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Information and training through the net: the experience of DFP (Italian Government Information on the net)

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Abstract

Continuing professional education programs for the library and information science professions are not very well developed in Italy yet, especially in the area of government information and official publications. This paper presents some initiatives in this sense, focusing in particular on a directory of the Italian government information resources available on the Internet.

The name of the directory is DFP: Documentazione di Fonte Pubblica in rete = Italian Government Information on the Net, hosted on the website of the Italian Library Association (AIB) since 1997 (<http://www.aib.it/aib/commiss/pubuff/guida.htm>).

DFP is mainly a tool to keep librarians and end-users informed on the best resources available on the net: nevertheless, although not originally conceived as a training tool, it also aims at increasing librarians' expertise, interacting with the Italian librarians discussion list AIB-CUR. In this way, librarians who are expert in the government information field extend their knowledge and skills to the librarians community, reaching out an ever-growing number of end-users.

Introduction. - Background: overview of the Italian situation in the area of government information training. - Origins: the Official Publications Working Group of the Italian Library Association. -

Librarians and e-government in Italy. - DFP organization. - DFP: an example of good practice and a didactic tool. - Integration of DFP with the AIB-Cur discussion list: an example of distance-learning and workplace learning. - Measuring DFP's impact

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to outline some Italian initiatives in the field of training and skill development, concerning government information issues. Experiences carried out by the authors are described: in fact, both authors, although operating in different backgrounds such as legislative and public health sources of information, have a large familiarity with training and education initiatives, practitioner- or end-user-targeted.

We'll in-depth analyse DFP, Documentazione di Fonte Pubblica in rete = Italian Government Information on the net, a directory of relevant websites in the area of information produced by public bodies, hosted on the website of the Italian Library Association (AIB) since 1997ⁱ.

DFP arises from the work of the Associazione Italiana Biblioteche (AIB) Official Publications Working Groupⁱⁱ, who developed the idea that the future of public information is on the net. DFP's creation also derives from the large demand by citizens and library users for data and documents of public origin.

We focus on the effects of DFP information spreading through the Internet, and specifically on the aspect of promotion of government information. We believe that these effects can be a good example of how the power of the Internet can be exploited for teaching and training purposes, especially in a context like the Italian one. In our opinion, our experience may be useful also to colleagues operating in other countries.

Background: overview of the Italian situation in the area of government information training

The basic librarian preparation in Italy is University education, although employers do not always require degrees and diplomas in Library science. Up to about ten years ago, as stated by Petrucciani in a 1991 articleⁱⁱⁱ, university degrees and diplomas were offered only by a few academic institutions, and there were post-graduate two years programs in Rome, Milan, Padua and Naples Universities. After the University reform, which took place in the academic year 2000/2001, a system based on three years (first degree) plus two years (specialist degree) was introduced in Italy. Therefore, there are now more courses in Library Science, mostly within the context of the Preservation of Cultural Heritage studies. Currently, according to the *Directory of Education opportunities for librarians* of the Italian Library Association (AIB)^{iv}, about thirty universities offer a first-level degree in Library science or Archive-keeping science. About ten Universities offer a second-level degree (specialist), while at least eighteen academic institutions offer both first and second level masters. According to the recently published "Report on Italian Libraries 2001"^v, there are "at least 27 courses aimed at the formation of librarians, in 26 universities and with locations in 25 different cities".

Quite recently (March-April 2003), a lively debate on librarians' education took place in AIB-CUR (the Italian Librarians discussion list)^{vi}: the results of this debate (in which librarians and information specialists participated with more than fifty messages) showed that:

- many professionals believe that academic courses in Italy are too much focused on traditional historical subjects, such as Bibliography or Bibliology;
- the archivist tradition is still prevailing, as witnessed by education programs.

All messages report changes in the library professions during the latest years, and stress the need for new skills. Therefore, there is a large demand for updating flexible practical courses, especially by librarians who started their profession many years ago, without any previous formal professional education.

This is particularly true for librarians working in special libraries, and mainly in the sector of government information, with almost a total absence of specific academic or training courses.

In this field, we can report two recent training courses organized by the AIB - which in its statute “promotes activities which guarantee professional training and continuing education” in the framework of continuing professional development. The first course “Public Documentation: sources and techniques for its finding, retrieval and valorisation” was held in 1999^{vii}. The second one, “Grey literature: basic principles and new trends” was carried out in November 2002^{viii}, with a session specifically devoted to administrative information.

It's also worth mentioning the three National Conferences on Grey Literature, jointly organized by the AIB and the Italian National Institute of Health (ISS), respectively in 1992, 1996 and 1999^{ix}, and the Symposium “From Official Publication to Documentation of Public Origin”, organized in 1998 by the Chamber of Deputies and the AIB^x.

The above mentioned conferences gave important opportunities to librarians willing to develop or to update their knowledge in the field of Government Information, but represent rare, non-systematic initiatives. In this scenario, the potentialities of a Web directory such as DFP should not be undervalued, both as a training tool for librarians, and as an instrument of diffusion of public information topics.

Origins: the *Official Publications Working Group* of the Italian Library Association

Italian librarians and information specialists have always paid little attention to information produced by public administrations, because public authorities libraries are, generally speaking, poorly equipped, thus providing a restricted number of services, as compared to other European countries.

In Italy, a bibliographic control of official publications doesn't exist because the Italian National Bibliography covers only a small portion of public sector publications and we do not have a central official publisher like GPO in USA or HMSO in UK. Libraries like those at the Chamber of Deputies and at the Senate, receive books published by public authorities on the basis of the legal deposit law^{xi}, but do not provide any bibliographic control service in this field^{xii}.

Moreover, Italian citizens have not the habit of using a public library to gather information about laws and cases related to their daily life, or to find a document published by the European Union or by the local municipality.

In 1995, in order to study and change this situation, the Italian Library Association formed a Working Group on Official Publications, which closed its works in 2001. Its activity

concentrated on the following points: a wider definition of the official publication, bibliographic control^{xiii}, the importance of libraries as access points to public information, the role of the Internet in spreading public data.

The Internet has been considered the decisive element to change the Italian situation. In any case, before the Internet's age, libraries were not in the condition, if not in rare cases, to grant access to a large amount of official documents and had often difficulties even in delivering the simplest legislative information. Through the Internet and the growing availability of public sector information, new possibilities of services in this field have been developed, even for the smallest municipal library, provided that librarians have the necessary skills and know the specific characteristics of official materials. So, in the last part of its activity, the research group focused on the accessibility through public libraries and launched a survey about their role, in collaboration with the Italian National Statistics Institute. Some partial results^{xiv} show that Italian public libraries have no complete awareness of the services provided in this field because, and even if they have a modest but significant number of reference requests for public information, they do not seem to play an active role, and limit themselves to the simplest performances.

Librarians and e-government in Italy

When the Official Publications Research Group began its work, the first Italian public administration websites had just been established. Some group members began to study the characteristics of Government websites and the different experiences of public data spreading through the net. The Italian official sites developed without any initial coordination, in particular at the central administration level. The first policy act of the Italian Government was issued only in March 2001: the Civil Service Department directive of March the 13th *Guidelines for the organization, the usability and the accessibility of public administration websites*^{xv}. This document is not exhaustive: for instance, instructions about the minimum level availability, integration, completeness and conservation of public documents are absent. The result is that Italian citizens may access a lot of very technical documents but, for example, cannot gain complete full access to the Official Gazette of the Italian Republic. Professional librarians, operating in the Italian Public Administration, have never been involved in the development of Government websites. All the process was managed by IT professionals and by administrators, under political directives completely concentrated on delivering administrative services more than information. The recent *Guidelines of the Government for the development of the information society*^{xvi}, developed by the Minister for Innovation and Technologies Mr. Lucio Stanca (June 2002), represent a strategic document based on the use of IT to modernize a country in which, as far as e-government is concerned, all the attention is directed to the online interactive services (according to the slogan: *from queues to clicks*^{xvii}). The Italian Government, as many other Governments in the world and with the support of EU, is determined to exploit the Internet to improve the efficiency and efficacy of public administrations, with the aim of helping the citizen in using the administration from his/her home, saving time and money. For this purpose, the Parliament passed several important laws, which are qualifying Italy as one of the most advanced countries in this field: for instance, the electronic signature and the electronic protocol regulations^{xviii}. The Minister for Innovation and Technology Mr. Lucio Stanca has recently pointed out the great expectations of the forthcoming Italian Presidency of the EU (second semester 2003), in the field of e-government. In a press release issued on March 10, 2003, he stated that "the e-government challenge to bring the enlarged Europe online is starting in Italy"^{xix}.

On the other side the e-government policy has neglected the purpose of making public sector information available simply, efficiently and consistently. For this aspects, each department or public authority acts as a separate entity. Different practices between and within departments result in completely different websites in which public information is scattered on, and, for this reason, often very difficult to find. Moreover, there is not a register of public information assets. The National citizen's portal <<http://www.italia.gov.it>> on the one hand displays the services offered by the central and local authorities, being very user-friendly and useful for the layman, but, on the other, does not pay enough attention to the information repositories managed by public administrations, since its contents focus on key events in the life of citizens. For example, in the field of legal information, Italy is the only European country in which the Official Gazette is not accessible for free, if not for the last 60 days <<http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it>>. This lack is not counterbalanced by the presence of a legal search engine such as *Norme in rete* [Statutes-online] <<http://www.normeinrete.it>>, by which it is possible to search the legislation that the government departments and offices have made available for free on their websites. In fact, the list of contributors is quite short, the same regulation is often published in more than one site, and the user is not able to understand whether the retrieved text is consolidated or not^{xx}.

DFP organization

DFP is a structured catalogue of the Italian Internet Resources relevant to public information. It focuses on legal aspects and, more specifically, on normative information. DFP is characterized by its accurate selection, according to quality criteria, of the included resources, especially of those mentioned in the subject sectors. As a matter of fact, its nature has been evolving in time towards two directions:

- as a meta-catalogue of directories and guides in the official publications field, already present on the Web;
- as a tool for monitoring information policies and trends of public bodies in different areas.

In this context, great importance is given not only to the activity of retrieving and posting new resources, but also to the steady updating of the records, according to modifications occurring in the reviewed sites.

The editorial board of DFP is made by librarians who initially formed the AIB original Official Publications Working Group, followed by other librarians who already used their library websites to disseminate legal information, and wished to contribute to the directory with their resources^{xxi}. Therefore, we can say that DFP has at present a “federal structure”, since it is currently a set of pages which are edited and published in different websites, but nevertheless have the same structure, and definitely belong to a single project^{xxii}.

DFP's first addressees are reference librarians working in Public Libraries, University Libraries (Law and Social Sciences Schools), special libraries and documentation centres in public structures or private firms.

The resources described in DFP are divided into three sections:

General Sources Documentation

It includes the Official Bulletin, Regional bulletins, Collections of Laws, Codes, International Agreements, Parliamentary Proceedings, Cases, Statistics and Elections Documentation, Synopsis of the Italian legal information on the web. In this section search

engines and guides to Internet resources, legal information services, e-government resources and foreign governments information can be found as well.

Subject Sources Documentation

This section contains links to websites on specific administrative fields, that include laws, decrees, regulations, directives, agreements, jurisprudence, bills, forthcoming conferences, official reports and statistics. Special attention is devoted to the Environment and Public Health areas, considering that those are fields of particular interest for European citizens^{xxiii}. In this section public bodies sites are mainly posted, but some private sites are also reviewed, if they provide public source information.

Official Websites

The Directory of Official Websites is a list of Italian governmental Agencies, with direct links to relevant home pages. The Directory offers an overview of the whole site. It is divided into eight sections, according to Agencies' nature and mission: within each section Agencies are arranged in alphabetical order.

The standard DFP record includes the following fields:

- Heading with the name of the website or of the service (e.g. a database) provided in the site.
- URL.
- Synthetic description of the resource, posting if the site is an institutional or a private one, if its services are free-of-charge or on payment, coverage, information contents, updating frequency.
- Last date of consultation.

Sources of information for DFP are, in order of importance, personal experience of the editors, directories of Internet links prepared by various institutions, postings on print journals and newspapers, Italian search engines.

DFP: an example of good practice and a didactic tool

During the training courses organised by the ISS in the field of public health information sources, we often talk about quality issues and about the importance of evaluating websites on the basis of generally accepted criteria. DFP Directory is shown as an example of good practice for its selection of high quality Internet resources. This is especially true for the Subject Sources section, since there is a huge number of potentially relevant websites in these areas. Resources are selected according to quality criteria established by the Commission of the European Communities^{xxiv}. This set of criteria includes Transparency and Honesty, Authority, Privacy and data protection, Updating of information, Accountability, Accessibility. Although not all Italian public or private websites adhere perfectly to those criteria, attention is paid on the selection of those sites which at least:

- clearly state the sources for all information provided
- are concerned about the clear and regular updating of the site, and about guidelines on physical accessibility.

DFP, therefore, collects the main reference sources available on the net, and, at the same time, performs a selection of the best authoritative sites developed by private and public institutions.

For this reason we believe that DFP is a useful training tool, which can be profitably employed in training courses addressed to practitioners and end-users. The “Synopsis of the Italian Legal Information on the Web”^{xxv}, in the General Sources Documentation section, represents a good example of reference tool addressed also to inexperienced practitioners. It sums up the best information sources for the different fields (National, Regional and European Legislation, Cases, Parliamentary Acts, Juridical Bibliography), dividing each area into two sections:

- Where to search.
- Where to find the last updates.

Integration of DFP with the AIB-Cur discussion list: an example of distance-learning and workplace learning

DFP is not only a directory of Internet resources, but even a tool for the transmission of information and skills in the sector of public information, from expert librarians towards public libraries colleagues. For this purpose, the interaction between DFP and the discussion list of the Italian libraries association is essential. The discussion list of the AIB, called AIB-CUR, collects nearly 3500 members. AIB-CUR was created in 1992 by the University and Research Commission of the Italian Library Association (from which the acronym AIB-CUR).

It's a no-moderated list, intended for discussion about all general issues related to Italian library profession. Yet, the list is supported by a technical staff that develops a steady work in the back stage, in order to facilitate the right use of the list, or to organize the mail files, making the list not only a communication tool, but also a documentation one.

A library of documents is associated to the list. It's possible to pick up subject collections of e-mails, and other documents. The AIB-CUR technical staff has been working a lot for the integration of the discussion list with the AIB website. Therefore, some of the AIB-CUR serial mails are public, since they are located in special web pages. These messages are identified by the subject beginning with a key word. This allows the software (LISTSERV) to sort each message to the AIB-CUR subdivisions (so called sub-lists), that each member may activate or not. For example, messages with the subject AGENDA inform about conferences, seminars, training events and presentations of professional interest, while the subject WORK informs about working opportunities for librarians. At the same time, these messages are filed in freely accessible web pages (AIB-NOTEBOOK CUR and AIB-WORK CUR).

DFP updates are spread by AIB-CUR, as well. The first e-mails related to public administration websites were diffused through the list, thus becoming the first edition of the DFP directory. Since then, the list is updated twice a year. In update intervals, any new electronic resource as well as news on public bodies' policies are posted in the AIB-CUR list by DFP editors, with the subject DFP. This allows the creation of a file including all the mails available between an edition and the other. Moreover, some colleagues who do not take part in the DFP staff send their messages through the list, using DFP as subject. In this way the most experienced librarian in government information field extend their knowledge and skills to the librarians' community.

Measuring DFP's impact

We would like to conclude our paper with a short note on how DFP is reviewed by our colleagues in Italy and all over the world, and on how it is cited in the international guides to the Internet.

We tried to measure DFP's impact by a survey performed through those search engines, such as Google, Arianna, and Yahoo!, which give the possibility of selecting websites that link to a given URL. By introducing the DFP's URL we found that about 250 sites have a link to it. Most of them are Italian sites, mainly from Universities, Law Schools and Public Libraries guides to Internet resources. DFP is quoted in many Italian guides to the use of Internet resources^{xxvi}, as well.

DFP has links from about ten sites from different countries as USA, France, Spain, Switzerland, and Germany. The New York University School of Law in its guide to Foreign and International Legal Databases, states that DFP provides "a very good list of information resources on Italian public documentation"^{xxvii}. DFP is also cited in the FindLaw for Legal Professionals directory^{xxviii}.

Our purpose and our hope for the next future is to facilitate through this tool the outreach of an ever-growing number of practitioners and end-users, enabling them to better use government information sources.

We would like to end up with the words of Blanche Woolls: "With the rapid changes in technology, we will soon have capabilities beyond our wildest imaginations. It is our creativity that we must employ to make links between us as Continuing Professional Education providers."^{xxix}

ⁱ <URL: <http://www.aib.it/aib/commiss/pubuff/guida.htm>>

ⁱⁱ <URL: <http://www.aib.it/aib/commiss/pubuff/pubuff.htm>>

ⁱⁱⁱ Alberto Petrucciani, "Continuing Education in Italy" in Blanche Woolls, ed., *Continuing Professional Education. A publication of the Continuing Professional Education Round Table (CPERT) of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions*. (IFLA Publications 55). Munchen: K.G. Saur, 1991, p. 125-126.

^{iv} <URL: <http://www.aib.it/aib/form/form.htm>>

^v Vittorio Ponzani ed., "Report on Italian Libraries 2001", *Bollettino AIB*. 42 (4) (December 2002): p. 475-504.

^{vi} For a summary of this debate see: Vittorio Ponzani, "Quale formazione per bibliotecari e documentalisti?" *AIB Notizie*. 15 (3) (2003), p. 7. <URL: <http://www.aib.it/aib/editoria/n15/03-03ponzani.htm>>

^{vii} <URL: <http://www.aib.it/aib/corsi/99c-06.htm>>

^{viii} <URL: <http://www.aib.it/aib/corsi/c02g.htm>>

^{ix} The references to the proceedings of these three Conferences edited by Vilma Alberani and Paola De Castro are available on the ISS website <URL: <http://www.iss.it/publ/cong/index.html>>

^x <URL: <http://www.aib.it/aib/commiss/pubuff/giornata.htm>>

^{xi} L. 374/1939, section 11

^{xii} For a general description of the main Italian official publications see in English: *Italy*, in: Guide of official publications of foreign countries, 2nd ed., Bethesda, Md.: CIS, 1997, p. 202-209 and Vilma Alberani, *Pubblicazioni ufficiali italiane*, Roma: AIB, 1995. See also: Fernando Venturini ed., *Le fonti per lo studio dell'amministrazione pubblica italiana: guida bibliografica, 1848-1992*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994, particularly for the section on official publications and grey documentation.

^{xiii} On this matter a conference was organized in 2000. The proceedings were published in: *Dalle pubblicazioni ufficiali alla documentazione di fonte pubblica: il ruolo delle biblioteche tra controllo bibliografico e diffusione dell'informazione*, Roma: Camera dei deputati, 2000.

^{xiv} <URL: <http://www.aib.it/aib/cen/q0106a.htm>>

^{xv} <URL: http://www.governo.it/Presidenza/web/circ13mar2001_FP.html>

^{xvi} <URL: http://www.innovazione.gov.it/eng/documenti/linee_guida_eng.shtm>

^{xvii} This is the title of a booklet published by the Minister for innovation and technology: <URL: <http://www.innovazione.gov.it/ita/news/click2003.shtml>>. It presents the online services offered by the central Government and local authorities.

^{xviii} A website completely dedicated to the electronic protocol has been set up by the Italian Authority for IT in public administrations: <URL: <http://protocollo.aipa.it/>>. See also an English version of the decree No. 513 of 10 November 1997 <URL: [http://www.aipa.it/english\[4/law\[3/pdecree51397.asp](http://www.aipa.it/english[4/law[3/pdecree51397.asp)>.

^{xix} See the news in EU E-Government observatory:

<URL: <http://europa.eu.int/ISPO/ida/jsps/index.jsp?fuseAction=showChapter&chapterID=140&preChapterID=0>> where it is also possible to have a synthetic view of the Italian situation.

^{xx} An English overview of the sources of Italian law has been published by Raffaele Ladu on the site <http://www.llrx.com>.

<URL: <http://www.llrx.com/features/ladu2.htm#Free%20Online%20Italian%20Legal%20ReSources>>.

^{xxi} DFP editors are: Laura Ballestra, Graziella Casarin, Maurella Della Seta, Alessandra Ensoli, Grazia Vecchio and Fernando Venturini (coordinator).

^{xxii} The institutions taking part in DFP are at present the Municipality of Fiesole Library and the “Mario Rostoni” Library of the LIUC University.

^{xxiii} According to a survey carried out by the European Commission. *Eurobarometer 55.2 Europeans, Science and Technology*, Bruxelles: European Commission, December 2001

<URL: http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/special.htm>

^{xxiv} Commission of the European Communities. “eEurope 2002: Quality Criteria for Health related Websites”. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*. 4 (3) 2002 .e15. <URL: <http://www.jmir.org/2002/3/e15/>>

^{xxv} <URL: <http://www.aib.it/commiss/pubuff/tabella.htm> >

^{xxvi} e.g.: Francesco Brugaletta. *Internet per giuristi*. Napoli: Simone, 1998, 1st ed.

^{xxvii} <URL: http://www.law.nyu.edu/library/foreign_intl/italy.htm >

^{xxviii} <URL: <http://www.findlaw.com/12international/countries/it.htm> >

^{xxix} Blanche Woolls, “Building a plan to deliver lifelong Continuing Professional Education across space and time” in B. Woolls and B.E. Sheldon eds. *Delivering Lifelong Continuing Professional Education Across Space and Time. The Fourth World Conference on Continuing Professional Education for the Library and Information Science Professions*. (IFLA Publications 98). Munchen: K.G. Saur, 2001, p.24.