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National Bibliographies and the International Conference on National Bibliographic Services Recommendations: Introduction

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BACKGROUND

Project Assignment (1999/2000)

Towards the end of 1999 the Standing Committee on Bibliography appointed a Working Group consisting of Barbara L. Bell, The College of Wooster, Ohio and Anne M.H. Langballe, National Library of Norway, Oslo Division, with a charge to:

- 1) Identify those national bibliographic services which are especially effective by virtue of their ability to meet the criteria and provide the features identified in ICNBS (International Conference on National Bibliographic Services) Recommendations 5-11; and,
- 2) Identify those Services that could improve effectiveness through greater conformance to these Recommendations, suggesting ways to request that they implement ICNBS Recommendations.

In addition, Recommendation 1 (on legal deposit legislation) was later added to the charge, as this turned out to be useful in connection with the other points examined.

The Standing Committee suggested that the basis of the work be Barbara L. Bell's *An annotated guide to current national bibliographies*, München: Saur, 1998 and viewed it as a one year project with some funding from IFLA.

Working methods

The Working Group observed time frame set by the Standing Committee and established an approach that would make it possible to finish the project within one year.

Bell spent spring 2000 in Stellenbosch, the Republic of South Africa, autumn 2000 and spring 2001 at home in Ohio. Langballe has been at home in Oslo, Norway for the duration of the project. The investigators maintained communications by e-mail and fax. Since Bell was commissioned by the National Library of Norway to evaluate the Norwegian National Bibliography, the authors were able meet to discuss their project during her stay in Norway in June 2000.

The authors divided responsibility for their investigation, as follows, taking into account language difficulties:
Bell: Africa, the Middle East, and Asia (East, South, Southeast, Central and Transcaucasia)
Langballe: Europe, North America (including Central America and Caribbean), South America, and Oceania with Australia and New Zealand.

The basis of the work was Bell's *Annotated Guide*. In addition, all printed bibliographies or CD-ROMs found in Oslo and Stellenbosch have been examined. Several printed national bibliographies consist of more than one part – e.g. a monograph part, a serial part, an article part – and many are published in more than one format. As a result, the authors decided to examine one part (usually the monograph part) and at least one format, assuming that findings regarding this part would be typical for the whole national bibliography. All home pages of national libraries on the Internet were searched for information about the national bibliography; these were found through *Gabriel, the information service for the National Libraries of Europe*, IFLANET's list *Web Accessible National and Major Libraries*, *Directory of LAP* [Libraries of Asia and Pacific], and search robots.

In filling out worksheets, the investigators discovered that a few of the ICNBS Recommendations called for specific information not readily available in the sources they were using. For example, Recommendations addressed how national bibliographic agencies accommodated national bibliography users with special needs. They also addressed where copyright, availability, ISSN, and price were given in the national bibliography (on the title page, its verso, or in an introduction of the national bibliography), and whether a certain script was used in the bibliographic records. For specific points such as these, it was necessary to view a current issue of the national bibliography.

During autumn 2000 and spring 2001, the authors traveled to libraries where bibliographies they needed to view could be found: Langballe went to Stockholm, Sweden, and Bell to the Library of Congress as well as the University of Wisconsin, Madison. As there were still some bibliographies left to be seen, the lending departments of their own libraries helped by borrowing them or obtaining copies of relevant pages from foreign libraries' holdings.

To a certain extent the authors also corresponded with national libraries to get more information. They decided not to contact all national bibliographies in order to be able to answer all details of recommendations 5-11. This was partly due to time constraints; also because, in compiling her book, Bell had requested national bibliographies to provide information about their future plans. However, as Bell's *Annotated Guide* was published in 1998 and the volumes she examined for that work sometimes had been published some years

earlier, it is likely that some national bibliographies may have experienced changes. Such changes would most likely have occurred in cases of national bibliographies that had individuals attending the ICNBS to represent them. In August, the investigators sent a letter, including with it the ICNBS Recommendations, to the participating agencies asking them to advise whether changes had been made to their national bibliography as a result of these Recommendations. Of 71 letters sent, the authors received 30 replies, for a return rate of 42.3%. The information received is now part of their findings. They used the participants list of the Programme and addresses found on IFLA's *National Libraries of the World: an Address List*, as the ICNBS Conference Secretariat was not able to provide an updated participants' address list. The inquiry was sent by e-mail (when such address was found and worked), fax, or post. In some cases, but not all, unanswered letters were sent again during the autumn. Bell was able to supplement information about southern African countries with information derived from a recent investigation conducted for another article. The authors believe the 42.3% return rate noted above is disappointing, but feel that they may not have reached the appropriate addressees in some cases. On the other hand, many answers were very encouraging and led to more correspondence. The national bibliography of the Czech Republic was the first to reply and which proved very helpful on several later occasions later. Also meriting special mention were the national bibliography in Mongolia, where the Recommendations were translated and published in their library journal; and the national bibliography of Jamaica, which thanked the authors for their interest.

The authors have also read several articles on national bibliographies published in library journals during 2000-2001 and consulted with subject bibliographers who had expertise in specific countries.

The authors are aware of the fluidity of the field of national bibliographies, particularly with regard to the use of electronics in creating various formats. Consequently, they have consulted the separate studies undertaken by Robert Holley and John Byrum; the authors also checked for Web sites that might not have been available one or two years ago. Even with this the authors know that important information must have been overlooked. In the compilation of the *Annotated Guide* the national bibliographies were asked to report future plans, and it is gratifying to see now that many of these plans have been implemented. Equally, it is sad to see that, in some cases, civil war, natural disasters, and other unforeseen problems have kept national bibliographic agencies from accomplishing goals.

In summary, there are only a few bibliographies the authors did not see either as a print, CD-ROM, or Web version – or through copies of some pages. But, despite attempts, in many cases they did not prove able to view the newest issues. And, the authors may not have been able to update the information of the *Annotated Guide* in other ways either. So there are certainly developments of which they probably are not aware, so some information reported below may be outdated. This is also true, because developments often happen quickly in this field. Thus, in several cases, information noted from home pages in February 2000 when the investigation began no longer applied when rechecked in November. As the latest revision of the ICNBS *Final Recommendations* was February 2, 1999, they were not implemented in the national bibliographies before the volume covering 1999, only in the “best” cases published in 2000. So probably more changes will be seen in the following years – especially concerning inclusion of remote electronic resources, standard number systems for those, and metadata.

This survey compared to earlier surveys

Members of the Standing Committee on Bibliography have conducted two surveys related to features of national bibliographies in recent years: Robert Holley's “Survey on bibliographic control and national bibliography” and John Byrum's “Inclusion of information covering electronic resources in national bibliographies”.

Both surveys concentrated on types of documents included in the national bibliographies. Holley's also focused on standards used. The current survey, however, mainly deals with the *formal presentation* of document descriptions included in the bibliographies and of the *formal presentation* of the bibliography itself, but also looks at standards used. In accordance with the *Final recommendations of the International Conference on National Bibliographic Services* of 1999, paragraphs 1, 5-11, the questions which this study attempted to answer have been:

- Is there a current legal deposit law?
- Does the bibliography follow international standards when describing documents?
- Is the bibliography arranged in a user-friendly way?
- Are there enough indexes or search possibilities to enable efficient information retrieval?
- Is there a user-friendly introduction that describes the bibliography properly as to what is included and how the information is arranged?
- What would make this a better national bibliography?
- What can the Standing Committee do to encourage NBAs to implement the ICNBS Recommendations?

The authors sincerely hope their report will be useful to the IFLA Standing Committee on Bibliography.