DVRS as a catalyst for transforming L&I services.

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Abstract

Digital and virtual reference services have (DVRS) have been there in libraries in the developed world for more than a quarter century now. There have been a few experiments in India with regard to provision of DVRS, and education and training for DVRS for a few years. This paper explores the need for a collaborative effort by academic libraries in India for digital and virtual reference services, and briefly describes SandarbhSoochna: a DVRS training initiative at Punjabi University. Such efforts are a sine qua non for developing qualified and trained manpower that would transform the L&I services scene by managing knowledge and information resources effectively in a global electronic village. Trained manpower is the most crucial resource to act as catalyst for knowledge discovery and management from diverse sources. The paper also proposes that collaborative DVRS, especially among academic libraries in India is needed to develop and manage knowledge and information resources effectively to satisfy the five laws of library science and to meet the increasing demands of users' in a global electronic village.

Keywords: Virtual Reference Service, Reference Service, Library Leadership

1. Introduction

Managing information and knowledge for the mankind has always been the primary concern of librarians and information specialists. Although the use of terms information management and knowledge management has been recent, librarians have been at the forefront of practical applications for managing information and knowledge. A major communication revolution the form of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has rendered the vast and remotely located populations in the world into an electronic village where most economies and societies are globalized in this village. Proponents of historical approach to concept of information society argue that ICT revolution is another link in the chain of communication revolutions, just as the invention of Gutenberg's movable type printing in 15th century was. As librarians and information workers, a major challenge before us is to understand the broad ecological context of information and knowledge in decision-making and to develop tools, mechanisms and systems employing ICTs optimally for the purpose. Collaborative digital and virtual reference services (DVRS) are important ways in which libraries can serve their users globally.

Indian literature of library & information science is full of buzzwords and cutting edge themes. This would be evident from a glance at the contents pages of last few years' issues of leading conference and seminar proceedings published in India on the subject. The current landscape of library and information services (LIS) in India has a broad spectrum and consists of world class services by a few libraries on the one hand contrasted with a large number of libraries offering little more than lending services on the other, and even larger number of public and private collections virtually

closed for public or unknown to public The libraries of the first kind are few in number, are primarily elitist, urban-centered, and have successfully experimented with information and communication technologies (ICTs). A large number of libraries can be categorized into the second kind where that is only partial awareness of the potential and applications of ICTs. This can not necessarily be said of the users of the libraries of the latter category. Many libraries stand between these two extremes in provision of services.

2.   Population and literacy in India

India is the second most populous country in the world and is a home to more than a sixth of the total world population. The illiterate population in India accounts for more than a third of its total population. In statistical terms, the illiterate population of India alone is exceeds 360 million, which is more than the combined total population of the United Kingdom and the United States. According to the world population prospects, India would be the most populous country on the earth in next 40 years (United Nations, 2005). According to 2001 census, less than 28% of the total population of India resides in urban areas and the majority (more than 72%) in rural areas (India. Office of the Registrar General, 2001). In spite of increasing worldwide trend towards metropolitization (Decentralization, 2005), a vast majority of the population is predominantly rural or at the most having very limited facilities and services available at nearby semi-urban areas.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are now also reaching semi-urban and rural areas in India. The increase of Internet users in India from 0.01 million users in 1995 to 39.2 million in December 2005 (Chauhan and Murthy, 2006, p. 385) seems very good, but in terms of total population of India, the Internet has been able to penetrate only 3.6 % of the population. When we talk of statistics of Internet users, we should also take into account a large number of indirect users that do not have the infrastructure facilities available to them. But they use the basic Internet facility of email and also of the Web indirectly through direct users.

3.   Library and Information Services (LIS) in India

Library and information services, as localized or community-based services, have not yet taken roots in many parts of the country. The system of public libraries has developed in a hierarchical and bureaucratic set-up with foundations laid in British India. The Government of India (GoI) has not done enough to spread the public library system in the country. Besides establishment of the National Library, and the Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation, there is little that it can say about promotion of library and information services.

However, two important developments have taken place in 2005 that are showing some impact on information services in India. These are establishment of a National Knowledge Commission (NKC) (http://www.knowledgecommission.org/index.aspx) and the enactment of Right to Information Act (RTI) (http://www.persmin.nic.in/RTI/rti-act.pdf). The enactment of RTI has been hailed as a major success by the media. But the focus of RTI is on complicated, time-consuming, and in many cases unaffordable system of provision of information to a person as a onetime 'thing', rather than on the

right to information as a continuous service for citizens in an information society. The scope of RTI is limited, as far as right to information is concerned, because it gives only a right to seek information. There is no obligation on the part of public authorities to disclose public information on a regular basis or in a systematic way.

Public libraries come under the purview of state governments. Public library system having libraries at different levels, e.g., panchayat, municipal, town, district, and state does exist in almost all states and union territories India, but in terms of growth and development, this sector lags behind other library sectors such as university, research etc. Only 18 out of 28 states in India have enacted laws for public libraries since 1948 when the first such law was enacted in the state of Madras (now Tamil Nadu) with the leadership and efforts of Ranganathan. Perhaps the only other library sector less developed than the public library sector in India is that of school librarianship. The national library should act as an apex body leading and directing the librarianship and information activities in the country. The National Library of India at Kolkata celebrated its centenary in 2003 and organized many events including an International Conference on National Library Services in March 2004. But the web site of 'the largest library in the country' has only few services to offer, although it has started online registration of users recently through its website.

Besides the efforts of governments, many organizations and institutions in India are working for developing digital content. Initiatives like the Manuscripts Mission of India, the Digital Library of India project, and the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library project, are a few examples of work undertaken by elite institutions in the digital era. Gaur (2006) has given a brief description of these two projects and many others being undertaken in India.

4.   Need for Reexamining LIS

In the light of some demographic facts mentioned and general observations on LIS earlier in this paper, and the explosive growth of the Internet in less developed countries like India, and the GoI's with the concept of information and knowledge society, library and information services in the country need reexamination. After the formation of a committee for formulation of a national policy for library and information services (NAPLIS) in mid 1980s by the GoI, no significant national level initiative furthering library and information services has been announced by the GoI. Even if all the recommendations of NAPLIS were to be adopted today, there is not going to be a substantial improvement in LIS in India as much water has flown down the Sutlej since the recommendations were made nearly two decades earlier. Therefore, in the light of ICT developments, NKC, and RTI, library and information services need a fresh look, keeping the needs of millions of information users in mind. These millions include 39.2 million Internet users and hundreds of millions of non-internet but literate population and an illiterate population more than the total population of USA and UK combined. The present state of libraries and their services in India typifies five aspects of unstructured and unsystematized nature of their management, highlighted by Buckland (1983, pp.7-8), i.e.,(a) commercial focus of management specialists, (b) approach of LIS specialists confined to books, bibliography and retrieval, (c) lack of effectiveness criteria for LIS, (d) library services as support services for larger organisations, and (e) limited administrative authority with librarians.

5.   Digital and Virtual Reference Services (DVRS)

DVRS hold immense potential in less developed countries like India for managing information and knowledge where information and knowledge resources being digitized are available in many languages, besides born-digital resources that are increasingly being generated in Indian languages besides English. In the age of automated search engines, portals, and web-based services, even for an techno-savvy user making sense out of online data available in zillions, even if it only in one language, requires human effort rather than over-reliance on machines. When the data and information are available in more than one language, problems in accessing and managing online and printed data get compounded. Though DVRS are not a substitute for the traditional reference service, but in an online environment DVRS is essential for complementing and supplementing traditional reference service to users across space, and across different time zones. Whether in traditional reference or in DVRS, the human element is central in providing personal assistance in helping find and make sense of data and information in zillions.

Digital reference services (DRS) are not a very common feature in Indian libraries and information centres. The term DRS has been used in its widest sense in this paper including electronic, virtual, ask-an-expert, and ask-a-librarian services. This is in spite of calls being made (Kalra, 2002; Khan et al, 2004) for starting such services using simple technology, i.e. email, that nearly 40 million people in India use directly and many more indirectly. Indian libraries have started experimenting with DRS, but the efforts are primarily by individual and committed library and information professionals rather than outcomes of directional support by professional societies or government agencies or the National Library. MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) took a lead in this direction by starting work on 'Information Village' on an experimental basis for rural areas in Pondicherry in 1998 (http:/ /www.mssrf.org/iec/601/index.htm). Among libraries, the library of Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai, (IITM) is offering similar service using a web-interface. (http://www.cenlib.iitm.ac.in/ docs/library/index.php?page=asklibrarian). Libraries and information centres of British Council and American Embassy in India do provide DVRS to their users. A few other libraries in India provide only an email address for providing ask-a-librarian services on their web pages. Academic libraries represent the most widespread and developed aspect of Indian librarianship, and therefore the onus of developing new and innovative L&I services lies on this sector.

A collaborative effort on the part of library institutions, leadership, and associations is still a major gap, to boost the initiatives of individuals and institutions experimenting with DVRS. The picture that emerges from the present state of DVRS in Indian libraries is that of some activism among library and information professionals, but in the absence of direction or policy from national level, these are largely individual efforts. QuestionPoint as a collaborative effort has been a success in the developed world. It is high time for library and information professionals in India experimenting or interested in DVRS to come together to start a collaborative effort. In case of QuestionPoint, the initiative came from the Library of Congress and the largest library cooperative, the OCLC. In the absence of a national level library, government agency providing leadership, library associations should come forward to take the initiative. The track record of library associations in India in this regard so far has not been very good.

6.   SandarbhSoochna: A DVRS Training Initiative

DVRS have also been incorporated into the syllabi of library & information science education in India. But absence of formal internship programmes as part of course structure in most cases makes students only aware of it in theory. An effort to prepare a training module for DVRS has been started in one of the universities in India. (Kalra, 2004). Department of Library & Information Science (DLIS), Punjabi University, Patiala took a lead in starting training for DVRS through SandarbhSoochna initiative. Details of this initiative are available at: http://sites.google.com/site/digrefinfo/ . Under this initiative volunteer students are given training using real-life information queries for providing reference services using ICTs. The objective of this initiative is to give basic training in DVRS so that they can help start/improve such services at their work places even with limited information and ICT resources. Under this initiative, users from many countries have been served with their required information from locally available printed sources and networked sources available in the Department. With limited volunteer students, many information seekers from France, India, Japan, Nepal, Pakistan, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, and the USA. If without funding and only with volunteer students and one university library collection in printed form, a large number of users could be provided with the information they sought, imagine the quality and effectiveness such a service would provide where experienced librarians in colleges and universities and other institutions are working together across the country. It is for the INFLIBNET to seize the opportunity and develop plans for making a collaborative DVRS in India a reality.

7.   Library Associations Institutions and Leadership

Library associations (LAs) in India deserve a special mention here. From a few state and national level LAs such as Andhra Desa Library Association, Punjab Library Association, and Indian Library Association (ILA) formed in the pre-independence period to a large number today, the story of LAs is that of successes and failures. Few leaders of the profession have emerged after the Ranganathan era in Indian librarianship. Libraries and information centres in mid-1960s experimented with computer technology. A few years later the same trend started in India. Unfortunately, by that time the golden period of librarianship was nearing its end. If we take a holistic view of the growth of libraries and their services in India in the last 30 years, both qualitatively and quantitatively, and compare it with that of population and literacy, the statistics will not make us proud.

To illustrate, there are many Sectional Committees of ILA on various professional themes and but there is hardly any mention of the activities of many of these committees. A good effort, however, has been made by the sectional committee on Distance Education by formulating 'Guidelines for Library Services to Distance Learners' (http://gateway.uvic.ca/dls/LSDL_Guidelines.pdf) in 2001. The first service listed in these guidelines says 'Reference service either in person, by telephone, or fax, or through e-mail". But the web site of the largest professional body in India, ILA has become functional only recently and there is almost no progress on the implementation of guidelines nearly a decade earlier. The record of Indian Association of Special Librarianship and Information Centres (IASLIC) is somewhat better than ILA although at the time of writing this paper, website of IASLIC was not operational. IASLIC maintains a library on library & information science at its headquarters

in Kolkata but the services of its library, like the activities of the association itself are centered in Kolkata. Indian Association of Teachers of Library and Information Science (IATLIS) has however maintained a pilot website in recent years and shows promise, but its mandate is on education, research and training rather than on library and information services.

Library institutions such as the National Library, RRRLF, NISCAIR, DRTC, INFLIBNET, leading departments of library & information science, and prominent libraries/information centres have a major role to rejuvenate library associations and provide leadership support to the profession. Consolidation of resources and services through collaboration across different sectors of libraries is one way we can

8. Concluding Observations

A contrasting picture of illiterate millions (including information illiterates) unserved by library and information services on the one hand and DVRS experiments and initiatives by individuals and organizations on the other presents a unique information reality that many in the profession conclude as pessimistic. Many others are optimistic about this and treat it as an opportunity. In spite of these problems and challenges that face Indian librarianship today, we should find out opportunities to reach out to under-served populations. There is hope for improving the situation where millions of illiterates and literates remain un- or underserved by LIS. Nongovernmental organizations like MSSRF have experimented in this direction. This hope is also based on Poster's (2001) acknowledgement of the potential of the Internet to transform contemporary world practices. Poster hopes this even in the wake of corporate and government forces working for colonization of the Internet to further their ends. The ball is in the court of emerging leadership in the profession to develop a long-term vision for library and information services for all, and start working for a collaborative effort in starting digital and virtual reference service for one and all for effective information and knowledge management. If we want Indian librarianship to have its rightful place in the global electronic village, we will have to develop such services for direct and indirect Web users. Web services on mobile phones and in Indian languages are also getting popular day by day. Unless we scale up DVRS experiments and develop services in Indian languages as well as in English, we cannot claim that we are following the second and fourth laws of library science "Books are for use" and Save the time of the reader". Among library institutions in India, INFLIBNET is uniquely placed as a special agency of the UGC to promote automation and networking of academic libraries. Besides, it is well endowed with funds liberally. With onus of developing DVRS on academic libraries, INFLIBNET needs to play a leadership role in developing guidelines for starting a basic DVRS by university and college libraries. If through such initiatives and services Indian libraries increase the quantity and quality of the reach of their services to include millions of web users who use the Internet directly and many millions others who use the web indirectly, then only we should claim to be information and knowledge managers. The first law of library science 'Books are for use' as 'Libraries serve humanity' becomes even more relevant for managing knowledge and information in the multilingual global electronic village.

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