Information Supermarkets in the Context of Community Information Services

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Abstract

Community information (CI) is an umbrella concept. It can be described as 'survival information', hence the scope of CI will be proportionate to the numerous ways and means of survival of the members of the community. There is a need for controlling and institutionalisation of CI services. 'Information Supermarkets' in the context of CI which could be called as 'CI Supermarkets' (CISMs). This would ensure the availability of CI at 'one stop' information supermarkets to suit the information seeking behaviour of the modern customers. The paper discusses the need for information supermarkets in general and the CISM in particular, describing the nature and scope of CI. It briefly presents the important features of CISMs. The author opines that, with the emergence of Internet and Intranets, the concept of CISM will be a reality in near future.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of supermarkets is very recent one. Supermarkets have emerged in the modern world, where the consumer behaviour is different from that of the earlier societies. The consumers/customers of the modern times have a very limited time for shopping. They expect availability of everything at one place or point with reasonably good or high quality. To satisfy the changing needs and behaviour of the customers, the business world in the modern times has evolved supermarkets to sell their products more effectively and efficiently.

This being the case with marketing of essential commodities, what will be the fate of marketing of information services and products that are often done away with? To a large extent, many an information needy does not even have perception. There is also an element of indifference towards the use or consumption of information. Further, unlike essential goods and services, the information needed by members of the community will be widely varied and innumerable. The amount of time spent or wasted for obtaining required information is usually considerable, because of the information being widely scattered and geographically dispersed and almost uncontrolled and unorganised. Many a time, people loose interest in obtaining the required information, and thus, there is an attitude of doing away with information and its use or consumption. The same is true with CI because it is by and large, uncontrolled and flows through informal channels/information networks. Being informal channels, they are disorganised, and uncontrolled and thereby almost unknown and inaccessible to the seekers of information. Therefore, institutionalisation of CI is very much inevitable to counter these problems. When CI is institutionalised, the factor of one-stop availability or information flow through a single window is possible.

Hence, it is desirable to promote information supermarkets, because, of late, even the governments at state and central levels prefer to have single window system to facilitate the citizens.

Besides the very nature of CI implies the establishment of information supermarkets in the context of CI. Therefore, information supermarkets have to be promoted to facilitate the flow of CI through single window.

2. CI CENTRES ON THE ANALOGY OF SUPERMARKETS

According to Michael Edwards[5], "community information 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 solve problems in the fields of housing, disability, household finance, marriage, employment, and so on." Here Michael Edwards had listed only a few problems and the rest are implied with the expression 'so on', giving a greater scope for the concept of CI.

Whereas, Joseph Donohue[3], considered to be one of the earliest creators of CI, describes and defines CI as 'survival information' and 'citizen action information'. This implies the significance and scope of CI. Each member of the community will have his/her own ways and means of survival and the CI has to cover all walks of life. These definitions indicate that the concept of CI covers varied areas that are of interest and crucial need of different members of the community.

Summing up various definitions on CI, Durrance[4] opined that the most serviceable definition of community 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 called the former (information/ component of CI as defined by Donohue) 'information and referral (I&R)' and the latter 'public policy information (PPI)'. He added to these two 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 organisation, fraternal groups, and clubs. These three components for Durrance will constitute a basis for the understanding of presently practised and emerging CI services. Thus, according to Durrance "CI services is an umbrella term that encompasses these three components."

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 I&R component refers to survival information. But, in reality I&R is again an umbrella concept because it can include all types of information and referral services. Thus 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 that has not been dealt with clearly by him nor was clearly spelt out and discussed by anyone else. For example, information about medical specialists 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 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 the CI goes beyond the local boundaries, social groups and so on. The nature and scope of CI will be in conformity with and proportionate to the numerous ways and means of survival and citizen action of the member of the human community in general and the local community in particular. Therefore, the CI centre is an umbrella centre. Consequently, the

CI centres should be information supermarkets. In fact, as quoted by Bunch[1], Goodman[6] referred to the CI centres as one-stop information supermarkets as far back as 1976 itself.

Further, because of the nature of CI, the CI centres need to meet diverse information needs of the members of the community. There shall be no discrimination among the users of the CI centres by age, sex, caste, creed, economic and educational status, etc. The CI centre should collect all local, trans-local, public policy and subject and discipline-oriented information and develop referral databases.

The collection, organisation and functioning of these information centres may be on the same lines of supermarkets.

3. THE SUPERMARKET ANALOGY

The basic features of a supermarket in general are:

(a) Dealing with varied varieties of products to ensure availability of a number of products at one-spot,

(b) Super organisation and display of the products to attract the attention of the customer to each and every product, and

(c) Ensuring availability of quality and packed products, with an open access for the customers to reach, select and pick up the products, thereby saving the time of the customers.

The CI centres also should deal with a variety of items of information. They should be organised and displayed in such a manner that the moment the users enter the CI centre, they may find various items of information well displayed and accessible without much wastage of their time in information searching and retrieval.

4. INFORMATION COLLECTION

The information in CI centres should be supplied by the generators and distributors of the information or all persons who are concerned with their respective fields of operation or activity. This is essential because,

collection of CI will be very difficult by the information workers especially in those CI centres where there is meagre staff.

Further, it is difficult because of lack of control of the local, trans-local and other information. Therefore, as far as the CI is concerned, it is imperative on the part of the generators and the members of the community to contribute authentic and reliable CI, which they generate or acquire, to the CI centre. For instance, the local doctor may provide the CI, especially, in the field of medicine by offering voluntarily free-consultation, advisory and awareness generation services once or twice a week at the CI centre. He/she may also provide the CI centre with the pamphlets and other government and non-government publications on health and hygiene, which comes to the clinic/health centre.

In case of CI centres in urban areas, the hospitals, nursing homes and diagnostic centres may provide the local CI centres with information about the facilities and specialists available with them.

The local lawyer(s) may be associated with the CI centres to provide advocacy and legal advisory services and current material on important legal and legislative aspects, which are of higher concern to the public at large.

The agricultural extension officers may contribute information on their respective field. Thus, every official, expert, professional, etc. in the community may have to provide or supply information to the CI centre for the socio-economic development of his or her own community. There shall also be a few young voluntary information workers who will also collect much of the local information on behalf of the CI centre.

5. INFORMATION ORGANISATION

Information will be usually organised according to its subject. The organised information on shelves and in machine-readable form will have various retrieval aids and facilities. Apart from organisation of information on shelves and in machine-readable form, the CI may also be organised in a different fashion,

for better service, marketability and display. Much of the CI needs to be displayed as the commodities in supermarkets.

There will be several forms of CI which need to be displayed. These include: material, like pamphlets, pictures, and charts, and ephemeral material, especially pamphlets, prospectuses, etc. for dispensing purpose. The pictures and posters on health and hygiene, environment, agriculture, useful arts, etc. may be displayed on notice boards, show cases, and window-display, etc. meant for each subject. Thus, much of the current information should be displayed to the extent possible.

There should also be pamphlet-dispensing trays in which the dispensable pamphlets may be placed. The CI must also be organised and repackaged in a manner that suits the needs, taste, expectations and levels of the members of the community.

Information organisation should be a continuous housekeeping process. Updating the information is essential. There should be aesthetics in the display of the pamphlets, charts, posters, etc. The internal and external decoration and environment should be pleasing, attractive and welcoming. This is essential to create demand for and promote the optimum consumption of CI by the members of the community for personal and community development. The volunteers have to help the CI centre in organisation, updating and housekeeping operations also.

5.1 Service

The CI supermarket (CISM) may render all kinds of information services. It may render, a part from services already mentioned, community current awareness services, and selective dissemination of community information services. As listed by Bunch[2], they may also extend advocacy, advisory, practical help, etc. to all the members of the community.

5.2 Staff

The staff should be well trained information workers with marketing and communication skills. The size of the staff should be considerably moderate. A single information worker or a single staff CI centre will be most unhelpful. There must be at least three staff members. One on information receiving side, second on information organisation and third on rendering personalised information services and coordinating the efforts and service of the volunteers. The volunteers (voluntary information workers) also form part of the staff of the CI centre. They need training, coordination and motivation.

6. CISM REALITY

In view of the scope and nature of CI, many experts in the field expressed doubts relating to the feasibility of rendering CI services; some have opposed to the very concept itself. Wilson[7] feels that the use of the term CI itself is certainly dangerous for librarians as it conflicts with similar areas and services of information dealt with by other departments. He cites an example of social welfare, an area of information, advice and advocacy in the US.

However, there has been considerable growth of several CI services in the Great Britain, USA, Canada, Australia, etc. Some of the African and South American countries have been curious to develop the concept and the service in recent past. Further, in view of the emerging IT, information super highways and global networks, CISM will be a reality. Particularly the availability of internet and the intranets facilitate the emergence and development of a true and practical CISM. The CI services through internet will be so effective and efficient, provided there will be speedier lines without traffic jams, through which the CI may be rendered in its true spirit. As far as the local information is concerned, even information about an individual member of a community can be accessed and provided when there is a web site of the member on the internet. This is an ultimate facility for rendering the CI services. However, it takes time for every organisation and individual to be on the WWW. Once a fully matured web emerges, the CI centres could be one-stop information centres. Information access will be easier and the amount of time spent will be minimal. In fact, the idea of internet and intranets is to facilitate the universal flow of information in general and

CI in particular. In spite of the emergence of CISMs, there will be a need for intermediaries and information providers. The modern technology will merely help the system, but it will not be able to replace the system.

Further, in the third world, it will be a long way to go to realise the objective of accessibility and affordability of IT on the part of each and every household. In view of this, the CISMs backed by Internet and planned CI control in every country will transform the developing societies into the information societies in the 21st century.

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