

Evaluation of ARK

Summary Report

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Background

ARK, the Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive, is a web resource which aims to make available, to the widest possible audience, information on the social and political life of Northern Ireland. The underlying assumption of ARK is an archive that provides a bridge between the world of academia and the needs of ordinary people for information about their society.

At present, ARK (www.ark.ac.uk) comprises three distinct sites:

- CAIN, Conflict Archive on the INternet, provides information and source materials on the troubles which began in 1968. This service originally began in 1996, and was launched in 1997. (www.ark.ac.uk/cain)
- NILT, Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, provides details of the annual survey of attitudes to social policy questions in Northern Ireland. NILT began in 1998 and the site was launched in 1999. (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)
- ORB, On-line Research Bank, launched February 2001, contains a bibliography and summaries of social policy research for the benefit of the academic and non-academic communities. (www.ark.ac.uk/orb)

ARK is a joint initiative between Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster, with staff and web servers in three different locations. ARK has 5.26 staff, and its work is supplemented by the support of academic members of staff in the two universities. The project is also assisted by an advisory panel of seven experts. The annual budget of the project is in the order of nearly UK£290,000, drawn from eight different sources.

The project is guided by an operational plan, and systems have been developed for monitoring and collecting statistics on the use of the website.

ARK's target audience consists of anyone who wishes to obtain information about social attitudes, the conflict in Northern Ireland and social and political development. Specifically, this includes:

- Media and journalists
- Voluntary and community organisations
- Academics in Northern Ireland and abroad
- Students
- Schoolchildren
- Policy-makers
- Politicians and those involved in the new political structures developed since 1999
- Anyone with an interest in social issues in Northern Ireland at the turn of the century

It was anticipated that users would come not only from Northern Ireland, Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland but also from continental Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia. Publicity and outreach are important aspects of the work of the project.

Evaluation

Terms of reference

This is the first and pilot year of ARK, running from 1st June to 31st May 2001.

The general aims of this evaluation are to:

- assess the position of ARK in relation to its stated aims and objectives;
- examine ARK's options for the future.

The specific terms of reference of this evaluation are:

1. To identify the developments and successes within the existing websites over the pilot period 1st June 2000 - 31st May 2001. This will include an examination of the quality and quantity of the content and recent additions to the web sites, web usage statistics, external awards, publicity and queries as well as feedback from the users of the sites and the relevant helplines.
2. Identify the development of ORB during the period and assess its success to date. This will include the willingness of researchers to collaborate, quality of service, quantity of bibliographic entries and summaries on website and feedback from users and contributors.
3. Identify new plans by the ARK team to expand the range of services offered.
4. Evaluate the nature of ARK as a joint university venture and make recommendations about its future. This will include the interest and commitment to ARK within each institution and the position of ARK and ARK team members in terms of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).
5. To establish the market for ARK, to assess the current market and its potential, particularly beyond the academic.
6. To evaluate the outreach strategy and the marketing of the service.

Methodology

This study was carried out using the following methods:

- An examination of the ARK website.
- A study of the documentation, information, publicity, progress reports and other ephemera produced by ARK.
- A total of 19 personal and 11 telephone interviews conducted with:
 - the staff, advisory board of ARK and academic staff at Queen's University and the University of Ulster;
 - people familiar with the work of ARK.
- A survey of 220 users and potential users of ARK, concentrated on the academic, voluntary and community sectors conducted by e-mail. A pilot was tested first (24 respondents), following which the main survey was sent (186 respondents). The effective response rate was 41%.
- An on-line survey placed on all ARK sites between 13 April and 24 May 2001, which attracted 153 responses.
- The on-line questionnaire applied manually to a group of 28 Social Policy students.

Outputs

Media and web outputs

In the pilot year, CAIN and Life & Times were mentioned frequently in the print and electronic media. In particular, CAIN attracted many commendations, such as BBC 'Site of the week'.

The use of the websites has grown significantly throughout the pilot year:

- CAIN rose from 266,000 hits a month at the beginning of the period under review to 392,000 at the end, up 47%.
- NILT rose from 4,000 hits a month at the start to 14,000 at the end, up by 210%.
- The new service, ORB, had 2,809 hits in its first four months.

Other indicators showed significant traffic in e-mail enquiries and the use of helplines for each site. Comments to CAIN have proved almost universally positive and many have been extremely enthusiastic. These come from all over the world. Typical words used to describe the CAIN service are:

informative, interesting, continued excellence, easy to navigate, enlightening, what the internet should be, opened my eyes.

Surveys

The use of ARK was tested using several surveys, with the following results:

- CAIN has the highest profile and is the most used, followed closely by Life & Times and, some distance behind, by ORB.
- Just over half of the general survey respondents (57%) had heard of ARK - which is encouraging - but suggests that more work must be done to promote the brand among the other 43%.
- There is a big potential for extending the service and making it better known. Those who had not heard of ARK before indicated a high level of using it in the future.
- Based on scores on a scale of 0 to 10 over 3 indices, the ratings for ARK as a whole are between 7.1 and 7.9, which is high. Overall, Life & Times has the highest quality rating (8.3), followed closely by CAIN. Life & Times is rated slightly higher for quality and up to datedness than volume of information. CAIN rates highly for volume (8.2) and quality. ORB is the weakest of the three, respondents being especially critical of the volume of information (5.45).
- The 153 on line respondents gave CAIN the highest 'very useful' rating (80%), followed by Life & Times (37%), then ORB (25%).
- For the 28 students, the 'very useful' ratings were 66% for Life and Times, 61% for CAIN and 32% for ORB.
- The three sites rate highly for navigability - CAIN and Life & Times more so than ORB. The proportion finding the sites difficult is less than 5%. On-line respondents rated them 45%, 34% and 31% respectively. The general respondents were much more favourable - 66% for CAIN, 64% for Life & Times, 55% for ORB. The student group gave 66% for Life and Times, 54% for CAIN and 24% for ORB.
- When asked would they provide information for ORB, 68% said yes and only 4% no. The rest were prepared to do if they had a clearer idea of what was wanted. Some cited problems of lack of time, but there were no principled objections to collaborating.
- CAIN was the principal point of entry to the ARK site by far. Most of the other respondents had been referred to ARK by word of mouth. Apart from those responding to the on-line survey, very few had found ARK through the use of a search engine. Leaflets and publicity accounted for a small proportion.

Overall, the surveys paint a very positive picture. Although the size of the groups was modest, the data were quite consistent and produced a rich stream of comment, including:

- 'A wonderful asset for academics and individuals'
- 'Easy to navigate, information easy to obtain'
- 'Information here not available elsewhere'
- 'Bridges academic, activist, lay, voluntary and student communities'
- 'First class shop for final year students'
- 'Interesting, comprehensive and thought-provoking'

Issues arising

Expansion

ARK is a quality product well positioned in the continued evolution of electronically-based services. There is big potential for extending the service and making it better known. Promising proposals have been developed for ARK to provide a survey results service for academic and public service users, but are likely to involve a considerable amount of delicate negotiation.

Development of ORB

Perhaps because it is the newest ARK resource, and is still finding its feet, ORB attracted the most critical comments from respondents. Its ratings are notably lower than the others. The level of enquiry is very low compared to CAIN and Life and Times.

On a more positive note, however, the ORB concept has attracted widespread support, a number of individuals and organisations have contributed reports and data and several are enthusiastic. Their enthusiasm is undimmed.

Funding

Overall, the ARK project is under-resourced. The production of even the current sites leaves the existing staff and budgets stretched, and ARK has no dedicated promotional budget. Ideally, a full complement for ARK should comprise:

- Full time director
- CAIN researcher and assistant (restoration of assistant)
- ORB researcher (with consultancy to complete summaries)
- Two Senior Social Survey Officers
- Life & Times consultant
- Full-time marketing officer (new post)
- Full-time computing consultant (up from 0.25)
- Half time financial administrator (up from 0.33)

Promotion

Recommendations were made for more aggressive promotion. ARK has used a number of dissemination strategies. The newspaper coverage and media audits show that it has been successful in reaching the mainstream media. However, acquaintance with ARK in the target group is patchy (43% of those surveyed had not heard of ARK as a brand).

Institutional factors

The evaluation studied the operation of ARK as a joint venture between Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster. The institutional experience of ARK in the past six to eight months has been a difficult and problematic one. In particular, decisions made by the university hierarchy on establishing the new Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research were often well intentioned but badly mishandled. There were also serious problems with accounting systems. However, despite the problems caused by internal restructuring and financial reorganisation within the universities, ARK should continue as a joint enterprise between the Queen's and the University of Ulster.

Conclusions and Recommendations

ORB

- Completion of summaries as a priority, being done on contract as required
- Front page access to topics
- E-newsletter on social research in Northern Ireland
- Prioritise links to full text versions
- Freshening the website, with details of staff, what's new?
- Host on-line voluntary sector journal
- Extending links to governmental, library and information sites - new links panel
- Renew proposal for archive reviewers
- Asking for collaboration on ORB website and explaining what was wanted and why

Promotional strategies

- Single database for all the target groups
- E-mail newsletter for ARK with subsections for CAIN, NILT, ORB
- Moderated discussion groups for NILT, ORB
- Registration and checking with search engines
- Referrer log package to determine points of entry and repeat visitors
- Experimental advertising package with banner advertisements at selected entry points
- More prominent display of the URL on headed paper, banners and demonstrations
- Merchandising of mousemats and screensavers
- Personalising of the site

Outreach strategies

- Specific measures to approach the educational sector (curriculum development, in service training, demonstration CD in software bundle)
- Demonstrations to specific groups in the public sector (e.g. civil servants)
- Use of posters, postcards

Funding

- Full staffing complement should rise from 5.26 to 8.58
- The need for resources for:
 - Core funding
 - The post of director
 - ORB research officer, with consultancy to complete the summaries
 - Additional time for the computing consultants, financial administrator and for CAIN
 - A promotional budget
 - New server

Technical changes

- Single server to replace the existing three servers

Joint venture

- ARK should continue as joint venture
- New organigram, outlining lines of responsibility through the institutional architecture in both universities, to be circulated and approved
- Formal proposals to Bursar of the University of Ulster for a solution of the accounting problems
- Amendment of role of director to acknowledge liaison with senior academics in both universities

Conclusion

- ARK is an innovative website bringing together three different services, each of which has reached a different level of maturity. Substantial progress was made during the pilot year under evaluation. The projects has withstood difficult institutional and accounting challenges. It is a project which merits renewed support. The proposals outlined here suggest ways in which the site could be strengthened and developed for the period ahead.