

COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICES IN PUBLIC LIBRARY: CONCEPT AND NEED

Pushpanjali S. Patil

Librarian

Shri Chamundamata Homoeopathic , Jalgaon

Dr. Shamkant J Deshmukh

Librarian

Nutan Maratha College

Medical College, Jalgaon

Abstract

Public libraries, being the library of communities can play important role in providing effective Community Information Services. This paper deals with the design and development of public library based computerized community information services. This paper discusses the definition of CI, concept of CIS. In this paper highlights the components of CIS, Need of CIS, Community Information Service and Public Libraries. Further, discuss the new role for public libraries

1. Introduction

Information is so essential that it has become part of every human being. All human beings have information need, either individual or collective. And it is information transfer and information revolution through which cultural change; socio-economic development of a nation is possible. Information is that basic need of life, which helps in the proper fulfillment of other needs such as food, shelter etc. for its survival and growth. Without this information, it is difficult to go through the challenging process of life. As a matter of fact, every organization 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.

Like any other socio-cultural concept, the concept of Community Information (CI) is easy to understand but hard to define. Unfortunately CI inherits some of the vagaries of two component terms- *community* and *information*. Community services have existed in India since the inception of Gram Panchayats, but the term Community Information Services (CISs) is of recent origin and may have its roots in the west. It has been emerging as a facet

of public library system in the developed countries; with UK and USA taking the lead in this regard. Community Information (CI) may be defined as information for the problems and crises encountered by individuals and their independence at different stages in their lives. It is the information for self-reliance and self-determination. It is the information in the community for the community. According to Allan Bunch, who first attempted systemization of CISs, the CI may broadly be divided into two groups:-

- Survival information such as that related to health, housing, income, legal protection, economic opportunities, political rights, civil rights etc.
- Citizen action information, needed for effective participation as individuals or as members of a group in the social, political, legal, and economic process. It includes basically public policy information such as information about the government, and its operation, programmed, plans, schemes, activities, agencies etc. These information at the local level and trans-local level will help community development.

Hence it can be rightly said that without information, survival and development of any community is not possible. Therefore it is the basic responsibility of any welfare government to provide information services to communities. But in India, this important task of providing Community Information Service (CIS) is performed by many governmental, non-governmental voluntary organizations in their own way. There is no single agency to collect, reorganize and disseminate community information in a suitable form as per the requirement of different communities. In this context, Public libraries, being the library of communities can play important role in providing effective Community Information Services. These are the only institutions entrusted with the duties of providing right information to right users at right time, there by help people to deal with daily problem solving or in improving the quality of their lives.

2. Community Information Service (CIS): The Concept

Community Information (CI) is the combination of two terms i.e. Community and Information. The term “Information” is used to identify many concepts; hence it is extremely difficult to define it precisely. Normally, information is a message, communicated by a communicator to a receiver. It is the product of human action in mind, which may be abstract or concrete. Therefore it is the raw material that is used in knowing, making decisions, taking actions, thinking and learning. **Reid** defines information as “a process rather than as material. Data only becomes information by the act of imparting it.” Information can be regarded as

data, which can be transmitted between individuals, and each individual can make use of it in whatever form he/she wants. When information becomes publicly recorded, it becomes objective knowledge available to all.

Community is a body of people in the same locality or a body of people leading a common life or a group of people having common rights or a group of people having a common possession or enjoyment. **Giggey** defines community as “a group of people who have something common. This can be their age, education, religion, interest, political affiliation, activities, work, possession or a combination of two or more of these.” Similarly **Usherwood** defines community in a comprehensive way that “any geographical community or neighborhood will be made up of a number of communities definable by race, social class, or income group, employment, leisure interest, religion and so on, each with its own informal information network that has grown up without the help of librarians or any other information advice workers.” Thus community in general indicates towards a group of people having common interests. However, neither they can be assumed nor they can be created to legitimate a political programmed or to support a plan for action. In the context of librarianship, it is a group of people with shared meaning and shared communication.

Community Information (CI) is the information for the survival and growth of the community or it is that information which is required by the member of the community to make effective use of the available resources around them. In this context **Kempson** has rightly defined CI as “information of self-reliance and self-determination”. Thus CI is that information which helps to solve their day to day problems related to survival such as health, education, housing, legal protection, sound economic development, political rights etc and also to participate in social, political, cultural, legal and economic progress of the society either individually or collectively.

The information services through which community information (CI) is provided to communities is called Community Information Service (CIS).

3. Components of CIS

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

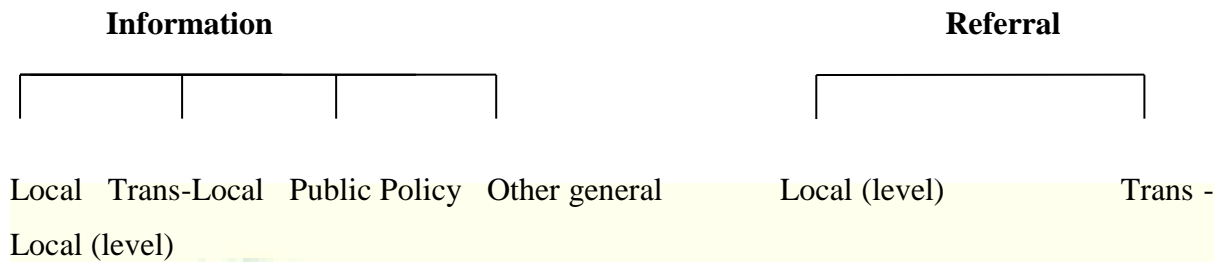


Figure 1: Schematic representation of components of community information services (CISs)

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 organizations, fraternal groups and clubs.

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 neighborhood localities and/or trans-local areas).

Public Policy Information Defined as information about the Government, and its operation, programmers, plans, schemes, activities, agencies, etc.

General information (i.e., conventional discipline- oriented information Defined as awareness generating information on important subject area 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. Need for CIS

The social system is undergoing a vast change with the development of information generation and information technology, which has clearly divided the society into two groups i.e. 'have' and 'have not'. The 'have not' group has led to the formation of a section called 'disadvantaged' and the people under this group are not in a position to help themselves. In this context, there is high need for community information service to help these people. Lack of access to information i.e. both public and private information is one of the major drawbacks for community development. Access to information leads to deprivation from a certain standard of life. In addition, lack of access to governmental information leads to low participation in governmental processes, which hampers the developmental process of a community and nation.

Society and social system must change with time. Lack of CIS affects this changing process and creates social imbalance. In this context **Bundy** has rightly described that "Access to information does not in itself give people power over their lives but lack of access to information can render a person powerless in the sense of being unable to exercise intelligent life options"⁵. Therefore CIS is very much needed to make the people of a community informed about the changes around themselves and to improve their standard of living in all respect.

In the present information age, information is considered to be a resource, a product and thereby a need. Hence, the problem of developing countries is not merely economic poverty but also information poverty, which should be met on a priority basis. Such kind of productive, survival and developmental information is called Community Information (CI) which is crucial for socioeconomic development of a community.

5. CIS through Public Libraries: Why and How

CIS may have its origin in west but in India also dissemination of community information through CIS has been taking place since times immemorial. In ancient India, the CIS could be traced back to the inception of dandora, clay tablets, palm leaves and edicts of Ashoka. For instance, during royal administration, information about the local events, taxation, penal sanctions, royal policies, public policies etc were used to reach the

people through the medium of dandora and these works were carried out by an officially engaged team who would beat the drums and attract the attention of the public and then announce the message loudly. This was also a popular medium of communication of information in rural India at that time. Similarly, during Ashoka Empire, the edicts of Ashoka were clearly illustrated to disseminate it to public. Later on, these information and messages were recorded on various types of inscriptions. But all these services were made informally. In independence India, CIS started somewhat in a formal way since the inception of Gram Panchayat. In rural India, these Gramasabhas were serving as the community information center by summing up the local and other events and planning of various social, cultural and political activities.

With the advent and advances of communication and information technologies, the mass media and print media have undertaken the responsibility of performing CIS in their own way but with a wider coverage.

Gradually all these publicly recorded knowledge, starting from clay tablets, pamphlets, books and non-book materials were started to store in a place for its further use, called library. Thus since the dawn of human civilization and formation of civilized societies, the human beings are in need of community information and the libraries. Among different types, the public libraries are performing the duties of providing it either in a formal or non-formal way.

Public libraries that are entrusted with the basic duty of preserving the recorded knowledge of past and present for future use are also responsible for providing required information to the surrounding communities. Besides, in changing situation of society, public libraries are facing new challenges. On one hand there is tremendous pressure due to information explosion, development of new information technologies etc for acquiring latest information on all fields of knowledge, on the other hand there is an increasing demand for pinpointed exhaustive and accurate information in quickest possible time. Thus in the changing library environment, public libraries have no way other than to shift towards information based community oriented libraries rather than repository centers of books and other documents. Failing which, the existence of these libraries will reduced to the status of a store house of books and other printed documents.

Basically CIS has two common aspects i.e. general community information services (GCIS) which is anticipatory in nature and specific community information services(SCIS), which is responsive in nature basing upon the information need of the community. GCIS provides information common to all and help people to solve their day-to-day problems. For

instance information on health, education, transport, employment, consumer problems, entertainment, housing, banking system, governmental agencies, legal information etc should be included under general CIS, which will help to increase the quality of lives. SCIS is concerned with specific target groups, such as those belonging to the lower socio-economic groups, the disadvantaged, or person with information on a specific problem. For instance a person want information on a specific problem of agriculture, or on animal husbandry or on establishment of a small scale industry or utilization of available local resources, or an a particular governmental / non-governmental agency and its activities etc. This service can be performed by various methods such as counseling, referral, practical help, advice, advocacy, community education, self-help, escort, liasioning with different governmental and non-governmental agencies / experts etc. This service will improvements in their lives.

6. Community Information Service and Public Libraries

Public libraries had long been a 'Free Space' or a neutral place in the community, which welcomed people from different walks of life. Public libraries in many parts of the world are oriented towards middle-class segment that tended to be from a relatively advantaged and educationally elite group in the society. Public libraries are best known for the support in recreational reading but a large section of the community that Indian public libraries are serving requires survival information. There is a close relationship between lack of access to information and deprivation. It is the public library that must meet the challenge of poverty and deprivation. It is this requirement that distinguishes public librarianship from other types of library work.

Public library system could provide the requisite institutional mechanism for the community information support system. A public library is already fulfilling its responsibilities by its fundamental functions of informing, educating and entertaining. But it has no mechanism to address the information need of the disadvantaged section of the society. CIS may help public library system to overcome this limitation. While there is overlap between public library and CIS provision, Coleman [4] defines four distinguished characteristics of community information work:

- CIS offers materials that are different in both context and nature. The subject matter deals directly with the lives of people and the materials are often ephemeral, consisting of newspaper cutting, pamphlets and leaflets. There are virtually no established library procedures for either obtaining or organizing this type of material

- In CIS, the degree of interaction needed to establish the user's problem is greater than that usually engaged in traditional public librarianship
- CIS rely on close links with other agencies. It is part of an overall network of information and advises agencies. A CIS cannot operate in isolation. It will depend on other agencies/groups for information gathering and will need to refer users to them
- CISs are based on the principle that everyone has a right to equal access to information and to the nations resources. In this sense, it is not a service but an aid to making democracy work. This point truly characterizes CIS

Therefore, community librarianship requires some special skills to fulfill all the necessities of CIS. Community librarianship is another form of librarianship for promoting library and information services to groups within the community whose needs are not adequately met at present by traditional library services. Community librarianship requires new attitudes of mind together with alternative techniques and appropriate training facilities. The need for close working links with other voluntary and statutory agencies is a must for community librarianship. At the action plane community librarianship may be manifested in two ways ³/₄ service to the disadvantages and outreach. The first one helps to raise the general level of interest in library service to the disadvantaged class [includes the economically deprived, the poor and the unemployed, senior citizens, deprived young people, people with language & literacy programmed and the physically and mentally handicapped]. The second one is the activities or programmed undertaken in addition to traditional library services with the intension of reaching to disadvantaged population. It is the librarianship beyond the four walls of a library. It involves two concepts³/₄ make & break. It makes it possible to reach outside the library into deprived people who are 'information poor' as well as lacking in material resources. It also breaks the traditional library notion of neutrality in the name social justice.

7. New Roles for Public Libraries

New roles for public libraries in the evolving networked environment are still being developed. But clearly, the *electronic* public library in the global networked environment has the potential to be a community resource center -- with the term community being defined very differently than in traditional use. These roles might be to:

- Introduce new information technologies to the community

- Demonstrate applications and uses of networking for education, lifelong learning, economic development, and a range of other applications
- Be a local access point to a range of government information resources and services
- Create, maintain, and organize electronic community information
- Provide public access interactive video conferencing for the public to conduct a range of activities including electronic commerce and interaction with state, local, and Federal government
- Equalize access such that all Victorian Public Libraries and the Internet: Results and Issues Bertot & McClure 40 members of the local community can realize the benefits from "being connected" to the global networked environment
- Provide training to community residents on how to use the Internet and interact successfully with a range of service being provided via the net
- Promote collaboration among schools, local governments, and other community groups to use the Internet

While the library can also serve as a safety net, a place of last resort to access and use the global information network, its greatest potential lies in serving as place of *first* resort to access and use the Internet. Electronic resources of all types and forms would be publicly available for those who cannot connect from the home or workplace. Librarians and educators would serve as electronic intermediaries, navigators, and instructors -- being actively involved in assisting people for the best use of network services. Parents, students, adult learners, educators and others could work interactively and inter-dependently on projects and activities that we can only begin to imagine now. The library, as a publicly supported institution, with strong local community ties, is well suited to serve in this role. A major role for public libraries is to reduce socioeconomic gaps and to tap the full potential of the network and provide equal opportunity to networked services and electronic information resources.

8. Conclusion

CIS is an important issue, and it has been theoretically accepted that a public library system can play a major role in it. Public libraries contribute immensely to the educational attainment of rural people. It has always been the door to learning for a great majority of the populations that they serve. In defining the concept of library, Rubakin, the famous Russian biblio- psychologist and educator opined that "it is not just a shop where books are to be had;

it is an advisor, a guide, a friend. It must go out to reader, bring him in rather than wait for him to come of his own accord

The services should be concentrated on the needs of those who do not have ready access to other sources of assistance and on the most important problems that people usually face, problems to do with their homes, their jobs and their rights. To perform such vital functions by the public libraries

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