

Community Information Network

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Abstract

This article overviews what community information means and its implications on the role of a library and information centre. No single institution can meet the general information requirements of any given community. It attempts to examine how a cooperative venture of interagency network can lead to an effective community information service suitable for the local population.

1. INTRODUCTION

The key concepts of the information age are: information, community and access. No organisation, including that of the library and information centre, can function well and be effective, if attention is not directed towards these key concepts from varying standpoints. Today's information society has grown to be complex warranting lots of initiatives, strategies and implementation of informing the community under the range of service of a given library and information centre. This article intends to give an overview of the implications of community information (CI) on the role of libraries. The libraries may not be able to accomplish this task single handed in addition to their routine and/or other services. There are a few insights into how effectively multi and inter-agency networking can enhance the CI service. A few constraints in this are also highlighted.

2. DEFINITION

The title and the prime objective of this article implies three basic concepts which are easier to describe than define. There are a large number of definitions to the term 'community', whereas no consensus has been reached over

the term 'information'. Despite this, many have attempted to define community information.

The most quoted and accepted definition of CI is that of the Library Association¹. It reads as: "which assists individuals and groups with daily problems solving and with participation in the democratic process. The services concentrate on the needs of those who do not have ready access to other sources of assistance and on the most important problems that people have to face, problems to do with their homes, their jobs, and their rights". This seminal definition implies that CI is an activity which involves a wide range of organisations and many different forms of communication media. A service of information, advice, referral, counselling, guidance, advocacy and feedback of social, fiscal, ethical, political and cultural issues is recognised as the need for skilled information-aware and conscious community.

The term community librarianship refers to the "exploration of the relationship between the library and the people which it serves"².

3. FEATURES OF CI

The need for information has become greater as the society is becoming more and more complex. Those who wish to use CI

services will come from a wide range of socio-economic, cultural, education and other such backgrounds.

The public and academic libraries in collaboration with campaigning agencies like government, self-help and pressure groups, mass media, voluntary agencies, clubs and councils—all play a vital role in the CI network of a neighbourhood.

The availability of a wide range of diverse sources of information is fundamental for a healthy community so that information surrounds people which can be used to stimulate ideas and initiatives, and flourish. Information is an essential ingredient in community development; and the latter is an important factor in working towards participative democracy. The sustenance of the local community to cope with economic and social change depends heavily on access to information.

The level and complexity of the language used in community information service, both in oral and graphic encounters need to be simple and clear. Access to information is often not adequate to solve problems. This may require the involvement of a variety of community groups, organisations and the like. People living and working in communities tend to have very unstructured information environment.

In community groups and local development agencies, the formal provision of information tends to have a low priority. Often this is because, in under-resourced circumstances, information cannot be shown to be of direct relevance to their objectives. When one is dealing with the reality of poverty, ill-health or unemployment against other severe constraints, it is hard to justify the kinds of investment, for uncertain return, which information demands. What we are concerned with here, after all, is the kind of environment 'where the absence of information is a constant irritant rather than a major concern'. For people in households, the same tends to apply, except that the minor irritant is not constant but occasional and may be unpredictable. This means that there is a natural inertia in the home and in the neighbourhood environment for a systematic approach to information.

Some other problems in offering CI service by libraries and/or other organisations individually include low status funding of the library, physical and attitudinal barriers, and operational environment. However, all of them could possibly be overcome with serious efforts and attention. To be more effective, all the activities must operate from a secure base of carefully programmed aims and objectives.

4. LIBRARIES VERSUS CI

Though other communication media and other governmental and non-governmental/voluntary agencies handle these issues independently, the wide range of such services emphasise that CI is primarily a library function. By early 1970s, the library profession has realised its social responsibilities seriously. Particularly that the mission of a public library supports CI and it can serve CI beneficially to the society. And, its extended easy access to knowledge/ideas contribute to social enrichment and empowerment. Such developments are a reflection of a continuity of library purpose and the fact is that there are many missions rather than one.

A public library is already fulfilling its responsibilities with regard to social need by its fundamental functions of informing, educating and entertaining. With the recent developments in information technology and in the economy, the society is undergoing sea-changes. The direct and major impact is the division of society into two groups—the 'haves' and the 'havenots'—leading to the formation of a section termed as 'disadvantaged'. This would entail a much more structured and focused response than that at present available with the designation of 'community librarianship' as an area of high priority. A public library must challenge this deprivation of information and become demonstrably more responsive towards community.

5. CI NETWORK

No single institution can meet the information requirements of the modern society. Cooperation among organisations providing information to the community has now become an established practice across

many sectors. Public libraries, academic institutions, advice centres, voluntary groups, business organisations, statutory services, and the mass media are in regular contact with each other as part of their efforts to satisfy the increasing sophisticated demands expressed by the modern society. A user accessing one agency will often have to be referred to another, as each individual organisation has its own 'culture'—policies and practices.

Three types of inter-agency cooperation have been suggested by Owen McDowell³. The first is termed as 'networking', whereby two or more agencies may develop stronger links to improve the services each offers to its users. For example, a regular exchange of information via mailing newsletters and current awareness bulletins, etc. The second benefit of cooperative working is the potential it offers for increasing the level of resources available for providing information. For example, voluntary groups, local and health authorities and other interest groups come together to strengthen the information resources to provide health information. The third form of cooperative working is the strategic planning of library and information services within a particular locality. It would seem that there are a number of choices available to librarians wanting to improve their information services such as:

- (a) Improve the library holdings; arrange exhibitions and posters; publish pamphlets, leaflets, newsletters, information package, bulletins, house journals, self-help booklets, and directories; offer telephone help line designed to provide much of the information that is required as a means of developing the speedy form of provision of relevant material.
- (b) Improve information service on purely local matters and act as a referral agency or sign-posting agency to other local services

such as consumer affairs, household finances, housing, electricity and gas supply.

The range of these information services can be providing an explanation, notification, advice, guidance, practical aid, mediation, active referral campaign, updating, secretarial aid, self-help initiative, etc.

6. CONCLUSION

Libraries can make a provision for CI in two ways. They can try to provide a service direct to individuals and groups by running an advice desk/bureau/centre handled by specially trained professionals. Alternatively, they can provide this service indirectly in conjunction with other agencies targeted for focused group like disadvantaged community within a locality⁴. In urban areas, the role of library and information centre will be supplementing and complementing while in rural areas there will be a need to initiate this activity.

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