

euromphysics news

September/October 1995

Vol. 26, No. 5

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Cover illustration

Short-wavelength semiconductor laser: the pseudomorphic structure used in a quaternary ZnMgSSe-based injection laser. A ZnCdSe quantum well (QW) active layer, with ZnSSe guiding layers for optical confinement, is clad with ZnMgSSe layers having negligible lattice mismatch with the GaAs substrate. Contact to the nitrogen-doped p-type ZnSe layer is made via a ZnSe-ZnTe digitally alloyed layer. (see D.J. Olego, page 112).

The Right Balance

The Directors of many of Europe's national libraries argued at their annual meeting (Bern, 12-15 September) that in addition to storing, promoting and making available a nation's patrimony, they should motivate and coordinate the development of university and research libraries. To be successful in this role their libraries need to acquire experience by offering facilities for research. So national libraries ask the same questions as research libraries: Should they become major suppliers of good quality, authentic information via networks such as Internet's World-Wide Web (WWW)? Should they offer advice to network users? Should they, in fact, rethink their role?

The response of each of the major national libraries to the Internet age mirrors national perspectives (a strong central role in France, a flexible, pragmatic approach in Great Britain and a decentralised, highly organized strategy in Germany). This is not too surprising because national libraries have reflected national attitudes in becoming "unique cultural artifacts". Developing a homogeneous European approach will be difficult. Indeed, few Directors felt that a European Library can be taken seriously.

Time will tell if they agree with advice from across the Atlantic where the Internet thrives (page 119). J. Michalko, President of the Research Library Group (RLG), Inc., which operates an on-line resource information service for 150 research-based institutions, argues that there is "a lot of room" for a partnership between geographically based national libraries and subject-based research libraries because they are complementary. But for partnership to be effective, both types of libraries should "scale down and focus", a process the Internet age will facilitate because national libraries can now use on-line directory services to "show the way" to specific collections. The vision (B. Lang, Chief Executive, British Library) is a network of national and other libraries with a shared On-line Public Access Catalog (OPAC) "aligned to international standards" (K.-D. Lehmann, Director General, Deutsche Bibliothek). So one anticipates collaboration agreements and the creation of more consortia like the Consortium of European Research Libraries that aims to "share resources and expertise".

European OPACs are now becoming available via WWW, but mainly in small countries (the national libraries' Gabriel project tracks developments). Such activities are promoted by the European Union's Telematics for Libraries Programme. Some university libraries also offer services via the WWW, but they are mostly in the US. "Getting the balance right" on the amount of resources that should be devoted to distributing knowledge via new media "will not be easy" (B. Lang) as it involves publishers, the public, governments, and the research community. So it will be interesting to see how a recently launched French study of what sort of national library system one needs will reconcile national specificity with the global village.

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European Physical Society ©

Europhysics News is the bulletin of the European Physical Society, published at least six times each year. Subscription price: SFR 135.– p. a.

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Subscriptions and EPS Fees

SBS Geneva; Acc. No. 164.899

Swiss PO Acc.: CCP 12-19107-4

German Post Office Acc.: Postbank

Karlsruhe 1801-30-754

Advertising

Deadline for advertising orders: first week of month of publication.

Advertising is charged according to space on a sliding scale ranging from SFR 2700.– for a full page to SFR 700.– for a one-sixth page. Rates for colour and cover advertising and for series insertions on request. Special rates for EPS members and for positions vacant.