

**DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS AS A MEANS OF FACILITATING
PUBLIC ACCESS TO INFORMATION**

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Abstract

The study adopted a non-empirical and qualitative research method and took a critical look at issues of public access to information in a digital context as well as the corresponding conception (digital literacy), which is the skill sets needed to effectively navigate and utilize digital information. The study established the need for digital literacy services for the public as the sine qua non for self-reliance and independence in meeting their individual or collective information needs in contemporary times. Recommendations were made on ways through which those literacy skill sets will be entrenched in society.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy in contemporary times has transcended reading and writing. Although the basis of literacy is reading, the possession of skills and tools necessary to exchange ideas, assess and evaluate information, and make informed decisions in order to attain self-reliance and thrive in society has become an integral and intricate part of literacy.

Today, a person whose literacy is confined to only reading and writing is unarguably restricted to the shallow limits of print resources.

Literacy has evolved into a complex and technical issue, and this is wholly the import of information and communication technology.

Digital literacy is a conception rooted in earlier related conceptions that metamorphosed from each other, beginning with ‘visual literacy’ in the late 1960's, followed by technological, computer, and ICT literacies. However, traditional (print) literacy paved the way and has remained the very bedrock upon which all these seemingly phased literacy conceptions were built.

Digital literacy, as defined by ALA (2011), is the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills.

Since the world has gone digital, each individual living in it should possess basic competencies that guarantee his or her survival and relevance. Information, being an essential ingredient in human life without which his or her existence will be devoid of meaning, must be prioritized by ensuring access is freely and readily available.

Digital technology has brought about ease of access to information, but the skill sets required to navigate and effectively utilize the digital collection have remained a major issue.

THE DIGITALLY LITERATE PERSON

Before looking at the competencies of a digitally literate person, it is noteworthy to point out that the general public is comprised of two groups from the prism of digital citizenship. There is the group that was born into the full-fledged digital era whose life experiences are blended with digital technology (these are the “Digital Natives”), and on the other hand, there are those born before the prevalence of ICT (“Digital Immigrants”). Belshaw (2011), while quoting Eshet-Alkalai and Chajut (2009), noted that the skill sets for digital literacy are embedded in the following six frameworks:

1. Photo-visual literacy: the ability to work effectively with environments, such as user interfaces that employ graphical communication.
2. Reproduction Literacy: ability to create authentic, meaningful written and artwork by reproducing and manipulating preexisting digital text, visuals, and audio pieces.
3. Branching literacy is the ability to construct knowledge through nonlinear navigation through knowledge domains, such as the internet and other hypermedia environments.
4. Socioemotional literacy is the ability to communicate effectively on online communication platforms such as discussion groups and classrooms.
5. Real-time thinking skill: the ability to process and evaluate large volumes of information in real-time, such as in computer games and chatrooms.

In more practical and elaborate terms, the ALA describes a digitally literate person as one who:

1. Possesses the variety of skills—technical and cognitive—required to find, understand, evaluate, create, and communicate digital information in a wide variety of formats.
2. Is able to use diverse technologies appropriately and effectively to retrieve information, interpret results, and judge the quality of that information.
3. Understands the relationship between technology, lifelong learning, personal privacy, and the stewardship of information.
4. Uses these skills and the appropriate technology to communicate and collaborate with peers, colleagues, family, and, on occasion, the general public.
5. Uses these skills to actively participate in civic society and contribute to a vibrant, informed, and engaged community.

IMPORTANCE AND BENEFITS OF DIGITAL LITERACY

1. **BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE:** Digital literacy is a proven solution to the digital divide barrier. As people become more digitally literate, their ability to access information is not only guaranteed but also equipped with the ability to access opportunities in the globalized economy and become digital content creators.
2. **E-SAFETY:** With the rising concerns associated with internet usage, including online scams, cyberbullying, and cyber identity theft, digitally literate people are at lower risk of being cut off from this negative trend.
3. **INCREASED ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND LIFE-CHANGING OPPORTUNITIES:** As people graduate from ordinary literacy to digital literacy, the avalanche of information and opportunities will be within their reach, which will bring

about a radical societal transformation in terms of socioeconomic, educational, and democratic advancements.

4. **BUILDING OF AN EGALITARIAN SOCIETY:** When more and more people are digitally literate, society will witness equity and equality in rights, which will promote social harmony and cohesion—the building blocks of unity and peace.

DIGITAL LITERACY AND PUBLIC ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Information access is a human right. The United Nations’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article XIX states that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers.”

Similarly, UNESCO’s Paris conference on the planning of the National Library and Information Services (1974) declared that “Information is an essential part of a nation’s resources, and access to it is one of the basic human rights. . .”

Having established the significance of information and its access, the next issue is literacy, which is the *sine qua nonto* information access and use by any person.

Nigerian society is plagued with literacy problems; according to UNESCO’s 2015 report, 65 million Nigerians remain illiterate. That is basic literacy, which, according to Kofi Annan, is a “bridge from misery to hope. It is a tool for daily life in modern society. It is a bulwark against poverty and a building block of development. . . Literacy is, finally, the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman, and child can realize his or her full potential.”

This statement succinctly underscores the importance of literacy, and as earlier stated, literacy has

gone beyond reading and now encompasses skills needed to independently access information in the digital medium.

While reading and writing will aid access to print information, knowledge of navigating the digital world in its entirety will foster an all-encompassing opportunity for wider and deeper access since technology has changed how information is handled and presented in contemporary times.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is imperative that, since it is both a human right and the livewire that sets man on a developmental pedestal, all new media, conceptions, and techniques that will aid equitable and all-inclusive access to digital literacy should be prioritized. It is necessary for institutions, governments, and all stakeholders to be committed to the provision of digital literacy skills to all; digital literacy, just like literacy and information, should also be seen as a rights issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All library types, and most especially the National Library of Nigeria, should come up with programs of instruction on information and digital literacy for their clientele and the general public. The educational curriculum relating to computing should be blended with digital literacy skills from the basic education level to the tertiary.
2. Librarians should encourage communities to come up with volunteers who will drive the digital literacy campaign in their communities.
3. Librarians should also partner with and welcome NGO's who are willing to provide digital literacy trainings through the library.
4. All tiers of government should intervene in digital literacy services.

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