

The changing role of the DH Library: Bridging the information gap between developing and developed countries.

Elsa Barber¹

Director, Department of Library and Information Science. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, University of Buenos Aires

1. Introduction

There are no doubts already that we've entered a new age, the information age. Information technologies constitute the core of a multidimensional transformation of the economy and society, which affects every aspect of our lives. As usual in history, our comprehension of this transformation process goes behind the change itself. It has decisive social consequences, as well as economical. In order to be able to orient and to benefit from the huge change we are living in, we need to learn its logic and dynamics, both from government institutions viewpoint, as much as from businesses. Lately, some analytical efforts have been made, which from starting from data, try to find the sense of the new technological and social world we have entered.

As information professionals, we find ourselves facing a new challenge in which we must participate by collaborating to make of such highly advertised information society, a society for every one; a real society in which we can participate by trying to decrease inequalities between developed and developing countries, by endowing them not only with the capabilities and resources, but also the necessary conditions and infrastructures to make it possible.

It would be useless to get countries with a high level of information technology, if it doesn't go together with improvements in the life conditions of its people, at all levels: educational, sanitary, social and political.

At present, most occidental countries have seen how the industrial sector moves to a second place, being the services sector the one becoming preponderant; and this situation takes place in countries with different levels of development, such as the United States, countries from the European Economic Community, and so on.

2. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library role

The Dag Hammarskjöld Library plays an important role in increasing the access to electronic information resources all over the world. In order to accomplish this, several assessments of the Library were conducted, looking to the improvement of all its services and making use of new, cost-efficient, automated and electronic information technologies and services.

¹ Director, Department of Library and Information Science. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, University of Buenos Aires. Argentina. E-mail: elsabarber@ciudad.com.ar

The Dag Hammarskjöld Library web page was launched in July 1996, as a part of the United Nations presence on the World Wide Web. Its scope is continuously being extended.

In the beginning, it had the following main components: Services and Collections; Databases and Publications, Reference Guides; UN Info Quest (UN-I-QUE), Depository Libraries, and Services Directory. In 2001, we find three sections clearly defined: UNBISnet, Resources and About the Library.

UNBISnet:

- Bibliographic Search;
- Voting Records;
- Index to Speeches.

Resources

- UN-I-QUE (UNInfo Quest);
- UN Documentation: Research Guide;
- Documents Alert;
- Landmark General Assembly Documents;
- UN System Pathfinder;
- Reference Guides;
- Flags/Maps/Geographic Information;
- UN Conferences and Observances

About the Library:

- Services and Collections;
- Databases and Publications;
- Directory of Services;
- Depository Libraries;
- UN Small and Field Libraries.

It's worth emphasizing the efforts made in recent years to make more information available on the Web, the digitization of the United Nations documents, the sharing of resources among the different agencies, the training programs for permanent staff and depository libraries, and the creation of multilingual reference tools. This is an outstanding role the Dag Hammarskjöld Library plays in promoting this innovating method, consisting in facilitating more and more electronic information, not only to the official users of their services, but also to the general public worldwide. This contributes to greatly and quickly facilitate access to United Nations information in a profitable way.

The library's intranet has been re-designed to include a direct link to UNBISnet. It started being first used by traditional user groups, but already since year 2000, it is open to the general public. Access restrictions have been eliminated, enabling online access to the library to the general public for the first time.

The United Nations Consortium, and inter-agency activity coordinated by the library, continues to grow.

As part of its program of extending its services to the civil society, the Library continues organizing seminars and workshops at their Headquarters for visiting librarians from depository libraries, as well as regional workshops worldwide. In order to get depository libraries actively involved in the dissemination of United Nations information, the Library has increased the distribution of important messages by e-mail to the libraries capable of receiving them.

Another important issue is the translation of the United Nations Bibliographic Information System Thesaurus, to facilitate multilingual subject access to the optical disk system and to other United Nations documents databases, already available in English, French and Spanish, to the remaining official languages. This task is almost finished.

Thanks to their ongoing programs and new initiatives, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library continues devoted to its task of bridging the digital divide. The web page on “Small and field libraries technical assistance”, which has just been put up on the library’s website (<http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/sflib/index.html>), has as its main goals to avoid unnecessary duplications of effort, to facilitate the use of shared resources, and to encourage the exchange of training systems, standards and recommended improved practices. In the beginning, it was created for the United Nations use, but during the present year, the first steps were taken to make the website a general library network for offices in all countries and through the whole United Nations system, as well as for information centers and depository libraries.

Consonant with the renewed insistence of the UN in multilingualism, the Research Guide to the United Nations Documentation, is being translated into all official languages, and the first chapters of the French version have appeared a short time ago.

The Dag Hammarskjöld Library offers consulting services on database structure, website design and digitization, as well as intensive training programs designed according to the needs of the end user, in order to allow a better self-sufficiency in the research work.

Recently, one of the main initiatives in inter-institutional cooperation is the United Nations System Consortium for the Acquisition of Electronic Information. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library leads this project, which consists in centralizing the acquisition of online information products and services for the more than seventy entities comprising the whole United Nations system. Thus, and due to the savings produced through the Consortium, the Library can offer to the permanent missions of the Member States, distance access to electronic databases and services which were previously rather expensive, and even prohibitive in some cases.

The selective dissemination of information is one of the main services offered by the library, especially nowadays the dissemination of information through e-mail. In the year 2000, more than one million articles selected from forty-six electronic publications, were sent to subscribers from all over the world.

3. Conclusion

It is about trying to ensure that all segments of society benefit from the possibilities offered by new information technologies to support the development process. In the heart of this challenge, lay the notion of universal access, and the issue of learning how the 'right to communicate' will become true in a more and more digitized universe. In this sense, access consists not only in a service which is physically available at a reasonable price or for free, but also in that the end user may benefit from it because he has a minimum level of digital competency. In the information world, placed more and more under the sign of competition and for profit, there are severe risks of excluding minorities, and even entire societies, both in developed as well as in developing countries.

One of the main issues of the 'right to communicate' refers to access to telematics at a reasonable price, for "intellectual" sectors (education, science, culture, media, libraries and archives) which must play a decisive role in the development of a national information infrastructure.

The advancement of information technology makes it possible today the access to a wider variety of information resources available worldwide, but libraries, information centers and archives in developing countries continue behind schedule. They won't be able to provide a greater amount of value-added information products and services to an ever growing and more demanding population, unless they can solve crucial problems related to costs and knowledge of information technology.

International and regional agencies of cooperation and assistance carry out a double action to fill this blank. They facilitate the flow of information from scientific, technological and other fields from developed countries towards developing countries so that these can get it at fair prices, and reinforce their national infrastructure, thus allowing them to negotiate the acquisition of external information resources, to choose the ones that are more appealing to them, and to integrate them with the information they produce, looking forward to an efficient application and exchange.

For many years now, the United Nations, and in particular some of its specialized agencies such as FAO, UNESCO, PNUD, gives their support to the development of libraries, information systems and archives, as well as the sharing of resources in developing countries, and the set up of international cooperative systems in the information field.

The concept of virtual library, which describes the combination of access in situ to a library collection (in printed, audiovisual or electronic format), and remote access to electronic information that can be transferred, is no longer a dream. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library has started taking actions to make it real by giving users who have the necessary technological infrastructure, access to some information resources from their desktop computers.

The library, which pays special attention to the needs of developing and developed countries in the framework of financial difficulties, is performing an important function in the provision of information to its diverse users. The United Nations has the obligation to provide support

regarding to information to all its members, and the Dag Hammarskjöld Library is effectively performing this task. The needs of all Member States must be addressed, especially those of countries that haven't had developments in information technology or libraries and information infrastructure. It is the United Nations responsibility that library services continue to being offered to that community through the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, which will have to persist increasing and updating its technological capabilities in order to being able to give quicker and greater access to the wide variety of United Nations' and other agencies' information resources.

4. Bibliographical references

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