

MANAGING ACCESS TO THE WEB-BASED DIGITAL RESOURCES: ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

By

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ABSTRACT

Declining library budgets, growing user expectations, technological innovations, and the globalisation of information have forced the library & information (LI) professionals to share their precious resources via networks. As a response to these developments, there is a transition from stand alone libraries to library & information networks, infomediaries to infoliterate end-users, and print-based publications to digital documents. The professional competencies are falling short in managing access to the web-based digital documents. In this context, an effort has been made in this paper to raise a few pertinent issues and discuss the implications of the web-based digital documents for the LI profession.

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0. Introduction

The invention of the printing press in the 15th century was a landmark in the history of scholarly communication. It was possible to produce large number of documents with the help of printing press. Moreover, the libraries, in the real sense of the term, came into existence only after the invention of the printing press. But now with the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs), the LI profession is finding itself into a paradoxical situation. The web, which has no head and tail, is both blessing and curse for the stakeholders. As there is no competition for space in the web, a lot of junk is being made available by the information elite. The non-elite members of the society are being left behind in the emerging information society. As such, the existing gap between the `info-rich' and the `info-poor' is widening further at a warp speed. Therefore, there is a strong need that we take cognizance of this phenomena and develop certain policies and strategies to separate web-based junk from the quality information, as well as to bridge the widening gap , between the `haves' and the `have nots'.

1. Resource sharing

We are surrounded by rapid economic, educational, political, cultural, and technological changes. Declining library budgets, growing user expectations, shifting priorities of governments, commercialization of education, consumerism, and digitization of documents are forcing the LI professionals to devise new ways and means to survive and thrive in the networked environments. There is a shift from just-in-case to just-in-time approach for managing access to right information. It is not possible for a stand alone

library to meet all the information needs of its end-users. Resource sharing via networking is the only alternative. There is a trend towards library & information networks. LANs, MANs, WANs, Intranets, and Extranets are manifestations of this trend. The Internet is a striking development of our times. It is a vast storehouse of information and a perpetual discourse of human minds is going on it. Moreover it has dramatically changed the whole process of scholarly communication. Conceptual access to tacit knowledge has been improved significantly. The traditional pattern of authorship is also changing. Validation and creditation of intellectual property is becoming more difficult as there is no stability on the Internet. Moreover many people contribute to discussions via virtual conferences, seminars, discussion lists, newsgroups, and bulletin boards. As such the traditional competencies are falling short to manage access to the web-based digital resources. It is very important for the professionals to know:

- (a) what information is available;
- (b) where it is located; and
- (c) how to access it.

All this can not be done in a piece meal manner. We must develop systems thinking and follow a holistic approach. Following are a few ways and means to do this.

2. Strategies for Access Management

As has already been pointed out that there is a trend towards managing access rather than ownership of information. The first and foremost requirement is to enhance awareness of the authorities, professionals and end-users of the web-based resources. Electronic journals, virtual reference desks, opacs, digital databases, scholarly discussion lists, mailing lists, electronic newsletters, bulletin boards, community telecentres, etc are the new resources and services on the web which must be managed to satisfy the info-literate end-users.

It is essential now to get commitment from the higher authorities for providing the Internet connectivity. This is the basic requirement to get benefits of the web.

3. Redesigning the LIS Courses

The Library and Information Science courses must be redesigned to incorporate the IT components. Only this way we can provide competent manpower to the LI profession. There should also be a provision for continuing education and training programmes. ILA, IASLIC, IATLIS, SIS, INFLIBNET, NISSAT, UGC, universities and other organizations such as INSDOC, NASSDOC, and DRTC can contribute a lot in this regard. These bodies are already very active, but still there is a strong need for regularizing and coordinating their efforts.

4. Empowerment of the Stakeholders

The LI professionals and the end-users are the main stakeholders who are going to be directly affected by the widening gap between the stand alone and networked libraries.

As such there is a strong need to empower the LI professionals and the end-users. LI professionals must be provided with opportunities to update their knowledge base and develop their skills. Efforts must be made to change their mind-set to overcome their resistance to integration of web-based resources in libraries. Critical thinking, and thorough understanding of the networked environment must be cultivated among them. Similarly, it is now possible to empower the end-users also. With the emergence of user friendly 'drag and drop' and 'point and click' systems it is possible for the end-users to find pertinent information in many cases. Information literacy is a way to empower the end-users.

5. Information Literacy

It includes basic computer and network literacy. Besides, the end-user must be enabled to search right information as well as make its judicious use in a timely manner. LI professionals have a pivotal role to play in this regard. They should not only act as facilitators and tutors but also as motivators.

6. Quality Information Management

As there is no competition for space in the web, it has become very difficult to retrieve relevant information in time. In case of general information web returns thousands of entries, and in case of esoteric information sometimes not even a single relevant reference is available. The end result of this phenomenon is a frustrated end-user. We must make efforts to help the end-users to come out of such a demoralizing and demotivating situation. LI professionals must search the web on regular basis and customize the retrieved information according to the interests of the end-users. Only this way we can manage access to the web based resources. LI professionals have an ethical commitment to serve as gatekeepers. Quality information must be sifted from the information deluge which is engulfing the emerging information society.

7. Useful Pointers to the Web

In the networked environment, different types of libraries are required to serve as hybrid libraries as well as gateways to digital resources and services. To start with, URLs of a few useful web sites available via the Internet are given below. These are:

BUBL: Bulletin Board for Libraries
<http://bubl.ac.uk>

This is just like one stop shopping centre and provides seamless access to the web-based resources in library and information science across the globe.

PICK: Gateway to Quality Library and Information Science Resources on the Internet
<http://www.aber.ac.uk/~tplwww/e/pick.html>

It is a UK based very useful site for LI professionals.

CNI: Coalition for Networked Information
<http://www.cni.org>

This is a joint venture of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), CAUSE, and EDUCOM in the USA for advancement of scholarly communication with the help of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

UKOLN: The UK Office for Library and Information Networking
<http://www.ukoln.ac.uk>

A good starting point to get pertinent information in library and information studies.

Virtual Library for Information and Library Professionals
<http://www.pbi.ernet.in/PUP/DLIS/VLIB.HTM>

This is a gateway service being developed by the author of this paper. It provides onward links to the web-based quality information resources in library and information studies.

Unesco, IFLA, and FID also have their own web sites. Besides, there are many other useful sites on the Internet, but because of the constraints of space and time it is not possible to do justice with these sites in a small paper like this.

8. Conclusion

There are certain issues which must be addressed immediately. These relate to implementation of the National Policy on Library and Information System, enhancing end-users' awareness of the web-based resources and services, empowering the LI professionals, getting commitment from the purse holders for the Internet connectivity, managing access to digital documents, customizing digital resources to the needs of the end-users, and developing and mounting indigenous databases on the web. Inflibnet and Delnet are doing a good job in this regard. Library associations, universities, R&D organizations, the UGC, Nissat, Insdoc, Nassdoc, DRTC, etc should provide leadership to the LI professionals for bridging the existing gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' at least in India.

This is not an easy task. It has wide implications for the LI professionals. We will have to develop suitable policies and strategies, adequate infrastructure, and competent LI professionals. Besides, there must be a provision for continuous maintenance of the LI infrastructure as the ICTs will never be stable. We are living in an era, where uncertainty is the only certainty, instability is the only stability, and change is the only constant. We must learn to create and manage change. Only this way we can survive and thrive in the networked environment, and provide delight to the end-users. We must automate our library and information systems, but not our thinking. Our biggest challenge is to provide access to multimedia information. Biggest challenge it is because information today has become fluid and transcendental. Managing access to digital information is just like

hunting a moving object. Only competent LI professionals with thorough understanding of the web-based environment will be in a position to manage access to web-based digital resources.