THE DIANE CENTRES IN NORDIC NATIONS

Even Hartmann Flood, NTNU Library

Background

The DIANE centres which came into existence in the 1980’ies made a lot of people curious - what was it? People assumed it was a) fan clubs for the British princess, b) office for a safari hunting agency, c) a cover for scientologists; and that is just a few of the options available. Several times we had to patiently explain that is was a government supported activity to get people to use electronic information on remote online information services, that DIANE stood for “Direct Information Access Network for Europe”, and we were definitely not trying to convert people to DIANEtics. Most people accepted that fact grudgingly, but could not see any use for it and probably not why the taxpayers’ money should be used on something like that.

The origins of the centres were the interest for better international networks for data transmission that came in the end of the seventies and early eighties when several international information services were coming online and providing very valuable information in online databases. Among those early database hosts outside the Nordic countries were Lockheed (later Dialog), Data-Star, SDC (later Orbit), ESA-IRS (later EINS), Questel and STN International. The users of electronic information had very difficult connection opportunities at that time. If for example, we wanted to search the American databases we had to call long distance to a node in Amsterdam to get connected. So we needed a better way to get online.

The Commission of the European Communities (CEC) realised the importance of packet-switching telecommunication network for information retrieval services in the early seventies and founded the Euronet project. Euronet was implemented as a separate network by the PTT’s. Sweden and Finland joined Euronet by special arrangement in 1982. CEC continued promoting the offering and use of European online services within their Euronet-DIANE concept. In 1981 a European X25 packet switched network named Euronet was established to great fanfares, the online society was coming. Later on, from the beginning of 1984 Euronet was replaced by interconnection of the national packet-switching networks like the Norwegian Datapak, developed and operated by the PTT’s, as was planned from the beginning.

Now what could be done to get people to use the network? The Euronet was not exactly user friendly. I remember a demonstration of the login procedure, it required the user to input a string of often more than thirty characters to get connected, no errors allowed. And other networks were just as unfriendly. Long, strange numbers and in the case of use of the Amsterdam node for getting to the US services we had to apply to the PTT about which network we wanted to use and which hosts we should connect to. And in addition, the lines were unstable and noisy and the systems were intolerant to faults. Users needed several tries just to get where one wished. And above all this was the important question: Why should one want to get anywhere in the first place? What was going on out there? How to get people to use the networks?

The Euronet DIANE project included establishing national information centres called DIANE centres in the participating nations to help users access the electronic information, for the benefit of the network providers, for the benefit of online service providers, and most important, for the public who would benefit from access to much more information much quicker. The public was in this case everybody who needed the online data. In the beginning that was mostly research scientists and information specialists in government, libraries, education and industry.

So the network was there, the potential end user were targeted, the DIANE Centres were to be established. Now the question was who to put in charge of the national information centres. The answer was, go to the people who already were using the services, and ask them to help others get in on the act. And where were those users? In the libraries. Especially they were in the specialist and research libraries. After all, the early databases were extensions of major paper based reference works which the libraries already subscribed to, so the content was well known to librarians. And since the cost of using the services was based on usage like time and output,
and not on subscription, it paid to have specialists who were likely to do it quicker and cleaner to do the actual searching. So the main experts in using online services were in the libraries of the private industry and the large information centres and libraries that were connected to main universities and technical research institutions.

The DIANE Centres were established in connection with the main research information centres in all the nations. In Denmark it started in 1981 situated at the Technical University of Denmark, however the centre was not a part of the library, but an independent institution. In 1982 the Swedish DIANE Centre was established at the Information and Documentation Centre of the Royal Institute of Technology Library (IDC-KTHB). Next out was the Norwegian DIANE Centre which was established in 1986 at the then Documentation department at the then Technical University Library of Norway in Trondheim in cooperation with Riksbibliotekstjenesten (RBT) or National Office for Research Documentation, Academic and Special Libraries in Norway. Finally the Finish DIANE Centre was established in 1988 at the Information Service of the Technical Research Centre of Finland (VTT).

All of the DIANE Centres were established in cooperation with or close to information centres of technical universities. That is were the first major users of the online services were. (It is also no coincidence that many of us early searchers were chemists. Probably chemists were among the very first to realize what a huge leap forward it was to have the information online, and a chance to finally tame the savage beast called Chemical Abstracts.) It is important to realise that this was nothing new for these organizations. They had already for many years shared their online experiences with other users, given advice in database choice and use, given courses and seminars when needed, in short carried out all the duties expected of the centres. So establishing the DIANE Centres meant formalizing that part of the work, getting some extra people for it and more funding.

The main functions of the centres were:
- Advice and counsel users about choice of databases and access to the databases,
- Giving courses and seminars in the use of databases
- Write and publish materials promoting the use of databases
- Promote the use of national electronic information sources
- Provide end users with information about information centres who could help with searching
- Try out new services and changes in existing services and introduce those to the users.
- Give advice about technical equipment and telecommunications.

The last point was not originally planned as part of the activity, but turned out to be very important. For, while we were not experts on computers or networks or protocols, we were the only ones that actually used the stuff and therefore had the practical experience that the experts on the systems lacked. In the beginning, that was fairly simple: Dial the number, wait for the whistle tune, put the phone receiver on the black things on the Texas Silent terminal and hope for the best. But as soon as the use of personal computers, modems and networks became available the possibilities of improving the performance increased, while the possibilities of getting things wrong increased tenfold more. And the online information centres were the vanguards in using the new equipment and made all the errors early on. We got a very rich experience in handling all the things that could go wrong, and finally getting it right. So we were well prepared for all those queries about how to set up and use the equipment. One example: The first years the centres spent time collecting and publishing lists of NUAs, small directories covering the X25 Network User Addresses for the various information services, so users could get one place where all the most used numbers were collected.

Summing up: We were not experts in use on the networks, the experts were the telecom people. We were not experts in operating personal computers, for that we consulted the computer department, or the nearest teenager. We were not experts in using the computer programmes, again they were in the computer department (or that same teenager). We were certainly not the experts in modem use or network use, the experts worked for the PTT services. We were not experts in use of the databases either. Many of the information services, or hosts as we called them back then, had good support services, although they were not locals. But we at the DIANE Centres were experts in getting all this together to make a working information service and that is what counted. In short, we were that much sought after elusive beast, the Users. Or even more important, we were super users who could disseminate our knowledge to others.

The target groups of the DIANE Centres were originally supposed to be the end users as well as the current users who were the intermediates. The goal was that the person actually needing and using the data should also be the one doing the searching. That goal proved to be elusive. The online services were complicated and expensive. So training was of two kinds: The first was to show the end users what was out there, how they could use the
information, and whom they could turn to get the results. The second target group was the ones actually doing
the searching, showing how the services worked, how the search languages worked and how the databases were
structured.

The online services recognised that the centres were very valuable customers and helped in the work. Some
services gave permanent demonstration passwords, other gave temporary passwords to try out the services and
different features. It was also easy to get extra training passwords when we had seminars and courses in use of
databases. And the trainers from the different services rented equipment and rooms from the centres when they
wanted to give their own courses.

So what happened to the DIANE Centres in the different nations? That was different according to who funded the
centres. In Norway and Denmark the funding came from the ministries of education which meant that this was
regarded as part of a government educational service, and not supposed to make money. In Finland and Sweden
the funding came, at least in part, from the PTT and as their demands for profit increased the DIANE Centres
suffered. Here is a rundown of their different stories.

Sweden

(By Marie Wallin, with help from Lilianna Kanafarski and Winnie Hemborg)

The Swedish DIANE Center was established and financed by DFI,, the Swedish Delegation for Information
Procurement, when Sweden connected to the EURONET, 1982. The centre was situated at IDC-KTHB as an
independent activity and staffed with one and a half person: The leader of the centre Lilianna Kanafarski and
the assistant Lena Siewerts. This was a strategic choice as IDC-KTHB had the longest experience in the country of
using databases and connecting to external systems. A grand opening seminar was organized at the “House for
Industries” in Stockholm with the minister for Industry himself as guest of honour. Nils Åsling was very pleased
when Lilianna made the first connection and searched in Predicasts news for his name and this online dialog was
unfolding on the huge projector screen used for the occasion.

The DIANE Center especially marketed the systems connected to EURONET and their databases but of
course also answered questions concerning other systems or the use of online information in general. The
DIANE Center participated with lectures and demonstrations in many seminars or courses organized amongst
others by Televerket (that was promoting its newly created packet switching service Telepak at the time), TLS or
SOLUG and even had awareness lectures and courses with CCL training at the library school in Borås, A first large
seminar organized by the Swedish centre where invited speakers represented the different systems connected
to EURONET was attended by as many as 200 people eager to learn about the "European" online systems. (A
total of 1160 persons participated in DIANE courses (98) or other activities (100) during only four years). Training
material and free access to ECHO as training database were readily provided to the DIANE centres but Swedish as
a language in the European community came much later. For example a simple leaflet in Swedish detailing the
costs and procedure for connecting to online databases had a large success wherever it was distributed. A modest
newsletter DIANE-nytt was issued irregularly. The Swedish DIANE center was also actively participating in meetings
and other networking organized between the DIANE centres themselves.

With the end of DFI in 1986 the DIANE Centre was terminated as a government supported activity.

The experiences with the activities of the Swedish centre showed a great need for both qualified information
on databases and services and also for more user support concerning telecommunications and problems with the
equipment.

At IDC-KTHB Lilianna persuaded the direction of the library that a more general helpdesk and online
promoting service should be continued, independent of system providers and specializing in the subject area of
science and technology, the area for which KTHB had now become the national information resource library.
This service was called REFLINE, headed by Lilianna and pursuing all the functions of the previous DIANE Center
and making heavy use of the qualified help from the other information specialists at IDC. As was the case for the
DIANE Centres REFLINE was given free passwords to almost all online systems to be able to make demonstrations.
Even REFLINE organized larger seminars like the more special one on factual business databases in 1991 but
mainly now provides course facilities for database and system vendors and maintains a mailing list for more
than 1500 active online users in Sweden. System independent advice on choice and use of online databases was
and is provided free by REFLINE as a helpdesk but more technical questions on communication were referred to
Databastjänsten as long as this existed.
Databastjänsten or Televerkets Databastjänst to give the official title (English: Swedish Online Center), was a unit created by Televerket at the termination of the Swedish DIANE center, taking over the promotion and counseling on use of online information. Databastjänsten had four persons from the start. This service was headed by Winnie Hemborg, an earlier employee of IDC-KTHB and DFI, also with long experience in information work. Among other things she is the author of the first catalogue of online databases in Sweden: DOLDIS (an acronym for databases online but which in Swedish means the “hidden one”). Databastjänsten was mainly organized for helping the users accessing information wherever available online and using Televerket’s packet switching communication service by then named DATAPAK. The activities of that service providing courses, training facilities, demonstrations and most of all a helpdesk for the DATAPAK users is well documented in its regular newsletter Call Connected. This unit inside the telecom company after growing to a staff of seven people never got financially self supporting (was any information counseling service?) and was dismantled in 1991 when Televerket in the wake of EU communications policy directive was privatized and became TELIA.

Norway

In Norway the centre opened on the first of January 1986. The funding was from the Norwegian Department of Education (or what ever the name was at the time, it has changed several times over the years) through Riksbibliotekstjenesten (RBT, the National Office for Research Documentation, Academic and Special Libraries in Norway) and placed at the documentation centre at the then Technical University Library of Norway in Trondheim. It was only staffed by one person full time. Even Hartmann Flood who came from the University Library in Tromsø took the position one year later, 1. January 1987 was employed by the RBT as leader of the DIANE centre. However, the expertise behind the activities of the centre was in addition the whole staff of the documentation department of the library, at the time Aud Lamvik, Roar Storleer and Hilde Bakken. Since the author was employed at this centre, this part will be a bit more personal than the others, for which I apologise (a little).

The first years were devoted to the general use of databases and information services. Also communication equipment was an important part of the information people wanted. So there were lectures and courses in general use of databases and in communication equipment. The information services were quite helpful, after all better use of the systems was to their advantage too. Some, like Data-Star, Dialog, ESA and STN even gave us permanent trial accounts so we could demonstrate the systems and try out new features. Others gave us a temporary password whenever we needed it in courses and seminars.

The centre published a small free newsletter, Norsk DIANE Nytt where news about the field was published. It was meant to come four times a year, but became more and more erratic. Eventually after 32 issues in 1996 that part of the service became incorporated into RBT’s journal “Synopsis” as a regular feature.

An important part of the activity was that the centre provided a free helpdesk for all users, anyone could call and get the benefit of the expert experience. The inquiries were first by telephone, later email would be a very important part of that service. However early attempts to provide this service through electronic bulletin boards and electronic conference systems failed. An attempt was made in 1992 with a service called DIX provided by the journal Datatid. But in those pre internet days in the early nineties, the market was not ready for this.

After some years the emphasis of the subjects people wanted to know about changed. The courses became less general, more subject oriented: Environmental information, business information, technical information and, most important, EU information. In the last two years leading up to the referendum about Norwegian membership in 1994 information about EU information was one of the prime activities. However another subject also became of interest in those years, the Internet.

In fact it can almost be said that the Norwegian referendum about EU membership in September 1994 was the date everything changed. For the last two years before that EU information was the most important area, after that interest in the Internet took over completely. The first Internet seminars were about the fundamentals, and about the joy of telnetting, using e-mail and Usenet and, most important, using Gopher. The web was waiting in the wings until everyone had fast lines and computers with Windows, after that everything was about the World Wide Web.

In the last years, the main activities have been in two areas. 1) The Internet information, especially using the different search engines and internet directories, and also evaluating the quality of Internet information. 2) A return to the commercial information sources. The RBT has made several national consortia agreements with online services, and much of the work has been in user support and seminars in using these services. In fact, as
more and more people realise that it is not true that “everything is on the web”, at least not free on the web, the need for information about the commercial services and evaluated information sources is coming back.

RBT was from the 1. January 2003 merged with the museum, archive and public library sector in a new organization, Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority or ABM-Utvikling. ABM-U decided not to continue the centre and it was officially ended on the 31. December 2003.

A longer history about the Norwegian Diane center was written in the Norwegian journal Bok og Bibliotek no 3, 2004.

Finland
(Written by Elisabeth Mickos)

The official DIANE Centre Finland was established in 1988, one year after the Norwegian, at the Information Service of the Technical Research Centre of Finland (VTT). VTT Information Service had started using online information systems in 1974 and already acted as an unofficial advisory organisation for online questions as well as SCANNET help desk. In the 1970's and 1980's most courses and seminars in international online databases were arranged at VTT. The Finnish online newsletter was also produced at VTT.

DIANE Centre Finland was partly sponsored by the Finnish PTT, the assignment including some hundred hours per year. Other Nordic DIANE Centres had at least one full-time employee; the Finnish DIANE worked in the same way but only part-time. One person was in charge of the centre and the other information specialists contributed to the advisory activities when required. The first co-ordinator of the services was Merja Lehti, who started and developed the whole DIANE scenario.

The service was a free help desk for online users, providing information about publicly available online information services, equipment and networks. Customers normally phoned the centre and got the answers either directly or by mail.

Information about DIANE Centre Finland was also available via Telesampo, the videotex system of the Finnish PTT.

Besides answering questions the DIANE Centre collected various materials, e.g. brochures of more than 70 online systems or databases. Contract forms were also available for the most important international online systems as well as for the Finnish data communication network. Contract forms were especially popular among users.

Other useful information was published in information leaflets which were regularly updated and very popular among users. In summer 1989 the following information leaflets were available:
- Bibliography of online searching and databases
- International databases according to subject
- Domestic online systems and databases
- Domestic databases according to subject
- Online services in Finland
- Contact information and prices of DATAPAK and Telesampo
- Address number to data communication networks in different countries
- Network User Addresses (NUA) of online systems
- How to start online searching
- Costs of online searching
- Collection of training databases.

The emphasis of the DIANE activities lay on online courses arranged at VTT and on distributing printed material. However, the help desk was not used to the same extent.

It was, however, rather cost-intensive to run these activities. VTT Information Service and the Finnish PTT therefore decided to install a payphone, a premium rate answering service. The payphone service started in January 1991 with a fee of 11.70 FIM/minute (about 2 ). All questions concerning databases, online searching and telecommunications were directed to this number. At that time Elisabet Mickos was in charge of the service.
The funding by the Finnish PTT was discontinued in 1992 but the service itself still continued for a couple of years.

Denmark

(Written with Ulla Retlev)

Finally, we come to the Danish DIANE Centre. By any reasonable criterion (alphabetical, chronological, size, importance, influence) they should have come first, but I wanted to end this chapter with the best part of the story.

The Danish DIANE Centre (DDC) was opened on the 9th of June 1981 with four persons employed full time and situated at the DTH (Danish Technical University) in Lyngby. That was more staff than on the other centres put together. The office was in rooms rented from the Library of the technical university, now the Technical Knowledge Centre of Denmark. The opening was attended by the Danish Minister for Education among other dignitaries and it was obvious that the Danish government was putting a lot more resources into this than their neighbours did later on. The four people present in the centre at the start were two documentalists, Keld Drube as Head of the centre and Ulla Retlev, a librarian Klaus Elkjaer Søndergaard and a typist Bitten Danig, very soon to be replaced by Anette Due. In 1984 Keld Drube left the centre and was replaced by Mogens Johne as the new documentalist, while Ulla Retlev took over as head of the centre, and Klaus Søndergaard was replaced by Kirsten Thorkilgaard. Originally the centre was a five year trial project (same as in Sweden), but in 1986 it was given permanent status.

The centre was established by Dandok, the Danish Committee for Scientific and Technical Information and Documentation, and placed under and in the trial period fully financed by the Ministry for Education. From the very start a well equipped training room was available and from the very start it was decided to centralize the registration of all online training activities in Denmark. This meant that the centre also became responsible for most of the arrangements, the result of which was a better coordination, more training arranged and the information reaching more people, thereby helping the providers of online information. Finally it meant a relief of staff resources in the libraries where this type of training had traditionally taken place. From 1982 basic, host-independent online training courses were offered free of charge as part of the goal to promote the use of online services and reach more potential users. In the four years 1982 – 1985 at least 24 open courses were held on Basic online training with a total of 457 participants. Besides were offered other courses such as Introduction to online, Common Command Language, Equipment and Advanced search strategy. The same sessions were often given to closed groups but no statistics have been kept on the number of participants. As mentioned, the training room could also be used free-of-charge by hosts and database producers. In the years 1981 – 1984 a total of more than 1000 people attended training in the centre.

But the centre came in contact with many more people through bigger arrangements like seminars on databases in the social sciences and the humanities. The last-mentioned attracted about 180 people (1984). The first-mentioned had to be doubled due to the huge interest, (more than 400 people).

As a result of the large government investment, the Danish centre has been an inspiration and a help for all the others. Their journal “Display” has been an information resource for the other centres as well as for libraries and users all over Scandinavia. It started in 1982 as a free newsletter with four issues a year, but with the growing popularity and amount of information it was decided to extend to ten issues a year but then no longer free-a-charge. In 2001 Display was succeeded by the web portal Informationsportalen which had a broader focus on electronic information. A newsletter with the same name was published for a few years. Display was after the first few years established as an online database which was free, but strangely enough the electronic version was not as much used as the paper version (which at that time was no longer free).

Also the special publications the centre has published over the years have been very valuable. Many of them were humble publications with advice on (Vink om …) how to search and which equipment to buy, databases on a specific topic like free training databases or where to find company information. A very popular one was the Price comparison that was regularly updated, giving information on search costs for an average search of a given number of much used databases at more than ten different hosts. Other publications were guides to Online information centres in Denmark offering a broker service, to producers and providers of online information, and the Danish contribution to the Nordic Database Guide.
A very important part of the activities was the enquiry service which as all other services from the centre in the first years was free-of-charge. During the end of the trial period 4000 – 5000 enquiries a year were received by telephone and mail.

Among all other assignments the centre has also been agent for the databases from the EU commission, including Celex. The seminars they have had in use of these databases have also been of great help to users of EU information in the rest of the Nordic nations. In an earlier stage the centre acted as Scannet helpdesk, and later, in 1993 it was appointed as National Awareness Partner for the EU Impact programme. During the years staff members from the centre have contributed to national and international work in many ways, e.g. lecturing at seminars and conferences, participating in working groups and writing articles to different publications.

One example is the paper given at 6. NordIoD August 1985 by Ulla Retlev: Informationer til informationssamfundet (Information to the Information Society) on the idea and importance of the Diane Centres.

From 1986 the Danish Diane Centre received a permanent subsidy from the government, but at the same time the centre had to recover some of the costs for the activities, e.g. the subscriptions to the newsletter for a fee. In 1993 they changed the name to INFOSCAN, since the original DIANE Project was ended and the name DIANE was confusing. Several people wondered if it had anything to do with DIANEtics, and thus with scientology. The centre has also moved from the DTH in 1987 and established itself as an independent institution, at that time with Alex Gorski as head of the centre, after Ulla Retlev had left. Since then it has moved to new premises several times. The last years the staff has been Alex Gorski, Karen Bonnis, Katarina Holm and Peter Raben.

In 2000 INFOSCAN merged with Statens Information and in 2001 they moved once again and renamed to “Informationsportalen”. As mentioned it was also the name of the new journal that had replaced “Display”. After only 16 months the centre had to move again, as Statens Information and Informationsportalen were included in the new “IT og Teletstyrelsen”, or National IT and Telecom Agency. In 2002 it all ended. In December the Danish government decided to no longer subsidy the activities of Informationsportalen and close down the activities. Informationsportalen published the last issue in December 2002, but continued as an electronic newsletter for about half a year. At that time the newsletter had reached a lot of new users and was mailed free of charge to several thousand people.

The electronic newsletter Informationsportalen is continued by the library at the Royal Danish Library School but only focused on articles related to the scope of the library. They also took over and maintain the archive of articles from Display and Informationsportalen.

An era had ended. Ironically the knowledge centre for electronic information could not survive, when Internet had made everyone their own information specialist, public subsidies were no longer attainable and chaos became a condition of daily life. It is hard to say how things would have been without the centre but at least a lot of taxpayers found they saved money when using the services from the Danish Diane Centre.

Much more about the history of the Danish DIANE Centre is in Peter Raben’s history of the centre, published in Display, vol 19 (2000), issue 9/10 p 15 - 17. The article is also online at http://www.informationsportalen.dk/artikelarkiv/artikler/art483.htm. There the full story is, including how the centre was involved in both fictional and real crimes.