Library Services in the Realm of Social Responsibility: Three-Dimensional Libraries (3DL) in sustaining the information 'life' in the Jaffna District, Sri Lanka

T. RAMANAN
B.Sc. (Agric), MLIS, Dip. HRM & OB.
Senior Assistant Librarian
Eastern University
Sri Lanka
SRIKANTHALUXMY ARULANANTHAM
B.A (Econ.), B.Sc. LIS, A.D.I.Sc.
Librarian
University of Jaffna
Sri Lanka

Abstract:

It has been considerably a long time since the war in the Jaffna Peninsula was ended, thus, the normalcy of life has been steadily restored through different levels of developmental activities. In this regard, libraries' roles are perceived crucial to retain and improve social knowledge and education. This paper is based on the experiences from experiments on three-dimensional library services and aims at the extent and outcomes of such services set up in the university library, school libraries and public libraries in Jaffna District, Sri Lanka. This was an innovative service commenced by the librarian of the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Therefore, the paper looks into the potentiality of the services across the District and possibility of sustaining the reading habit of the user community. Further, it elaborates as to how this unique service could be of great importance to the society that was war-torn for the past three decades. In addition, the authors recommend such beneficial practice to be spread across the nation to enhance the reading habit and information seeking behavior of the people who were struck by the war and

Tsunami. Further it proposes that this venture could be extended to the digital library services where the three-dimensional objects could be digitized.

1.   Introduction

The war has changed virtually everything in the country, especially, in Northern Districts; it had drastically damaged education, emotional strength and infrastructure. RRAN (1998) says, the population of the Jaffna peninsula was close to 900,000 before the SLA offensive in 1995 and dropped to approximately 450,000 within a year. Almost half a million people had left the area. Mahalingham (2000) quotes that in the whole Jaffna District there are approximately 490,000 people living in the Jaffna peninsula, whereas, the current population of Jaffna town is approximately 44,000, which is less than half of the pre-1990 population. Whilst the displaced educated, business and professional people of the district are reluctant to return, there is a high percentage of residents in the 'poor' and 'vulnerable' categories (Sivanathan, 2000; GTZ, 1999). These facts show that how far the existing community is disadvantaged, due to the war and brain-drain.

In the era of electronic information explosion, not all the libraries in Sri Lanka are enjoying or reaping the full benefits of virtual information resources and services. The reasons envelope the following items: scarcity of library resources, incompetency of the library staff, literacy rates of the potential library users, reading habit of the users, availability of mobile devices, and social norms.

Hence, a library or an information resource center cannot restrict its services within its walls. In this regard,

libraries should outreach the society with their resources and services. With the advancement of social media on the Internet, many libraries could go beyond their walls to extend the service tentacles to the grass-root level of the society, which enable the libraries to function at 360 degree on vertical and horizontal planes.

As Keenan and Shiri (2009) state, society is now interacting through social websites that have become a major medium to communicate, as for example, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Digg and so forth. These social media are exponentially emerging in user number and unique visits every day. However, there has been a considerable fraction of the world that does not enjoy these networks or sophisticated devices to get access to information. Library services cannot ignore this potential user community that comprises of elders, kids, special-need users, and students from destitute nature.

In addition, as Healey (1998) states, knowledge resources include *local knowledge* which is gathered through a combination of practical experience as well as the knowledge provided by other stakeholders including professionals and the so-called 'experts'. These types of knowledge fall into tacit sphere, so that users would find it difficult to tap the information they require. Hence, 3-dimensional libraries are functioning as hubs to connect people and knowledge and information resources, in one place.

On this account, libraries with unique services that will exhibit a wide range of information resources from print collection to electronic media to artifacts and archeological specimens. When the resources are presented in three-dimensional, a number of ardent learners and information seekers from different walks of life will be attracted and intrigued, as the feedback from the experiments revealed.

2. Three-Dimensional Library (3DL)

In this paper, there are three user communities identified, namely school students, university users, and general public. Therefore, conception of three-dimensional library services is to embrace all these user groups.

2.1 What is 3DL?

A three-dimensional library is nothing but a service that is consisting of three important elements in a unique discipline arranged in pyramidal form to explore information for self-learning process. In the bottom of the pyramid, objects will occupy in more quantity. In the second stage of the pyramid, will be the various forms of the information resources, such as books, periodicals, compact discs, etc. Third element of the pyramid will be converging to result in quality, by presenting specific information rather than displaying number of materials.

2.2 Salient Features of 3DL

This concept is an outcome of the research done in the Jaffna District to promote the reading habits at various levels of the society. The intended features of the 3DL are: a guide to identify the limits of information search, an intellectual motivation in the pursuit of information searching, being a step-stone for sharing of cultural, information in the region and expedition into the multimedia information access.

In simple terms, a particular search topic in 3DL will be offered in three different forms which are objects, document and information. In other words, it is a means to information literacy programme. In this type of library service, objects of archeological importance, sculptures, laboratory specimens, ancient coins, portraits, recorded interviews, graphs, photographs, compact discs, movies, music, textbooks,

magazines, and many more information resources could be displayed.

3. Experiments in Real Life

In the beginning, this service was experimented in Jaffna Public Library to mark the International Book Day in 2008. The exhibition was named "Records of human thoughts from Stone Age to the Present". It allured a vast range of information users from schools to university to lay people across the peninsula.

Having succeeded, the same experiment was held again in the form of mobile exhibition, with more information added. It was taken to more than 35 schools of 1AB, 1C and Type II[1] levels and a number of places where public would gather. As a result of this, many school children and general people of various age groups in the Jaffna District joined the public libraries in their zones. The same experiments were carried out in the university library and public libraries.

In the series of such experiments, the main concern was given to exhibit realia and artifacts for disciplines concerned in the District. It was realized that through the participatory and non-participatory observations that the information seeking behavior of the students were enhanced through the evidence-based display of information. An array of feedback from the students and teachers revealed the fact that realia and artifacts could act as the most important resources for supporting teaching and learning activities.

The direct observation of the service outcome evinced that a substantial number of school students were inculcated by

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[1] According to Sri Lankan School Education System, 1AB schools are offering science, mathematics, commerce subjects, and arts and culture in the Advanced Level (A/L), whereas 1C schools do not have science or mathematics in the A/L section. Schools that do not have classes beyond Ordinary Level (O/L), i.e. up to 9th Grade, will fall under Type II.

the exhibits and resources. In this way, it could be expanded to other region of the country, with the incorporation of digital library setups.

4.   Benefits of Three-Dimensional Library Services

In a developing country or third world nation, this type of services will reach out school students, peasant community, and other potential user groups such as elders. Meanwhile, a three-dimensional library service is more significant in resolving emotional instability of a society that is isolated from the current world due to war or natural disasters.

In a report by UNDP Sri Lanka (2012), public expenditure on education was declining from 2006 to 2010. It further depicts that in Jaffna District, schools with a permanent library is very low in number, in comparison to other Districts in the island. In conclusion, it states that education in Sri Lanka (secondary, higher, vocational and technical) is falling. Therefore, the role of the libraries in uplifting the country's education is inevitable. To be existing, libraries need to devise new strategies to thrive in the business.

Being ruptured by the war for the past three decades, the people living in Jaffna District require alternatives to sprout out in economy and education. In this way, a 3DL will help them to revive their emotional strength that was shattered due to the consequences of decades of conflict in the region.

Reading habits among the general public and students are declining due to the invasion of television and other electronic entertainments; therefore it is intended to increase the reading habits among the population of the District, by setting up 3D library services in every library corner and by mobile library services.

It is intended that 3DL services could sustain peace process, whilst preserving regional heritage. And, the existence of 3D libraries will help balancing 'social equilibrium' as the

society is encountering 'polarization'. As Kagan (2005) presents that the income range between richest and poorest countries is dramatically widening ever since 1820. Furthermore, the gaps within countries are also enlarging. The affluent elites live well and have access to libraries and information, but the poor are lagging behind. This is called 'digital divide', which is not new.

Therefore, innovative and proactive library practices are believed to narrow the gaps within the society to sustain the economic development and enhance the education of the nation.

5.   Social Responsibilities of Libraries

It is of immense importance that role of libraries in social development, especially in society that is affected by three-decade civil war. Despite people in Jaffna carry out their economic and educational activities amidst political unrest, young generation in rural and sub-urban area is lagging behind in pursuit of deep and wide knowledge using a number of information media.

Healey (1998) states that knowledge has a social aspect, in which development of networks in society facilitates communication flow around stakeholders, and contribute to mobilizing the political and economic resources that are necessary to achieve the objectives of stakeholders. In this regard, the users of 3D library services, primarily school students, can develop reader circles among the interested. In addition to school community, general public are entertained by a range of exhibits of different palm-leaf manuscripts and ancient artifacts of cultural and linguistic importance.

Libraries' role as social responsibility is emphasized in order to increase the utilization of information resources and to justify their existence in the society. Furthermore, innovative services enhance interaction between library personnel and customers. Allen & Conroy, (1971) suggest that public libraries

may contribute to social capital through the relationships and interactions that occur between staff and patrons.

These relationships and interactions include: building users' trust in libraries and staff, connecting people to information resources and related communities, providing social support for readers, narrowing social gaps, helping patrons gain skills to function in an increasingly digital world, and providing a positive place for neighborhood residents to gather. Last thing was the significant aspect the 3DL was intended to achieve in the beginning of its initiation since war-torn communities were placed apart.

Further, public libraries in a region can contribute towards local economic development by satisfying the information needs of people of the region, small businesses, and new entrepreneurs. This new vision of the public library as an information centre creates greater links and integration between the public library and its local community (Santos, 2009).

Lozano (2002) in Santos 2009 believes that the library's role is to provide information about its community. Thus, the libraries in the Jaffna District have a vital role to re-build the community from the repercussions of the war that prevailed for about 26 years.

Moreover, libraries can perform greater role in bridging the communities and religious groups. Kagan (2005) says that libraries can serve as a resource for the entire community, a resource that can provide access to information and cultural materials to all, regardless of class, gender, ethnic group, country of origin, citizenship status, or sexual orientation. This will promote literacy, equalizing access to materials in all formats, advocating for human rights, preserving and promoting cultures, and by promoting intellectual freedom.

A physical library arena offering social communication opportunities and capabilities for learning and knowledge sharing on individual as well as on group levels, adds

additional value to the knowledge-based organization. Both the physical and the virtual library must provide inducement and excitement to the user, thereby promoting knowledge sharing and knowledge growth (Kalseth, 2005). In this line, the three-dimensional library will present itself as an essential service component in every library in the Jaffna District, and play an indispensable role in developing the economy, education, emotional strength, and cultural heritage.

6. Conclusion

In the line of moving on the electronic services, libraries cannot exclude the lower strata of the society and potential users who are unable to own novel devices to get access to new information. This is more severely true in the countries and regions that were/ have been affected by both man-made destruction or war, and natural disasters.

With respect to that, libraries in the Northern part of the country (Sri Lanka) have to devise new strategies to encompass the whole society to re-build their emotional stability and the region's economy. Along with new information media, inclusion of realia, artifacts, and replicas will also help the society to be informed and literate. In time of financial crisis, except for a few special libraries, other libraries cannot afford expensive electronic resources, thus they cannot be dragged to the height where they lose their existence. Therefore, 3D library services will enhance the literacy and sustain the livelihood of the society, especially in the developing countries.

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