Community Information Concepts

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Abstract

This article discusses the definitions and concepts of CI (CI) and CISs (CISs), given by several authors. It traces the history and details the components of CI and CISs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Information has been described by subject experts as the fifth need of man ranking after air, water, food and shelter[1]. In fact, in view of the vital role played by information in daily life, it should be considered as the first need in terms of survival. This is because it is information about the availability of food, which food to be eaten, how to build a shelter, protection of territory, ensuring security and success, etc., which are primarily of organic importance. Without this information, it is difficult to go through the challenging process of life. As a matter of fact, every organisation knows or needs to know about its surroundings, availability of food and probable potential dangers for its life. Information is so basic that it is a part and parcel of nature. This is evident from the fact that every organism is endowed with certain amount of knowledge or knowledge-base by nature itself (for example, migration and imitation of natural groups) and it tries to add to its knowledge-base through sensory perception or experience. Without information, survival would be impossible.

All human beings have information needs, both individual and collective. And it is information transfer and information revolution which are the key factors for the cultural revolution and societal development of mankind. Of course, the strength of any nation depends on its economic condition and/or economic development. "Development is the most important challenge facing the human race. Despite vast opportunities created by the technological revolution of the twentieth century, more than one billion people, one-fifth of the world's population, live on less than one dollar a day—a standard of living that Western Europe and the United States attained two hundred years ago"[2]. This indicates that the poor nations of the world are poorer and more backward as they are about 50-200 years behind the advanced countries simply because their information resources are inadequate. Therefore, development is a greater challenge to the third world or developing countries and this challenge is much more serious in view of the constraints on their information resources. That is, the economic development of a country depends on soundness of the information system of its economy. Mountjoy states: "In this group (i.e., the third world countries) are the poorest nations in the world, technologically backward but capable of great advances and possessing in their territories a great wealth of mineral, vegetable and energy resources[3]." This clearly means that the weakness of the third world in its information resources has a direct bearing on its economic development.

The intensity and extension of underdevelopment or poverty is much more profound in the rural areas of the third world in general and those of India in particular.

Describing the state of poverty, Justice Bhagavathi[4] states: "no amount of politics will be of any avail, until the masses in India share the fruits of freedom and development. Today, they are the outcasts of society. They are living lives of misery and suffering, want and destitution. When, as the Chief Justice of Gujarat, I toured the rural areas, I found poverty for myself—stark and naked poverty, people with sunken eyes, empty starved stomachs, with hardly any clothes to wear, with scarcely a roof over the head."

This form and proportion of poverty is not limited to Gujarat alone, it pervades the entire rural India to a larger extent and we find a heart rending picture of poverty and exploitation of the poor in the rural India. There prevails a vicious circle of poverty. It is hard to breakthrough because of various reasons. This situation finally supports the theory that poverty breeds poverty. As the saying goes, the rich grow richer and the poor grow poorer in a democracy like ours. This is due to the high rate of exploitation and denial of all needs of the downtrodden by the feudal system that there is an induction of the culture of poverty.

Describing the nature of the vicious circle of poverty, Rao[5] states: "The people in rural and tribal areas of our country are greatly handicapped because of the culture of poverty. The cultural constraint works in a plethora of ways to keep the poor people poor."

In order to achieve a breakthrough, the poor may have to raise their awareness levels. At present, they are ignorant of the ways to overcome and combat the consequent evils and pain of poverty. They lack the power to discriminate between good and bad and they do not know how to act collectively. They do not have a clear perspective of themselves and their life. The awareness levels of the poor are so deplorable that their condition makes them to be more downtrodden and underprivileged. As quoted by Rao (ref. 5, pp. 4) Oscar Lewis observe "people with a culture of poverty know only their own troubles, their local conditions, their own neighbourhood...usually they do not have the knowledge, the vision or the ideology to see the similarities between their problems and those of their counterparts elsewhere". And

it is in this context that Rao (ref. 5, pp. 4) states, "the creation of the knowledge-base within the poverty-stricken cultures is assuming great importance. The processes of acculturation and bringing about change in human behaviour are complex and time-consuming. They require changes in perceptions and attitudes of people facilitating change, as well as people receiving the advantage of change." He further states, "the immediate need to comprehend first is that there is widespread information hunger in rural areas".

But, then there is a crucial question of determining priorities like which is more important—physical/physiological hunger or information poverty? Discussing developments and spread global communication and information revolution, BG Verghese[6] observes: "yet ours is a very different world where large sections of people will struggle for existence or for simple basic rights. To talk of their communication needs might appear like offering them cake when they are desperately searching for a morsel of bread. Yet, at another level, communication would be an important element in transforming their lives."

Delivering the Sardar Patel Memorial lecture on Communication and Nation Building, organised by the All India Radio, in 1985, PC Joshi,[7] the noted Indian economist, who headed the Committee on Software Planning for Doordarshan, observed: "the poor classes who have to struggle for survival in a new system, whose rules of game are unknown to them, the right to information becomes fundamental as right to food, to shelter and to employment... . The poor themselves were becoming aware that removal of their information poverty had become a precondition for the alleviation of their material poverty. Elite domination of the information system has meant denial of basic information to the masses." All this shows that in the wake of emerging information society, information is very basic to peace and human development.

The communication of survival/developmental information is much more crucial for the alleviation of the downtrodden, particularly in the developing countries like India. As a matter of fact information is so basic

(ii) Citizen action information, needed for effective participation as individual or as member of a group in the social, political, legal, economic process.

But, Donohue does not make any specific reference to the community part of CI.

Hilary B Thomas[19] feels that "those definitions are so broad that they could encompass almost any information need, irrespective of the attributes of the enquirer or the purpose for which the information is required...".

Allan Bunch (ref. 8, pp. 4), regarded as one who had first attempted to synthesise definitions of CI, states that CI has two aspects: "one is concerned with the nature of the information provided, that is, information in the community to help people with daily problem solving or in raising the quality of their lives; the other is concerned with the nature of the clientele served, namely, those who belong to the lower socio-economic groups or are disadvantaged through an inability to obtain, understand, or act on information that affects their lives."

This definition also may not be totally satisfactory, a fact acknowledged by Bunch himself. But he justifies it as a sort of consensus among the UK and US practices.

Commenting on this definition of Bunch, Durrance[21] feels that they move the field to a common understanding, but both fall short of providing a comprehensive definition of CI.

Not merely the definition given by Bunch, but some of the above definitions resort to certain extremities, such as the one given by Library Association's Working Party on CI, which describes CISs as "a positive decision to concentrate on enabling people .... to act either individually or collectively on their problems in the fields of housing, employment, family and personal matters...". Here the questionable aspect is whether CI service, as an institutionalised service, can deal with personal and family matters? Probably, this might be objectionable to certain individuals—both LIS professionals as well as the clientele. Also it is not clear whether it is advisable to render such a service by the CI providers.

In a review of CISs by Thomas[19], it is stated, "these definitions are so broad that they could encompass almost any information need. Thus, the scope of the CI concepts mentioned above is also problem in itself."

But being broad at the conceptual level is not a defect in itself. Hence there should not be any restrictions on the scope of a broad concept, such as 'CI', on the basis of social fragmentations, such as minorities, disadvantaged, etc. Some of the definitions emphasise the orientation of CI to be biased towards minorities, disadvantaged groups in the community. This is not fair. It is reasonable that the service should not be restricted to only a section of the community.

The information needs of the affluent may also be very much crucial and intensive, and they too might find it very difficult to locate the required information easily at the time of need, as the information is not perfectly controlled and organised. Right information provided at the right time of need might save lives and transform the living conditions and standards. Therefore CI is described as survival information and the concept needs to be clarified further.

Durrance (ref. 20, pp. 102) is of the opinion that the concept of CI finds its premise in the concept of reference service. He states, "there are striking similarities between the current state of CISs and Rothstein's description of the innovative first two decades of reference practice."

Further, he feels, "the difficulty which the field has encountered in establishing adequate terminology relating to CISs is due to several factors:

(a) lack of agreement by leadership on the specific words to describe CISs,

(b) inconsistency in the use of the terminology which is selected, and

(c) inadequate indexing.

Each of these factors can ultimately be traced back to the fact that the field is in the relatively early stages of the development of a complex innovation which in its purest form deviates substantially from the norm and in its

official sources and has necessity to avoid too close an association with political or pressure groups." Wilson's preference to use the safer term public information in view of his above arguement is reasonable but in practice the alternative terminology suggested by him leads to further confusion for the simple reason that 'public' is much wider in connotation than 'community'. For example 'public' can be an antonym for 'private', and 'public' can also mean 'open'. Between the terms 'public' and 'community' the later is preferable for two reasons: firstly it is less ambiguous than 'public' and secondly it is a widely used term by CI practitioners.

In view of this problem of terminology a helpful distinction between the three terms 'Public information work', 'Local information service' and 'CI service' has been provided by the Library Association's Working Party on CI[13]. They describe public information work as "a general information service which makes 'no discrimination in favour of specific groups'; Local information service as 'information service on purely local matters..., (which) will involve building up detailed local information files and publishing directories and generally acting as a signposting agency to other local services'; and service as 'a positive decision which concentrates on enabling people, particularly those in lower socio-economic groups, to act either individually or collectively on their problems in the fields of housing, employment, family and personal matters, consumer affairs, household finance, education, welfare rights and civil rights".

Elaine Kempson[14] narrates the role of CI in self-reliance and self-determination; thus she describes CI as "information for self-reliance and self-determination". Dorothy Turick[15] in her report titled *CI Service in Libraries* describes CI as "the alphabetically organised resource file or published directory of current information descriptive of agencies".

Michael Edwards[16] says: "CI is considered to be that information required by members of the public (or those acting on their behalf) to make effective use of the resources potentially available to them in the communities in which they live. Such information may be needed to help solve problems in the fields of housing, disability, household finance, marriage, employment, and so on." Thus, he opines that CI is information in the community for the community.

A distinctive feature of David Smith's[17] definition of CI is that he explains each term independently: "A community is made up of persons who bring to the common life a variety of resources both material and of knowledge and skill. Each member of the community has needs and each has resources. In the most profound sense we are functions of one another and it is the interpenetration and co-ordination of these resources which creates the community. We define information in terms of an experience whereby people are linked with one another in mutually useful ways. Information is created, shared and used by two or more persons acting together. Information does not exist in books, data banks, and files, but is the experience whereby, the symbols in the books on files are translated into action between two or more persons. The need of the questioner is matched with the resources available in the process of this interaction." With this backdrop, he describes CI as the binding element which binds the disparate elements together to form a community.

A critical analysis of the components of the above definitions of CI reveals that most of them have focussed attention either on the nature of information or on clientele or on both. There is a high degree of agreement among the CI experts that it is concerned with that information which enables people both individually and collectively to face crises in their day-to-day life.

Joseph Donohue[18], considered to be one of the earliest creators of CI, too centres his definition around the above idea. According to him, it is information needed to cope with crises in the lives of individuals and communities. Explaining this definition, he has identified two types of information provided under CI service:

(i) Survival information such as that related to health, housing, income, legal protection, economic opportunity, political rights, etc., and

more conservative incarnations closer to the practice of reference (ref. 20, pp. 103).*

Summing up various definitions, Durrance (ref. 20, pp. 108) opines that the most serviceable definition of CI was developed by one of the earliest creators of CI service, Donohue, who identified two types of information to be provided by such a service "survival information such as that related to health, housing, income, legal protection, economic opportunity, political rights, etc., and citizen action information, needed for effective participation as individual or as member of a group in the social, political, legal, economic process."

Durrance calls the former 'information and referral' and the latter 'public policy information'. He adds to these items a third component called 'local information' which according to him is information appropriate and useful to the community, including a calendar of local events, courses and other educational opportunities, and basic information concerning government agencies, local organisations, fraternal groups, and clubs.

These three components for Durrance will constitute a basis for the understanding of presently practised and emerging CISs. Thus CISs will be an umbrella term that encompasses these three components, according to Durrance.

However, the above conclusion by Durrance also suffers from implicit and intrinsic overlapping of the constituent components at the conceptual plane. As stated by him, 'information and referral' (I&R) component refers to survival information. But, in reality I&R is again an umbrella concept because it can include the other two components, namely, public policy information and local information.

Another important and implied dimension is the neighbourhood information or trans-local information which has not been dealt clearly by him nor was clearly spelt out and discussed by anyone else. For example, information about a medical specialist in the neighbourhood (locality) may be of great value in case of emergencies; employment opportunities do not always emerge from the local community itself.

Therefore, information about such opportunities elsewhere would also be of a great value. Therefore, survival information does not and should not have any geographical boundaries or limitations.

Further, the boundaries of neighbourhood are also relative. In view of this, the scope of CI goes beyond the local boundaries, social groups and so on. As such, at the conceptual level, there need not be any restrictions on the scope or meaning of an umbrella concept such as the CI, because it means all things to all men.

Particularly, in a changing society, where the concept of global village and *Vasudaika Kutumbam* are turning out to be realities, by shrinking distances through speedy transportation and communication, high rate of migration from rural areas to urban areas and between and among countries, and interdependence of regions and nations delimiting the concept and its functional validity to certain sections of society would be unreasonable. In the context of these social changes, the CISs need to be much more comprehensive and dynamic. Nevertheless, the nature, scope and success of the service would fully depend on the capabilities, facilities and resources of individual information centre and also on the clientele needs.

3. COMPONENTS OF CI

For better understanding, the term 'CI' could be meant as survival information linking needs with resources for better living. And it is basically the community I&R with emphasis on the referral component.

The community I&R services could further be detailed as in the following figure.

These components may further be detailed as given in Fig. 1.

On the other hand, the 'Referral' component involves directing the needy to the sources of information at the following two levels:
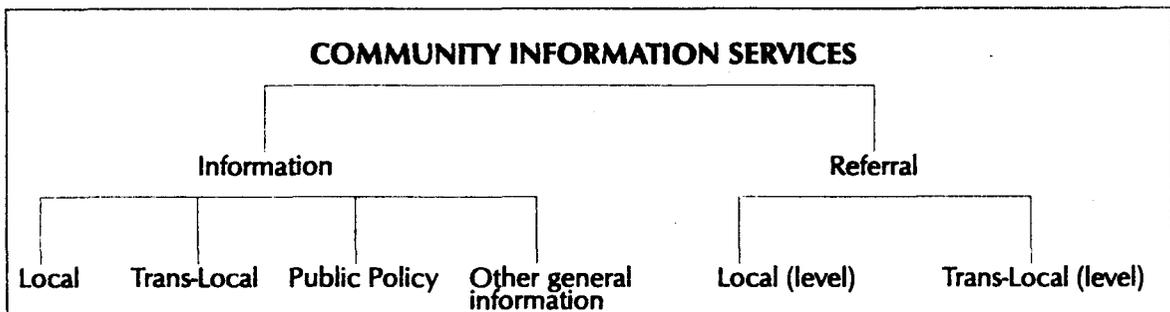
I. Local level; and

Ii. Trans-local level.

COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICES

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                            COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICES

                   Information                                    Referral

Local   Trans-Local   Public Policy   Other general      Local (level)       Trans-Local (level)
                                       information
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Figure1: Schematic representation of components of community information services (CISs)

Local Information	Defined as information appropriate and useful to the community, including a calendar of local events, courses and other educational and employment opportunities, and basic information such as those concerning government agencies local organisations, fraternal groups and clubs[6].
Trans-Local Information	Defined as information appropriate and useful to the community pertaining to the localities beyond the local area or community concerned (i.e., local information of neighbourhood localities and/or trans-local areas).
Public Policy Information	Defined as information about the Government, and its operation, programmes, plans, schemes, activities, agencies, etc.
General information (i.e., conventional discipline-oriented information)	Defined as awareness generating information on important subject areas, such as health and hygiene, environment, conservation of energy and resources, agriculture, animal husbandry, useful arts and fine arts (i.e., vocational information) technology as well as political, and socio-economic awareness, etc.

It can be seen that an attempt has been made to include in the above definition the various components of CI already identified by earlier researchers.

4. HISTORY OF CI

Since the dawn of human civilisation and formation of larger societies, the human beings have been faced with CI needs. And the CI flowed to the needy through various channels, unmediated by librarians through informal networks.

History speaks out that the importance of dissemination of CI was felt in ancient days itself. For instance, the Edicts of Ashoka amply illustrate the method of dissemination of public policy information in ancient India. Information about the local events, penal sanctions, taxation, grants, local activities and public/royal policies, etc., used to reach the people through the medium of Dandora (Tom! Tom!). Through Dandora publicity of the necessary information was carried out by an officially engaged team, who would beat drums to attract the attention of the public and then announce the message loudly. This system is still a very popular means of communication in rural India.

Information was also recorded on various types of Inscriptions, such as the donors' inscriptions, etc. Messages of ethics and code of conduct used to be conveyed through several people-oriented cultural programmes like *Burrakathas, Harikathas, Veedhi Natakams*, and by proclamations, preaching of the religious heads. Of course, these were meant

for the propagation of religious and epic themes. These cultural events not only motivated and entertained the masses but also enforced ethics, discipline and the accepted code of conduct among them. The *Gurukulas*, i.e., the ancient residential centres of education and learning were also centres of information and communication.

In the rural setup, the *Rachchabanda* (Grama Sabha Venue or meeting place of the elders/leaders of the village) where the summing up of the local events, planning of the activities, and other activities take place, are the CI centres and the centres of social, legal and of various other activities of the village(s). The wells in the rural areas also serve as centres of information for the rural women folk.

With the advent and advances of communication and information technology the mass media, such as radio, television, and newspapers have undertaken the responsibility of disseminating the CI in their own limited way but more efficiently and with a wider coverage.

Of all the channels enumerated above, the channel of individuals, that is interpersonal communication plays a vital role in the flow of CI, both formally and informally. Though CI existed since times immemorial, the concept of CI is very recent and still in the initial stage.

As mentioned earlier, dissemination of CI has been taking place since times immemorial. But, the formal/institutionalised flow of CI, particularly in India could be traced back to the inception of Dandora and edicts of Ashoka as far back as third century BC.

Unlike in the case of India, as Bunch (ref. 8, pp. 4) states, "the roots of CISs, both in Britain and the United States, have been traced back to the end of the nineteenth century. But the most significant developments arose during the crisis period of the Second World War, when the Britain Citizens' Advice Bureaux (CABX) were set up at the outbreak of hostilities to cope with wartime problems such as emergency regulations, missing relatives, evacuation, and separation of families."

Gradually, CABX increasingly took on family and personal problems not directly associated with the war. Interestingly, many municipal libraries were also called on to set up information offices during the war, and thus libraries performed a function similar to that of CABX. But, afterwards, even where they remained under the control of the library service, these centres never developed a wider role but generally limited themselves to the sign-posting of local authority services, leisure activities and later to tourism.

Linked up with the Second World War in the United States, Veteran's Information Centres, modelled on the Citizens' Advice Bureaux, were set up by the Department of Labor, to deal with the crises presented by men returning from the front to their communities and in need of advice on such matters as rehabilitation and retraining. Over 3,000 such centres were set up, but most of them were closed by 1949 (ref. 8, pp. 4).

Further, Bunch states: "The present phenomenal growth in CISs stems from the late sixties and seventies and, although it is not possible to point to a crisis as catastrophic as a world war to account for this growth, there are a number of factors prevalent in mainly urbanized society which together have produced a situation of crisis proportions."

According to Long[21], "the roots of CI in the United States have been traced back to the charity organisation movement of the 1870s out of which grow the Social Service Exchange." But, as Kahn states, the period of more significance, however, was the formation post-second world war of Veterans Information Centres.

Coleman[22] traces the origins in a different way. According to him, "the term 'CI' stems from the American War on Poverty Program of the 1960s which was a concerted but largely unsuccessful attempt by the US Government".

According to Durrance (ref. 20, pp. 104-06) the term has been in vogue since early 1970s. His inference is based on an analysis of titles of

periodical articles and conference programmes/themes.

Perhaps, in view of the above, Bunch (ref. 8, pp. 5) has stated, "the present phenomenal growth in CISs stems from the late sixties and seventies." But, a majority of the authors seem to have not taken the process of informal dissemination of CI in the human society since times immemorial and in the ancient civilizations. However, a full-fledged research on this issue might bring forth startling findings.

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