

Letters to the Editor

EUSIDIC and its conference

Dear Sir,

We were pleased to see the favourable review given to our annual Conference in your issue Volume 4, 1/2 [pages 59–69]. Unfortunately, your reviewer seems less familiar with the structure of EUSIDIC than he does with its Conference. In particular, his criticism that “Note that the EUSIDIC Executive Committee is 100% British, as are the secretaries”, is inaccurate, as well as misleading. *

Membership of EUSIDIC is by organisation, not by individual, and EUSIDIC is governed by its Council, elected annually by full members of the association. The current Council contains members from organisations in Britain (5), but also from organisations in Austria, France, The Netherlands, the CEC, Belgium, Switzerland, Italy and Norway. True, I as Chairman am representing a British organisation, but of the three vice-chairmen, one represents a French organisation, one an Austrian and one a Swiss. Of the previous chairmen in recent years, there has been one other Briton, one Swede and two Dutch. The secretary is British. Council has always been careful to maintain a balance of nationalities; I can never remember a EUSIDIC Council in which any one nationality ever had any form of a majority.

Your correspondent's comment that, at EUSIDIC Conferences, “it is probably advisable to alter EUSIDIC policy to the extent of allowing speakers to use their own languages” is obviously well-intentioned, but what languages would be permitted, and to what purpose? Recent EUSIDIC Conferences have been held in France, Portugal, Switzerland, the German Federal Republic, Jugoslavia [sic], The Netherlands, Norway; this year's is in Austria; next year's will probably be in The Netherlands. Papers are given by, from memory, the French, Germans, Italians, British, Dutch, Belgians, Swedes, Norwegians, Finns, Spanish, Portuguese, Swiss... etc. The only language understood by everyone who attends a EUSIDIC conference is English, the working language of the association. A discourse in French would probably be followed by no more than 20% of attendees at most EUSIDIC Conferences; in German by no more than 10%; in Italian by no more than 5%; in Spanish by no more than 5%; in Finnish by no more than 2%.

* The text actually read: “... as are the Administrative and Technical Secretaries.” [Editor].

Europe, in the information world, does not have a second European language; most people speak their national language plus English. Good simultaneous translation, even from and into only one or two languages, is hideously expensive and would provoke a savage reaction from Conference attendees when they found a hugely inflated Conference fee.

Thank you for your encouragement; please assure your correspondent that running a multi-national, multi-lingual organisation in Europe on voluntary contributions is far from easy, but that EUSIDIC has always shown a need to preserve a balance in an association with members, currently, from twenty-six different nations.

Yours faithfully

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Our editorial correspondent replies:

Dear Sir,

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to the letter sent to you by Mr. Harry R. Collier of Learned Information, in his capacity as present Chairman of EUSIDIC Council.

First the matter of my allegedly inaccurate and misleading remark concerning the composition of EUSIDIC's Executive Committee. The Constitution of the European Association of Information Services (EUSIDIC) states in article 15 that "The Executive Committee shall have five members and shall include the Chairman, the Vice-Chairmen and the Treasurer." (official English translation from the Dutch original). According to a EUSIDIC promotion piece, listing all Council members and officers, and available at the 1983 Annual Conference in Nice (the event covered by the report in question), the individuals currently occupying these posts were to my knowledge all British (though one of them resides and is employed in Austria), as are the Administrative and Technical Secretaries. The organizations which they represented were (with the one exception noted) all located in the United Kingdom. Such was the information which served as the basis for my statement (*ISU* volume 4 number 1/2, page 69), quoted—with an unacknowledged omission—by Mr. Collier in his first paragraph. What he goes on to say indeed suggests that in the meantime two of the Vice-Chairmen have been replaced, leaving the Executive Committee only 60% British. If such is the case, we can only be gratified that a more balanced representation than was

previously the case has been achieved. (Only about 15% of EUSIDIC member organisations are located in the United Kingdom.) Mr. Collier construed my statement as a criticism. It was not phrased as such, and was in fact only a parenthetical observation, appropriate in its context, of what I reasonably took to be the actual state of affairs when I wrote my report shortly after the conference.

So far as the language problem is concerned, there is of course no easy solution, and I would not wish to modify my observations in this respect. The Nice conference presented at least one example of a person who, because compelled to speak in English, but far from fluent, was probably well understood by only a small fraction of those in attendance. The drift of my comments was that such a person should be given the option of using his or her own language for the actual oral presentation, and thus of at least being comprehensible to—if we are to adopt Mr. Collier's estimates, which I myself consider to be far too pessimistic—a fifth of the audience, rather than to almost nobody.¹ A genuinely European organization, while not perhaps justified in expecting all of its native Anglophone members to be bi- or multilingual, probably should not impose mastery of English as a condition for allowing a member-representative to present his or her statements and opinions, in the form of a conference paper, to assembled colleagues. For the record, we might note that the most recent EURIM conference involved presentations in three European languages; the EURIPA symposium always allows the speakers a choice of four languages. Simultaneous interpretation facilities are of course available for these events. Such facilities are naturally expensive, as Mr. Collier indicates, and perhaps difficult to arrange for a conference that moves from one country to another each year, and often takes place outside of the big cities. Admittedly this variety of settings is one of the charms of the EUSIDIC conferences (as opposed, for example, to the EURIPA symposia, which always take place in Luxembourg).

As indicated in my conference report, the annual gatherings of EUSIDIC, in spite of any, perhaps unavoidable, shortcomings, are useful and rewarding opportunities to exchange experiences and opinions with colleagues active in the computerized information services sector—as this correspondent has been fortunate enough to verify on more than one occasion. The Association has since its inception performed some useful work, and done a good deal to encourage international contact. I hope that it keeps up the good work, and am gratified that its current Chairman has taken the occasion of my conference report to enunciate his view of its structure and its mission.

¹ Actually, the speaker on this occasion would have been understandable—in French—to at least forty percent of the audience, since that is the percentage of conference attendees who came from French-speaking countries (thirty percent from France itself). Only slightly more than one fourth were from English-speaking areas (twenty percent from the UK itself). I might incidentally point out that about a third of the *speakers* at the Nice conference were French, and yet another one was a French-language Belgian.