Library 2.0 and Information Management

Essays in Honour of Dr. Jalaja V.

Edited by

Dineshan Koovakkai
T.M. Vasudevan

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Remote Access Possibilities in Indian Academic Libraries: An Overview

V. Gopakumar and *V. Anuradha*

1. Introduction

Internet and the World Wide Web have brought a revolution in libraries. It has removed the barriers of time and space in information transfer. A number of new online library services were introduced and the existing services have gone through drastic change. Over a decade, the demands from the users have also changed. They now want to access the resources and the services of the library from wherever they want and whenever they want. The modern libraries have come out of their four walls to meet the users' demands by a new phenomenon called 'remote access' to library resources and services.

2. Meaning of Remote Access

Remote Access is the ability to log into a database on a computer or a network of an organization from an external location. Remote access is typically accomplished via a connection to the Internet or the intranet within a campus. Peters[1] has defined the term remote access as "any computer access to library resources and services from outside the physical confines of the library building". The distance education programmes of the universities and other academics are presently supported with Distance Learning Library Services which are essentially remote access to library resources.

We can divide the library users into three categories: on-campus users, off-campus users and distance education users. On-campus users are the ones who access library resources from

classrooms, staff rooms, laboratories, the residences within the campus and the library itself. The off-campus user group belongs to student, faculty and staff members who access library resources from their homes or other locations which are away from the campus. The third category consists of members enrolled in distance education programme of the parent institution. They access library resources from faraway places and perhaps never visit the library.

Each of these categories of users has different needs regarding the type of information they look for and the type of assistance they seek from the library. So the library should use different methods to reach each group effectively. It is possible for the librarian to reach the on-campus users personally and look into his needs. Off-campus users and distant users are not so easy to reach. Most of their library needs have to be dealt with online. Librarians have to plan carefully which type of services to offer and how to offer them; within the limitations of time and money.

In early 1990s after the innovation of the Internet, the library scenario started changing. The earlier websites of libraries were static web pages which could provide information on the various resources and services of the library. During that period searching the catalogue was not possible, as databases were not integrated. Gradually, with the revolutionary evolution of Web 1.0, we could search the catalogue of libraries.

The evolution of Web 2.0 has brought in totally interactive websites for libraries too. OPACs of libraries have changed integrating the features of Web 2.0 like the RSS, Tagging, etc.

As the Internet became more popular, there came into existence digital sources of information in the form of e-books, e-journals and a number of online databases, both free and commercial. With e-resources, the demands of users changed. They wanted the information on their desk-tops with a click of a button. The libraries had to break their physical boundaries and reach out to the users wherever they are located. The remote access compels the modern libraries to provide appropriate support services in order to meet the needs of their users.

3. Advantages of Remote Access

The basic advantages of remote access are as follows:

- Information is available to a larger group. They need not even visit the library. Users can access information sitting anywhere.
- One copy published on the Internet is available to any number of users through remote access.
- Remote access has removed the physical limitations of library.
- Information can be accessed 24×7. The limitations of library timing are no more a matter of concern. After library hours the user need not wait for the library to open again so that he can use the resources.
- Dependency on library staff for locating the information is reduced. Much of the time of library staff was spent on locating a book or a journal issue. As the information is available in digital form through remote access, it can be easily located and accessed.
- Instant information promotes research and development. Information is delivered to the laboratories and the R & D divisions instantly.
- Providing electronic database information through library network can be economical for any institution. The library can purchase one subscription and through remote access make the service available to all its users.

4. Remote Access and Library Services

Libraries offer various services to satisfy the information needs of their users. Some of the services are designed in anticipation of the users' needs and some are served on demand. They include Reference Services, Current Awareness Programme, SDI, Interlibrary Loan, and Document Delivery Services. These traditional services of libraries have also got revolutionized through the demand for making them available remotely.

4.1 Methods of Remote Access

The methods by which the users access the resources of a library are many. Some of the important remotely available services and resources of a library are enlisted below.

4.1.1 OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue)

OPAC is one of the major changes that are taking place in the library as a result of technology development. OPACs are like gateways to the resources of the library. They are the index to the holdings of library which is remotely available anytime. One can browse and locate information. They provide direct access to library's bibliographic database. It can be searched from a number of locations. Many libraries provide help in the form of instructions through OPAC. One can know the status of the document also from the OPAC. OPAC that is accessible through Internet is called as WebOPAC. It is available on the library website. Some ask for login ID and User Name and Password. Users can place request for document delivery and also view their own borrower accounts through Web-OPAC. They also provide cross references. Many Web-OPACs provide links to external resources like full text links, links to companies or scientific and research institutions, links to publishers, etc.

4.1.2 Access to Databases

Libraries subscribe to the databases (full text as well as bibliographic) maintained by aggregators and publishers. These subscribed databases are provided to the users of a library through proxy servers within the Intranet or the Internet.

In the case of Intranet the databases are made available to all those who get connected to it. But when it is provided over Internet for a wider audience the access is usually restricted with user names and passwords.

The escalating costs of such databases have forced libraries to have consortia arrangements for more bargaining powers. The INFLIBNET Centre of UGC in India is such an agency facilitating the access to e-journals through the nationwide network. The project is called 'Infonet'. The universities in India are very much benefited out of it.

4.1.3 Digital Reference Services

Reference Service is the direct personal assistance given to the reader either to find information or to answer his query. Users of a library now prefer to get their queries answered by the librarians online. They request for reading-lists, bibliographies and such other services through e-mails. Even the chatting facility is also used for this purpose. Internet technology supports the libraries to satisfy all these needs of the library users. Libraries design documentation bulletins, new arrival lists and such other current awareness bulletins and disseminate among the users through e-mail. These are services prepared expecting the use of the resources. Even library instruction programmes are also available online.

4.1.4 Online Information Literacy Programmes

With the implementation of modern technologies at every level in the functioning of the libraries, it becomes essential for the users to keep themselves updated with the new developments. This is a continuous process. Many libraries provide online information literacy tutorials to keep their users informed and trained.

4.1.5 Document Delivery Services

A library can e-mail a borne digital object or a created one through scanning, to a user who requires it. This is equivalent to the document delivery services existed/ing in traditional libraries. The present change is that as it has become digital, the transfer is instantaneous and multiple copies can be transmitted. For example, under the UGC Infonet scheme, there is a consortium called JCCC@inflibnet. This consortium has an index of all journals subscribed by the universities in India. It also has the index to the archival volumes of these journals. The JCCC website allows a user to find an article required by him through a keyword search. If it is available the user can send an e-mail request to the librarian for a copy of the same. The librarian has to oblige to this request by sending a digital copy to the user's e-mail.

The new integrated library software packages allow libraries to send e-mail alerts, SMS alerts to the users about the new arrivals, overdue of books, etc. Library Blogs and integrated RSS facilities inform the latest developments in a library to its users.

4.1.6 Digital Libraries and Institutional Repositories

The digital libraries and Institutional Repositories are extensions of libraries available to users over the Internet. Digital libraries are organized collection of digital documents usually held in the servers of libraries. The documents can be searched using the keywords and metadata. Most libraries make them available to the uses who want to make use of them from remote locations. Similarly, many institutions offer online locus for collecting and indexing digital documents that originate from that institution. They are called as Institutional Repositories. These collections are also available to the users for access from remote locations. Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETD) are another new development in the services that are extended from the libraries. Many universities have started digitizing their research output in the form of theses and dissertations and make them available to users for open access. The Sodhaganga project of the INFLIBNET Centre, Ahmedabad and the Vidyanidhi project at the Mysore University are some of the examples. The Mahatma Gandhi University in Kerala has hosted their ETD under the URL:www.mgutheses.org, which is functioning very well and offers open access to their thesis anywhere on the globe.

4.1.7 Current Awareness Services

Many libraries give current information like the list of new arrivals, newly added journals arrivals of latest issue of the journals, faculty publications and others through Remote Access. They put this information on digital Bulletin Boards or give a link on the library websites or simply send a mass-mail to their users. Library notices are also uploaded form time to time. Some libraries also come out with a documentation bulletin in digital form wherein they index all the articles of the journals subscribed by the library. The Goa University Library has started such a service.

4.1.8 E-Selective Dissemination of Information

In most of the academic and R & D institutions, because of tight schedules of teaching and research, their faculty members and researchers find no time to visit the library. To facilitate these people many libraries started SDI service to provide information in the area of user interest to their desktops. The profiles of users and the information in electronic databases are searched periodically and e-mails are sent to the respective members.

4.1.9 Internet Subject Gateways

A number of European libraries are developing Internet subject gateways on remote access. These are subject specialized entrances or gateways to quality assessed Internet resources. They act as an alternative to the Internet search engines and web directories. They are like electronic special libraries. A very popular subject gateway is 'PINAKES'.[2]

5. The Indian Scenario

From 1970s onwards the use of IT in the field of libraries started becoming popular in India. Libraries started taking steps towards automation and also started accessing and subscribing to digital resources. However Remote Access to library resources is no longer a dream now. Libraries of well-established institutions like IISc, IITs, IIMs and major universities are now providing online access to the library resources to their users. This is facilitated through the library websites. Access to e-books, e-journals and a number of e-databases, and multimedia products is provided by these libraries. They also maintain electronic databases of theses and dissertations. They support electronic submission of thesis and dissertations by postgraduate and doctoral students and maintain full text database of the same. Most of these libraries also have set up an archive of publications brought by the faculty of the institute. Very few libraries have uploaded their institutional archives on the Internet. Most of the resources are on the Intranet where in the access is restricted to the campus. As the service is restricted to the registered members of the library, a simple authentication in the form of login, username and password is necessary to access the resources.

6. Conclusion

Remote access to library services and electronic resources round the clock is one of the most challenging development of contemporary librarianship. Libraries are taking full advantage of the Internet and web facilities. However a point to be noted is that, in the enthusiasm to provide remote access, the traditional library services should not be neglected. Remote access services should complement the existing services. The traditional ways of personally meeting the needs of the users should be used to promote remote access and at the same time remote access should be utilized to promote conventional library services. Ultimately remote access is only a means to reach out to the library users and it is up to the libraries how best they can exploit it to their advantage.

NOTES

1. Peters, Thomas A. (1998). Remotely familiar: Using computerized monitoring to study remote use. *Library Trends*, 47 (Summer), 7-20.
2. http://www.hw.ac.uk/lib/WWW/irn/pinakes/pinakes.html (Retrieved on 15th January, 2011).