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The Role of the Public Libraries in Enriching the African Rural Information Environment

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Abstract

Information has become a veritable currency for today's economic environment and efforts are made by every institution to enrich the information ecology for vibrant and sustainable economy. Although the entrant of information and communication technologies had altered and made great impact on information environment in other parts of the world, the situation in Africa is still bleak. Information is created every second and there is upsurge of big data on the information landscape and these developments have not only created a new society called the knowledge society but also brought about information and digital gaps in the society. In Africa access to information even in this new information environment is still poor. Majority of Africans are rural dwellers and they are mostly affected in this information gap syndrome. For an enriched information environment in Africa, there must be a system that will consistently provide information services to this information disadvantage group. Public library has been very close to the people and can contribute or play important role in the sustainable information environment in the rural community.

Key words: Africa, Information, Information environment, ecology, public library, digitization, digital divide.

1.0 Introduction

Libraries as actors are important institutions in shaping and influencing the information environment. Public libraries are central in every development. In the writing of Aabo (2005), the purpose of public libraries is to further democracy, equality and social justice, increase access to information, disseminate culture and knowledge, contribute to a meaningful and informative leisure time, and act as a communal institution and a social meeting place.

The traditional Africa information environment is predominately embedded in oral tradition and this and lack of political will influence the accessibility, organisation, dissemination and use of information and also the nature of information environment. The African Platform on Access to Information (APAI) (2013) reveals that out of fourteen African countries surveyed only 4 countries have access to information laws. The result of this single research also shows that African countries have a long way to go in access to information. Generally the citizens access to information is very poor despite the influx of information technologies and the spread of big data. How then can public libraries contribute to brightening of this gloomy information ecology in Africa?

Public libraries of the past were developed at the time of information scarcity and so people depended on them for their information. However in today's information ecology, there is a great shift; there is abundant information everywhere in different formats with different nature and people no longer depend on one information infrastructure to get what they need. The effect of this to the information seekers is development of new set of needs for the individual, the ability to gain value from information, to produce new knowledge and develop new skills. To help the information seeker survives in this environment, the public library has to ensure that the people have equity access to information, digital tools and the knowledge to use them (Garmer, 2016). Garmer and Aspen (2014) opine that the modern public library is rooted in three major attributes; people, place and platforms. Public libraries use their resources to provide access to information and development opportunities to people; provide places for people to gather and connect and establish platform services that are tailored to the changing needs of communities in a more mobile and connected society. Today's public libraries will regain public confidence

when their services and functions have been reengineered and re-innovated to meet the new information trends.

This theoretical paper through online self-study using various online resources like journal articles and web pages from various sites explores nature of information environment and the public libraries roles in enriching the rural African ecology.

1.1 Information environment

Information is the means by which people build understanding of one another and themselves, and Information environment is the medium through which this information flows as the various players use it to influence each other's decision (Ehlers & Blannin, 2020). The Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, (November 2019) defines information environment as "the aggregate of the individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, process, disseminate or act on information". The information environment comprises and aggregates numerous social, cultural, cognitive, technical, and physical attributes that act upon and impact knowledge, understanding, beliefs, world views, and, ultimately, actions of an individual, group, system, community, or organization..

According to Ehlers & Blannin (2020), the global information environment is a highly complex and emergent system of systems in which information moves and produces impacts with rapidly increasing speed and often high-order and unanticipated impacts. In short the information environment is the space within which information is produced and manipulated by people using physical assets to gain knowledge and achieve their individual and corporate needs. It includes all the systems, subsystems, information infrastructure, information behaviours, publishing output, technologies, barriers to information and actors to information.

Joint Operations (2017) in (Ehlers & Blannin, 2020) sees information environment as comprising three dimensions: physical, informational, and human (or cognitive). The physical dimension comprises the infrastructure facilitating the transmission, reception, and storage of information. The informational dimension includes the wired networks allowing content and data flow to be collected, processed, stored, disseminated, and displayed. It forms the links between the physical and human dimensions. The human (cognitive) dimension includes the

individual and collective minds of decision makers and all others who act upon and are in turn affected by information flows.

1.2 Role of public libraries

Public library is closer to the general public than any other library. As the "people university" it has vital role to play in enriching and sustaining the African information environment. To play this role, it must get out of box and develop proactive innovative strategies especially in areas of services and infrastructure that will have impact on access to information, bridge the information gap and digital divide and develop information skills in communities. The role of public libraries in enriching the information environment can be viewed from different perspectives.

1.2.1 Access to information

Public libraries are key players in ensuring that every citizen has equal access to valuable information in this era of information evolution. Access to functional information is key to both national and individual economic, political, educational advancement and development(Clark & Delgado, 2017). Information technologies devices and tools are producing information in a geometric rate and they are more fluid and changing in nature. Public libraries role is to make sure that the public has equitable and equal access to information irrespective of their status, religion, gender, region, educational and economic status (ALIA, 2018; Barton, 2019; IFLA/UNESCO 1994 - 2019). Contributing to equal access to information and knowledge, ALA (2017) opines that core values of the library community such as equal access to information, intellectual freedom, and the objective stewardship and provision of information must be preserved and strengthened more than ever in this era of information and technological evolution.

Accessibility of information by all and the visions of UN 2030 Agenda developed framework of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)(2015) will be achieved if libraries will employ functional technologies like social media, mobile technology, web and internet in their services. Public libraries should endeavour to package and repackage and digitized their contents not only to reach out to everyone but also provide contents that meet the different level and needs of the people. Accessibility to the public also means reaching the home bounds and the prisoners who

are not privileged to come to the library or access the contents of the library using information technologies. These two sets of people are forgotten easily. Public libraries should resume the use of mobile libraries to reach the unreached and ensure they have access to relevant and quality information materials to solve their information, health, education and social needs.

1.2.2 Bridging the Digital Divide

Digital divide is one of the offshoot of technological revolution. The digital divide can be seen between the educated and uneducated, between male and female, between city and rural dwellers, between developed and under developed nations. Digital divide cuts across all the facet of the society and it is one of the known factors hindering equal access to information. The public libraries have roles to play in bridging the digital divide. They can achieve this by providing information technology for public access, by teaching basic computer skills and by participating in programmes to combat illiteracy (Mugwisi, Jiyane, Fombad, 2018).

1.2.3 Digitization

The result of the research by Steinerová (2018) shows that digital libraries and repositories were identified as very important information structure needed for the improvement of information environment. Digitization of information resources in public libraries is very vital in ensuring that the users in the information environment are independent of the factors of space and time. It will promote access of all the public library's resources. This was collaborated by Briksa (2006) in her research which reveals that digitization in public libraries will help to preserve the community cultural heritage, improves the quantum of local contents. Public libraries can embark on digitalizing the materials in traditional medium: newspapers, maps, posters, postcards, notes, portraits, photographs, drawings, community memory and also have an archive and database of digital publications. The content will be uploaded to the library portal via the national information grid. This will make the library contents be integrated into the national information environment where everyone can access it easily and seamlessly.

1.2.4 Cloud computing
In the library, the ultimate goal of cloud computing is to create virtual communities of information professionals and clients. This creates a strong social interaction, collaboration and

friendly environment in the information centre. The cloud concept also has the potential for scholarly communication, storage and sharing of information, knowledge and intellectual records. Continuing on this, Ramsumar (2016) posit that we need cloud computing in libraries because of: changing formats and usage patterns; customized services; challenges in managing hardware and software. In the African information environment where public libraries are financed when all other sectors have been taken care of, the one way public libraries can survive and provide needed services to their communities is by going viral. Though its adaptation and use are still slow in public libraries in Africa, but when fully functional cloud computing will greatly enrich African information ecology. In times of emergency and pandemic like the COVID-19, cloud computing will be very easy and more reachable technology public libraries will use to disseminate facts to the rural communities concerning the issue at hand and save them from being bombarded and confused with propaganda and opinions.

1.2.5 Creating and Promoting Networks

The new world is a networked world where information is in abundance and very mobile. The result of this is that public libraries must renovate and establish new information systems that lean to network features. According to Garmer (2016) the information society has the following characteristics: people live their lives more on online; reduction of physical materials; greater personal mobility; desire for more creation, collaboration and sharing. Then public libraries as a matter of relevance and impact should move with the trends and meet the citizens where they are operating. Librarians in public libraries should help users develop skills they need to solve problems by connecting to the information resources they need wherever they are available, collaborating in the creation of new partnerships and networks across the community, nations and the world that respond to community and individual needs. The application of social media and mobile technologies are relevant in this area. When public libraries become more involve in networking, they will not only create quality and enriched information products, they will also infuse and promote information ethics and attract public approval and respect.

1.2.6 Promotion and Marketing of Library Resources

Marketing and promotion services in libraries is meant to create and increase awareness and use

of library resources and services; optimize the use of information within limited resources and manpower and provide precise and correct information for their research and study(Patil & Pradhan, 2014). It is one thing to provide information resources and products and another thing for them to be accessed and use. Public libraries can promote and market their resources through creating websites and social media platforms. Contributing further, Patil & Pradhan (2014) list ways libraries can promote their resources as:

- *Organization of Information Literacy programme on regular basis at various level.*
- *Organization of workshops/ training programs about awareness of resources available in the libraries and information centres.*
- *Organization of training programs to library staff with modern technologies and expertise people.*
- *Attract the people by organizing book exhibitions of new books with the help of vendors or the material available in the library should be displayed at prominent place.*

1.2.7 Understanding Information Behaviour of the People

The digital divide is severe in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and the role of the public library is to understand the information behaviour of the community and provide resources and services that align with their needs. The research of Kabede (2004) reveals that the information needs of end-users in SSA are for information content that is relevant for day-to-day tasks and that is adequately accessible and effectively usable within the capabilities of the information and communications technology (ICTs) that they possess and their level of skill in manipulating the ICTs. End-users need information content that is adequately accessible and effectively usable within the capabilities of ICTs currently in use by the end-users concerned. Recognizing and understanding the nature of the information needs of the end-users through users satisfaction study will help in meeting their needs as well as in selecting appropriate strategies in addressing information issues in the community. Public libraries should constantly study the information behaviour of the end-user because it changes with time. The contents that solve the information needs of end-user today might not be relevant to that end-user tomorrow.

In the present knowledge society two groups of people emerged - the digital immigrants and the digital natives. According to Prensky (2001) in Juchnevic (2014), the role of the library is to understand how the changing environment impacted on each of these two groups and create roles that match their different needs. Juchnevic (2014) contributing more on this issue gives ways public libraries can function to benefit these two groups. For the immigrants to digital world,

public libraries should mediate between the quantum of information and users by providing free access and use of quality information. For the native of digital world, the role of the public libraries is to provide both physical and virtual spaces to create, collaborate, communicate and share their experiences with their peers, friends and people with common interest.

1.2.8 Developing Public Library as a Hub

Public library in the present information ecology must think out of the box and be a hub of activities, providing both physical and virtual spaces. Modern public library should have meeting spaces for public events, space for group discussion, learning common and maker spaces. Garmer (2016) suggested that public libraries can offer free library's virtual reading rooms in public places like health, recreation and shopping centres in the community so that people can easily log on to the free Wi-Fi to access the free library's e-books, podcast and digital contents. Public libraries can provide smart phones and tablets that the public who are not able to afford them can use to access and send messages.

1.2.9 Use of Technologies - Internet, World Wide Web (www)

The public libraries are structures in the community that can help in narrowing the gap of digital divide if properly and adequately funded (Aalo, 2005). The UK research project investigated by Eva and Bophy (2001) on end-user IT services including access to the Internet, World Wide Web, e-mail, word processing revealed that provision of IT-based services in public libraries have a positive impact both on the communities and the individual users on their job seeking, formal education, building and maintaining networks. Creating library portals by public libraries will not only enhance access to information resources, reach out to larger group of the community, but will also promote and motivate information seeking behaviour of the immigrants and born native digital generation of users. For Detler and Lewis (2004), this can be achieved if library's portals will enable and promote the inclusion of a broad range of information browsing and searching activity.

1.2.10 Teaching of Information Literacy

Information is an important resource in individuals' lives during their lifelong learning processes. In an information society and a digitalized world, information gives meaning to the

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individual's presence and enables the individuals' personal and professional development. However, in a digitalized world where information increases and changes quickly, reaching the most accurate information and using it effectively has become a necessity. Choosing the most reliable information, using and assessing it are functional processes. This function is carried out in an effective way by acquiring information literacy skills (Yılmaz & Soylu, 2014). The public library has a role in social participation and social inclusion of the people. This could be achieved through information literacy that will empower the general citizen to learn skills on the creation, access, evaluation, and ethical use of information and social media. Raju and Raju (2010) explain that libraries and librarians provide opportunities for citizens to develop the skills needed to gain access to information of all kinds and to put information to effective use in the generation of new knowledge for active participation in society, economic well-being and good health. Corroborating this, Chang (2011) reiterates that public libraries can support the development of information and media skills, including maintaining online reputations, analysing information and working within the law. Public libraries are perfectly situated and capable to handle the ever-changing information world and help people learn how to find, use and evaluate information.

1.2.11 Provision of E-government Education

According to Jaeger and Bertot (2009), e-government is the provision of government information and services through the online environment including such activities like applying for Medicare prescription; drug plans; government directives on how to behave during any natural disaster, epidemic and pandemic; paying taxes and rents; applying for jobs and these are enabled using computers, personal digital assistant(PDA), smart phones and other mobile technologies. The role of the public library is to ensure that the community of users have access to, and assistance in all government programmes and services using e-government information and services. Public libraries are to teach and enlighten the citizenry on the skills in creation, acquisition and use of information using technological tools and devices. In this current information environment where people are confused with the quantum of information flying in and out and not knowing how to sieve the facts from opinion and propaganda, the public will rely more on the information coming from public libraries than from other sources. The public libraries must device

appropriate strategies in disseminating government information easily to the people in the level they will understand them.

1.3 Conclusion

The purpose of public libraries is to promote democracy, equality and social justice, increase access to information, disseminate culture and knowledge, contribute to a meaningful and informative leisure time, and act as a communal institution and a hub and social meeting places. Although African information environment looks gloomy, public libraries as the "people's university" have the capacities to enhance the information environment in Africa if properly equipped and re-engineered. This paper has reviewed various ways public libraries can enrich the information environment Africa continent in this era of big data and digital divide.

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