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The Changing Role of Researchers in Nigeria : The Internet as an Alternative Future to Modernity

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Introduction

It is commonly believed that researchers and students in Nigerian higher education institutions are battling the problem of inadequate and out-of-date materials. It could be argued that the only way to pursue knowledge is through research; however, research is changing. The Internet a developmental agent having a profound impact on the research process and dissemination of information. Rosenberg (2001) remarks that "the internet is the most remarkable technological breakthrough of the 1990s … and it will continue to play an important role in transforming higher education."

Developing countries, particularly in Africa, have difficulty accessing materials from developed countries because of distance and financial limitations among other things. Ng'etich (2003) notes that "socio-economic and technological changes ushered in by globalization demand that researchers devise new ways of addressing emerging research challenges" The Internet has introduced new form of learning material in which the dispersal of knowledge becomes easy, quick, and with minimal cost.

In spite of the Internet, Nigerian researchers have continued to depend on traditional ways of doing research. This dependency on traditional methods is contributing to the low level of research output in Nigeria.

Internet Connectivity in Nigeria

Many authors have written about Internet connectivity in Nigeria. According to Adeya and Oyeyinka (2002:10) the level of access and connectivity is far below that of developed countries. Nigeria as a whole has only two percent of the Internet connectivity in the developed world. This is improving as a result of many universities and other institutions achieving direct access either through telecommunication or VSAT (wireless). As access grows, Nigerian researchers, scholars, and the general public have the opportunity to undertake research, teaching, learning, and other activities via the Internet.

Manir (2007) reported that most of higher education institutions in Nigeria are connected with the Internet via VSAT facilities with Pamsat at their university computer centers. Most of universities have a base station with at least a 150 foot mast/sectoral antenna that supplies service around campus. With installation of VSAT, the use of the Internet for research has skyrocketed, as it has with the existence of many private and independent Internet cafés in the cities.

Internet as a Medium of Research

With the introduction of the Internet, Nigerian researchers have been able to consult more information resources. Research is an important aspect of human development, and our libraries cannot

1

provide us with adequate and current materials for our research needs. The Internet also provides us with the means of carrying out research online by acting as the main engine for exchanging information and publishing.

According Manir (2007) "will lead the academic community [in Nigeria] to exploit opportunities that will make them to be educated, more literate and conscious of the potentials for research". Buckle (1994) states that "scholar and researchers will use this medium to transform ways of reviewing and using information in conducting research."

The use of the Internet for the exchange of research materials gives rise to the concept of electronic resource sharing. This has reduced the shortage of information resources in Nigeria and consequently increased the output of research publications.

The Internet as a Medium of Communication and Collboration

The Internet is a means for exchanging information and ideas among researchers and scholars, and is a medium for communication and collaboration among colleagues. In Nigeria, censorship has been a distortion to academic freedom. Mandari and Diouf (1993) assert that "Internet technology provides the means of circumvent most of the constraints to academic freedom. This is because the Internet technology pays no attention to geographical boundaries and provides possibilities to thwart the censorship of scholarly publication in print media." Thus the Internet has the capacity to provide an enabling environment for Nigerian scholars and researchers to overcome the barriers of communication and collaboration.

The Internet as a Medium for Dissemination of Information and a Publisher

Communication is a key to success in any activity. Until recently, information dissemination was a difficult task using traditional methods. The Internet reduces these difficulties, because it is "live, constantly moving, theoretically borderless, potentially infinite space for the production and circulation of information" (Evans 1996). The Internet has provided Nigerian scholars, researchers, individuals, and their institutions with an opportunity to present their ideas and research findings. Thus, they also serve as an alternative for publishing materials, in print media as well as other contributions. These new technologies go beyond providing an electronic version of what is available in print media. It may include other contributions available only in electronic form.

Nget'ch (2003) asserts that electronic publishing on the Internet has provided a greater opportunity for scholars and researchers to publish and present their ideas and research findings. Similarly, the Internet provides access to other scholarly contributions from different parts of the world for Nigerian researchers to scrutinize. It also provides the opportunity to recognize and access research and work produced by Nigerians, which may have in the past been ignored due to the information divide between developed and developing countries.

Researches and scholars need the Internet for literature searches, but data can also be collected through this medium. Data can be processed and analyzed on the Internet and findings can be disseminated.

Oshikoya and Hussaini (1998) discuss initiatives to provide access to electronic publication in Africa . For example, projects offering distance-learning courses and electronic library services include the African Virtual University (AVU) project. Similarly, African journals online (AJOL) has about more than 250 titles from 21 different countries online as of 2004. These examples have shown the power of modern information technologies to increase access to educational resources.

Murphy, et al. (2004) discuss initiatives that are underway in developing countries to provide access to current information through the Internet. Babini (2004) discusses how the Latin American Council on Social Science (CLACSO) whose virtual library for social sciences provides access to more than 4,000 textbooks, journals, and papers.

The Implication of the Internet and Electronic Libraries for Research

Nigerian institutions and libraries lack current material. Even when these materials are available, they are difficult to be access due to poor records management systems. Yet many Nigerian scholars and researchers largely depend on traditional information sources, particularly print, for their scholastic activities and research.

Accessibility to library materials in Nigeria has been constrained by various factors including:

- Inadequate library collections.
- High cost of postal service, which makes interlibrary loan and resource sharing almost impossible.
- High cost of international journals and books.
- Poor funding of libraries and universities.
- Inadequate and poor information infrastructure
- High level of poverty.
- Devaluation of Nigerian currency against foreign currencies.
- Negative attitudes by the Government and its agencies towards library development.

The aforementioned problems have led to an extreme scarcity of books and other information material for research. But today, the advent of information technology is a welcome development; the use of the Internet has the potential to solve all these problems through electronic publishing and digital resource sharing.

Use of the Internet for academic activities afford the opportunity for Nigeria to wake from its information coma. Several studies have shown that publications are rapidly migrating to the Internet (Byork and Turk 2001). The power of Internet publishing is overtaking paper publishing worldwide. It is hoped that Nigerian scholars and researchers will take electronic publishing seriously as an alternative.

Conclusion

Nigerian researchers and scholars must move from traditional to modern practices in order to exploit the benefit and potentials of Information technology. Nigerian researchers can only make a profound achievement and optimally contribute to the development of knowledge by using the Internet to enrich their research and to disseminate their findings.

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3

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