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Libraries Driving Access to Knowledge in the 21st Century in Developing Countries: An Overview

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Introduction

Only by transmission of knowledge by each succeeding generation can civilization maintain itself and make advanceupon the knowledge of the past. Jefferson, (1962)

Libraries are service organizations where individuals, organizations, and societies are provideed unhindered access to substantial quantities of information. Libraries are collections of books and other information resources gathered for the purposes of reading, study, and reference (Onwubiko and Uzoigwe, 2004; Aina, 2003; Encyclopedia Britannica, 1974). Reitz, (2004) sees a library as a collection or group of collections of books and/or other materials organized and maintained for use. Historically, libraries have served as places where books used for the documentation of knowledge were kept, but they are now portals to global information relevant in education, research, individual and national development (Omekwu & Ugwuanyi, 2009 in Okore, Ekere, and Eke, 2009). Knowledge, according to Reitz (2004) expressed either in formal or systematic language, codified in form of data, scientific formulae, etc. It can be defined as information that has been comprehended and evaluated in the light of experience and incorporated into the knower's intellectual understanding of the subject. With the emergence of new technologies that facilitats access to information, an economic struggle has arisen in libraries.

The library, as a conduit for information, serving a wide spectrum of information

seekers, has a critical role to play in the facilitation of knowledge generation; hence, an unhindered access to knowledge is essential in a development process. It serves as a liberator from poverty and deprivation and as a springboard in the quest for innovation and change. Drake (1984) in Tise, Raju and Masango, (2008) says that access to information is a complex concept. Libraries have the mandate to drive access toinformation to alleviate poverty and deprivation due to paradoxical situation of a scarcity of information in an era of information explosion.

The Importance of Library to Knowledge Management

According to Lee (2005), while the business world is changing in the new knowledge economy and digital age, libraries of all types are undergoing drastic changes also. The new role of libraries in the 21st century is to be a learning and knowledge center for their users as well as the intellectual commons for their respective communities where, to borrow the phrase from the Keystone Principles, people and ideas interact in both the real and virtual environments to expand learning and facilitate the creation of new knowledge. As a learning organization, libraries should provide a strong leadership in knowledge management since the most important mission is to expand the access of knowledge for their users.

The importance of library to knowledge management can be facilitated by library services in a variety of ways, which are itemized below (Lee 2005)

- Knowledge resources management: As a result of exponential growth in human knowledge in a variety of formats, libraries must develop their resources access and sharing strategies from printed to electronic and digital resources in concert with their mission and charges;
- Resource sharing and networking: Libraries have had a long tradition of resource sharing and networking. These have been greatly expanded by the rapid development of computer, telecommunication, networking, and digital technologies and the success of which are largely as a result of the full cooperation and participation of all member libraries.
- Information technology development: To facilitate the implementation of knowledge management, a well-designed and operational knowledge management system should be in place. Latest information technology should be used as an enabler.
- User services: The utmost goal of knowledge management is to provide users with a variety of quality services in order to improve the communication, use and creation of knowledge.
- Human resource management: A great amount of expert knowledge is possessed by library staff and users, both in and outside the libraries. In university and research communities such expertise is abundant and should be inventoried, indexed, and updated regularly and be made searchable and accessible through electronic databases created and maintained by libraries. Also the transfer of knowledge and experience from experienced staff to new staff members must be encouraged.

In a nutshell, libraries preserve knowledge so that none is lost, organize knowledge so that none is wasted, and make knowledge available so that no one need be deprived in this information age.

Libraries Driving Access to Knowledge in the 21st Century

Tise (2009) argues that knowledge is foundational to all spheres of life and critical for the growth of society. It is produced when information is absorbed, processed, and internalized by individuals. Libraries, as critical providers of

information, have an important role to play in the creation of new knowledge, arguing further that knowledge is functional at many levels: it can alleviate poverty and deprivation; it serves as a springboard for innovation and changes; and, it is a catalyst for national development and personal achievements. As knowledge institutions, libraries provide spaces for information-sharing and learning for all ages, genders, ethnicities, and socioeconomic groups regardless of their needs. Libraries provide the means through which new knowledge is developed and made available to all.

Some of the key enablers for access to knowledge through/by libraries and librarians are (Tise, 2009):

- Libraries and librarians must become more user-oriented by bringing libraries and their resources to the user; empower users through information literacy, social networking, enabling access to information and facilitating the full participation of all citizens in societal activities;
- Become active in advocacy by actively promoting libraries through effective communications with stakeholders on library and society matters, facilitating and supporting open access to all, becoming innovative information agent;
- Create partnerships and foster opportunities for convergence with commercial / private enterprises, cultural institution, societal stakeholders such as health workers, teachers;
- Library as a space and place should foster information for all; community knowledge space; gate-openers to information, safe and trusted public space, content in formats that appeal to young and other discrete library user groups.

The fact that libraries are the home of knowledge is no longer debatable. Although ICT has revolutionized the provision of information and knowledge to the general public, the library will continue to maintain its prime position as the hub of academic and general public information facilities. As Klaus (2008) asserts, libraries will continue to exist as centers of information, communication, cultural exchange, and cultural heritage. Libraries have changed most patterns of traditional services and information processing and handling as well as information dissemination to suit the changes in the global village. Anaeme (2008) states that ICTs and their application in library and information services have continued to change the scope and patterns of library services. This development has forced libraries to provide new formats. Many libraries especially in developed countries now provide a computerized catalogue of materials, automated patron registration and checkout services, Internet access round the clock, websites, e-mail notification service that allows a user to place holds on materials and subscriptions to online databases.

The Internet represents the most important medium for the 21st century library transactions.Many libraries, according to Klaus (2008), are digitizing their important holdings as fast as possible to make them accessible, as far as possible under the legal and technological conditions. Akintunde (2004) asserts that libraries have taken on a new paradigm of service. There has been a shift from being documentalist or archivist to being a gateway to knowledge. The librarian guides clients on how to navigate effectivelly. Corroborating this, Anyakoha (2005) says that the information available on the Web is vast and continues to proliferate. Many individual users are still not able to use the Web efficiently.

According to Dike (2007), with or without ICT, it is the responsibility of librarians to help users formulate their enquiries and develop searches. Librarians have knowledge of the vast array of information sources, how they can be located and accessed, the strong and weak points of each, and the methods for evaluating them.

Marketing is another way of making knowledge accessible.According to Keane

(1990), marketing is a planned approach of meeting users' needs with library resources and services in the most efficient and effective way. This calls for being client-oriented. Melline (1996) says that the ultimate goal of this technique is to improve the customers' perception of the library services by tailoring the services to meet the patron's needs.

Finally, the use of interlibrary cooperation and resource sharing via networking further provides access to knowledge. In the words of Agbaje (2002) library cooperation now takes the form of library technology consortia. Libraries now operate automated library systems through which they share facilities and resources. This has increased reliance on interlibrary loan supported by electronic communication and delivery systems.

Technology and Library Operations in the 21st Century

Libraries are not immune to the societal forces re-shaping other institutions brought about by technology and economics are changing all. Social institutions today look vastly different than they did twenty years ago. A variety of forces, most especially economic changes and technological developments, have reshaped and redefined our notions of what constitute a library (Besser, 1998). He further submits that technology has made libraries to become less important for the materials they collect or house, and more important for the kind of materials they can obtain in response to user requests. This movement from collecting material *just in case* someone will need it, to delivering material from elsewhere just in time to answer a user's needs, is a profound shift for the library as an institution. This shift is a direct result of the recent proliferation of digital networking in an environment where standards for description were already well established. The information technology revolution therefore no longer encompasses only the applications of computer but also the access to and the sharing of huge amounts of information. The term 'information and communication technology' (ICT) is used to refer to all of these developments. (Plomp, 1999).

It is an established fact that libraries are driving access to knowledge, the question then is, why the emphasis on 21st century? Why is the 21st century different from past centuries? The truth is that, the 21st century is revolutionized by advances in computing and telecommunication technology. According to Salami (2007), the 21st century has witnessed a great increase in information management and transmission. The new information age has brought about improved knowledge delivery, processing of information, precision, good time management and improved network system. Furthermore, information is also called data and databases are created and made accessible online via the Internet and other machine readable formats. Search engines are made accessible to the public. In view of this, conventional libraries seem to be giving way to hybrid and virtual libraries. (otherwise called libraries without walls or paperless libraries) accessing or developing digital collections alongside print-based collections.

Technology application to library services has brought a lot of changes to library operations there by making access to knowledge more convenient to user. Some of the fastest growing trends are noticed in the area of networking; file storage, graphic user interface. They have also been enabled by agreements on standards and protocols (such as Z39.50) which permit the linking together of resources from disparate sources.

- From multiple locations: From any where, users can consult all library holdings from workstation throughout the systematic catalog, indexing, and abstracting services. Divorcing library services from a physical location provokes a profound difference in what a library service is.

Availability of more resources: Technology now allow users to have access to diverse resources i.e. from pure bibliographical records(online catalog) now to delivery of indexing and abstracting services, course descriptions, class schedule.

- Making information available in raw form: Types of information available to users in digital form has continued to grow. In indexing and abstracting; search has moved from providing searchable index terms/descriptors to searchable abstracts, to more recently full-text of articles and books. In the library catalog, we have moved from bibliographic description and subject headings to providing tables of contents information, to full–text and page images. Technology has moved patrons to rawer information or more detailed representation often called enhanced records and has been a key element for those studying information retrieval.
- Diminishing roles for intermediaries: Increase interaction with online system means patron less reliance upon library staff. Patrons can check circulation information without ever contacting the circulation department. Many inte library loan experiments let users request a work without ever interacting with a library staff member. And we are seeing an increase in experiments using strategies from Artificial Intelligence community to help aid user searching (Besser,1998)

Challenges and Recommendations

The birth of ICT actually changed the place of libraries in terms of information acquisition and storage as well as the methods of rendering services. Despite the beautiful development, there exist basic challenges that tend to hinder the provision of access to knowledge by libraries especially in developing countries like Nigeria. These challenges include:

- Poor/unreliable public power supply: In Nigeria for instance, poor power supply has not only paralyzed most economic activities of the country, but equally rendered many projects unrealizable and libraries fall within this area. Most virtual libraries in Nigeria are not functioning efficiently due to ineffective and irregular power supply.
- Inadequate operational human resources: In most developing countries, like Nigeria there are shortages of librarians who are skilled in digital library operations
- Apathy on the part of staff: Many library staff tend have an apathetic attitude towards work. They are not committed to client-oriented service.
- Lack of Maintenance Culture: Lack of maintenance culture renders infrastructures and equipment like ICT facilities non-functional.
- Poor Funding: This is the key to effective management as long as such funds are judiciously used.

The following recommendations are made to improve access to information resources in the library.

- Provision of constant electricity power supply including functional standby generating set should be provided in the library to eliminate the issue of unrleliable power supply.
- There should be training and re-training of librarians and ICT staff in the area of computer technology and management of information services.
- The institution and library managers should be committed and work round the clock to ensure that ICT equipment and facilities are maintained regularly.
- Finally, adequate funds should be provided to ensure effective library operations.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that access to knowledge is critical for the development and growth of the society and for participation in democratic processes. The library is an integral part of the society that surrounds it. It is shaped and changed by many of the same forces that shape other types of institution. Librarians need to recognize the changes that have already taken place in libraries, and to be aware of the ways in which broader societal changes are affecting other institution. Igwe (2010) concluded that libraries provide access to an endless variety of information resources and opportunities for interactive communication. Though the fundamental mission has remained, to facilitate and give access to information and knowledge, the processes, tools and techniques have undergone remarkable changes. However, access alone is of course not enough, it is also about extending services, methods, and practices and developing innovative approaches to guarantee free and universal access to relevant knowledge. Libraries should ensure that the world's citizenry have access to the world's knowledge.

The library today, is a technologically driven one that uses the principles of traditional library services to organize knowledge and communicate same to clients in the global community essentially by electronic means.

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