

AMELIORATING ACCESS TO NEEDED INFORMATION IN AFRICA THROUGH RESOURCE SHARING

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INTRODUCTION

Information is a basic condition for growth and development. We certainly cannot develop without information backup. Resource sharing it is submitted, can deliver the goods.

PERSPECTIVE

The Library as a term and when used to refer to the various kinds of repositories of valuable information is a social institution and as such its the prime duty of librarians or the managers of information centres to meet the need for mental food of each potential reader visiting the library. Ranganathan's second law of library science "Every reader his/her book" points in the same direction. However, in the present era when the wave front of knowledge is expanding with a terrific speed and a lot of literature is being generated all over the world daily, as well as the fact that the tastes of users vary, it is almost impossible for any library, however large it may be to be self sufficient and to cater to all the needs of its clientele. Moreover, the third law of library science "Every book its reader" combined with the fifth law "Library is a growing organism" ties down the hands of the information manager when it comes to book selection and the attendant constraints such as limited funds, storage, space, plus staff needed for the upkeep of the materials. The situation forces the librarian to leave out materials not in frequent demand needed occasionally by certain readers. The only solution to the problems of meeting the needs of occasional potential readers or special

interest groups of users, and to fully do justice to the second law of library science without violating the third and fifth law, is in sharing library resources at local, national, regional and international levels.

SCOPE OF RESOURCE SHARING

For the sake of brevity the elements that make up the scope of resource sharing will just be enumerated as being Cooperation acquisition; Book exchange; Cooperative storage; Cooperation in technical processing of materials; Cooperative binding; Cooperative training; Cooperation in reference and documentation services; and interlibrary lending.

THE MODERN LIBRARY

The changing information needs of people and society have completely reshaped the institution of the library. The traditional hardbound "book" has been overshadowed by other forms of records of knowledge which have a capacity of enormous coverage, quick reference, easy storage and simple transportation. These include all kinds of films, images and phono recording micro-documents, computer diskettes, maps and compact discs. These and other forms of documents like pamphlets, newspapers, handouts, posters, etc, are all covered in the modern definition of books as records of knowledge, carriers of information or sources of information.

Whereas in the past readers used to visit libraries to read books on the premises under restricted usage, now the situation is

different. They now don't necessarily come to the library to read but to seek information which they are most likely to get by referring to almanacs, directories, bibliographies, indexes, abstracts, encyclopaedias, abstracts and any other kind of documents or databases, or by simply enquiring from the reference personnel. They don't even necessarily have to come physically if they have access to communication means by which to reach out for reference service. Librarians have changed from dealing just with readers to dealing with users of information.

The librarian who was traditionally considered as a custodian of books has transformed into an information expert. No wonder the phrase "information specialist" is now more commonly used in reference to librarians. The librarian now demands more rigorous training and a strong academic background.

The library which was previously a trinity of books, staff, and readers has now been transformed into a trinity of sources of information, information specialists, and users of information.

This new phenomenon is a result of specialized information needs of users, the increase in technology as an aid in information processing, the increase in the amount of information continually generated, the prevalent competition in the field of science and technology, and most vitally, the need for worldwide cooperation for interchange of information to avoid duplication of research.

IMPORTANCE OF RESOURCE SHARING

Resource sharing is imperative today because of:

- a) Inadequate budgets which means no library/information centre has sufficient funds to acquire all the materials necessary to satisfy its users' needs. Among identified alternatives is resource sharing.
- b) The information explosion which has led to the proliferation of information materials, too many for even the richest centre to acquire.
- c) A need for good economic policy to avoid duplication of resources. This calls for astute coordination in the planning and management of libraries and information centres so that available resources are maximally exploited to maximum economic advantage.
- d) Through resource sharing, the dire need for the coveted Universal Availability of Information (UAI) can be achieved since there will be all round access to the holdings of cooperating centres or institutions.

PRE-REQUISITE FOR RESOURCE SHARING

Cooperation in information exchange can only be realized if proper bibliographic control is ensured and information resource sharing through an appropriately active networking mechanism is implemented. This concept suggests that every available piece of information such as in the relevant discipline of veterinary science must be made accessible at any given time wherever and whenever, without hindrance or barriers.

For our specific needs as animal health information professionals, the major pre-requisites would be:

- 1 Collection of all locally produced information using the mechanisms facilitated by the legal deposit acts of our various countries.
- 2 Creation and maintenance of lists of serial publications.
- 3 Compilation and updating of holdings in standard machine-readable format.
- 4 Availability of directories of subject libraries and information resource centres in the African region.

- 5 Agreed standards for information management and administration commensurate as well as compatible with international standards.
- 6 Formal or informal agreements amongst us for cooperation in exchange of information.
- 7 Use of efficient information communication systems and technology.
- 8 A work force of appropriately trained information professionals.
- 9 Facilities for both formal and informal information training.

RESOURCE SHARING PROSPECTS FOR THE REGION

If resources of all our libraries are technically consolidated together, the users will have access to an enormous amount of information. In a like manner if resources other than information e.g. technical know-how, equipment, communication facilities, and specialized services are put together as well and made available for sharing through formal and informal agreements, the partners in the arrangement will enjoy many more facilities without spending proportionate amounts of money. This though may seem to be loaded with a biased advantage for the poorer partners but then in the spirit of a global aspiration toward the attainment of a more balanced growth in the region, the richer partners ought to regard it as an honourable contribution toward worldwide or on a lesser and more modest though relevant note, regional development.

The resources which may be mutually shared could include:

- 1 Information sources: books, periodicals, films, video cassettes, audio tapes, compact discs, computer diskettes, maps, pamphlets, microfilm, microfiche, etc.
- 2 Human resources: information technology experts, cataloguers, indexers and abstractors, bibliographers, information marketing experts, communication ex-

perts, media technology experts, library planners, etc.

- 3 Physical resources: equipment used in processing information.

TOOLS OF RESOURCE SHARING

Resource sharing can be facilitated and implemented with certain basic tools. These tools of resource sharing can also be viewed as mechanisms through which resource sharing is implemented. They involve information on the existence of libraries or information centres, the creation of bibliographic records and the means of locating which materials are in which centres. These tools include library/information directories which refer to libraries and other related centres giving details of their names, physical address including telephone/fax/telex or e-mail, etc. The tools will also include union lists, accession lists, and communication systems. Qualified and experienced staff are basic requirements in achieving an effective venture.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL RESOURCE SHARING

Resource sharing can go far beyond sharing of available resources if the will to cooperate is present.

There are a number of conditions for resource sharing but the most important of them all is the clearly identified "need" for resource sharing. If the need does not exist there is no reason why one should bother to design resource sharing and networking arrangements. It is important to note here that the main factors responsible for the need for resource sharing are limited finances, large amounts of information, increasing research activity, information technology development, costs of information specialists, and occasional physical needs of information units.

RECOMMENDATION

If the need is viewed to be present and the will to share has been implanted (assuming it has been absent) then I would like to suggest

that this congregation embark on an experimental project to gauge the possibilities of successes, problems, and logistics of resource sharing. The production of a union list of serials of all our individual libraries and information centres, which would be held by all of us and would eventually have to be regularly updated would be a good starting point in a venture of this nature.

CONCLUSION

The sharing of resources among libraries has become a necessity today on account of a growing mutual interdependence created by the explosion of knowledge and ever accelerating technology. No single library can have all the literature that might be asked for by its users. The problem can be tackled through a well-planned programme for sharing library resources at local, national and international levels. The help of modern technology especially the computer can be used in the preparation of union catalogues and dissemination of information. The need of the hour is to implement the various cooperative programmes in earnest and to overcome the constraints and impediments coming in the way of librarians with determination and missionary zeal.

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