the very people who stand most in need of the liberating experience further education can offer. At its best, it can transform them from being the victim of their circumstances to being the master or mistress of them. In this scenario, the university library is uniquely well placed. Not only is it serving an institution committed to higher and increasingly to continuing education. It also lies in a domain, the library domain, which is well regarded for its role in topping up people's educational capacity. But if it is to exploit its position to maximum advantage, it needs to operate in the broad scenario of all libraries, not just in the narrow setting of academic libraries.

Clearly, academic libraries exist primarily to serve the academic community which is their *raison d'être*, and, quite likely, their principal source of funds. But I am firmly convinced that the library role in mediating information is still important in the age of the World-Wide-Web. And I also believe that the library can be a major force in tempting people to continue their education, in providing important resources to enable them to do so, and in channeling them, in due course, towards those formal education experiences from which they can derive the most benefit. Through an organisation such as Hatrics, the academic library is enabled to play a fuller part in responding to the challenges of our time and in enriching the broader community to which we are ultimately accountable.