

Introduction

The development projects that ensued from Initiatives for Access (IA)* undertook to investigate hardware and software platforms for the digitisation and subsequent networking of a range of library materials. Services that will be increasingly important as the Library moves towards its vision of the Digital Library such as the Patent Express Jukebox and Inside, a current awareness and document delivery service, were part of the original IA programme. Over 20 projects were launched under the IA banner and the Library produces a free newsletter containing information about the projects progress and related topics. The interest generated through this publication and through the information about the Initiatives for Access programme posted on Portico (<http://portico.bl.uk>), the British Library's World Wide Web site, prompted the library to stage one day seminars in London and Yorkshire.

The seminars were designed to be an opportunity to learn more about the Initiatives for Access projects from those who have been actively involved. They offered a chance to discuss the issues involved in digitising across a range of different media, and in multimedia retrieval and delivery. In the presentations of material from several of the projects and in the chance to use some of the systems, delegates gained a greater insight into the key challenges in library digitisation and networking projects.

In addition their own knowledge and experiences which they brought to the seminars helped to produce a series of practical, informative sessions.

The articles in this special issue, some of which are based on papers delivered at these seminars further develop these themes and The British Library is pleased to have the opportunity to share the experience we have gained over the past three years with a wider audience.

In an overview of the Initiatives for Access programme, Michael Alexander summarises the main projects and discusses technical and quality standards.

Simon Shaw outlines the methodology involved in the digitising of an ancient Buddhist text written on birch bark.

The British Library's new search and delivery service, Inside, is previewed by Richard Roman.

Hazel Podmore explains how the British Library digitised an historic part of its microfilm collection.

Neil Smith explains how the Z39.50 protocol will offer seamless access to the major databases of the EC through the Opac Network Europe project.

Project Digitise explored issues arising from the conversion of analogue sounds to digital. Peter Copeland outlines the main findings of Project Digitise.

Sandie Beaney and Leona Carpenter discuss the indexing and retrieval of digital items.

Simon Shaw

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