

INFORMATION LITERACY IN NIGERIAN HIGHER INSTITUTIONS – ANY ROLE FOR LIBRARIANS?

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Abstract: It is the aim of this paper to mobilize Nigerians to view information illiteracy as an obstacle to progress in personal and social lives. The paper showed that information literacy is a major route to overcoming poverty, hunger and disease in the immediate environment. The paper finally examined strategies for combating information illiteracy like application of ICT and made recommendations on what Nigerian University libraries and librarians working in them should do/ adopt to promote literacy awareness among Nigeria's teeming population.

Keywords: Information literacy, Information and Communication Technologies, Internet services, Computer literacy, Academic libraries, Literacy awareness.

INTRODUCTION

There are a growing number of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) initiatives in developing countries. As revealed by Khushbu Tilwale *et al* (2009), these initiatives are usually under taken on the basis that they are important for social and economic development. However, one barrier to the efficient utilization of ICT in developing countries is the relative low level of information literacy. Without the ability to manipulate and use information effectively, investments in ICT for development projects may be unsuccessful. The significance of information to human society and its mode of communication can no longer be overemphasized. The society requires information on its-day-today activities; education, management, mass communication, governance, research and development (Osinulu 2011). Libraries and information centers play valuable roles in meeting societal information needs, facilitating and making access to such information possible. The traditional functions are being transformed and made compatible with electronic age, called Information and Communication Technology (ICT) age. Information technology or ICT is the use of computers and other electronic technologies for creating, acquiring, storing, processing and communicating information. Information acquisition, storage, handling and dissemination have been tremendously and positively affected by computer technology. All

routine activities involved in collection development, readers services (circulation and reference services), serials management and technical services are now been accomplished on the platform of information technologies - computers and other related hard and soft ware. The impact of ICT application to library services is indeed incredible. From the above premises, one can easily conclude that it is very difficult to separate computer knowledge, ICT, information literacy and librarians from each other. According to Mohammed (2004), electronic and communication technology has come to remove most of the limitations to access and use of information resources and services. Information resources are now available both in print and electronic formats. The rapid advances in ICT and computer applications to the functions and services of libraries have brought remarkable benefits to libraries, library users as well as the librarians. Such benefits include provision of fast, effective and efficient services, ease of access to vital statistical records, cost reduction, elimination of duplication of work, improved networking and greater cooperation among libraries, as well as improved services through access to resources of other libraries which can be beneficial to library users and hence improve their information literacy. It should also be pointed out that ICT has helped in providing solution to the problem of paucity of resources through databases, online information services and resource sharing and the basic tool required for access is the INTERNET. So it can be concluded that without proper usage of the internet and the techniques of how to use the academic libraries, a student can not be hundred percent literate as far as information literacy is concerned.

It is the objective of this paper to stress the need for information literacy in Nigerian higher institutions and the strategies to be used to raise the standard of information literacy through the use of ICT and Internet services. This paper addresses the need for information literacy among Nigerians students and the ways university libraries can help them achieve their educational goals. There is the need for provision of library and information services for Nigerians with particular reference of meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

INFORMATION LITERACY – WHAT IS IT?

While we agree with Postman's (1990) claim that the information age began with the invention of the printing press, we believe that information technology has had a major impact in society during the last few decades. We have moved into a "post-industrial society" – where the service sector dominates the economy - (Bell, 1973), to an "informational society" (Castells, 2000), where "information generation, processing, and transmission become the fundamental source of productivity and power"- (Castells, 2000 p 21). In this new era, information literacy has become a fundamental skill. The importance of the concept of information literacy has been recognized by several researchers and different definitions of information literacy in various contexts have been put forward. The first definition of information literacy, to the best of our knowledge, came from the American Library Association (ALA), as "the ability to recognize when information is needed as well as the ability to locate, evaluate and effectively use it" (Carpenter, 1989, as cited in Plotnick, 1999). Doyle (1992) emphasizes diversity in the origin of information and defines information literacy as "the ability to access, evaluate and use information from a variety of sources". From Education perspective, Bruce (2003) defines information literacy as "the ability to access, evaluate, organize and use information in order to learn, problem – solve, make decisions in formal and informal learning contexts, at work, at home and in educational settings". Ralph (1999 as cited in Bruce, 2003, p.8) considers information literacy as "a key to lifelong learning" which includes computer literacy, information technology literacy, library skills, information skills and learning to learn. It is a key characteristic of the lifelong learner - strongly connected with critical and reflecting thinking. It is the process of empowering students or anybody to learn rather than about being dependent on the teacher for acquiring knowledge and skills. The information literate student, individually or as a member of group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose. The information literate student understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and accesses and uses information ethically and legally. Information literacy is the people (staff or students) who bring particular values to the idea of information literacy and its programs, investing the idea with personal, social, organizational or economic

significance. As individuals or groups decide on ways of thinking about the phenomenon, and which value systems are important to identify with, their interpretations....give their programs distinctive characteristics (Bruce and Candy 2000).

If we go into memory lane, the 21st century falls within the epoch period called the Information Age. The concept of Information Age/Society epitomizes the changes brought about by technological advances and globalization (Dike, 2001, Oladele, 2008; Ogunsola, 2005) towards the end of the 20th century. These epochs are characterized by speed and precision in the production, transfer, access, and use of knowledge (Chakrabarti, 2001). The information society, as a concept, “sum up the new world order where the position of nations, their power, wealth and influence, increasingly depend on their access to and ability to use information (Dike, 2003). Infact, for any individual or group to navigate well in this increasingly computer age, information is essential (Kohen and Donohue, 1976). The provision of library and information services for Nigerians therefore, is a *sine qua non*. Access to, and ability to use information among Nigerians is the single most important factor by which Nigeria can remain the giant of Africa and achieve its dream to emerge among the twenty largest world economies by the year 2020. The information age has led to a shift in the global economy’s focus from physical resources to the way information is manipulated (Castells, 2000; Drucker, 1969; Machlup, 1962). ICT has become the major driving force behind this shift. The challenge of keeping up with the information economy particularly affects developing countries. Although many developing countries still struggle with the provision of basic services like clean water and electricity, they are increasingly looking to ICT for development projects to improve their social and economic development (Shih, Kraemer, and Dedrick, 2008; Walsham, Robey & Sahay, 2007). However, one barrier to the efficient utilization of ICT in developing countries is the relatively low level of information literacy. Without the ability to manipulate and use information effectively, investments in ICT-for-development projects may be unsuccessful. Infact, some scholars have suggested that the digital divide between the developed and developing world has widened because of the lack of information skills in developing countries (Dewan, Ganley, and Kraemer; 2005). Without information literacy, developing nations may continue to underutilize the technology that is provided (Pejova, 2002), resulting in a waste of resources with potentially serious repercussions for their development. We take the view, therefore, that achieving development through ICT is not just a matter of providing access to ICT tools. Rather, efforts should also be made to enhance information literacy, which provides the ability to manipulate and use information effectively. Academic libraries are institutions that are established to take care of the information needs of students, lecturers, researchers and other community scholars. Their mission is to provide quality information service and knowledge products (print and electronic) to resident community of scholars. In the words of Wolpert (1999), “academic libraries are cost effective information service and provider of knowledge products to a resident community of scholars”. In other to function and provide timely information at a faster speed to lecturers, researchers and students, it would appear that administrators of academic libraries should realize the important role which information and communication technologies (ICT) play in their job performance and so make Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) available to their workforce. Communities and organizations spend money on library materials and services as a cost effective way to help community members gain access to the works and ideas of others so as to answer questions, solve problems, learn new things, and explore entertainment opportunities. Since the library is the agency that manages access to the social transcript paid for by the community, it is a widely shared belief that the library, particularly those funded by educational institutions, should be the lead agency in articulating, promoting, and developing the community’s information literacy (Stanger, 2009). From this analysis, the roles performed by academic libraries as far as information literacy is concerned cannot be over-emphasized.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS TO BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE INFORMATION LITERACY

Academic libraries in Africa do not enjoy the same information delivery methods like those in developed countries except those in Southern African. Chisenga and Rofissa (2001) point out the great disparity in the adoption and use of ICTs in academic libraries. For instance academic libraries in Kenya suffer poor funding, poor communication systems and lack of ICT qualified librarians. The case is not different in Uganda and other African countries like Nigeria where power unreliability is the norm, poor management attitude and inadequate ICT skills of librarians, inadequate computerization, infrastructure and human capacity are the major challenges towards ICT use. Rosenberg (2005) opines that challenges to ICT use include lack of library software standardization. The changes in libraries and the roles of librarians originated in the United States of America and other English-speaking countries, but electronic networks do not have geographical boundaries; and their influence has spread rapidly. With internet connections across the globe, people who did not have access to traditional library services now have the opportunity to get information about all subjects, free of political censorship. Increasingly, librarians have assumed the role of educator, teaching users how to find information both in the library and over networks. Traditional libraries and librarians exist alongside the electronic libraries which are eroding the functions of both traditional libraries and librarians (Ogunsola, 2011). Academic libraries in Nigeria attempted to automate library function as far back as 1970s to 1990s and the attempt still continues. TINLIB software was introduced in leading academic libraries including those of the University of Ibadan and Ahmadu Bello University Library (Omoniwa, 2001) but due to some technical and organizational problems, no single academic library in Nigeria in general and in the southern Nigeria in particular uses the TINLIB software today. Obajemu and Ibegwam (2006) point out that libraries in Nigeria are still on the race to make their services totally ICT-based. The MacArthur Foundation report of 2005 titled "Developing Strong University Libraries in Modern Technology greatly enhances such system". The report also points out lack of appropriate funding system to acquire relevant information and communication tools, and lack of infrastructure to provide access to electronic information. Money was not there for collection development and there have been few acquisitions, most of the collections stopped growing substantially in the mid-70s. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) enhance service provision to library clientele. Libraries use ICTs to perform functions like cataloguing and classification, serials management, collection management, budgeting, circulation management, referencing, indexing and abstracting in order to improve information services for library users. The advances in the fields of telecommunications, computer technology, and satellite communications have revolutionized information delivery services in advanced countries. As asserted by Akpan (2001), information can be delivered across countries into houses and offices instantly. It must be realized that the sharing, however, has been uneven across the globe. Countries with advanced technology are years ahead of countries with developing economies. Within developing economies, some have moved further ahead than others. In Nigeria, the expression "virtual library" or "digital library" is relatively new, being a little than a decade old. However, it has been observed that most academic libraries in Nigeria still struggle with manual library operation methods. Consequently, library users show dissatisfaction and complain of poor information service delivery by the academic libraries (Haliso, 2011). The use of ICT promotes development and improves services in any organization. In an academic environment, it speeds up information delivery, facilitates teaching, learning and research. In spite of the above observation about the potentials, and benefits of using ICT, the level of awareness and use in Nigeria appears to be very minimal. Organizational, environmental and cultural factors stand against the good and perceived will of the use of ICTs. Omolayole (2002) points out three strong reasons that stand against the effective use of ICTs in Nigerian academic libraries. Each of the factors she has mentioned has a resultant effect on availability and use of ICT. The factors are: low level of computer culture: poor telecommunications infrastructure; and general lack of awareness. Another constraint that affects the use of ICTs in Nigerian academic libraries is low level of computer culture. When librarians are not computer literate, utilizing the facility would be a problem. In other words, having a good background in computer skill makes the use of computers in work places very practicable. Lack of awareness on the other hand makes availability impossible. Library managers must be aware of the advantages of using ICTs in libraries and information sector. Training workers in the use of computers and other related

technologies for services in any organization including academic libraries is very important. A well trained worker can perform effectively and efficiently in his/her work place than he/she who is not trained at all. As noted above on the challenges faced by academic libraries in the process of making ICTs available and used, the report submitted by the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs at Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (2005) pointed out that lack of government funding; limited and expensive internet bandwidth; unstable power sources; and insufficient development affected job performance of academic libraries. Although traditional channels of communication will remain important, the new information and communication technologies hold great potential for broadly disseminating knowledge at low cost, and for reducing knowledge gaps within countries and between industrial and developing countries. In a broad sense as revealed by Ogunsola (2004) access to the right information at the right time gives people greater control over their destiny. Despite all these shortcomings, it must be emphasized that automated library system is the best in terms of providing fast, error free service and at the same time increased efficiency.

It should be realized that the strategies for meeting the current challenges to providing library and information services for Nigerians must begin with library and information professionals themselves. These professionals must vigorously adopt proactive approaches to library and information provisions. It is their responsibility to correct the prevailing unhealthy state of library and information practice, which is predominantly passive or reactive. Library and information professionals must appreciate the fact that the prestige enjoyed by professions like law, engineering, medicine and accounting did not come by chance but as a definite product of proactive toils and sweat of successive generations of professionals in these other fields. The prestige which society accords any profession reflects the value which, in the society's opinion, the profession delivers to it in form of qualitative indispensable service. Library and information service provided in Nigeria, therefore, must cease to be a mere product of professional chores and reflect the needs of the target user groups. Such proactive approaches can assume various dimensions which include that library and information professionals, like physicians or any other professionals, must diagnose the information needs, plan and then implement the service which meets these needs. They should also evaluate performance periodically in the light of these needs in order to take necessary corrective measures and ensure that the needs of the user groups are being met adequately by the services rendered (Gwang, 2011).

CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, it must be realized that information is an essential requirement for the development of any nation. The provision of library and information services in Nigeria is a positive step towards making information widely available to the people, make them information literate, be able to access and use accessed information to develop the country. Nigerians like others from African countries are in the majority illiterates. A literate person is one who can decipher meanings from written or printed records. Awareness, on the other hand, is the condition of knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association. Literacy awareness thus encompasses ability to decipher meaning from written or printed and non-printed materials. Literacy for all is crucial to national and personal development, while illiteracy is a major obstacle. Literacy is the ability to communicate or be communicated with effectively in writing either in English or any one Nigerian language. Literacy is a major route to overcoming poverty, hunger and disease in the world, while illiteracy is the number one obstacle to economic, political, social and individual development. The question that readily comes to mind with respect to literacy awareness in Nigeria is: what should Nigerian university libraries do to promote literacy awareness in order to eradicate illiteracy in the country? Librarians are agents and major gateways to knowledge as such, it is recommended that the federal and state governments should encourage the creation of the position of literacy librarians in our university libraries and saddle them with the responsibility of initiating meaningful programmes for those who, as a result of poverty/living in the rural areas, learning deficiency or physical or mental disability are being disadvantaged. Budgetary allocations to university libraries have been shrinking recently. For these libraries to be able to render services

enumerated above, it is recommended that they should be given special votes in their budgets to cater for the promotion of literacy awareness. Effective promotion of literacy awareness by University Librarians is based on personal commitment. For this reason, it is recommended that university librarians should work to establish rapport with adult education teachers, adult education officers both at federal and state levels, and ministers/commissioners of Education. It is only when they are able to stimulate interest and enthusiasm in such people with respect to possibilities offered by specialized literacy services like those enumerated in this paper that they can benefit from the personal experiences and support of such professionals and experts.

If Nigeria is to become a reading and literacy society, positive reading habits should be inculcated in children from an early age. Parents, teachers and other adults should try to provide children with a congenial atmosphere for reading. Literate parents and other adults should encourage the development of the reading habit through their own example. Children who are interested in reading should not be discouraged in anyway. Finally, parents, teachers, librarians, publishers and all others interested in promoting avid reading habits among Nigerian children should cooperate more closely for the benefit of our children. The governments both at federal and state levels should marshal a potent book reading policy. The depressed economy in the nation also accounts for why most of the nation's universities do not have well-equipped libraries or bookshops. If our universities are not to become glorified secondary schools, there must be one indivisible trinity between the university library, the university bookshop and the university press. Because the depressed economy has virtually closed down the major publishing companies, University Presses should be able to fill the vacuum left by the commercial publishing houses. Improving the quality of libraries in the higher education sector will improve the quality of the products of the system. In recent times and as attested to by the findings of a 2001 Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research/World Bank report on the quality of Nigerian Universities, the competencies demonstrated by university graduates are "lowering at an alarming rate". The poor state of academic libraries was found to be a major cause. The Nigerian virtual library project is a justifiable venture for bolstering higher education quality. The virtual library will enable students, lecturers, and other scholars to profit more from electronic communications revolution by having access to databases critical to their research and teaching interests. Within the higher education system in a majority of African countries, libraries are far from being up-to-date. A digital library scheme will facilitate access to a vast collection of books and journals, even titles from as far back in time as possible. A subscribing Nigerian library or any other African university library will be several times richer and current in its collection of books and journals than is presently the case. If all these suggestions are judiciously followed, information literacy among Nigerian students and people will be greatly improved. It is note-worthy to state that major benefits that automation will bring to a library and its patrons by far out-weight its demerits – especially counting the cost. It will therefore be fool-hardy for developing countries and Nigeria in particular to cling tenaciously to out-dated manually operated methods of information processing. Library computerization has made it possible to control world literacy output in spite of its phenomenal post war increase. It must be realized that a revolution in information technology is occurring now, it is a revolution that will essentially shatter the effectiveness of traditional, scientific and authoritative methods of management, and it will undoubtedly lead to profound changes in libraries, Librarians functions, and user expectations. It is true that we are already in computer age; it has become an inevitable chapter in the march of world's civilization. Because the computer technology is not our own invention, our challenge is to go to it, understand it, and use it to our literacy advantage, we cannot wait for it to come to us. To raise our literacy level, the imperative, therefore, is that we must catch up with the revolution and not wait for the revolution to catch up with us, otherwise as its usage becomes a common denominator in the field of business, science, communication, etc. we may pretty soon find ourselves and our methods irrelevant to current usages and practices and trailing several years behind the times. Chief executives should take the bull by the horns and attempt to bring their libraries to the level of their counterparts in the developed countries. That is the only way we can develop. They should go in for minicomputers since technology needs not always be complex to be effective, where they cannot do it alone, they should form a network of cooperating libraries to ensure that we are not left out of this new system. I believe that if the above steps are vigorously followed, our information literacy programme will be raised to a higher and enviable standard.

The increased availability of electronic information should lead libraries and librarians to develop important relationships with computer centers in our higher institutions. In some places, the computer centre is responsible for electronic information and the library is responsible for print information. In some educational institutions, librarians have assumed responsibility for both the library collection and computer services. Increasingly librarians (Ogunsola, 2011) have assumed the role of educator to teach their users how to find information both in the library and other electronic networks. Public librarians have extended their roles by providing local community information through publicly assessable computing systems. Some librarians are experts on computers and softwares. Others are concerned with how computer technologies can preserve the human cultural records of the past or ensure that library collections on crumbling paper or in old computer files can still be used by people many centuries in the future. The works of librarians have moved outside library walls. Librarians have begun to work in the information industry as salespeople, designers of new information systems, researchers and information analysts. They are also found in such fields as marketing and public relations in such organizations as law firms, where staff needs rapid access to information. By this, one can see that the roles of librarians can never be overemphasized as far as information literacy is concerned. 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 be rapidly and effectively transmitted for use.

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