

Conference and Book Review

EURIM 5

Peter J. Taylor and Blaise Cronin, eds., *Information Management Research in Europe*. Proceedings of the EURIM 5 conference, Palais des Congrès, Versailles, France, May 1982. London: ASLIB, 1983. iv + 212p. 33 fig. £19 (in the UK) or £22 (overseas) (for ASLIB members: £16 in the UK, £19 overseas). Hardbound. ISBN 0-85142-171-7.

One might possibly wish to argue that the best thing about attending EURIM 5, as matters turned out, was the splendid spring weather combined with the impressive setting. Just a few tens of meters from the conference venue there stood, bathed in brilliant sunlight, the imposing palace of Louis XIV, and behind that the expansive gardens and park. Some kilometers away in Paris itself—from which many of the participants made their three morning journeys to the conference site, and to which they not terribly reluctantly returned for the evenings—the chestnut trees were in glorious blossom, the air was gently warm (if not entirely clean), and the metropolis was as always brimming with all manner of potential diversions. Surely it was for many a ‘delegate’ not uncommon to find his or her thoughts pleasantly drifting away from the subject of information management. Even, for better or worse, while sitting in the comfortably appointed lecture hall—since most of the twenty-one papers on the technical program did not even address this topic, some were uninspired and/or less than well presented, and several had apparently little new to offer the listeners. There were a few gratifying exceptions: for instance the contribution by Peter Canisius (president of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Dokumentation) on multilingual information systems (delivered, not in his own language, but in elegant and compelling English), as well as the opening address by G. Denielou (president of the Association nationale de la recherche technique) and the closing address by Jean Meyriat (Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, and secretary general of the International Committee for Social Science Information and Documentation). Some presentations—for example that of Margaret Slater of ASLIB (read by Peter Vickers) and that of Fredrik Backlund of DFI in Stockholm—stimulated lively discussions. Papers were delivered in three languages: German and French in addition to English. In some cases, listeners had the option of simultaneous interpretation. At least one of the non-English-language contributions is here

published in an English version, but there remain two in German (one of which was delivered at the conference in English) and three in French. (Oddly enough, the title of Werner Schwuchow's paper is printed—both in the contents-list and atop the paper itself—in English, though the text is in German, as was the oral presentation.)

The EURIM conferences have lately been taking place every two years (in various European countries) and, as in previous cases, this one was organized by ASLIB in collaboration with information- or research-oriented associations/institutions from various parts of Europe. There were some 235 persons registered for attendance—from all parts of western Europe as well as a few non-Europeans (from Australia, South Africa, the Middle East and North America). The exhibition was not large (seventeen exhibitors, thirteen of them from France) but nonetheless cramped, because of the small quarters and peculiar layout. Informal contact among participants was hampered by the fact that they were lodging in various places around the capital, and there was but one (minor) social event on the schedule.

Some sixteen months or so after the conference, this proceedings volume was published by ASLIB. (The editor had been originally announced as L.J. Anthony, who in the meantime has of course retired from employment with ASLIB.) Previous EURIM proceedings have been issued in large-format (two columns) paperback; this book is approximately 6×9 inches, in hardback. It was produced from camera-ready-copy (good-quality dot-matrix reduced). No running headlines were added in order to give the reader easy orientation. Outside margins are narrow, and in a few cases almost non-existent. Figures are sometimes rather faint, have in several instances been insufficiently reduced, and one of them (on page 83) is partially lost at both right- and left-hand sides. There is no preface or introduction, and no index. Prof. Denielou's opening address has not been printed here (though Prof. Meyriat's closing address is included), nor have the session-chairmen's remarks. Short discussion-summaries (all in English) do appear. Curiously, the great majority of papers have no accompanying abstract or résumé, though abstracts were provided to conference participants. Some authors give lists of references (as many as forty-seven in one case), many do not. The quality of editing is good; typographical errors are not frequent, but in one case it is impossible to determine the correct reading.

The papers appear under four rubrics, corresponding to the session titles of the conference: 1) The management of information systems and libraries, 2) Retrieval techniques, 3) Information transfer and delivery, 4) Multilingual and international systems. The second of these was not especially well chosen, since three of the four papers deal specifically with automatic indexing and/or classification (based respectively on British, French, and US work) and the fourth with a specialized aspect of reference data bases. The papers range in length from four to fifteen pages of text. It should perhaps not be surprising that they do not necessarily correspond very closely to what a given speaker actually said on the podium. In some cases this is probably a good thing: one of the best known among the speakers (whom I out of respect shall here leave unnamed) presents a balanced,

straightforward and useful account of his topic in the printed proceedings, though at the conference itself his oral delivery was embarrassingly disjointed and confused, his diction disconcerting, his approach high-handed, and his argumentation very hard to follow. In other cases, it is perhaps less fortunate: one speaker offered some interesting observations on the nature and value of information research, which do not appear in his published text.

These proceedings are a rather mixed bag, covering a broad range of subject matter: from the problems of information professionalism to the future of machine translation, from R & D communication to minicomputer-based information-management packages, from automatic classification to the macroeconomic aspects of specialized information, from videodisk applications and satellite link networks to the social ramifications of information transfer. Though after the time which has elapsed since the conference was held some of the material may seem slightly dated (especially to those who have carefully followed recent developments), and, as indicated, the quality of the papers is uneven, there is probably enough here to justify purchase of the volume for any generalized information science collection. Here and there one comes across passages which suggest how attitudes and usages differ from one country to another (for example, the concluding remarks to Bernard Marx's provocatively titled paper "Utilisateur, producteur, serveur: un ménage à trois pour le meilleur ou pour le pire?" appear to indicate that our French colleagues employ the terms 'horizontal' and 'vertical' (as in 'vertical integration') in precisely the opposite way as we (page 139)). Those with a very strong interest in the subjects of multilingual information transfer and computer-based translation would probably do well to have a look at the last four papers before the closing address, which show an interesting variety in authorship: a German from the Federal Institute for Highway Affairs, a (real) Luxemburger on the staff of the European Commission, a Frenchman with the Institute for Textiles, and a computer/communications systems researcher from the Netherlands. What you however will not find in this proceedings volume is any extensive or particularly useful treatment of the subject of information management as such—in spite of the book's title and ASLIB's pre-conference claims about returning to the subject on which the first EURIM (EUropean Research in Information Management) conference was convened at Paris all the way back in 1973.

One final observation may be in order. During the discussion on the first afternoon of the conference (Wednesday the 12th), the old complaint was raised that research results are not effectively or quickly enough transformed into practical applications, or are of no use to practitioners. Dr. Wilson (University of Sheffield) had already that morning voiced more or less the same opinion, Prof. Salton (Cornell University) clearly shared it, and Prof. Meyriat reinforced it in his closing address. This is an old and perhaps insoluble problem in the information science field. Well over half of the speakers at this conference came from the academic or research-institute environment—and among those who actually dealt with information management that percentage was even higher. (Admittedly, some of the material here may prove useful to practitioners: for instance that in

the paper "Planning the future: computer-based modelling and the dynamics of information systems" by Vickery and Heseltine of University College London.) Active information managers or actual real-world practitioners were hardly if at all represented. Possibly ASLIB could not find any such individuals who were willing or able to come to Versailles as speakers. That is a pity. I am reminded of what B.C. Brookes has recently written on this topic: that we have to do here with "an 'experiential' gap which cannot be closed by 'information transfer alone', i.e. by dialogue only. Some research has to be *done* by the practitioner. One cannot learn to swim without getting wet." *

ASLIB, incidentally, has no current plans to organize a EURIM 6 conference, and has, to this reviewer's knowledge, not made clear whether it has decided definitively to discontinue the event. It is perhaps debatable whether discontinuation would be a bad thing—now that we have biennial gatherings of the European-based International Research Forum in Information Science (IRFIS), biannual meetings of the European Association of Information Services (EUSIDIC), annual symposia of the European Information Providers' Association (EURIPA), as well as the yearly online meeting in London, the Cranfield Conference, and many comparable events organized at the national level, not to mention such global gatherings as the FID Congresses. An anonymous conference report on EURIM 5 published in *ASLIB Information* itself (for August 1982, when the proceedings were still due to come out later in that year) stated that "with hindsight perhaps the choice of papers could have been better. Overall, the content and level of presentation was too varied to give the Conference a truly convincing sense of thematic coherence.", but nonetheless looked forward to EURIM 6. ASLIB appears recently to have taken a stronger and more explicit interest in what was EURIM's original concern (note its new official name—Aslib: The Association for Information Management), and has announced that it aims increasingly to operate on an international level. All this would suggest that there is reason to keep EURIM alive. What actually happens, remains to be seen.

L.H.

* *Journal of Information Science* 7(3)(October 1983), p. 133.