INFORMATION SERVICES AND THE IRRATIONAL

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INTRODUCTION

Most discussions of information services and patterns of information- seeking seem to assume that those who are served are rational actors in a basically orderly world. Thus, an agricultural extension field agent might supply farmers with information about a new strain of crop, or a method of cultivation. This information will have originated from an agricultural research centre or a commercial organisation with a research capacity and been processed by the ministry of agriculture and its experts. The farmers will therefore be expected to incorporate the innovation into their practices with direct beneficial consequences. A similar set of arguments might also be applied to any other similar transfers of information, especially those that involve a top-down route from the creators of information to its recipients. Such expectations also attach to responsive services, such as libraries, which provide information materials and access facilities from which users can obtain information of their choice. The librarians or other providers have carefully selected the documents and other resources available and the assumption is that users will thereby obtain useful knowledge, and act accordingly.

The problem is that it does not always work like this. For much of the time users and potential users ignore or reject what is offered to them and carry on in their own sweet way. To the determined provider of information services this seems quite irrational. What is more, the choices of information that people make and the sources from which they obtain it may, on examination, seem to compound this irrationality. This article will concentrate mainly on services that provide agricultural information to the people of developing countries, but the authors are confident that the line of argument that will be developed can be applied, at least to an extent, to information services anywhere in the world, relating to almost any kind of subject matter. The mismatch between a rational model of information provision based on an idealised user and the disappointing reality of information seeking and use, could scarcely be better illustrated than in the Information and Communications Technology (ITC) systems with their 'intuitive' icons and menus, manuals, help lines, service desks and consultants that continue to puzzle and frustrate ordinary system users. In the following pages we will identify some patterns of what may seem like irrationality in the use, and provision, of information services in the developing world. Then we will go on to identify examples of the cultural context that needs to be appreciated if the counter-rationality behind seemingly irrational preferences is to be understood. Finally we will draw some conclusions for the providers of information services.

'IRRATIONAL' USER AND PROVIDER RESPONSES

To begin with a striking example of seemingly irrational response to provision of an information service, we will cite an electronic network set up in Ethiopia in the 1990s This network, providing outreach information for farmers, was surprised to receive numerous requests for astrological information from farmers wanting help in making decisions on crop planting, stock rearing and family matters. The network staff wondered if it was legitimate to use its hard won funding to give such 'irrational' information: but in the end they did. The irrational information was 'good' because it increased the farmers' confidence in the service. To show that this is not an isolated instance of a kind that is perhaps best disregarded, we can turn back to one of the very first studies of informal information provision in African rural communities.

In Olabimpe Aboyade's classic RUDIS study (Aboyade, 1985) her research team experimented with a very simple service provided to a comparatively isolated village in the hinterland of Ibadan University. The researchers let it be known that they would come once a week to a designated spot in the village, bringing with them a few information materials. They would then read out relevant information to any villagers who asked for information, and respond on the next visit to any queries that they could not immediately answer. They collected data on the service by logging the queries that they received and the responses that they were able to provide. The service proved reasonably popular and over the period during which it was provided an interesting pattern of enquiries emerged. As predicted, the researchers were asked about farming, health and hygiene, and education. What they had not anticipated was that they were also asked for news on football teams in the city (because newspapers had little penetration into the community), they were asked for devotional material from the villagers' religions, and they were asked to bring and read stories. The virtue of the project was that it was open to unexpected responses and although the desire for recreational and religious materials was a surprise, the fact that this was recorded was important.

Incomprehension of why the services that are offered to the community are not as well received as they 'should' be, is undoubtedly a contributor to the continuing problem of making the services function as efficiently as they might. It is easy to accept the suggestion that conventional libraries, operating on a pattern tried and tested in Europe and North America, struggle to make an impact in developing countries. A recent study of African public libraries for the Carnegie Corporation amply illustrates this. (Issak, 2000) A librarian who was faced with a two metre high pile of books off-loaded from a lorry into a jumbled heap at a Vietnamese agricultural university's library was not alone in despairing. The books were a donation of second hand material collected and supplied by an American charity. The librarian doubted that the effort in evaluating and processing the material would be repaid by the value that could be obtained by users from the books. The unhappy history of charitable book donations has been largely reversed by the carefully focused efforts of organisations like Book Aid International, but too often in the past the consignments sent to developing countries were indeed more of a burden than a benefit. (Sturges and Neill, 1998)

Extension services, as another instance, have also hit low spots such as that described

by Wiggins (1986):

> In sub-Saharan Africa extension agents are all to often sad figures, abandoned in the bush with little or no support, infrequently supervised, with no messages worth passing on to the farmers, and with few incentives to get on with the work. Farmers do not appreciate the agents' work, and only make use of them when they can gain access to some inputs – especially if subsidised – such as seed, fertiliser, chemicals, tractor hire, or farm credit. Consequently agents are demoralised, with little enthusiasm for their jobs.

The causes and consequences of such demoralisation are illustrations of irrationality at the provider, rather than the user, end of the chain.

Irrational investment is one way in which information services are undermined. Examples include the recent graduate in Extension Studies encountered at an Agricultural research station in Tanzania who had just been appointed to travel around farms and advise them on new techniques. The enthusiasm of this young woman had been blighted by the discovery that she had no funds for fuel and not even a serviceable bicycle. A considerable investment in the collection of important information and in the graduate's education had been effectively wasted because of the irrational unwillingness or inability to make a much smaller investment in transport facilities. In a similar case in the 1980s, donor funding was obtained for a consultant to travel to each of the two dozen or so agricultural research stations in Tanzania to microfilm and index all the Station Reports. These reports were a rich resource of information on crops and livestock in the country. The work was completed and the archive delivered, but the necessary investment in microform readers was not made, guaranteeing that only a few of the intended users were ever in a position to see it.

The managers of information services are also responsible for decisions that constrict the potential of their own services. North Vietnam, in the years before independence was achieved, and the whole of Vietnam in the early years after the fall of the South Vietnamese regime, fell within the Soviet sphere of influence. Russian and Eastern Bloc advisors were particularly active in the agricultural and food industry sector, and Vietnamese students studied in Russia and Eastern Bloc countries. Many of the agricultural research centres were built and equipped in that era, and this included the setting up of substantial libraries. (Gooch, 1995) A great number of useful texts became available in Vietnam through this process. Although they were mostly in Russian and other Eastern European languages, specialists able to read them and pass on their content in one way or another were available. However after the fall of the Soviet system around 1990 all assistance from that direction stopped, and the Vietnamese turned to the West for help. On a visit to the library of a major agricultural university, a request to examine book stacks visible on one side of a gloomy courtyard roofed over and fenced off with chicken wire, met the response 'Oh, those are Russian books, we don't use them'. What is more, nobody could find a key to the padlock. As far as the Vietnamese were concerned, the Soviets had lost the game, so their products and processes were worthless.

At a more humble level, in the Tanzanian research station, mentioned earlier, a researcher had been methodically carrying out field trials for resistance to drought and

pests with several varieties of coffee over a 15-year period. Each year he received grants for his work, which supported him and his family. Each year he set out his tabulated results, which were laboriously typed out and filed away. When new sources of relevant information were suggested to him, he revealed no interest. The task itself was sufficient for his needs and new information on the varieties with which he was working, or on superior varieties, would be a major threat to his livelihood and way of life. His resistance to new information was both self-protection and a response to his perception that his findings were received with a complete lack of interest. This response was a limited but probably not completely irrational response. It probably falls into the same category as the reply of the administrator of the Ethiopian information service mentioned earlier who, when asked why there was no record of requests for information from a particular area, said 'Oh that tribe? We wouldn't answer questions from them'. A whole host of unapparent intertribal relationships and hierarchies clearly lurk behind such a response. They might be irrational or they might arise from hard experience.

Malawian farmers, asked for their opinion on the extension services that were supposed to keep them in touch with technical and market developments expressed support for the principle but considerable disillusion with the reality. (Sturges and Chimseu, 1996) People hinted that the extension agents favoured certain better off farmers and used the knowledge and resources available to them by virtue of their position to farm successfully themselves. Certainly a visit to one agent in the course of this research found him harvesting his own crops at a time when he might have been expected to be out instructing others in the area for which he was responsible. Research more specifically directed at the functioning of extension services in Nepal supports this suggestion in more detail. (Roberts, 1997) Farmers in the flatter, more fertile land of the valley bottoms were regularly visited by agents, whilst the farmers on the poorer land higher up the valleys seldom if ever saw them. The disparity between the experiences of farmers was not only based on the accessibility and potential of their land. The poorer highland farmers were generally of lower caste and did not always speak the same language as their more prosperous neighbours.

Other responses to the provision of information services were actually rooted in a calculated estimation of the types of service likely to be most effective. A visit to a medical school in upcountry Vietnam revealed an astonishing lack of texts and equipment for the students. This was not simply a matter of lack of funds for information resources, but the result of an apparent decision to concentrate on certain affordable services with a predictably high rate of success. The school was concentrating on Barefoot Doctor programmes, whereby students were given training in the diagnosis and treatment of the small group of diseases most prevalent in their area. This was highly effective until a more 'professional' attitude to medical education and practice led to its abandonment. Whilst it was used, this approach illustrated the point that it could be quite reasonable to equip people for a job without giving them access to the whole range of information that they might notionally require. Less might in such circumstances mean more.

We should now ask ourselves what these examples of apparently irrational user response to information services, and similarly irrational response by the providers of information services, actually suggest. Rather than merely assuming that what we are dealing with here are simply examples of confusion and human inadequacy, it makes

sense to explore the possibility that there is in fact another, underlying rationality here that is missed when we look through the perspective of information specialists from advanced information economies. To do this, we have at least to be open to perceptions of the cultural patterns of the communities with which we work in developing countries, and the oral indigenous knowledge that already informs and expresses these cultures.

CULTURAL SOURCES OF 'IRRATIONALITY'

Once again, if we start with a specific case, we can derive an argument from exploring its implications. Take a story that appeared in a recent issue of a Ugandan newspaper. It was reported that Bikisa primary school had been closed in May 2004 and again in June because of demon possession of large numbers of the pupils. (Nsubugu and Kiwawulo, 2004) The children had gabbled incoherently, run around, ripped off their clothes, foamed at the mouth, and shaken violently. Some had attempted to run away from home and their parents had had to tether them to posts to prevent this. In this case the trouble had quickly been attributed to the activities of a local man, Isma Sserunkuuma, who was arrested and questioned about the matter. What Sserunkuuma then admitted was that he had acquired demons from a witchdoctor because he wanted to be rich and felt that the demons could help him achieve his ambition. Unfortunately he had found himself quite unable to meet the demands of the demons, which had asked for 300 virgins for sacrifice and cattle whose blood they could drink. Sserunkuuma had therefore had to release the demons, which had in turn attacked the pupils of the school. He was clearly contrite but pleaded that his offence was only 'failing to control demons'.

The story then goes on to detail the response of the community to this situation.

1   The parents were obviously extremely distressed, and several local residents migrated to other places saying they were tired of the mayhem caused to them by demons.
2   The chief local administrator, the District Commissioner Margaret Kasaija, was responsible for Sserunkuuma's arrest and asked 'I wonder why people really acquire demons and resort to bewitching others?' She went on to caution the public against acquiring demons.
3   A traditional healer, Ben Ggulu (in fact the Chairman of the national association of healers), was called in to ritually cleanse the school. He then cured 15 particularly badly affected pupils by holding herbs over their heads. He sought out the demons, speaking in strange languages and wielding a cow's horn wound with bark cloth. He also pointed out that 'harmless demons do not ask for blood and human sacrifices',
4   In his other capacity as Sub-County Chairperson, Ggulu criticised the police for an inadequate response and generally failing to investigate witchcraft cases properly. He also called for a review of 'weak' witchcraft laws.
5   The district Police Commander merely confirmed that most incidents of mob justice in the area were due to witchcraft accusations.
6   A priest was called in and prayed over the pupils, but this is not recorded as having any particular effect, nor does he seem to have offered any memorable comment.

7   A local councillor stated that it was unacceptable to acquire demons and suggested that 'We have to come up with a by law to evict anyone who will be found with demons'.

8   The local Health Services Director could only say that cases were still being examined in the local laboratory.

Perhaps the most interesting responses of all are those of the journalists and photographer responsible for the story. At no point in the account do the journalists introduce any note of scepticism. Everything is recorded through the perceptions of local people and all of them are shown as accepting the basic facts of the case as indicating demon possession. The possibility exists, of course, that the journalists were directing a particularly subtle form of irony towards the local community by reporting the story just as they were told it, but there is absolutely no clue in the text to suggest that this was what they were doing. In fact, there is only one slightly discordant element. One of the photographs illustrating the story shows the Deputy Headmaster of the school restraining a possessed pupil in front of a group of other pupils. The grouping suggests that this was staged and many of the pupils are laughing happily at the camera. Perhaps here we get a small clue that not everyone took it as seriously as others did. However, this may by an over-analytical view of what is to all intents and purposes a factual account of supernatural events in an African community. Sturges (2004) works through some of the implications of this story for libraries, but what it offers to the present discussion is an indication of the depth and strength of a particular form of belief that has been systematically disregarded by outsiders for generations. To this extent, if no other, demon possession is real and societies that adopt traditional responses to it are merely turning to what is tried and tested. The fact that modern medical or spiritual provision seems rather inadequate to cope further reinforces the preference for the traditional.

The same argument can very reasonably be applied to responses to modern information services, such as the example from Ethiopia outlined earlier. If people have found that over the years their astrologers give what they find to be good advice on matters including planting and harvesting, it is perfectly reasonable for them to persist in consulting them. In other parts of the developing world similar means are used. In northern Ghana, for instance, farmers consult soothsayers and earth priests (*tendana*) to obtain messages from their gods and ancestors to assist with agricultural decision-making. The messages give guidance on matters of wind, rain, crops and livestock, and the agriculture of the region has a good record of innovation and success. (Millar, 1993) The record of formal agricultural advice services in giving appropriate advice is not so perfect as to justify the wholesale shifting of trust from the traditional to the modern. Failures of introduced innovations, from the East African groundnut scheme of the late 1940s onwards, have occurred regularly and often devastatingly.

However, it is important to note that the rationality of recognising the irrational may at times be inadequate if it does not recognise the fact that outside 'interference' may at times be extremely positive. Consider the mobile phone: its impact on developing countries, particularly in Africa, is possibly the most important agent of future development. Yet the significance of this device could not have been foreseen by any needs assessment project ten years ago, however well integrated with local needs or wants.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

If information services in developing countries can be better received by their potential users, the benefits will not only accrue to these users. The providers of the services will have a solid agenda for the acquisition and presentation of resources, the promotion of the service and the subsequent development and expansion of services. Their case to funders would have a foundation on which to apply for continuing allocation of resources. All of this essentially depends on acknowledging the distinctness of the cultures that they serve, and adapting services to the conventions and preferences of those cultures.

Acknowledgement is only the starting point. In the long term a thorough understanding of the culture of the potential recipients is required. Hunter-gatherer communities with few possessions or cultural artefacts often evolve incredibly complex rules for marriage and other social institutions and this remains so in many present day settled communities. It seems irrational to make life more complex than it needs to be - but it appears to be a basic human characteristic to erect complex and irrational structures to govern group behaviour. So we should expect new information to be met with some resistance - to need to pass through a filter of 'irrational' structures before acceptance. This does not necessarily mean an uncritical acceptance of the whole content of the culture of a particular people. It is arguably not necessary to accept uncritically that astrologers and mediums can accurately predict the favourable and unfavourable circumstances that might affect agricultural decision-making. To understand and believe that people trust in this method, or are reassured by it, is probably enough.

It is also important to recognise that there are perils of cultural relativism, or complete absorption in the beliefs and practices of a culture that one seeks to understand. To accept the rightness of ritual slaughter of animals and the killing of humans in the quest for support from supernatural powers is something that really cannot reasonably be expected of even the most committed information specialist. Yet even some beliefs and practices that, at first sight, seem totally unacceptable may be more comprehensible on closer examination because of economic imperatives that drive them. Examples that could be cited include arranged marriage and the so-called 'honour killing' of family members who offend against social codes. A particularly contentious example is female circumcision, or female genital mutilation (FGM) as it is frequently called. This arouses extreme horror in people from Europe and other parts of the world in which it is not just an alien but also an inhuman practice. Yet when considered from an anthropological viewpoint it is possible for women social researchers, such as Gruenbaum (2001) to construct a rationale for it, argued from inside the mentality of the community.

This said, some people might suggest that the general interest in the indigenous culture of the developing world is dangerously strong. They would be referring to: the interest in ethnic art, music, and crafts, from dealers and promoters in the industrialised countries; the impulse to learn about, synthesise and patent the herbalist content of traditional medicine by major pharmaceutical and cosmetic companies; and the pursuit of knowledge of plant strains with special nutritional and disease

resistance qualities. The exploitation of what most traditional societies seem to regard as public goods or communal property as intellectual property (the exploiting companies' intellectual property) includes disgraceful examples and is something which the growing fair trade movement opposes strongly. For example, despite the current horrendous civil war in the Congo basin, the forest pygmies have an 'irrational' dread of the coming peace, since this will mean the advent of the commercial logging companies that are the chief threat to the ecosystem in which the pygmy lifestyle thrives. Developing a deep understanding of indigenous culture so as to be able to provide information services should not present readymade opportunities to exploit those cultures. The ethos of information services must be assistance not exploitation.

So, in conclusion, we would suggest that the failures of information services that we highlight call for their realignment in a much more participatory mode. This means a preparedness to embrace what may seem, in the first instance, to be the irrational. If we can understand that services most commonly fail to meet the needs of their users through not understanding those needs, then we have a starting point. Consultation to find out what needs the community will actually express, involving them in designing and implementing systems follow from this. The scope of the service may well not stop short at what the community considers the limits of what its members will want. There should be scope for the service to develop the community's ideas beyond this point. It is working in participation with the recipient community so as to set a baseline that is important. Continuing dialogue and participatory evaluation will enable the service providers to ensure that the service stays in touch with needs, especially the new needs that it should be able to stimulate. (Sturges and Wallis, 1999) Starting from what seems to be the irrational, understanding it, working with it and treating the community in which the seeming irrationality arises as partners, will ensure that more effective services can emerge.

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