

Institutionalising Access to Internet

by Dr Fazlul Alam

Globally available information is not organised in the way that enables a busy academician or a common person to have access easily and quickly. In order to solve this problem, it is suggested that well defined Information Requiring Communities (or IRCs) have to be developed along with an Organisational (IRC Organisational) to whom the IRC members can approach in the same way as they approach a librarian or information scientist. In the present set-up, individual attempts to receive information via Internet are meeting with more frustration than success. Therefore, there is the need for institutionalisation or de-individualisation of the access to global information.

THE ever increasing use of the buzz words 'information explosion' and 'information superhighway' and the innovations of 'Information Technology' do not mean that all are set and running well. My basic argument in this paper is that all are neither well, nor running well. I would like to explain this argument in terms of the problems and attempt to find possible avenues to minimise them.

The Two Businesses of Information and Knowledge

There are distinctly two different businesses in this sphere. One is the 'information business' and the other 'knowledge business'. I call them 'business', because in the days when everything is 'business' including the business of idealism and intellectualism, the vast network of satellite communication on which the high sounding 'globalisation of information' rests has generated and will probably generate more business than Henry Ford or Cadbury dreamt of. But the information or knowledge business is claimed to be different from that of Ford or Cadbury in the following two respects: firstly, it is conducted in the sphere of our 'intellectual capabilities or higher faculties', and secondly, it works to overcome the human, geographical, political, social and even industrial constraints that have existed among us from time immemorial.

The two, 'information business' and 'knowledge business', we have to admit, are different, yet complementary to each other. Generally speaking, information may be ephemeral and it may act as an index or a guide to knowledge. Knowledge on the other hand, is the accepted and acceptable theoretical developments proven either by logical arguments or by proof. (This difference is generally valid despite instances of

information becoming knowledge by certain style of its use and interpretation, thus forming part of our historical consciousness, e.g. history made from data and information.)

When we the librarians talk of information, we do not always realize that our clientele may be receiving different signals. We are talking about 'information', but the clientele may think that we are meaning 'knowledge'. The confusion about the two concepts is very common, not only in developing countries, but also in the developed world. Information is not knowledge, but a gateway to knowledge. In the libraries, access to Library of Congress Catalogue is often taken literally as if it gives the clientele access to the books (i.e. knowledge).

Globalisation of Access to Information

In order to assess the significance of the relationships of the concept 'information' with the activities 'globalisation' and 'access', we would, first of all, need to ascertain the nature of this 'information', and then to what end the 'information' is to be used. The concept 'globalisation' is the bridge made possible by what is commonly known as the 'information technology' (IT), comprising of an array of technologies and human interface. Let us first discuss these two activities and their problems.

Globalisation: Someone has to put the information into the net. This 'someone' may be an individual or an organisation, whether commercial or non-commercial. It means that the activity of globalisation is performed from the viewpoint of this 'someone'. Of course, this 'someone' is aware of his/her audience, or at least some idea about who might use them. This cannot strictly be called a 'participatory' situation.

The Access: The present state

of Information Technology (IT) allows anyone who has a computer with reasonable capacity, a modem and a telephone line to reach the world's information (via an ISP) that has been made available through the web sites, or may be via telnet or PC Anywhere directly to another computer's hard disk. It is as simple as that, but the questions are 'Does the user get the information required?', and 'How well is the user served?'.

The Problematic of Globalisation of Access to Information

There are two kinds of problematic in this, one is technological and the other is filtration of information. The globalisation of access is a technological matter which means certain gadgets and their usability have to be guaranteed. Assuming that the technology is running without hitch in the western developed countries and NICs, the same may not be true of all countries of the world. This should also take into consideration that access to the technology is severely limited to urban centres of many developing countries mainly for the lack of an efficient telephone network of ISPs.

The second problematic filtration of information means that there are too much of information. The user is often bewildered and lost, despite adequate facilities for searching index and in many instances by keywords.

The two problematic arise due to commercial and business reasons. This statement may come as a shock to many of us. The fact is that despite Internet being a non-property, its service has been proprietary in one way or other. The acceptable part of this is the commercialisation of technology, and the non-acceptable part of it is the monopolisation of information commercially.

Developing a Theoretical Framework

In order to overcome the above problematic, we may offer a theoretical framework in which we the librarians and information scientists may develop our work strategy. The theoretical framework I propose is to consider the globalisation of information as a global library and information centre into which all users have equal access. This equal access means that the users should get their required items or information in the shortest possible time and spend less time on searches. In conventional library system, a very large library is arranged in a way that should enable this performance. This has become possible because the service has been institutionalised. By this I mean that the service operates within an institutional framework, and the institution offers a filtration service.

The difference between this conventional library system and a global library via Internet up to now is that the latter is

more individual-oriented than the former. Even in the cyber cafes, the time bought is for an individual, and in many cases the individual is guided by an experienced staff. Because of the enormity of the information available, and the amount of time required for downloading information from a host, the desired output may not always be what is expected within a fixed period. On the other hand, the user may not have been able to determine his/her requirements.

The logical conclusion of the above is that we need organisers for appropriate access to global information. This is possible if we consider the global information availability at an Information Centre with the expertise of classification by keywords and by a thesaurus system. This should be the theoretical framework for access to Internet information.

How This Theoretical Framework Can Operate in Pragmatic Situation? We would need to fulfil certain pre-requisites before we proceed to operate the theoretical framework in pragmatic situations.

Development of IRCs Most important of these is the recognition of or establishment of Information Requiring Communities, in brief IRCs.

What is a Community? Here community is taken to mean a 'fellowship of interests'. This fellowship of interest may operate not only within a locality, but nationally as well.

What are these 'interests'? These interests may embrace anything which will be beneficial to achieve a common goal of the people in the community. The concept 'Information' is to be seen in the light of the 'interests' of the Community. When we talk of community information, we mean those information that are useful in the pursuance of a common goal.

So, we have a community, and the information requirements of this community have to be organised and delivered. Let us take a group of scientists on one hand, and a group of textile weaver on the other. Both have information to disseminate, and both require information to pursue their profession or trade for some declared common goals. Because of the problematic referred to above, an IRC Organisational can act as a clearing centre which would minimise the difficulties.

The basic social system of the communities with declared or held community goals and their need for information have existed since time immemorial. Only the Internet is the latest. In conventional information service, there have been constraints of format, bulks, national boundaries, censorship, financial regulations, time factors, preservation problems, and so on in the past. We have been told that Internet has made it possible to distribute and receive information without any of the above constraints. We shall try to examine later in this paper if such

constraints or any newer kind of constraints exist in this age of Internet.

Let me chalk out some basic problems of using information via Internet:

- The language problem;
- Commercialism of most ISPs;
- Lack of directory;
- Hypertext preparation requiring special skills;
- Poor telephone service - non-existent telephone service in rural areas;
- Lack of common format for data and information input;
- Computers-Internet combination is taken too seriously and often with awe for common, daily and regular application.

The suggested remedies include a government action plan, but now I don't think it would work towards solving the problems. Development of IRCs with an IRC Organisational seems to be a better and more workable proposition. An IRC Organisational can take care of the language problem, just like an information specialist does in conventional situation. He can maintain up-to-date directory, employ hypertext preparation staff, organise alternatives to telephone services for remote areas, liaise with other organisations for developing common communication format, and finally popularise the use of global information network.

Conclusion

De-individualisation: Since Internet and globalisation of information along with the idea of information superhighway have been firmly established among the educated communities of the world, the whole thing has been prone to individual exercise. In the beginning of this year, Department of Heritage in Great Britain which is responsible for public libraries in UK issued a report entitled IT for All. It stressed that IT should be used in the public libraries to regain

the serious character of the British public libraries. But the report frankly admitted that the Department did not know how it would be possible.

This confirms my view that instead of letting the information handling to be carried on by individuals in their private studies or on dining tables, institutionalisation is a better proposition. At this moment cyber cafes are already working in certain public library system at \$5.00 an hour in UK (which is for individual use), the proposition of further use of IT for serious business means that institutionalisation is being deliberated by the British public library authorities.

My conclusion is that if we wish an access to the globally available information for serious and meaningful purposes, particularly for Research and Development (R&D), we have to start by institutionalising and at the same time campaign for de-individualising the technological access.

A Point of Sociological Interest: As we, the librarians are busy with the upcoming 'informational society' from the perspective of access to information, sociologists are also becoming restless to study the impact of the information technology on the society. Manuel Castells (The Information Age, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) has studied the role of IT in transforming the whole economic, social and cultural environment of our times. Krishan Kumar (From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) deals with the idea of an 'information society' and post-industrialism, moving on to post-Fordism and post-modernism forecasting a possibility of transition to a new society the shape of which may be uncomfortable to many.

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Arsenic Contamination: Foreign Media Reports and Expatriates' Concern

Drinking Deadly in Bangladesh

by Uli Schmetsner

"It's no use looking for culprits. What we need is quick and coordinated action to identify all the poisoned wells and find ways to sanitize the water by filters or additives."

HATKOPA Village, Bangladesh — By the time a government team painted the nozzle of his well red, as a warning not to drink the water, Abdul Jabbar already was suffering excruciating pain from stomach cancer caused by arsenic poisoning. Jabbar will die as sure as the annual monsoon rains flood the wetlands every year. Millions more will share his fate over the next decade unless rural Bangladesh and neighboring India are freed from well water contaminated by poison that causes a slow and painful death.

"When the other wells don't work, we start drinking from this one with the red mark," admitted Jabbar's wife, Soara, 38. "What else can we do? We either drink, or a Belgian study has found the arsenic contained in well water and used for irrigation has crept into leaves, stems, roots and cattle fodder, and may have poisoned the entire food chain in this river-braided delta, the world's most densely populated region, home to 126 million people. Testing for signs of contamination begins this month in 300 villages. "If it is the disaster some people fear it may be, we have a huge problem and must act quickly," said Babar Kabir, a World Bank hydrologist.

A survey financed by the World Bank covered about 10 per cent of the 4 million Bangladeshis wells. It found 40 per cent of the surveyed wells were contaminated with arsenic. After years of dallying, skepticism and bureaucratic inertia, the race is on now to save between 18 million and 24 million people who Kabir said face death by arsenic poisoning. Another 6 million potential victims are estimated to be in India's West Bengal state. Progress has been slow. The arsenic alarm was first sounded in 1988 by a Calcutta gadfly named Dipankar Chakraborty,

a chemical analyst who was dismissed as a 'panic merchant' on both sides of the border. In March, 11 years later, a World Bank-funded survey will start to test all of the 4 million Bangladeshis wells.

"When we brought up the problem three years ago we were told, 'Don't create a panic. Keep quiet,'" said Dr. Mahmud Rahman, a physician and head of Dhaka's National Medical College. "Even the World Health Organization had a negative attitude and their consultant rejected our report." By 1997, local bureaucrats, politicians and international skeptics finally accepted the magnitude of the problem. By then it was too late for many rural inhabitants.

"Now we have 9-year-olds with the disease, and we need quick action," Rahman said. "Arsenic is cancer-producing. It's slow. You may get cancer only after 20 years. According to a (University of California at Berkeley) study, we now have 30,000 to 40,000 cancer cases a year as the result of arsenic poisoning." But many more are never reported because doctors here don't know how to diagnose it. They just call it a skin disease. The only remedy to reverse the disease is to drink safe water. The only antidote for the first two stages of arsenic poisoning is arsenic-free water. For the third stage there is no cure.

Water in this delta is both a blessing and a curse. Surface water contaminated by fertilizers and a population that doubled since Bangladesh won its independence from Pakistan in

1971 have caused diarrhea and cholera epidemics that killed millions in the past. The current tragedy has its roots in a Good Samaritan act by the international community. Beginning in the late 1970s, United Nations agencies such as UNICEF began to ban rural people away from polluted ponds and canals by providing them with 1 million wells that draw water from what hydrologists then considered pure aquifer water deposits 65 feet or more below the surface.

UNICEF officials admit no one tested the new wells; the campaign was hailed as a resounding success. In fact, 97 per cent of the rural population now drink from deep-bore aquifer wells. Villagers dug 3 million more wells at their own expense, and they used the additional water for irrigation, which has now raised fears of food-chain poisoning. The wells had been drilled into a subterranean layer of arsenic that had washed down from the Himalayas by the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers over eons and seeped to the bottom of the silt that makes this region so fertile. As irrigation and more thirsty throats lowered the water table, people inadvertently pumped the arsenic to the surface. According to studies submitted to the World Bank, as many as 200,000 people a year now die of arsenic poisoning in Bangladesh.

Many more may have succumbed to cancer caused by a poison that frequently affects internal organs, such as the liver and kidney, but is diagnosed only by sophisticated

methods, too costly for this impoverished nation. "It's no use looking for culprits," said Kabir. "What we need is quick and coordinated action to identify all the poisoned wells and find ways to sanitize the water by filters or additives." The World Bank made an initial \$32 million available for a 12-month project to test the country's wells. The Swiss government has kicked in \$3 million, Bangladesh Govt another \$9 million.

Hatkopa, a small village of bamboo huts off the Dhaka-Chittagong highway, is a microcosm of the problem. Jabbar is not the only victim. At least 30 more villagers suffer from the tell-tale signs of arsenic poisoning — itchy, white-spotted skin, calloused palms, black warts and pink patches on their feet often mistakenly diagnosed as leprosy. Scientists are still baffled why some people, like Jabbar, are dying while his wife and children, who drank from the same well, show no visible signs of poisoning.

"We just don't know what makes some sick and not others," said Rahman. Some months ago a government team came to Hatkopa and tested 64 of its 120 wells. It found only one was not contaminated by arsenic. The team painted the nozzles of the tainted wells red. Left in limbo about the other wells, the villagers ran their own tests with mashed guava leaves dropped into well samples. If the water turned black it contained arsenic. Only three wells passed the test. "What shall we do?" asked village elder Abdul Barez. "The other day a man came and said he could give us clean water but we'd have to pay for it. We told him we could not afford to pay so he went away and never came back."

The writer is foreign correspondent of Chicago Tribune.

Courtesy: Chicago Tribune

by Jim Davis



"Poison Water in Bangladesh"

Evening News with Jim Lehrer, PBS, USA Feb 10, TV Broadcast

Abu Samad writes from Florida, USA

I have been living in the United States for the last eight years. I hope one day I will return to my country to live with my family again, not only because I miss them here all the time but to protect them from all kinds of sufferings. I fully assume you understand what I mean by all kind of sufferings. I read all the newspapers from Bangladesh those go online through Internet just not only to know how my country is being developed, but to keep informed myself what extent of sufferings I have to bear once I land in my country.

Now-a-days I read newspaper not to acquire knowledge but to know how to prepare myself for the worst suffering coming forth. I have some stunning reasons as I can evaluate them. I will not cite thousand reasons as those exist but only one, we are the greatest hypocrites in the world. I know every one in the world, if I do, then I will blame on government and political parties in Bangladesh. I would say it is politics of destruction, destruction of a nation, destruction of a family, destruction of an individual.

I see hypocrisy in my country because our intellectuals, teachers, professionals, good Samaritans sit at their home to listen, watch and digest all the evil doings by the political parties. I see hypocrisy in my country because the so called political parties kill people for the

spoke of 'democracy even'. It is a pity that politics is now a way of means of life in Bangladesh and that's why it is so big a deal even though this country is one of the poorest in the world. I see hypocrisy in my country because most of us belong to such a religion that has so much respect all over the world but we are doing each and every thing against it in our private, social and state life.

However, while I was watching evening news on PBS channel on Feb 10, 1999 I was horrified to see the first headline of the news which read 'Poison water in Bangladesh'. If someone watch this news sitting in front of a TV he or she certainly be horrified as the news graphically described how in Bangladesh arsenic water is found. The news also showed Dr. Iftekhar Hossain from ministry of health was testing water in tube-wells found the level of poison way above than safe. The news showed many people with the diseases related to drinking arsenic water for long time. When this disease will fully blown it will be like leprosy rotting hands, legs and other part of the body.

I was so scared that I almost choked. Millions of people will be affected and the disease will spread as epidemic! A filter system for arsenic water costing US\$4000.00 is totally impossible for any family in

Bangladesh. Even to move an existing tube-well to another place is not workable since the level and spread of poison water are not predictable. As a result a devastating situation may arise in the next 10/20 years. It will be a big social problem too because of a sort of discarding own family members catching this disease. What a terrible time for Bangladesh.

We polluted our water bodies for long time through different ways like unhealthy sanitation, animal bathing in the ponds, mismanagement of waste disposal etc. As a result we have been paying the price in the wake of water borne diseases. Now who knows it's not our callousness that has poisoned the water and this time we are going to pay a huge price which will eventually put our country at a stake.

Certainly, one way or the other we have poisoned our water and there are so many examples if we look around. My concern is how are we going to correct it. If we do, how long will it take and whether practically it is possible at all. What kind of resource we have? Yes we have sources like UN, UNDP, EEC, WB etc. and also we know how to approach them that we have been doing for the last twenty-eight years. How pathetic? And, we still are doing politics, hartals, elections,

and destruction of economy. This is a shame for our whole nation that we have polluted our water which is a gift from God. Water is life. We believe it, but we pollute it. We have it for this indifference. It's overdue, God says, 'if people do any good they do it for themselves and if they do any evil they do it for themselves too'.

And I see one solution — stop doing politics. No more politics, stop it right now. How I relate politics with water? There is no doubt, it is the politics that gave preference more than what we were supposed to do first. We cannot afford politics of fruitlessness any more. We tried for twenty-eight years, it just did not work. We do not have any more time left. We have the courage, will, determination as we showed in the past, still we can show it in better pursuits.

Those countries are laughing at us who did not want our liberation. We are wasting another achievement that we are independent. Please look around the world, and see how many nations are struggling for decades, but yet to achieve their independence. We were blessed by God. So please stop all negative politics. If we do any politics that would lead only for welfare of the people, and for nothing else. We must find way to fix this disaster. It's late but it is for the sake of our next generation if we at all are blessed by God.

Crop Price Crash Hurts Farmers

Kenya is now feeling the pain from a government decision last year to import nearly 800 million kilograms of maize. Gemini News Service reports that maize farmers will likely lose money this year, despite a record harvest. Charles Wachira writes from Nairobi

MAIZE is arguably Kenya's most politicised food crop, so when its price crashes because of a government decision, a lot of heat is generated.

Farmers are earning only 400 Kenyan shillings for a 90 kg bag, down from a high of Ksh 1500 per bag in the middle of last year.

In Trans Nzoia District in the Rift Valley — the bread basket of Kenya — farmers have vowed to boycott planting maize this year, arguing that they were unable to sell their crop last year, after the government created a glut by allowing imports of 8.5 million bags. The government's recent attempt to control the irritable farmers has proved abysmally inadequate. This season the government earmarked KSh 400 million for its National Cereals and Produce Board (NCPB) to buy maize from farmers. But according to officials at the NCPB who talked on condition of anonymity, it would cost 10 million bags forecasted to be on offer in the Kenyan market.

The money set aside by government is only enough for the purchase of 400,000 bags at the minimum price required for a farmer to break even, KSh 1000. The current harvest is estimated at 25 million bags. The Kenyan government is unwilling to let the maize farmers offload their product in neighbouring Tanzania, where a food shortage is looming and where

market prices are reasonable. The contentious bags imported into the country last year were supposedly meant to forestall a food shortage expected this year.

Critics of the import policy argue that some of the maize imported had not attracted any duty as it was ostensibly earmarked for relief agencies in the famine-struck neighbouring countries of Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia. Yet it found its way into the local market after being cleared at the port of Mombasa, 500 km southeast of Nairobi.

NCPB acting managing director Willie Maina says the 8.5 million bags imported into Kenya were subsidized by the government. He says the timing was bad because the imports "came at a time when NCPB sells its maize."

Maina says the imports created such a glut in the market that the board could not sell its 1.8 million bags, which could have generated KSh 2 billion, enough to start buying fresh maize from farmers and stabilize prices. The lack of cash also hampered the board's efforts to help farmers with fungicide, drying and market information.

Under Kenya's grain sector reforms, the NCPB is to retain the roles of relief distribution, market intervention to stabilize prices and national reserves management. Yet there is an impasse over policy on maize imports and

Bread basket bungle

Farmers in Kenya are critical of a government decision that has pushed down the price of maize



exports, says Dr Hezron Nyangito, and agricultural economist with the Institute of Policy Analysis and Research a local non-governmental organisation.

Due to the glamour for liberalised trade, the government has opened up the domestic market for imports of food commodities, but duties are imposed to protect against dumping of cheap imports.

"The import duties vary from period to period depending on the levels of domestic supplies," explains Nyangito. "Unfortunately the use of import duties has been a subject of abuse in this country."

Accusations are being made that Finance Minister Simeon Nyachae and his political cronies engineered the maize crisis for personal benefit. Ny-

achae is the proprietor of some of the biggest private milling firms in the country.

The finance minister has tried to distance himself from the maize crisis: "I detest any attempt to make me a political scapegoat for a grain marketing system which is in shambles."

Before his appointment to the finance post early last year Nyachae was the minister for agriculture, livestock development and marketing. He took over his current job from Musalia Mudavadi. The pair are engaged in a power struggle over succeeding President Daniel arap Moi, who is constitutionally barred from seeking another term after 2002.

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