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Re-engineering Public Library services

Thought
Leadership



Abstract

Public libraries have a social mission which involves in providing collections and services to meet a community's information needs. They exist to serve communities. It is the local gateway to knowledge and provides a basic condition for life long learning, independent decision making and cultural development of the individual and social groups. But tremendous changes in the Information and Communication Technology and changing life style have greatly influenced the information seeking behavior of the library users. Library services based on the conventional service model lack the new information services and there exist a large gap between user needs and actual library service. The public library services should be re-engineered to meet the changing atmosphere. Library leaders must have the skills to create and nurture a new type of library culture in which change is encouraged and new visions of service implemented. A new focus on the needs of non traditional library users has also become necessary to attract the community.

Introduction

Traditionally, Public Libraries have a social mission that they have to undertake in the public interest. This mission is educational in nature and is best measured in terms of quality rather than quantity. It involves providing collections and services to meet a community's information needs. This service is provided because it benefits the community, even though the results may be long term, hard to measure and difficult to fit into standard cost/benefit analysis. So libraries exist to serve communities. It is the community that establishes the library, it is the community that funds it and it is the community that derives benefit from it. According to the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto. "Public Library is the local gateway to knowledge and

provides a basic condition for life long learning, independent decision making and cultural development of the individual and social groups".

(UNESCO 2004) Public Libraries are people oriented institutions which should service the widest population possible. Thus Public Libraries as public institutions have a historical social mission. But the tremendous changes in the communication and information technology have blurred that mission. These changes in the technology have also greatly influenced the individuals and their information seeking behaviour. Today's rapid social development and advances in information communication technology have caused diverse changes to our lives and values. It is assumed that this in turn has been affecting people's use of public libraries. Radical changes are needed in the

various services offered by public libraries in order to meet this changing atmosphere.

Public Library situation in India

The Public Library scenario is not uniform in India. It is very difficult to collect authorized statistics on Public Libraries in the country as they are under the responsibility of a variety of agencies who, for various reasons, never disclose such information on a national scale. According to the Constitution of India, public library development is a state responsibility. Therefore all states are vested with the mandate to set up libraries at different levels within each state. But out of 28 states and 6 union territories only 15 states have so far passed library legislation enabling their respective state governments to provide a public library system.

It is estimated that there are more than 60,000 public libraries scattered over the country out of which nearly 70% are merely reading rooms situated in rural areas.

As a response to their variability in the level of development in the states, the Dept. of Culture, Govt. of India has set up Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF) to act as a nodal agency for the development of public libraries in India and has also been

given the responsibility for resource mobilization/distribution of funds for modernisation, the development of infrastructure and training of personnel in these libraries. Although a considerable amount is being distributed for the modernization of the public libraries in our country, most of the libraries still remain in an abject state. Majority of the public libraries are in the rural areas which do not have their own buildings. Many of the libraries are housed in thatched huts or they have to share the premises of other institutions. Storage facilities are minimum and the stock of reading materials very poor. It is estimated that there are more than 60,000 public libraries scattered over the country out of which nearly 70% are merely reading rooms situated in rural areas. There are 28 State Central Libraries situated in different cities which are funded by RRRLF. In addition, during the last 32 years out of the 60,000 public libraries, the Foundation has helped more than 31,000 libraries at different levels. **(Bhattacharjee 2002)**

Though there are a number of constraints faced by Public Library system in India for effective dissemination of information, they are providing traditional library services with utmost care and trying to serve the community in the changing atmosphere also. A number of public libraries especially in the urban sector have adopted Information Communication

Technology (ICT), thanks to the help received from RRRLF. But despite these advances, majority of the population are still denied the benefits of these services.

Real role of Public Libraries

Public Libraries have a social mission and are devoted to the development of the community. It has been providing information for education, leisure and entertainment for decades and will continue this function for many more years. Users are able to read and borrow anything available in the system. The library is seen as a safe place for people to meet or simply browse through rows of books. **(Hendrix, Francis)** Whatever may be the changes that are taking place, Public libraries cannot step back from their established roles i.e. culture, education, reading, literacy, and information. Public libraries have enduring relevance because of

- The library is the centre of cultural life
- Library services support both adults and children's educational needs
- The library supports the development of children's reading skills.
- The library is a suitable place for adult literacy classes.
- The library remains important as a source of free reading materials,

especially for economically poor people.

- The library is a place where people meet and share interests.
- The library service supports community groups and activities.

(Linley, Rebecca and Usherwood, Bob)

Every community member gets an opportunity to enjoy what the library has to offer. Rural libraries serve people in close proximity. Free access is crucial in maintaining the reading habit of the community member. They cannot buy books for leisure reading due to self budget limitations. The reading would be limited if they are forced to buy books. So public libraries should continue to offer free access to library resources and services for many more years.

Managing change is a way of life and it is essential for survival in society. It is difficult to survive if you do not negotiate with the changes in life style, thought processes and practices.

Changing life style of community members and influence of Internet

Major constraints faced by Public Libraries in providing effective services can be summarized as follows in the Indian context.

- Poor resource allocation for infrastructure development and collection development.
- Lack of sufficient sanctioned posts forcing most services to be operated by voluntary non professional staff which damages information organization and services.
- Educational Professionals preferring to work in Special and Academic Libraries than Public Libraries.
- Changing life style of community members.
- Little emphasis on the adoption of Information and Communication Technology for Public Library system and services.

There is no longer a need to depend on a library to satisfy a person's information need but he can satisfy himself to a great extent by depending on the Internet and information sources available on the net.

Leaving the first three, the last two problems are highlighted here.

Managing change is a way of life and it is essential for survival in society. It is difficult to survive if you do not negotiate with the changes in life style, thought processes and practices. Changes in society and technology have its own effect in our life style. Globalisation and economic liberalization changed the life style of our society. Competitive labour

market and intensive work environment compress people's time for reading, learning, relaxation and community gathering. Television, Telephone, Cable TV and Internet have revolutionized our life style. Technology opened up new avenues for making life better. Almost every household has a TV which may be further supported by cable TV connections. A number of channels which are available provide entertainment/relaxation. People find more time to sit in front of the TV than visit a library for leisure reading or for group meeting. Telephones/mobile phones provide opportunity to contact another person at anytime whether it is day or night. You can send SMS to any one person or group of persons using your mobile phone to provide any information. "Television has done wonders to rural India. People may not be literate in the true sense but they know what is happening around the world because of television. And they are aware of how rest of the country live" (Rajan, RV). Competitive labour market force student community to strictly follow their studies according to the syllabus prescribed and do not allow them to have leisure reading. They are more centred to their prescribed text books/guides which help them to score high marks in entrance examinations. Even if they want to go for extra reading, their parents do not allow them to do so

and compel them to stick to their academic calendar.

Access to Internet and World Wide Web has completely changed the information seeking behaviour of library users.

People access Internet through home connections and cyber cafes. Since Internet connection is now affordable, people approach it as one stop shop for communication, information seeking and entertainment. Internet offers various information seeking tools which are designed to explore various types of information formats and user friendly interface. Search engines make information seeker's job easier than before and a visit to the library to find an old magazine article or newspaper is becoming an old story. People with hectic schedules would not be ready to spare their time to search a dusty paper from the heaps to collect a piece of information. International and regional newspapers have already announced their presence in World Wide Web and they have archived their yester year collection on-line for the convenience of users and extend search facility to dig news. Periodicals also archive their old issues in their web site and allow metadata search through aggregators (eg. Magportal) and databases.

On-line publication processes are also now easy, fast and economical and have a high chance to get popularity. Scholars, information professionals,

educators and subject experts turn to Internet for sharing their knowledge and expertise. Growing number of learners hopefully consult Internet for study materials, reading lists, course syllabus and for completing their assignments/thesis. Many voluntary initiatives are formed by information professionals and subject experts to provide free and quality information services. Google scholar, Intute, Internet Public Library, Infomine and Librarians Internet Index are some popular initiatives providing free on-line services for education and research.

Library in its architecture and design can be a symbol of the values and vision about what the community is all about.

Open access journals, Institutional Repositories, Open Courseware etc. are making new trends in the distribution of free scholarly literature and learning resources. Many Universities make available their educational videos on video sharing devices. e-Gyankosh is an initiative of Indira Gandhi National Open University to share digital learning materials to the public. They distribute videos of lectures using YouTube Video Sharing Service. Thus one need not essentially depend on a library to satisfy his information need but can satisfy himself to a great extent by depending on the Internet and information sources available on the net.

Need for re-engineering Public Library services

Library leaders must have the skills to create and nurture a new type of library culture in which change is encouraged and new visions of service can be implemented (**Kent, Susan**). According to Susan Kent library leadership issues mainly revolve around three factors: architecture, technology and planning.

New age Public Library building should be designed to focus on the needs of new generation of non traditional library users. Library should be a meeting place for community groups. It should offer comfortable space for leisure activity and social interaction of individual and group use. Library in its architecture and design can be a symbol of the values and vision about what the community is all about. (**Bliss, Catherine**) Creating a virtual presence in web and delivering services through on-line is a cost effective model.

Public libraries have to explore its potential to involve in the community economic development.

Delivering critical information through on-line is sometimes extremely helpful for patrons, for example providing availability of blood donors and information about doctors in a particular area through public library website will be very useful.

Communication services on Internet are now more accessible for public use. Blogs, Wikis, Pod Casting, RSS feeds, email, instant messaging and SMS are powerful communication tools available through Internet. These services have the capability of changing the nature and delivery of library services. SMS, E-mail and chat services are already popular among public libraries to deliver reminder, notification and reference service. Sending SMS via on-line is comparatively cheap (eg. Skype) or free (e.g. SMS Gupshup). And public Libraries should be aware of how to make use the advantage of these new age communication services to keep connected to the community. In terms of media preference, choose low cost technology to keep in touch with users. Keeping track with the technology changes and adopting the best services to support library services should be a tactic for handling technology. 'Google Librarian Central' is a free service for information professionals which instructs how to best use their services in libraries. ALA Tech source and OCLC Librarian's Toolbox are other services which help librarians to get in touch with emerging technologies useful in libraries.

Library user's life style is changing day by day and information professionals should be fully aware of it. Continued user surveys are necessary to know the user needs. Constant research is

necessary to buy appropriate reading material of both digital and traditional formats. Text version of Ramayana may not be of appeal to a public library having substantial number of children. Decision to buy illustrated and animated Ramayana can amuse the child users.

Public libraries have to explore its potential to involve in the community economic development. Help local business to make use the information sources and services available in the library. Libraries can introduce the local business people into opportunities of market that are available in national or international locations using Internet without any extra investment. Local business people may not be aware of how to advertise their product and name into on-line business directories (e.g. Google Local, Yahoo Local). Libraries should help them to sell their products

through on-line shopping portals (e.g. e-Bay) Innovations in library services are likely to attract a more diverse range of people, broadening the scope of library users.

Conclusion

Due to advancement of information technology, many of the library users satisfy their information needs at home/cyber cafe through Internet. Library services based on the conventional service model lack the new information services and there exist a large gap between user needs and the actual library services. The library should avoid such situations and should re-engineer their library services to meet the challenging needs that have arisen due to the tremendous changes that are taking place in Information and Communication Technology sector.

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Network Links

