
INFORMATION USERS NEEDS EXPECTATIONS & SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

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It has often been complained that documentalists had for a long time neglected one of the most important component of an information system, namely, the user. They were more concerned with the documents and their bibliographical organisation and control. It is true this organisation was ultimately meant to satisfy the information need of user. But very little was known about the exact nature of this need. How exactly the user behaved when he was looking for some information, what type of document was used in which situation, how the information was used when obtained, all these were not very clearly known to the documentalists. Gradually, the users came to be observed like 'bright dolphins' from a distance without being asked anything about their information behaviour. It is only in recent years that systematic studies of the user community and the information behaviour of various groups within it have started.

A few conferences were held to focus on documentalists' concern and interest in user communities. One of the most important studies entitled "Pilot study on the use of scientific literature by scientists" was conducted by Ralph R Shaw. This study and a few others brought an element of pessimism into such studies. They were compared with public opinion polls conducted for the improvement of consumer services and it was held that in library and information services, which were essentially technical services, there was hardly any scope for such surveys. It was also held, in some quarters, that the user of information would at best know what he wanted from an information system, he would hardly be in a position to say what he needed from it. In other words wants and needs are not same. Thus, who could tell us the usefulness of computer produced KWIC index and its variations or the Science Citation Index before they were produced and available for use? However, in spite of

the above dissenting tone from some experts there does not appear to be any dampening of enthusiasm nor any abatement in the number of users' surveys.

User's studies and surveys that have been carried out so far are of various types. Surveys which are conducted to find out the pattern of overall interaction of the user's community with the communication system, without reference to any specific information-receiving event, are called communication behaviour studies. In the second category are placed surveys which are conducted to find out the use of any communication medium, such as a primary periodical, a secondary periodical etc. and are called use studies. The third category includes surveys which are conducted to find out the pattern of flow of information in the communication system. They are studies in the flow of information. Many studies based on all 3 types were done. But perhaps some of the most valuable deductions which have arisen from these user studies have been about the nature of information need itself. It has now been realised that information need is a composite concept of different types of requirements and approaches to information. A remarkable analysis of this composite nature was made by Melvin Voigt. His study revealed that the same person could interact with the information system in different ways at different times depending upon his purpose in relation to his work, stage of his work, general interest, amount of information already available to him and so on. Melvin Voigt clearly identified three types of information requirements. Later on a fourth type was added by other workers in the field. Now, it is generally accepted that there are four different types of information requirements or approach. They are :

Current Approach : Every active worker has to keep himself abreast of current developments, upto a fair degree, not only in his specific field of work but also in the broader field or fields of interest or areas, whose developments can substantially change the course of his present work. Here, the worker interacts with the information system in a very general way-browsing through his favourite periodicals, going through the abstract journals etc. but all these without keeping in view any specific search for information. This type of approach is called current approach.

Everyday Approach : The second approach stems from the research worker's frequent need, in the course of his investigation, for specific piece of information, such as, data e.g., boiling point of a substance, a method, a formula, etc. The nature of information sought in such a

situation is very specific and a quick answer is usually expected. Librarians are used to calling more or less a similar approach as 'short range reference' queries. Because of its frequency of occurrence, as compared to other approaches, this is called everyday approach.

Exhaustive Approach : The third approach, for which dependence on documents is very much necessary and hence had attracted the attention of documentalists quite early, is for all or almost all relevant literature on a subject. This is why it is called exhaustive approach. When a worker or a team of workers want to take up a new area of investigation or have come to the stage of reporting the results of an investigation, such an approach to information is necessary. It can be easily realised that such approach would be occasional only.

Catching-up Approach : Next comes the catching-up approach which is still more occasional. A worker may at times need to have a brief but a complete picture of the recent developments of a related subject or a subject in which he was not very much interested or which did not come within the area of his main interest. This is likely to be an area in which he is not an expert. As a result of this he is not quite current with the subject. Hence, in such a situation, he expects to have in the communication system a device which will help him in quickly catching-up with the subject.

Let us see these requirements of a user are being met by any of the major services which the library offers to the user community. What then are the services a library offers? Document delivery and information retrieval activities, using these terms in the broadest possible sense, are the major services provided by libraries. Many "special" services offered by libraries are merely forms of document delivery or information retrieval (e.g., document delivery services to particular categories of users, such as the blind, the socially disadvantaged, or the hospitalized) or public relations/promotional services designed to encourage use of the basic services of document delivery and information retrieval. Some of the services offered by libraries are performed only when a user expresses a need. They are "on demand" services. An obvious example is question answering. A library does not normally answer a question until it has been asked. Other services, however, are unsolicited. Unsolicited services are mostly notification services-telling people things whether they specifically ask or not. All current awareness services, in a sense, can be regarded as unsolicited. A list of new books on gardening, distributed to local gardening clubs, is an unsolicited service that may be provided by a

public library. But does a user really get all these services? Especially in the Indian scenario it can only be a far away dream, whose chances of it being a reality are remote.

In addition to these services, the library has the objective of making the universe of information resources as accessible as possible to the user community. On the other hand, its objective is also to expose the user community to those information resources of greatest relevance and utility. These two objectives are not incompatible; they are two sides of the same coin. When a user needs a particular document, or documents of a certain type, or information on a selected topic, the role of the library is to make this material/information available to the user, whether from its own resources or from external sources. The role of the library is to inform users of potentially relevant information without waiting for those users to levy demand on its resources.

Providing accessibility and providing exposure are interfacing activities since both bring users and resources together. This is where the user expects the librarians to inform and make accessible information necessary to them. In an ideal situation, the materials most likely to be needed should be made most accessible (physically, intellectually, and psychologically) to the library users. The most accessible resources should be purchased by the library and placed on open shelves. Slightly less accessible resources should be stored in closed-access bookstacks. Less accessible still resources owned by the library should be stored in some off-site storage location. Finally, all resources not owned by the library too should represent a further level of accessibility. They too should be accessible to library users (through photography, interlibrary loan, and referral activities), although may not be as conveniently or rapidly as the resources owned by the library.

Interestingly enough, the further we move into the electronic age, the less important becomes the distinction between what is owned and what is not owned. On the one hand, procedures for referral to external information resources and for acquiring documents not owned have become much more efficient through the use of resource directories and union lists, improved photocopying procedures, and on-line networks as means of identifying who has what and of requesting the supply of documents or information. On the other hand, computer terminals give a library ready access to information resources not located on-site. If an information resource is readily accessible to library users through the medium of on-line technology, it matters little whether it is owned by the

library or not. However, the user should be in a position to make use whether it is owned or not by the library. In this electronic age it is important that the library users know how to search for information.

It is here that user education plays a vital role in minimizing certain problems. User education in recent years has become the subject of a great deal of activity and concern. In India, the user education is beginning to receive more attention. Indian National Scientific Documentation Centre (INSDOC). Documentation Research and Training Centre (DRTC) and Indian Association of Special Libraries and Information Centres (IASLIC) have organised some activities in this area through seminars and workshops.

Library Orientation Programme : The problem of inefficient use of libraries led to the introduction of reference service in academic libraries. As a result of the development of reference service in libraries, assisting the users who requested for help, became the traditional function of reference librarian. However, the medium of answering the same questions or similar types of questions again and again might have led to the development of orientation programmes. An orientation programme aims at acquainting the freshman with some of the basics concerning the library use. It introduces the user to the general techniques of library use and services. In Ranganathan's terminology, it is called the initiation of the freshman.

Bibliographic Instruction : Instruction in the use of bibliographic sources has been considered important enough to the extent that separate courses in bibliographic instruction have been developed in academic libraries in the United States and elsewhere. According to Stevenson, bibliographic instruction is introduction to the user of the information resources available in particular subject-disciplines and the techniques of making use of those resources. Lewis and Foster consider it as education in the systematic use of information sources. Bibliographic instruction is meant to help users take maximum advantage of library resources to meet their information needs.

User Awareness : Library awareness and bibliographic instruction are two important inter-related components of the user education. However, need has been felt for user awareness, as an initial step in user education preceding library orientation. It aims to increase user awareness of the library as a primary source of information and as an agency to which users may turn for assistance with their information needs. It is achieved through publicising the library, with special reference to its re-

sources and services available to the community.

Interest Profiling : The three components of user education, viz., the library orientation, the bibliographic instruction and the user awareness are not able to take adequate care of the needs of research workers. Interest profiling provides the answer. This consists of creating profiles of the users, who are to be provided bibliographic instruction. A profile consists of key words that collectively characterise the subject interests of an individual or group.

In addition to these four components the user should be educated in the use and application of computer technology in libraries. It is a well-known fact that computer facilities increase the opportunities for library cooperation and networking. The use of computers and telecommunications to allow libraries to have access to outside data bases is a much more important and far-reaching application because it not only increases a library's capabilities for literature searching and question answering, but completely changes the economics of access to information. A single on-line terminal can provide entry to several hundred data bases and data banks, rich in numerical and other types of data. New data bases and data banks appear almost daily. This development has not been limited to North America. Western Europe is close behind, and on-line searching is now penetrating rapidly within Central and South America and other parts of the globe. India too has joined this race in recent times.

The whole technology comes to nought if the system is not user friendly. But what is user friendly? User friendly suggests an entity that is warm and comforting to the one who uses it. User friendly is not merely the addition of high tech hardware such as a mouse, icons, or three-dimensional graphics. Meads states three requirements for user friendliness. The first is that the system is cooperative-it provides active assistance during the task and makes its actions clear and obvious. Second, the user friendly system is preventive - it acknowledges that people make mistakes by preventing those mistakes to the extent possible and by providing backout and recovery procedures. Third, the friendly system is conductive - it is reliable, predictable, and assists rather than controls the user.

The term user friendly has become a buzzword. Everyone would probably agree that on-line library systems should be approachable. However, despite efforts to make system use easier, many first-time users still feel intimidated. The major cause of user fear may be the everyday jargon used by those persons who are the corporate keepers of the Holy

Grail - i.e., automated library systems. Often the words used in discussing on-line systems are overly expressive and needlessly violent in tone. Even the term user fits this situation because it sounds drug related rather than library related. The key is to simplify dialogue and use everyday terminology instead of jargon. It is just as easy to say "program error" as to say "bug". "Running" a program sounds better than "executing" it. The online catalog should assist experienced and inexperienced users by revealing its inner working organization. A person should be able to use an online catalog without knowing its structure and without regard to age, education, experience, or sex. Minimal instruction should be required. User friendliness is based on positive interaction between the computer and the terminal user. Human conversation provides the best model for this human-computer communication. Stewart, in his article, "Communicating with Dialogues", reminds us that : "A dialogue is by definition a two-way process which involves the sharing of knowledge by the exchange of information.

This exchange of information is what strengthens the bond of the library and the user as the relation which they share is lifelong especially in an academic institution where half the life of the user is spent between the books or should we say between the terminals? As pretty soon we are expecting an era of bookless libraries where everything in 'on-line' networks linked to the entire universe sitting in front of a terminal.

In this changing scenario, it is imperative that India too should not lag far behind. In identifying the user's needs and trying to satisfy the expectations of these users, lie the future of the libraries, where till today, the services offered are quite poor although technologically we may try to put our best foot forward, that too not in its entirety.