

October 2012

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Ezeani, Chinwe Nwogo and Igwesi, Uzoamaka, "Using Social Media for Dynamic Library Service Delivery: The Nigeria Experience" (2012). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 814.
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Using Social Media for Dynamic Library Service Delivery: The Nigeria Experience

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Abstract

This paper examines how Nigerian Libraries can leverage on social networking and social media skills to provide dynamic library services in the face of dwindling economic problems in Nigeria. The unprecedented technological advancement of the 21st century, no doubt has impacted on library services globally and in Nigeria in particular. The social media hype has gradually crept into the library profession-with social sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, YouTube, Library Thing, Ning; it has become evident that our services will need to change to meet the growing needs of our end users. Libraries in Nigeria have been challenged like never before to render more proactive and more value added services to meet the ever changing needs of our patrons. This paper is therefore, an attempt to examine the present scenario in library services delivery with these new and emerging technologies. Challenges faced by Nigerian libraries in the use of these social media are investigated and possible solutions proffered.

Introduction

Social connections have become very important and have improved the library profession tremendously in Nigeria. According to Suraweera et al (2011) social networking refers to a process of relationship building among a group with a common interest. Social media emerged in Nigeria principally for the purpose of socializing. The Facebook initially was used only for social discussions, however over time, particularly by the turn of the 21st century the grouping of individuals into specific groups emerged. Professional groups started to spring up and within time the library profession had its own group with the sole purpose of sharing ideas and gathering first hand information regarding the profession. The first library professional group was the Nigeria Library Association (NLA) forum. Librarians from all institutions in Nigeria would enroll in the group by subscribing to it. This allowed the librarians to exchange

information on professional opportunities, professional events and new technologies within the Library and Information science field. This national growth has continued to grow in leaps and bounds.

Beyond this, the different libraries in the country have felt the need to move with the times. With the exponential growth of the use of social media such as the Facebook, MySpace, twitter, YouTube, it became inevitable that librarians must learn the use of these tools to be able to keep their ever growing and sophisticated patrons. Libraries have started to use these tools to interact with their patrons on real time. In fact, given the present economic scenario in Nigeria, where library budgets have been constantly on the decline, the social media have become a means for serving our patrons in a more specialized, interactive, and value added way without incurring undue expenses. These media are used mostly to provide current and up to date information to clients, provide links to other open source library resources, give information about new arrivals in the case of books through the link to the library world cat and through the updated list of journals. Also, the previous top-bottom approach to service delivery where the library would pass information down to its patron without feedback will no longer suffice for our ever growing clients. Library users have been yearning to be a part of the services rendered to them, in essence being able to dictate what they need thereby making for a more interactive service delivery which will foster a two way communication pathway and provide the opportunity for more involvement.

Undoubtedly, as a growing economy the use of these media often meet with challenges which are succinctly discussed in this paper and strategies for the enhancement of library services through these media have been proffered.

Conceptual Definitions

It is germane at this juncture to define some basic concepts, in an effort to enrich this discourse. Social networking is an evolutionary development of online participation where people of common interest communicate, share and contribute content on the social cyberspace. It is a viable tool for cooperation and sharing of knowledge in an open access platform. In the Social Network Space (SNS), people with common interests are able to share information with each other via a huge variety of social networking sites (sites created specifically to make sharing, communicating, and creating information as simple and efficient as possible). Social networking is a new way of providing library service through new Internet technologies, with emphasis on "user-centered", two-way interaction and communication of information. With new networking tools, information can now flow in a multi-faceted dimension (library to user, user to library, library to library, and user to user), rather than the one way stereotype form of library to user. It is constantly expanding the world of participatory and collaborative scholarly communication and learning. It is a new model of online service that encourages an increased flow of information from library to users and from the user back to the library. Online participation and content contribution are core issues in the present social networking practices.

Social networking tool is a platform where users are both consumers and producers of online content. With these tools, librarians can constantly evaluate and update content to meet the changing needs of users. These tools are used for collaboration and sharing of ideas and it is becoming an integral part of library services. It also calls for libraries to encourage users' participation and feedback mechanism in the development and maintenance of library services. The active participation of users enables them to contribute content, establish communication links, and stay informed of new developments in the social network space. With information and ideas flowing in both directions – from the library to the user and from the user to the library – library services have the ability to evolve and improve on a constant and rapid basis.

Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, to articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Different social groups in Nigeria such as Nigerian Library Association (NLA) can establish

contacts and online forum. Social Network Sites (also called Social Networking Services or Social Networking Communities), are those Internet systems that have at their heart the personalized profile (Tapscott & Williams, 2006, p. 49). Some of the prominent examples include: Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and MySpace. Social networking sites are two-way transparent communication that encourage a feedback mechanism; connecting people with shared interest. Social networking sites allow librarians to adopt a new role by placing themselves into a social realm with users. By reading blogs, group postings, and message boards, the librarian becomes an active participant, who is able to anticipate and advise patrons as needs arise. Linking to patron profiles also keeps the library within the consciousness of users, potentially increasing interaction. Courtney (2007, p. 83). In the social network site, the user is a participant, a co-creator, and a builder of knowledge. The dynamic nature of this technology enables users to have an open access to knowledge and contribute local content on the social network space. Some of these Social Networking Sites (SNS) popularly used by librarians in Nigeria to meet the information needs of the users include:

- **Facebook:** most popular now because it is librarian- friendly, with many applications like JSTOR search, World Cat, and much more. Librarians can interact with users to know their information need. Libraries try to link some of these specialized library applications to Facebook.
- **MySpace:** In Academic institutions where the students are; libraries have taken advantage of this site to post, calendar, custom catalog search tools, and blog features to improve their presence.
- **Ning:** Librarians can get connected with users, library associations, and more. The Nigerian Library Association (NLA) utilizes this platform to discuss topical issues among the members.
- **Blogs:** Here, librarians can periodically post messages; share information on a particular subject or issue, and allow users to contribute to content. They can write articles, news on topical issues and expect an instant reaction from their users.
- **Wikis:** is a free online encyclopedia that gives a background knowledge and definition of concepts. It offers a platform for users to access, edit and contribute to content. This is a collaborative web page for developing web content.
- **LinkedIn:** Librarians can get patrons connected with specialists in their particular field of interest via LinkedIn. Librarians can use this platform to render specialized services such as Strategic Dissemination of Information (SDI).
- **Twitter:** a micro blogging application, to keep staff and patrons updated on daily activities, like frequently updated collections. Users can utilize this platform to type in short messages or status update. Librarians in Nigeria can use this platform to give users firsthand information on the on-going national elections. Users can send Instant Messages (IM) on complaints or ask questions on a particular issue and get a feedback on the spot using twitter.
- **YouTube:** In institutions in Nigeria, events such as important highlights of inaugural lectures, conferences and workshops are disseminated via the YouTube.
- **Flickr:** Librarians can use this tool to share and distribute new images of library collections. Cover page of new arrivals of both books and journals can be disseminated to users via Flickr. It can also be used to enlighten users on topical issues such as the different pictures of emblems of the political parties in Nigeria; for the on-going lectures in Nigeria, many Public and Academic libraries put this to great use.
- **Library Thing:** A tool that enriches the library OPAC. Once an account is created, a list of books with ISBNs is sent to Library Thing which sends back a piece of code which is pasted into the footer of the Library OPAC. Librarians can utilize this to send a list of current publications to users.

The Changing Library Environment

Today, libraries are using the latest technologies and trends to make their services popular and user friendly. The concept of a library as physical place where one can visit to get information is rapidly changing to a social cyberspace where users access, communicate and contribute to existing knowledge. This is because the modern library of the 21st century is characterized with collective knowledge creation and enabling technologies; and also a movement away from the old stereotype, conventional and one directional library services to users to a more dynamic, two-way communicational network environment

characterized by open access, content creation, collaborative and participatory social space where users are free to access and contribute content. The potentials of the modern technology with the Open Access Protocols provide the opportunity for free access, free interaction, free communication and contribution to knowledge. Tise (2009) posits that libraries facilitate access to information thereby providing the means through which new knowledge is developed and made available to all. Ezeani and Eke (2010) posit that the most applicable web 2.0 technology for library services is the social networking tools – where librarians can interact with their users to study their needs and give a feedback; photo sharing – where archival pictures can be posted to users or uploaded on the library websites...”Librarians in Nigeria are gradually utilizing these tools to offer “on the spot” library services to users. These are made possible with the present social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Wiki, etc. which provide interactive platform for users to access and generate content. Information is now produced in a variety of media whose representation can no longer be presented in the physical books alone. Libraries need to realize that in order to engage with their users they will need to reach them “in their preferred methods of communication” (Topper, 2007, p. 378).

Social Networking: a Platform for Open Access to Knowledge

Social networking sites are constantly promoting open access to knowledge. Open access is the term used to refer to resources that are openly available to users with no requirements for authentication or payment. It is a model that presents free access to publications. In an open access platform, users are not charged for access to articles or other resources, and are free to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to full texts of these resources, provided they do not violate copyright rules, Budapest Open Access Initiative, 2002. In: Tihamiyu and Aina (2008). The feature of social networking allows users to search, browse, filter, find, collaborate and have online open access to knowledge and contribute to web content.

Social Networking Opportunities for Libraries

Social networking presents some important opportunities to libraries which include marketing of library services and reference services.

- **Marketing of library services** – the growing population of patrons and librarians that make use of social networking is an indication that it is an ideal vehicle for marketing the services of libraries to patrons. Flickr is an excellent marketing tool which could be used by librarians to sensitize the users on general library services. Most students are not aware of the different services offered in the library such as reservation of books, reference services and Strategic Dissemination of Information (SDI). Librarians can spread awareness of library services to those who may not be aware of these services via social media. Librarians can also develop subject-specific blogs and play a leading role in advocating the use of blogs for scholarly communication and commenting on research findings.
- **Reference Services** – the use of social networking tools enable librarians to identify library patrons on the social cyberspace and pro-actively provide the type of information that would normally result from reference service. Social networking tools are not only being used as a vehicle for promoting services, programs and new resources but they are also used for reference service. (Steiner, 2009, p. 4) Students are using tools like Ask a Librarian, meebo and twitter to ask questions in “real time”(Steiner, 2009, p. 5) and this is assisting in promoting the library as a relevant, efficient and helpful place. Social networking tools like Instant Messaging (IM), Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) could be used to achieve a successful and sustainable reference services in an online social space by engaging in an online face-to-face interaction. This is particularly useful for distance learners who may call in from any part of the country with reference queries. Reference interaction has always been a conversation (Lankes, 2008); moving towards reference in the social environment is therefore a natural development that has been shown to be not only practically viable, but also to benefit the researcher. Using social networking tools for making the reference act a participatory one means that the client can be served by multiple sources and a variety of authoritative, scholarly perspectives resulting in an enriching

wealth of information and experience (Lankes, 2008; Miller, 2006) .Ezeani (2010) observed that for librarians to effectively deploy these social media for reference purposes they must be versatile and knowledgeable in different subject fields to be able to match patrons with desired information.

Future Roles of Librarians

Libraries play important roles in providing information for research and access to knowledge. In order to stay relevant in the socially networked environment and meet the growing needs of their users, libraries therefore need to pro-actively embrace the new technologies and face the challenges for better services delivery. Librarians are responding to the popularity of social networking sites and their expanding role in the creation, use, and sharing of information by engaging them as a central medium for interacting with library patrons and providing services to meet their information needs. The ways in which people communicate, acquire and share knowledge, will inevitably have an impact on the library, its services, and its staff (Miller, 2006). Librarians should follow the public conversations, posts, updates, and events of these key individuals, and pro-actively offer advice, resources, and help. He should act as an active participant of the social space and be able to identify the needs of the members of the library communities and to proffer solutions by offering information, links to the websites that are relevant to their information needs; and even direct offers of help. There is an urgent need for libraries to adopt the new social networking tools in their services as a strategy to embrace change while promoting a participatory role for library users in knowledge creation. The growing use of social networking tools calls for librarians to develop 21st century skills on digital technologies. Libraries can connect their social networking sites with their library Websites to links to their catalog, chat reference pages, research guides, calendar of events, news etc. Some of the roles of the social networking librarian include: understanding and articulating the nature of social networking sites, creating webpage and content, establishing friendly user interface over the network, creating online database management, evaluating and applying information, and assisting users with skill acquisition. Other skills for a social networking literate librarian include: searching and navigating the web, creating social network space, teaching, and providing quality online library services. The Model below is an adaptation of Richter and Koch (2008) model on *process of IT supported social networking*. This model encapsulates the future roles of the 21st century librarians in the dynamic technological environment. Librarians must possess these skills:

Identity management – Librarians should be able to examine profiles of users to mirror their information needs and match them with the library collections.

- **Network awareness** - Should be able to share views and create awareness of the different social network sites and their uses.
- **Expert search** – The 21st century librarian should be an expert in web navigation; able to find friends of friends, and potential library users with common interest.
- **Contact management** – Librarians can cross-link people and ideas among the conglomerate of different groups.
- **Context awareness** – should be diversified in knowledge and able to link information to people's profiles.

The important characteristics of social networking (SN) in libraries are:

- **Participatory** - Users have the opportunity to actively engage in the construction of knowledge rather than being passive consumers of content;
- **Educative** – Users are kept abreast of the latest developments and can have open access to knowledge;
- **Collaborative** –SN ensures knowledge sharing, establishes communication link with experts and allows users to develop a team working skill;
- **Fascinating** – It is inspiring, interesting and users can be engrossed in the use of social network sites; some users garner information with these sites in an easy and unencumbered manner; and
- **Flexibility** – Easy content creation and sharing, easy to update files and personal contact.

Library as Educator

Libraries should play important roles in educating patrons about the new technologies and the social networking skills. We can educate our users on new skills and competencies needed to flourish in the new environment. Users need to know how to navigate the web as new method of learning requires a form of connectivity with other people as knowledge is no longer acquired in a linear manner. Librarians can and should educate patrons on the use of these social networking tools to adapt to new ways of accessing, communicating and sharing knowledge. Brilliant use of the social cyberspace promotes opens access to knowledge.

Challenges of Social Networking

Lack of Awareness – Most librarians in the developing countries are not aware of social networking services, even the few that are aware are still struggling to find out the productive uses of these sites for library services. Users are also not aware of the protocols involved in social communication. Many students and possibly even some of the academic staff may be unaware that there is a subject specialist in their discipline. It is important for librarians to initiate contact with clients and experiment with developing a “public self” (Horizon Report, 2007).

Getting students and Facebook users to move beyond the social aspect of Facebook to use it for more serious and productive outcome is a challenge in Nigeria. In fact, there is a general slogan in Nigeria that says “leave Facebook and face your book”. This points to the fact that Facebook is usually seen as a vehicle for unserious communication

Bandwidth problem – Most institutions have limited bandwidth to support this practice. Poor connectivity can frustrate effective online participation.

Technophobia – Many librarians and users are afraid of handling computers. They make the traditional library services their comfort zone and are not eager to embrace change.

Lack of maintenance culture – Maintenance culture is seriously lacking in most institutions in developing countries. The few available technologies are in moribund conditions that may not support remote access to information.

Unreliable power supply –The low supply of electricity discourage people from participating in the online forum.

Lack of training of staff – Most librarians lack the 21st century skills that could be required to adopt the social networking tools for effective library services.

Government intervention: There is little or no intervention of the government in the area of ICT in Nigeria.

Copyright Issue – The free access to information where people copy, paste and edit without acknowledging the authority is a serious challenge to copyright management.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The above identified challenges could be solved through the following strategies:

- Organizing a public awareness forum such as library orientation, conferences, symposia, workshops to create awareness and educate librarians and users on the social networking services and applications. This will help to stimulate new ideas, sensitize and create awareness of the new tools.

- Embracing current change in order to remain relevant and adapt to the new ICT driven environment.
- Imbibing a maintenance culture so as to manage the few available ICT facilities effectively.
- Provision of stable power supply will encourage and facilitate the effective use of these tools.
- Pro-active training of librarians to acquire 21st century skills to adapt to the changing ICT environment.
- Government should take an active role in providing ICT facilities to institutions.
- Educating the public on the issue of copyright law and violation.

In conclusion, this paper has tried to examine the concept of social networking and its application to library services with particular reference to the Nigerian situation. It has been observed that librarians in Nigeria have not fully embraced these social networking tools in library services. As such, there is a need for a pro-active awareness and training to educate both the librarians and the users on the invaluable importance of utilizing social networking in library services.

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