RIS IN ALENTEJO: LIBERATORS IN THE INFORMATION AGE [CASE STUDY]

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study about the implementation of the LIBERATOR project in the Portuguese region of Alentejo. Project LIBERATOR complies with the objectives of the Telematics for Libraries Programme of the EU in seeking to demonstrate the pivotal role for public libraries in the European Information Society through the establishment of Regional Information Services in the European context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Public libraries can play an active role in the Information Society (IS). A concrete example is the implementation of four Regional Information Services (RIS) within the same number of different European regions: Great Britain, Portugal, Belgium and France. This was achieved through EU funded project LIBERATOR (Libraries in European Regions-Access to Telematics and Other Resources) which was developed between 1998 and 2000.

At the start of the project the consortium consisted of four full contractors, Gateshead Council's Libraries & Arts Service (Gateshead), the Provincie Vlaams-Brabant, Centrale Openbare Bibliotheek Leuven (Leuven), Instituto Superior de Estatistica e Gestao de Informacao at the New University of Lisbon (ISEGI) and the Royal School of Library and Information Science, Denmark (RSL). A fifth partner, Aquitaine Europe Communication (AEC) joined the consortium in October 1999.

2. RIS APPROACH

LIBERATOR encouraged public libraries to take the lead within their regions by forming partnerships between information producers (any individual or organisation that produces information for the public domain), mediators (public librarians) and all sectors of end-users.

RIS offer mediated and unmediated information provision via regional web sites and networked public library services. RIS web sites link and co-ordinate other local sites pertaining to the needs of participating regions. An extensive range of information is provided including information from voluntary organisations, often ignored by more commercial information services. The web sites also provide opportunities for local

businesses and organisations to present themselves to new markets, thereby stimulating economic growth through regional development.

RIS further public participation in the information society through an increased awareness of Telematics and improved access to information. They provide structured gateways to the mass of information available on the World Wide Web organised by information professionals. In addition to improved information retrieval tools for mediators. The LIBERATOR project introduced many library staff to the Internet for the first time. The acquisition of new skills for all citizens improves competitiveness in the job market and offers new opportunities for personal development.

3.   METHODOLOGY

The methodology followed in this project consisted in the following phases which corresponded to work packages (some occurred in parallel):

- Keynote Report;

- Specification Analysis and Preparation;

- Demonstration, Development and Testing;

- Realisation and Launch of Demonstrators;

- Continuing Technical Developments;

- Evaluation of RIS;

- Exploitation Activities and Plans;

- Dissemination Activities;

- Project Management.

During the first six months of the project, RSL carried out an evaluation of the North of England RIS, assisted by Gateshead and their associate partners. An internal Evaluation Report and the public Keynote Report were produced. The **Keynote Report**, 'Regional Information Services – a Key Role for Public Libraries in Europe' highlighted the key themes of the project and the role that public libraries can play in the information society. It examined how the benefits of the information society can be of practical benefit to users, in addition to addressing legal and regulatory issues such as copyright, charging for information, censorship and electronic commerce. The report also included a list of transferable lessons for RIS development in the other regions. The report is available on the project Web site at http://thenortheast.com/liberator/keynote/index.htm.

Leuven, ISEGI and AEC carried out surveys of local conditions within the regions of Vlaams-Brabant, Alentejo and Aquitaine in order to identify information producers, access points, performance targets and the technical infrastructure required for building and maintaining RIS. **Specification reports** were produced for the development of RIS in those regions, with reference to the Evaluation and Keynote Reports.

The next step was the building of demonstrator RIS in Aquitaine, Alentejo and Vlaams-Brabant. Validation was then required in order to prepare for the next stage of development and eventually the actual launch of the RIS. It is important to note that validation is not a full evaluation, but the testing of something incomplete and evolutionary, and full evaluations of the three RIS were carried out as part of Work Package 6 during the second half of 1999.

The following **prototype** Regional Information Services were realised and launched:

- North of England RIS at http://thenortheast.com

 lthough the RIS has been available on the Internet and through the regions' public libraries for some time, an official launch took place in May 1999 following installation of the new North of England public library

network. The network substantially increased the number of Internet access points for library staff and the public across the region.

- Alentejo SIR at http://adamastor.isegi.unl.pt/sir/

at the time of the launch in May 1999, the RIS database contained 400 entries - 10 % of which had a WWW link. The number of WWW links is expected to increase in future alongside the growth of the Internet in Portugal. The database currently has in excess of 900 entries organised around the themes of economy, culture, tourism and entertainment, education and research and health.

- RIS Vlaams-Brabant at http://ris.vl-brabant.be

at the time of its launch in May 1999, RIS Vlaams-Brabant contained over 400 links to other web sites. This has now increased to 650. Information is organised within 10 subject categories. The RIS also contains information produced by local librarians to fill gaps in web based information provision.

- RIS Aquitaine at http://www.liberator-aquitaine.org

The RIS Aquitaine web site was launched in October 1999 and provides a forum for librarians in the region to exchange their ideas, views and experiences of developing new ICT based services for citizens in the region.

The launches were timed to gain maximum publicity for the project and its aims, and to gain the support of key decision-makers. It was also essential to make an impact within each region to demonstrate how public libraries can play a leading role in bringing the benefits of the information society to citizens.

Throughout the project, the partners remained aware of the need to monitor technical developments that could benefit RIS. Gateshead produced a monthly current awareness bulletin called 'Technology Watch' for the LIBERATOR project Web site at http://thenortheast.com/liberator/tw.htm.

ISEGI, with input from all partners, also prepared four '**Technical Development Reports**' on the following topics:

- techniques and applications for making Web sites more attractive, accessible and secure;

- development tools for Internet applications, multimedia and graphical applications and tracking software;

- high speed Internet technologies and new Internet languages;

- E-commerce.

These reports were summarised for public dissemination and are available on the project web site at http://thenortheast.com/liberator/tdr.html.

Next step was the **evaluation** of the RIS. Although smaller in scope, the evaluation model used was based on the one developed by RSL for evaluating the North of England RIS at the start of the project. A combination of practical web based exercises, interviews with library users and information providers, questionnaires and research were used.

The model evaluated the RIS on three levels:

- the strategic level examined the specific focus and goals of RIS;

- the tactical level investigated how the strategic goals will be achieved;

- the operational level was based on an empirical survey of user attitudes and use of the service.

In terms of **exploitation activities**, throughout the project, the consortium worked hard to build partnerships and gain political support for public library led RIS. This was essential to ensure post project sustainability of the new services.

Regarding **dissemination activities**, partners attended conferences and exhibitions, wrote and presented papers and submitted articles and press releases for publication to ensure that information about the project was disseminated effectively to a wide audience. At the start of the project, the consortium set up a project web site and a public mailing list.

In terms of **project management**, the project progressed according to schedule with the full support and co-operation of all partners and associate partners.

4.   REGIONAL DIFFERENCES - THINK GLOBALLY AND ACT LOCALLY

Developing new services in diverse European regions using Internet technologies presented many challenges, some of which were met by the consortium, while others were beyond the scope of LIBERATOR.

Within the first few months of the project it became increasingly evident that there were many differences within the regions in the way that web based services were developing and in the way that library services were organised would have a marked effect on how RIS developed. There was also a wide range of ICT experience within and between the regions involved. Although all partners shared the overall objectives of LIBERATOR, implementation strategies had to be developed in the light of the national and regional policies of the countries concerned. The principle followed was therefore: "Think globally and act locally".

The project began with an evaluation of the North of England RIS established some 18 months earlier, to produce a set of transferable lessons to help the other regions establish their RIS. However, unlike many other regions, within the North of England there exists a long tradition of inter-library co-operation and collaboration. Also libraries in the UK provide information on any subject to members of the public, as part of their normal service. This is not necessarily the case for public libraries in other states.

For example, in Portugal public libraries are a relatively recent development and there is no tradition of individual libraries working together. However, they have a model similar to that of the UK in providing community information services to local people.

At the start of the project, web activity in the North of England was beginning to increase. Businesses were beginning to see the potential of the medium in reaching new markets. The Web was becoming accepted as a useful source of information. Though access to the Internet through public libraries was rare, both library staff and the public were expressing interest in the medium and a demand for new services was being created. The existence of a critical mass of regional web sites enabled the North of England to adopt what was termed a distributive information model. This meant the LIBERATOR team used the regional portal to link to information provided by third parties.

By comparison, there was a general lack of web activity in Portugal, France and Belgium due to many factors, not least of which was the predominance of the English language on the Internet. This led to a different approach to developing RIS in the regions. Portugal based their RIS on a database of local organisations and businesses without their own web sites. Links to organisations with their own web sites were created but formed a very small part of the service in the early days. The percentage is expected to increase as Web activity in Portugal increases.

Within the regions there were many library staff who had not used the Internet before and this highlighted training and other issues that were beyond the scope of this project. However, this was not a cause for abandoning the development of a web based Regional Information Service to enhance the services already provided by public libraries.

5.   RIS IN ALENTEJO

5.1.   What is the RIS in Alentejo?

The RIS in Alentejo (see Figure 1) is a multifunctional system giving:

- mediated points of access to the Internet for local citizens

- a virtual shop window designed to stimulate the regional economy

- new tools of access and research for library staff

Due to low levels of Web activity in Portugal, RIS in Alentejo (in portuguese, SIR Alentejo) consists of a combination of web links and content created by the team at ISEGI and their public library partners: public libraries of Castro Verde, Beja and Vendas Novas (all from the Alentejo region).

Access is available through participating libraries and from any place with Internet access. The web site contains around 900 entries delivered through a combination of active server pages (ASP) and basic HTML. The system provides 2 ways of retrieving information through menus and enquiries. Information is organised into the following subject categories: Economy, Culture, Tourism & Entertainment, Education & Research and Health. Users may also submit information for consideration and inclusion.

Figure 1: *Home page of SIR Alentejo*

5.2.   Information Model

The SIR Alentejo information model consists of the following: The information is produced by libraries, ISEGI 'SIR Alentejo' staff or by outside providers which ISEGI makes available and manages. In the near future, that management role will be progressively handed to the participating libraries and the body which will manage the SIR Alentejo.

The information model for SIR Alentejo is mostly nucleated because information content is created by the RIS staff in ISEGI and the collaborating libraries. This is due to the lack of information producers in the Alentejo region. The information consists of two types: region specific information and link information. The former refers to content on specific topics such as local poets (poetas populares) or walks through the region (percursos). The latter refers to general information about important places or organisations from the participating regions (i.e. name, address, phone, description, URL if available and other specific information). Users can also submit link information/sites and, if approved, will be made availabe within the system.

5.3. Used Technologies

The RIS in Alentejo was developed using several standard technologies:

- The system is based on an Intel NT Server 4.0 using Microsoft Internet Information Server 4.0. It puts together ASP, HTML and database technologies;

- It uses Access database and ASP technology to provide information 'on the fly'. ASPs enable web pages to be kept up to date without huge demands on human resources;

- New features are being developed including a mailing list, controlled insertion into database, and improved presentation of results grouped in 10.

5.4. Evaluation

The evaluation has revealed that the development of RIS has had a positive impact for both library staff and citizens in the regions. Although the regions are diverse, RIS have improved access to information and increased awareness of telematics. Users found the service to be a useful addition to traditional library services.

In Alentejo the RIS has provided librarians with an opportunity to exchange knowledge and ideas to ensure that citizens in this traditionally 'information poor' region are not excluded from the information society.

This is a summary of the analysis of the questionnaires completed by remote users and the library user interviews in Alentejo. A small number of remote users (16) completed the questionnaire so statistically generalising the results is not possible. The mean age of respondents is 27.8 (the oldest is 42 and the youngest is 12).

Five interviews with library users were conducted and Beja's library was selected for this specific task. Caution must be used since it is a very small sample. We can deduct trends from this research rather than certainties.

Remote Users

There were 8 male and 8 female respondents. All have Portuguese nationality, the majority being students or professors, probably because they have easiest access to the Internet.

The respondents knew of the existence of RIS Alentejo mainly through the Internet, others found out through friends or the mass media.

The service was used frequently by half of the respondents and only 2 had never used it before. The topics searched for are; information on the community (4), education (3), leisure time (3) and other (5).

Education and research was most popular search topic with 13 responses (they could choose from several search topics). This is not surprising, as the majority of the respondents are students or teachers.

Of the 16 respondents, 14 said that the information found usually satisfied them. Most (13) preferred to search through the search engine, with the subject index being less popular.

Library Users

Library users have few problems using SIR Alentejo. Only 1 user had problems in one search task. For locating information the subject index was clearly preferred and was used for all the search tasks. 2 users used a combination of subject index and search function during the tests.

Overall SIR Alentejo has information users need. 4 respondents said that they didn't need more information besides that available on the site. No one found it necessary to use the help function, or to have help from other people. The help function will still be developed, because this may not be the case for all users.

Comments on the design were also favourable; colours were 'well chosen', 'soft to the eyes', 'acceptable', 'pleasant' and 'excellent'. The images are good, well positioned, clear, and of good dimensions although it was stated that there too few images. Finally, the text is 'accessible', 'well done', 'acceptable', 'good in dimension' and 'clear'.

Only 1 user didn't feel confident about using SIR Alentejo as an Internet interface to find information. Curiously, this user found all the information we asked for and with only 2 or 3 clicks. When questioned about locating information using the SIR Alentejo, 3 users said it is easy, 1 said it is logical, and 1 said it is acceptable.

The three tasks set did not prove to be a problem for the respondents. Only 1 failed to complete all of the tasks, and they completed 2 out 3. The respondents found the information with a minimum number of clicks

Collaborating Libraries

Two librarians from two libraries (i.e. Beja and Vendas Novas) answered the questionnaire for the collaborating libraries.

Analysis of both questionnaires:

- Both libraries offer free Internet, with people paying for printing and disks;

- In Beja library there are three library service points with Internet access (2 public) and in Vendas Novas library there are fifteen (eight public);

- Beja library contributes to the RIS with information on local events and Vendas Novas library does not at the moment.

- In both regions the library staff occasionally use the subject of the RIS; the idea is to incorporate it into "Information to the Community" service. In Vendas Novas library this is being developed based on three directories which RIS will fit into: Local, Regional and National Information directories;

- In Beja library the subject structure is well considered and in Vendas Novas library they do not have an opinion(the latter were the last of the associate partners to start collecting and classifying information for the RIS);

- Beja library stated that the RIS was good for improving communication and Vendas Novas library signals the possibility of creating an effective project;

- In Beja library they spend an average of 15 hours per week with the RIS collaboration and in Vendas Novas the librarian had difficulties in giving an estimate (he gave the example of the 500 records of information that they recently finished collecting and explained that the person involved spent one whole week, 7 hours a day doing that, and in the next week spent only a few hours);

- In Beja library there has been publicity among users and in Vendas Novas library they have promoted RIS within all the services that relate to information inside the library. The RIS was officially launched in Castro Verde but it will be presented both in Vendas Novas as well as Beja in public sessions.

Impacts and Results

Liberator and SIR Alentejo have an important impact on the Beja, Vendas Novas and Castro Verde regions because they develop and enhance the library component of "Community Information Service". Libraries in these depressed areas have an important social inclusion role allowing the traditionally 'information poor' to participate in the information society. They provide an important gateway to information and the RIS enhances this. There is no tradition of sharing resources within libraries in this particular region. The project has given librarians an opportunity to meet and exchange ideas on how best to involve public libraries in the information society to ensure that the region's citizens are not excluded.

The expected benefits from the RIS partnership are, Beja library says that it's good for improving communication and Vendas Novas highlights know-how transfer, better use of the existing technologies with added value and development of new methodologies.

Partnerships

Both librarians wish to continue with RIS collaboration after the end of the Liberator project because both believe it is a very good idea and that it can be integrated into the "Information to the Community" service. In Vendas Novas library this is being developed into three directories: Local, Regional and National Information.

5.5.   Exploitation

The first goal of the team in Alentejo is to extend RIS to other libraries in the region. The second is to extend it nationally. Libraries will be invited to participate either through direct contact or through the "Alentejo Digital" association. The latter option is preferred, as it is more likely to yield positive results.

Through user target groups, work will continue to raise awareness of the RIS through participating libraries and by participating in national conferences, seminars, leaflets in libraries, registering the web site in several search engines, participating in relevant national newsgroups, and so on.

The exploitation plan is based on the following assumptions:

- continued demand for the RIS;

- the need for libraries to develop their "information to the community" role;

- the need for local businesses and organisations to establish a web presence.

A desire exists within Alentejo to develop the RIS in a multitude of ways and it is recognised that public libraries have a key role to play in bringing the benefits of the information society to citizens.

The planned (or implemented) activities for exploitation are:

- Host awareness groups to introduce RIS and gain increased interest from the community – general and age group directed (i.e. senior citizens, young people);

- User education to develop people's IT skills - Internet, WWW, e-mail, etc. within the libraries;

- Transmit technical and operational know-how on RIS development and maintenance to other regions or people capable of undertaking similar projects in other regions.

The main consideration for RIS development in Alentejo is the need for the librarians to collect and produce the information. Unlike the North of England where there are several hundred web pages, in Alentejo there are relatively few web sites. In this way it is obvious that the information must be produced first to become available. Municipalities and other entities such as The National Employment Agency, Social Security and others can help to provide information to supplement the information produced by the libraries. But it is at the moment a very difficult task.

For all exploitation purposes the identification of target groups is very important. Target groups have been considered at several levels:

A: Political level:

Relevant target groups for the Alentejo region are:

- Local public administration;

- Representative bodies from schools;

- Local business associations.

B: Information providers:

In Alentejo there are few information providers but they are willing to have the opportunity to participate.

C: Future user groups:

Future user groups will include young people firstly because they are more prone to new technologies and second because they will progressively have more jobs in the services sector which are more likely to use these technologies. Other important user groups may be business people that may look up for information through the RIS.

D: Employees:

The Alentejo region is slowly changing from an agricultural region to a service region. The service sector employees are more open to technologies such as the Internet and to RIS. One problem is their competencies in using computers and new technologies. Employees from this region generally have a very positive attitude towards new things.

In financial terms, expected financing depends fully on agreements that can be reached between three parties: IPLB or Alentejo Digital, library's Municipalities and ISEGI. If this agreement is not reached ISEGI will try to get sponsors and maintain the service itself.

6. CONCLUSIONS

RIS in Alentejo (SIR Alentejo) is a important service for a whole region. The service enables libraries to effectively deliver what they traditionally do well: selecting resources and mediating access to information. Moreover, in the Alentejo area it's an opportunity for regional development and new possibilities in terms of providing opportunities and facilities for information availability both from information producers, designers as well as common citizens.

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