
24 A NATIONAL INFORMATION SYSTEM

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Librarians and other interested individuals have long recognised the need for a National Information System in any country, particularly in developing countries where there are limited financial resources and the "need-to-know" is greatest. In this paper I have tried to show how library personnel, under very trying conditions, have tried and are still trying to implement a National Information System in present day Guyana. There are some omissions as there are information sources, still to be tapped and those which are tapped have their own problems of satisfying their own community before serving the wider community. They have to consider their own resources and manpower available to perform the functions for which they were created primarily. But in spite of this, efforts have been, and are continuing to be made, to implement an efficient and effective National Information System.

A system is designed to serve a purpose, to meet certain user needs - this is its function. So the purpose of an information system is to provide information that users need.

A National Information System is such a system but on a national scale. There is quite a lot of documentation on National Information Systems and this is available to all who are interested. UNESCO has organised conferences, one in Paris in 1974 and another in Jamaica in 1975 and these have produced even more documentation, so much so that theoretically organising a National Information System seems very simple (and unfortunately too many decision-makers believe this). All that one has to do is to get Government's support, get the manpower and information, and hey presto! - an Information System worthy of any nation.

However, when one gets down to the practical tasks involved one sees so many difficulties looming imminently overhead, that one must logically and methodically plan, reconsider those plans and then implement them, before one is overwhelmed by all the problems. But in developing countries like Guyana, the problem is even more serious.

The NATIS concept implies that Government should maximise all relevant information through documentation, library and archives services.

If this concept is accepted it would be that Government would be provided with a set of guidelines to enable them to "give a unified sense of direction and common aim" to the diverse

information activities being carried out in specific subject fields. To expect a Government of our developing country to put this as one of its priorities (as this involves a lot of financing) regardless of the importance of the information, is being most idealistic. So one has to look at the existing conditions and design a system along those lines.

In Guyana we have very few libraries e.g., National Library, Public Service Ministry Library, Caricom Library, and the University of Guyana Library. In the majority of cases where one is told that there are libraries, there are just unorganised collections of documents supervised part-time by someone who has no interest in library work. But nevertheless, these documents contain information which must be made available to the National Information Service.

Assessment of existing information sources

1. List of Libraries.

First of all a listing must be made of all the libraries and organisations, which possess these unorganised collections of books, called "libraries". Such a directory is in the process of being revised by the Librarian of the University of Guyana Library.

2. Subject areas covered

In the questionnaire prepared by the University of Guyana Librarian, the question of subject areas is asked of all library personnel filling the forms. This gives some idea of where one can obtain information on a particular subject from. Unfortunately the returned questionnaires were not complete on this point.

3. List of holdings

This is necessary as one must not only know what subject areas are covered but what documents are available for use by any section of the community, and the National Information Service would be failing in its tasks, if it failed to provide such a service. In Guyana there is the problem of lack of personnel to record the documents in these "Libraries". This is a very time-consuming task and the recording of the bibliographical data must be standardised.

4. Services provided

In the questionnaire prepared by the University of Guyana Librarian and distributed to all information sources, there was the question regarding the services provided by the "library".

5. Personnel employed

A question regarding the number of persons employed gives a very useful information about the number of persons involved in information work, whether they are qualified or

not, thus informing those interested in the training requirements in this particular field.

6. Co-operation with other libraries

This is the basis for our national information network. For some "libraries" are involved in inter-library lending, thus making their documents available to a wider section of the community. There are exchange programmes between libraries e.g., University of Guyana Library produces a list of documents, they have for exchange and sends it to other libraries. Then there are also donations, and this not only from one library to another but from individuals.

The Guyana Library Association, which has a membership of librarians, library personnel, institutions in which there are libraries, and individuals interested in library development, has tried to overcome some of the problems connected with libraries in Guyana. The GLA recognises the necessity of an up-to-date Union catalogue of all the holdings of the various libraries, if correct information is to be disseminated at a national, and later international level. The recording of the various holdings must be done according to some recognised bibliographical standard so the library personnel must be trained. The Guyana Library Association has undertaken several training workshops over the years with not too much success, as the staff who attend these workshops are moved from one post to another very frequently and not usually to a similar post. So there must be follow-up work at least once a year.

Individual libraries e.g., University of Guyana Library and National Library have their own training programmes.

At present the information picture looks like the one in the diagram on p. 5. One is able to offer information not available in one's own library by contacting another who is a member of the Guyana Library Association. There is no centralised agency to which one could go. However, the Guyana Library Association recognises that it cannot accept the responsibility of co-ordinating the national dissemination of information so it has set up an Ad Hoc Committee. The terms of reference of this Ad Hoc Committee are:-

1. to evaluate the existing information system and services within the context of the development of Guyana;
2. to make recommendations to the highest government authority on:-
 - (a) the co-ordination, improvement and development of information services;
 - (b) manpower and financial requirements; and

(c) the implementation of proposals;

This Ad Hoc Committee has undertaken to visit these "libraries" subdivided by subject areas to discover exactly what subjects are covered and in what depth. This is all that is possible at the present time. No one yet has undertaken to record the individual documents.

A user-questionnaire is in the process of being prepared so that any information service which evolves will be designed with the users needs in mind. For example, some of the information required from the users are:-

1. What is your main area of professional interest?
2. Do you keep any personal information files? What is their content? How and when do you use them?
3. The last time you needed job-related information what was the first source you approached?
4. What did you get from this source?
5. How long did it take to get?
6. Why did you use this source?
7. How was the information used?
8. What type of information did you find difficult to obtain?

When these questions and others have been answered, the output of the information system will be decided on. At this point the input and the processes of storage and dissemination can then be catered for.

In a national information system in Guyana there must be a co-ordinating source. This means having to depend on one of our larger libraries e.g., National Library. At this point the onerous task of actually organising the information for dissemination occurs and the finding and financing of the necessary manpower expertise and the financing of the necessary equipment must be considered.

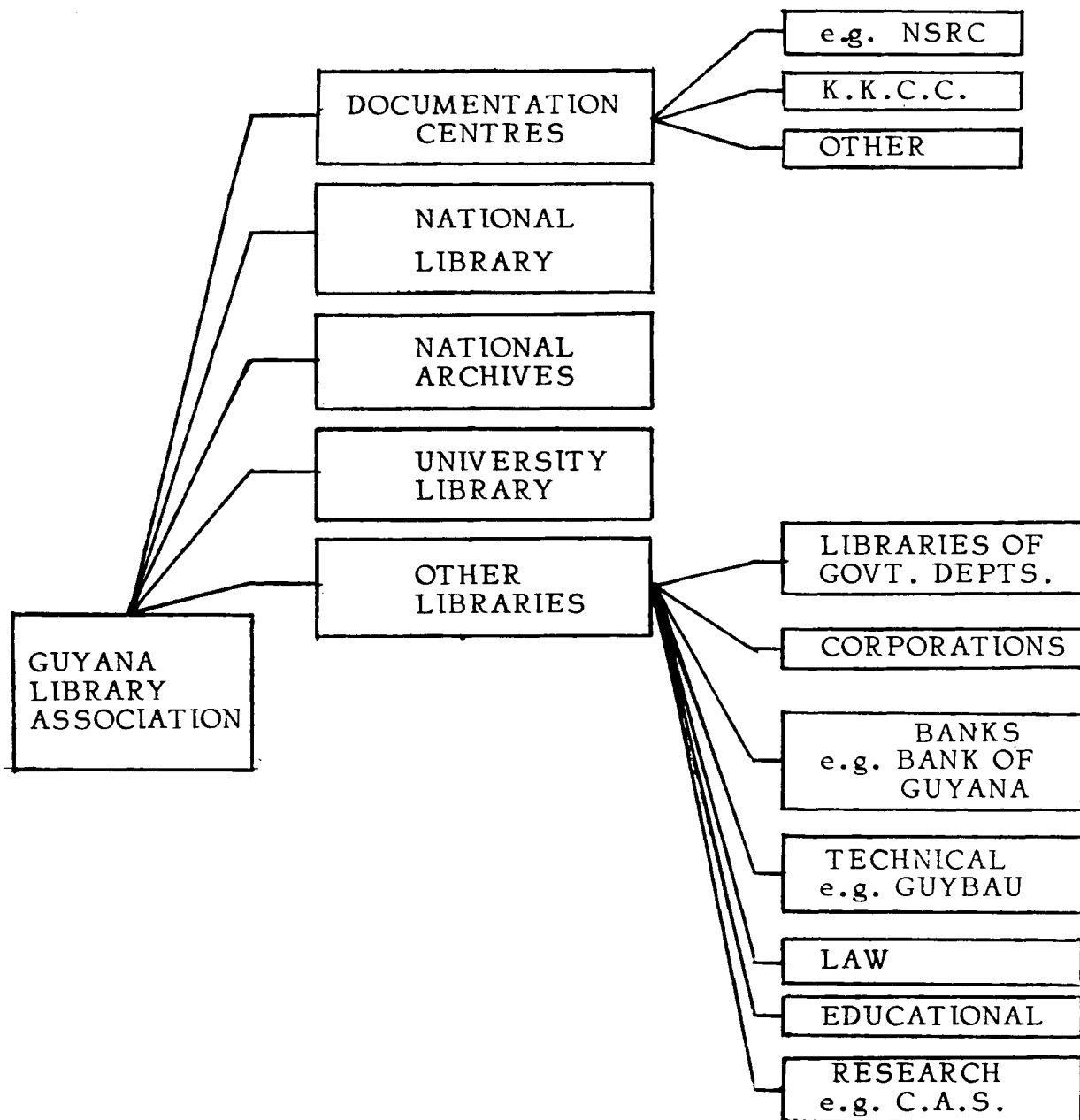
Does the parent body of the co-ordinating organisation finance the National Information System, or do all the parent bodies of the various information services contribute to the financing of the system? As this cannot be decided on at this stage in Guyana's information development the various information services will continue to contribute in their usual way.

All that happens at the present time is a referral service. For example, a reader wants information on the problems of malnutrition in the first three years of the child, and he goes to the National Library. He must be referred to another library e.g., Medical Science Library if the information is not available in the National Library. There is no way in which a reader can receive a copy of the documents unless the particular information source to which he/she has been directed has such services.

Generally the interested staff in the "libraries" provide a reasonable service which can be greatly improved by an

increase in their financial allocations from their parent bodies.

It has always been shown how important it is to get information when it is required, yet less and less is being allocated to the information services. It is to be hoped that there will be our increase in financing, so that a National Information System can devolve, improve and blossom into an International Information System.



The Existing Information Network