Public Libraries as Community Information Centres: A futuristic approach

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Abstract - Information is considered as one of the basic needs of mankind in this information era. Therefore, it becomes an important duty of a state to facilitate its citizen for information access, easily and freely. Community Information is considered as problem-solving bustle which helps the people to take right decision at right time. It can be further described as 'survival information', which means information for everyone in a community for their day-today life. Having said the importance of information, public Libraries play a vital role in information dissemination to a wide range of user community at free of cost. This study attempts to explore various community information needs and to find out all the possible opportunities to provide Community Information Services (CIS) through public libraries. In this paper the authors explore the possibilities of providing community information services through public libraries in India.

Keywords: Community Information Services, Public Library, India, UNESCO

Introduction

The developments in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) during the past three decades have made tremendous changes in all walks of life, libraries have no exemption in this revolutionary changes, in fact, it could be mentioned that the libraries are more beneficiaries because information acquiring, preserving, maintaining and disseminating have became more easier, faster and accurate than the early periods. But still, it is vary from library itself, that is, the public libraries didn't get the fullest benefits, which ICT brought into, because of Government's meager attention on these libraries. No one can deny the fact that the public libraries are the poor recipient of so called ICT revolutions. Public libraries in the developing countries are still in a traditional mode of library services. They are concerned about providing daily newspapers with some periodicals.

The UNESCO's Public Library Manifesto defined the public library as a 'local centre of information, making all kinds of knowledge and information readily available to its users'[1].

Thus it is the need of the hour to make the public libraries as 'local centre of information'. The present condition of the public libraries can effectively change with providing various Community Information Services. Through CIS, the public libraries may transform from mere store house of books to the real information centres.

Community Information Service – definition

Community Information Services were defined by a group appointed by the British Library Association (1980)[2] 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 are necessary for everyday life. We can otherwise simply define CIS as the process of collecting, organizing, storing and disseminating the community information. According to Allen Bunch (1982)[3], who first attempted synthesization of CIS has the following two aspects;

- One is concerned with the nature of the information provided, that is, information in the community to help people with daily problem solving or in raising the quality of their lives;
- The other is concerned with the nature of the clientele served, namely those who belong to the lower socio-economic groups or are disadvantaged through an inability to obtain, understand, or act on information that affects their lives.

Purpose of the Study

- To study the concept of Community Information Service (CIS) and its application in public libraries
- To understand various community information services and identify community information needs
- o explore opportunities and challenges in providing CIS through Public Libraries
- o propose possible ways of providing CIS through public libraries

Scope of the Study

This paper intends to study opportunities for implementing Community Information Services in Public Libraries.   The scope of the study is limited for the public library system in India.

Review of Literature:

A. Anaba Alemna (1995) in his study[4] suggested setting up of separate community libraries as an alternative to public libraries, which are committed to provide community based information

only for rural development in Africa. Parthasarathi Mukhopadhyay (2006) made a study[5] to develop software web based community information services and proposed Greenstone Digital Library, an open source software to provide web based community information services. Sunil Kumar Satpathy (2006) has emphasized in his study[6] that public library is the best organization to provide CIS than any other organization or agencies. Md. Anwarul Islam and Muhammad Mezbah-ul-Islam (2006) have made brief study[7] on community information services and proposed that public library will be the right institution to provide community information services.

Methodology

The review of related literature was done to understand about the present studies conducted in India and throughout the world in Community Information Services. The information was collected from primary sources such as books and journals. Internet also used for current research updates about the concept.

Community Information - an overview

UNESCO Public Library Manifesto defines 'ensuring access for citizens to all sorts of community information' as one of the twelve missions of public libraries. Information is considered as a basic unit for all developmental activities in this information era. Provision of easy and quick access of information by all citizens will surely accelerate the pace of development of a community which results in the development of nation. Therefore an informed citizen is considered as an asset to a democratic system of government. It is a proven fact that proper utilization of information will improve the quality of life of citizen. Being a social institution, the public library tends to develop the lives of people through access to all sorts of information and entertainment available from books as well as from a variety of other resources. Community Information is information for everyday living, information about local community groups, organisations, services, programs, courses, facilities and events that are available within this community. This services aim at supplying the general public with current and accurate 'information for everyday living'.

Public Libraries – the best platform for providing Community Information Services

Public library is rightly praised as people's university. Serving as a local gateway to knowledge, the public library provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social goups.MalabikaDas[8] lists out seven basic roles of public libraries as knowledge archival, the preservation and maintenance of culture, knowledge dissemination, knowledge sharing, information retrieval, education, and social interaction. Manohar B. Lamani (2014)[9] stated that libraries do not grow in vacuum. They function within societies. The library functions should change with the changing social conditions. Public library is closely linked with the community and has the obligation to provide information needed by the community.

In this information age, one of the key functions of the public library should be Provision of up-to-date information necessary for all the sections of the community. Joseph C. Donhue(1972), one of the earliest creators of CIS, stated that the following two types of information should be provided by CISs:

- Survival information such as that related to health, housing, income, legal protection, economic opportunities, political rights, etc. (Information and Referral).
- Citizen action information, needed for effective participation as individual or as members of a group in the social, political, legal, and economic process (Public Policy Information)[10].

Community information may be described as 'survival information', which means the information which everyone in a community need for their day today life. The possible community information which can be given through public libraries are given in the Table1.
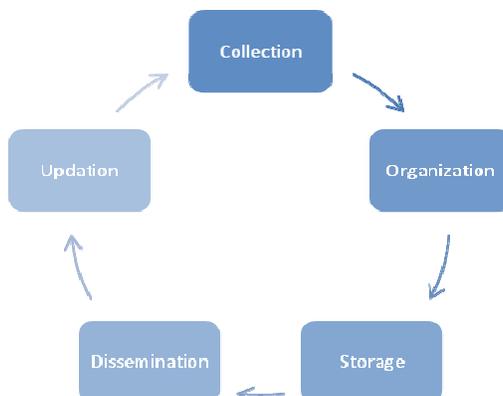
Agriculture	Education	Health	Senior Citizen
Animal husbandry	Employments	Legal Services	Social Services
Business	Emergency Services	Local Events	Recreation and Hobies
Consumer Affairs	Finance	Local History	Transport
Disability Programs	Government Schemes	Local News	Weather

Table 1 : Community Information Services List

Process in providing Community Information Service
Like all other information services, CIS also should be given in an organized way. The provision of CIS consists of five steps as mentioned below.

1. Collection - Collecting all aspects of community information from the reliable sources.
2. Organization - The collected information is organized for the easy dissemination
3. Storage – Storing the information in local or online servers for easy access
4. Dissemination – Disseminating the community information based on the queries
5. Updating - update should be a routine process

Mode of providing Community Information Services

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

Community Information Handbook (Offline mode)

The public library authorities must prepare a 'Community Information Handbook' containing all community information collected by the libraries. The handbook should be in English as well as local languages. To update the changes like address, phone number etc., the CIS Handbook should be updated regularly at least once in a year. This printed form of CIS Hand book can be made available in all public libraries.

Community Information Portal (Online Mode)

An online CIS portal should be developed by the public library authorities. For constructing CIS portal, the library professionals may consider Marc 21 formats for Community Information. This portal must be updated regularly and made freely accessible in the public domain through internet.

Suggestions

- Public libraries should conduct community surveys to find the information needs of the community and provide services accordingly.
- Public libraries should create close link with the government , non-government agencies and other sources of community information.
- Each public library should prepare directories on different community information like agriculture, animal husbandry, education, health etc.
- Public libraries should be facilitated with adequate ICT infrastructure to provide community information services.
- Community Information should be accessible in the local language of the people.
- In order to promote the usage of CIS in public libraries, orientation programs in accessing and using community information for the Public library users should be designed and conducted by the public libraries.

Conclusion

The changing developments in the field of information and communication technology and growing information needs of the users urge the Public Libraries to be more equipped with information resources and facilities. In this juncture, the public libraries should think beyond the traditional library services and come out to facilitate their users with information what they really want for their day today problem solving. Public libraries with the existing infrastructure and resources are capable of providing community information services to the public. The overall picture emerged from this study shows that Community Information Services in Indian Scenario is almost at the concept level. Therefore, to create an information society, it is the duty of the

welfare states to take initiatives to make CIS as mandatory services in all public libraries throughout the country.

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