

# 10th Anniversary of the Nationwide Access to Electronic Information in Iceland

**Dr. Sigrún Klara Hannesdóttir**

*Sigrún Klara Hannesdóttir graduated with a MLIS degree from Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan in 1968 and received her doctoral degree in Library and Information Science from University of Chicago in 1987. After graduation she worked as librarian in the USA and Peru. In Iceland she has worked as School Library Director for Reykjavik and taught library science at the University of Iceland from 1971. She was director of NORDINFO, Nordic Council of Scientific Information in Finland 1998-2002 and then returned to Iceland to accept the position of National Librarian. She retired from that position in April of 2007. She is now the president of Upplýsing, the Icelandic Library Association.*



The idea of providing nationwide access to electronic information in Iceland is now 10 years old. Upplýsing, the Association of Libraries and Librarianship, called the conference which was held on October 15, 2007 to celebrate this occasion. The fact that Icelandic people have free and unlimited access to the contents of about 14.000 electronic journals in all aspects of knowledge, plus several databases, has been the envy of librarians and scientists from around the world. It was therefore considered highly appropriate to look back, but also to look forward and study the likely developments in the field of access to information in Iceland. The main questions were: How has this project benefited the Icelandic society and what is likely to happen in the future?

To look back briefly on this development, it all started in 1997. It was becoming clear then in Iceland as in other countries that the future of access to scientific information would be through electronic access rather than through printed media. The Association of Research Librarians in Iceland (predecessor of Upplýsing) decided to focus on what was hap-

pening in the world and called a conference on September 11, 1997 titled: *Information on the Internet: Conference on the Access to Information for Industry as well as the Scientific Community*. The invited speaker was Dr. Leslie Campbell Rampey, a librarian from the state of Georgia in the USA who described how the libraries in Georgia had joined forces to reach agreements with producers and suppliers of databases and information resources. Through this cooperation it had been possible to reach a better deal with the suppliers than libraries could reach individually. This struck a cord with the Icelandic library community and at the end of the conference a resolution was passed, directed to the Prime Minister of Iceland, where the government was encouraged to appoint a committee that would work out a proposal on how to guarantee to the Icelandic people that they have as much access as possible to electronic information through the Internet. The committee should deliver the proposals no later than March 1998.

In the spring of 1998 a committee was appointed to work out a plan of how to proceed. The committee consisted of professional li-

brarians and computer specialists. The committee presented their proposals in April of 1999 and had then surveyed the field to find out how interested Icelandic librarians were in the idea of licensing. To make a long story short, the first agreement was signed by the Minister of Education, Björn Bjarnason on April 23, 1999 with *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and the most remarkable fact is that *Britannica* was made searchable to every single computer in Iceland, linked to the Internet. This was a historical moment for the Icelandic library community as well as for all users of information in the country.

Other licenses followed and now, on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Icelandic nation has access to about 14.000 electronic journals in all fields of knowledge as well as several databases, access that is free and unlimited to the individual user. Users do not need to be linked to an institution or a library; all Icelandic IP-numbers provide this access. This fact has changed the research facilities in Iceland immensely and scientists in Iceland have now among the most comprehensive access available to any scientific community in the world from their home computers. It is now possible to open small research institutes in the most remote parts of the country, providing a wealth of information without much cost in acquisition of research material. Students, as well as the general public, can all access the most recent scientific materials wherever they are located and at any time, day or night. This nationwide access costs the Icelandic society about 1.1 million Euros and is paid for by libraries and institutions and the payment is based on different types of models, depending on the type of institution or library. The Ministry of Education also provides a grant to subsidize the license fees. Most libraries in the country contribute to the project and the users can download as much as they like.

The anniversary conference that was held

on October 15, 2007 consisted of three main themes: A brief history and development of the project and the experience of the users; the next national project, and thirdly the focus was on future information policies as well as some possible scenarios in the field.

After a brief historical survey of the project given by the President of Upplýsing, *Sigrún Klara Hannesdóttir*, the conference was opened by the Minister of Education, *Thorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir*. In her presentation she outlined how important the nationwide licenses were in the development of universities and research institutes, as in fact all distance education and the development of higher education in the country. The government has set the policy to provide equal access and equal educational opportunities for everybody in the country and this is one of the key elements in fulfilling this policy. Access is equally as good on the campus of the largest universities as it is on an isolated farm in the north-east.

*Sander Verboom*, Account Development Manager with Elsevier who has followed the development of the use of Elsevier sources in Iceland, presented a very positive picture of the constant increase in the use of scientific information, and he made an effort to link together the increase in the publication of reviewed articles by Icelandic scientists with the increased use of the electronic sources. He called his paper *ScienceDirect in Iceland - A Ten-Year Subscription to Growth*.

*Pálína Hédinsdóttir*, Librarian at the Natural Institute Library, has just completed her MLIS-degree where she looked at the changes that have taken place in her library with the advent of this electronic access. She cited a scientist that she interviewed for her study who claimed that without this access, some of his research could not be carried out. Two people from the medical field talked about their experience with the nationwide licensing and how the increased access had helped them

with their research, teaching and practice.

*Dagrún Ellen Árnadóttir* gave a presentation on the information behavior of university students who make great use of this facility. All agreed that the gigantic improvement in access has made their life, studies and scientific work easier and more effective. They all wished for more material and cited some sources that were high on their list of preferences.

The second factor that is of special interest to the Icelandic scientific community at the moment is the registration of research in progress and the preservation of scientific data in digital repositories as well as open access to research publications. *Arne Jakobsson*, Library Director and Project Manager for NORA, gave a comprehensive view the development of institutional repositories in Norway. The Norwegian approach to shared preservation of digital resources and their concepts on open access seems in many aspects to be the ideal model for Iceland. *Halla Björg Baldursdóttir*, Project Manager from the Prime Ministry gave a short review of a committee report on the preservation of electronic documents which has just been completed. *Dirk Willinghöfer*, Senior Project Manager gave an intro-

duced by Ex Libris to control and make electronic documents available. He described the technical details of the system and how it reacts with Aleph, the Library System in use in all Icelandic libraries.

The conference finished with two forward looking presentations. *Sólveig Þorsteinsdóttir*, Director of Libraries and Information at the National Hospital described her future vision on open access and the possible future scenario. *Guðbjörg Sigurðardóttir*, Chair of the Policy Department of the Prime Ministry, described the work on the next governmental policy for the Icelandic Information Society

It was very interesting to get the users' own experience with nationwide access, and it would also be a very interesting study to look at how the various problems that have come up during the lifetime of the project have been approached and solved. The Icelandic nationwide access is unique in the world so there were few models to follow and all solutions had to be developed locally to fit the Icelandic situation. The future of the project seems to be secure and for the scientific community as well as for industry it would be hard to imagine what would happen if this facility would be closed down.