

# EUSJA News

Newsletter of the European Union of Science Journalists' Associations

Spring 2000

EUSJA on-line

Editorial

## Power in your pocket

I often wish I could turn back the calendar to the early days of computers. Remember the Apple IIs of around 1980, and those original IBM PCs? They were simple, stable, and they did the things that matter most: word processing and spreadsheets.

Computing today seems to mean less time actually working. Instead, we spend most of our time buying new hardware, installing software, and fighting bugs, software incompatibilities and viruses.

But nostalgia is no use. We have to learn to live with information technology (IT), just as we have to live with taxes and pensions. The focus these days is on portable computing, so that's the subject of this issue's column.

To start at the traditional end of the market: laptop PCs. The only real choice if you have to do a lot of work away from base, laptops still have plenty of disadvantages. They cost a lot. *turn to page 6*

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## EUSJA: keeping us all up to date

A good cultural background is a requirement for every science journalist. And to do their job well science journalists need to keep on top of new developments in science and technology. Experienced journalists will have devised their own ways for doing this. But what should EUSJA do to help bring on the next generation? Should we offer financial support to help less experienced journalists, especially freelancers, to develop their skills? Or should we concentrate on bringing to their attention the opportunities already available in Europe for skills development?

Reporting on scientific developments and their implications places a heavy responsibility on the shoulders of science journalists. Along with disseminating news, science journalists are also expected to translate the often cryptic scientific jargon used by researchers into language that is easily understood by non-scientists, and to correctly assess the benefits and risks associated with the new developments. Unfortunately, there are still many examples where poor reporting of scientific developments have served only to generate hysteria. But I hope that better training of science journalists will help to reduce the number of these incidents.

For EUSJA, working to improve the training of science journalists in both eastern and western Europe involves more than just pledging to spend more of the income EUSJA derives from the annual contributions of each member association. Rather it involves thinking carefully about how to spend EUSJA funds to best effect. Should we, for example, set up exchanges between the different national associations, like the one between Ireland and Slovenia that EUSJA supported last year? Or would it be better to serve as a clearing house to draw attention to and promote existing opportunities?

I am writing this editorial in advance of the annual EUSJA Board meeting, due to take place on 6 May, 2000 in Strasbourg. At this meeting the delegates representing EUSJA's 22 national associations will discuss proposals for spending and the promotion of exchanges drawn up by the outgoing EUSJA president, vice president, secretary and treasurer. At the meeting delegates will also elect new officers to replace them.

It will be up to these new officers to implement the plans agreed by the 22 national delegates who serve as EUSJA Board members. I wish them well, and hope that they can rely on the full participation of all the member associations to achieve EUSJA's goals.

*Paola De Paoli*  
Outgoing EUSJA president

## Keep in touch!

News, views, stories, announcements, ideas or even cautionary tales — they could all be of interest for the next issue of *EUSJA News*, due out in early December 2000. Send me yours by 10 November. An e-mail to <ninamorgan@compuserve.com> is preferred. But you can also get in touch by phone or fax (the number is the same for both) on +44-1608-676530; or by old-fashioned post at: Rose Cottage, East End, Chadlington, Oxon OX7 3LX, UK.

*Nina Morgan, Editor, EUSJA News*

## An annual event

### News from the EUSJA Board Meeting

The annual meeting of the EUSJA Board took place at the headquarters of the European Science Foundation in Strasbourg on 6 March, 2000. Delegates from 13 of the member associations took part. Apologies were received from Kjell-Gunnar Heimark, representing science journalists in Norway, and Viola Egikova, of the Russian science journalists' association Intellect – both victims of the Air France strike.

Topics discussed included setting budgets, establishing accountability, and agreeing what EUSJA money should be spent on; changes to the EUSJA constitution to allow decision making by e-mail; past and future study trips and the election of new officers to serve on the executive committee.

To see a full copy of the Board meeting minutes get in touch with your national representative. Their names and contact details are listed on the back page.

Meanwhile, here are some of the discussion highlights. Although two study trips were organised during 1999, EUSJA is still far from reaching its goal of organising four or five trips each year. But things are looking a bit better for 2000, with proposed visits to Denmark, Ireland, possibly Geneva under discussion.

The balance sheets for 1999 were also discussed at length, with the northern European delegates forming a tight lobby group demanding better accounting. They argued that it is virtually impossible to understand the financial status of EUSJA from the current balance sheets. Many associations still owe their financial contributions to EUSJA, but opinions differ as to how much.

The assembly decided, at the suggestion of the northern Europeans, that EUSJA should call on the help of a professional accountant to ensure better financial reporting in future. But in terms of spending money, the agreement was total. Everyone agreed that some of the money should be used to help journalists from eastern Europe to participate in study trips and east-west exchanges.

Following difficulties in obtaining permissions to list members names in digital form, the Board decided that Goran Tenze's (Slovenia) work on the EUSJA database should not continue. Istvan Palugyai of Hungary reported that only a few of the national associations had responded to the questionnaire he sent out in January 1999. Nina Morgan was asked to continue editing *EUSJA News*, and changes to EUSJA statutes were agreed to allow democratic decisions to be made by e-mail. Various changes to the terminology used to describe the EUSJA delegates and officers were also agreed.

Finally, new officers were elected to the EUSJA Board ('newspeak' for the former executive committee). These include: president Werner Hadorn of Switzerland (from the Alps); vice president Istvan Palugyai of Hungary (east of the Alps); honorary secretary Marialuigia Bagni of Italy (south of the Alps) and honorary treasurer Kaianders Sempler of Sweden (nowhere near the Alps). This being done, the delegates sat down to eat, drink, chat and laugh at a nearby restaurant

until we were thrown out in the small hours when the proprietor wanted to close. Clearly this was a successful meeting on all counts.

*Kaianders Sempler, Swedish Science Journalists' Association and the new EUSJA Treasurer*

## New man at the top

EUSJA's new president, elected at the May board meeting held in Strasbourg is Werner Hadorn, a member of the Swiss Association of Science Journalism. Born in 1941, Werner studied German and English language and literature at the universities of Bern (Switzerland) and Kiel (Germany). He became a regular contributor to various newspapers while still a student. In 1974, following several years teaching at the Gymnasium in his home town of Biel, he began full time work as a journalist. He went on to join the Büro Cortesi Biel, a unique media service staffed by freelance journalists working in a wide range of media, including print, TV and radio, where he now heads the journalist department.



*Werner Hadorn*

As a science journalist, he has followed developments in a number of different disciplines, including linguistics, energy policy, health, local history and space technology. He has also written several books. In 1978 he co-founded the Büro's own weekly newspaper, *Biel Bienne*. At about the same time he joined the Swiss Association of Science Journalists, where he served as secretary and as the Swiss delegate to the EUSJA Board. In 1998 he was elected Honorary Secretary of EUSJA and in May 2000 he was elected as EUSJA's president.

## A welcome surprise

### A word from EUSJA's new President

I was as surprised as anyone when the delegates at this year's EUSJA board meeting in Strasbourg came up with their brilliant idea of electing me to a term as EUSJA president. How it happened, I can't say. I can only assume that, after having served as the secretary to the Swiss Association of Science Journalists and as the Swiss EUSJA delegate for many years, my experience in the field of science journalism may have been what prompted my colleagues to pursue this malicious act(!) – along with the desire to avoid being elected themselves.

I won't make any promises, but it is my firm belief that EUSJA should concentrate for the next two years

on promoting exchanges between East European and West European journalists and promoting and supporting trips organized by the National Associations.

At the May Board Meeting (now renamed the General Assembly) we laid down the necessary constitutional basis to allow the EUSJA officers (formerly known as the Executive committee, but now referred to (confusingly!) as the EUSJA Board), to spend EUSJA funds to promote these goals, within clear limits set by the General Assembly, without seeking Assembly approval for each expenditure. I hope this will enable us to set up programmes that will benefit as many of our colleagues as possible. In this way I hope that the contributions paid by the National Associations will be spent on fruitful EUSJA projects – rendering maximum benefit to EUSJA members! *Werner Hadorn, incoming EUSJA President*  
<wernerhadorn@compuserve.com>

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## At your service

### AlphaGalileo extends its options

For some time now, European science journalists have been able to visit the AlphaGalileo website ([www.alphagalileo.org](http://www.alphagalileo.org)) to gather stories at the click of a mouse. Now AlphaGalileo, the Internet press Centre for European Science and Engineering, is set to become more useful than ever.

Now that Germany has officially joined France and the UK in the AlphaGalileo fold, we now receive financial support from the French, German and UK governments. This assured funding is allowing us to upgrade and extend our service. And to ensure that the service continues to develop beyond 2000, a team made up of Finland, Greece, Italy, Portugal, together with our current funders is bidding for funding from the European Commission's Framework 5 Programme. This is good news for science journalists, since it means we are able to offer an extended range of services.

By the autumn of this year we will be providing a three-language service (French, German and English), as well as extensions to the service that will include online access to experts and multimedia files. The German service will be launched in September 2000.

In the meantime we have upgraded our service to include the following features requested by journalists:

- If you forget your username or password, they can now be sent directly to your registered e-mail address. To make this work, you must ensure that you are using the e-mail address from which you originally registered with AlphaGalileo;
- You can now change your address details online, including your e-mail address;
- You can also change the keywords you've chosen for e-mail alerts online;
- You can receive a weekly alert service, posted on Friday afternoons. This allows you to receive your e-mail alerts regularly once a week. To take up this option, log on and select 'Set Alerts';
- Our site search now also accepts Boolean logic. This means, for example, that 'roman not scotland' will

get you all references to Romans as long as Scotland isn't mentioned.

On top of this, we've also introduced new keywords to make it easier to receive only those alerts of interest to you. Now instead of requesting 'science', you can specify 'earth sciences', 'life sciences', 'chemistry' or 'physics' instead. If you select 'science' as a keyword you will get alerts about releases that include any of the new science keywords.

We've also added three additional keywords: 'science policy', 'grants' and 'personalia'. 'Personalia' allows us to accept releases about major new appointments or prizes won by staff.

So if you are only interested in physics stories or want to know of new grant awards then change your keywords. Log on and select 'Set alerts'.

We believe that these changes will allow us to continue to meet the needs of both of the communities that we serve: both journalists and people working in science, medicine and technology.

We also have further improvements in mind. Our priorities include providing an option for local news, and offering alerts by language. Language selection will require us to offer additional subsidiary preferred languages, so that you see the site in your most preferred language, but can also receive alerts about items in other languages if you wish. When this system is ready, we will be asking journalists to select their extra languages online.

Extending the options for geographical keywords is another thing we have in mind. But deciding how best to tackle this is more difficult. Should we simply divide the larger countries into 'North', 'Middle' or 'South', or should we use narrower geographic regions? If we use the latter how can we ensure that our contributors recognise the same areas? Should we leave the task of allocating regions to AlphaGalileo's editors? We'd like to hear your views!

*Peter Green, Project Director, AlphaGalileo*  
<[peter.green@alphagalileo.org](mailto:peter.green@alphagalileo.org) / [www.alphagalileo.org](http://www.alphagalileo.org)>

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## Don't ignore the outsiders

Science is an enormous field to cover. Because they have limited time and resources to research stories, and because media outlets generally reserve little space for science, many science journalists tend to base their reports on the news and announcements issued by respected and established scientific institutes and people with a good scientific reputation.

But if you, like me, also consider science journalism as a form of public service, by concentrating on reporting on developments announced by the established institutes you are ignoring the important fact that progress in science and technology also takes place outside of the scientific community.

Many of the ideas that spark off radical new insights and developments come from scientific 'outsiders'. Specialists are, by definition, competent to impart established textbook knowledge. And one of the most regrettable characteristics of the intellectual world, it

seems to me, is the yawning gap that is perceived to exist between 'establishment' science and the knowledge the scientific community chooses to ignore. This is not just a recent phenomenon. The history of science and technology reveals that cross-thinkers and ingenious people of all sorts faced similar problems in the past. Just imagine what we might have missed – and what we might now be missing out on!

Many of the major innovations in the past could have been labelled "unorthodox" when they were first proposed. This will also be the case in the future. Nobody can foresee what creative people will come up with. Science journalists should not promote the idea that the future of our technical world is predetermined according to what experts predict. We all should listen to less prominent thinkers, too. That's one of the points I'll be making when I present a paper entitled *Scientific and Practical Obstacles in Developing and Introducing Unorthodox Energy Technologies*, at the UNESCO World Renewable Energy Congress, talking place from 1-7 July in Brighton, UK.

Gottfried Hilscher, TELI  
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## Le dernier mot

Despite the gallant efforts of the Public Understanding of Science (PUS) pundits, scientists and journalists will never agree on the subject of science communication. At least, that's what busy journalists and busy scientists appear to believe as they pursue their professions and occasionally add their personal experience and opinion into the great pot of ideas that is PUS. A commission from the EU provided Bertrand Labasse, editor of the monthly journal *Recherche & Industrie* and lecturer in information and scientific communication at the Université Claude Bernard in Lyon and at the École Supérieure de Journalisme in Lille, with a little time for reflection to peer into the pot. His verdict: it contains a watery stew, lacking meat and not yet thickened.

In his 97-page report, *Observations sur la médiation des connaissances scientifiques et techniques*, prepared for the European Commission, Labasse notes that PUS is a new science and argues that the lack of real substance and progress in PUS debates is indicative of a science in the making. PUS has yet to establish consensus ideas, working models, fundamental concepts. In Kuhnian terms, says Labasse, PUS is still looking for its paradigm. Meanwhile, the objectives of scientists and journalists in science communication remain ill-defined and divergent. The debates remain lively.

Before scientists or journalists will ever understand science communication, further research into its processes, principles and purposes is paramount, he argues. Yet academic analysis alone is useless. It must be effectively communicated. After all, the discipline of science communication studies already exists, but who subscribes to journals like *Science Communication*, let alone implements the research recommendations?

This new discipline of science communication research, says Labasse, must also be an applied science.

Academics must meet and work with journalists, learn their art, understand their trade, get their hands dirty – even at the expense of not sticking strictly to their academic results.

Meanwhile journalists must take the time to reflect upon their work, to sit back, turn away from the screen and contemplate the wider implications of their handiwork. Sure, they'll need financial support. But Labasse concludes his *tour de force* by suggesting that the "European Community more than any other is in a position to play a central role as initiator and co-ordinator" in the grand effort to finally beef up the PUS program. Anyone fancy a sabbatical, compliments of the EU?

Edwin Colyer, ABSW

<edwin@scientia-scripta.freeserve.co.uk>

### Read him in the original

Bertrand Labasse's report is published in French and can be downloaded as a pdf file from

<[www.univ-lyon1.fr/spr/GEV/ReportAcces.html](http://www.univ-lyon1.fr/spr/GEV/ReportAcces.html)>.

For an English translation, described by Labasse as 'mediocre', contact the author by e-mail at:

<[B.Labasse-ScPresse@univ-lyon1.fr](mailto:B.Labasse-ScPresse@univ-lyon1.fr)>

## Farewell to a friend

Dr Walter Baier, for many years the German EUSJA representative, died in Berlin on 3 March at the age of 71. Walter worked as a freelance journalist for daily newspapers and for popular science magazines, writing mainly about science and technology.

He edited the German edition of the encyclopedia *The Atomic Age*, as well as the *Elektronic Lexikon*. In addition, he wrote a two-volume book, *Natur und Technik*, aimed at schools, and published a book on modern plastics under a pseudonym. He was also a frequent contributor to EUSJA-L, EUSJA's e-mail discussion list.

Born in Worms in December 1929, Walter went on to study modern languages in Mainz and later Lille, where he received a PhD. He continued his education by studying physics in Geneva, where he graduated with a *license des sciences*. He moved to Berlin in 1960 and joined TELI in 1971, where he proved to be a very active member. He served on the TELI board from 1980-1992 and represented TELI on the EUSJA Board.

Although he was physically handicapped by arthritis and other ailments, Walter, accompanied by his wife Edith, was an enthusiastic supporter of EUSJA visits, and organised several to Germany. Known for his forthright personality, Walter had strong opinions about how EUSJA should be run and he wasn't shy about letting his opinions be known.

He corresponded regularly with some of the EUSJA Board members and took an active part in e-mail discussion until just a few days before his death. With his death, EUSJA has lost a friend.

Dietmar Schmidt, TELI

<[dietmar.schmidt@lrz.uni-muenchen.de](mailto:dietmar.schmidt@lrz.uni-muenchen.de)>

## Who's a pompous ass?

On the EUSJA-L we yammer on for days about April fool jokes. Are they funny? Did the Brits invent them? Yes, we science journalists take ourselves very, very seriously. We believe we play a very important role in society. We're doing important work and it doesn't matter how we do it, so it seems.

I'm not sure. All too often it's obvious that science journalists are taking shortcuts and ending up making fools of themselves. Too lazy to check facts out in the archives – well never mind, it was in *Nature* so it must be all right.

Walter Baier would never have made that sort of mistake. He knew what he knew. No one could fool Dr Baier. And as a result some people regarded him as an arrogant know-it-all.

Back when he represented Germany at EUSJA Board meetings, he more than once pointed out to other board members that they were ignoring the rules set out in the EUSJA constitution. Many found this 'regulatory behaviour' very irritating. Often his interpretation of the rules turned out to be, in fact, correct. But what does the truth matter?

His comments on science could also drive people to distraction. A normally pleasant British colleague referred to Walter as a 'pompous ass' on the EUSJA list not so very long ago in the course of an argument about last year's solar eclipse.

But when I heard in early March that Walter had died, tears crept into my eyes. I must be getting more sentimental as the years go by, but that's not the only reason. Just before he died Walter sent me an e-mail to fill in a few holes in my 'memory'. After he read my article about that world famous scientist in that attic in Berlin (see *EUSJA News*, Winter 1999, page 6) Walter sent me an e-mail to say: "You wrote about Professor Rolf Hosemann, who worked at the Fritz Haber Institute, part of the Max Planck Society. I trust you know Fritz Haber; he was the first chemist to obtain nitrates from air. Hosemann was one of Von Laue's disciples. The collection of historical benches is down to his private initiative. He saved them from being thrown away. Unfortunately, Rolf Hosemann died several years ago." At moments like that I know what life is all about: science is just a minor matter, it's the people that count.

Well let's hope Walter won't clash with God. I know my grammar isn't correct, but I can't resist saying it anyway: *Grüss Gott von mir, Walter.*

*Arno Schrauwers, VWN  
<schrauwers@avd.nl>*

## Health news...

If you take a healthy interest in health matters, the *PUFA Newsletter*, which reviews research concerning diet supplementation with the essential fatty acids, may be of interest. The newsletter has a particular emphasis on omega-3 long chain fatty acids, both in

terms of preventive and possible clinical applications – a hot area for health news. Recent research reports relate to infant formula, cardiac arrhythmias, cystic fibrosis, the Palaeolithic diet and other topics.

The newsletter is published in English. Although it receives support from Hoffmann-La Roche it is independent editorially. It is already sent without charge to a number of medical and science writers in Europe and is also posted on the website <www.medev.ch>. The editor says he'd be pleased to send copies to any interested EUSJA members, and would also be interested in exchanging newsletters with other editors.

To request a copy of the *PUFA Newsletter* contact: James Magee, MeDev Medical Service, 5 chemin du Canal, 1260 Nyon, Switzerland; e-mail: [magee@dial.eunet.ch](mailto:magee@dial.eunet.ch)

Information/technology

## ...Y actualidad de salud

Actualidad de las ciencias de la vida en español

Si tu puedes comprender español y tienes un interés en las ciencias de la salud, entonces no deberías perderte BIOMEDIA, una nueva herramienta de comunicación. BIOMEDIA es un servidor de noticias especializado en temas de biomedicina y salud. Publicado exclusivamente en formato digital, es consultable en la WWW en las direcciones <[www.biomed.net/biomed](http://www.biomed.net/biomed)> y distribuido de forma gratuita a través de Internet. El contenido de BIOMEDIA es de libre reproducción siempre que se cita la referencia del autor y procedencia de las informaciones y artículos de opinión.

BIOMEDIA se elabora en el Observatorio de la Comunicación Científica (Universita Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona), centro especial de investigación social dirigido por el periodista y profesor Vladimir de Semir. El equipo redactor está coordinado por Cristina Junyent, doctora en biología.

Creado con la voluntad de cubrir un amplio espectro de necesidades informativas, BIOMEDIA es un servicio concebido para el usuario genérico, no especialmente experto en Internet y se dirige de forma especial a periodistas, comunicadores y divulgadores científicos, profesionales – así como a docentes de todas las disciplinas citadas. Por instrucciones para mantener o anular su recepción gratuita ver la WWW dirección <[www.biomed.net/biomed](http://www.biomed.net/biomed)> o envíe a <[biomed-request@biomed.net](mailto:biomed-request@biomed.net)> un mensaje con la palabra "subscribe" en la primera línea del texto.

### If you've enjoyed reading this issue...

*Nina Morgan (e-mail <[ninamorgan@compuserve.com](mailto:ninamorgan@compuserve.com)>, or fax +44-1608-676530) awaits your contribution for the next EUSJA News. Articles in languages other than English are welcome; the deadline is 10 November.*

## Best practices

We can learn from each other

As a new delegate to the EUSJA Annual Assembly, but armed with information about the ongoing discussions, I decided to bring an open mind to the meeting. All organisations go through ever repeating phases – pioneering, consolidating, expanding, lack of inspiration, new life and back to pioneering – and EUSJA is no exception. With so many new delegates, it was obvious that new inspiration would lead to changes; a transparent structure will help us to carry out projects and plans.

Sometimes I wonder why people do it: taking on responsibilities for an Association like EUSJA, spending much free time and a lot of energy, and often getting very little appreciation for it. Science journalists are a critical lot, and serving on a board with a group of science journalists from many different cultures is rather a challenging job. What we could and should do, is learn from each others' way of working.

For example, when financial matters got a bit out of hand a couple of years ago in the VWN, we decided to get external assistance from an accountant. Large sums of money need to be properly taken care of, and we're journalists, not financial experts. It's good husbandry to spend money wisely, and keep a nice little nest-egg for future generations. Maybe that's a very Dutch and 'polder' approach, but it certainly helped us. With accounting and financial matters now causing concern in EUSJA, the Board has decided to take a similar approach to solve the problem.

Of course, all national associations in EUSJA will be able to provide 'best practices', so we can grow from pioneering to consolidation, or from lack of inspiration to new life, or from consolidating to expansion, depending on the activity in hand.

EUSJA is poised for change. There are new officers in place, we've agreed on many changes to the constitution, and there are a great number of plans for exchanges between Eastern and Western European countries. Now it's up to us to contribute to these plans and host exchanges.

Those who haven't done so yet, should fill out the questionnaire Vice-President Istvan Palugyai mailed in 1999. The comparison of our 'daily lives as science journalist's' should be interesting. It's also a great way to add 'best practices' from our own national associations, to improve EUSJA's way of working.

*Lizet Kruffyf, VWN*  
<C.Beijersbergen@net.hcc.nl>

## European co-operation

How the Danes see it

During the late 1980s and 90s the Danish Science Journalists' Association was disappointed with EUSJA because there was little activity and the

organisation seemed messy. We even discussed leaving EUSJA. Although, in the end we decided to stay in the organisation, we chose to keep a low profile and to concentrate instead on promoting closer cooperation between ourselves and journalists in Eastern Europe. For example, we arranged a study visit to the former Soviet Union, attended by 23 of our members, and we also invited journalists from Hungary and Slovakia to visit Denmark. This, in turn, resulted in invitations to undertake study visits in these two countries.

Recently, however, our attitude towards EUSJA has changed because we can see that the organisation is starting to function again. We regard organising study visits to member countries as EUSJA's most important purpose because we think that these promote European co-operation and encourage valuable cross-national friendships and contacts. We are also strongly in favour of the EUSJA Board's decision to support the new member countries in Eastern Europe both financially and on the organisational level, where appropriate.

We also consider it important for EUSJA to make full use of modern information technology which helps to make distances less important and opens up new avenues for international contacts and co-operation. To encourage this we think more frequent updates of the EUSJA web pages, particularly the home page, would help. In addition we think it would be a good idea for the recently compiled database of members belonging to all the national associations in EUSJA to be available on the EUSJA website. And we argue that it would be a good idea if all the national associations (including ourselves!) urged their members to join the EUSJA-L e-mail discussion list to help to make it a more valuable source for international contacts and debates that are relevant to us all.

*Rolf Haugaard Nielsen,*  
*Danish Science Journalist's Association,*  
<haug@post4.tele.dk>

To subscribe to the EUSJA-L e-mail discussion list send the message: *subscribe eusja-l* *firstname lastname* (don't forget to substitute your own name!) to the address: <listserv@listserv.rl.ac.uk>

EUSJA on-line

## ... Power in your pocket

from page 1

Laptops are heavy and bulky – even the small ones. And if you need to work anywhere that lacks a power outlet, they have a very short battery life. On the plus side, a laptop will run all the software you use on your desktop machine. In short: if you need a laptop, you probably have one already.

At the opposite end of the scale are PDAs – personal digital assistants – such as the Palm IIIe, Palm V and Cassiopeia E-105. The Palm machines are good value for money, while the Cassiopeia packs an impressive amount of computing power. But they don't have keyboards, and for many journalists that rules them out.



Strasbourg: charming squares, canals, cobbled streets — and the home of EUSJA

So what about something intermediate between a laptop and a PDA? A pocket computer or “handheld” based on the Windows CE or EPOC operating system can give you a reasonably-sized keyboard and display, plus a good battery life, in a package that is genuinely pocket-sized. My current favourite toy is the EPOC-based Psion Series 5mx, which has what is widely reckoned to be the best keyboard in a computer of this size (170 x 90 x 25 mm). You wouldn’t want to write a novel on it, but for knocking out a 500-word news story it’s fine.

The Psion’s built-in software is excellent, and if you want more there is a good choice of both commercial software and shareware. Exchanging files with a PC works pretty well; Mac users have a harder time, but I can live with it. The new Psion Series 7 has a larger case and a colour screen. And the best bit: EPOC *never crashes* (at least, not in five months of daily use).

I have no experience of Windows CE machines, now being re-branded as “Pocket PCs”. Windows CE has not so far been a roaring success, and the word among the geeks is that technically it comes a poor second to EPOC. But it’s a Microsoft product, which has to be a good thing when you want to connect your Pocket PC to your desktop. There’s also a wider choice of machines, with colour screens and good-sized keyboards.

The nice thing about these handheld computers, whether EPOC or Win CE, is that they are small enough to carry with you everywhere. I don’t know about you, but what I need most of the time when travelling is access to e-mail and my contacts file, and maybe a place to jot down some notes or rough out a story.

Any PDA or handheld, with or without a keyboard, will handle contact information with ease, though synchronising with a desktop machine can be tricky.

An infra-red link between Psion and mobile phone makes it easy to use e-mail, and also mobile-phone SMS messages. I find SMS surprisingly useful, but not when you have to tap out messages on your phone’s own keypad. Try it with a proper keyboard, and a messaging program that puts SMS and e-mail in the same mailbox, and prepare to be impressed.

The Psion’s Web browser is less than ideal, but it works, and for the moment at least it’s a better bet than the much-hyped WAP technology for mobile phones. I reckon the WAP phone, with its display the size of a matchbox, will prove about as much use as a calculator on a wristwatch. If any EUSJA WAPmeisters think different, let’s hear their arguments!

Did I mention that the Psion has a built-in sound recorder? I threw out my office dictating machine some years back when I discovered MicNotePad Lite, a free Mac program that lets me record phone interviews. With the Psion I can now record when I’m out of the office, and download the sound files to my Mac when I return. It’s possibly not as good as a dedicated digital recorder, but it’s one less piece of equipment to carry.

Sorry if all this sounds like a sales pitch for Psion — it’s impossible to be impartial when I haven’t the time or money to try out the alternatives. But I’ll be happy if I can convince you that some of these super-small gadgets are not just toys.

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Planning a journey? Your colleagues in Europe can help

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