

The Nigerian Librarian in the 21st Century

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As we approach the end of the 20th century, one could safely say that we are moving fully into the age of "information technology" which has been with us for sometime now. In Nigeria, successive governments and professional bodies have been making predictive statements to forecast what the situation would be in the year 2000, namely, health for all, housing for all, good motorable roads for all, and so on and so forth. This goes to tell us that 21st century is loaded with so many dreams and promises. The Librarian can as well join the queue with the assurance that, in the 21st century, there will be books and information for all, that our libraries will be automated, and information in all spheres of human endeavour will be accessible to all, so that Nigeria can become an information-conscious society. However, the much talked-about many things for all by the dawn of the next century boils down to getting information and to providing the same to our teeming population.

The librarian, therefore, has an important role to play to ensure that there is free flow of information on the current events and that of the next century. Librarians should not be oblivious of the changing pattern of information but be able to provide access to the information, that people need now and beyond this century. Therefore, the future of libraries and librarians in this country depends largely on adopting modern information technology strategies. The significance of this need not be overstressed.

TRADITIONAL PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES

The old practices of librarians in Nigerian libraries, be it public library, academic library or special library, have been that of acquiring, organising and disseminating library materials and information to users. Hitherto, the work of a librarian has been that of confining himself to the preservation of library materials being stored in a room. The emphasis has been on acquiring the books and other relevant materials, arranging them properly by discipline on the shelves and then the librarian sitting tight in his office on the chair expecting users to come for consultation or borrowing from his neatly arranged

collections. The catalogue cards in the cabinet have been the guide or link for tracing the books arranged on the shelves. It is interesting to note that all the processes such as cataloguing and classification, putting the information on catalogue cards, tracing the information or books on shelves, were carried out manually, and it took a lot of time to accomplish.

On some occasion, users could not trace some of these materials on the shelves because they might have been withdrawn from the shelves for the purpose of binding due to wear and tear. Obviously, information arranged on the shelves are in printed form, bound in books, journals, newspapers, magazines, and so on (Yunuba, 1997). Librarians stand as intermediaries in this process, providing information to those people who cannot afford to buy the information for themselves. The dissemination of information in the traditional practices which still operative is a method that entails that the user should wait as the librarian sought out the information from the volumes of collection on the shelves. On the other hand, the user may be directed to get the information he or she wanted by himself from the shelves. There was no way that such library materials could be stored except on the shelves, and before the user could browse through the volumes of books on the shelves to get what he or she wanted, valuable time had already been spent.

CHANGING PRACTICES

This is an information age, an age when an indescribable volume of information is available to the society. This is a time which makes librarians change their professional practices. This implies that librarians can shrug off the traditional role of being custodians of books and accept a new role in an information society. Systems have been designed which enable sound data, and images to travel on a single line. One of these systems, called Integrated Service Digital Network (ISDN), would allow one conduit to provide electronic-based services such as television, fax, telephone and computer links to individuals upon request, and would be able to do so at anytime, from any place (Yunuba, 1997). Yunuba further observes that it would be accessible from anywhere, home, work place, or elsewhere. The information superhighway, as a tool for the transfer of technology of information, is the ultimate at this moment. Nigerian librarians should not ignore this new professional aspect of work because we are in the information or communication business, especially the communication of information to the society. Therefore, they should reassess their approaches in the light of emerging technology (Middleton, 1996). Another issue librarians need to address in these changing practices is the latest research and new terminology in the field and/or discipline within which one is employed as well as that of library and information science and communication technology.

Librarians definitely need to acquire training to manage computer and networking developments. Training can range from basic computer literacy to familiarity with networking systems and basic electronic mechanisms (Shamin, 1996). The librarian of the 21st century should see himself as one who is to provide the Nigerian government with the latest and most accurate information on policy matters. In the developed world, administrators and managers of industries and institutions have applied modern technology for increased efficiency in the decision making process, librarians can as well pick up the same technology to increase the efficiency of their information organisation and dissemination. It is pertinent to emphase here that the 21st century librarian should not content himself with just acquiring books and arranging them properly by discipline on the shelves and then sitting tight in his office in the chair expecting users to come for consultation or borrowing from his properly arranged collections (Ochai, 1995). Sampath (1982) expressed that the era of an arm-chair librarian has passed. Therefore, new breed librarians of the 21st century should be creative, innovative, and should be those who will abandon their chairs and go out to the streets to proclaim to the potential users or clients, the value and need for their material. Librarian in this changing world of information should become active agents who, with the aid of modern scientific and technological tools, should promote the dissemination and direct the use of knowledge for the good of all.

Furthermore, the popular notion of librarians as people in charge of a building with books has been challenged by the trends of the new technology. In this new change, librarians should not be defined by a wall or book. They should not be defined by the print or non-print materials, but by the service they offer to people. The notion of librarians being caretakers of book collections in a building should be erased in the minds of the public. With this new trend in place, librarians should become gate keepers of information rather than custodians or watchdogs of books in a building. One thing to note here is that digital storage is many times more dense than print-on-paper storage, and so libraries of books can be reduced to a short stack of disks. Digital storage is also cheaper, for it takes a fully equipped and staffed printshop and bindery to create books, but digital information can be created and stored on a small, inexpensive desktop computer. It is also faster, easier and cheaper to communicate digital information. A digital book can travel from Lagos to London over phone lines in a few minutes; a printed book travelling the same route by air plane will take much longer time. Again, a researcher can retrieve information stored in a computer within seconds, a feat which might take hours with a printed book.

It is worthy to note that with Internet Connectivity in our libraries, one can send Electronic Mail (E-Mail) to anyone who is connected to the network provided one knows the correct E-Mail address. Delivery takes only seconds. These communication channels provide global communication environments that

facilitate easy sharing of technology and cultural experiences. The internet is a powerful tool to search for, retrieve and make information resources of the world more accessible to ordinary people the world over. The 21st century libraries and librarians should not be by-passed by the advent of internet. Freeman (1996) points out that with internet, one can have a growing information database without data collection and maintenance responsibilities. With this technological development, the internet has, therefore, become one of the most important means of communication of the present age.

MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES IN THE TECHNOLOGICAL ERA

For librarians to be able to function effectively in delivering the much needed information services in the new century, some management techniques have to be adopted. The managers of Nigerian libraries can embark upon some of the following strategies as suggested by Michael (1996).

- a. **Technological Management Techniques:** The full operation of information technology and establishment of electronic library will demand technology skills and management in the 21st century. It becomes very necessary for librarians to acquire the technological know-how so that they can process and distribute the needed information.
- b. **Management of Financial and Other Resources:** Nigeria today is facing a downturn in its economy, and so library managers should demonstrate their ability to manage what they have. Librarians of the 21st century should be prudent in their financial management and prioritize their expenditures. Librarians need to establish strategies for generating alternative sources of funding their library institutions instead of depending on government for funds. Librarians can sell out themselves as information consultants. Funds can also be generated from photocopying services, bookselling, stationery, etc.
- c. **Relationship With Customers:** The 21st century librarians should work hard to see that they establish a good rapport with their clients. They should be able to supply the kind of information their clients really want, and the effort of the information providers should be appreciated by the seekers too.
- d. **Updating of Skills:** To be able to deal with the new technology, librarians of the 21st century should update their skills to cope with the new technological innovations of the time. It is possible that, in the next millennium, librarians will be required to make use of computer terminal when automation of libraries becomes effective. This, therefore, implies that librarians should be able to handle, operate and manage the machine at their disposal properly.

PROVIDING INFORMATION FOR THE RURAL COMMUNITY

In Nigeria, the level of information awareness is still very low in the rural setting. Librarians have been wrestling for decades with how to promote equitable access to information for all. Ironically, librarians' predominant decisions have been how to provide libraries stocked with printed materials for the rural Nigerians. It is pertinent to state here that a kind of service being defined by a building, stocked with reading tables, chairs and books is irrelevant in the rural areas. The fundamental problem of the rural man is not how to read and write, but rather how to obtain information that will enable him to improve his occupation, not the traditional library system. The rural man needs a kind of information provision in a library without walls, yet can provide services that can meet his needs.

The rural man possesses some of these most pronounced characteristics which still make him uninformed about current development. There is still low level of literacy in the rural areas. Majority of the rural people are strictly agriculturally subsistent, and others engage in small scale businesses such as carpentry, weaving, cattle rearing, and so on. Inadequate health care facilities still abound even though some agencies like mission clinics, state and federal ministries of health, are making effort to reach out to the rural areas (Dakur, 1997).

There is also the lack of good motorable roads, especially during rainy seasons.

Other factors that could make information provision in rural community unfeasible is lack of adequate volunteers and trained information or library personnel to carry out such hectic services; lack of suitable vehicles to transport personnel or staff who could offer themselves to provide information to rural dwellers; high level of illiteracy and ignorance of the rural dwellers would be a hindrance to accept any change.

However, some of these problems could be surmounted if the government would provide vehicles that could travel to rural areas with less difficulty to provide information for the rural dwellers. The level of illiteracy and ignorance in the village can be lowered if the services of their learned people who belong to the villages are employed. They can be convinced, if they are spoken to by their elite. Villages that are cut off from their local governments and state capitals, especially during rainy season, should employ the services of boats.

THE IMPACT OF COMPUTER ON LIBRARIANS

The introduction of machines in Nigerian libraries should increasingly result in the performance of tasks which in the past were the sole province of skilled workers. Computers are better than humans at performing tasks involving sorting and calculating. This information technology or information super highway promises to be a panacea to information seekers world over, but it has its own impact; the impact of computers for libraries and librarians would seem

to be somewhat grisly. If, for instance, a whole library can be stored on a disk, why should we need a library building? Why should we need a librarian to take us round, browsing through volumes of collections of books arranged neatly on the shelves, while digital information is so much easier to retrieve, store and communicate? Library's task such as indexing and the generation of bibliographies, however, can be done faster and better and for less cost by computers.

Having direct access to information from internet by users, for instance, effectively cuts out the librarian. However, this has a limitation even in the developed world. As far as people still not cease to write and publish books, there will still be a place for librarians. Despite the present trend in Nigerian environment, librarians in Nigeria have many roles to play in assisting information users to acquire the needed information in information technology age. The coming of information technology can help boost the image of the librarian. The librarian is an information professional, and he should see himself as such. According to Udo (1997), information technology assists the librarian to accomplish his task more efficiently. This is possible in the areas of storage, retrieval and use of information. The Nigerian librarian will need to prepare himself for greater challenges and more useful roles in the next millennium.

CONCLUSION

The olden day libraries and librarians' tasks were known to be labour intensive, due to the volume of work the library had to do to offer services to its numerous community of users as well as organise the information resources. Manual work was emphasised in a traditional way. But, with the introduction of computers, a new mode of organising library resources has been provided so as to enhance effectiveness and productivity. With the communication technology on ground, the demand for information increases at a faster rate than before.

However, the stage we are in now technologically, appears to suggest that the Nigerian librarians will continue to operate manually for sometime until Nigerian fully embraces information technology. Nevertheless, the Nigerian librarian should start to take the challenge by preparing for eventual transformation of Nigeria into an automated age as we journey into the 21st century.

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