

Library Consortium and Contemporary Scenario of North Eastern Academic Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Discusses the problems associated with academic libraries of North east for resource sharing. Reviews related literature and surveys the current automation status of some academic libraries. Gives various suggestions for a functional consortium for the libraries of North east.

KEYWORDS : Library Cooperation, North East, Academic Libraries, Libraries Consortium.

0. INTRODUCTION

Library consortium is an idea conceived and evolved from library cooperation. Cooperation among libraries, documentation, and information centres have been in longstanding existence in the form of producing shared catalogue, union catalogue, joint services and resource sharing by providing interlibrary lending services. Knowledge explosion and proliferation of scientific journals during the late 20th century compel the libraries to cooperate. The reason to cooperate was compounded by spiralling prices of scientific journals and concurrent cuts in the library budgets. Resource sharing became the only means to access the information which otherwise was unaffordable. Consortium is another form of cooperation for resource sharing. According to Chartron (2001) "the term consortium is derived from the field of economics and refers to the grouping together of

different independent companies in order to bring together financial or material resources under a single managing body for the joint performance of specific operations. A consortium may comprise an informal group with reciprocal agreements between partners or it may constitute a separate legal entity in itself. A purchasing group may be considered as an example of an informal consortium." The idea of consortia became more relevant and practical for libraries with advance technologies that facilitate the availability of heaps of information accessible from anywhere.

It has taken many years for library automation to reach a stage where the librarians' objective of integrated online access to information is truly available. This objective continues to change with the developments in information technologies especially with the advent of internet and World Wide Web. "Another evolving desire is to have online library system function as the document management system or at least to interface with the document management system... based on web technology" (Pamela, 1999). The current and emerging trend is to collectively develop and share databases, integrated library systems, collection development, purchase of electronic journals and staff development.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Though the idea of cooperation was in existence for many years now, library consortium is still at its nascent stage in many countries. Being an emerging development where the number of participating libraries is increasing everyday much attention is placed on library consortia and consequently a good deal of literature has been written about it. The focal point of most of the literatures is on case studies determining the feasibility aspect of consortia. Nfila and Darko-Ampem (2002) traces the history of library consortium from 1960's through 2000 and report that in 1997, an international Association of library consortium was formed. Most of the literatures, as mentioned earlier, investigate consortium in the light of a given geographical or political area. Rao (2001) reports about the status of the existing library and information networks in India. Mclean (1999) and Steele (1999) and Brodie (1999) examined the characteristics underpinning resource sharing among university libraries in Australia on how the information revolution poses global challenges in times of infrastructure and use of internet. They argue that Australia lack resource coordination at a national level, but several important initiatives are underway. A survey conducted on French research libraries about electronic resources and documentary consortia show that libraries are in the process of purchasing groups for printed resources. Chartron (2001) further reports the absence of a determined policy concerning electronic scientific documentation at national or any other level. Ashoor (2000) suggests few guidelines for the Arabian Gulf regions and concludes that libraries in the region should enter into partnership to establish virtual electronic library. Giordano (2002) traces the history of information communication technologies in Italian libraries with reference to library networks and digital cooperation initiatives.

It is evident from the above literature that every region or country appears to have some unique and confined problems. These are barriers not necessarily of library consortium and hence, the perfect solution for a given place is not necessarily the same for another. However, identification of the factors impeding library consortium is vital in order to address the issue suitably.

2. PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH LIBRARY CONSORTIA

Owing to the increasing prices of information and limited resources more and more libraries are opting for consortium to overcome these information barriers. It has been proved beyond doubt that consortiums are cost effective. Consortiums of the libraries can save a lot of expenditure and this money can be redirected in enhancing other facilities in the libraries. Nevertheless, a rational innovation like consortium has its own inherent problems that delay or even prevent the library from taking up such initiatives especially in the north eastern part of India. Some of the factors holding up the proper implementation of consortia in the North east are :

1. *Lack of complete automation:* A consortia without sharing the resources of the participating libraries is limited to online subscriptions made available from the gateway portal. Many libraries are allowed to jump into the ban wagon of consortia without considering its automation status. With the availability of some internet connectivity this will allow such libraries to access the resources of other member libraries but their recourse remains inaccessible till complete automation is done.
2. *Lack of resource:* The resources of all participating libraries need to be balanced to certain extent. Without some form of parity of collection of each library there is a risk of one library becoming a lending library while others remain borrowing libraries. A participating library with very few resources is a loss to the libraries which have lots to offer.
3. *Absence of any culture of interlibrary lending:* Participating libraries should be open to interlibrary loan. Availability of information on the participating libraries' collection does not facilitate resource sharing unless the libraries are willing to lend them out on loans. Traditionally, no interlibrary loan facilities or any form of co-operation is functional in the North east.
4. *Relative isolation from the main stream:* Distance from the mainland and infrastructural development remains in the infant stage and main constraint in development. Owing to its geographical and cultural isolation, many ideas and policies developed from the mainland are, most of the time, irrelevant in the North east.
5. *Absence of any kind of union catalogue of libraries:* In the absence of union catalogue, participating libraries would be left in the dark of what is available with which library.
6. *Un-availability of Web environment:* Un-availability of web environment will stop the participating libraries from accessing online subscriptions. Making each library resources available online would, on the other hand, facilitate greater access. Internet connectivity is still in primitive stages which make online consortia almost unfeasible.
7. *Specific institutional problems:* Every institution has its own specific problems related to work culture, environmental differences. For example working hours is quite limited in the North east India especially in winter.
8. *Lack of leadership/initiation:* Excellent library leadership will begin with the notion of enabling every one who works in the library to grow in knowledge, ability, and commitment as the primary task. Appropriate image for librarians is the one who knows his staff very well and motivates the staff constantly to work. Is really this happening in the library? We

can conclude by saying that a library short of resources can borrow them but a library short on leadership has little chance to survive.

3. THE NORTH EASTERN SCENE

It will still take time for libraries in the North East India to reach a state where a concerted goal of libraries to integrated online access to information in the library is truly available. Web based interfaces to catalogue serials and acquisitions etc... are still a far cry not only in North East but the whole of India. Despite of such factors impeding the consortia initiatives, university libraries in the North East are coming up to be at par with the mainstream. With the advent of UGC-Infonet, Agrilibnet, INDEST etc. university libraries in the North East are planning to become part of these consortiums. Five technical institutes including Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati are part of INDEST while other libraries are still at the initial stage of planning to become members through Inflibnet. With Inflibnet spearheading Agrilibnet for agricultural libraries and UGC-Infonet for other University libraries, many of the universities will become consortium member in the near future. It will be of interest to know the present situation in various university libraries in North East. The present scenario of Northeast University libraries are summarised in table 1 "Present information technology status of university libraries-1" and table 2. "Present information technology status of university libraries-2" Data could not be collected from four universities namely Manipur University, Nagaland University, Central Agricultural University and Tripura University. Through personal observation of these universities, it can be safely said that situation in these four universities is not different from other universities in North East.

Table 1

Present Information Technology Status of University Libraries-1				
Sl. No.	Name of the University	Year of Establishment	Total Collection	Database Record
1.	Arunachal University	1986	32,556	32,556
2.	Assam Agricultural University	1969	90,559	30,000
3.	Dibrugarh University	1968	1,73,497	1,72,497
4.	Gauhati University	1948	5,34,393	16,000
5.	IIT Guwahati	-----	55,000	55,000
6.	Mizoram University	2001	28,000	None
7.	North Eastern Hill University	1973	2,20,000 (above)	1,30,000 (approx.)
8.	Tezpur University	1994	25,400	25,400

It is very clear from the above table that all the libraries are in initial stages of automation. The first stage of library automation, creating complete database of all records is also not complete in most of the libraries. Some of the newer universities have not even started whereas some have completed creating database of their records. The following table will reveal more information about these libraries.

Table 2

Present Information Technology Status of University Libraries-2

Sl. No.	Name of the University	Library Software	No. of Computers	Local Area Network	Internet Connection Type	Internet for Users	Plan for Consortia	IT Trained Staff
1.	Arunachal University	CDS/ISIS, LIBSYS	7	UNIX	PSTN	Available	Yes	4
2.	Assam Agri. University	CDS/ISIS	16	Yes	VSAT	Available	Agrilibnet	3
3.	Dibrugarh University	CDS/ISIS	20	Yes	VSAT	Available	UGC-Infonet	7
4.	Gauhati University	CDS/ISIS	6	Yes	PSTN	Available	UGC-Infonet	12
5.	IIT Guwahati	LIBSYS	12	Yes	ERNET/STPI	Available	INDEST	11
6.	Mizoram University	None	4	Yes	PSTN	Available	Yes	None
7.	North Eastern University	LIBSYS	30	Windows NT	PSTN	Available	UGC-Infonet	2
8.	Tezpur University	LIBSYS	9	Yes	VSAT	Available	UGC-Infonet	Nil

Considering the geographical topography and lack of infrastructure the North Eastern states are a unique cases with embedded complications for suitable connectivity. In such a terrain like the North East connectivity through VSAT is one answer to the problems. But as far as the present scenario is concerned majority of the libraries does not have VSAT facility and they are connected through PSTN lines, which may not be enough for library users' access. To actively participate in the library consortium the university libraries should have dedicated VSAT facilities.

The configuration of Local Area Network in the libraries as reported in table 2 reflects, to some extent, the automation scenario of the libraries. However, most libraries did not specify the software used for the same. Another important aspect is the number of staff trained in information technology. For a fully automated library most of the staff should have some knowledge of IT. All the participating university libraries claim to have user access to Internet. North Eastern Hill University with 30 computers have maximum number computer and Mizoram University with only 4 computers have the minimum. Considering the number of computers in each library the number

of terminals available for Internet access would not be sufficient. This will, to some extent, limit the access to online information to the faculty and university employee with online computer terminal in the office. Research scholars and other students will have to manage with few terminals available in the library. Despite of the drawbacks in the infrastructure development and pressurised by the advances in information technology University libraries of the North east India are already or ready to become a member of library consortium.

4. SUGGESTIONS

Bearing in mind the readiness of the libraries in Northeast India certain issues need immediate and proper execution. INFIBNET has initiated UGC-Infonet to which the university libraries of the northeast are willing to participate. Under this scheme selected gateway portals will provide customised access to the online resources and resources of other libraries. Online resources can be accessed anytime with any form of internet connection. But adequate user accessibility should be made available by increasing the point of access in the libraries and within the campus. Access point in the library requires more computer terminals which the libraries, presently, are not adequately equip with. The other aspect that requires instantaneous attention is access to resources of participating libraries. For this purpose database creation of all collection is the primary requisite. Automation of libraries and making the resources available online will finally facilitate resources sharing. Another important aspect is union catalogue which should also be updated from time to time. Availability of union catalogue with at least one gateway portal is a must and libraries in the north east should start developing union catalogue. Lack of infrastructural resources remains the core issue and other related issues are:

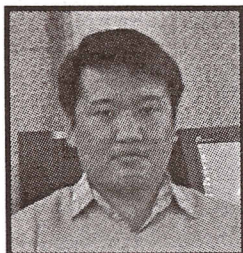
1. *To provide training and consultation in emerging area:* Consortia can play an invaluable role by providing training and consultative services in areas such as – knowledge management, web design etc.
2. *Decision about services:* All consortia are faced with the challenge to provide services that are relevant to the members. Prediction of information needs of users and providing relevant service will be one of the important tasks of consortia. A regular assessment of demand of service will also be required because of services is the main objective of any consortia.
3. *Leadership initiation:* Libraries professionals should take initiatives in creating a consortia model conducive specifically to the North eastern libraries. In this regard, teachers, librarians, and library associations can come together and work out a model.

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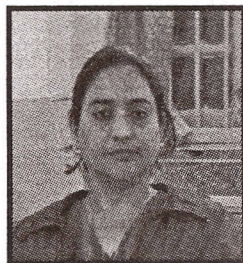
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