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Perceptions of LIS Professionals about Digital Libraries in Pakistan: The Pakistani Perspective

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Abstract

The concept of the digital library is new in Pakistan. Although LIS professionals in Pakistan are users of digital libraries, setting up local digital libraries is very rare here. This study analyzed the perceptions of Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals in Pakistan concerning digital libraries. Six research questions were asked:

1. What is the concept of the digital library?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of digital libraries?
3. What is the situation of digital libraries in Pakistan?
4. What are the problems in setting up digital libraries in Pakistan?
5. What are the needs and requirements for setting up digital libraries in Pakistan?
6. What are the suggestions to promote digital libraries in Pakistan?

The problems which are hindering the promotion of digital libraries in Pakistan include lack of IT literacy, lack of funding, power failure, copyright issue, etc. The respondents suggested that trained manpower and proper equipment and infrastructure, along with training, orientation, support and awareness were essential requirements for setting up digital libraries locally.

Introduction

The digital library is an umbrella term for conceptual modes of libraries that focuses on the provision of services associated almost totally with digital content and to describe those aspects of existing library services that have significant components (Prytherch, 2005). A digital library is comprised of collections, services and infrastructure to support lifelong learning, research, scholarly communication and preservation ("Digital libraries," 2006). It is the collection of services and the collection of information objects that support users in dealing with information objects and the organization and presentation of those objects available directly or indirectly via electronic/digital means. Feather & Sturges (2003) define digital libraries as organizations that provide the resources, including the specialized staff, to select, structure, offer intellectual access to, interpret, distribute, preserve the integrity of, and ensure the persistence over time of collections of digital works so that they are readily and economically available for use by a defined community or set of communities.

Developed countries are preserving human knowledge in digital form, which has less managerial, preservation and conservation issues and providing instant access to their users' and researchers' community. While developing countries are far behind in preservation of information in digital form, which hinders in easy and instant provision of access to the users. This digital age has raised the issues of digital divide between information rich and information poor countries.

The idea of digital library is new in Pakistan. No research study was conducted to find out the status of digital libraries in Pakistan. Only a few articles and reports are available which have discussed the issue in Pakistani perspective. In 2004, the British Council planned to launch an online digital library in Pakistan to help individuals and institutions in their research work. In the same year, the United Nations launched its digital library to provide access to full-text documents produced by various UN agencies, programs and funds that were active in Pakistan ("UN Digital Library," 2004). Pakistan Library Automation Group organized the first ever national greenstone digital library training program at Riphah International University, Islamabad in June 2006 (Pakistan Library Automation Group, 2006). The Higher Education Commission (HEC) started a 'National Digital Library' program to provide local researchers with access to international scholarly literature across a wide range of disciplines (Higher Education Commission, 2006). A digital library consisting of 17,000 science journals was established in Pakistan (Atta-ur-Rehman, 2005). Some other digital library projects have been introduced in Pakistan such as United Nations Digital Library at Islamabad, which is an open-access, online searchable repository; the Pakistan Library Network is a research initiative of Planwel Academic and Research Network to build electronic access network of all the regional libraries for

furthering research and development; Pakistan Education and Research Network (PERN) is a nationwide educational intranet connecting premiere educational and research institutions of the country and the Pakistan Research Repository is a project of the Higher Education Commission to promote the international visibility of research originating out of institutes of higher education in Pakistan (Eprint, 2006; Pakistan Education & Research Network, 2006; Planwel, 2001).

Objectives

The objectives of this study were to find out the perceptions of LIS professionals regarding the following questions:

- What is the concept of the digital library?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of digital libraries?
- What is the situation of digital libraries in Pakistan?
- What are the problems in setting up digital libraries in Pakistan?
- What are the needs and requirements for setting up the digital libraries in Pakistan?
- What are the suggestions to promote digital libraries in Pakistan?

Methodology

Interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences. The flexibility of the technique allows an investigator to probe, to clarify, and to create new questions based on what has already been heard (Powell, 2004). Therefore, interview technique was employed for the collection of data for this study. An interview schedule was formulated based on six research questions.

A purposive sampling method was adopted. Interviewees were selected based on their professional knowledge, skills and work regarding library automation and the use of digital libraries. A list of 25 LIS professionals, working in academic, public, special libraries and library schools in Lahore, was made. They were contacted by telephone. Twenty persons agreed to participate in the study. The principal author physically visited the participants at their offices. The interviews were audio recorded with the help of an MP3 recorder. The transcripts of interviews were qualitatively analyzed.

Analysis of Data and Discussion

Interviewees were asked to give their opinion about the various aspects of digital library. Thematic analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data follows.

Concept of Digital Library

The interviewees perceived that the digital library was a confusing term, one that can be defined in different ways. The definitions provided by the respondents are as follows: “The library which includes digital objects, in broader term electronic documents, sounds, videos and other documents which is accessible through personal desktop is a digital library” (N=12). “The collection of the digital library will be in the form of zero and ones” (N=2). “All the recorded information in a digital library will be in digital format i.e., books, journals, theses, dissertations, patents, encyclopedias, etc.” (N=2). “The digital library is an organized collection of uniformed electronic artifacts”, “A fully or partially automated collection is a digital library”, “The Information stored and accessed through a machine is a digital library”, “An online collection of scanned items is a digital library”, “Any material in digital format is a digital library”, “The library that is using electronic devices to disseminate the information is a digital library”. The frequency distribution of the responses is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewees’ Concept about the Digital Library

Concept of Digital Library	Frequency
Library that is accessible through personal desktop	12
It has collection in the form of zero and ones	2
It has organized collection of uniformed artifacts	2
It has fully or partially automated collection	2
Any information stored and accessed through the machine	2
It has online collection of scanned items	1
Any material in the digital format	1
Use of electronic devices for dissemination of information	1

The interviewees also gave opinion about whether abstracting databases and subscribed electronic resources can be called a digital library or not. They were of the view that “subscribed resources are not a form of digital library. We can call it the collection of electronic resources, electronic databases, or online databases but cannot claim it our own digital library as HEC is using the name “National digital library program” for subscribed sources” (N=18). Some were of the opinion that “Abstracting databases are the digital libraries” (N=14) and “Abstracting databases are not the digital libraries but we can say it is a step toward digital libraries as they don’t provide full text information” (N=11). There was an agreement of opinion among the participant on the issue that the concept of library automation is quite different from a digital library. “The environment of the digital library can be both online (Internet or Intranet) and offline (CD-ROM, Flash disk and other digital devices)” (N=16). “The Internet is an essential requirement for setting up a digital library” (N=9). “Video and

audio cassettes are not part of a digital library as this type of material is not in digital format” (N=18). “Video and audio cassettes are part of a digital library” (N=2).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Digital Libraries

The interviewees were asked to opine about the advantages and disadvantages of a digital library. The common advantages narrated by the respondent include: “The digital library has a comprehensive search facility”, “It is always time saving”, “It gives around the clock access”, “Resource sharing is very easy with the help of a digital library” (N=20). “It occupies minimum space”, “The digital library enables text plus sound and images”, “The digital library helps in building a better image of the library in the society” (N=18). “It is portable” (N=16). “It can deliver information very quickly” (N=15). “Remote access is possible, there is no need to go physically to the library to get any information” (N=14). “Multiple users can access it at the same time” (N=13). “It is a safe medium” (N=9). Frequency distribution of the responses on advantages is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Opinion about Advantages of Digital Library

Advantages	Frequency
Time saving	20
Round the clock access	20
Convenient for resource sharing	20
Covers minimum space	18
Enables text with sounds	18
Build the image of the library	18
Portable	16
Quicker	15
Remote access	14
Multi-user	13
Safe medium	9

All the respondents were of the opinion that the advantages of the digital library are much more than its disadvantages. However, the demerits narrated by the respondents are: “Power failure” (N=20), “Internet security problems” (N=17), “No physical appearance” (N=16), “Computer or server problems” (N=15), “Copyright issues” (N=12), and “People’s preference to read print material” (N=9). Some opined that “The digital library has no disadvantage but has some hurdles that can be removed” (N=2). Frequency distribution of responses on disadvantages is given Table 3.

Table 3. Opinion about Disadvantages of Digital Library

Disadvantages	Frequency
Power failures	20
Internet security problem	17
No physical appearance	16
Computer or server problem	15
Copyright issue	12
People prefer to read print material	9
No disadvantages	2

Situation of the Digital Libraries in Pakistan

Respondents were asked to opine about the situation of the digital libraries in Pakistan. All the respondents were not satisfied with the current situation of digital libraries but were of the opinion that now the concept of digital library is making its roots in Pakistan and some institutions have taken initiatives towards it. They also claimed that digital libraries of UN and the World Bank are the best examples of digital libraries in Pakistan.

In Lahore almost all reputed academic institutions are now thinking about developing digital libraries. Some efforts have also been made by different institutions. Lahore University of Management Science (LUMS) has set up a digital library of press clippings. Government College University (GCU) has started a digital library of abstracts of theses and its publications, like RAVI, Scientific Ravi, etc. Iqbal Academy has digitized the works of Allama Iqbal. Furthermore, the institutions like COMSATS University, University of Management and Technology, FAST National University, Quaid-e-Azam Library, Punjab University Library, University of Engineering and Technology, Shirkat Gah, and SAMEDA are going to set up or plan their own digital libraries. All the respondents agreed that the collective efforts in this regard are the dire need of the hour especially at Lahore. All the interviewees were of the opinion that the co-ordination among different institutions would reduce the duplication of work.

Keeping the situation of Pakistan in view, all the respondents recommended the freely available software “Greenstone”, which can be used to set up a digital library. The astonishing feature of this software is that the help, training and support are also freely available and a national training workshop on Greenstone digital libraries was held in the month of June 2006 at Islamabad. Some respondents (N=6) pointed out that the use of software for the digital library depends on financial resources of the institution and there are many commercial software packages, which are available with additional features. One example of these packages is the VTLS Virtua digital library

module. So we should choose the best suitable software to establish our own digital library.

Problems in Setting up Digital Libraries in Pakistan

The interviewees were asked to mention the problems that hinder setting up digital libraries in Pakistan. All the respondents agreed that “IT literacy rate is very low in Pakistan, which is the fundamental hindrance in setting up digital libraries.” “The copyright act is also a barrier” (N=20). “Lack of funds is a problem in Pakistan” (N=16). “Basic required infrastructure for digital libraries is not available in the country” (N=14). “Local resources (publications) are not available for digitization” (N=12). “Absence of suitable infrastructure and trained manpower”, “Resources are available, but people are unaware of the importance of digital libraries”, and “The higher administration is not willing for any change” (N=9). The frequency distribution of responses is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Problems in Setting Up Digital Libraries

Problems	Frequency
Low IT literacy rate	20
Copyright laws	20
Lack of funds	16
Non-availability of basic infrastructure	14
Local resources are not available	12
Lack of trained man power	9
Lack of awareness	9
Lack of interest by the higher management	9

Needs and Requirements for Setting Up Digital Libraries in Pakistan

All the participant of the study felt that “the appropriate hardware and software is essentially required for setting up digital libraries in Pakistan.” “Locally published documents for digitization are required” (N=18). “The funding is the major requirement for setting up digital libraries in Pakistan” (N=15). The support and orientation is required in this regard (N=13). “The cooperation of higher administration is the basic necessity as they have authority for making decisions and if they are not willing for any change no one can do anything” (N=12). “The availability of trained staff is most important and there is no institute in Pakistan, which offers it as a separate subject, degree or course” (N=10). The frequency distribution of responses is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Needs and Requirements for Digital Libraries

Needs and Requirements	Frequency
Appropriate hardware and software	20
Availability of documents for digitization	18
Funding	15
Support and orientation	13
Interest and cooperation by the higher administration	12
Education and training	10

Suggestions for the Promotion of Digital Libraries in Pakistan

The interviewees were also asked to give their suggestions for the promotion of digital libraries in Pakistan. They said, “Proper arrangements should be made for the training and education of digital librarianship in Pakistan. Library schools can play a vital role in this regard by introducing a full-time digital library course at the Master and MPhil levels. Professional associations and library schools can organize seminars, conferences, workshops, continuing education programs, and lecture series etc., for the promotion of digital librarianship in Pakistan. Government or other funding agencies can be helpful in its promotion through frequent provision of funds. The Library and Information Science professionals can also play a vital role in this regard. They should work like a unit with full coordination for its development and promotion. There should be an institute, organization or association of LIS professionals, which can provide help, support and orientation to the librarians for setting up digital libraries in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The perceptions of selected LIS professionals in Pakistan reveal that the digital library is a confused term, which can be defined in different ways. The respondents were of the view that in this era of information technology, the digital library is the need of the hour and can play a vital role to enhance research and development in the country. Keeping the Pakistani perspective in view, the respondents mentioned many problems, which were hindering its promotion, i.e., lack of IT literacy, lack of funding, power failure, copyright issue, etc. They pointed out that the trained manpower and proper equipment and infrastructure, along with training, orientation, support and awareness were essential requirements for setting up a digital library. The present situation of digital libraries in Pakistan is not satisfactory although some efforts have been made. The respondents stressed that the training workshops, seminars, lectures and other activities are needed for the promotion of digital libraries in Pakistan. It is suggested that library schools and professional associations should

divert their attention towards this important issue and take necessary measures to promote the concept of digital librarianship in Pakistan.

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