Chapter VII

Impact of the Internet on Malaysian Libraries

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet plays a significant role in Malaysian libraries and information centers today. From a humble beginning where computers were a luxury that only the very large libraries could afford, the Internet is increasingly being incorporated into the daily routine of librarians and is being used to provide services that were not possible in the pre-Internet days. Today, Internet services are no longer luxuries, but are being used in management, communication, information access and retrieval, document delivery and personal development by librarians and patrons.

The Internet began in Malaysia in the early 1980s as Telita, a two-way commercial tele-text system primarily to exchange e-mail. At about the same time, computer hobbyists started creating local bulletin boards. Through these bulletin boards users could send e-mail worldwide and download freeware and shareware through FIDONet, a global network of bulletin boards. The first Malaysian network connected to the Internet was set up in 1983 from the University of Malaya’s Faculty of Engineering. In 1986, a Malaysian computer network (Rangkaian Komputer Malaysia or RangKoM) was established linking the main universities in the country. This network offered e-mail facilities and access to the USENET newsgroup. However, it was expensive to use since connections were through dial-up lines to gateway countries. On January 24, 1990, a Joint Advanced Research Integrated Network (JARING) was launched to optimize the use of
data communications, which became the base for Internet services in the country. In 1992, the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems (MIMOS), which was the only Internet Service Provider in the country at that time, obtained a 64Kbps leased line to the United States, thus marking the beginning of the real Internet connections (Wong, 1998).

Since then, the use of the Internet has increased by leaps and bounds. With an estimated 10% of the Malaysian population having access to the Internet at the end of 1998, the popularity is evident in the number of seminars and conferences, exhibitions, publications, cybercafes and from conversations among the ordinary person-on-the-street. Malaysia’s aim of attaining a developed nation status by the year 2020 (commonly referred to as Vision 2020) is expected to further enhance the use of Internet. Furthermore, the commitment of the government towards setting up the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), a 15km by 50km corridor as a multimedia testbed incorporating electronic government, a national ‘smart’ card and world-wide manufacturing webs, is expected to be a further boost for the Internet in the country.

The use of the Internet among Malaysian libraries took off in 1994, when the National Library introduced the Jaringan Ilmu (Knowledge Network) project to link libraries using the Internet as a platform. Under this project, the National Library, all 14 state public libraries and 35 special libraries in federal government ministries and departments were provided with computers linked to MIMOS. By early 1995, a few libraries had started developing their own Web sites, and in early 1996, it was estimated that about 60 libraries had set up their own Web sites (Mohamad & Fadzil, 1996). Today, it is estimated that more than 500 libraries have access to the Internet. This number may appear to be small for a country with approximately 10,669 libraries (Singh, 1998a), but considering the large number of school libraries in rural areas which only have basic infrastructure, this figure is commendable. A quick search of the Internet also shows that approximately 100 libraries have their own Web sites that are easily located by the major search engines, with an unknown number having their Web site on free Web hosting services.

This chapter describes the use of the Internet by Malaysian libraries and information centers, and looks at the impact of this usage. The chapter represents a synthesis of ideas gained from the author’s
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