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## Role of Public Libraries in Providing Community Information Services: A Review

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### Md. Abdul Karim

Lecturer

Institute of Information Sciences

Noakhali Science and Technology University

Noiakhali, Bangladesh

makarim.iis@nstu.edu.bd

### Md. Emdadul Islam

Lecturer

Institute of Information Sciences

Noakhali Science and Technology University

Noakhali, Bangladesh

### Abstract

*This paper reviews selected research studies on role of public libraries in providing community information services in several developed and developing countries with an aim to identify some of the key issues and future research directions in this field through critical desktop review. The analysis suggests that the public libraries' role among community people from all countries are very similar, although community people they do vary from region to region and from country to country depending on socio-economic conditions. These services are mostly related to the daily life of community people.*

### Keywords

Public Libraries; Community Information Services; Community People; Literature Reviews

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## Introduction

There is much potential for community information services, and for the public library to become involved in developing and managing these services. We passionately believe that libraries build community, and know that we are not alone in this belief. Our faith in libraries' ability to strengthen communities puts us in the company of many insightful professionals in the library and community development fields. Public libraries are integral to both democratic societies and the idea of democracy. California's state librarian emeritus Kevin Starr (2012) agrees, noting on the state library's website that "free public library service is the basis of our democracy and will keep us a free nation. Democratic values depend on the free flow of information and knowledge with each individual assured the right and the privilege and the ability to choose and to pursue any direction of thought, study, or action." Public libraries can be lifelines for individuals who are unwelcome or excluded by others. GhadaElturk (2003) describes the reality:

When these communities (newcomers and minorities) come to the library, especially the public library, it is sometimes the only and last safe and welcoming place left in their lives. By the time they are at our doors they have already experienced discrimination at every stop on their way: the gas station, school. Workplace, restaurant . . . the list goes on. (5)

## Community Information Services

Community information(CI) is a 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 such type of information needed by the members of the community for effective use of available resources to solve their day-to-day problems. Giggey (1988) 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".

According to Susan Fleetwood "Community Information is considered to be that information required by members of the public (or these 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

help solve problems in the fields of housing, disability, household finance, marriage, employment and so on”.

CI is information for the survival and growth of the community, or information required by members of the community to make effective use of the available resources around them. The information service through which CI is provided to communities is called Community Information Service (CIS).

It may be worthwhile to look at two definitions of this concept in order to understand the focus and scope of CIS. Joseph (1993) described CIS in 1976 as offering: Survival information, such as that related to health, housing, income, legal protection, economic opportunity, and political rights. Citizen action information, needed for effective participation as individuals or as members of a group in the social, political, legal, economic process. CIS was defined in 1980 by a group appointed by the British Library Association as: Services which assist individuals and groups with daily problem-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. (BLA 1980) The generally accepted definition today is services offered by all types of libraries and other organizations to provide people with information relevant to their everyday life, particularly those in the lower-economic and disadvantaged groups who need to learn how to obtain, understand, and use information. It was originally intended to help eradicate deprivation and illiteracy in the rural areas. CIS activities include health, education, employment, agriculture, village industries, daily necessities, consumer services, and so on.

According to Allen Bunch (1982), CIS has the following two aspects:

- one is concerned with the nature of the information provided, that is, information in the community to help people with daily problem solving or in raising the quality of their lives;
- the other is concerned with the nature of the clientele served, namely those who belong to the lower socio-economic groups or are disadvantaged through an inability to obtain, understand, or act on information that affects their lives (Bunch, A Allen, 1982).

### **CIS and Public Libraries Worldwide**

CIS is concerned with the provision of problem-oriented information. UNESCO (1972) states that “the public library must offer to adults and children the opportunity to keep in touch with their times, to educate themselves continuously and to keep abreast of progress in sciences and arts. Its contents should be a living demonstration of the evaluation of knowledge and culture, constantly reviewed, kept up-to-date and attractively presented. In this way it will help people from their own opinions, and develop their creative and critical capacities and powers of appreciation. The public is concerned with the communication of information and ideas, whatever the form in which these may be expressed.” The public library is rightly designated as an agency for the promotion of universal education. Its task is to disseminate information and enrich personal and social life. The idea of public libraries offering information on everyday societal problems is not new. However, public library involvement in this area in the UK and USA increased after World War II, with active cooperation among governmental and social agencies to help disadvantaged segments of the community.

During the 1960s and 1970s, a shift took place and libraries started offering CIS directly. CIS was introduced by public libraries in the Western countries in response to an expressed need at a time when general library service was more or less universally available. The New York Public Library is one of the most active in offering CIS. Each branch has current information on local community and city-wide services. People can find information about community groups, consumer and educational organizations, health and social service agencies and religious, recreational and cultural institutions. The New South Wales public library in Australia develops guidelines for public library participation in CIS on the basis of reports from Australia's Community Information Sharing Service (CISS). In Thailand (Kulthorn, 1999), the Department of Non-Formal Education has a policy for all types of public libraries to provide and promote community activities. The shift to CIS in libraries took place at about the time when the profession began defining specific services for specific communities. Public library service in developing countries is still very limited. It generally serves small segments of the urban population and is minimal. Service is still traditional, and the library profession has so far not

engaged in the CIS activities. One can safely speculate that interest in CIS in developing countries will also be minimal. Community services could be taken as extension services by libraries. The Bangladeshi population still needs awareness about public sanitation, family planning, socio-economic reforms, education, and so on. CIS can be built over the existing public library system for free and impartial use of information.

### **Scope and Method**

This paper reviews selected research studies on role of public libraries in providing community information services in several developed and developing countries with an aim to identify some of the key issues and future research directions in this field through critical desktop review. The studies reviewed were primarily identified through Google Scholar and Scopus. The World Bank Group (2011) definition was used as a source for classifying the countries covered in this study. The World Bank defines countries with low-income economies as those with a gross national income (GNI) per capita of under US\$1005, lower middle income economies as those with a GNI per capita of US\$1,006 to US\$3,975, and upper-middle income economies as those with a GNI per capita of US\$3,976 to US\$12,275. The countries that fall under these income groups are considered to be in a state of economic development and thus can be described as “developing countries.” In contrast, “developed countries” are those in the high-income group with a GNI per capita of US\$12,276 or more and are Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries. Thus, the literature reviewed under the category of developed countries includes countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Norway, the UK and the USA. The developing countries reviewed in this study, on the other hand, include Bangladesh, Africa South of the Sahara, Ghana, India, Kenya, Pakistan, Nigeria and South Africa.

### **Findings**

#### **Role of public libraries in providing community information services in developed countries**

There have been some studies of computing practices and community information exchange among low-income, predominantly African-American community.

In an early study, *Bishop et al. (1999)* assessed to develop an understanding of the social context for the use of networked community information services. While findings contribute to an understanding of the digital divide that currently threatens our society, conclusions about networked information services and low-income communities should be interpreted in light of basic characteristics of the local area from which they were drawn. Further, perceptions and habits related to community information exchange are, of course, based on the specific characteristics of the local environment and institutions. In one focus group, for example, some participants suggested schools as public access sites because of their proximity and promotion of activities for kids. Others in the group countered that the schools their kids attended did not seem very eager to open their doors to the community at large and that their hours of operation were severely limited. Library use may be another example of local variation: low-income community members in our study may be more active library users than those in other towns. They also mentioned that Low-income community members identified a wide range of beneficial uses of computers and the Internet within the context of their own lives and associated their computer marginalization with a general sense of being left out of society’s mainstream. Low-income residents were eager for online access to information related to community services and activities, especially resources for their children, healthcare, and educational and job opportunities. The desire for relevant local content extended beyond the need to obtain resources and services, however. A number of people sought the means to contribute information about themselves and their assets to the community’s store of networked knowledge. Low-income community members expressed an interest in creating personal Websites and using Prairienet to convey information about community activities to others, in part through disseminating information from the organizations with which they were affiliated, such as churches and neighborhood associations.

In the eve of 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Pettigrew et al. (2002)* distinguished a feature of these CI gatherers is that they are socially connected or active, and, perhaps more importantly, are aware of the potential CI needs or interests of people they know. These CI gatherers do not wait for someone to say “I need to know about X;” instead, they take mental notes of what’s going on in the lives of the people around them, their interests and situations, and then keep an eye out for CI that might be of interest or helpful—not by initiating an actual, purposive search.

In another study, *Tran (2005)* tested a set of propositions for the Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Model be applied to the diffusion of CINs in Alexandria City Library (ACL), i.e. relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, observability, external communication channels, interpersonal communication channels, extent of change agents' promotion efforts, social system, types of innovation decisions.

In the interviews library staff indicated that, in their view, community information services on the ACL website offered a number of distinct advantages over traditional information services. These advantages include:

- it offers 24/7 service as it provides information to users throughout the city and the region at any time, and any place
- it can provide a growing range of materials for a variety of purposes because it includes almost everything of interest to the local community
- it is searchable in what staff hope is a variety of user-friendly ways
- it helps people to make friends and to communicate
- staff provide better on-screen search tools that enable users to find information quickly and efficiently
- staff can introduce more content more easily onto the CIN site, particularly resources that aim to serve the needs of the community.

From these views expressed by the Alexandria CIN staff, it is clear that they regard their CIN as having relative advantages in: accessing, communication, information exchange.

At ACL considerable discussion takes place before any major decision is made regarding the CIN. Three examples show the range of decision-making processes that are employed, and all of them can be related to Rogers' typology.

- First example - the Community Database Designer, Reference Manager, IT Services Manager and Library Manager held a series of meetings in order to make a decision to develop in-house database.
- Second example - the IT Services Manager can make decisions about IT solutions and technologies that are needed, but he has to discuss these issues with the Library Manager for budget approval. This case also shows the cooperation and support in developing community services at ACL.

- In different contexts the decisions can be made by individual staff. Thus in the third example the Community Assistant can decide the most efficient ways to support users; The Community Coordinator can decide what topics and directories might be added and which template would be relevant to the database; and The Library Manager is charged with decisions on the budget and funding, or approving purchase orders related to CIN.

In a later study in the United States, *Bertot et al. (2008)* found that the substantial majority of communities rely on their public libraries to ensure that free public Internet access is available. Their observation is that one implication of this change in service provision is how public libraries define their community, and what services they will provide to which groups in the community may require considerable revision. This "service role" of moving toward meeting Internet-based information services demands may be occurring by default without adequate consideration of the impacts resulting from this change, for example, reduced or eliminated information services and resources in other library service areas.

*Goulding (2009)* identified community information(CI) users have no control really about how library services are delivered, even though they have the biggest say and biggest stake. They still have no real control about what goes on the shelves, opening hours, stock selection, they're not involved in selecting performance indicators or success criteria or impact or outcome measures. They don't even know what they are, they're not even reported on. They are passive recipients of an archaic service; is how I will sum it up.*Johnson (2010)* stated that visiting libraries is only one of a number of possible venues where people can connect with other community members. Participants were asked to indicate the frequency with which they visited bookstores, coffee shops, restaurants, or bars within their community. It is not possible to say which comes first—library use or community involvement—however, there is no doubt, at least for this sample, that there is a strong likelihood that library users will also be involved in other community organizations and activities. Library users may become more aware of these organizations through community information bulletin boards located in libraries or may witness meetings of these organizations taking place in library meeting rooms.

It is reasonable to assume that library use and membership in community organizations is a symbiotic relationship, with attendance at one making one more aware of, and more likely to become involved in, the other. *Sung et al. (2013)* stated in a study at UK that There were four stages of community engagement (CE) in Citizens' Eye, including informing, consulting, involving and empowering. Firstly, local communities were informed about news, events and voluntary opportunities in Citizens' Eye and those specific news agencies. Secondly, local communities were consulted through offering their feedback on the decisions and services that affected them in Citizens' Eye. Thirdly, local communities were involved directly in the decision making and service delivery in Citizens' Eye. Finally, local communities were empowered, or given power to run their news agencies, which was seen as a key stage relating to engaging with the community in Citizens' Eye.

In another study in Australia, *Slatter and Howard (2013)* emphasized most on the benefit of each participant which was community engagement, with all positive impacts on local communities arising as a result of the makerspace. Although there were significant differences in participants' individual experiences, each described similar benefits provided by content-creation spaces. These included increased community engagement, access to new technologies, new learning opportunities for users and future-proofing the organization

### **Role of public libraries in providing community information services in developing countries**

In an early study *Stilwell (1989)* stated public library development in South Africa has been severely retarded by the race policies of a succession of governments. The class implications of education and library provision in South Africa are also a large factor. Despite the confusion caused by the race-based system of data reporting, it is clear that the South African library system is designed to limit public access. For both school and public libraries, this is accomplished in two ways, i.e. an inequitable allocation of resources, with the tiny white minority receiving a disproportionately large share and the great majority of the population - Blacks, 'coloureds', Asians - receiving little or no funds; and a censorship system that keeps a broad range of books out of the public reach.

In another study *Alemna (1995)* cited the importance of locally-generated information for the majority of the communities in Africa cannot be overstated. It is

necessary not only for the non and newly-literate, the lowly-educated rural and urban populations, but also for government functionaries at the lowest levels to middle-level officers concerned with implementation of policies and even to planning officers responsible for the analysis of past performance as a foundation for projection into the future.

Community information can be provided from within a library or from a separate centre. There are varying opinions about which is better. What is being suggested for African countries are community services provided outside of the public library system. This is already being experimented with in countries such as Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa. But they have not shown any radical redefinition of the purpose expected of them.

A librarian in this sense should be a fully committed member of the community and become involved in its productive activities. The concept of the professional librarian who is removed from the struggles of the people around him has to be changed. Only then will users place full confidence in librarians and the service they are providing. They should be teachers of peasants, as well as learning from them. They will therefore act as mediators between the materials and users. What is needed is an intermediary between the "illiterate" rural African and the store of knowledge in libraries.

*Mukhopadhyay (2004)* noted that 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.

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

*Mahmood (2005)* mentioned an effective public library system is non-existent in Pakistan's rural areas. People fulfill their information needs through informal sources. The government is always busy in fulfilling other basic needs and fully ignores setting up public libraries.

In a later study *Satpathy (2006)* found 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. 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.

In another study at Africa where fifty years after the colonialism became ended and the transmission of knowledge and culture in rural communities continue, *Nyana (2009)* stated future library initiatives that should have flexible programs to meet the unique needs of rural African communities. Some suggestions were proposed that could be modified later if needed like: incorporating oral tradition in library services, Borrow relevant technologies, Collaboration between information agencies, Retraining of African librarians, Marketing of library services, Meeting the needs of diverse rural communities, Preservation of oral tradition. *Islam & Mezbah-ul-Islam (2010)* proposed a road map where the Central Public Library of Bangladesh will act as coordinating agency to initiate CIS through public libraries in Bangladesh. The Directorate of public libraries will authorize all public libraries to prepare a work plan for implementation of CIS. Initially, a three- phased implementation plan may be made, i.e. Phase I. CIS may be launched immediately by the ten most-advanced public libraries, which have partial CIS facilities and basic IT facilities. Phase II. Participants in Phase I may share experiences. Those experiences will guide the less advanced public libraries who will be included in phase II. Phase III. The Phase I and II plan will advance to Phase III, with all CIS components to achieve dissemination of community information. An evaluation cycle will allow libraries to make improvements.

*Iwhiwhu & Okorodudu (2012)* identified the response rate of the administered questionnaire is 196 (98%). The result showed that 123 (62.8%) respondents were males while 73 (37.2%) was females. The majority of the respondents (103, 52.6%) were between 21-24 years of age while 15.8% and 13.3% are between the ages of 15-20 years and 25-34 years respectively. Not surprisingly, only 12 (6.1%) of the respondents are under 15 years of age while 2.6% and 1.5% of the respondents are between 45-54 years and above 55 years of age respectively. Also, significant is the fact that 144 (73.5%) respondents were single. This is expected as majority of the respondents are students. Furthermore, 128 (65.3%) of the respondents had secondary education while 60 (30.6%) had tertiary educational qualifications. Only 8 (4.1%) had primary education. Their employment status revealed that 124 (63.3%) respondents are students while 50 (25.5%) were civil servants. However, only 13 (6.6%) and 9 (4.6%) of the respondents were selfemployed and retired respectively. On services of Edo state central library, the mean value of 3.19

means that there are poor services rendered by the library, which constitute challenges to users. Libraries are open to render services to users. With the poor services being rendered at the Edo state central library, it is obvious that one of the major obligations of libraries to its client cannot be effectively achieved.

In another study around Nigeria *Uzuegbu and Uzuegbu (2013)* mentioned information resources for community information centres are sourced bearing in mind the needs of the people. The situation where resources of all kinds are brought into libraries (public libraries) not caring for their relevance to the people's need are never the case with community information centres. Thus, the information provider looks out to what the users' needs are, who has the information that will solve their needs and where to gather them.

With regards to career guidance, *Fourie (2007: 51)* acknowledged that young people in South Africa face a number of serious problems in terms of the educational system and employment. High rates of unemployment among the economically active youth, wrong subject choices at school, and poor examination results are the results of lack of career guidance. For this reason, they need and expect information on career guidance in the libraries as the educational support services of the Department of Education are hampered by financial constraints and low teacher ratios (*Fourie 2007: 51*). Crime also appears to be one of the problems in Limpopo Province. Of the respondents, 199 (56%) regard crime prevention information as "very important". This finding is contrary to the findings of the study by *Mnkeni-Saurombe (2010)* wherein information relating to crime prevention was ranked the lower

In a recent study, *Majumder (2017)* proposed some programmes which can be taken to provide CIS, i.e. public relation, information literacy and its marketing, distance education, preparation of information file, preparation of computerized database, internet and world wide web, preparation of area profile, identification of the needs of community, networking among community information centers, collection and preservation of indigenous knowledge, computer awareness programmes and training about internet. Different types of community information services have also been suggested which can be given from public library, such as: information regarding livelihood, health information, drinking water, transport,

emergency services, education, government information and publications, self-help programmes, rights and duties, consumer information, environment pollution, employment, travelling, recreation, internet services, social programmes of different NGOs, blood donation and health camp, and legal aids.

### Discussion and future research

This literature review confirms with the earlier studies that role of public libraries in providing community information services are mainly focused on day-to-day life of the community dwellers. While many of the studies reviewed in this paper are public library-based (see *Bishop et al. (1999)*; *Pettigrew et al. (2002)*; *Tran, L. A. (2005)*; *Johnson, Catherine A. (2010)*; *Iwhiwhu&Okorodudu (2012)*; *Slatter and Howard (2013)*); others focused on a particular community group, e.g. Sahara community (*Nyana, 2009*) or Limpopo province (*Bopape et al., 2017*). A few studies have also been concentrated on the needs of the entire community engagement (*Mahmood, 2005*; *Mukhopadhyay, 2004*). Moreover, there is a large body of literature described the general community information services through public libraries in developing countries (*Stilwell, 1989*; *Alemna, 1995*; *Pettigrew et al., 2002*; *Mukhopadhyay, 2004*; *Mahmood, 2005*; *Satpathy, 2006*; *Bertot et al., 2008*; *Goulding, 2009*; *Islam & Mezbah-ul-Islam, 2010*; *Sung et al., 2013*; *Uzuegbu and Uzuegbu, 2013*). All these studies, however, conclusively stated that community people do have needs and that they need information services for their day-to-day living, such as information regarding livelihood, health information, drinking water, transport, emergency services, education, government information and publications, self-governance, rights and duties, consumer information, environment pollution, employment, travelling, recreation, internet services, social programmes of different NGOs, blood donation and health camp, legal aids, occupation and income generation, , agriculture, religion, and current affairs.

The findings reported in this literature review indicate the need for further research into several areas of community information services and information-seeking behaviour in both developed and developing countries. Although the studies reviewed in this paper identified the public libraries' role in community information services, overall, they paid less attention to how community people use various sources, services and systems to satisfy their information needs. There is also a general lack of

attention given to how various services could be organized to provide better information to these users. Besides, the studies conducted in developed countries are few in number, are dated and are less comprehensive than those conducted in developing countries. More research is therefore needed to understand the community information services of community people in developed countries. Moreover, few studies have reported the CIS through public libraries of community citizens (see Stilwell, 1989; Pettigrew et al., 2002; Mukhopadhyay, 2004; Tran, L. A., 2005; Satpathy, 2006); there is a need for more research on how they approach and use information services. Additionally, more studies are needed on the community information services through public libraries of lagging community people, particularly in the developing countries.

Studies have indicated that non-government organizations (NGOs) can also play a crucial role in delivering information to rural dwellers. In many developing countries, they are the main providers of information in rural areas (see Islam & Mezbah-ul-Islam, 2010). It is important to streamline and integrate their services to cope with the needs of the community people. Also, the activities and needs of local authorities, extension workers and government community information networks must be examined regularly, since these are the primary tools used by governments in many developing countries in getting information out to community residents.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review analyzed research studies on the public library services and community information services of community people in both developed and developing countries. The main conclusion that can be drawn from this review is that the community information services of community people from all countries are largely on the same parameter. The common community information services are related to the daily life of the community residents. A nationwide coordinated effort by government agencies, community authorities and NGOs is therefore needed to bring day-to-day information to the community people in a way that is more cost-productive and efficient. It is also important that attempts be made to develop and strengthen community information services, not only from the top down, but also from the community level. 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

community people. It has always been the door to learning for a great majority of the populations that they serve (see Islam & Mezbah-ul-Islam, 2010). These efforts must be made by working with the administrative structures of a country. A cultural and social change must take place in the perception of how crucial it is to meet the community information services of community residents and in how to go about meeting those needs in a comprehensive and integrated way.

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