

COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICE THROUGH PUBLIC LIBRARIES: PRESENT SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT

Information is the basic need of life of all human beings, which helps in the proper fulfillment of other needs such as food, shelter etc. for its survival and growth. Hence it can be rightly said that without information, survival and development of any community is not possible. Therefore it is the basic responsibility of any welfare government to provide information services to communities. And it is information transfer and information revolution through which cultural change; socio-economic development of a nation is possible. In this context, Public libraries, being the library of communities can play important role in providing effective Community Information Services(CIS). These are the only institutions entrusted with the duties of providing right information to right users at right time, there by help people to deal with daily problem solving or in improving the quality of their lives. This paper will discuss about the present scenario of Community Information Services that can be provided by the public libraries in addressing such challenges.

KEY WORDS: Community Information Service(CIS), public library, information, society.

INTRODUCTION

Information is a basic resource for the development of a country. It facilitates social, political and economic progress of a country. In India, the important task of providing Community Information Service (CIS) is performed by many governmental, non-governmental voluntary organizations in their own way. There is no single agency to collect, reorganize and disseminate community information in a suitable form as per the requirement of different communities.

COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICE(CIS) : THE IDEA

Community Information (CI) is the combination of two terms i.e. Community and Information. The term “Information” is used to identify many concepts; hence it is extremely difficult to define it precisely. Normally, information is a message, communicated by a communicator to a receiver. It is the product of human action in mind, which may be abstract or concrete. Therefore it is the raw material that is used in knowing, making decisions, taking actions, thinking and learning.

Community Information is considered as problem-solving information which helps the people to take right decision at the right time. Community Information Services were defined by a group appointed by the Library Association (1980) as services which assist individuals and groups with daily problem-solving and with participation in the democratic process. The services concentrate on the needs of those who do not have ready access to other sources of assistance and on the most important problems that people have to face, problems to do with their homes, their jobs, and their rights. Community information is the information which is necessary for everyday life. We can otherwise simply define CIS as the process of collecting, organizing, storing and disseminating the community information such as health, housing, education, economy, employment, government welfare schemes, transportation, recreation etc.

Community is a body of people in the same locality or a body of people leading a common life or a group of people having common rights or a group of people having a common possession or enjoyment. Giggey defines community as “a group of people who have something common. This can be their age, education, religion, interest, political affiliation, activities, work, possession or a combination of two or more of these.” Similarly Usherwood defines community in a comprehensive way that “any geographical community or neighborhood will be made up of a number of communities definable by race, social class, or income group, employment, leisure interest, religion and so on, each with its own informal information network that has grown up without the help

of librarians or any other information advice workers.” Thus community in general indicates towards a group of people having common interests. However, neither they can be assumed nor they can be created to legitimate a political programme or to support a plan for action. In the context of librarianship, it is a group of people with shared meaning and shared communication.

Community Information (CI) is the information for the survival and growth of the community or it is that information which is required by the member of the community to make effective use of the available resources around them. In this context Kempson has rightly defined CI as “information of self-reliance and self-determination”. Thus CI is that information which helps to solve their day to day problems related to survival such as health, education, housing, legal protection, sound economic development, political rights etc and also to participate in social, political, cultural, legal and economic progress of the society either individually or collectively.

Therefore, the information services through which community information (CI) is provided to communities is called Community Information Service (CIS).

NECESSITY OF CIS

Information explosion and the rapid growth in the field of Information and Community Information Technology have made tremendous changes in the life of human beings. Despite the fact that these developments have made many positive impacts on the society, they also created some undesirable impacts on the society, mainly the gap between the information haves and information have nots or otherwise called information rich and information poor. The information poor are the victims of insufficient resources, updated information, lack of basic training in retrieving the information. In this context, there is high need for community information service to help these people.

Lack of access to information i.e. both public and private information is one of the major drawbacks for community development. Access to information leads to deprivation from a certain standard of life. In addition, lack of access to governmental information leads to low participation in governmental processes, which hampers the developmental process of a community and nation.

Society and social system must change with time. Lack of CIS affects this changing process and creates social imbalance. In this context Bundy has rightly described that “Access to information does not in itself give people power over their lives but lack of access to information can render a person powerless in the sense of being unable to exercise intelligent life options”. Therefore CIS is very much needed to make the people of a community informed about the changes around themselves and to improve their standard of living in all respect.

In the present information age, information is considered to be a resource, a product and thereby a need. Hence, the problem of developing countries is not merely economic poverty but also information poverty, which should be met on a priority basis. Such kind of productive, survival and developmental information is called Community Information (CI) which is crucial for socioeconomic development of a community.

Process in providing Community Information Service

- ❖ Collection - Collecting all aspects of community information from the reliable sources.
- ❖ Organization – Organizing the collected information using standard formats.
- ❖ Storage – Storing of information online or offline for future use.
- ❖ Dissemination – Disseminating the information to the people through public libraries.
- ❖ Updation –Community information should be updated frequently.

Mode of providing Community Information Services

The CIS, in public libraries can be provided in both offline and online modes.

Offline Mode of CIS

The public library authorities should prepare a Community Information Handbook in English as well as local languages. The CIS Handbook should be updated regularly at least once in a year. The printed form of CIS Hand book can be made available in all public libraries.

Online Mode of CIS

An online Community Information Services database should be developed by the public library authorities and the portal should be updated regularly and made accessible in the public domain through internet.

COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICE(CIS) THROUGH PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The systems for Community Information Services through libraries or other agencies are only understandable by literate community. In India, Community Information Services (CIS) is still in its planning stage. Community Information Services through 'CLIC (Community Library and Information Centre)' projects are established in West Bengal but now it is in its infant stage. Like USA, UK, various types of libraries should be equipped with effective CIS facilities; Communities Advice Bureaux, Rural Community Councils should be established. Public libraries must plan their development in the light of existing local provision. For best effect, close co-operation with Communities Advice Bureaux (CABx) and Rural Community Councils is essential. One way of achieving the necessary cooperation is by working with local liaison committees where they exist and possibly by initiating them where they do not. Such committees are not common, however, and it is usually necessary to make separate approaches to the different types of agency.

Public libraries are most suitable to provide the information services for the rural illiterate/nee-literate communities (like Santa! community). Public libraries should offer a direct community information and advice service to the public because a significant part of any such service involves referring clients to other agencies/offices like Village Panchayat, Block Development Office, Agriculture Development Office, Animal Resources Development Office, B.L.& L.R.O (Block Land & Land Reform Office) Office, Court/Judiciary etc., and successful referral is only possible when there is a clear understanding of their work. In some cases the direct service may be in conjunction with other agencies/offices, either by making premises available or by actually working together to provide the service. In rural areas, for example, there is considerable scope for librarians to become involved in village contact schemes.

In many cases it will not be appropriate for the library to set up its own direct service. There is still much can be done. However, librarians can make a significant contribution by making their professional skills available to local agencies. In some areas librarians should assist with the production of self-help information packs on particular topics. In other areas librarians will work with advice agencies to produce local directories and to share local information. Other libraries will produce information bulletins and information packages intended for use by local agencies.

CIS may have its origin in west but in India also dissemination of community information through CIS has been taking place since times immemorial. In ancient India, the CIS could be traced back to the inception of dandora, clay tablets, palm leaves and edicts of Ashoka. For instance, during royal administration, information about the local events, taxation, penal sanctions, royal policies, public policies etc were used to reach the people through the medium of dandora and these works were carried out by an officially engaged team who would beat the drums and attract the attention of the public and then announce the message loudly. This was also a popular medium of communication of information in rural India at that time. Similarly, during Ashoka Empire, the edicts of Ashoka were clearly illustrated to disseminate it to public. Later on, these information and messages were recorded on various types of inscriptions. But all these services were made informally. In independence India, CIS started somewhat in a formal way since the inception of Gram Panchayat. In rural India, these Gramasabhas were serving as the community information center by summing up the local and other events and planning of various social, cultural and political activities.

Professional Assistance to Community Groups One area in which small voluntary organisations - advice centres, self-help groups for the disabled, single parents, elderly etc- find a great deal of difficulty is that of collecting, up-dating and organizing of the information they require for their work. Librarians trained and experienced in these areas can provide real practical assistance to such groups.

Public libraries that are entrusted with the basic duty of preserving the recorded knowledge of past and present for future use are also responsible for providing required information to the surrounding communities. Besides, in changing situation of society, public libraries are facing new challenges. On one hand there is tremendous pressure due to information explosion, development of new information technologies etc for acquiring latest information on all fields of knowledge, on the other hand there is an increasing demand for pinpointed exhaustive and accurate information in quickest possible time. Thus in the changing library environment, public libraries have no way other than to shift towards information based community oriented libraries rather than repository centers of books and other documents. Failing which, the existence of these libraries will reduced to the status of a store house of books and other printed documents.

With the advent and advances of communication and information technologies(ICT), the mass media and print media have undertaken the responsibility of performing CIS in their own way but with a wider coverage.

From the early time, public libraries are performing the duties of reference service, both anticipatory and responsive. Simply these services are to be restructured to provide CIS. Basically CIS has two common aspects i.e. general community information services (GCIS) which is anticipatory in nature and specific community information services(SCIS), which is responsive in nature basing upon the information need of the community. GCIS provides information common to all and help people to solve their day-to-day

problems. For instance information on health, education, transport, employment, consumer problems, entertainment, housing, banking system, governmental agencies, legal information etc should be included under general CIS, which will help to increase the quality of lives. SCIS is concerned with specific target groups, such as those belonging to the lower socio-economic groups, the disadvantaged, or person with information on a specific problem. For instance a person want information on a specific problem of agriculture, or on animal husbandry or on establishment of a small scale industry or utilization of available local resources, or on a particular governmental / non-governmental agency and its activities etc. This service can be performed by various methods such as counseling, referral, practical help, advice, advocacy, community education, self-help, escort, liasioning with different governmental and non-governmental agencies / experts etc. This service will improvements in their lives.

THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

Libraries are organized collection of monographs, periodicals and other sources of recorded information. They commonly include catalogues, directories that provide factual information and indexes which help users to find information in other sources for the last few years, libraries started providing access to information in electronic formats such as CD-ROMs, World Wide Web and online databases.

The traditional role of libraries has always been as an intermediary between the information producer (and publisher) and the user. For the information producers, libraries acted as a clearing house of products. Information producers would normally provide the library with their products, thus reducing administrative problems and costs of providing the products directly to users. For the user, libraries are efficient instruments to make available making of limited set of relevant information source out of the entire universe of publications. Libraries act as selective filter and quality instruments, making available to users only those publications that are relevant and sufficient to end-users. Since publications are acquired though library funds, information is usually made available to end users either free of charge or at a minimum cost.

Today, there has been a shift in the role of libraries, from the clearing house of products and a service center for printed publications towards becoming an intermediary for traditional materials and for networked service based on digital information resources. Information resources come in various format- printed, audio, video multimedia and electronic. These resources may or may not be owned by the library. Some of these resources may be free and available to users directly, others are available only through libraries that have acquired them.

Libraries are expected to “add value” to the products and services. Adding value to information is part of the core and expertise of libraries. Value is added to information by facilitating access through indexing and bibliographic description, and through the creation of systems, which make information more logically organized and easier to find. Libraries themselves add value to the collection (both traditional and networked) by helping users navigate the universe of information through content development, instructions, search services, and reference assistance.

Information services Generally speaking library user services can be divided into two categories: library public user services and library technical user services. Library public user services refer to circulation, bibliographic instructions, distance learning, government documentation, reference and special collection. Library information user services focuses on procedures and operations of maintaining, developing and supporting library collection and services behind the scene such as acquisition, cataloguing, classification, inter library loan, document delivery and serial systems.

In the 1990s, the Internet became the primary platform for libraries to build and deliver information resources, services and instructions. Lately library user information services, also called library user public service became evolving into two sections: traditional library user information services and electronic library user information services.

Electronic library user services include the Internet and the worldwide web, computerized library catalogs, digital libraries, distance learning services, e-databases, government, instant message services, interlibrary loan and virtual references.

Technology trends change in library services

Since the 1980 each new step in library automation has changed library services. In hindsight we can see a number of trends, among them: access from multiple locations, making more resources available; making information available in raw forms and diminishment in the role of intermediaries. All these trends have been enabled by technological developments in the area of networking, file storage, and more graphic user interface) they have also been enabled by agreements on standards and protocols (such as Z39.50) that permit the linking together of resources from disparate sources.

The key challenging areas for libraries in online age

A number of societal trends have the potential to severely affect libraries, particularly as these move into the online information delivery environment. Key elements among these trends is the movement from flat fee pay to pay – per – use model, best – seller phenomenon, the consolidation of electronic information distributors, erosion of provably, and issues of access and cultural diversity.

Flat fee Vs pay – per – use: The movement towards pay – per – use model is likely to severely affect user habits, particularly as this begins to penetrate web based delivery systems. Pay –per- use models tends to discourage exploration and encourage viewers /readers to examine items that others have already deemed popular (favoring best sellers over more esoteric works). Libraries 1980s experience with pay per – use online indexing and abstracting services led by many librarians to embrace newer flat– fee model that arose such as CD – ROMS.

Best seller phenomenon: Economies of scale make mass distributed information cheap and available, and can lead to an environment where smaller audience information is more expensive and harder to find (Basser 1995) over time this may well lead to the favoring of electronic delivery of entertainment over delivery of information (Besser 1994).

CONCLUSION

We are moving towards information and knowledge society. A full-fledged information society is not possible until we solve the moral problem of information poverty. The information poverty is not only a problem of inequality but also a problem of social injustice. Information poor do not have equal opportunities to access the necessary information. Providing Community Information Services in Public libraries can be an efficient method to fight against the information poverty. Public libraries should use the abundant opportunities before them to ensure equal access of information to all.

A public library, being the library of the community is intended to provide functions of an advice center and local information center for the whole community rather than only offering books and other reading materials to readers. There are many agencies alternative to public libraries to provide CIS such as Community Resource Centers, Community Information Centers, Community Libraries etc. But these alternative centers seem to be serving a particular community information need or a particular interest group. In fact, it can be said that the inherent problem lies in the services of traditional public libraries are responsible for the emergence of such centers.

Therefore, to keep pace with the social change, the library professionals have to consider the libraries social commitment. They should take its social responsibility seriously. Besides providing reading materials, they have to provide CISs, which should assist individual groups with daily problem solving and with participation in the democratic process. The services should be concentrated on the needs of those who do not have ready access to other sources of assistance and on the most important problems that people usually face, problems to do with their homes, their jobs and their rights. To perform such vital functions by the public libraries, this paper suggests the followings.

- Identification of community information needs through careful research.
- Collection of community information from all sources and in all forms. Therefore the established rule for obtaining and organizing these materials should be changed.
- The acquisition of these materials should be on the basis of local and translocal community need and should be accurate, extensive and up-to-date.
- The acquisition and organization of such materials should be a regular house keeping process.
- The organized materials should be available in shelves and in various machine-readable forms for its easy and quick retrieval.
- The pictures and posters should be pasted in a prominent place. There should be provisions for display of pamphlets. Moreover the community information must be organized and repackaged in a manner that will be best suited to the needs of community members.
- All public libraries in a state should be connected through a networking system to share their resources. Further the state network should have connectivity to different regional, national, and international library networking system.
- The public library should keep close link between other governmental and non-governmental agencies, experts of different fields to collect and share resources. This will help to solve specific problems of the individual or groups of the community.
- Each public library should prepare directories on different aspects such as health, education, transport, telephone etc and on different agencies, along with their activities and contact points of their locality to meet the general community information needs of the community.
- The relationship between library personnel and users should be increased through constant interaction. In this context it is highly suggested that each libraries should carry out proper human resource planning and development process.

Libraries are an integral part of the society that surrounds it. Librarians need to recognize the changes that have already taken place in libraries, and to be aware of the ways in which broader societal change are affecting Libraries. Many library functions are migrating to

other environments (and because libraries are affected by the society around them) Librarians must resist the type of changes that threatens basic principles such as equal access to information and fair use. And they need to be concerned about issues such as pay per – use, privacy cultural diversity and the consolidation of electronic content owners and distribution.

Therefore it is concluded that public library is the best organization to provide CIS than any other organization or agencies. However it is highly essential that once this programme is undertaken by library, the programme should be constantly reviewed and necessary changes and modification should be made to provide effective and efficient community information services (CIS).

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