Internet: Importance and Usage for Library and Information Professionals

Neena Singh

Abstract

The paper focuses on the impact of Internet on various library processes, services and products. It also emphasises the challenging role of librarians and information professionals in the present Internet era. Today the Internet has revolutionised the traditional library activities viz document acquisition, technical processing, circulation, reference service, resource sharing, document delivery, etc. The paper also emphasises the crucial role of librarians and information professionals in designing and maintaining libraries' web page/website leading to increase in library efficiency.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant achievement in the information and communication sector is the introduction of advanced communication network i.e., the Internet, the technology connecting a computer with millions of computers in the network. The Internet today has become one of the most important mode of communication and its services are being exploited by people in every walk of life such as business, education, defence, medicine, etc. In the field of library and information science, the Internet has become one of the most popular and talked about subject. In fact the library profession is one that has been most intensely affected by the challenges of Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW). The shift from collection management to information management, from ownership to access, and the change in nature, boundaries and structure of information all call for a change in mind set of library professionals.

The library professionals need to position themselves as leaders not only in information field but also in the field of information technology. One can do it by information organisation and management on Internet and by designing and maintaining library website. Libraries can also project their collections and activities on the site and supplement their services by exploiting the Internet. The scope is unlimited, all that is required is selective and imaginative applications to library activities.

Before we see the opportunities the Internet and the WWW offer to the library and information professionals, it is better to have brief about what Internet is.

2. WHAT IS INTERNET

The term Internet has been coined from a concept inter-networking that denotes interaction between networking of computers. It is an umbrella under which different networks, small and big, freely exchange information across the globe. Internet, thus, can broadly be defined as world wide network of computers communicating via an agreed upon protocol (rules for exchange of information). It provides access to the most diversified source of information hosted by individuals and various organisation world wide on a vast network of servers.[1]

Internet gives on to the world web, the interconnections to thousands of servers

created by various organisations, commercial establishments, industrial units, academic establishments, various groups, individuals. The web pages loaded on various servers provide variety of information in the form of text, graphics, animation, multimedia, etc. either free of cost or for a modest fee.

The main characteristic of Internet and the WWW are:

(a) Users across the world can connect or access information irrespective of time and space factor.

(b) Point to point communication, rather than one to many broadcast communication.

(c) Provides access to large number of databases.

(d) The facility of hyper linking from one server to another by clicking on a highlighted word which enables the user to directly switch to another data source, on the other side of the world.

(e) Instant and interactive community creation on a global base.

The Internet therefore, is a vast electronic library made up of millions of pages of information stored in hundreds of thousands of linked computers a the globe. The Web has brought to the desk top, not only metadata sources like bibliographic databases and table of contents, but also full text of journals, preprints, technical reports, patents, courseware, etc.

3. IMPORTANCE OF INTERNET TO LIBRARIES

Internet has become a part of library environment today. It has added a great value to the library and information services. According to Gryez, "with the expansion of Internet a new class of electronic document has emerged, it was at once promising and attractive for its obvious advantage of speed and transmissibility and profoundly elusive and confounding to the library community because of its intangibility and malleability. Within the last ten years, the Internet has become global and ubiquitous. It reaches in hundreds of countries of all continents and is featured daily in the business sections of all major news papers."[2]

Internet is playing an important role in transforming the library system and the way in which we view the library resources and the library services. With the help of web based library services in developed countries, users are attended round the clock. Internet provides links to various library sites, specializing in almost every topic and they can be accessed directly from any part of the world. As the libraries are going web based more and more libraries' are becoming accessible via libraries' web pages. With an Internet connection, a student in any university of India can browse through the documents in computers of US National libraries or else where in the globe. The Net therefore, provides instant access to billions of information sources which include books, reports, journals, video films, sound recording and wide variety of other sources. The library and information professionals have a vital role to play in organising the information and bridging the information gap. Internet has created some of the following new and different service operations:

(a) By designing clearly organised, easily accessible and well published library web sites librarians can extend the traditional librarianship to the use of information technology and seize a leadership role in both fields.

(b) The libraries can initiate Bulletin Board Service which gives complete information regarding services, products, and various events organised by them.

(c) Ready reference service can be provided with greater speed and in much shorter time.

(d) Books and journals can be ordered online, technical processing of the documents too can be done without much effort.

(e) E-mail services can be used for delivering information to the users and communicating with the fellow information professionals.

(f) E- SDI services can be used for delivering information to the users.

(g) Access to various databases and OPAC of other libraries located in remote areas can be provided.

Internet has thus integrated nearly all library activities e-mail, discussion through listserves,

support reference service through search of remote databases, exploiting the catalogue of other institutions, participation in inter-library loan (ILL), ordering books and journals, inter-library loan establishing home page, etc.

Under these circumstances resource sharing and cooperative functioning of the libraries through Internet has also become vital. The utilisation of facilities by them largely depend on getting Internet connection and exploiting its services and resources for providing better access to global information. The scope is unlimited or rather limited to the imagination of library professionals.

4. NEED OF LIBRARY PROFESSIONALS IN THE INTERNET ERA

Librarians acting as custodians of information have gone through a dramatic change and from providing document to their clienteles have switched to be information providers. The role of librarian as information organiser and a navigator has gained importance in the Internet era.

The library professionals need to focus and seize new opportunities and demonstrate how the tools of Internet can be gainfully harnessed for improving library services.

Internet can be viewed as the biggest library in the world in which information is not properly structured and organised, there are no standardised rules of classification or access. Recent/current literature shows that the best search engines on the Internet allows access to only approximately 30% of the information corresponding to search. This underlines the inadequate methods used to access information despite the best available search engines.[3]

Moreover, there is no guarantee that same query expressed in the same language using various search engines will give same results. The information on the Internet is stored in an unstructured way with innumerable databases, each having its own searching interface, also the volatile nature of sites, lack of information on these sites will come in the way of accessing the Internet.[4] Taking into account the current and foreseeable increase in the number of documents or the web sites on the Internet, these issues will become the crucial problems in access to information It is therefore, important to seek a definition of catalogue, indexes and thesauri and help of library professional which would provide homogenous access to information and data.

Internet has many other drawbacks like lack of comprehensiveness, coverage, the inability to distinguish between popular material and research work, lack of controlled vocabulary and also a casual approach of the web page designer often makes the web databases more difficult to search. In addition to this, according to a latest report, a search engine covers only 15% of the total database available on the Internet.[5]

Librarians can play a greater role in identification, listing, and classifying information sources and providing systematic approach to accessing the required information. This way they can take rightful place as human agent along side the search engine in searching the Internet. In the due course of time the librarians will have to develop new indexing methods and evaluation techniques to tap information from the Internet and also establish the classification modes in a open way to allow for those addition of new categories of document that may differ from original priorities. Hence, the uncertainties raised by some people that Internet may be a threat to library and library science profession is no longer true.

5. ROLE OF INTERNET IN DISCHARGING LIBRARY FUNCTIONS

Internet is playing an important role in discharging the functions of libraries. It is changing the ways, the librarians organise, manage and disseminate information. With more and more documents getting published electronically and Internet resources growing at 18% a month, libraries of 21st century will have to shift towards electronic means of acquiring, processing and disseminating information.[6]

Today all sorts of library services from membership registration to document delivery can be offered through the Internet. The trend is quite evident from the web sites of American