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USER EDUCATION - SOME DEFINITIONS,
ITS AIMS, GOALS AND UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY.

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As a result of the information explosion, and the increasing sophistication of information handling methods, the size and complexity of libraries, documentation centres, and information centres has increased significantly, with a corresponding increase in the complexity of the users' information needs.

"The term 'user' refers to all potential beneficiaries of an information system and not just to those using the facilities at a certain time. Such potential beneficiaries include individuals, enterprises, government agencies, and other organizations that use information regularly to make informed decisions, and to achieve particular goals" - UNISIST Guidelines on studies of information users.

As the above definition of information users seeks to incorporate present users and potential users into a unified group, and although present users might have some awareness of and familiarity with their library or libraries, there is general recognition of the fact that users have difficulties in locating appropriate information and sometimes in even locating appropriate sources of information. At times success is achieved with the aid of the librarian, at other times this is done by the user. The occasions on which information is not found, or not sought, are difficult to measure.

The diagrams used by Pauline Atherton in her Handbook of Information Systems and Services illustrate views of an information system from the points of view of the user and of the reference librarian. Both see the system, but from different angles, with the reference librarian having a significant advantage over the user, in terms of awareness of the full range of the system.

A possible consequence of this situation is the possibility of having libraries which are wrongly-oriented and which might be little used or certainly do not achieve the optimum utilization.

In the past decade there has been increasing recognition of the needs of the users of information systems and measures to assist in providing effective access to information resources include "user education". This concept is to be found in the literature under various headings - user education, user training, orientation, bibliographic instruction, publicity, public relations and even marketing. All focus on the user and aim to help him or her overcome difficulties of access to information.

The definitions of the UNISIST Guidelines for developing and implementing a national plan for training and education in information use, seem to provide an appropriate synthesis of the various definitions. It defines USER EDUCATION as:

THE PROCESS WHEREBY:

- POTENTIAL USERS OF INFORMATION
- THOSE CONCERNED WITH THE CREATION OF NATIONAL INFORMATION POLICIES
- I. ARE MADE AWARE OF THE VALUE OF INFORMATION IN SPECIALIZED FIELDS AND EVERYDAY LIFE
- II. ARE INSTILLED WITH POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE NEED TO SEEK INFORMATION
- III. ARE MOTIVATED TO USE OR DEVELOP INFORMATION RESOURCES

This definition omits, however, an aspect of the process which certainly seems relevant and I would therefore add as the fourth activity to be undertaken:

- IV. ARE MADE AWARE OF THE RANGE OF INFORMATION RESOURCES AND SERVICES AVAILABLE WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THEIR LIBRARY

The UNISIST definition singles out potential users for this treatment, but I propose that in the context of our exercise here, present and potential users should be considered within the scope of user education activities, as the present users might not be making optimum use of the resources available from their library or from related sources of information.

Corresponding to USER EDUCATION the UNISIST Guidelines also give a definition of USER TRAINING as the process by which:

- PRESENT AND POTENTIAL USERS ARE GIVEN SKILLS FOR:
- I. DISCOVERING RELEVANT INFORMATION RESOURCES
- II. SEARCHING THESE SOURCES
- III. ORGANIZING THE INFORMATION FOR USE

These two definitions cover the broader promotional aspects as well as the more specific training which can help the user and potential user to have greater interaction with sources of information. They might also seem to be somewhat out of line with some more commonly held definitions which tend to incorporate user education and user training into one concept, or to focus on user training. This definition of USER EDUCATION is widely used:

THE PROCESS WHEREBY THE LIBRARY IS:

- I. MADE AWARE OF THE EXTENT AND NUMBER OF THE LIBRARIES RESOURCES
- II. SERVICES AND INFORMATION SOURCES AVAILABLE
- III. TAUGHT HOW TO USE THESE RESOURCES, SERVICES AND SOURCES

These two definitions are a synthesis of the concepts of user education as described in the literature. The definitions of user education and user training given in the UNISIST Guidelines seem to incorporate the more commonly used definition and to provide for an added dimension, which is likely to be able to provide users with a greater awareness of information systems and services. For the purposes of this workshop it therefore seems appropriate to use the modified definition of the UNISIST Guidelines.

The above definition omits the concept 'marketing' which is becoming increasingly popular and is sometimes considered to form part of user education activities. Mainly carried out by suppliers of computerized databases, this principally involves training of information users, or information intermediaries, in the use of particular systems or services.

While employing some elements of bibliographic instruction, marketing of information services cannot be considered the equivalent of impartial and evaluative user education.

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Having established the basic definitions, let us look at the targets at which the user education programmes are aimed and what they are expected to achieve.

The UNISIST Information Policy Objectives propose that:

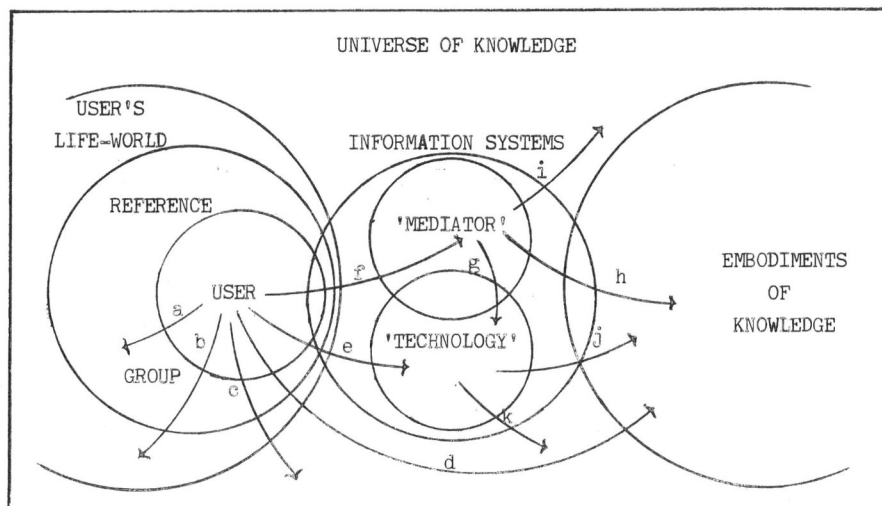
"The general aim of user education should be to reach a situation at each stage of the progress of science and in the development of information technology when most, if not all scientists:

- (1) recognize their information needs clearly, and
- (2) can assess the strengths and weaknesses of existing and experimental services."

This general aim as stated by the UNISIST Information Policy Objectives seems to me to require some expansion, for an important factor in information service seems to be not only recognition by the user of his needs but also articulation of these needs to the information system. Another desirable aspect of the general aim would be the eventual awareness by the user of relevant information systems and services which are available to him.

Let us now examine the implications of this aim for the activities of information systems and services. User studies would need to form part of the development of information systems and services. This would include studies of the users' concepts of information, the users' present method of seeking information, and his/her present channels of communication with the information system.

T.D. Wilson in his article on User Studies and Information Needs defines several information-seeking paths. The diagram below illustrates the users concepts of information and the methods which he uses or which are used on his behalf



Information-seeking paths

to locate it. Linked with this is the need for articulation by the user of his needs. The diagram shows that even if the user does recognize his needs, he does not always convey them to the information system or service, but instead might seek the solution from other sources.

Related to the question of articulation of information needs is the fact that the user must have some idea of how the system works in order to be able to formulate his information need most effectively. Implications can be seen here for user education.

In aiming to have users aware of the relevant information systems and services which are available, as well as able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of existing and experimental systems, there is need for user education programmes on the systems, developments in information technology, and the various information services which are being provided by libraries and other suppliers.

We can now look at the purposes which user education and user training can serve within the national context. The user education policies and programmes logically fall within the national information system, and are linked to the national educational system. This would mean that it would be able to draw on the resources of the media as well as of the educational system.

T.D. Wilson categorizes the purposes and functions of user education.

User education and user training serve a variety of purposes for a range of target audiences. The UNISIST guidelines indicate the major targets, groups and the main functions served.

In the absence of national information infrastructure, or sectoral deficiencies within the national information system, user education of key planners, key educationalists, key library and information personnel, plays a crucial role of providing sensitization as to the value of national policy and the benefits to be gained from the availability of information services.

The general educational system provides suitable scope at all levels. The schools providing the basic training, and the universities giving more in groundwork to be used later by researchers or practitioners. Malcolm Stevenson, in surveying user education in Britain, the United States and several other

countries concludes that most of the user education activities are carried out in schools and universities. Increasingly, training in information-searching skills in the educational institutions is most effective when associated with specific learning projects. User education and training for scientific and technical research activities by conveying to them the importance of provision of information for scientific and technical research, while making them aware of the short-comings of existing systems, and the means of utilizing local and international information systems for research purposes.

For practitioners, the primary function of user education and training is to encourage the idea that information has value for decision-making, that use of information can enable the adoption of more efficient and effective work practices. To be effective, user education for practitioners needs to recognize that their definition of information would inevitably be wider than that provided by conventional libraries, and consequently, user education and training programmes would therefore need to incorporate access to undocumented data, administrative and financial information of their own and related organizations.

User education also serves the function of informing the average citizen of ways of locating information relating to daily life problems. These services might be provided by public libraries, community information centres, or other agencies within the community. Such programmes are less easy to execute as this requires:

1. Identification of the various target audiences within the population.
2. Determination of the information needs of these target groups.

The fact that these requirements exist does not of course negate the value of user education and training of the average citizen.

Having examined possible purposes of user education, it is useful to consider the main contents of the programmes. They can best be set within the context of the national and international systems, and the benefits to be gained from each can be identified and evaluated. Similarly, there should be description of the local or organization's information system and service, as this would eventually help the users determine the type of information which they can seek, and the form in which this might be delivered to them.

Training of information intermediaries is also considered to be a component of user education and training. These intermediaries might be librarians, agricultural extension officers or industrial liaison officers. They learn certain information-seeking skills which they are expected to pass on to groups of end users to whom they relate in their work.

These concepts of user education are based on the underlying philosophy that:

1. libraries contain the information which users require;
2. lack of use is based on lack of familiarity with the resources;
3. and that user training will transform potential users into actual users.

This philosophy is partially valid, but it is necessary for librarians to consider how much information which their libraries hold, can satisfy the needs of their users, whether the information is organized in a manner which will provide ease of access, and promote use.

User education and training combined with the users needs are likely to provide some motivating influence on the users information-seeking behaviour in the future, but in response to information gained in user education exercises, libraries might need to modify some of their policies to provide more user-related services.

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