

Guest Editorial

It is generally believed that web-based information sources which are used for social science research can be accessed conveniently through subject gateways. Research method and information-seeking behaviour in social sciences is somewhat different from natural sciences. Scientific research is practically a 'brief laying' process, i.e., each new development is based on earlier accepted findings. On the contrary, social sciences normally seek to examine, evaluate, accept or reject ideas, beliefs and findings of the peers. Of late, particularly after the independence, there has been an emphasis on empirical or quantitative evidence-based research in social sciences. It has been rightly said that in older days, people derived their understanding of society mostly from history, literature and personal experience. Now they want to base their conclusions on numerical evidence. As a result, economists have become more econometric, political scientists, more numerate and sociologists more systematic. During the past few decades, there has been a stress on problem oriented social science research. Late Prof. M.N. Srinivas, an eminent social scientist said that problem-oriented research could not be avoided in the light of the fact that international agencies and national governments have become anxious to use social sciences for promoting development efforts.

Published literature in the form of learned periodicals, conference proceedings, patents, reports, etc. is a major source of learning and research and plays a cementing role in the development of science. Similarly, in social sciences, published literature in the form of books, periodicals, newspapers, annual reports, memories, government records etc. play an important role in research. Needless to say, recent advances in information and communication technology (ICT) in the form of Internet or World Wide Web (WWW), CD-ROM, online digital libraries have a profound impact on organisation and dissemination of social science literature all over the world. It has been said that the invention of writing made society historical as it could keep records. Later, printing ignited literacy, and eventually, large scale use of written records in the form of books, periodicals, conference reports, etc., made it possible to facilitate fast transfer of data and information. Now, with the exponential growth of the Internet, we are still struggling to understand the ultimate result. The information field has now spread out of libraries and information centres, and it has been transformed into an industry that sells, organises and processes information. Web browsing has in fact become an electronic extension of library research. A close look at the developments that took place during the past 40 years would reveal that there were three massive waves of changes:

- ✘ Availability of indexing and abstracting periodicals in electronic online form starting with ERIC and Chemical Abstract in 1969;
- ✘ CD-ROM revolution of the 1980s and early 1990s using Graphical User Interface which allowed for more elegant database creation;
- ✘ Internet age starting in mid 1990s practically revolutionised the entire scenario and it eventually brought many of the promises of earlier technologies to full potential.

In the first phase, online versions of indexing and abstracting services made bibliographical records widely available with more access points. It was quicker in search than the print version; and in many libraries of developed countries, print subscriptions to indexing and abstracting sources were cancelled. However, these early databases could not replace the primary hard copy source material. The early online systems added a fair amount of full-text material in the form of plain ASCII text. This form was fine for searching but it could not match the richly formatted, illustrated printed page of a periodicals or a magazine.

In the second phase, CD-ROM became very popular as it could provide significant amount of fully formatted page images. The storage capacity of a CD-ROM was limited to 650 megabytes per disk. However, with low cost production, there was an explosion in full-text electronic reference works and smaller databases on CD-

ROM. Most of the electronic sources in CD-ROM were secondary sources or small-scale primary sources. Even during the present era of the Internet, this medium is popular in many of the developing countries.

In the third phase, the Internet has revolutionised the way in which one can access information. Graphical interface, inexpensive home computers, and computer-literate public finally provided the environment for Internet-based end user searching. Information is now widely available. This has become possible due to decreased scanning and storage costs. As there are now millions of Internet users, publishers can justify mounting long runs of learned periodicals and other scholarly publications as fully formatted page images with the facility for full-text searching. All these developments let us to believe that we now live in the 'information age'. However, one has to rethink whether the use of this term is justified. We can not dissuade the fact that society has always been based on exchanging information and our libraries have long been rich sources of information. It is the technologies that have changed rapidly since the invention of the digital computer. These technologies are themselves products of long-term societal processes. Information can now reach any corner of the earth almost instantaneously; but this does not mean that everyone is equally accessible to everyone else. In fact, instantaneous connections are possible between those who are plugged in to the right equipment while neighbours remain offline and inaccessible. Most of the Indian libraries located in small cities and governed by local bodies do not have the requisite equipment and proper Internet connectivity to reap the benefits of this much hyped technological advance.

One can say that social science research programmers in a country are largely influenced by national issues and as a result, social sciences are mostly found to be confined to a region or a country. Bibliometric studies conducted so far suggest that both producers and consumers of literature in this field are normally confined to their own country and they write for or read fewer foreign journals as compared to scientists working in basic sciences. However, in recent years, there is a gradual shift towards international social sciences. The factors like economic globalisation, research funding by international agencies and willingness on the part of the academic researchers to publish in high impact, international journals for career advancement are responsible for this emerging trend. Even so, the social scientists prefer to use national literature (i.e., literature produced within the country) for their research. Indian National Social Science literature is published by various government agencies, autonomous bodies and NGOs. Regularly published serials, reports and other forms of literatures by all level of governments, i.e., union, state, municipal, district are extensively used by researchers and they have high reference value. Most of the government agencies which have been established for the purpose of the collection, processing, tabulation, and dissemination of the data on different socio-economic variables have started disseminating their data through their official websites. Most of their mainstream publications such as annual reports, basic statistics, etc. are also posted on the websites for wider and real-time dissemination. Major agencies are:

- (i) Central Statistical Organisation (CSO).
- (ii) Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance.
- (iii) Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics (DGCIS), Ministry of Commerce.
- (iv) Directorate of Economic and Statistics (DES), Ministry of Agriculture.
- (v) National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO).
- (vi) Registrar General of India (RGI), Ministry of Home Affairs.
- (vii) Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

RBI has put full-text of all its important publications on the website. Most of the planning, policy making and regulatory agencies of the government have their websites developed by the National Informatics Centre (NIC). For the proper implementation of e-governance initiatives and to propagate RTI Act, 2005, government agencies have now started upgrading their websites. It has been found that electronic publications have fared better in niche markets. Time-sensitive information such as stock prices and market intelligence have found perfect mode of delivery on the web. Such information tends to be read in smaller chunks and therefore need not be read of a screen in a long running sequence.

While discussing future libraries, experts in the field have started believing that computer screens and keyboards are gradually taking over printed books and journals that are kept on library shelves. Publishers of science, technology, and medical journals now prefer to provide online access to full text of their serials. The concept 'virtual library' is gaining ground in minds of librarians as well as policy makers. Journal articles

are often disseminated in the form of PDF files that are facsimiles of print versions. In India, library consortia have been formed collectively to acquire electronic versions of learned periodicals. Successful initiatives are (i) Indian National Digital Library in Science and Technology(INDEST), and (ii) UGC–Infonet e-journal consortium and CSIR consortium. These consortia have subsequently improved research facilities in universities and other institutions of higher learning.

In fact, creating digital content and making it available on the web as a part of the research process is getting easier; and many research organisations now have institutional repositories to showcase their publications. This special issue of *DESIDOC Journal of Library and Information Technology on Social Science Gateways* covers four papers written by experienced scholars. The first paper written by Dr Usha Mujoo Munshi mainly deals with interoperability of digital repositories so that subject gateways can be generated and easy access to scholarly literature can be provided. The second paper by Dr B.M. Gupta, Dr S.M. Dhawan and Shri Ugrasen Singh provides a comparative view of social science research in India, China, and Brazil using various indicators. The third paper by Shri Naved Ahmed and Ms Nishat Fatima presents results of a survey conducted to assess the use of ICT by social science researchers in Aligarh Muslim University. The fourth paper by Shri Shantanu Ganguly discusses the dynamic nature of the library portal 'Gyanoday' developed at the Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Lucknow for the students and researchers.

The subject matter of this special issue is digital information. A question is often asked in seminars and discussions, i.e., what is the life span of digital contents? What about, say 30 years later when our grandchildren would like to see our photographs captured in a CD? Will it be possible for them to get a drive or proper software to read the data? Today's historians, archivists, librarians and computer professionals are not sure whether it would be possible to retrieve electronically preserved data after 20 years. Most hardware and software manufacturing companies have commercial interest in quick obsolescence. They want customers to buy latest or upgraded versions that remain compatible with only a few older versions.

It is often said that in a virtual library, the stakeholders, i.e., the library manager, service providers, and the readers need not be present in the same place (i.e., physical library) at the same time. But a shared commitment to the cause (i.e., high quality service) still requires personal contact to make it real to augment John Naisbitt's phrase 'high-tech has to be balanced by high touch' to build high trust organisations. Paradoxically, the more virtual an organisation becomes, the more its people need to meet in person.

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