

Download counts: a new indicator to measure the efficiency of S&T libraries

Nowadays, there is a general tendency to report that use of library among the faculty and students is decreasing. A few intellectuals and well-wishers of the library are anxious about its future. Sometimes authorities of the library try to exploit the situation by reducing the budget and human resources of a library. If we study the statistics of direct services rendered by a library, then we find that the number of visitors to a library is decreasing but use of library resources is not decreasing. To understand the situation we have to consider the range of services nowadays offered by a library and the library's role in the process of generation, storage and retrieval of information and knowledge.

The library and information services of the 21st century are fast changing. Technological advances have created tremendous impact on many of the routine library functions. The services of most of the S&T libraries are now computerized and not confined within the four walls but integrated into local, regional, national and even international networks. With the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs), libraries are now not only acquiring reading materials like books and journals in print, but also arranging for providing access to various learning resources in electronic form (e-resources). In the new situation, the role of librarians in collection development and management has become restricted. In fact, they are playing the new role of access management rather than acquisition management in respect of information and knowledge.

In special and research libraries, the main attraction of the users or researchers is the articles of learned journals. Most of these articles are now available in electronic form. The cost of their subscription or access charge is escalating at a very high rate and even the most presti-

gious and well-funded libraries in India can hardly afford them. Thanks to the intervention of consortia like INDEST, INDONET, etc. in the matter of collective bargaining with the publishers, it is now possible to reduce the access charge of e-resources for Indian institutions. Most libraries are members of one or more of the consortia and have been availing the benefits of these reduced rates of access charges. The publishers are mainly controlling the access of e-resources through IP address authentication. In this system, access is provided to all desktops (including those installed in the library) of the subscribing institutions which are connected to the Internet. As the e-resources are not confined in the library, users need not visit the library any more for utilizing these resources. With access to a wide range of e-resources available on every desktop of the institution, the number of visitors to the library is gradually going down. But considering the use of e-resources by the faculty and students, the question of decreasing in number of users does not arise. All these indicate that the users have only changed their habit a little to cope up with the present trends of journal publishing.

Although the e-resources are accessible from every department even from a small laboratory of the subscribing institution (where a desktop or computer is installed and connected to the Internet), the responsibilities of the effective and optimum use of the e-resources lie with the librarian of the institution. Moreover, the expert group of the consortia-based subscription to e-resources (appointed by the MHRD, Govt of India), usually asks the librarian of a member-institution to derive for maximum benefit of these e-resources. It also recommends gradual decrease in print resources that the member-institutions are currently subscribing. How-

ever, proposal of e-resources from some publishers is linked with their print subscriptions and libraries are not at liberty to delete print subscriptions for their publications. The Indian accreditation authorities (e.g. NAAC and NBA) are now considering access to electronic journals as an important parameter for determining the level or standard of the institutions. The AICTE, on the other hand, is treating the access to e-journals as substitute to subscription to foreign journals in print, which is one of the mandatory requirements for compliance of norms and conditions for the approved institutions.

The most important and powerful indicator to measure the efficiency of a library was the circulation or issue statistics. The advent of the photocopier or xerox machine and its random use in the library gradually blurred the use of this indicator. In the Internet era, download counts or in broader term usage statistics of e-resources (i.e. number of research papers and book chapters downloaded per unit time from the institution) can be taken as an important indicator to measure the efficiency of S&T libraries. This indicator helps the librarian and library authorities to measure the usefulness of e-resources subscribed by them. It also helps in selection of books and journals. But strategies of some publishers imposing certain conditions such as journal and book bundling in subject categories, subscribing only in block-years and hidden charges for value-added services exasperate the library and the librarian.

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