

Reference Service Delivery System in West Africa: Limitations and Prospects as Seen From Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

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This paper focuses on the centrality of reference services to the practice of librarianship. It enumerates the limitations faced by Kenneth Dike Library (KDL) in its bid to deploy Information Communications Technology (ICT) to its reference services delivery system. Being a university library in a developing country, KDL has to cope with the problems confronting universities in Nigeria. The problems that plague the ivory towers and, consequently, the libraries that serve them, include lack of proper funding, infrastructural deficiencies, inability to retain information technology experts, and intra-local politics regarding the control of ICT facilities in the library. The paper also projects on KDL's efforts at establishing the virtual reference suite to complement its present reference services.

KEYWORDS, reference services, Information Communications Technology (ICT), Kenneth Dike Library, Nigeria, West Africa

INTRODUCTION

The Ibadan University Library, now Kenneth Dike Library (KDL) was founded in 1948 when the University College, Ibadan was established as an affiliate of London University (Majuetan, 2000). The library started with a small collection from Yaba College of Technology, Lagos and a few donations from the private collections of notable individuals like Herbert Marcauley. Since then, KDL has grown significantly. University of Ibadan now has a library system which, according to the University Librarian, has an aggregate holding estimated at over one million volumes. (Kenneth Dike Library, 2007). The

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collection consists of books, journals, dissertations, technical reports, maps, manuscripts, and special collection materials of historical significance such as Africana materials. Apart from KDL, which is the main library, the library system has the Latunde Odeku Medical library (located about eight kilometers away) at the College of Medicine and 26 Faculty, Departmental, and Institute libraries. These libraries serve a wide range of clientele including students, lecturers, researchers, and the public.

Reference services constitute an important aspect of the librarianship profession that should be taken seriously if we must, as librarians, deliver our mandate to support teaching, learning, research, and community development. Reference inquiries are categorized into simple directional queries, in-depth bibliographic questions, or technical and research-based searches. The library has the responsibility to respond to all forms of inquiry. In order to do this effectively, all library resources are harnessed by the librarian. These resources include library personnel (especially librarians with defined subject specializations) and library materials (print and non-print; electronic and online). The library also deploys its network and cooperative connections to ensure that users' (patron's) information needs are met. According to Dunn (2009), "reference and instruction activities depend on ready access to both print and electronic resources."

Electronic reference is regarded as a service by which the librarian is able to deploy computer and multi-media technologies to answer users' queries. The combination of information technology and the new communications media have brought about new approaches in handling reference inquiries. Indeed, Nilsen (2004) affirmed that

library reference services that allow users to ask questions in the digital environment are a relatively new phenomenon. The terms used to describe such services vary widely, including, among others, virtual reference, digital reference, electronic reference, remote reference, and real-time reference.

In fact, digital reference is referred to as a service that is conducted online with the reference transaction being mediated through computer communication. The aim is to find information to answer users' questions and fulfill their information needs. This form of reference work expands reference services from the physical reference desk to a virtual reference suite where the patron does not have to be in direct face-to-face contact with the reference service provider. The reference transactions can be conducted online or through telephone. This means that the patron can actually be located at home, work, or other places.

REFERENCE SERVICES IN KENNETH DIKE LIBRARY

KDL operates the traditional reference service (TRS). A section located in the research library wing of the main library complex is designated as the

Reference Section. The research library has restricted patronage. It is opened only to postgraduate students, lecturers, and researchers. Final year students are allowed to use the research library only if they come with proper referral letters from their Heads of Department or project supervisors. The section handles all forms of reference queries and manages all conventional reference works like dictionaries, encyclopedias, biographies, bibliographies, directories, atlases, and others. It is also in charge of most of the closed-access collections like Africana, Government Documents, Legal Deposits (Public Ordinance Materials), Dissertations, Newspapers, and other Special Collections.

The Section is headed by a Reference Librarian who is assisted by two Library Officers and six Library Assistants who run shift duties from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm and 3:00 pm to 10:00 pm. The open access collection, which is opened to all students, lecturers, and other registered members of the university community and the external users, has a collection of reference works for quick reference consultations. The use of these reference materials are strictly monitored by the Circulation Librarian and his/her staff. The branch libraries, Latunde Odeku Medical library, the Faculty, Departmental and Institute libraries, have special reference collections tailored to meet the needs of their users. In other words, they offer some forms of reference service in their various libraries.

BEST PRACTICES IN REFERENCE SERVICE DELIVERY

Increasingly, libraries tend to adopt a holistic approach toward handling reference services. Basically, libraries handle most reference queries and services based on the available resources within their disposal. In the traditional mode, designated professionals are assigned specific roles of managing reference services. Today, there is a shift in this seemingly stereo-typed practice. Even in libraries like KDL where the position of Reference Librarian is enshrined, it is recognized that no single professional can do the job. Reference services can be assisted through cooperation from professional and faculty colleagues. With careful time-management, the faculty members constitute a major resource-base that librarians can resort to in tackling some research-based reference questions.

Library users now desire easier access to information and more timely response to their reference questions. Encapsulating the significance of reference service delivery, Tyckonson (2001) opined

regardless of the type of library, the size of its collections, or the demographics of its users, patrons expect to get help with everything from complex research projects to finding materials in the collections. Service has become almost synonymous with libraries. In view of this, libraries

deploy new technologies for rapid response to the information needs of their patrons.

Also, according to the American Library Association (2003),

Virtual Reference is reference service initiated electronically often in real-time, where users employ computers or Internet technology to communicate with librarians, without being physically present. Communication channels used frequently in virtual reference include chat virtual videoconferencing, voice over IP, e-mail and instant messaging.

Libraries and librarians are designing and adopting new methods of giving best reference services to their patrons. The usefulness of electronic and information communications technology in discharging reference services is phenomenal. This is evident in the enormity of literature on the subject (Brietbach, Mallard, and Sage, 2009; Wan, Clark, Fullerton, Macmillan, Reddy, Stephens, and Xiao, 2009; Osareh, Bigdeli, Mansouri, and Khasseh, 2009; Gray, 2000; Krisowitz, Blythe, and Lankes, 2000; Davis, 2009; Guernsey, 2000; Sessoms and Sessoms, 2008; Jamali, 2008; Ola, 2006). Furthermore, many authors, such as Behler and Girven (2008); RUSA Reference Guidelines on Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers (2004); and Katz (2001) have attested to the versatility of deploying the new technologies. All acknowledge that academic reference desks have added electronic format to the traditional mode of delivering reference services.

LIMITATIONS IN OFFERING VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICE IN KDL

From the fore-going, it becomes imperative to what limitations inhibiting the deployment of virtual reference service in KDL. They are discussed below.

Funding

Public universities and their libraries in Nigeria are funded mainly by government. Government funding of universities in Nigeria has dwindled over the years. It is well known that libraries that are mainly dependent on public funds are usually at the mercy of their parent bodies. By implication, whenever the universities experience a reduction in their funding, the libraries are usually the first to experience drastic cut in the library development fund (LDF) (Ola, 1990). The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) took up the issue of the poor funding of Nigerian-owned university libraries with the Federal Government in 1992 and reached an agreement that 10% of the university recurrent expenditure should be used as LDF. This agreement was

actually never adhered to as only 10% of university overhead costs, which is just an item of the recurrent expenditure, is released to the library. The library is therefore handicapped in carrying out its mandate of providing support for learning, teaching, research, and community development. The vision of and mission of the library can hardly be met. Explaining the parlous and chronic state of under-funding in Nigerian university libraries, Ojoade and Ochai (2000) lamented:

Unfortunately, with hardly any funds, the library is being put under pressure to justify its existence and provide improved and extended services to a clientele that is becoming increasingly sophisticated in information seeking behaviour, as well as to provide a range of information and communications technologies necessary for retrieving information from distant location.

Ekpenyong (2005) included funding in the list of constraints militating against the provision of necessary information communications technology (ICT) infrastructure for establishing a viable consortium among Nigerian university libraries willing to come together to share resources.

Infrastructural Deficiencies

There is perpetual breakdown or absolute lack of infrastructure for powering ICT, on which a vibrant virtual reference delivery system can be anchored. The national electricity grid, Power Holding Corporation of Nigeria (which should be the main power supply) is so ineffective that it has literally become non-existent. In fact, at times, the university would be without electricity for several days. The university is presently sourcing for alternative source of generating power. The lack of efficient Internet connectivity due to low bandwidth and heavy traffic of Internet users have constituted perennial problems in KDL. Despite the heavy usage of Internet facilities in KDL, the library is connected to the university VSAT—the only one that serves all the faculties and units in the university. Also, the local area network (LAN) in the library is not properly laid. In most cases, the main library building would be connected to the Internet while the research library would not. Computer engineers have checked and tried to rectify this problem. The recurring complaint is that the fault has been the way the LAN was laid from the outset. Thus, infrastructural problems in KDL and within the university have contributed immensely to inhibiting the setting up of the virtual reference suite in the library.

Computer Personnel and Intra-Campus Politics

The university has a salary scheme that is not quite competitive in the Nigerian labor market especially when it comes to staff with special skills in

computing and information technology (those that are now popularly referred to as “techies” in the emerging librarianship parlance). For more than a decade, KDL had experienced staff fights for more prosperous and financially rewarding jobs. Several system analysts had been employed and trained who had to leave the employment for better offers elsewhere. This had constituted an impediment to the library’s efforts to deploy improved services to its users. Presently, the whole library system has no single system analyst who can handle systems maintenance and ensure that the library computers and communication gadgets are functioning optimally. KDL contracts these functions out to companies at great costs. On the other hand, the university ICT center that has responsibility for overseeing the library ICT infrastructure, unfortunately, regards the library as a threat. The center runs a cyber cafe just like the library. Since both the library and the center strive to give e-service to the community, they regard themselves as rivals. Instead of serving complementary roles for easy access to information and fast reference service delivery, they engage in internal wrangling; fighting for supremacy, relevance, and recognition from the university administration. The problem still persists and portends greater inhibition to the system, both at the general university level and in the library.

Campus Network System

The Kenneth Dike Library system has several branches, faculty, departmental, and institute libraries spread all over the University campus. This has posed serious challenges to the smooth communication and free flow of information since there is no network system connecting the main library to other libraries in the library system. KDL is currently involved in championing the advocacy for the provision of a campus-wide Network system in the University.

PROSPECTS

Despite the limitations confronting KDL, the library has made efforts to put certain measures in place toward actualizing the virtual reference services delivery.

The university and the library authorities have started a systematic capacity building program to train and expose library staff to modern techniques in library management. Some staff benefited from international and local grants that assisted them in training locally and internationally.

Some funding bodies and institutions have provided assistance in terms of providing databases that run on hard drives in the library local area network system. Institutions like Cornell University and Iowa State University provided LANTEEAL and e-Granary, respectively. These databases have been very useful.

In order to improve the facilities in the library, the Postgraduate School, University of Ibadan equipped the e-classroom in the reference section with computers and multimedia equipment. Similar supports were given by the Distance Learning Centre (DLC) of University of Ibadan and the Education Trust Funds (ETF).

KDL has a subscription to e-brary Digital Library for access to Web-based digital databases where users can get information materials on various disciplines.

KDL has also acquired and is presently deploying the VIRTUA library management software (Visionary Technology for Library Solutions, VTLS) which will assist in solving problems of bibliographic queries. Users will be able to access Kenneth Dike Library catalogues anywhere, anytime, as long as there is Internet connection.

A user-friendly web technology that has provision for reference tool-bars where e-mail and chat reference services could be handled is being designed. This toolbar will offer a form of the "Ask A Librarian" service.

An intra-library communications network is being laid for direct contact between the users and the reference staff within the main library complex. KDL is a four-story building with East and West wings on each floor. When completed, the users on the floors will no longer need to come to the ground floor to have physical face-to-face interaction with the staff before getting their reference queries across to the librarian. "Help desks" will be situated in the Reference and Circulation Sections. They will be staffed by library officers or competent librarians who will be given the responsibility of forwarding queries that cannot be immediately answered to professional librarians or the experts in the area.

KDL is initiating a consortium of libraries that will work together in ensuring that there is a cooperative approach to problem solving when queries are directed to any of the libraries in the network. A mechanism that will allow for rapid response would be installed within the consortium. This is expected to be electronic and online in the long-run. Members of this consortium will include: National Archives (which has one of its major offices on University of Ibadan campus); international centers and institutions like The French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA); International Institute for Tropical Agriculture; Institute of Agricultural Research & Training; Cocoa Research Institute of Nigeria; Forest Research Institute of Nigeria; and Nigerian Institute of Horticulture. The consortium will offer alliance or working arrangements for service delivery with all available resource centers in and around Ibadan metropolis. This will constitute a robust information base for member-institutions to tap into when answering reference queries.

The library is planning on harnessing and utilizing the academic and research output of the University as a knowledge base for dealing with research-inclined queries by involving the faculty members of the institution,

who are experts in their various disciplines, in tackling the more rigorous users' questions.

In view of the epileptic supply of electricity by the Power Holding Corporation of Nigeria (PHCN), the University recently acquired a stand-by giant generator, 250 KVA that has capacity to power the whole main library of the University. Unfortunately, instead of being the alternative source of electricity, it is now the main source of power. Although this is expensive because of the amount expended on diesel fuel, it goes a long way in ameliorating the poor state of electricity supply in the library. While KDL is still far off from its target of providing a 24/7 service, it is a step in the right direction.

CONCLUSION

Even though KDL is still transiting from the traditional reference service (TRS) to the virtual reference service (VRS), its prospects in joining libraries that are deploying the virtual technology for handling reference services is very high. With improved funding and the assistance given by local and international bodies the library is prepared to ensure prompt response to reference queries using both the traditional and virtual tools at its disposal. This becomes imperative when the library now has responsibility for attending to the information needs of the students of the Distance Learning Centre of the University. The electronic and online discharge of reference services will enrich the distance learning program of the University.

It is instructive to note that a few authors have already predicted the demise of reference librarians and muting for outright eradication of the traditional reference desk (Ewing & Hauptman, 1995; Fritch & Mandernack, 2001). Without prejudice to the proponents of the abolition of the traditional reference desk, one recognizes the continued relevance of the printed reference books as highly veritable in delivering reference services; there is the need now to embrace electronic reference sources for easy access. Obviously, no one can controvert the fact that the way of electronic reference is the way of the immediate future in the library service delivery system and KDL is gradually adopting new technologies for carrying out its reference services.

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