CONSORTIUM OF ESTONIAN LIBRARIES NETWORK

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Since 1970s Estonian librarians have held seminars and conferences on library automation. They were organized mainly by the centralized state-run Estonian Institute of Information (EII) and librarians and museum staff took actively part in these. Although it was very difficult those days to get any information on the computerizing of libraries from other countries because of the Western embargo on advanced technology towards the socialist countries, the organizers managed sometimes to invite foreign specialists as well.

In the beginning of 1980s the EII started to create the first bibliographic databases in cooperation with research libraries using mainframes. The participating libraries sent data on catalogue cards and the EII staff input the data into the databases. Later by the end of 1980s as the libraries could acquire some personal computers, mainly of Soviet origin, the libraries started to send data on tapes or floppy disks to the EII. The databases were located and managed in the EII. The main goal of the computer databases used to be printed catalogues with several indexes.

Two big projects of that time were "Union Catalogue of Foreign books in Estonia" and "Union Catalogue of Foreign Periodicals" (yearbooks were published for the libraries to use), the database "Old Book of the University" - books from the XV c. to 1830 in Tartu University Library (it was meant to be a printed catalogue).

In the end of 1980s first attempts were made to send queries to the EII databases via modems and telephone line, but as the quality was very poor we could not use it in real work.

In 1988 the Estonian Librarians' Association (ELA) was born and several working groups to organize the cooperation of libraries in Estonia were formed, e.g. the Working Group on Cataloguing, the Working Group on Union Catalogues etc., among these the Working Group on the Computer Format of Bibliographic Information as well.

In the end of 1980s a lot of changes took place in Estonia and other Baltic Republics. It became possible to have tighter contacts with libraries abroad. By this time library automation in the Western countries had been developing very quickly.

In the beginning of 1990s the Estonian Information Institute was not able to keep up with the changes of the society and the libraries had to take the initiative. In 1992 the Council of the ELA decided to form the Research Libraries' Working Group on Automation. It consisted of the representatives of the National Library of Estonia, Tartu University Library, Library of the Academy of Sciences, Tallinn Technical University Library and Tallinn Pedagogical University Library.

The main goals of the Working Group were to coordinate the creation of electronic catalogues of the libraries and to agree on data communication standards.

The first union bibliographic databases in libraries were started on the basis of CDS/ISIS and moved later to ProCite. They were Union Catalogues of the Foreign Books and Foreign Periodicals. The databases are located at the National Library of Estonia and research libraries send their data on floppy disks or catalogue cards. The participants in the project have the possibility to get the entire database on floppy disks. Printed catalogues are published annually.

1992 was also the year when the first libraries in Estonia got full Internet connection and now can search library catalogues and databases on Internet.

In 1994 two working groups of the ELA were united: the Working Group on Union Catalogues and the Working Group on Library Automation. It became clear that they have actually the same goal. Two more libraries joined the Working Group: the Library of Estonian Agricultural University and the Archive Library of the Estonian Literary Museum.

By this time some bigger libraries were running projects of their own. The Library of the Academy of Sciences has the retrospective national bibliography database. The National Library of Estonia is maintaining the current national bibliography database since 1991. Tartu University Library has a home-made library system and an electronic catalogue of the library (still only latin alphabet) since 1994 on the Internet. These are the bibliographic databases of national significance. Beside these there are several in-house applications used in the libraries, for example the circulation module in the National Library.

In 1994 the Working Group on Library Automation and Union Catalogue made the decision to purchase a common integrated library system for all the seven research libraries and to form a consortium to coordinate the cooperative work of library automation. We developed the set of functional requirements that would satisfy all the participating libraries and contacted all bigger integrated library system vendors in the world.

As the financial situation in the post-socialist Estonia is not very favourable for libraries, seeking support from various agencies and state budget to improve the technical infrastructure has been quite a big part of the work of the Consortium. Open Estonia Foundation has helped us a lot, we are very grateful to them.

In spring 1995 the representatives of Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian librarians came together in Tallinn and signed an agreement to use common standards and principles.

In September 1995 the Consortium of Estonian Libraries Network (ELNET Consortium) was formed. The aim of the organisation is to acquire a common integrated library system for all the member libraries and to make the bibliographic databases and union catalogue of Estonian libraries accessible via internet.

The Consortium is working hard on the project "Information System of Estonian Libraries". At the moment we are in the stage of final selection of a library system. We are seeking support for our project from various agencies and we hope Estonian Government will give us financial help.