
EBLIDA: lobbying for libraries in Europe

Andrew Cranfield
Director, EBLIDA
Tel: +31 70 3090551
Email: cranfield@debibliotheken.nl

The European Bureau for Library, Information and Documentation Associations – or EBLIDA – was established in 1992 to promote the interests of libraries and other non-commercial information suppliers to European Union (EU) institutions, such as the European Commission and the European Parliament. The membership of EBLIDA is made up of library associations and institutions from Europe and is represented by an Executive Committee of ten members and a president. The President for the period 2007-2009 is Gerald Leitner, who is also the Secretary General of the Austrian Library Association.

A central strategic aim of EBLIDA has been – and continues to be – working towards a legislative framework where libraries and other cultural institutions can continue to provide access to information, not least in an online environment. With the advance of digital technology at the beginning of the 1990s and the intention to create a single market in Europe, copyright and intellectual property rights came on to the European political agenda. It was obvious that the legislation would have to change to incorporate new technologies: I think that most now accept that digital and analogue are not the same, and therefore require different legal solutions.

It might be slightly too dramatic to call the last 15 years a battle to keep the ‘delicate balance’ between the legitimate interests of right holders and more societal interests in general, but from the point of view of EBLIDA it is safe to say that recent years have seen a continuing upward spiral of copyright legislation. During this period we have seen the Public Lending Right directive from 1992 (or – to give its correct name – ‘Council directive on rental right and lending right and on certain rights related to copyright in the field of intellectual property’), the term directive from 1993 (which set the duration of authors rights to 70 years; many member states had 50 years prior

to the directive), the database directive from 1996, and the Information Society directive from 2001. EBLIDA has lobbied intensely on all these directives, striving to put forward the view points of libraries and show how these legislative proposals might hinder libraries in providing information services to European citizens.

In 2006 the European Commission launched the European Digital Library and with it the problems of copyright have become apparent once again, and the question remains how to avoid a 20th century black hole of literary and scientific works in digital format. Much will undoubtedly be solved by contracts, but it will also be necessary to find practical solutions for orphan works (works where the right holder is not known or cannot be located) and out-of-print works, which have little or no commercial value but are still protected by copyright. EBLIDA has worked with stakeholders, including the European Commission, to arrive at suitable solutions for these types of works. These solutions will enable libraries to start projects of mass digitisation with economically manageable models for rights clearance and with legal certainty for this type of endeavour.

While the legal aspects remain central to EBLIDA, the organisation has defined four other key strategic areas for the work of the organisation: digitisation and online access; life long learning and education; culture and information society; and professional education. These are areas where library associations need to work together at the European level to achieve the best results for the members we represent.

For digitisation there is a need for coordination and prioritisation at the European level – what we might call a European Collections Strategy. We need to ensure interoperability between diverse resources, not just between libraries, but between libraries, archives and museums. The European Commission had decided not to fund the creation of digital content, leaving it to the member states to fund these projects, encouraging private-public partnerships. EBLIDA recognises that these partnerships can be productive in some circumstances, but it is unlikely that they alone can reach the targets set by the Commission and we hope that the European commission will reconsider this standpoint.

Life long learning (LLL) and continuing education are also at the heart of the knowledge economy and EBLIDA feels that public and academic libraries – and other cultural institutions – have

a pivotal role to play in supporting this agenda, through e-learning, distance learning and providing resources for those engaged in learning processes. It is vital for these institutions to underline their importance in LLL and education, and that we are able to contribute to the European agenda.

The cultural agenda in Europe remains broad, but also here we feel that libraries have a role to play. In many European member states, libraries are one of the primary disseminators of culture, literature, music and so forth. By establishing various cross boarder co-operations (of which the European Digital Library is a good example) we can help establish a vibrant European cultural scene.

For library associations, organisations and institutions it is important to help to facilitate dialogue between theory and practice in the library and information sector and ensure that research is incorporated into the daily practice of librarians. EBLIDA will also continue to monitor the Bologna process and how higher education is aligned in the European community.

Some of the issues outlined above are new and some have been with us for at least a hundred years. For libraries it is essential to take our traditional strengths and adapt them to the digital age and to be able to compete and collaborate with new commercial and non-commercial players. Many important issues are decided at the European level and it is essential to have organisations that can bring together viewpoints from all of Europe and be the common voice of libraries – a role EBLIDA will continue to play in the coming years.