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Nigerian University Libraries and the Challenges of Globalization: The Way Forward



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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to examine the importance, implications, and opportunities opened to Nigerian libraries in the current Information Age as related to the concept of globalization. This paper shall attempt to address possible areas of importance and advantages that can propel Nigerian universities and their libraries into being a respective player in the global IT revolution and enhance their status in what is now widely called as Global Village. This paper stresses the necessity for Nigerian universities to be part of the new and emerging technologies which are challenging the traditional process of teaching and learning and the way education is managed. Strategies of leap-frogging Nigerian libraries into an enviable position of Information Technology will be carefully articulated in this paper.

Introduction

The history of university library development in Nigeria dates back to pre-independence time when the University of Ibadan and its library were established in 1948. As pointed out by Aguolu (1996), since independence in 1960, there has been an unrelenting upsurge in the establishment of educational institutions at all levels, especially university education. Successive Nigerian governments have continued to invest strongly in education. It must be realized that university libraries, being integral academic parts of the universities, generally emerged simultaneously with their parent institutions. Hence there are as many university libraries as there are universities. The proliferation of universities, despite the economic recession in the country since the 1980s, has increased the problems of the universities and their libraries so much that now their future seems uncertain. Added to these problems are the problems of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Nigerian universities as related to library development. Ever since the problem of the literature explosion became noticeable in the 1970s, the developed world has devised various systems to facilitate the flow of information both within and across the countries, and developing countries are invited to take advantage of these devices. However, this invitation is not

often readily accepted by the developing nations like Nigeria because of some mitigating factors. These include the human factors, fear, and the level of development-cum infrastructure of the nation and so on. The case of application of modern technology in the library should start with the acceptance of the new technology as vital to the effective performance of the functions of the library.

Perhaps in any discussion of application of modern technology in the library, as revealed by Ukoh (1984), the first thing that comes to mind is the computer. The librarian does not have to be literate in the various technologies before employing them. In other words, he does not have to be a technical expert before using any form of technology or a programmer before using a computer. However, he still is required to possess some technological knowledge, albeit at an abstract and intellectual level. Whatever we choose to call it, the computer has made such a tremendous impact on the organization, management, and dissemination of information that it readily commends itself to any library ready to accept it. The computer has become such a household word in the developed world that university libraries should see it as a great opportunity which should be taken up as soon as possible. For the library, several systems have been developed for their various house-keeping chores and more still are being designed and refined, thanks to the technology of large-scale integration. These are known as mini or micro computers designed to handle any of the library processes, be it acquisitions, cataloguing, serials, or circulation control. The use of communication tools such as e-mail, fax, computer, and videoconferencing overcomes barriers of space and time, and opens new possibilities for learning. The use of such technology is increasing and it is now possible to deliver training to a widely dispersed audience by means of on-demand two way video over terrestrial broadband networks. Many students and lecturers can gain experience of communications through e-mail and electronic conferencing systems that run over the telephone network. College and university libraries should continue to make increasing use of the Internet. They should be using the Internet both to access materials, people, and resources and to display their own Web pages created by teachers and students. These developments are not only giving learners access to vast libraries and multimedia resources, but give access to tutors and natural phenomena throughout the world; hence the whole world is regarded as global village. The boundaries between one institution and other and between institutions and the outside world will become less important. Crucially, technology will remove the barriers between school and home. Many nations have used audio-visual devices to transmit educational materials over long distances.

The objective of this paper is to examine the implications and opportunities of ICT, which is one of the forces behind the concept of globalization for higher education as a panacea for the poor state of academic libraries in Nigeria. The paper attempts to

sensitize the Nigerian universities to the need of globalization of information for their educational development and the fact that Nigeria cannot afford to stand aloof.

Globalization and the Information Age

In the year 2000, the media were full of references to globalization of economy and communications, even politics, education, and military affairs. Globalization can then be described as a phenomenon involving the integration of economies, cultures, governmental policies, political movements, and even education. Internationalization is nothing new. What is now called globalization, however, represents an exponential acceleration of the integration process. As early as 1962, the Canadian visionary Marshall McLuhan wrote that the electronic age was turning all humanity into a “global tribe” and the term global village is attributed to him. The BBC, CNN, MTV, and the Internet have accelerated the integration of global culture. With globalization the world as a whole also becomes a social space in its own right. The new information and communications technologies, from e-mail to cellular telephony to teleconferencing, let more and more people share knowledge without having to be in the same place. From the above, globalization might be characterized as the rise of “supraterritoriality.” Through globalization, people become more able, physically, legally, culturally, and psychologically, to engage with each other in “one world.” Global connections take many forms. For example, jet aeroplanes transport passengers and cargoes across any distance on the planet within a day. Telephone and computer networks effect near instantaneous interpersonal communication between points all over the Earth. Electronic mass media broadcasts messages to the world audiences. Globalization is the trend whereby these various kinds of global relations emerge, proliferate, and expand. As a result of globalization, social geography gains a planetary dimension.

Technological innovation has contributed to globalization by supplying infrastructure for trans-world connections. As pointed out by Ajayi (2000) the revolution taking place in information and communication technologies have been the central and driving force for the globalization process. One of the key by-products of the globalization period of rapid technological development and on-going information revolution is dynamic change, which is occurring in nearly all facets of human existence and affecting the underlying structure of the society. The global village has removed geographical barriers and led to the shrinking of the frame. In particular, developments in the means of transportation, communications, and data processing have allowed global links to become denser, faster, more reliable, and much cheaper. According to Scholte (2000) large-scale and rapid globalization has depended on a host of innovations relating to coaxial and later fibre-optic cables, jet engines, packaging and preservation techniques, semiconductor devices, computer software, and so on. In other words, global relations could not develop without physical tools to effect cross-planetary contacts.

Nigerian University Libraries and Globalization

The university libraries have long been recognized as the “hearts” of their universities. To fulfill their mission of supporting the educational objectives of their parent bodies, which include teaching, learning, research, and cultural development, the libraries had to develop and maintain standard books, journals, and audio-visual collections and services. During the “oil boom” era, the libraries flourished—they were busy filling their shelves with learning materials in order to sustain the main academic disciplines established by their parent universities. Today, the story is very different. University libraries have problems even in maintaining core collections which represent their universities’ curricula and activities because of lack of money and high inflation. Coupled with this is the emergence of ICTs in the educational system worldwide. As revealed by Aguolu (1996), since the onset of the current recession the governments have been giving the universities grants that are not commensurate with their rapid growth in numbers, faculties, departments, staff, and students. The resultant underfunding of the libraries has become perennial and may remain so if the national economy does not improve significantly. It must be pointed out that university libraries have not been isolated from the financial problems of their parent bodies.

By the second half of the 19th century, Western countries had experienced such a proliferation of books of all sorts that the nature of the librarian’s work was radically altered; being well-read no longer a sufficient characteristic for the post. The librarian needed some means of easy and rapid identification as well as strong organizational and administrative skills, and the necessity for specialized training soon became clear. The library of today should no longer be a library of the 17th century image. Today’s library, especially university and special libraries, must be information systems. As pointed out by Osundina (1973) the library of today should not merely store documents and preserve them, it must also devise means by which the contents of such documents can be rapidly and effectively transmitted for use. Information has always played a very important part in human life. However, in the mid-20th century, the role of information increased immeasurably as a result of social progress and the vigorous development in science and technology. In addition, as Trostinikov (1970) has pointed out, rapid expansion of a mass of diversified information is occurring, which has received the name “information explosion”. As a result, the need has arisen for a scientific approach to information and for elucidation of its most characteristic properties which has led to two principal changes in interpretation of the concept of information. First, it was broadened to include information exchange not only between man and man but also between machine and machine, as well as the exchange of signals in the animal and plant worlds. The pace of change brought by new technologies has had a significant effect on the way people live, work, and play worldwide. New and emerging technologies challenge the traditional process of teaching and learning and the way

education is managed. Many higher education institutions have also exploited the potential of new information and communication technologies to develop new approaches to distance education, especially in business and management of computing. These new forms of globalization are beginning to replace more conventional types of academic exchange among the world's universities. Although traditional channels of communication will remain important, the new information and communications technologies hold great potential for broadly disseminating knowledge at low cost, and for reducing knowledge gaps within countries and between industrial and developing countries. In a broad sense, access to the right information at the right time gives people greater control over their destinies.

As a result of all these global changes, the purposes of higher education have been transformed. As revealed by Capron (2000), mail, telephone, TV and radio, books, newspapers and periodicals are the traditional ways users send and received information. However, data communications system—computer system that transmits data over communications lines such as telephone lines or cables—have been evolving since the mid-1960s. The use of Internet has revolutionized access to information for the business world, libraries, education, and individuals. A few of the most popular include e-mail, World Wide Web, FTP (File Transfer Protocol), Usenet, and Telnet. All these technological devices can be regarded as backbones of the concept of globalization. The Internet and its technology continue to have a profound effect in promoting the sharing of information especially in academic world, making possible rapid transactions among businesses and supporting global collaboration among individuals and organizations. Learning Resource Centres now often contain learning materials published on CD-ROM and most colleges and universities are connected to the Internet. These technologies have the potentials to develop “virtual campuses” and “virtual libraries” and thus increase students’ access and participation. According to Daniel (2000) Nancy Schiller was one of the first writers to use the expression “virtual library” which she defined in 1992, simply as “libraries in which computer and telecommunications technologies make access to a wide range of information resources possible.” Today this same concept is referred to variously as ‘digital library,’ ‘electronic library,’ ‘community network,’ or simply as ‘library without walls.’ It is called ‘virtual’ because in a good electronic wide area networked library, the user enjoys the euphoria of being in distant libraries and yet he has not physically moved. It is an experience of ‘virtual reality.’ One of its features is that its emphasis is access over ownership of collections. This stems from assumption that the whole universe of the global information superhighway is a human resource and heritage, which all who have the necessary infrastructure capabilities can tap for their own development. The Virtual Library is a child of necessity arising from the need to use technologies in accessing the world information overload, or information explosion, for human survival and

development. The need for a virtual library system has therefore become a most urgent necessity in the Nigerian universities and colleges.

World Wide Web resources are organized in such a way that users can easily move from one resource to another. Using IT, students can absorb more information and take less time to do so. Librarians or any member of the academic community at Obafemi Awolowo University Library can now easily find out any information concerning any book in the Library of Congress in United States of America within a couple of minutes—thanks to the concept of globalization. It must be realized that Information Science is indispensable to the progress of librarianship and it comprises that set of research necessary to support the profession now being called librarianship.

Nigerian libraries are now gradually being computerized especially in the universities. Online catalogues provide additional searching possibilities. Such systems can communicate with one another about which books are held in the libraries and use the computer to borrow various materials from many other libraries through interlibrary loan systems. The global information technology has been called “the world’s largest machine”, complex and difficult to visualize and understand in its different hardware and software subsystems. The moves toward a global knowledge society require a fundamental shift in thinking about the methodology of education. Information Communication Technologies have already begun to exert massive transformation of education systems in developed countries—distance education universities are now quoted on the stock exchange; the best teachers in the world are becoming available anywhere at the click of a button. The library as the life blood of higher education institutions can benefit tremendously from the facilities provided by the ICT. The university libraries can be transformed into a new information services unit, providing electronic cataloguing, electronic on-line public access catalogue, electronic acquisition and serials control, electronic inter-library loan, and electronic circulation functions. But it must be realized that many university libraries in Nigeria are yet to take advantages of modern ICT.

In some of the first-generation universities in Nigeria like Obafemi Awolowo University Library and a few others, digitalization is taking place in many of their libraries and library information networks established with connectivity through the university campus network to the Internet. Some Nigerian university campuses are now jam-packed with information technology facilities. It is no longer strange to see lecturers and students doing their researches and other academic works using various IT devices like e-mail and the Internet. Apart from the goodwill and support that Nigeria enjoys from international community, it is widely recognized that the country has manpower and financial resources to be in the forefront of the information technology race in Africa. It must be realized that Nigeria is blessed with a large army of telecommunication experts and information technology professional residents both

inside and outside the country whose knowledge can be tapped to move the country forward. This is a task in which all hands must be on deck. The private sector and the civil society must be actively involved to ensure the needed competition and its attendant efficiency. No one can deny the fact that Nigerians deserve a better telecommunication and information delivery service than they are getting at the moment. With a suitable national information and communication infrastructure policy, Nigeria has the potential to utilize informatics and telematics as effective tools for national development.

Problems and the Way Forward

Perhaps in any discussion of the application of modern technology in the library, the first thing that comes to mind is the computer. As pointed out by Ukoh (1988) the computer has become such a household word in the developed world that libraries should see it as a great opportunity which should be taken up as soon as possible. Libraries in Nigeria, and indeed in other Third World countries, should not give the impression either that we do not know of the capabilities and potentials of the ICT or that we do not need ICT to improve our services. There is no area of library operations to which the computer has not been applied with tremendous gains. At this juncture, one can ask how much of these technological devices are in use in Nigerian libraries. In the past decades, whatever has been done in terms of modern technological applications or automation has not gone deeply enough to make any appreciable impact. The inability of Ibadan University Library to update its Serials Catalogue produced by computer in 1975 has cast doubts in the minds of many librarians as to how vigorously the library will pursue its other computerization and information technology programmes. It must be realized that many Nigerian libraries, especially in the universities, face various problems in their attempts to computerize their library operations. These problems are not really of the library's making but it is the usual problem confronting most of the computer installations all over the country today—the shortage of manpower and lack of spare parts. Coupled with this is the problem of constant computer breakdowns and low level of electricity supply. This problem has really slowed down the activities of Nigerian university libraries in utilizing the global information and technological innovations for the services of their clientele. Erratic power supply resulted in the burning of some components which could not easily be replaced. Many other university libraries had at one time or another planned to automate their activities. These plans had to be dropped mid-way as a result of a shortage of both personnel and equipment for an effective completion of the projects. It must be realized that without proper automation of these university libraries the global technological and information explosion would be a mirage.

The demand for distant education in Nigeria is increasing, although this is still based on the traditional technology of print media. There is therefore the need to integrate IT into the distant education programme. The majority of the higher institutions in Nigeria, even those with good Internet connectivity, are still at a low level of the integration of ICT in teaching, learning, research, library, information and managerial services. There is a need for professional development in the integration of information technology into education and learning. The global trend is towards the use of ICT in all spheres of human endeavour, such as e-commerce, e-governance, e-finance, e-libraries, etc. In the educational sector, the trend has been the integration of ICT into all spheres of education, such as on-line courses, tele-education, tele-medicine, distance education, virtual learning, virtual laboratory, etc. Digital libraries and virtual universities are also trends in the use of ICT for higher education. In all these global developments, Nigeria should not be left behind and the government must be committed to seeing that ICT devices are encouraged and well established in the country. Digital libraries would offer facilities for on-line access to an ocean of academic informations by higher education institutions in Nigeria and the world in general. A large number of libraries in higher education institutions in the developed countries are now digital with the availability of electronic books, journals, and other periodicals. It must be realized that Nigerian university libraries should not be left out of this global educational revolution. The diffusion of ICT into Africa and Nigeria in general has been at a snail's pace such that the gap between information-rich developed countries and African countries continues to widen every day. For the way forward, many international funding agencies like Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, and Rockefeller Foundation should be involved in the general development of ICT in Nigeria. Such assistance would complement the efforts of Nigerian government in order to leapfrog the higher education institutions and Nigeria in general to the global information society. For instance, UNESCO is supporting a Pilot Virtual University and Virtual Laboratory Project to link initially six Nigerian universities in each of the six geographical zones and the Nigerian Universities Commission. Later, this project will help to link all universities, teachers' colleges, and research institutions in the country.

The new impact of globalization should be recognized; while a "borderless" world has been universally accepted as consequence of globalization (electronic world) both the universities and the government must tackle the new emerging trends. The western countries have started to recruit beyond their border; their immigration laws have been changed to open their doors to well-trained talented IT professionals from anywhere especially developing countries like Nigeria. This has a lot of implications for us in developing countries. We have to pay attention to training and research to be able to survive in the information age. Policies should be modified in various areas accordingly.

For the way forward both the government and the university managements should set up ICT Research Institutes in Nigeria; there should be linkages between universities, Research Institutes, and governmental agencies. In addition, it is advisable for the government to introduce monitoring bodies which are made up of experts for ICT development, and financial support should be encouraged from bodies, the government, and agencies. The Ministry of Education should integrate IT into secondary schools and colleges of education. From the above, it is highly recommended that for the survival and relevance of university libraries in Nigeria, ICT should be declared an institutional priority with adequate funding and support. Nigeria cannot be truly part of the Information Age or Global Village without active participation of the higher institutions in the use and development of ICT. Infrastructural, institutional as well as human capital capacities must be developed in order to face the challenge. In this regard, as pointed out by Ndiaye (2000) the tools of computer science must be perceived and considered as a 21st century universal language.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nigerian educational institutions face the challenge of globalization and the information age for the transformation of the academic system from the traditional role of teaching, learning, research, and development technologies to those driven by the information technology, which is the latest revolution changing all aspects of human endeavour. It must be realized that the current ICT infrastructure in Nigeria can not enable Nigerians or the universities to be part of the Global Information Society. The poor telecommunication infrastructure, quantity and quality, constitute a major problem to ICT development in many Nigerian universities. However, the situation will start to change with the wind of deregulation blowing across the country. One is happy to note that in the past five years things have been changing for the better as far as information technology in library operations in Nigeria is concerned. Until a few years ago, it was generally assumed that computer technology was not viable in Nigerian libraries. However, some university libraries are now either computerizing their activities through their respective university's Computer Centres or installing these computers in their own libraries. One is also happy to note that both the Federal Government of Nigeria and International funding agencies are now interested in the general development of ICT in Nigerian universities. For example, the Federal Ministry of Education has embarked on the establishment of the National Virtual (Digital) Library Project. One of the objectives of this is to provide, in an equitable and cost-effective manner, enhanced access to national and international library and information resources and to share locally available resources with libraries all over the world using digital technology. A Model Virtual (Digital) Library at National Universities Commission (NUC) will be the hub of the university-based libraries. The delivery of the Virtual Library will be through the Internet, CD-ROM,

and Wide Area Network (WAN). When this is finally materialized, it will definitely be a boost to the development of ICT in Nigerian educational system. There is the need for all universities to be interconnected by a network to facilitate cross breeding of research efforts. Also, all Nigerian universities must be connected by a network to all national laboratories and to the National Universities Commission. But it must be realized that those who will benefit from this IT globalization revolution first are those who will master them first. From this perspective, Nigerian university libraries which have started late must seek to understand the stakes in order to make up for lagging behind. To do this one needs first, after a strong political will, to have equipment that should facilitate the significant and irreversible introduction of these new technologies in the educational system.

The use of IT as a strategic management and cognitive tools is critically important if Nigerian universities wish to be run efficiently, access information through worldwide networks, and be globally competitive. The issue of a realistic National Information and Communication Infrastructure Policy is one that should no longer be allowed to linger unresolved. Nigeria needs a goal-oriented policy as well as well-thought-out plans and strategies to harness the potential of information and communication technologies for national development. The truth is that no country, small or big, can afford to be isolated in the information and knowledge-based society of the 21st century. In any case, every country needs to develop its information and communication facilities not only for its own sake but also for the sake of other countries that might wish to communicate or relate with it. It must be emphasized that this country is not short of ideals on what to be done or how it should be done on virtually on any topic of national interest. What is generally lacking is the ability to implement and follow through the plans and strategies beautifully crafted and documented. It is hoped that the outcome of a series of workshops and professional advice from ICT experts would be an exception to the rule and all our tardiness, slip-shoddiness, lack of political will, and commitment had indeed ended with the last century and the last millennium. Let this 21st century, this third millennium, propels us onto the super-highway of the new information technology age.

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