

User-Oriented Approach in Library Services Re-visited: A Link to Information Literacy

A. H. Ghassemi, Ph.D.

Shahid Chamran University, Iran

Email: tvahn@yahoo.com

Abstract

Library standardization is mainly concerned with technical services, space and equipment, and information content of library collection with little or no regard for the user. Given every country's certain social, economical and cultural conditions, specialized libraries should engage increasingly in producing information-literate users on the basis of standards rather than standardizing technical services, equipment and the physical space of libraries. By doing so, they give users more independence in acquiring information and gaining knowledge, and make the specialized libraries' services more efficient.

Keywords: Library Standards, Library Standardization, User-Orientation, Specialized Libraries, Information Literacy, User Education, Library Instruction.

Introduction

From the time of their emergence, libraries and information centers have sought to acquire and organize the information resources. As Buckland (1997) notes, the central end of libraries –and every information center- is to provide access to information. His good news is that nowadays there have emerged so many different means and methods to deliver library services that are unprecedented since the nineteenth century. The new challenge for all concerned with libraries is how, where, and when to use these new means.

Users are among the people concerned with libraries. However, they are not the ones deciding and setting a library's strategies and policies, though it is said that the library is seeking to provide information needs – broadly speaking, satisfaction – of library users. Therefore, which means and methods should librarians use to achieve the library ends?

Different Approaches to Library Services

Over the years, the paradigm shifts of the scientific and research domains have influenced the approaches adopted or espoused by Library and Information Science experts and professionals. At one time, collecting information sources were of highest priority to

libraries and, to complement their collections, librarians tried to overcome all obstacles, including shortage of premium space, equipment, budget, manpower, etc. Thus, according to "collection-oriented" approach, developing the library collection required resolution of previous and projected problems. Previous problems were those of budget and financial sources, location and acquisition, while projected ones included problems such as shortage of space, manpower, processing and organization, weeding, etc. One undesirable consequence of this approach was perhaps the fact that libraries turned into the custodians of information resources. The sacredness of the book is, of course, the heritage of this era which is still lingering on.

The results of this approach appeared gradually in gaining undeniable importance and value for books and information resources and the primary goal of "collecting information sources" - namely, being able to answer the users' questions - was forgotten, or easily descended down to lower levels. Libraries turned into museums dedicated only to books; the sacredness of the collection introduced serious difficulties in weeding and pruning out the collection. Librarians' prejudice over "comprehensiveness" of the collection diverted the primary goal to "filling up and up the library shelves continuously" and in practice, libraries in some cases changed into book collections.

Library and information science experts and professionals decided that the vocational principles and job duties for every library position should be defined and all library staff should be required to do their duties. This approach intended to stabilize the library system and to decrease the weight of library collection so that the library would be able to achieve its mission: dissemination of the information resources content.

However, these positive and ideal goals changed after a while and bureaucratic attitudes infiltrated mission-oriented approach and commitment to duties gained more ascendancy than the library users' needs and efforts to meet them.

The age of information & information technology, and a new approach to library services

The stage was set for introduction of a new, user-oriented approach in delivering library services. The essence of this approach centers on the ability to choose appropriate information in proper time. That is, knowing when, where and how to search, and how to explore what has not been explored before. Regarding the librarians, this approach means that they should provide the information required by the users, in the form they want and within the time frame they require. What the librarian, as an information operator, offers or is going to do is not important; the important thing is what the user demands. The views of the proponents of the user-oriented approach could be summarized as follows:

- The main goal is to meet users' information needs;
- Thus, information interests of users are to be explored and considered.

- The collection of information resources are designed to meet users' information needs. Taking advantage of new technologies, libraries/ information centers cooperate with other libraries/ information centers, share services/ catalogs/ holdings through interlibrary lending, document supply, and digitize their resources. Thus, library provides access to a wide range of information sources- including online databases, compact disk information sources as well as internet-mediated services (regardless of the medium: text, visual, audio, ...);

- Library provides access to services and information sources outside the library and offering services is the central part in offering information to the users. Users' access to information sources and texts in all forms is more important than maintaining them directly in the library;

- To achieve these, the library should know the users and understand their needs; distinguish between user groups per discipline or per role (i.e. student, teacher, researcher, staff, etc.). It utilizes instruments as day-to-day observation, questionnaires, site for complaints, suggestions, user forums, etc.

- Library provides wide range of information services and increasing supporting services. A librarian is not simply the one who loans information sources but the one who becomes more and more like an information advisor (Sosna, 1998). Thus, librarians should change from custodians of information sources and documents to the managers and disseminators of information. Information technology plays an important role in this new scenario. Libraries active in various sectors, should engage in resource-sharing and networking information centers as well as marketing information and information services, while taking advantage of different elements of information technology (Dasgupta, 2000).

So, considering the change in librarians' role and increased interference of users in information seeking and information dissemination processes, there is a need to changing of users' role. If traditionally it was necessary for librarians to be familiar with available infrastructure, types of resources and their formats, the hardware and software required to benefit from library resources, etc. in order to design/ provide library services, now it is necessary for users as well to be familiar with the issues to be able to benefit from library services optimally. In other words, the "user-library-information resources" interaction triangle requires its own skills. These skills are manifested in a new category of liberal arts called information literacy.

Information divide between north and south

On the other hand, a lot have been said on the information divide between the north and the south, and on the information poor and information rich. What's the source of this difference? Given the available information technologies and utilities, can one still emphasize on the "information restriction" by the North?

Comparing the library collections, information services, ability to use modern information technologies, research initiatives, and the competencies of library staff in developed and in developing countries, we would come up with some differences. In addition to different cultural and economical conditions, these differences are also rooted in one basic aspect: libraries in developed countries are information-rich and access-centered, while libraries of underdeveloped countries are information-poor and collection-centered.

Standardizing the libraries

Meanwhile, one of the strategies welcomed by libraries- particularly by academic and specialized libraries- is standardization. However, what gets more attention is not relevant to user-oriented approach. For example, "The Standards for Iranian Academic Libraries" (Taavoni, 2002) covers the following issues under the general topic of "standards": objective and mission, organization and management, manpower, collection, collection organization, services, building and equipments, and budget.

In sections on the standards concerning to collection, organization of materials, and services, efforts have been made to make the formulated content harmonized with so-called user-oriented approach. "International ISO-11620 Standards- indicators of library performance (First edition, 1998), "article 5.3.3: Users' skills and library performance", have references to the relation between library performance and users' skills:

To some extent, library performance indicators are affected by how well the user conducts various transactions with the library. For example, user satisfaction with the availability of materials may be extremely low at one library. This could indicate several things, one being that patrons lack adequate knowledge of how to locate materials in that particular library, or that the library has insufficient documents to meet demand. Thus, a low score suggests an area needing review. The review may suggest a need for strategies to improve user knowledge and skills related to library activities; or it may suggest a need to improve the availability of books by changing loan periods or buying additional copies.

Meanwhile, in section "B.2.8" (which defines the fields measured when "training the users"), no library performance indicators are described. However, in "Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science", on definition of library standards¹, it reads:

Library standards may be defined as the criteria by which . . . library services may be measured and assessed. They are determined by professional librarians in order to attain and maintain the objectives they have set themselves.

Standards may be interpreted variously as the pattern of an ideal, a model procedure, a measure for appraisal, a stimulus for future development and improvement and as an instrument to assist decision and action not only by librarians themselves, but by the laymen concerned indirectly with the institution, planning, and administration of . . . library service.

In "Standards for Iranian University Libraries" (Taavoni, 2002), the secretary of Standards for Iranian University Libraries Committee says:

Since the university libraries are considered the most important sites for scientific, educational, and scholar information, following the standards for this kind of libraries is a guaranteed way to reducing costs, preventing manpower loss, and – the most significant of all – upgrading the library services being provided to the users. Implementing these standards will actually realize the two great key factors that underlie new quality library services: systems interoperability, and resource sharing.

The essence of the message is that the purpose of using standards is as follows: evaluation and assessment of library services, facilitating the achievement of planned objectives, acquiring necessary tools for planning and managing the library, decreasing the costs, stopping the loss of manpower, and ultimately promoting library services for users.

In "Guidelines and Standards for Queensland Public Libraries" (Library Board of Queensland, 1997), a look at the table of contents reveals the subject of contents: standards on management, staff, working hours, building, provision and weeding, interlibrary loan, collections of reference and local sources, professional services, technology, cataloging, ... and there's no mention of users.

Current library standards and user-oriented approach

So, we speak of user-orientation in services, but everything serves collection-, mission-, and duty-orientation in services and etc. One of the scarce places where one could find "user standards" is the ACRL website where information literacy standards are discussed. However, the problem is still there: such standards have not been integrated into library standards; i.e. a separation between library standards and users' standards is still observed. Instead of standardizing the collection, man power, services, etc., by standardizing the users, information centers and libraries succeed in achieving objectives set as ultimate ends for libraries. Considering skills and competencies marked as characteristics and specifications of the information-literate, by producing info-literate users, libraries and information centers succeed in stepping towards following goals:

- meeting information needs of users,
- recognizing true information needs of users through users' stated needs (as stating and clarifying the need/question is an element of info-literacy),
 - expanding the extent of accessible and providable resources to beyond the geographical limits of the library/country,
 - extending the range of information resources regarding the format/carrier

Much of the above-mentioned goals depend on personal skills. For example, some sites and libraries provide customization facilities on their sites through which users may define several profiles and alerts to retrieve relevant information from accessible databases and services. Profiting from these facilities needs some ICT skills that consist an important part of info-literacy competencies.

Fully exploiting info-literacy competencies results in freedom of users in developing countries from the bond of collection-oriented libraries and stepping out of the circle of the "info-poor", playing the role of an information-producer citizen of the brave new world of information society, and helping to upgrade the developing societies level-state in info-economy.

So, standardizing the different parts and components of a library/ info-center is beneficial only when there are "standardized users" to take advantage of these upgraded components, users with info-literacy competencies.

Conclusion

Adopting user-oriented approach in libraries, especially in specialized libraries that have special objectives, duties and users, is inevitable. The outcome of the activities of such libraries appear in the form of "research outcomes" and lead to the production of new knowledge, or they help libraries' expert users in solving the problems of mother organization. What was said about the properties of user-oriented libraries should be naturally used with more variety and strength in this type of libraries.

However, it should be emphasized that- as the term "user-oriented" suggests, in this approach, the activities of the library and the information center are focused on the "user", and that standardization of library in various aspects won't be fruitful unless the main addressee - the user - is able to use these standardized and promoted services.

A quick look at the definition of "information literacy" clarifies the issue: Information literacy is the adoption of appropriate information behavior to identify, through whatever channel or medium, information well fitted to information needs, leading to wise and ethical use of information in society (Webber, 2003).

Or: Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (ACRL, 2000).

These definitions are clearly much more compatible with what was said of user-oriented library characteristics and with the objectives of library standards. In other words, standardization of library should primarily start with standardization of users' information literacy. Training the users and leading them towards acquiring information literacy according to high-level standards helps the libraries in getting to their user-oriented approach-associated objectives, particularly in the light of the fact that new definitions of information literacy all indicate that the information literacy is rooted in library education and the way the library is used.

With respect to influence of information technology in any country and the necessity of using extra-organizational and extra-library sources as well as communication's role in provision of information and meeting information needs, specialized libraries should formulate certain kinds of information literacy standards aimed at training users while considering their own missions. The issue becomes easier and more difficult at the same time in specialized libraries since they have certain, few, almost fixed and regular users; on one hand, a long-term, locally-specific, and staged program can be planned out with respect to low-fixed number of clients and on the other hand, because of specialty of the issues and of high-level technical and scientific abilities, high-level standards should be considered. And special abilities are required for related staff. As a result, while more independence is given to users in acquiring information and knowledge, services of specialized libraries become more efficient and librarians change from employees to information managers and active agents in the field of knowledge production; they would have a role to play in the production of knowledge, and experts would ask for their help in solving their specialized and topical problems.

Endnote

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