

STRENGTHENING AND REFOCUSING PUBLIC LIBRARIES TO COPE WITH THE INFORMATION NEEDS IN A MODERN INFORMATION SETTING

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ABSTRACT

In a democracy that is information driven, people seek information from the library. The Library must be equipped to provide this information promptly. This paper traces the situation where the Librarian serves as the information scientist positioned to retrieve, package and disseminate information through modern Technology.

The paper prescribes the necessary entry behaviour for Librarians, in service training, mastery of ICT equipments and satisfactory input and output equation. It ensures full exploitation of the bibliographic data base in various Websites for the clientele.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades library development has evolved tremendously as more and more governmental agencies and communities realize the place of library and librarians as agents of positive change. Libraries, as the repositories of human knowledge, have proved to be a desideratum for economic, social, political and other development of any community.

Traditionally, the duties of a librarian, to the public, have been, to keep books etc in an orderly form and discharge them to the clientele.

The checklist of a very good library should include:-

- Development of users profiles
- Selective dissemination of information (SDI) and other current awareness services
- General reference and information services
- Inter-library loans
- Reprographic services
- In some cases, professional advisory services
- Conservation and preservation.

These basic functions of the library have by and large, satisfied the reading community of the past. But this seemingly simple duty of the librarians has been expanded tremendously to include conscious selection, acquisition,

organization, and provision of access to materials to the readers through electronic and manual means. Many libraries, in spite of restricted budgets, have found these advances in the library operation and function quite effective in meeting the educational and reference needs of the clientele. Many libraries with scarce and very limited resources have decided to prioritize the needs of the information seekers and not provide everything. All the same, no matter the priorities adopted, the information explosion of the information age cannot be fully accommodated. The libraries and librarians must be strengthened and positioned to accommodate the global information order. This can be achieved through selective training. Ayodele (2000) posits that to strengthen the library to achieve the purpose of which it is founded, the following should be observed:-

- it should not be business as usual.
- Librarians must innovate, plan, design and maintain.

This paper is intended to explore the adjustments that should be made to make libraries and librarians relevant and capable to generate, retrieve and disseminate information in a modern age. It will explain why this vital shift must need daily management and implementation by full-time professional whose skills lie in their ability to manage information. Libraries will be strengthened to play the roles as information providers rather than being storehouses for those who care to use them.

2. INFORMATION ROLE OF LIBRARIANS

About a decade ago, practicing librarians in the country were asking and guessing the place of computers in the library environment. The computer, they felt, was for engineering designs, space technology and mathematics, while questions from all these areas are to be answered from books on the shelves. The librarian of today must be conversant with computer technology as a means of answering reference questions. Nigeria is fast becoming an information conscious society. A society where information is regarded as an important resource for personal, organizational, national and international decision-making, strategic planning, competitor intelligence and revenue yielding product. Information is a resource and is jealously guarded to become a product that has the capability to edge out people who are not serious with it, from business, industry and technology, hence the packaging of information has become a big market not only in Nigeria but all over the world and it is targeted to a very wide audience. This has promoted the transaction in such areas as in various types of computer hardware/software such as printers,

scanners, CD ROM (compact Disc Read only memory and CD-ROM production equipment.)

The Library is an information storehouse and has fully accepted the interplay of the above equipments to package information. Now the libraries have gone further to effect connectivity of computers and interconnectivity to the world wide web (www). The World Wide Web has become a tool for referral and information source through various search engines.

As a result of these, new services have been created such as electronic mails (E-mails) Bulletin Boards, electronic publishing, teleconferencing and access to information sources in the world. By implication, the information revolution has brought information generation as widely rated as petroleum or gold. Most disturbing, however, is the apathy of some librarians and some library schools towards computer technology and information management. The schools should make themselves relevant when they emphasize areas of satellite technology, information systems management, information resources management or information science.

We must insist on public access to global information networks. There is little reservation to this pronouncement bearing in mind the skeletal funding of most public libraries. However effort should be put into sensitizing governments and communities to invest in information generation and dissemination, which could even yield returns in cash. With the increasing changes in information scenario in the world, there is increasing demand on librarians to be information gatekeepers by acquiring what it takes to be information scientists. Therefore staying by the side while others are changing is disastrous to the profession.

3. BASIC SKILL REQUIREMENT

The basic skill requirement of a librarian is training on computer technology. We are now talking of the librarian who can fit into the new information order. This can only be done through training and exposure to experiences that transform him or her. Ikpaahindi (1999) stated the fundamental skills required to operate in the library that makes desirable impact. They include:

- Knowledge of the computer
- How it functions

- Inputting and retrieval of information from it
- Knowledge of the keyboard
- How to navigate the screen etc.

Computer training is the general practice in almost all the libraries in the country including the National Library of Nigeria. The general procedure is to contract a computer literate instructor to give the basic in-house training. This will lead to some staff becoming proficient in keyboard and cursor handling and eventually empower them to navigate the screen. Retraining of staff will be done in various seminars and workshops such as one organized by the British Council in Abuja for librarians and library officers. This new position must be embraced by all libraries.

Computer plays many roles in the lives of librarians. Computer literacy requires that we understand how computers affect our lives, the organization and the society at large. Today most jobs in the library require application of computer knowledge. Schools in developed countries require students to be computer literate. Most products, cars, gadgets are now computerized. Therefore to live a normal interactive life in a computer society, we need to be computer-literate and require competence in computer application. Librarians need it more now. Such competence includes:-

- Evaluating the appropriateness of specific applications;
- Selecting and using computer programmes as needed
- Collecting and studying necessary information to make wise decisions on how we need to use the computer
- Knowing what we want the computer to do for us and its limitations
- Being able to discuss computer to people in an information age

To make training worthwhile emphasis should be on training of most senior members of the profession. Most of them may have been long with manual systems and may be skeptical about the idea of computer technology. This is supported by Vickers (1975) that the success of a computer-based library system depends on the existence of a key person to provide strength, intelligence and enthusiasm for the new system. The hypothesis may have informed the wisdom of the National Library of Nigeria to have, over time, injected into the service key staff members who are at home with information technology (IT) to move the library forward.

4. INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT)

There are basic steps to be taken to embrace information communication technology in a library. These include

4.1 SOFTWARE CHOICE AND TRAINING

The software choice and training of staff are administrative responsibility of the library's management.

However, the choice is usually governed by replaying and studying the experiences of other libraries that have been automated. A wide range of library software such as TINLIB, CDS/ISIS, GLAS (Busicon, 1988) are available for public libraries which have a very wide range of clientele. The choice of software is usually a big project. But it is a task that must be done to remain relevant.

4.2 NETWORKING

The computers in the same library or library system should be networked to ensure coordination and monitoring. The entire library holding can be accessed at every workstation. The librarian, as well as clients at every point of the system should be able to share resources of the library system.

4.3 TRAINING ON THE INTERNET

We know that Internet is the inter-connectivity of thousands and thousands of computers online. Training of librarians on the internet is to enable them acquire the technique of exploiting the contents of the computers on-line. Hence we talk of searching the World Wide Web (www). Frankly, it is by appreciating the powers of the Internet that librarians can make the concept of digitized library, the paperless or e-library a possibility. And this time e-library is the ultimate.

To find one's way into the web is to be able to get a web address. This can be picked up everywhere-through the media, from friends, colleagues, radio and TV.

What is important is to locate the address that specifically deals with the narrow angle of the subject matter. That is why one needs the various search engines that get one there, Hence we have various general sites such as Yahoo, Alta Vista, Excite, Hotbot, Infosec, Lycos etc. with their search engines.

No search engine can be relied upon to satisfy every query. The choice of a search engine depends on the information source. Various queries can be answered if appropriate search engines are

applied. For example information on World Bank can generally be accessed using search engine [www. World bank. org.](http://www.worldbank.org), but their specific areas like information sources will be located in [http//www.wds. world bank.org.](http://www.wds.worldbank.org)

So also for other specifics like:

- World Bank indicators

- Getting job with world Bank etc.

4.4 INTRANET

Intranet is the use of internet technologies within an organization to achieve results other than with the conventional means of data access and transfer. Intranet helps in cutting costs, easy and fast accessibility of day-to-day information. Generally speaking an intranet is different from internet. Whereas Intranet is a network within an organization, Internet is a worldwide network.

Intranet has access to internet but not vice versa.

4.5. CREATING A WEBSITE

It is important that library should have a web site on the internet. This is the place where the services and activities of the institution could be located and accessed. The staff should also be trained on how to design the website as well as exploiting it. This includes making alterations and updating it. It is important that the information on the web site should not be static. It has to be visited frequently.

4.6. e-LIBRARY AND ON-LINE SEARCHING

It is already in the news that the open university system in Nigeria has started operation. Public libraries should brace up for support of the University. There cannot be effective learning in a university of this nature without electronic library (e-library). The orientation of facilities available to the reading public in a more modern and cost effective way can make a lot of difference. The public library will fill the gap readily. Given the distance of the learner to the University Headquarters, there is no other way except the existing public libraries making the facilities available on-line. The idea is to make services customer-driven.

5. CUSTOMER-DRIVEN EMPHASIS

This is a special competence that is demonstrated when libraries associate with Information Communication Technology (ICT). Libraries of this time should be customer-driven. And to sustain the

customer-driven emphasis, the performance evaluation should include such appraisal clauses, as does:

- employee provide customer driven services which is courteous, prompt to internal and external customers.
- employee routinely deliver service that exceeds customers expectation with accuracy and efficiency.

In addition, levels of performance will be measured by explicitly stating whether an employee meets these expectations of performance at a satisfactory level.

For example, outstanding performance is demonstrated – when an employee delivers service that exceeds customers expectation and always strives for continuous improvement.

6. RURAL COMMUNITY INFORMATION CENTRE

The public library in this strategic drive will not neglect the rural area as an important area to be covered. It is expected that at a later stage of development, the rural area will enjoy the Local Area Network of Intranet of an existing public library. When it realizes this as a special responsibility, the following are the focus:

- Identify the information needs of the communities, extension workers, policy makers and NGO's involved in rural development efforts;
- Identification, collection and repackaging of relevant development support information for intellectual and practical efforts towards rural development;
- Capacity building for development agents through training in information service and management skill; and
- Production of rural information media resources i.e. posters, photographs, audio-visuals, pamphlets, etc., to educate, inform and entertain the rural dwellers.

7. TRAINING ON THE USE OF LIBRARY

The public, including the policy makers, should be educated on library use. Several packages of the libraries and technical in nature items like Bibliographies, statistical information, directories, and research reports are always available and should be presented by library staff by drawing attention to them in several ways. Selective

dissemination of information (SDI) is useful only when the targeted patron receives the information directly and timely.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To have a purposeful public library system that can serve a large information community the following are specifically recommend:

1. The design and purpose of the library should be what it will be used for and by whom. A statement of purpose should be completed before beginning research on any particular hardware or software products.
2. Staff should spend time in training to ensure that what is in place should serve the public with staff in full control.
3. The budget of the library should have full financial backing from the sponsoring body. The budget itself will focus resources on central goals of the library.
4. NGO's should be made to have interest in library development
5. The end users and those asked to provide support should understand the role they are expected to play in support of the public library.
6. Recruitment of more experienced staff should be embarked on as a necessary step to achieve efficiency and productivity.
7. A User friendly environment must be created. Libraries should not only have academic content but the grounds should also be beautified with flowers and trees.
8. Regular self-appraisal workshops should feature as a morale-boost for members of staff that are above average.

The Greenstone Profile

The Greenstone is a digital library system designed specifically for developing countries and growing economies. The technology enables the user to access and exchange information and knowledge from local and remote sources. One user has been satisfied with the system and has said that it has been confirmed that the internet system is a very good one. Searchers encounter a massy information

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