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Consal Organization - Improving our communication network

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Abstract:

The paper briefly traces the development of CONSAL as a regional library organization and also discusses in depth, the CONSAL WEB, the communication infrastructure for professional development and communication amongst Southeast Asian Librarians. CONSAL WEB is assessed against the lessons learnt in implementing the infrastructure. In a region where IT infrastructure is weak, a centralized internet based communication platform helps to disseminate information quickly to the entire professional body distributed across government and private institutions. The implementation surfaced problems of use to outcomes and the paper adequately addresses these concerns and draws conclusions for library associations that seek to utilize the webfront for communication purposes.

1 Introduction

1.1 CONSAL (Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians) was formed in 1970 in response to a growing sense of regional identity, fostered particularly by the formation of ASEAN. CONSAL promotes libraries and librarians as part of ASEAN, task with the development of education and culture.

- The writer acknowledges the valuable contribution given by his colleague, Mr Johnson Paul in writing this paper.

1.2 CONSAL is a loose and flexible organization which provides a forum for professional contact and exchange. It holds a general conference triennially in each member country by rotation and promotes cooperation in librarianship, bibliography, documentation and related activities for the region. CONSAL provides for national membership restricted to national libraries and national library associations, associate membership to related organizations and individuals interested in the objectives of CONSAL. Additionally, membership is also opened to institutions and individuals within Southeast Asia.

2 CONSAL Executive Board

2.1 The CONSAL Executive Board is the executive arm of the organization. It comprises thirty members, three members from each of the ten ASEAN countries. Each member country is represented by two members from the National Library Association and one from the National Library. In the absence of the National Library in any country, all the three members of the Board will be represented by the National Library Association of the country.

2.2 The main functions of the Board are:

- To implement the resolutions adopted at the previous General Conference of CONSAL;
- To set up committees as deemed necessary and
- To undertake other activities in conformity with the objectives of CONSAL.

The Executive Board meets at least once a year and the presence of at least four member countries of the Executive Board shall constitute a quorum.

3 CONSAL Secretariat

3.1 On 26 April 2000, the CONSAL Executive Board set up a CONSAL Secretariat. A Secretary-General heads the Secretariat, which is hosted by the National Library Board of Singapore. The functions of the Secretariat are:

- To establish the financial and administrative base for the CONSAL Secretariat to function on a long-term basis
- To organize CONSAL conferences/seminars/training
- To monitor the implementation of CONSAL projects
- To represent CONSAL in international library conventions and meetings

4 CONSAL Projects

4.1 The CONSAL Executive Board has approved five collaborative projects coordinated by Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Projects were chosen based on their relevance to the current state of development in the region and also what members felt were important areas of concern in their respective countries. The approved projects are:

- Resource Sharing and Legal Deposit
- Copyright Management
- Preservation and Conservation
- Translation of Local Publications
- Training Coordination

5 CONSAL Publications

5.1 CONSAL's published proceedings are the main source of information on library development in Southeast Asia. The papers presented provide thoughtful discussions and analysis of professional issues. Please see a list of CONSAL's publications in Annex A.

6 CONSAL Web – The Library Community Portal

6.1 CONSAL, as an institution founded to create, acquire and disseminate knowledge, provides an electronic communication infrastructure that includes library resources, content, and tools for electronic communication for its members. This infrastructure, or CONSAL WEB, launched on 24 April 2001, is the property of CONSAL and it facilitates the business of the professionals in teaching, learning, scholarships, research, communication and other creative endeavours. By providing this infrastructure, CONSAL strongly encourages the free exchange of ideas and information amongst all members of its community as well as with members of other international communities.

6.2 CONSAL is committed to providing a learning environment that is conducive to the personal and professional development of each librarian. To fulfill its multiple missions as an institution of professional development, CONSAL encourages a culture that values and nurtures collegiality, diversity, pluralism and the uniqueness of the professional individual.

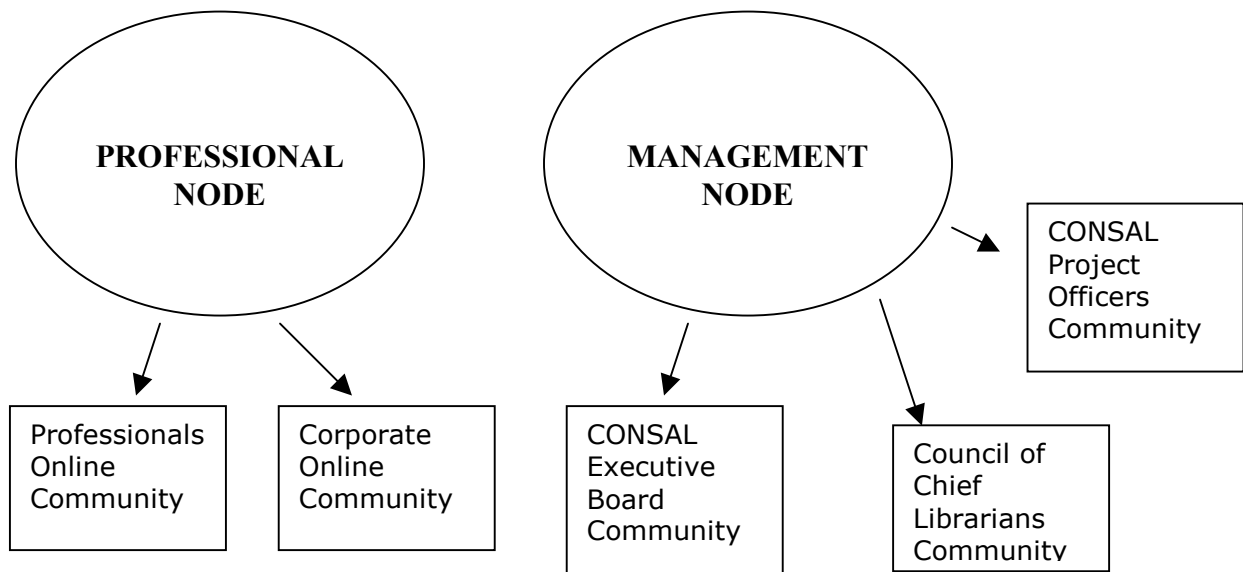
7. A Community Approach

7.1 One of the basic fundamentals of building a communication forum in CONSAL is the concept of a community. Building an online community requires new skills and structures. Unlike traditional communities that are defined by purpose and functions, online communities are defined by interests and friendships and communication flows. Online community is the concept of convening people in virtual space and describing a range of online activities including electronic collaboration, virtual networks, Web-based discussions and electronic mailing lists. Developing online communities to serve as a communication infrastructure, which will proliferate like a virus if successful. . Some of the initial questions that were raised were:

- *How will the online community advance CONSAL's mission?*
- *What are reasonable expectations for the online community?*
- *What other online communities are addressing similar issues and in what ways will ours be different? Will tapping onto an already established online community address our online community-building goals?*
- *What are the topics to be discussed? How will we keep the discussion focused?*
- *What is the time frame for the discussion? Will it be a one-time event or will we host ongoing discussions?*
- *What will CONSAL do with the information once the discussion ends?*

7.2 In addressing these questions, CONSAL WEB team has formulated a two-tier segment approach towards building the communication infrastructure which would be capable of housing multiple communities. The two tiers are basically – the **Professional Node** and the **Management Node**. This is primarily skewed towards the confidentiality of information and the hierarchy of management procedures that impact the flow of communication. Within these segments several communities are capable of operating. The regional group of professional librarians and corporate registrants operate within the framework of the Professional Node. The CONSAL Executive Board, Projects Committee and the

Council of Chief Librarians in Singapore operate within the framework of the Management Node. The diagram below depicts this clearly:



7.3 For all of these Communities, there is a common tier of communication structures as follows:

a. NEWS

This is a monthly update with regular features on:

- Librarians as Inventors – a monthly editorial*
- Monthly Electronic Publishing Updates*
- Monthly Updates on Libraries all over the world*
- Offers from Publishers and Booksellers*

b. REGIONAL CENTRE

General information about countries and the libraries in the country are located at this Centre.

c. RESOURCE CENTRE

Current and up-to-date information related to the professional work is updated here on a regular basis. Key components include:

- *ALERTS* pertaining to public libraries, digital library developments and technologies, etc.
- *BRIEFS* that document ideas and information about key developments, eg use of ICT (Information Communication Technologies) in libraries.
- *REVIEWS*, another key component of the resource centre, enables libraries to provide a review of locally published resources or books that are published by their parent organizations.

For the benefit of the wider ASEAN community, the reviews would help to communicate and thereby render acquisition by ASEAN member libraries. There are other information sources like E-Streams, etc that offer tools to assist librarians in selection of library materials. This section of the website enables librarians to bridge the digital divide by contributing articles or information packages to the rest of the library community in the region.

d. EVENT CENTRE

The Event Centre offers a communication platform for libraries to publicize their events. Through a simple “Post an Event” electronic form, information about local events can be easily and quickly loaded onto the site and appears on screen almost immediately. The Event Centre offers all communities the opportunity to participate in regional and international professional gatherings. Users will be able to search across these events through several categories like CONSAL Training Programme, Publishing Event, etc

e. EVENT PHOTOGALLERY

The Event Photogallery hosts photographs of librarians and library administrators who have participated in regional seminars or conferences. The photographs are visual communication tools especially for librarians who wish to touch base with other librarians in the region.

f. MARKET PLACE

The marketplace serves as a communication platform for publishers and librarians to market their products and services to the library community respectively. It allows users to post advertisements or make requests effectively. The advertisements allow for image uploading as well as hyperlinks.

8 COMMUNITY FORUMS

8.1 A distinctive feature of CONSAL WEB is the Community Forum which is customized to individual community participants.

8.2 Individuals who are part of the professional community have a customized interface to the various components of the website. More importantly, the user discussion listings in the “Communities” of “discuss” sections are tailored to the needs of the community. In the case of the professional community, the user groups are defined either by:

- Subject/function based (eg. ARTS Libraries, RFID Implementation, etc);
- Information based (eg. CONSAL Projects, Annual Reports of CONSAL Libraries, etc) or
- Online Conferencing (Librarianship 2001, Singapore-Philippines Consultation, etc)

8.3 The forum structures allow users to communicate at the comfort of their desk-tops and interact with others across national boundaries in a seamless manner. The community forums are also archived so that those who wish to look up proceedings of past discussions could do so even when the conference has ended.

8.4 Individuals who subscribe to the “Corporate Online” community share similar discussion groups with professional online users except that the community can eventually develop its own customized

forums for their own community. Currently, the presence of the professionals online is in itself an attraction for corporate users to publicize their products and services.

8.5 As for the management node, the CONSAL Executive Board, a community activated in this node, shares its minutes of meetings through the discussion group infrastructure. The forum is also used for sharing of project updates and consultations on latest issues impacting on organization as a whole. Hence the CONSAL Executive Board's activities and decision-making are conducted virtually.

9 OUTPUTS

9.1 LEARNING LESSONS

a. Know what you want to accomplish

Obviously, all learning organizations experiment with the Internet and CONSAL's interest lies in embracing these technologies and opening up an external dialogue through them. As a result, a great deal of "noise" is generated over the Internet and we should be mindful not to create even more. As with face-to-face meetings, any on-line dialogue or community should have a clear and focused purpose. Different purposes dictate different designs and technologies.

b. Signal clearly and regularly the objective and tone of your discussion

People tend to migrate in and out of Internet discussions just as they come in and out of working sessions in physical conferences. Therefore, it is important to assure that people know the purpose of the discussion list, as well as the ground rules, the general ethos and tone of the discussion. The role of the moderator or discussion facilitator is crucial in this area.

c. Moderation

Lists which are not moderated or filtered have their purpose. However, as one who has belonged to such lists can attest, they easily become an endless source of flood emails in your inbox with the "signal-to-noise" ratio pretty low. If your goal is to build a real "knowledge community" around a specific theme or development challenge, the moderator's (or facilitator's) role is vital. The moderator serves not only as "gatekeeper", filtering out irrelevant or offensive messages; he/she also sets the tone of the discussion; keeps the discussion focused and moving forward; "animates" the discussion when it is moving slowly; contributes useful information; helps/encourages members to contribute information on their experience (especially important for participants from developing countries); prepares summaries; and in general serves all the functions of a good "chair" in a working group.

d. Tools are just tools

Avoid the temptation to use the most sophisticated on-line tools available, unless they are specifically suited to your purpose and your audience. Sometimes a simple email list is the best tool of all, if it is well moderated and backed up by a user-friendly Web site that archives the discussion in a searchable format. It is not advisable get fancy for fancy's sake; the goal is to include people, not to impress them.

e. Capture the learning, and make it easy for others to access.

The combination of well-written regular (weekly in the case of very active lists) discussion summaries and a fully-searchable Web archive of list messages, organized by theme (or "thread"), is a vital tool for assuring that the learning, which takes place in the group is effectively captured. It also provides access to those who could not participate in the ongoing discussions. Similarly, if participants include information in their messages about other related knowledge resources (databases, websites, etc.) the moderator should cull this information and catalogue it in a user-friendly and easily searchable manner.

f. The best discussions do not necessarily last

The purpose of a good list is not necessarily to perpetuate itself but to accomplish some specific set of learning or information/knowledge sharing objectives. Lists that go on forever can lose focus, particularly if they are not tied to specific actions or decisions. If the objectives of the list are clear, the discussions well moderated, and the participants committed, a list can continue indefinitely. In general, however, the longer the duration of a list, the more pressing the need for a clear objective and concrete results if it is not to degenerate into "chat" and/or lose its best participants.

g. The best discussions involve the right people

If a discussion list is intended to achieve concrete results in relation to a development objective, recruiting the active participation of a critical mass of the "right people" is crucial. However, the "right people" need to be defined inclusively, with particular attention to those with limited email access and less experience in participating in such exchanges. A list discussion that only involves representatives of donor agencies and selected library chiefs and NGO types from CONSAL may be stimulating (and perhaps self-satisfying) but it is less likely to lead to tangible impact in the field if it does not include voices from the librarians themselves. Recruitment of, and support for, the participation of librarians from CONSAL countries requires a serious and sustained commitment of resources, particularly human resources. The moderator and sponsors of the list need to "work their networks" aggressively to encourage participation of a wide range of organizations and individuals in all the ten CONSAL countries, and to signal that those voices are valued within the dialogue.

h. Capacity-building and "railhead" strategies are important

If we are serious about attracting maximum participation to an electronic dialogue, one has to be proactive in addressing the dual impediments of limited Internet access and the lack of client experience for participating in and helping to animate on-line discussions. Spotty Internet access can be considered by an aggressive partnership/networking strategy that involves identifying, and working closely with NGOs and other organizations. They must have an extensive field presence and are willing to serve as the "window" to the dialogue for local individuals and groups. This leads to a related point that these dialogues are enabled by the Internet and they need not be limited to those with Internet access. Working with partner networks, one can encourage "off-line" dialogues that feed into the on-line dialogue, and in the process help to develop the capacity of local partners to use the Internet as a tool for knowledge-sharing for their colleagues and clients without Internet access.

i. Nothing exceeds like success

Sometimes a list discussion can prove to be very successful, especially if it is a "hot" issue, and this draw thousands of subscribers. However, barriers to entry (at least among those with Internet access) are extremely low and granted in most lists the majority of subscribers simply "lurk", reading the list traffic, but rarely, if ever, posting messages themselves. However, if your objective is to encourage new voices, especially from developing countries, then managing the volume of messages and

keeping it useful and relevant, that is filtering messages into sub-lists based on the popularity of the topic, is a mandatory task to be observed. This because we do not want to flood members with voluminous messages knowing that the less developed CONSAL participants are constrained by limited computer access and have to pay high fees for Internet access. They can only deal with a modest amount of emails

j. Building an on-line community is hard work, and time-consuming

If you plan to build a valuable and focused online dialogue, you need to devote adequate human resources to it. It cannot be viewed as something, which can be done during your spare time. Effective moderation of a focused, intensive, productive list discussion can be more than a full-time job. This is all the more reason why lists work best when they are focused and time-bound. If well organized, the work of moderation can be shared among several individuals, even in different locations. In general, however, the value and productivity of an online dialogue is directly in proportion to the intensity and quality of the moderator's effort.

k. Do not be afraid to learn

These are (relatively) new technologies and new forms of social interaction particularly for large public organizations. They are often seen to be self-contained and unaccustomed to engaging in dialogue and knowledge sharing with the outside world. It can be the beginning of an important step and one that will definitely be appreciated by clients and others.

10 Conclusion: Privacy in Community Building

10.1 It may be appropriate to conclude the presentation by talking about Privacy in the context of communication and community building in CONSAL Web. CONSAL strives to protect the rights and privileges and to enhance the self-esteem of all its members. All members of CONSAL Web should be aware that any form of harassment or discrimination against any individual is inconsistent with the values and ideals of CONSAL community and is not permitted within the context of the electronic communication infrastructure.

10.2 CONSAL makes every effort to observe the privacy of files, and materials stored on or transmitted by members. When faced with evidence of violations of policies or standards, of contractual obligations, or of copyright laws, CONSAL may consider such files, and materials stored on or transmitted by members to be property of CONSAL and may inspect them without notice. When taken, this action does not supersede the intellectual property policies of CONSAL; rather, it allows for the management of the electronic communication environment. CONSAL also has the right to deny, limit, or terminate access to material posted on or transmitted in the CONSAL web. In addition, CONSAL reserves the right to limit, restrict, or deny privileges and access to its information resources for those who violate CONSAL communication policies.

10.3 In matters not controlled by law or institutional policy, CONSAL urges members of its community to exhibit ethical conduct in the use of computing resources. Electronic communication can be ambiguous and is less personal in nature than other forms of interaction. While CONSAL encourages the exchange and debate of values and ideas, individuals are expected to exercise good judgment to ensure that their electronic communications reflect the high ethical standards of the academic community and convey mutual respect and civility. While CONSAL will not restrict access to electronically available information, individuals using public computer workstations are encouraged to maintain an appropriate

level of common civility and courtesy in viewing information content that could be identified as offensive to a passer-by or casual observer.

10.4 In the final analysis, it must be concluded that the libraries of the future are libraries of conversations and communication. CONSAL Web, in its seminal effort to promote the “knowledge society online,” has initiated the portal infrastructure, which in the absence would be an empty shell. It is imperative therefore that a communication tool is used effectively to communicate rather than use it as a showpiece of technological feat. May I take this opportunity to encourage each one of you to champion a particular forum of your interest which we could create for you. This means that you will also entice your friends and followers to participate in your forum discussions and conferences. It leaves me to say that CONSAL is one of the first library communities to activate a communication infrastructure as such and the success of this depends on the collaboration of the region as a whole.

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