

European Documentation Centres: providing researchers with a way through the maze

Abstract:

European Documentation Centres (EDC) are part of an EU wide network of information services and have been part of many academic library collections for over 30 years. An increase in online publishing and widening access to official documentation has meant that EDCs are examining their role and adapting their services and functions to meet the needs of today's researchers. The authors introduce the work of European Documentation Centres and examine current issues. An EDC provides a neutral collection for all researchers offering support for research into European integration, without taking a position one way or the other. Smaller physical locations do not mean that EDCs have a diminishing role merely one that is changing in line with users' needs.

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Margaret Watson (Bodleian Law Library) and Maria Bell (British Library of Political and Economic Science, LSE) write about their role in providing EU information for academic research and examine the issues that exist in this specialist area.

European Documentation Centres (EDCs) are part of an EU wide network of information services providing access to official EU publications and documents to their target audiences. Their primary purpose is to support academic study and research on European integration.

EDCs are located across all EU member states as well as in 'candidate countries' such as Croatia and Turkey. The UK is very well served with over 40 EDCs which means that wherever you are, there is likely to be an extensive collection and librarians that can provide specialist assistance in locating official material (whether online or in print) covering the whole history of the EU. EDCs are likely to be based in a university or research institution where research into European integration and other social science fields takes place. The Bodleian Law Library and the London School of Economics have been receiving official EU materials since 1963 so we and many other EDCs in the UK have collections spanning 30 or 40 years. The official collections are complemented by the research publications, textbooks, monographs and journals that each of the libraries also holds.

Having EDC status means that the institution and the European Commission have an agreement that in return for provision of free materials, the host institution appoints a member of staff to manage the collection; the collections will be catalogued and stored and specialist help will be provided in locating information for those within the host institution and the local area. (In the past, this also included free access to online databases such as CELEX but this is no longer necessary with the development of the web content of Europa¹, Eurostat² and EUR-Lex³.)

Collections

Most research libraries house the EDC in a discrete collection with their own arrangement and classification scheme. Typically, guidance to the collections is provided on the web. All EDCs will hold the following types of materials:

- Primary legislation (treaties) and secondary legislation (e.g. directives, regulations, published in the *Official Journal*),
- Proposals for new legislation,
- Documents generated during the legislative process, e.g. European Parliament debates and reports
- Case law of the European Court of Justice,
- Commission (COM) documents,
- statistical material from Eurostat,
- overviews and explanations of policy and reports from the various EU institutions

¹ <http://europa.eu>

² <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/>

³ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/>

- Journals e.g. *Bulletin of the European Union*

Material is held in a variety of formats; paper, microfiche, CD-ROM and now online. For example, European Parliament Reports moved from print in 1989 to microfiche to web only in 1998. Legal materials such as the European Court Reports (ECR) are still retained in print as an essential source for European law studies. Increasingly in an EU of 27 members, publishing of print materials in all official languages has reduced in preference for online publishing on Europa. (A similar situation exists in publishing from other inter-governmental organisations and national governments.)

Who is using European Documentation Centres?

Our students and academics, of course, and local external students from a wide range of subject areas. At LSE, Masters students from another university's European studies programme are also provided with an induction to using the EDC. Social science researchers require statistical data such as that produced by Eurostat to provide the raw material for socio-economic analysis. Members of the public do use our services, but to a lesser extent. The detail and level of the collection is not always suited to what is required for school students or for someone looking for information on living in another EU country. Public information booklets available on the web or from Europe Direct⁴ or EPICs⁵ in public libraries may be more appropriate. Despite the extensive network of EU information services in the UK, it is apparent that users find it difficult to know where information is to be found and who is providing it. An EDC can assist in providing a route to the information.

Public and research enquiries have lessened as users go online themselves. This has certainly had advantages for users and librarians alike. It is no longer typical for an EDC librarian to spend the day searching manually through indexes, providing photocopies and sending out booklets when dealing with an EU enquiry. However, although users with internet access can be referred easily to relevant websites and online publications, they often still want to talk to a person to clarify information or understand what they have found online and amongst the personal researchers there is still a lack of widespread access to the internet.

Enquiries that are received from academic researchers can be much more complex as they have usually found the basic materials and so are looking to go deeper in to a topic or need to trace documentation that is not so easily located (it may have been removed or has been less prominent on an official website) – meeting records, voting details from parliament sessions, earlier versions of proposals.

Examples of recent enquiries received at LSE are: who are the MEPs in London; how to register a car if moving to another EU country; researching the implementation of MiFID in EU member states; and how the EU's social policy has dealt with gender equality issues.

Students struggle with too much information in most subjects, and it is no different for EU information, with the added complexity of the organisation and its documentation. It may be available online but how to locate it amongst so much information? Europa itself has in excess of 4 million pages. Information skills training for EU resources (official and non – official) enables students to locate the material more efficiently and with greater understanding of the content of resources.

⁴ Europe Direct is the newest network of information centres aimed at disseminating EU information to the public. http://ec.europa.eu/europedirect/index_en.htm

⁵ European Public Information Centres are an older network of information points run by UK library authorities http://ec.europa.eu/unitedkingdom/information/index_en.htm

The EDC/EU specialist in a large institution is likely to need to keep colleagues and academic staff up to date in the same way as any other subject specialist⁶. The supportive network of EU information providers is invaluable in our work. Our tasks are made easier by seeking advice from, and sharing our knowledge with colleagues through personal contacts, email discussion lists and annual meetings. Keeping up to date with developments is always the challenge and in recent years, using news feeds and email alerts has become a very convenient way to receive updates (e.g. EUfeeds⁷, Europe Media Monitor⁸ or EurActiv⁹). Invariably, enquiries will relate to what has been making the news. The European elections in June this year and further discussions on the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon including the possibility of a second Irish referendum will bring EU issues in to the headlines again and generate interest.

Current issues

The key issue facing European Documentation Centres today is the challenge of how to adapt their functions, role and services in response to new technologies.

EDCs originally received one copy of every official publication distributed by the Office for Official Publications (OPOCE), but the increasing prevalence of electronic distribution has resulted in the latest EDC contract permitting the Publications Office sometimes to meet this obligation electronically. As the university libraries that host EDCs receive less in the form of physical collections, some have questioned whether EDCs offer a good return for the time and money invested in them.

EDCs have never been free of charge to their host institutions: the publications are free, but the commitment in terms of space allocated and staff time is not. Some of these costs have diminished, not only because fewer publications are supplied, but also thanks to the efficiencies of modern cataloguing and serials registration systems. However, it is still necessary to invest in professional staff, and this raises questions about the role of the EDC within the host institution and the purpose of an international network of increasingly "virtual" EDCs.

The local role of the EDC is partly defined by its position within the larger collections. While some libraries decide that it resides logically with other collections of official publications, others position it within a subject area, such as Law. In the latter case, it may be invisible to readers from other disciplines, in the former, it may be invisible to almost everyone. This matters, even in an increasingly electronic information environment, because readers still need the support and assistance of professional librarians to make the most of the resources available and to interpret them effectively.

An EDC is only as good as its staff. The EDC contract requires the host institution to provide a professional librarian to manage it. Herein lies the value of an EDC: the collection is neutral, and so is the professional staff. This distinguishes EDCs from a network such as Europe Direct: EDCs are never outlets for propaganda and they do

⁶ It is rare now for a librarian to have the EDC as their sole responsibility. At LSE, the EDC librarian is also responsible for law and the IGO collections. Likely combinations at institutions are the EDC and law or the EDC with the social sciences or official publications.

⁷ EU feeds: news feeds from European newspapers provided by the European Journalism Centre <http://www.eufeeds.eu/>

⁸ Europe Media Monitor's News Brief is provided by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre <http://emm.jrc.it/NewsBrief/clusteredition/en/latest.html>

⁹ EurActiv, an independent company providing digests of news across the EU states. <http://www.euractiv.com/en>

not promote the EU. They support research into European integration, without taking a position one way or the other.

The mass of material available on Europa is not a neutral collection. EU officials have not only written and selected material for dissemination, but have also decided how to display it, making certain items more prominent than others and frequently removing links to material judged by them to be irrelevant or unimportant. For example, the positioning on EUR-Lex of the link to the Lisbon Treaty immediately below the consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union sends a clear, but arguably misleading, message about its status¹⁰. Professional library staff can clarify such ambiguities, and the EDC network supports research into European integration through the impartial expertise of its library and information specialists. By applying their professional skills and understanding of the structure of the EU and its documentation, EDC librarians enable researchers to identify, discover and evaluate both highly visible and hidden material. For example, researchers relying purely on Europa and its associated databases would be unlikely to discover the Archive of European Integration¹¹, but EDCs can direct them to this and to other independent documentary sources. Likewise, an EDC librarian can help students to track the progress of cases and legislation through the databases, and draw their attention to commentary in the press and academic publications that presents alternative views to those found in, for instance, the Commission's press releases.

Turning to the wider picture, the European Commission still clearly believes in the value of the EDC network within the EU, although levels of support over the years have been extremely variable, and have sometimes depended on the commitment of individuals rather than the institution itself. For example, the UK EDCs were particularly fortunate during the 1980s to have the energetic and enthusiastic support of Giancarlo Pau, who arrived at the London Representation in 1979. Today, the UK EDC network still depends heavily on the commitment of a small number of individuals, who give their time to manage the *europe.org* website, organise annual general meetings and answer questions posted to the *eurodoc* mailing list. This is essential because support from the European Commission continues to fluctuate, partly for financial reasons, as when the free training for the networks in the UK was recently temporarily suspended. It would be easier if there were more consistent and reliable support from the EU institutions, but EDCs also derive strength from their independence. Located in organisations that are committed to academic freedom, EDCs are a source of unbiased information and advice. The EDC as a physical presence may be diminishing, but most EDCs have a web presence, and EDC staff use new technologies to network with each other both nationally and internationally.

The move away from paper distribution of documents offers both opportunities, and threats. While it enables EDC librarians to reach wider audiences, to spend less time managing physical collections and devote more time to preparing research guides, teaching and dealing with enquiries, it also endangers them, if the need for professional staff is equated with the existence of substantial holdings of books and documents. A smaller physical presence can be misleading: it is simply not true that everything is now available online, nor does the availability of free electronic resources reduce the need for skilled and knowledgeable staff to support research, teaching and learning.

¹⁰ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/en/treaties/index.htm>

¹¹ <http://aei.pitt.edu/>

It is therefore critical that universities continue to support the EDC network within their institutions, as centres of expertise that enhance the quality of independent academic investigation.

Notes:

To locate an EDC in the UK: <http://www.europe.org.uk/info/>

The European Commission Representation in the United Kingdom
http://ec.europa.eu/unitedkingdom/index_en.htm

Bodleian Law Library EDC, University of Oxford
<http://www.ouls.ox.ac.uk/law/collections/edc>

EDC, Library, London School of Economics
http://www.lse.ac.uk/library/govpub/euruni/european_union.htm

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