GUEST EDITORIAL

Indian Bibliographic Databases

Should we perpetually depend upon imported database products, keep paying ever-escalating prices for these, and be always at the mercy of database producer countries for granting access to or maintaining an uninterrupted flow of information services?

Surely the present situation is far from desirable, especially when India has the necessary capabilities to effect a change in the existing scenario.

True, it is foolish even to dream of creating a magnum opus like the Chemical Abstracts, Biological Abstracts or running a service like the DIALOG (now called Knight Ridder) and ESA-IRS in the short or immediate range. In fact there is a little scope to dabble in broad-subject coverage of similar kind. But, one could justifiably think of a number of narrow-sector approaches suitable to the Indian context.

The onus of collection, collation and dissemination of information pertaining to activities concerning the country or generated in the country, rests with the national institutions. Whether or not this makes any business sense, activities like the national bibliography and *Indian Science Abstracts*, should mandatorily be undertaken.

Who else should arrange for information on Indian companies, stock market, natural resources etc? Definitely not a foreign agency. The two systems may co-exist, but they are to perform different roles. Fortunately, the existing situation is just about right, while the CMIE and DSJ group make an in-depth treatment of a small population of Indian companies, the Teledirect- compass covers larger number but only in respect of certain basic element of information.

It is also possible to conceive of development efforts in narrow areas of global information. *A priori*, one could identify a large number of areas in which India could claim definite strength. These may be S&T activities on subjects like statistics, tropical diseases and tropical plant regime; economic activities like tea, spices and cashew cultivation, processing and marketing; a high-tech area like photo-voltaic power systems; or a service like formal and non-formal education.

The attention may be directed to development of databases on subjects of specific Indian problems but which may also interest other countries-for example, post-harvest technologies and communicable diseases. Inspite of several databases on drug and pharmaceuticals available, there was a need for the *Medicinal and Aromatic Plants Abstracts*.

Coverage of global databases is often biased towards publications, made in the journals of western origin or those dwelling on topics and problems of their interest. For example, in a global textile database like the WTA, the treatment of handloom and powerloom sector, jute, etc. is virtually nil. Indian institutions could identify such gaps, and suitably bridge these partially through databases.

The vast manpower wealth of India could be used for the development of value added products. The objective could be to make an in-depth treatment of a narrow area as

supplement to the global databases, the way NICMAP has created a massive database on machine tools (cf Compendex). The development could also take the line of leather database of NICLAI, in which information from various disciplines have been culled to create a commodity specific database.

The high skill base may be utilised to create sophisticated information analysis products like numeric and factual databases. The printed hard copy output of alloy phase diagrams by the Indian Institute of Metals, if converted into a database, could be one such product of international standard.

India has an edge over many other countries in developing multimedia products. Apart from the vast clientele of locals, and their more affluent brethren residing abroad, a lot of corporates and inquisitive individuals are interested in India's past, present and the future, its economy and population and so on, a ready market therefore exists already.

Necessary capabilities to satisfy the variety of market needs also exist. The vast educated unemployed and underemployed could be mobilized. The required computing capabilities already exist. Proficiency in English is an added advantage. It is understood that several leading producers of databases get a part of the job done in India on contract basis. Time may not be far when both Indian and foreign companies, individually or through tie ups, would use India for global database development efforts.

The basic conclusion that could be drawn from above, is that the opportunities could easily be identified if one is little alert. There is little justification to disheartened. "All that is required is being done, and nothing is left for Indians to venture in", is not tenable.

A cursory analysis of the INDAB database (A database of Indian databases) would reveal the variety of efforts already underway, though small, but many of them are useful and hold enormous potential to be big if properly nurtured.

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