

READERS SERVICES IN ICT AGE: THE EMERGING ISSUES

BY

DANIEL O. EGWUAGHA (CLN)

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NIGERIA, ABUJA.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the need for effective services to library users in an age that is highly information conscious. The paper exerts that satisfying the needs of library users is central in the service delivery. It maintains that from acquisition to processing, and organization, the critical consideration is in meeting user's needs. Some emerging opportunities Such as the Concept of Globalization; The Internet; the Virtual Library; as well as Digitization of library materials for effective service delivery, are discussed.

The papers reasoned that the above mentioned Concept are aimed at meeting library user's information needs in broader and better ways. The paper also discussed the new role of information professionals in evolving scenario, and concludes that the librarians should blend some of the tested conventional services together with the current trends to provide the building blocks for satisfactory reader's services;

INTRODUCTION

It has been repeatedly asserted that the world is steadily marching into the information age, although some countries are already there. This is the age in which the production, acquisition, organization, controls management use and exchange of information have become the object and vehicle for, not only socio-economic and political growth of any nation, but also the concern of every member of the society. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, it is expected that the greater part of the world should have transited into the information economy from the industrial economy. The concept of information in whatever form (oral, visual, print) transmits in or confers on the possessor over the less privileged ones. Parker (1973) in his work on the role of information in society asserted that information is the third basic element that makes up our largely man-made environment. It is equitable to the other factors of production such as land, capital and labour. Saracevic (1976) agrees that information is a resource, just like economic, physical, manpower and technical resources needed for the development of a country and society. He further asserted that, information is a vital element in rational decision-making, the creation, procurement, organization, dissemination and use of information are such vital aspects of development of a country, and in a society without these activities there is no development.

THE LIBRARY PATRONS

Eteng, U. (2003) Opines that Libraries and information centers exist to essentially meet user's information needs. Just as there would be no universities without students, no research institutions without researchers, no prisons without criminals, so also would libraries be unnecessary without readers or users. Acquisition of information resources would be a waste of funds if the resources are not consulted by users. From acquisition to processing, and organization, the critical consideration is in meeting users' needs. The core of professional training in information work is not just a theoretical understanding of knowledge and information management, it is rather how those theoretical concepts translate to meeting users' information needs in a practical way. It is on how the right person becomes more evident in an age where beyond money, men and materials, information has become the fourth capital factor. Expansions and advances in information systems have made the present age an information one. In a highly information society, Minc (1987) states that information service institutions occupy an interfacing position.

The interface between information resources and the information seekers. While the seekers are becoming sophisticated in their demand, the resources are becoming more complex in their content, context and communication. For instance, paper is no longer the only carrier of information, polymedia electronic, digital and electronic systems have emerged (Onykudi, 2002). How does the library meet users' need in the evolving scenario? This is the concern of this paper.

READERS SERVICES DESCRIBED

Readers' service as a concept is defined to include all the range of services, which the information institution designs and provides to meet the actual and potential needs of its numerous users. Readers' services from this perspective is expansive rather than static. It grows to accommodate emerging needs. It expands as the programmes and activities of the parent institution increase. Readers' services are distinct from the technical services. The technical services are behind the scene activities that encompass acquisition, cataloguing and classification of information resources. In essence, technical services include all processes from the time an information resources is identified for acquisition to the time it becomes available for use on the public access arena of the library. Although the technical services' department is often distinct from the readers' services, its work is actually the foundations for the construction of effective and efficient readers' services. The bibliographic records (author, title and subject catalogues) developed by the technical services department become the main apparatus for a dependable readers' service delivery. Reader services are essentially user-centered. They are

the public relationship functions of the library. They include the provision of not only information resources but also facilities that enable information access and use operationally. The reader service as a concept is used interchangeable with reference service. The distinctive attributes of readers' services have rightly been described by (Dada 1983).

Reference service more generally known as Readers' service is an important factor in the interwoven processes of Library Management, Acquisitions, Cataloguing and Classification, Circulation and services for readers. It can be safely asserted that the only point of contact between the library and its clientele is the reference desk. It is the place where the service concept of the profession of librarianship is best exhibited and executed. In short, the Readers' Services Department of any given library could best be described not only as the image maker of the establishment but also the public relation sector.

There are three critical factors that are germane to effective readers' services delivery. These are men, materials and methods.

Men, is used here in a genetic way to describe readers' service personnel. Dada (1983) describes the Readers' services Librarian as "the pivot of all infinities in the library" with a lot of challenging duties on his hands.

These include:

- Providing answers to readers information enquiries
- Conducting intensive bibliographic searches
- Compilation of bibliographies
- Abstracting and indexing as "bridge the gap" services
- Preparation of library guides.
- Organization of exhibition and displays periodically
- Supervision of shelving and shelve reading.
- Preparation of local rules and regulations
- Manage the processes of admission, registration, opening hours and weekend services.
- Preparation of reading list for specialized courses, seminars and workshops.
- Serving as the library's image maker.

In view of these enormous responsibilities, the duties of the readers' services department are strategic to the entire operation of the library set up. Any service

flaw here is a minus to the public perception of the information service delivery to the clientele. As the first point of service contact between the library and library users, the first impression can either make or mar users' perception of the entire library set up. Staff in this department should ideally be friendly, fair and firm. A friendly approach to users' enquiries gives the library a positive public relation identity. A fair disposition ensures that all users are handled without discrimination based on their specific rights and privileges. Firmness becomes necessary where library rules are to be enforced.

It can be seen from the foregoing, that the readers' services delivery is the work of a trained professional. There is often a misconception as to who the Librarian is. He/she is not the potter that opens the door at the entrance of the library or the library clerk or officer who shows the reader where the newspaper and other materials are kept. The readers' services Librarian is a skilled professional with appropriate training and experience to interface between the user and the information he/she needs.

\The information the user requires is contained in a range of materials in the library. A competent reader services Librarian with out-dated, disorganized and irretrievable materials cannot go far in providing efficient and effective information services to readers. Quality information materials are the building blocks for quality services delivery.

Men and materials are two of the tripod on which effective reader's services are constructed. The third stand of the tripod is the method. This deals essentially with how the materials are packaged by men to meet user's information needs.

Readers Services from the preceding discussion are central to meeting users information needs. The traditional service delivery approach has been to use all resources to meet the user's needs. But as more and more of the reference sources become available in electronic formats, and as the means of accessing the formats become information technology-intensive, reference or readers' services come to a number of crossroads.

SOME EMERGING ISSUES IN READERS SERVICES

Various authors (Richards, Jimba, 2003) have used terms such as information technology revolution, digital information revolution, digital age hitch information system to describe the present developments in information production, acquisition, processing and information service deliver. A dominant attribute of the information

age has is increased societal information consciousness. Omekwu (2003) has summarized the emerging issues of the information age as globalization, digitization, miniaturization of information technology hardware and software. Others include the migration of information resources to electronic formats, instant access to global literature and localization of information. Hi-tech information systems have made significance inroads into the paper-based stronghold of the conventional library practice. Consequently hybrid library systems, polymedia, electronic libraries, libraries digital and even virtual libraries are beginning to emerge.

GLOBALIZATION AND READERS' SERVICE

One of the emerging issues in information dissemination and service to users' is the information globalization. Generally speaking, globalization can be described as a phenomenon involving the integration of economies, cultures, governmental policies, political movements and even education. Through globalization, people become more able physically, legally, culturally and psychologically to engage with others in "One World". As a result of globalization, social geography gains a planetary dimension and global relations emerge, proliferate and expand. In libraries and information centers, the application of modern technology should start with the acceptance of the new technology as vital to effective performance of the functions of the library. The globalization of information is strongly identified with Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Technological innovation has contributed to globalization by supplying infrastructure for trans-world connections. Ajayi (2000) noted that the revolution taking place in information and communication technologies have been the central and driving force for globalization process. Perhaps in any discussion of the application of modern technology in the library as revealed by Ukoh (1984) the first thing that comes to mind is the computer. One advancement that has been achieved in the area of application of technology is that, unlike previously, the Librarian does not have to be literate in the various technologies before employing them. In other words, he does not have to be a technical expert before using any form of technology, or a programmer before using a computer; however, he still requires some technological knowledge as an abstract and intellectual level

As pointed out by Osundina (1973), the library of today should not merely store documents and preserve them, it must also devise means by which the contents of such documents can rapidly and effectively be transmitted for use. As a result, the need has risen for a scientific approach to information services, and for elucidation of its most characteristic properties, which has led to two principal changes in

interpretation of the concept of information. First, it was broadened to include information exchange not only between man-to-man, but also between machine and machine, as well as exchange of signals in the animals and plants worlds. Many libraries and Librarians have also exploited the potentials of new information and communication technologies to develop new approaches to distance education, especially in the area of information dissemination and services. These new forms of globalization are beginning to replace more conventional types of information exchange among libraries in the world. Although traditional channels of communication and service delivery to information users remains important, the new information and communication technologies hold great potential for broadly dissemination of knowledge at low cost, and for reducing knowledge gaps within countries and between individual and developing countries.

For instance, the use of internet has revolutionized access to information for libraries and information users. A few of these innovations include the e-mail, World Wide Web, FTP, (File Transfer Protocol) Usenet, and Telnet. All these technological devices can be regarded as backbones of the concept of globalization. The Internet and its technology, continues to have a profound effect in promoting the sharing of information among libraries and information centers, thus putting the libraries in a most advantageous position to effectively serve their patrons.

THE INTERNET AND READERS SERVICES

The Internet is an open worldwide network of computers that are interconnected through a mix of private and public telephone lines. It is arguably the electronic resources that is now having the most significant impact on library services and operations and on the professional activities of libraries. This strength of impact is due to its multi-faceted nature, since it simultaneously fulfils three important roles in library services. First, it is a resource that can be consulted and used like any other reference tool.

Secondly, it is more dynamic and far-reaching than any other resource used in the library setting. Finally, it provides a medium of communication that has extended the potential of librarians for interaction beyond the physical library. Among libraries, the crucial issue of meeting users' needs in the information age, should be the concern of Librarians. In an operation network, resource sharing enables the Reader Services Librarians to use resources within his/her own library and those of other network members to service the information needs of the users.

Discussing networked resources and electronic opportunities for users and libraries,

Klobas (1999) sees the role of Librarians as information providers who can make available much more collections, from remote log into catalogue and indexes and provide electronic copies of entire collection or books, in print or other formats. In this regard, Omekwu (2003) has rightly indicated that with more than 3000 e-journals and 40,000 e-books accessible online, the information use environment has become not only dynamic, but also challenging. Dynamic because the information professional has unlimited sources to assist his/her user. Challenging because, the necessary skills must be acquired to serve the users effectively in the electronic environment. The impact of internet, the emergence of virtual libraries and the possibility of reaching out to other libraries in a networked means, are new opportunities to extend readers service frontiers. With appropriate Internet connectivity, libraries would be able to provide resources beyond and above what is held in their own libraries.

THE VIRTUAL LIBRARY AND READERS SERVICE

The Internet and its technology has continued to have a profound effect in promoting the sharing of information, and making possible rapid transactions among individuals and libraries across the globe. Learning Resource Centers now often contain learning materials published on CD-Rom, and most libraries are connected to the Internet. These technologies have the potentials to develop "virtual campuses" and virtual libraries and thus increase information users' access and participation. According to Daniel (2000) Nancy Schiller was one of the first writers to use the expression "virtual library" which she defined in 1992, simply as "Libraries in which computers and telecommunications technologies make access to a wide range of information resources possible".

Today, this same concept is referred to variously as 'digital library' or 'electronic library', 'community network'. Or simply as 'library without walls'. It is called 'virtual' because in a good electronic wide area networked library, the user enjoys the euphoria of being in distant libraries, and yet he has not physically moved. It is an experience of 'virtual reality'. One of its features is that its emphasis is access ownership of collections. This stems from the assumption that the whole universe of the global information superhighway is a human resource and heritage, which all who have the necessary infrastructure capabilities, can tap for their own development. The virtual library is, therefore a child of necessity arising from the need to use technologies in accessing the world information overload, or information explosion, for human survival and development.

The need for a virtual system has therefore become one of the imperatives in information service delivery. Librarians from one end of the globe can now have

access to materials in other libraries for use in providing effective services to their local library clientele. The Librarians can also use this information superhighway to borrow materials from many other libraries through inter-library systems.

DIGITIZATION AND READERS SERVICES

With more advances in information and computer technology, new ideas and modalities have arisen to enhance the concept of offering education to anyone, anytime, anywhere through digitization. Cronis (1998) defines digital as the representation of the sequence of discrete symbolic values, each of them having two or more unambiguously distinguishable states, so that they can, at least, in principle be accessed, manipulated, copied, stored, and transmitted entirely through mechanical ways with high reliability. Digitization of library simply means the process of converting library materials resources, such as books, serials, monographs, conference or seminar papers articles and non-print materials into electronic format for the purpose of disseminating information to users. Doing this will greatly increase the accessibility, availability and contents' preservation and conservation of library materials for generation to come.

CONCLUSION

Libraries all over the world exist to satisfy the information needs of their clientele. It is meaningless to acquire process and store information materials in the library, without the corresponding dissemination of such materials to the target audience. Here, the Librarian as a professional has a duty in ensuring that the library clientele benefit from the library collections. To do this, he has to be equipped with both the conventional as well as the technology-based means of readers' services delivery. In an ICT World such as ours, it therefore behooves on the information managers, and other information resource persons to acquire the necessary skills that will enable them serve the users effectively in the electronic environment. Readers' service delivery has gone beyond servicing the information needs of the local users. As the world has gradually become, a global village through the opportunities offered by the Internet, libraries and Librarians are expected to effectively reach the information users by being ICT compliant. Being ICT –compliant entails taking full advantage of the emerging opportunities such as information globalization, the virtual libraries (VL), information digitization, and the internet. These emerging trends ensure that readers' services delivery are not localized, but extended to users beyond the immediate environment of the library.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Librarians should engage in both local and international library co-operation to maximize their resources in meeting user's needs.

The need for training and re-training of librarians and other information providers on ICT, cannot be over-phasized, for effective service delivery.

Library annual budgets should be made robust to enable libraries perform optimally.

Information products and services like other resources should be priced and marketed in Nigeria.

REFERENCES

- Ajayi, G. O. (2000) "Challenge to Nigeria of Globalization and the Information Age". Keynote address at the Workshop on National Information Communication Infrastructure (NICI) Policy Plans and Strategies for Implementation, March 28– 30
- Cronis, B. (1983): "Information for Professionals in Digital Age; In Akanmidu, J. O. Distance Learning in the Digital Age". *Nigerbiblios* Vol 17, No. 1 & 2 January – December 2006 pp 49
- Dada, T. O. (1983): Reference Service for the Profession: The Case Of Legal Profession in Nigeria: *Lagos Librarian*, 10 920 69-75
- Daniel, J. O.(2000): "Virtual Library of Nigeria Libraries" *Nigerian Libraries* 36(2): 56
- Edwards, J. (1997): *Electronic Journals: Problems Panache, Ariadne*
- Eteng, U. (2003): *Readers' Services at Crossroad: Meeting Users' Needs in the Information Age*" (paper delivery)
- Klobas, J. E. (1999): "Networked Information Resources: Electronic Opportunities for Users and Libraries. *OCLC Systems and Services*, 15(2),pp. 10 & 11
- Madu, E. C. (2000): Computerized references sources and the traditional Print Reference Sources: In Madu, ad Dirisu, M. S. (eds), *Information Science and Technology for Library Schools in Africa*. Evi-Coleman Publications, 58-71
- Minc, A. (1987) "The Information Society in Lawkell, A. C. (ed) *Evolution Of an Information Society*. London, Aslib. 134 -140
- Ogunsola, L. A. (2005) "Nigerian University Libraries and the Challenges Of

Globalization: The Way Forward: Journal Social of Science: Vol. 10, No. 3, 2005, pp. 199 – 205

Omekwu, C. O. (2003): Current Issues in Accessing Documents Published in Developing Countries. Liter Lending and Document Supply 30 (2), 130 -13

Omekwu, C. O. (2002): "The Challenges of Information Systems in ModernLibraries in Madu, E C. and Dirisu M. B. Information

Osundina, O. (1973) "The Relationship Between Information Science and Librarianship: A Viewpoint" Nigerian Libraries 9 (1 & 2): 47

Parker, E.B (1973): Information and Society: In Cuandra, Carlos (ed) Annual Review of Information Science and Technology, Vol. 8, pp. 346

Saracevic. T. (1976): "Information Science Education and Development". UNESCO Bulleting for Libraries, Vol. 30 (5), Sept – Oct., pp. 134-135.

Uko, R.A. (1984)" Application of Modern Tiechnology in the Library" Nigerian Library and Information Science Review 2 (1 & 2): 5

Umen, E. (2003) Readers Services at Cross Road: Meeting user's needs in the information age. LAJLIS: Vol 1; No. 2; pp 113-----118