`Report from the Bombay Library Network

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Abstract

This paper offers relatively unusual form of a report from the Bombay Library Network (BONET). Instead of reporting the number of members, list of lectures given, etc. (some such details are given in Annexure for the readers who are interested in them) This paper presents the essence of lessons learnt by running the BONET over last few years. BONET has been able to contribute to the activities concerned with the absorption of new technology by practitioners in the library and information science. Future plans including electronic publishing, are also given.

1. THE OLD VISION

We now have full library networks in a number of cities, thanks to the vision of NISSAT of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. At the national level, we have the INFLIBNET, to serve the universities. In the early days of planning these networks in India, the vision of a library network was that of an inter-library service provider, encouraging and facilitating inter-library activities. It was expected that they would help us control a big increase in library expenditure, by promoting the sharing of books and periodicals. Over the years, however, it has become clear that this objective is not being realised to any significant degree. So, the question arises: What should we expect out of library networks? What are they for? I will briefly list some of the problems networks are facing:

⊕ Library networking is best done when libraries are themselves computerised, offering at least an online catalogue

⊕ The motivation for sharing the resources of the library of a privileged institution with users of other libraries is altruistic; this is often stifled by the interests of the users, who do not wish their library give others more than what it receives in return; resource sharing is difficult to enforce

⊕ Library networking alone cannot solve our readers' problems; an increasing expenditure on books and periodicals is unavoidable in India; resource sharing has its limits

⊕ Creating a library networking culture is not a one year job; it takes time and resources to spread the culture.

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So, what should we expect out of library networks? I will argue that we should not forget the old vision, but should be realistic about it.

2. THE NEW VISION

It is worth reviewing the concept of a library network, and asking what should we get from them now? We know that what they will deliver as per the old vision is limited, but are there other services that they can and must provide? I offer my list in the following paragraphs.

2.1 Help in Starting Up

The first step is always the big step. The libraries in India are getting used to e-mail, with a few exceptions of libraries which have been using e-mail for many years now. The biggest impact will be in making e-mail routinely available to every library, and in encouraging its use for inter-library activities. I believe that every Indian library network, at this stage, should focus on this responsibility and ensure that all its members become regular users of e-mail.

2.2 Information Retrieval

Very few of our libraries have bibliographic databases for enabling researchers to identify documents of interest. CD-ROMs are making these databases more easily accessible. However, there will always be ten libraries without good bibliographic databases for every one that has them. The cost of CD-ROM equipment is not the central issue, it is the cost of the subscriptions.

To the extent that the libraries can share bibliographic databases, they can achieve a lot. Unlike sharing of books and bound volumes, here you can give without denying the information to yourself. You are giving access, not giving away the database!

2.3 Getting Reprints over the Network

Scholars and researchers will never be satisfied with the few hundred journals that each big library in India subscribes to. The number of active periodicals exceeds 50,000 easily. So, a very common need of the library user is to get a photocopy of a paper he knows about, but cannot lay his hands on. The cost of a copy for scholarly use is a few hundred rupees, but the cost of getting it from abroad over fax could be Rs. 2,000! Getting it by airmail will take too long. In any case the paperwork required for getting such a copy of a reprint is quite high. A library network can arrange to get these over the network. It can set up appropriate arrangements with overseas suppliers as well as with sister libraries in India. Specialised software is now available for this purpose. The paper is usually photocopied, and then scanned. This creates a computer data file, which is sent over e-mail, to be reconverted into a printed image at the other end, and printed on a laser printer. Since e-mail transmission is usually inexpensive, the operation becomes eminently worthwhile. This is an example of resource-sharing that fits in very well with the old model of a library network.

2.4 Information and Know-how

The world is getting to be quite complex. As soon as you wish to share database, you run into questions of intellectual property rights (IPR). The supplier of the database may not allow you to share them without additional payment. Even if you wish to give away photocopies of articles, you will need to know the IPR issues involved. While budgets have been, and will continue to be, a problem for libraries, technological know-how often turns out to be a more serious constraint. Whether it is about IPR issues, purchase issues, or computerisation

issues, a united community of librarians and others interested in sharing information and know-how, is better equipped to cope with them than individual libraries. A library network can, and must, offer information, know-how, consultation and training related to technology. A library network should offer information to its members on all network resources. Very often, this has to be done pro-actively through a series of periodic meetings. Ultimately, the user community should be able to learn about the new media, about local resources and network resources. The library network should train the staff of member libraries well enough that they, in turn, train their users.

2.5 Seminars and Workshops

The flow of information in this field has to be increasingly international. The efforts required, and the costs involved, in organising seminars and workshops are substantial. A library networking group can play a catalytic role in this, bringing together members frequently for valuable updates.

2.6 Network Publication

The network is not merely a tool for making better use of Information resources in a classical form. The network has become a big source of information itself. Electronic archival of technical reports, reprints and dissertations has become common. More visibility is gained for a laboratory through a well-done home page on the world-wide-web than through an expensive annual report. More preprints are shared by e-mail than by post. Increasingly, more time is spent reading "news groups" on the network than in the library!

The question is: Is information dissemination through these new media the concern of the library, or of the computer centre, or of others? I would argue that the library is no more limited to the old media than any other part of a university. The library should provide leadership for the exploitation of the new media. The library network plays a very important role here. By making the new facilities available, by encouraging member libraries to adopt the new media, the networks can play a catalytic role. I take up a few special forms of electronic publication, and deal with them individually in the few following paragraphs.

2.7 Electronic Newsletters

Have you heard of an Indian electronic newsletter that is produced in the country and distributed widely here? I have not! We need them. Library networks should create them and support them, in addition to publicising international newsletters available in electronic form. The skills needed to activate contributors, edit the contributions, disseminate the information, and control the discussion, are all valuable. These are not going to be the monopoly of library staff, but they will surely have their share of all this.

2.8 Electronic Archives

Almost every paper being published today is prepared by the author on a computer, and almost every dissertation. We still allow every author to throw these files away at the end, and keep only the paper copy! How can we do this? By creating an electronic archive for each community of library users, perhaps at the library level, or perhaps at the level of a library network, we can avoid this wastage. A document preserved in the digital form can be transmitted by e-mail at almost no cost and very rapidly. It can also be preserved forever at low cost. Such new ideas can be spread and exploited only with the help of library networks. Many archives offer world-wide access through the file

transfer protocol (ftp) to anonymous users. Running such an ftp site and stocking it with information of local relevance is an important responsibility. The library network should also carry out this responsibility.

2.9 The World-Wide-Web

This relatively new medium of multimedia communication is very promising. Offering access to remote collections of text, sound and visuals over computer networks, the web has revolutionised information dissemination. I would expect every library network to run its own web server and to instruct the staff of its member libraries in the art of creating and maintaining web pages and/or web servers.

3. CONCLUSION

What is a library network? It is not a mere tool for facilitating resource sharing! It has to be an organisation for information and know-how sharing. It has to be a demonstration site and training centre for new communication media and new technology. It has to offer consultancy and assistance. It has to be a meeting place and a coordination centre. It has to be a repository for an electronic archive and for other network resources. We can now talk of second generation library networks. They can meet the new needs of the libraries and communities of library users.

4. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Some Details of BONET

A. Database Created

(a) 15,000 items in a bibliographic database on computers and software technology.

(b) Union catalogue of journals and other periodicals in ten libraries in the region.

(c) A number of CD ROM databases have been mounted on a Novell Server for use in training activities, and for use in demonstrations to members. These databases are accessible over a Local Area Network (LAN).

(d) Software has been created for online catalogues. The whole of the NCST library has been automated using this system, *soochi*, for regular use, and for use in training and demonstrations.

In addition to the above, BONET hosts a database of tables of contents of Indian periodicals created by the National Centre for Information, Bombay. This covers over 250 periodicals.

B. Names of Beneficiary Libraries

- Bankers Training College
- Bhabha Atomic Research Centre
- Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd.
- Cancer Research Institute
- Centre for Education and Documentation
- Credit Rating Information Services of India Ltd.
- Crompton Greaves Ltd.
- Foundation for Medical Research
- Garware Institute for Career Education, Bombay University
- Glaxo India ltd.
- Godrej Soaps Ltd.
- Hindustan lever Research Centre
- Indian Institute for Geomagnetism
- Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research
- Information and Library Network Programme (INFLIBNET)
- Jain International
- Jamanalal Bajaj Institute of Management Studies
- Loyola Centre for Research and Development
- Marathwada Institute of Technology
- Narsee Monjee Institute of Management Studies
- National Addiction Research Centre
- National Centre for Performing Arts
- National Centre for Software Technology
- National Centre for Information
- Organisation for Educational Research and Technological Training
- Ramrao Adik Institute of Technology
- Reserve Bank of India
- SP Jain Institute of Management
- St. Xavier's Technical Institute
- Tata Consultancy Services
- Tata Memorial Centre
- United Phosphorus Ltd.

⊕ University Department of Chemical Technology

⊕ Victoria Jubilee Technical Institute

⊕ Vinayak Ganesh Vaze College of Arts, Science and Commerce

⊕ Wochhardt Ltd.

C. System Details

An IIP027 Computer named *Shakti* is used by the network for providing access to members. Locally developed software named *Request* is also used. Electronic mail software is very heavily used. An Inter-library communication system, also named *Soochi,* is in use.