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The Anatomy of Library Users in the 21st Century

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Introduction

The most crucial component of the 21st century library is the user. Every effort put into the establishment of a 21st century library is wasted if the library is not meant for use. According to Nwalo (2003) the library user is undisputedly, the most important person in any library setting. The library user is the focal point to the 21st century library and information services, as the library primarily exist to satisfy the user (Aina, 2004). This is the reason why the mission statement of any library always reflects the determination of the other components of the library to render excellent services to library users. As such, a library is said to be productive when the library users are satisfied.

Who is a library user? Nwalo (2003) defined him as anybody who visits the library with the purpose of exploiting its resources to satisfy his information need. The underlined word "visits" as used in the 21st century, include remote access to the library portal or website. Aina (2004) sees the term "user" to include all those who avail themselves of the services offered by a library. The term encompasses various terms such as patrons, clients, information users, information seekers, consumers, readers, etc. these terms can be used interchangeably, because they all apply to those seeking the services of a library.

The 21st century has virtually turned everything virtual. The library and its users have also gone virtual. Thus the 21st century library (which is virtual) is defined by Reitz (2005) as a "library without walls" in which the collections do not exist on paper, microform, or other tangible form at a physical location, but are electronically accessible in digital format via computer networks. From the definition above, the library users require 21st century technologies to access library collections, as access is no longer restricted to the user paying a visit to the library (building) physically. The 21st century library therefore, emphasizes access rather than ownership. In this vein, the library user needs to take more responsibility in locating and retrieving information from the library's collections more than they have done in the traditional library enterprise.

User Profile

Access to technology coupled with relevant ICT skill is required to put the 21st century library to good use. Like the library, users have also evolved as have the ingredients for defining who a library user is. In the traditional library setting, library

users are easily identifiable because they appear in the library physically most of the times. A physically-challenged user is seen. Child and adult users are identified. In online environment, it is not easy to identify these things. However, people are identifiable by their ICT skills irrespective of their age or physical challenges.

Traditionally, library users have been classified into groups. Whitakers (1993) classified them into general readers, subject readers, special readers, and non-reading users. Similarly, Nwalo (2003) grouped them into specialists, students, disadvantaged majority, and the indisposed. In addition, Aina (2004) grouped users into children, pupils, students, adults, professionals, researchers, policy-makers, artisans, hearing and visually handicapped, and physically handicapped.

Skill is the basis for categorizing users in this paper. The categories include:

1. Unskilled user/ computer illiterate user
2. Semi-skilled user/ semi-computer literate user
3. Skilled user/ computer literate user
4. Ab-User

Unskilled User/ Computer Illiterate User

Interaction between librarian and users will require the use of ICT in the 21st century library. The unskilled library user will not even be able to ask the librarian for guidance without the use of ICT. Unskilled users will not be able to use the resources of the library because of lack of ICT skills. This category of users includes those people who use library products through the third party that have ICT skills. This prompted Adomi (2010) to state that basic ICT skill is essential to be able to access and apply information. Widespread ignorance and misconception about ICT use amongst users is a major inhibitor to library development in Nigeria. He further stated that for this category, ICT is not familiar, distant and mysterious (Adomi, 2010). This category also include those that are not aware of the existence and importance of ICT (Adomi, Okiy, Ruteyan, 2003).

Semi-Skilled/ Semi-Literate User

This category of users can use technological devices to access the library with little or no support. This category of users can effectively use the basic search facilities such as the basic search engine (information literacy), but can not effectively use the advanced search engine features and operators which have the capacity to retrieve only relevant information from the library's collections.

Skilled User/ Computer Literate User

This category has the following qualities:

1. Knowledge of how to analyze information need (information literacy).
2. Knowledge of how to use basic and advanced search engines effectively.
3. Knowledge of how to formulate queries and keywords effectively.

No doubt this category consists of those who have undergone ICT training and have acquired relative experiences in the use of technological innovations as they relate to information retrieval. This group of users can obtain virtually all their information need as quickly as possible. In other words, this category includes those people that are able to break their information needs into searchable units, translate them into keywords, search for them using basic or advanced search

technologies, and retrieve up-to-date, relevant, and adequate information.

Users and Abusers

Among the users of the library of the 21st century are unauthorized users. They are very crafty in gaining illegitimate access to library resources available online. They are called hackers and they are most times possessors of virus software with which they carry out their illegal actions. It is unfortunate that they also use the library, but illegally.

Unlike, the traditional library, library without walls do not discriminate against any user category. Physical challenges do not limit ones skill or access to the 21st century library. The handicap in the 21st century library is the user (though physically fit) but lacks the skill to satisfy his information need. The gap between each category is based on their skills. However, the traditional library user as seen earlier, were defined by physical challenges and other considerations.

User Needs

It is universally agreed that every individual whether literate or not, has information need. People use the library for various reasons and to satisfy different needs. Some use the virtual library specifically to read, others use it for research, and some others use it to communicate and share information. No matter what you are using the library for, the fundamental truth is that it is information related. Aina (2004) opined that the most important information need is the information that will enable the individual to resolve uncertainties or problems, or that will help in making sound decisions. It very important to state here that there is outrageous quantity and quality information available to users of the 21st century library. Accessibility is however the responsibility of the user to a large extent.

The 21st century library users need information for the following reasons:

1. Personal-self development: people need information to enrich themselves and remain relevant to their society, career, organization etc.
2. Health: library users need information on how to stay healthy and how to understand medical conditions they or their families have.
3. Government: people seek information to know what is going on in their government and in their country. They want to keep abreast with government policies and plans and know how it affects them.
4. How-to-do-it: people require knowledge or information in order to know what to do at any point in time. Every problem at hand, requires information as the solution.
5. Work/ occupation/ career: every professional requires up-to-date knowledge in his chosen profession, information relating to better jobs etc. Students (whose occupation is schooling) need information to do assignments, pass their exams, and write projects.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Skills have become a major requirement for accessibility and use of 21st century library. Everybody needs information whether skilled or not. Users profile are now determined along that line. Without ICT skills, it is not possible to make effective use of the library except a third party is involved. This implication is that the librarian must be computer savvy.

It is therefore recommended that:

1. There is the need for librarians to appraise themselves to know if their ICT skill is adequate to function in the 21st century library and where it is not adequate, they should get themselves trained in ICT.
2. There is the urgent need for all library users to undergo self-sponsored basic ICT training to acquire skills.
3. Libraries in the 21st century must ensure that their collections reflect the need of users.
4. Skilled library users should use advanced search engines in order to make effective use of the 21st century library.
5. Libraries should put adequate security measures in place to deny unauthorized users access to their collections.

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