
Digital Provide: an Indian experience

ABHIJIT LAHIRI and SUNDER SINGH, BG*

A B S T R A C T

Nations world over find use and diffusion of ICT as means to achieving the well being of the people and the wealth of the country. Individual experiences and success notwithstanding, there is also a growing realization of the divides of the various kind – economic, educational, cultural, language, and the digital divide. On one hand, ICT is a powerful enhancer of individual and national competence; on the other, technology widens the divide among people and nations. Digital divide is now taken to mean the ability or the inability of an individual to access and utilize information / knowledge in an all-pervasive digital world. In this context, issues of access, interoperability, opportunities and challenges would remain central to the digital transition that the world is presently undergoing.

There are several definitions for a Digital Library/ies, but a description would be helpful. In a traditional context, libraries/information centers built non-digital sources of information/knowledge, providing for their physical storage, organization and more importantly-- access to the communities they served. Products and services of such library/information center remained more or less local, physically limited by media, language, space and time. Over the decades, the function of a library/information center changed with the prevailing information & communication technology. At the present time, ICT enables us digital preservation of information/knowledge, distributed and linked across, regardless of content, form, language and their location. From a service point of view, the purpose of a digital library should then be ensuring a virtual community access to the virtual information/knowledge resource.

The non-digital provide for information/knowledge will have to continue and co-exist with the digital provide as long as iniquities continue to exit. It is here that use of ICT plays the catalytic role in providing access to global knowledge. Some of the remarkable success stories in India – like the empowered villages in Pondicherry, and community information services like Drishti, Tarahaat, Srishti and many others, are addressed to help develop the poorest of the poor and the informationally isolated. Initiatives to provide for access at the places of higher learning and research in India are more recent and are in place; however, intensive efforts at organizing information / knowledge generated domestically and providing virtual access would be necessary.

Set up in 1977, initially as a part of the Department of Science & Technology (DST), NISSAT was perceived as a coordinating agency facilitating and promoting information provision in Science and Technology. Over the years, NISSAT as a Plan program of DST and later on as part of the Department of Scientific & Industrial Research (DSIR) played a pioneer, generic role in promoting and facilitating information/knowledge access across the country through:

- ❑ National Information Centers in various sectors of priority
- ❑ National Centers for Online Access to International Databases – online access in Bureau mode

- ❑ Library Networks
- ❑ Open Software distribution & training
- ❑ Internet Use
- ❑ Digital Library initiatives.

Indeed, the experiences of DSIR also helped model several other initiatives like the Biotechnology Information System (BTIS), The Environmental Information System (ENVIS), The National Science & Technology Management Information System (NSTMIS) and the INFLIBNET.

From the experiences of DSIR and by way of examples, a brief scenario of efforts on Digital Library initiatives is presented. The DSIR collaboration with Mysore Univ. on VIDYANIDHI (ETD), URDIP/CSIR (incentive to PhD aspirants for e-copy submissions), INSA (e-Journals of the Academy), FIC (Traditional Knowledge – methodology of data collection), IGNOU (course material on LIS), IIT D & ATIRA (Web site on Indian Textile Designs), IISc (Vigyan Server – Portal for Indian Science & Technology), various web resources on IPR, Biotechnology, Indian Tea is given. Besides these, efforts under the e-Governance programs, Traditional Knowledge Digital Library, IAS Electronic Journals, J-Gate & related services to DSIR-ICICI Knowledge Park Virtual Information Centre are also covered.

The paper touches upon issues like contents for digitization, creation of digital resources, language resources, Standards, technology and tools, skill development and IPR. Promotional activities such as e-publishing in government, academic and funded institutions; support to Academic, Digital publishing of journals; and inventory of digital efforts in the country are suggested. The paper argues for proper focus on services and marketing of Digital libraries, level playing field for information suppliers and the user community instead of laying emphasis on Hardware-software-networking.

Given the available ITC infrastructure, limited resources, access, and an obvious divide at places of higher learning and research, it is emphasized that Experimentation should certainly continue, but for people confronted with day-to-day real life needs, only access and services would make any DLI worthwhile.

* Department of Scientific & Industrial Research, Ministry of Science & Technology, Technology Bhavan, New Mehrauli Road, NEW DELHI 110 016 Ph: +91-11-651 6078

alh@alpha.nic.in bgs@alpha.nic.in