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# Academic Libraries in Cameroon in the Digital Age

Roseline Bawack  
rbawack.bcuyi@gmail.com

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## **Academic Libraries in Cameroon in the Digital Age:**

### **Abstract**

Radical changes in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and changing context in Higher Education have placed academic libraries in Cameroon in crisis. Unprecedented changes in the information environment caused by ICTs has led to a digital revolution, causing academic libraries no choice but to move from one paradigm to another. Change and transition in this new dispensation is fundamental and irreversible. Consequence academic librarians are embracing new roles to satisfy the incessant changing needs of library patrons. This paper seeks to provide an understanding of academic libraries in Cameroon in the digital era. It takes up one of the critical issues concerning transition from traditional to digital as required in the digital information age. The paper discusses key paradigm shifts, major impetus of change, competencies for academic librarians, new roles and the way forward. The paper examines the situation of academic libraries in Cameroon, and establishes the urgent need for these libraries to accelerate transition to the new paradigm in order to remain relevant. This study is based on an in-depth review of literature and the author's experience, and personal points of view.

**Keywords:** Academic libraries; librarians in the digital era; paradigm shift in academic libraries; skills and competencies; library transition; Cameroon.

### **Introduction**

The Republic of Cameroon is a country located in Central Africa. It is usually referred to as Africa in miniature due to its great ethnic, geographical and cultural diversity ("Cameroon Africa in Miniature," 2019). It is a bilingual country with English and French as the official languages. Cameroon has a population of about 24.8 million inhabitants and covers a surface area of about 475,442 sq. km (183,568 sq. miles). It is boarded by Chad to the North, by the Republic of Central Africa to the East, by Nigeria to the West and by Gabon and Equatorial Guinea to the South ("Cameroon Population 2019 "). Cameroon is endowed with abundant natural resources that spreads across all ten regions as well as its capital Yaounde.

Universities and higher institutions of learning in Cameroon are placed under the ministry of Higher Education, which is headed by a minister. According to the ministry of higher education

website, there are eight public Universities and two hundred and thirty five private universities and higher institutions of learning in Cameroon ("MINESUP Cameroon," 2019). All universities and higher institutions of learning are attached to academic libraries.

Academic libraries are libraries attached to tertiary institutions such as universities, Polytechnique institutions, Higher Colleges of Technology, and Higher Teachers Training Colleges. Teaching, research and learning including preservation and access to knowledge and information is the main mandate of academic libraries, alongside supporting the mission of their parent institutions which is teaching and research. However, the digital era, it is not enough for academic libraries to support teaching and learning, they must actually foster research, teaching and learning, and become partners in these areas (Delaney & Bates, 2015).

Academic libraries are expected to be leaders of providing information services to their communities which is made up of students, lecturers and researchers. Several scholars including (Hart, 2011) and (Klain Gabbay & Shoham, 2017) have emphasised on the crucial role of academic libraries in research and scholarship in universities and other institutions of higher learning in the digital era. In many occasions, (Abubakar, 2011b) the academic library has been referred to as the heart of the university, the nerve centre or the hub of academic activities. However, this perception has changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which I refer to as the digital age. The advent of information and Communication Technology (ICT) has dramatically transformed the role and position of academic libraries. Innovative methods of scholarly communication, the development of the library's virtual space, the proliferation and use of social media, and the explosive growth of mobile devices, like tablets and related applications, have collectively altered the traditional academic library beyond recognition (Raju, 2014).

The global trend is now characterized with a fundamental shift from traditional information environment to an e-environment where emphasis is placed on the acquisition of electronic resources such as e-books, e-journals as well as online databases. However traditional library and information services and functions still remain relevant especially where the mechanisms for change are absent.

Most universities in Cameroon have quickly embraced new methods of teaching, learning and research like online teaching, distance learning and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), yet academic libraries are lagging behind vis-à-vis changes presented by this new information and learning methods. Declining budgets, totally absent or inadequate state-of-the-art

technology and infrastructure, lack of trained human resources, the cry is the same for all public and private academic libraries nationwide. As a senior librarian with more than thirty years working in the academic library sector, I am concerned about the status and extent to which academic libraries in Cameroon are responding to the 21<sup>st</sup> century information scenery.

### **Paradigm shift in Academic Library operations**

The contemporary practice in academic library functioning and services is being propelled by an unimaginable information explosion due to ICTs in almost all aspects of library services. The displacement of print to electronic, from analog to digital, the supremacy of search engines, the emergence of digital lifestyle, open access and innovative patterns of scholarly communication are factors that have redesigned the activities of the academic library, changing from one paradigm to another. Traditional methods of library practices and library resources have been replaced by an electronic environment. The global trend is characterized by a shift in paradigm towards a new dispensation, the e-environment, making provision for the delivery of new and innovative services which respond to the needs of the twenty-first century academic librarian (Kumar, 2009).

Innovations in technologies, like digitization, electronic publishing, Web 2.0, Library 2.0, RSS, Blogs, Wikis, SMS, Podcasting, and Open Access have greatly affected academic libraries globally changing from the shift of manual or printed era to the digital era. (Nonthacumjane, 2011). Academic libraries are changing dramatically by adopting new means of technology in all activities of print to e-environment while a variety of manual methods are gradually being replaced by computerized systems providing great opportunity for online accessibility (Bawack & Nkolo, 2018). Electronic databases, digital and institutional repositories are occupying virtual space of academic libraries today.

Academic librarians have no choice but to transit to this new paradigm. The speed of change has created a new setting for the academic librarian in terms of services, activities and resources. Academic libraries have adopted technology in almost all of its activities providing to users a range of services and resources which are completely ICT dependent, necessary for quick and easy access to library e-resources, databases and repositories. The present day academic library uses technology as a means of providing electronic, digital and virtual library services. For example Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) has given way to e-catalogue. Resources like e-databases, e-journals, e-books and several online resources are being used.

The changing pattern of sophisticated information needs of patrons or library users is growing rapidly, this has caused a paradigm shift in library patterns. (Abubakar, 2011a) quoting Singh and Kaur 2009 observes that there is a paradigm shift from traditional academic libraries to modern electronic libraries, from stand-alone libraries to library and information networks; from printed publications to digital; and from proprietorship to access and tutoring. The transition according to the authors is as a result of the impact of ICTs, the internet, web 2.0 etc. Developments in the ICTs offers academic libraries several exciting and challenging opportunities that require prompt responses to all facets of library practices. The shift in paradigm has impacted administrative, technical and financial aspects of library operations.

Academic libraries can become indispensable to their institutions by undergoing three vital paradigm shifts. The three paradigm shifts in academic library operations (Jain, 2013) are: the shift from printed material to multimedia in a variety of formats; a shift from information ownership to information guidance; a shift from privilege institution to active competition. By undergoing these three paradigm shifts in library management, the academic library will assert itself rather than becoming merely a peripheral part of its institutions strategic vision. Therefore, change and transition is quick and inevitable if academic libraries and librarians want to remain relevant to their institutions.

### **Major Impetus causing change in paradigm**

There is no doubt that the emergence of ICTs and the proliferation of information has caused a change of paradigm in academic library operations. The major impetus behind this change can be attributed to:

Constant developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs): ICT revolution has been considered by many as the major drive affecting academic libraries. (Chutia, 2015). Academic library services and resources in the digital era are almost entirely ICT dependent.

Global Evolution of the Educational System:

ICTs have brought in new methods of teaching and learning such as open and online distance learning, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), virtual campus, flipped classrooms, online education etc. There is an increased in the use and integration of technology in education today, hence the need for highly skilled competitive workforce.

### Emergence of Social Media:

Social media is one of the major impetus of change in the digital era. Social media means the use of digital media including the internet and mobile devices for dissemination and collaboration to create user generated content and form (Jain, 2013). Social media is designed to achieve community shared goals through collaboration and exchange of ideas. Social media tools include blogs, Wikis, Forums, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. Academic librarians should use social media to collaborate with patrons and stakeholders. It should be used as a pedagogic tool. Social media is widely used today and a teaching, learning and research.

### Changes in scholarly communication:

Scholarly communication is the process through which scholars and researchers communicate the results of research or other creative endeavours to their peers formally and informally (Carpenter, Graybill, Offord Jr, & Piorun, 2011). Today scholarly communication has changed comprising of digital scholarship, institutional repositories and open access. Publishing modes are developing at a faster pace, requiring academic libraries to be actively involved or be left behind as far as sharing and disseminating intellectual outputs is concerned. (Chutia, 2015). There are changes in the publishing market like open access, changes in public policy like copyright issues and self-archiving, and changes in the way research is conducted like the use of networks and data intensive science.

### Changing needs of users:

Information seekers today are very conversant with latest trends in information environment. Library patrons have great expectations from academic librarians more than it has ever been, to access the right information, in a specific format, from the right source, at the right time. Modern technology makes it possible for information to be coded, packaged, stored, disseminated and accessed in a variety of formats at a given time, in a required format. This is another major impetus for change in academic libraries.

## **Situation of Academic Libraries in Cameroon**

Academic libraries in Cameroon are caught between the waves of transition. This is due to the fact that they are operating amidst several challenges. They derive their budget from their

institutions, most of which is inadequate to meet the exigencies and demands of modern library practices. Regrettably, institutional policy, inadequate library budget, lack of basic information and communication technologies, insufficient and unqualified library staff and the inability for directors of academic library to adopt innovation, has negatively impacted the transition of academic libraries to the digital era.

The absence of inadequate technology and lack of state of the art ICT infrastructure to build and manage sustainable institutional repositories that will enable free access to research and scholarly publishing are major technological challenges. Poor internet penetration and connectivity, unstable electricity supply, low bandwidth for access to, and download of resources are some major challenge in academic libraries in developing countries especially in Cameroon (Bawack & Nkolo, 2018). The situation is the same for both public and private institutions.

Despite financial difficulty in terms of budget and lack of some basic information technology and infrastructure, efforts have been made by some public and private university hierarchy in the area of internet and ICTs. Some have made a series of ongoing attempts to adopt technologies to improve services. (Shafack, 2016) reports that some academic libraries in Cameroon have made attempts to adopt technologies for improved services to meet modern demand. Significant efforts have been made by the government of Cameroon to assist higher education in acquiring ICT infrastructure. A lot still needs to be done.

The success of the library depends on the satisfaction of its users. It is incumbent to use modern technology to make library services faster and accurate (Bhoi, 2017). To satisfy the demands of ICT driven targeted academic library users today require innovative, dynamic, timely, adequate and appropriate ICTs (Fatoki, 2005). However, most academic libraries in Cameroon are constrained by a number of factors that include, slow internet, insufficient bandwidth, lack of hardware and software, insufficient and unqualified staff, lack of basic ICT infrastructure. These factors are as a result of insufficient and dwindling low and insufficient budgets making it difficult for the library to acquire state of the art technologies, purchase or pay subscriptions to e-journals, e-books and e-periodicals. This has deterred academic libraries in Cameroon from acquiring relevant electronic resources to support research, teaching and learning.

Academic librarians in Cameroon have been questioned about their role and efficacy in contributing towards the development of the country and the institutions they serve (Bawack,

2018). Most library staff are non-professionals with little notion of use and application of modern technology. Among the professional staff who manage library services, very few of them are ICT literate. As such, they find it difficult to provide basic services to a highly specific ICT driven academic community target, a generation which is very conscious and aware of alternative sources of information especially open access to information. The literacy rate of academic libraries in Cameroon as far as knowledge and usage of information technology is concerned is at the peripheral stage.

As a first major step to improve services, all academic libraries of public universities in Cameroon and ten private universities have joined the Consortium of Cameroon University and Research Libraries (COCUREL). Through the consortium academic libraries with internet connectivity have access to a variety of licensed e-resources negotiated by the International Advocacy for Scientific Publications (INASP). Other academic librarians have made distinguished personal efforts to move to the digital age through massive online training. The University of Yaounde I, the University of Buea, the University of Bamenda and the University of Dschang are making obvious efforts to meet the digital requirements. The library of the University of Yaounde I is currently digitizing its resources. With support from its institution, it has made available the institutions' theses and dissertations online through the database PMB. Library users have access to the database through free Wi-Fi using library code. The president of the Republic of Cameroon donated five hundred thousand laptops to undergraduates and post graduate students of all universities in 2018. According to the minister of higher education, this is a major step towards valorising research and a major step towards modernizing teaching and learning. Students use these laptop computers to access free internet and Wi-Fi on most campuses to access the library's electronic resources. A contract has been signed with a western donor country to build a structure in the university that will host the multi media centre and provide state-of-the-art ICT infrastructure for students and researchers. A collaboration and agreement was signed with some publishers to provide access to high impact factor journals published to the academic community.

### **Skills and Competencies needed by the academic librarian to meet up the demands of the modern era.**

To keep abreast with the pace of change, the academic librarian should not only contend to changing mind-set, but the traditional skillset of the academic librarian should expand to

embrace the digital world. Some of the skills and competencies needed by the academic librarian of the digital era are the following:

*Should be Innovative and Creative:* The transformation brought about by ICTs means that librarians and library leaders in particular should be creative and innovative to transit from one paradigm to another. Innovation is the gateway to successful transition to the new paradigm, and creativity is an enabler to change. Be able to re-design the library's space, resources and operations to embrace change in both the short term and long term, in order to stay relevant and sustainably in the coming years.

*Opt for Change Management and flexibility:* Be open to change in your library, your job description and mission of your institution. Upgrade your academic potentials as required by the digital library era. The emergence of ICTs and the exigencies in the labour market has impacted Higher Education to constantly change its policy, pedagogy, student orientation, behaviour, technology, and curriculum. The academic library is subject to these changes therefore, there is urgent need to keep abreast with the trend, to keep reviewing your position as a librarian in a new era, and do not stop negotiating the position of the academic library within the university. There is an urgent need to re-design roles and responsibilities of library staff, adapt to new techniques, practices and competencies. Flexibility and the ability to effectively manage change is one of the skills needed for librarians and library leaders in the digital era.

*Should Provide Value:* Academic librarians should prove value to their institution, by improving performance, identifying and using best practices, show evidence of successes and the impact on student research output, successes in academic performance, demonstrating the contribution and mastery in modern techniques in research, learning and teaching. The academic librarian should be capable to conduct research in her profession and relevant fields of study, write and publish articles in library and information journals. This will valorise your position within the academia.

*Should Support Research:* One of academic library's function is to support research and learning in its institution. In the digital era, scholarly communication is more and more digital, therefore the academic librarian should have adequate knowledge, competencies and skills to search, identify, capture, store, manage and provide access useful electronic information. The academic librarian has to exhibit research skills at an advanced level even at PhD level of

expertise. Should be able to teach and support research in the digital environment with an abundance of electronic resources, electronic journals, electronic books, open access, digital repositories, almetrics, and social media.

*Should have Digital Literacy Skills:* The need to equip student or library users with skills in the digital world is paramount and of continuous importance. Operating in a digital environment necessitates state-of-the-art literacy skills to select, use and manage modern technology and train students and researchers. The librarian needs continuous learning to acquire these skills to become more competent.

*Should have skills to manage Digital Information:* The academic librarian should manage issues related to digital information like licenses, ownership, copyright issues, open access, digital commons, communication and dissemination of digital information, presentation, access rights, management and curation in its institution. Such skills can be acquired by participating in free Massive Open Online Courses found on the internet.

*Should have good marketing and negotiating skills:* An academic librarian of the digital era should be conversant with tools and techniques to maximize access to the institution's digital platform and resources as well as print content and services. According to (Foo, Chaudhry, Majid, & Logan, 2002), positive attitudes and a market-facing mind-set will provide academic librarians with greater opportunities to exploit present and future challenges. Negotiation skills are required to deal with publishers, suppliers, stakeholders and decision makers. Good negotiation skills will led to approved policies from hierachy that will impact performance.

*Be a good Collaborator and Networker:* The digital era requires a lot of networking and collaboration with other colleagues and networks to keep abreast with changes to support international research, improve collaboration and transnational education and globalization. Collaboration and networking will lead to sharing best practices, lessons learned, learning opportunities, grant opportunities and regular updates on issues concerning the profession. This will assert your role in the modern era.

*Blended Librarianship Skills:* Blended librarianship refers to librarians who can, and should be integral, educational partners, as well as catalyst for students' knowledge enrichment and intellectual inquiry (Shank & Bell, 2011). According to the author, a blended librarian will combine both traditional skill set of librarianship with contemporary information technologies

skills in both software and hardware, with instructional and educational ability to use and apply technology appropriately in the teaching and learning process. Blended librarians use emerging communication technologies including web 2.0 tools to provide course related instruction in both environments and become partners with faculty in course design (Shank & Bell, 2011). Modern academic librarian should have these skills and competencies to assert their place in the new academic e-environment.

*Embedded librarianship Skills:* Embedded librarians engage in activities out of the traditional model. They are librarians who show close interest and collaborate with their clientele focusing on their needs, building relationships, showing interest and developing deep understanding of their work, and providing highly customized information services that are targeted to their needs. It involves shifting the model from service delivery to close collaboration, trust, and shared responsibility of outcomes (Delaney & Bates, 2015). No more time to seat and wait for clients. Academic librarians should be aggressively proactive and reach out to their clientele, get involved and engaged in their search for information and knowledge.

*Social Media Skills:* The mastery of social media tools is unavoidable in academic libraries. Learning modes have changed to participatory and collaborative. Web 2.0 and library 2.0 tools can contribute to the continued visibility and relevance of academic library services and resources. It is a tool for professional development to keep librarians abreast and relevant. It fosters collaboration among libraries, librarians and the library community. It is incumbent for academic librarians today to showcase skills in manipulating social media tools.

### **The way forward: What should academic libraries and librarians in Cameroon do to become assertive in this modern era?**

For academic libraries in Cameroon to meet expectations, they should provide the desired information services to their community, which will match the requirements of the digital era, emphasis should be shifted towards the following:

- 1) Academic librarians need to change their mind-set and skill-set to engage in personal and collective efforts to understand the need to urgently change paradigms.

- 2) Should exhibit research skills at an advanced level even at PhD level of expertise, and have to perform collaborative work and team building.
- 3) Academic libraries should improve in ICT infrastructure and usage. Should acquire state of the art technology and infrastructure such as internet software and hardware, web 2.0 tools and internet bandwidth including good Wi-Fi services;
- 4) Academic libraries and librarians should explore alternative funding sources through writing fundable projects and seeking for funding through cooperation and networking.
- 5) More emphasis should be placed on digitization and building institutional repositories given the fact that information seekers are digital literates.
- 6) The need to strengthen the consortium of academic libraries, engage all stakeholders and make the consortium more proactive in the digital era.
- 7) Prove their value constantly and eloquently to the academic environment by marketing services and resources.
- 8) Engage in lifelong learning, improvement in knowledge on ICTs, and create a roadmap for learning new skills and competencies on regular basis.
- 9) Be receptive and open minded, be willing to embrace the changes that confront the academic library.
- 10) Engage in blended librarianship as the option or way forward for professional modernism.
- 11) Advocate for institutional engagement and policy to valorise the library sector.
- 12) Government and Higher Education must realize the important role of academic libraries to institutional development thus provide adequate funding, invest in acquiring ICT infrastructure, respond to the acute shortage of library professionals and engage in constant capacity building.

## **Conclusion**

Electronic and digital services are the backbone of information today. The emergence of ICTs has revolutionized the operations of academic libraries. From analysis, it is apparent that the traditional information environment is completely transformed. There is an urgent need to digitize library resources and make them accessible through appropriate ICTs applications. Many academic libraries in Cameroon have not crossed the stage of digitization. Without digitization it is impossible to develop future prospects of the library. Faced with enormous challenges like that of insufficient funding, absence of skilled library professionals, poor

internet bandwidth and inadequate technology infrastructure, academic libraries and librarians should however, brave the odds, re-strategize to embrace new methods of services, acquire novel skills and competencies, and quickly adopt innovation as a solution. To prove their value and relevance they should re-invent themselves through continuous learning and embrace new and expanded roles that put them at the centre of activities between researchers, lecturers, students and authors. This is the route that will facilitate transformation and stress-free transition to the new paradigm. It is not an option anymore but the only way for academic libraries and librarians to remain valuable and relevant.

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