

Role of Libraries in Bridging the Digital Divide

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I. INTRODUCTION

The traditional societies are fast realizing the relevance of knowledge in day-to-day life, and trying to get converted into knowledge-driven societies through the use of information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Knowledge-driven societies give rise to knowledge-driven economies. This being a global phenomenon, societies that have less access to knowledge are less privileged and the societies that have fast access to knowledge become privileged and advanced. Among the societies, individuals with poor access to knowledge remain underprivileged. Also, within countries, regions, either remote or tribal in population, people remain less developed owing to lack of knowledge and lack of skills in using digital resources.

There are several factors that inhibit people from using knowledge and that is why they become less advantaged. They remain poor, in all respects. Some of the factors that influence people to resist change include;

- a. Lack of literacy and lack of vision about how digital literacy could help them
- b. Being economically poor
- c. Lack of access to necessary and sufficient information
- d. Control of information by vested parties and individuals, who do not pass it on to those who it the most, etc.
- e. Lack of guidance, etc.

As a result, only information-rich people, societies, countries, industries, etc. grow and give rise to the digital divide.

II. ROLE OF LIBRARIES; THE GLOBAL OVERVIEW

Many countries use ICT to reduce the digital divide. In the United States the release of 2014 Digital Inclusion Survey National Report which incorporates two decades of research on Internet and public libraries concludes that public libraries serve as supporters of the communities and look after them with necessary information support for their economic, educational, and health issues.' As a result of this hand-holding between the public and public libraries the public expects more from public libraries. Thus public libraries become more relevant in such societies. In UK the British Council has initiated the 'Maker Library Network' which facilitates exchange of knowledge and skill in libraries. "A Maker Library combines three element of a make space, a library and a gallery. Three spaces are connected online and through a programmer of travel exchanges, exhibition and events. People use them to make things, show things, get inspired and connect with like-minded people. "In the US public libraries offer space and tools such as "3d printers, laser cutters, design software and components (circuit boards, sensors)" to the public to invent and learn to create products. In Canada, public libraries undertake information literacy programmes. Public libraries provide technology and information support to people. They also provide help in using online banking and Internet for their personal use. These and many other initiatives help to reduce the digital divide. We therefore feel that since technology is going to remain with us, the public libraries should adopt several means to bring people closer to technology and help them it. That will reduce the digital divide that exists today.

III. ROLE OF LIBRARIES: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Public and Rural Libraries

There is a flood of information growing on the Web. Most of the public libraries in India are not able to this type of content for various reasons. Public libraries can play a major role in offering quality content to the public. For instance in the United State, 65% of the American population maintain that libraries contribute to helping people decide what information they can trust. To achieve these objective concerted efforts need to be made by public libraries in India through surveys and other means to know which information or document a person living in its vicinity needs to have. Also, concerted efforts need to be made to have. Also, concerted efforts need to be made to know where good content is available on the chosen topics of interest to the public. Every person wants the information that he or she needs. Most of the public is unable to use the technology and are unaware of the fast that great content useful to them could become available through the use of ICT. If we give them content through the public libraries which is of no use to them, they as usual will turn their backs on the public libraries. In this era of information overload, the quality of information thus becomes very important. We need quality content for people in the regional languages. While we know that the demands of users vary from user to user, we also know that they vary from location to location, town to town or village to village. The content to be

delivered to them has to be on full- text digital form and presented in an integrated network system so that that content promotes learning, development and dialogues within the communities. Many forums will in turn get establish. Therefore the content of interest to the community at large, especially in the rural areas could initially fall within the following categories:

- i. Health and Welfare: Primate Information on health, sanitation, water, environment, etc.
- ii. Agriculture: Appropriate information on seeds. Herbs, crops seasons, etc.
- iii. Education: Language and literature, teaching, aids, general science, geographic information, general history, current affairs, etc.
- iv. General Information: Information on marketing of agricultural produce, government policies within the state and in other states, transportation, employment, development programmes, finance and credit, legal issues, etc.
- v. Small-scale information on establishing small-scale industries and units for making every individual and family financially self- sufficient.

Development of appropriate content one the issue listed above will be an important exercise. As people begin to depend more on digital resources substantial amount of information will be regular needed for use and consumption by people. Through India's public libraries system is divided by Stare Central Libraries, District Libraries, Village and Panchayat Libraries besides private public libraries, they do not contribute much to reducing the digital divide. Neither there are proper professionals in most of those libraries to manage these libraries nor are the necessary infrastructure and knowledge resources available in most of them to attract the public. While 60% of India's population lives in rural areas, there is Once this is achieved, there will be a great deal of transformation taking place in the rural sectors and the digital divide the exists today will be greatly reduced Also, while there are some examples of Interne access being given to the rural population I may give the example of Kallare Gram Panchayat Library launched at Triavandrum. Fourteen rural information centres, one in each district of kerala were offered free Internet access under the scheme. Many more with appropriate content to emerge on the rural scene.

Digital Libraries

Libraries have played meaningful roles in promoting literacy and in elevating the digital divide. But, each library has access to limited printed and digital resources. They could do well the help of library. A library network can support the use and development of digital libraries. Such a library in the ordinary course has access to networked digital resources and also maintains on its own information resources in the digital form, with proper technical infrastructure and appropriate manpower to handle such information resources. The library networks can have close coordination with digital libraries as they depend more on access to digital resources. In bridging the digital divide both the library networks and digital libraries can help other libraries by offering training, know-how and access to the latest information.

School Libraries

For bridging the digital divide school libraries could play a major role in the country. For young mind, school libraries should act as windows to the universe of knowledge and inculcate in them the desire to read and write. School libraries, therefore, need to be strengthened with select information and knowledge resources in formats that attract the young minds of school children and ignite their inherent creative sensibilities. If after school hours school libraries become available for public use, it would greatly help in bridging the digital divide. The students and the public are getting lost in the current deluge of information and they need to be helped by giving them access to quality content. The use of school libraries for bridging the digital divide will be very rewarding.

IV. QUALITY CONTENT

Managing Quality Content

In bridging the digital divide the development of appropriate content by libraries is important and its importance is going to grow in future as digital resources have grown phenomenally. Efforts are being made in countries to visualize how content will be managed in future which stresses the need for bridging the digital divide by managing the distribution of content more scientifically; 'the implementation of a technology infrastructure should be fully integrated with the creation of content that people will want to use, with the National Gird for Learning, with training and development programmes inside the library service, and with coaching programmes for users. The funding proposals presented here attempt to provide the means for such a holistic approach to implementation.

'These proposals provide the means to encourage innovation across the library networks. When implemented, they will make networked information and learning resources available to every citizen in all communities, linking individual learners – adults and children – and their teachers to a panoply of institutions and organizations. At the same time this network can make public libraries' services available worldwide, and give citizens access to global information sources.'

Digital Resources in Other Indian Languages

As we want digital resources in Indian languages be accessed from any part of the world, the content can be accessible using UNICODE compatible software. Under the Digital India Mission of the Government of India content is being developed in India languages. But so far as libraries are concerned not much catalogue data has been created by most of the libraries. As the Digital

India Mission expands libraries will also begin to create content in India languages of their respective resources. This will definitely help in bridging the digital divide as in many states students and the public want to read the content in local languages.

Promotion of Appropriate Infrastructure in Libraries

The library and information professionals through public libraries have to contribute to the creation of a knowledge society. For this purpose the libraries need to have the basic infrastructure to let library users comfortably use library spaces, resources, services and have access to internet with a good bandwidth. The condition of several public libraries is not up to the mark and suitable infrastructure like proper space for reading rooms, sufficient number of tables, chairs, reference tools, computer terminals in the reading rooms, and subscription to some important networked and online sources does not exist. The central government and state governments need to provide basic physical and digital infrastructure to public libraries.

Bridging the Gap between Users, Resources and Services

In this rapidly growing technological, libraries will have to bring users, resources and services closer so that an environment of scholarship and study emerges among the public in the digital environment. Most of the public libraries do not offer digital content and the fact remains that not all good content is available in the digital form. That is available mostly in print and MS forms. As we look at public libraries as hybrid libraries and they should grow in that form in India, they could reduce the digital divide by attracting users to quality content. The public not only needs hand holding in using the digital technology and content but also better services for accessing new and reliable content. We have to look into the means and methods to achieve these objectives.

V. CONCLUSION

The digital divide can be reduced fast if each public library takes the following steps to begin with, irrespective of the major published resources available with each library. To reduce costs and increase access to maximum and quality information resources the public should be given access to networked information available and the library staff should begin to use this networked information for serving the public. As a result, a network culture will emerge. The following could be the preliminary steps that may be undertaken as early as possible by every public library;

1. Each public library should undertake a survey of people living within a radius of 5 kms on their information needs.
2. Arrange training for qualified and other library staff.
3. Provide a number of computer terminals with internet access in the Reading Rooms as are necessary to serve the public and offer free internet facility.
4. Arrange free training for the public in using computers and information the Web.
5. At the state and district level committees of experts be constituted to find out local count needs could be met.
6. Participate in consortia to reduce subscription cost on E-resources.
7. Subscribe to audio books, videos and music databases.
8. Arrange extension programmes for the public to solve their digital training and content needs and reduce the existing digital divide, and
9. Identify provide partners besides the government support who could contribute to reducing the digital divide in society through public libraries.

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