

Chapter L

Development of Digital Libraries in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to discuss the development of digital libraries in Pakistan. It gives an account of the digital transformation taking place in the country and reviews a few digital library initiatives. It discusses a number of issues associated with the development of digital libraries with specific reference to Pakistan. The major issues appear are as follows: misconception about digital libraries; lack of technological applications; lack of human resources with needed skills; copyright and publishing; cultural divide; digital divide, and insufficient financial support. The authors believe that understanding the underlying issues will not only accelerate the development of DL in Pakistan, but also in other developing countries with more or less common environment.

THE CONTEXT

Extensive discussions on the definition and scope of digital libraries (DL) have appeared in the literature since 1990s. Both computer scientists and library professionals emphasize different aspects of DL while defining this term or concept. Chowdhury and Chowdhury (2003) conclude, after giving a brief evolution of the DL concept,

that two different schools of thought, one emphasizing the enabling technologies [computer scientists or engineers] and the other the service aspect of digital libraries [library professional], may be noted in the literature. The third dimension of DL is social which reflects users' perceptions and expectations regarding service aspects and it surely is important to consider those. Chen and Zhou (2005) state that DL is a technology in which

social impact matters as much as technological advancement. It is hard to evaluate a new technology in the absence of real users ... (p. 2).

In Pakistan, the phrases electronic library (EL), virtual library (VL) and DL have been in use interchangeably. However, the term DL is getting common, though with different meanings for different people. For this paper, it is considered that digital library (DL) is “a managed collection of information, with associated services, where the information is stored in the digital formats and accessible over a network” (Arms, 2000, p.2). As a matter of fact, DL culture is just at beginning level in Pakistan. The creation of DL involves a number of technological, social, usability, financial, and legal issues. Accordingly, library professionals, academicians, higher authorities and users in Pakistan are in confusion regarding their perception, creation, ownership, content management, collection management, usability, access, copyright issues, needed skills, infrastructure and so forth. Furthermore, there are only a few local studies available on the development of IT and digital library scenario in the country—for example, Ramzan (2004) reported the extent of hardware, software, their utilisation levels, and degree of changes that have occurred in the use of IT in Pakistani libraries. He reveals that hardware and software were available in majority of libraries and majority of librarians used computers in their daily works. However, lack of computer literacy among librarians; improper planning; nonavailability of standard library software; lack of standardization and quality control; librarians’ absence in decision making, and bureaucratic attitude of the management are major problems preventing the wider use of computers in libraries. This chapter makes a brief review of the current status of the digital culture. Before discussing these issues, it seems appropriate to have a brief look at the present scenario of IT developments and library setup in the country.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Several indicators reveal that Pakistan is witnessing digital transformation. A most recent study by Shafique and Mahmood (2008) reveals that “An information society is emerging at a very fast pace in Pakistan” (p. 76). It states that the information society applications such as e-learning, computer supported political participation, e-government initiatives, telemedicine, information and communication technologies (ICTs), cellular phones, satellite dishes, the Internet, and so on indicate a prominent growth.

Pakistan’s ICT infrastructure seen a significant expansion in recent years (Digital Review of Asia Pacific, http://www.digital-review.org/05_Pakistan.htm). Internet has become an essential tool for scholarly and business communication in Pakistan. The use of broadband services has started to grow in homes and offices located in major cities. This trend is expected to accelerate. Efforts to network the country continue, and so far, over 1,898 towns and cities have been plugged into the Internet backbone (Shafique & Mahmood, 2008). The demand for digitized contents is ever increasing worldwide and the same phenomenon is emerging in Pakistan.

LIBRARIES AND INFORMATION RESOURCE CENTERS IN PAKISTAN

Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive and current directory available to quote the latest number of libraries/information resource centers in Pakistan. However, an overview is given in the following:

National Library of Pakistan (NLP)

NLP is responsible for publishing the National Bibliography, to serve as depository library for

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