DESIDOC Bulletin of Information Technology, Vol. 15, No. 5, September 1995, pp. 23-26

Privatisation of Tradeable Government Information

B Guha

Institute of Social Analysis & Communication, New Delhi

Abstract

The author discusses the concept of tradeable information and the methods of value addition to the government held information and the possibilities of privatisation in this area. It also mentions the outcome of the first information industry-promoter-user meet held by NISSAT in 1994 and the subsequent work that is required to be done in this area.

1. INTRODUCTION

Privatisation appears to be the prevailing buzz word in India in many fields. The buzz is often strong enough to make the stock market listless, make workers entrenched in sheltered public sector service organisations feel shaken and even go on protest strikes, while it instills hope in the disgruntled consumers that happier days might come again with privatisation. One would grant that this is very much true for our power, telecommunication, transportation and several other sectors.

2. PRIVATISATION IN INFORMATION SERVICE

With the talk of privatisation going around in several fields, it is quite natural that sooner or later people would start thinking about it in the context of information services also. In fact, we have come to that stage in India. The information professionals and the information industry have already started exploring the possibilities of introducing better services and products with increasing participation of the private sector, ultimately bringing about a complete transformation in the information market scenario in India.

Traditionally, the area of information services has remained protected from the effect of usual market forces. In most of the developing countries, it is believed that provision of library, documentation and other information facilities are the responsibilities of the government and that such facilities can be created mainly with the support of public funds and service should be made available at minimum cost.

Perhaps, prevalence of such a notion among the users has largely hampered the proper understanding of the value of information and also the proper use of it. Even if a customer pays for some information received by him, very often the price paid hardly reflects the cost of production or procurement of that piece of

information. Further, there is no assessment as to whether the information purchased has been properly utilised. There can be many more instances of the effect of market forces in the sale and purchase of information products. However, the focus of this paper is limited to only a single category of information, i.e., government-held and the associated activity of adding value to this information to produce new information products and services.

3. THE MAIN CONCEPT

Let us have a quick rehash of the current thinking on some of the concepts about the government-held tradeable information and the methods of adding value to information. Much of the thinking, on the concepts, in developed countries have appeared in several publications. One such publication[1] from the British Department of Trade and Industry is very significant and extremely relevant for our purpose.

3.1. Government-held Information

It is well known that most government departments usually generate and hold large volume of data and information in the normal course of their work. This data covers a wide variety of subject areas relating to population, health and family welfare, education, manpower, trade and commerce, industry, agriculture, science and technology, power, patents, natural resources, etc. Government departments also supply vast amount of information to the media, serious workers in various subject fields, officials, and the public. However, it is being increasingly felt that all government-held information does not come up in the information market. Further, recent developments in the information market have made it obvious that such information is not always provided in a form or manner readily acceptable by the users (for example, information might be required in value-added form and in electronic medium). Many government departments are not equipped for taking up such work.

3.2 Tradeable Information

This expression is being increasingly used to emphasise the idea that information is a commodity which has value, can be bought and sold like any other and that like most commodities, value can be added to the raw information product at various stages of processing. Extension of the above idea in the context of privatisation would mean that intervention of private agents will bring into free play the market forces and regulate its supply as per demand. Similarly, like all other markets, the information market could also be expanded by applying modern marketing techniques such as market survey, demand analysis, demand forecast, product differentiation, pricing, advertising, etc.

3.3. Value added Information

Value can be added to raw information by using the following methods:

(a) *Increasing Accessibility*: Specific information on a topic may be available in a form which is difficult to retrieve. This raw information when processed and stored as a computer database can be accessed easily and retrieved quickly. The ease and speed of access to information are of value to all types of users. Such values can be easily added by the application of information technology.

(b) *Agglomeration*: The value of information can be enhanced by combining it with other information. For example, when a user of a database in a field is given the facility of having access to a variety of files at the same time and with the same query formulation, the value of the database is increased. Major database hosts

provide such facility and extend the benefit of 'one stop shopping'.

(c) *Change of structure*: Value can be added to raw information by the way it is structured, the way it is stored, and the complexity of the software used to retrieve it. Highly structured data, however, often has to be searched at a variety of levels which requires complicated software capable of manipulating the search result in a better way.

(d) *Transaction*: Very often information gains value in a trading or transaction process. This is very much true in the case of financial market information.

(e) *Reutilisation*: Information collected for one purpose can often acquire a different value in another context. For example, information valuable in itself in hard copy can have different and additional uses in electronic form.

The above methods do not in any way exhaust the possibilities of adding value to information. Printed material, with all its limitations, can be a tradeable information too, with its own market and value. But information technology methods can add further value to such information and can make it suitable for a specific market which may demand it on screen, through voice link, on CD-ROM or, of course in print on paper.

4. THE CHANGING SCENARIO

Against the above background it would be worthwhile to consider the status of the Indian information market and then see the possibilities of privatisation. Like most of the developing countries, Indian information scenario continues to have the following characteristics:

(i) Heavy bias towards storage and dissemination of library based information,

(ii) Absence of indigenous databases and

(iii) Dominant role of the Government in promoting and financing the information activity.

According to an estimate by NV Satyanarayana[2], composition of the Indian information market was as follows. The global market has an annual input of about 2,90,000 items of which 2,50,000 items are in the print media and 40,000 items in electronic media. As against this, India produces about 2050 items annually, of which only 50 items are in electronic media. Evidently it is far behind the global level.

The first Information Industry-Promoter-User Meet, held during 7-8 December 1994 at Surajkund under the auspices of NISSAT, provided a joint forum to consider in some detail the above points along with several related issues. In fact one of the recommendations of the meeting was that "Companies and organisations, producing and/or marketing information products and services, should join together to form an information industry association to represent and promote collectively the interests of the industry at both local and international levels". This recommendation was so relevant and timely that before the delegates dispersed, some of them formally met in a specially-called session to form the required information industry association. This has surely been an important development. One can hope that the newly formed association will in course of time, be able to provide direction and correct the serious imbalance prevailing in the Indian information market.

4.1 Publishing in the Electronic Media

When publications in the print and electronic media have to coexist in the information market, it becomes necessary

to identify the areas where electronic publications are likely to be suitable and commercially viable. There are various suggestions on these points. For example, the flora and fauna of India published in CD-ROM medium will have good national and international market. At the same time, one publisher has put as varied titles as the Constitution of India and the Bhagavad Gita in CD-ROM medium in the market. Generally speaking, one would like to think that publications requiring frequent revision or updation would be more suitable for the electronic media. Further, information which are required for reference purpose and not for continuous reading are also better suited for electronic media. One can also add that due to the familiarity and publication process of the print media most users/readers accept the authenticity of the information in such media. However, most electronic publications are yet to establish such credibility.

4.2 Directory of Government held Information

An important direction on publishing the government-held information in the electronic media, was also provided, by the Information Industry-Promoter-User Meet. This is crystallised in another resolution of the Meet, which reads as "A comprehensive directory giving details of databases available from various government departments/laboratories with details of access mechanism should be prepared and published. Databases with good national and international market potential should also be identified".

The above recommendation clearly points out to the necessity and also the possibility of opening up of the government-held information sources and ultimately bringing them to the information market through the provision of suitable information services and products. The basic requirement here is to have the full knowledge of what is held by different governmental departments and agencies. Fortunately, NISSAT, in the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, has already initiated action and the proposed directory (database) may soon be made available.

Compilation of the directory is the first step. This will help the representatives of the information industry and others in locating and retrieving the government-held information from various departments and in turning them into commercial products or services in electronic form. However, it would be necessary to go into some administrative and financial aspects before a smooth transfer of the government-held information to the private sector electronic information industry is possible. In many cases, the existing regulations may not allow a government department to transfer information/data/files to private sector information industry. On the other hand, as the information is for commercial exploitation, the question of profit sharing will naturally crop up. Such questions will have to be answered before privatisation of government-held information is made possible.

REFERENCES

1. Government-held information: Guidelines for government departments in dealing with the private sector, 2nd ed. Department of Trade and Industry, Great Britain, 1990. 35p.

2. Satyanarayana, NV. *Information Today & Tomorrow*, 1995, **14**(1), 9.