

INFORMATION LITERACY RULES THE NETWORKED WORLD: THE IMPLICATION FOR LIBRARIANS & INFORMATION SCIENTISTS.

BY

OTOKUNEFOR, HENRIETTA O.C.
University of Port Harcourt Library,

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to demonstrate the significant role of information literacy in the networked world of the 21st Century. The growth of the Internet and the "digitization of society" are producing an ever increasing number of library clientele using digital technologies. The impact of this phenomenon on Nigerian university libraries and librarians as the key and significant actors in the use of ICTs is reviewed. The paper also suggests solutions to the operational problem of information illiteracy amongst Nigerian librarians and information scientists.

INTRODUCTION

In the networked world of the 21st century, librarians and information scientists that are not both computer and information technology literate are living in a fool's paradise and are a potential national development risk. Potential national development risk because they cease to be literate professionals. They become non-literate professionals because literacy in the networked world is defined in the levels of reading, writing, computer and information skills. The widespread integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) into the larger society determines success in the Networked World. Therefore, as individuals begin to accept and understand ICTs usefulness, they generate new value propositions that are ICT based. A change in attitude and behaviour is a crucial factor in creative solutions and new models in ICTs that can radically reshape the workings in librarianship and information science. More than enough energy and resources have been dissipated blaming inadequate funding and infrastructure to the detriment of survival issues of the profession. Meanwhile, other professions are forging ahead, having come to realize that information is the most valuable single resource in the world today. Timely availability of relevant and accurate information is known to make a difference between success and failure in all aspects of the life of individuals, organizations, institutions, and the nation. The present pervasive role of information is what has given birth to the Information Ages. (Akinde: 1999).

A change of mindset is needed because the convenient excuses that have always been made are no longer tenable. For instance, "information famine"

in Africa, including Nigeria/with particular reference to lack of access to current journals is now becoming an attitude. (Levey: 2002). No library anywhere in the world can subscribe to enough journals. Ifidon (2004) demonstrated that a researcher whose home university library can satisfy 9.2% of his or her research information needs is not handicapped; because with ICT applications the remaining 90.8% of his needs can be met from outside electronic resources. Levey (2002) says no academic with even minimal access to the ICT tools in the year 2002, can plead lack of access to current journals as an excuse for ignorance. Therefore the problem is not the lack of access to current journals rather it is the lack of computer literacy and information literacy especially among practicing Nigerian librarians and information scientists. This paper suggests solutions to this operational problem of information illiteracy amongst Nigerian librarians and information scientists.

What Is Computer Literacy?

For the purpose of this write-up computer literacy refers to the levels of computer knowledge of individuals and the degree to which such knowledge can be used in problem solving. At this point in time, it is the degree to which practising Nigerian librarians can use computers in accessing the intranet and internet.

Information Literacy

Information literacy is defined by the American Library Association as a set of abilities which require the individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information. In the Information Age, information literacy is a survival skill that forms the basis for lifelong learning. It is common to all learning environments, disciplines and levels of education.

Information literacy is what makes learners content masters, enabling them to extend their investigation; more self-directed and assuming greater control over their own learning (ALA). Information literacy is the ability to find, to locate, and use information from print sources, computers and other media being the keystone of lifelong learning. Ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They are people prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand (ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy, Final Report). Information literacy for Nigerian librarians and Information Scientists is the ability and skills to comfortably navigate the web in search and identification of free sites where literature could be located by clients.

The Networked World

The networked world is the turning of the world into increasingly interconnected network of individuals, firms, schools, universities, communities, governments, nations communicating and interacting with each other through a variety of channels by emerging technologies like the internet, personal computers and wireless telephone. The nature of global relationship, competitive advantages sources, economic and social development opportunities have been changed basically by ever-evolving and increasingly powerful information and communication technologies (ICTs). The world has become a place where the potential to reap the benefits of connectivity to the network is made available to everyone irrespective of his or her location on the globe.

The Changing Role of University Libraries and Librarians

The networked world and corresponding growth of the internet and the "digitization of society" have resulted in more and more library clients using digital technologies. They are now in a position to access the global information resources via the World Wide Web. As a result of the hugeness of the amount of electronic information available on the Web, information users are generally overwhelmed. This is more in Nigeria where a good number of web users are unable to effectively and efficiently use it (Chisenga: 2004). Library services' emphasis has moved from the old use of the librarian being the store house of knowledge to that of empowering the user to access the information directly through the applications of appropriate information and communication technologies (ICTs). In the networked world, the capabilities to access information and adapt it for local problem-solving are the real developmental dividends as against information possession (Saint: 1999). University libraries and librarians therefore are key and significant actors in the efforts of using information and communication technology application to raise the quality of higher education and research in Nigeria.

It takes more than having mere access to the internet. This is a crucial point often overlooked by African Universities when embarking on ICT implementation. How to use ICT to improve teaching, research and learning is the real driving force behind any ICT implementation. In applying ICT in the areas of teaching, research and learning, the first step involves using ICT to access information (Levey: 2002). In accessing information on the internet, university users (Faculty and Students) lack information-retrieval skills and so do not know the information resources most appropriate for their needs. Therefore, they need to be trained in electronic retrieval skills. While computer literacy could be acquired anywhere including cyber cafes, information literacy cannot. Information literacy can only be acquired in the university libraries through university librarians. University librarians cannot

train others if they themselves have not acquired the skills. Here lies the problem that must be solved promptly as time is running out.

THE WAY FORWARD

1. A changed mindset

As mentioned above, there is the need to have a changed mindset by Nigerian University libraries and librarians. Members of the university community are not sympathetic to the library course especially the university administrators who will rather install VSA T and the internet everywhere else except the library. Help is not readily going to come from outside the library. Librarians should embark on aggressive self development. They should explore every avenue to become computer and information literate to avoid being overtaken by the current wave of intruders. There is great incursion into the library and information profession by others who do not belong to the information service providers group. These are aggressively and progressively capturing library clientele. Among the clientele are members of the universities who are becoming dissatisfied with the obsolete services they receive from their libraries and librarians (Ochai: 2000). This calls for a change in mind set that will readily invest sacrificially in the acquisition of requisite skills for professional competence and sustainability.

2. Self-Help Projects

The university library as a matter of uttermost urgency should constitute a strategic planning team or committee. The team should be made up of forward looking librarians with a vision for the growth of the library in the field of ICTs. The team should be given the mandate of creating a vision of where it would like the library to reach within a time frame. It should also map out how to get there in terms of both human and material resources through "self help projects". "Self help projects" means other forms of project funding outside the Federal Government through the NUC. In the prevailing circumstance where funding is drastically reduced, while the cost of equipment and materials required for efficient library services are increasing exponentially, university libraries must invent ways of providing best possible services for their teaming clientele. This can only be achieved if they generate funds internally to augment whatever they receive from their parent institution. Where the goal is to get the library connected to the Internet, the team should realistically cost what is needed to achieve results. What viable and suitable options are available to the library within her geographical location in order to get connected?. How long will it take the library to get there in terms of financing it solely from the

library's internally-generated fees; like the student library bench fees paid along with the annual school fees, over due charge and library ticket levy? A federal university with a student population of twenty thousand charging five hundred naira per session for library levy will generate a million naira annually. Therefore the team should come up with a well articulated strategic plan for the judicious use of this fund which is outside the 10% Library Development Fund (LDF). Oloruntoba (2002) refers to it as users' levy which is capable of brimying some financial relief to libraries where the collection of the money is effectively done and correctly appropriated. Some of these libraries are also into the production of library handbook which is another way of internally generating funds within the university system. Such funds could be strategically planned for. The resultant plan should be well prepared and documented with its principle sold to the university management for approval and implementation.

3. Library Public Relations Unit

The time has come for Nigerian university libraries to set up Public Relations Units within their libraries. The unit should develop strategic plans to sell the image of the library to the university community through positive community services. Marketing of libraries, activities is taking a central position in the delivery of efficient library and information services (Aina: 2004). As academic staff, they are legally qualified to contest for committee positions. For example, statutorily they could get elected to university council through congregation. The University Librarian as a member of senate could also be elected to council as senate representative as short term measure while lobbying through the Committee of University Librarians of Nigerian Universities (CULNU) to be statutory member of council ultimately. University librarians should play an active role in the politics of their parent institutions. Lobbying is becoming an essential component of democratic political set up including the university community environment. University libraries and librarians that possess marketing skills will be better placed to lobby policy makers and management in order to raise the library's profile resulting in generous funding (Aina: 2004). Therefore the Library Public Relation Units should strategically identify key committees which librarians could use as stepping stones for the promotion of library's activities and programmes.

4. Aggressive Research

Academic status was granted to libraries in Nigerian Universities by the 1993 Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) Nigeria Federal Government's agreement. Since then, librarians in Nigerian Universities have been enjoying the same privileges as their faculty

counterparts. However, they are yet to demonstrate and convince the university environment the justification for the acquired status by way of research and publications. Recognition and advancement of academic staff in any university environment globally is determined by both research and publications (Ochai and Nedosa: 1998). Therefore, it is time for these librarians to wake up and engage in aggressive relevant research works that produce publications. Any member of the academic community that is a prolific writer as results of good research works is respected and commended. Librarians must work very hard to earn the respect of the other members of the university community. The 21st century has opened up so many aspects of the profession in the Nigerian environment that are interestingly begging to be researched into. All the problems and obstacles confronting librarians in Nigerian University libraries need to be researched into in order to find suitable solutions. Until librarians in Nigerian University libraries engage in aggressive research, their relevance to the University community will remain questionable and unappreciated.

5. ICT Champions

These are those who push for ICT implementation. University libraries should identify such persons within and encourage them. They may not hold high administrative posts but are interested, therefore their voices can be heard. According to Levey (2002) such. "ICT Champions" make their faculties, departments or units to benefit first and may be greatest from ICT implementation citing the example of the medical library at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) where the medical librarian took the initiative to send a proposal to the Carnegie Corporation of New York requesting \$25, 000 and started using CD-ROM at least two years before the main library did (Levey: 2002).

CONCLUSION

In the networked world, a university library's work is no longer based on the number of volumes possessed but in the ability to locate, access, adapt information produced globally to local need. Nigerian university librarians therefore need to be both computer and information literate for them to effectively assume their changing role. Without appropriate infrastructure, facilities, equipment, and staff expertise, the task is almost impossible (Bazillian:2001).

The paper has attempted to proffer solution by giving five recommendations of :

- * A changed mindset
- * Self-help projects
- * ICT champions
- * Aggressive research

* Library Public Relations Unit.

The time has come for Nigerian university libraries and librarians to take their destiny in their hands. They must learn to do a lot more things for themselves and be ready to blow their trumpets as no one else would.

REFERENCE

- AINA, L.a. (2004) "Coping with the challenges of library and information service delivery: the need of institutionalized professional development" In compendium of papers presented at the NLA 42nd National Annual Conference & AGM, Akure June 20 -25 pp.4-9
- AKINDE, Adebayo D. "Information and communication technologies: applications in African testing institutions for the 21st century." In Revitalizing universities in Africa: strategies for the 21st century. Final Report. Accra: AAU, 1999 p.61.
- BAZILLION, Richard J. (2001) "Academic libraries in the Digital Revolution; libraries in the midst of revolution need new ways of thinking about their missions." *EDUCAUSE QUARTERLY* (1). pp. 51 -55.
- CHISENGA, Justin (2004) "ICT in libraries: an overview and general introduction to ICT in libraries in Africa". In ICTs and the library; experiences, opportunities and challenges for libraries in Africa workshop. Presentations Handout. Benoni: pp 1-19.
- IFIDON, Sam E. (2004) "Information superhighway access to research resources in Nigerian State Universities". *Social and Management Sciences Review* 1 (1): pp 1 -19.
- LEVEY, Lisbeth A. "Is the glass half full or half empty? ICT in African universities". In Rowing upstream: snapshots of pioneers of the information age in Africa. Edited by Levey, Lisbeth and Young, Stacey. Johannesburg: Sharp Sharp Media, 2002 p55.
- OCHAI, Adakole (2000) "Academic and research libraries information agenda (for transforming its libraries for use) in the new millennium. In a compendium of paper presentations at the 2002 NLA Annual National Conference and AGM, June 25th-30th.
- OCHAI, Adakole and NEDOSA, Peter S. (1998) "Publications output of librarians: the search for alternative justification. *African Journal of Library, Archives & Information Science* 8(2):pp.89-96.
- OLORUNTOBA, A (2002) "Funding library services in a depressed economy" *Lagos Librarian* 23(1 &2)pp.30-37.
- SAINT, William "Tertiary distance education and technology in Sub-Saharan Africa. Washington: The World Bank, 1999 p.44.