

Maldives Digital Library Project

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Introduction

Maldives is a nation comprising of 1,192 dispersed islands. There are 294 libraries across the nation, where over 200 libraries are located in the outer atolls and these libraries have very limited resources for their targeted library customers. Most of them are Government school libraries. It is not feasible for the government to provide sufficient resources for each and every library. Accessing to both local and international publications, the creation of a digital library/repository is the solution to overcome this dilemma to some extent. This paper is based on the 'Maldives Digital Library Project' which was launched in August 2011 under the initiative of the Maldives Library Association (MLA).

Background

Maldives' libraries have very limited resources and many libraries are still operated manually. To stay relevant in the current online environment, implementing an integrated library system is believed to be a basic requirement. The main factors resisting the implementation of a fully integrated library system (ILS) were, and still are, budget constraints, lack of trained manpower and awareness in this area. An internationally accepted level of library automation of circulation and cataloguing components were introduced in the Maldives at the Maldives National University (MNU) Library (former Maldives College of Higher Education) in 2007, and the National Library of Maldives (NLM) in 2011 (Riyaz, Rijal, Shrestha & Nashfa, 2012). This has been a massive achievement for these libraries. The next step was to create a union catalogue which would be useful for a small island nation like Maldives. Maldives Library Association took the initiative and commenced work on "MLA Koha Pilot Project 2011". The project was later endorsed by NLM with commitment of full administrative support in the implementation of this project (Riyaz, 2011).

The MNU Library initiated the creation of a digital library in 2006, however, it did not get momentum until the establishment of Maldives Greenstone Network (MGN) in 2010 (Riyaz et al., 2012). MGN was formed through a Grant received by NLM from the University of Waikato, New Zealand.

MLA Koha Pilot Project 2011 and the formation of the MGN were later resumed as "Maldives Digital Library Project" (Riyaz et al., 2011). The aim of this project was to automate the physical library collections of the Maldives and to make it accessible as much as possible. This would also result in providing equitable access to the local publications by the geographically dispersed Maldivian communities.

Digital Library Project

This project consists of two main components: Koha Integrated Library System (ILS), and Greenstone Digital Library (GSDL).

Specific objectives of the Project include:

- To computerise the cataloguing and circulation functions
- To develop computerised Online Public Access Catalogue

- To computerise the circulation services
- To lead the creation of union catalogue of the Maldives libraries
- To facilitate the creation of digital library collections

(Riyaz et al., 2011)

Union Catalogue: Koha Integrated Library System (ILS)

By 2012, Koha ILS was installed in 17 libraries (4 school libraries in the capital city, and 13 school libraries in other islands), and training was provided to over 50 participants, including library and IT staff. In addition to MLA, this country-wide library automation project was later embraced by three government bodies. They are the National Library of Maldives, National Institute of Education (former Education Development Centre), and Maldives National University (MNU) Library. The general objective of the Project is “to assist libraries of the Maldives in materialising automation of library services, thereby improving the overall service provision within and among the libraries” (Riyaz, 2011, p. 2).

A status review done by the National Library of Maldives in mid-2014 revealed that shortage of IT staff and library and information professionals were the main reasons many schools could not maintain the library system. A strategic solution need to be formulated in order to develop or create professionally trained library staff, and to maintain the Koha ILS.

Digital Library: Greenstone Digital Library (GSDL)

IFLA (2014) defines a *digital library* as an online collection of digital objects, of assured quality, that are created or collected and managed according to internationally accepted principles for collection development and made accessible in a coherent and sustainable manner, supported by services necessary to allow users to retrieve and exploit the resources.

A digital library was created by the Maldives Greenstone support Network which comprised of five bodies - both government and non-governmental organisations. They are the National Library of Maldives, Maldives National University (MNU) Library, National Centre for Information Technology (NCIT), Department of Heritage, and Maldives Library Association. National Library was the leading institute of this project. An e-library cannot give access to the local contents.

Challenges

The Digital Library Project began with so much anticipation in establishing a network to share and give equitable access to the geographically dispersed nation. However, a status review done in September 2014 revealed that the library management system services provided in most of the libraries were ceased mainly due to the following reasons:

- Lack of adequately trained IT staff to handle Koha related issues
Basic Koha and GSDL training have been provided every year since 2011 until 2014. It has been identified in the project review that the staff are unable to solve minor problems due to lack of basic IT skills. It is also noted that we do not have trained personnel to attend advanced software issues or problems that might occur in Koha and/or GSDL. This hugely impacted the island school libraries ability to continue with the work in maintaining the system.
- Slow internet, or internet services terminated afterwards
Many libraries complained that they do not have high speed internet connection, or the connection being terminated due to various reasons.
- Lack of the needed computer infrastructure

Some libraries do not have access to a computers or proper equipment within the library building/room.

Other challenges identified include:

- **Budget**
Finance constraints have been an issue in the Government offices due to budget cut down. However, there are possibilities to get funding from the Government or from external organisations if the project is justifiable.
- **Monitor digital library work**
As mentioned earlier, the Maldives Digital Library Project began at a very fast speed with voluntary contributions from interested LIS professionals. One of the main reasons for the project to hinder was due to the absence of a mandated core unit or body to coordinate and/or monitor the project.
- **Awareness**
Many libraries have received very little or no corporation at all, from their management. It is very clear that the management do not provide much effort to develop the service as it is considered as an additional or insignificant task. Graham (cited in Kuny & Cleveland, 1998), states that the institutional commitments will be much more difficult to achieve than technical tasks which are easier to solve as these will only cost money. In our libraries, the library staff or first-line/middle managers do not have much say at the decision making level. Unfortunately, there is lack of understanding at the policy level.
- **Staff turnover**
Library staff turnover is also very high. As the school libraries were unable to retain the already trained personnel, the school management did not see the importance of training further staff. As a result, the knowledge was not transferred when the trained staff left.
- **Copyright issues**
Copyright law is complex, obscure and varies from one country to another (Witten, Bainbridge & Nichols, 2010). Copyright law was introduced in the Maldives in 2010. Sufficient work has not been done to provide public awareness on copyright law. Hence, it is important to develop the GSDL collection in accordance with the copyright law of Maldives. In order to do so, the project requires experienced or trained staff who have thorough knowledge of the copyright law. It is important to consider the copyright owner's concerns and address them where necessary.
- **Scanning equipment**
National Library's national collection holds early publications which do not fall into the copyright law. Those include monographs, bound newspapers/magazines, etc. With necessary scanning equipment such as v-cradle scanners, local publications could have been made accessible to the public through GSDL.

Recommendations

In order to overcome the above challenges, the Maldives Digital Library Project team should consider the following actions:

- **Unit to develop and monitor the digital library.**
The importance of establishing a Unit to coordinate the Digital Library Project was also identified. This is believed to be one of the main reasons for the project to hinder. In the review of its structure in November 2014, the National Library created a new unit to coordinate and develop the digital library. Standard operating procedures (SOP) are yet to be created to maintain the Digital Library Unit work and its service at an acceptable level.

- Employ staff with relevant and necessary educational qualifications and aptitude for the tasks
Often times, in the Maldivian context, staff are identified from the existing staff pool of the organization, for tasks in the hope of or promises of offering relevant training in the future. The digital library to succeed, need to change this approach and recruit people with at least relevant information technology and/or library and information management skills.
- Train library staff with relevant IT background
Training should be provided at two levels: (a) technical skills required to enter metadata, upload files, etc., and (b) advanced IT skills to handle software related issues. An approved criteria needs to be considered when selecting participants for the trainings. Online forums could be created to share their knowledge and experience in Koha and GSDL. This may create interest, and motivate IT and library personnel to further develop their knowledge in using these software.
- Library staff should have relevant or adequate library training
Library staff selected for Koha and GSDL training should at least have intermediate level cataloguing and classification skills. It would also be an advantage for IT staff to have basic library skills or training so they have better understanding when customising Koha and GSDL software.

In addition to the recommendations above, it would be significant for the Asian countries to make their collection accessible to Asian libraries. Currently, Asian publications are largely invisible to the scholarly community because there is very limited structured online content.

Conclusion

Digital library is the way to remove the barrier for the information divide, both nationally and internationally. We need to provide access to our local content through online resources. On a larger scale, Asian countries could make their collection accessible to other countries through digital libraries, or at least provide it through Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) so that the users would be able to search what information is available. It took a long time to materialise what MLA envisioned. We could gain the full momentum towards success with trained professionals, awareness, and continuing coordination of the Maldives Digital Library Project.

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Reference

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