Article

PRACTICING LIBRARIANSHIP IN AN INFORMATION AGE

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Abstract

The advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has transformed the way librarians as information managers cum scientists acquire, process, store, retrieve and even provide information to the users. What this means is that those not versed in this global trend will be left behind or unable to perform their duties to the satisfaction of their various clientele. This paper through analytical method takes a look at information as a concept, its importance in national development and librarianship as a profession. Also discussed are the challenges facing the profession and the need to keep pace with the information explosion. The paper also examines the transition that has impacted on librarianship as a profession due to the advent of ICTs. Finally, the paper advices that for librarians to fit into the changing trend, the National Universities Commission (NUC) and the Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) should incorporate ICT training into the academic curriculum of all institutions training library and information scientists.

Introduction

During the Berlin Conference of the 19th Century (1884-1885) when European nations scrambled for the partition and control of Africa, the driving force was Africa's natural resources. That was when those nations were in need of the raw materials for the growing industries in their homeland. That was then. Today, the trend has changed and the race is for the control of information which exerts a lot of influence, not only on the peoples' worldview but their ways of life. Today all forms of domination, control or influence in whichever guise-political, economic, cultural etc are rooted in information flow. The powerful nations of the world are those that have control over ICTs, and the librarians who are the managers of this information cannot sit on the fence, but become the key players in this information superhighway. In modem societies, information is power, whether in politics, economy or any other field of human endeavour. Ovia (2003) captures the trend this way," look behind the wealth of nations and you find information. Look behind the poverty of nations and you find lack of information. We

can now appreciate why countries are beginning to compete and fight over the control of information, not natural resources.

Aina (2004) asserts that information which is the analysis and synthesis of data has unquestionably become one of the most vital resources. According to him, information will be treated as an asset and the corporations that excel will be those that manage information as a resource. Still on the importance attached to information in different parts of the world, Aina (2004) states that many research works are beginning to regard information as the fourth economic resource after land, labour and capital. In reference to Stonier (1991), he argues that information remains the most important factor in the modem production process because if one possesses enough information, he would be able to manage, manipulate and maximally use other factors of production.

Today, different countries of the world, individuals and groups hardly toy with information since to them it remains the weapon for both development and modern warfare. Librarianship presently is a profession in transition and information and communication technology has become a productivity tool. Following from the facts above, information has not been given due recognition in our society today, because the librarians are ill-equipped in the area of the global trend ICT. Therefore, this is affecting the practice of librarianship in Nigeria, hence, there is an urgent need to correct this anomaly, thus, this paper.

The Concept of Information Having briefly discussed the importance of information in the society, one can then ask the question: "what is information?" The word "information" means different things to different people. It is a word that is difficult to define because it has many dimensions. To some people, information means news while to others, it is essentially data. The Webster Dictionary (1983) defines information as news or intelligence communicated by word or in writing, facts or data, knowledge derived from reading or instructions gathered in anyway. Harrods (1997) also defines information as an assemblage of data in a comprehensible form recorded on paper or any other medium, and capable of communication. Information is seen as knowledge given to people in a form they can understand. While information handling means the searching, storage, retrieval and updating of information (Stevenson, 1997). With this in mind Ifidon and Ifidon (2007), defines information as man's accumulated knowledge in all subjects in all forms and from all sources that could help its users to make rational decisions. Information can be classified into two groups- soft and hard information.

While soft information refers to that information obtained through interpersonal and mass communication, hard information refers to that obtained through libraries and allied institutions. The success of any administration in terms of policy formulation, implementation, decision making and policy monitoring is usually anchored on prompt access to relevant information. In the present technological age, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have revolutionalized Information gathering, processing, preservation and distribution that no one born after this revolution could imagine how the situation was years back. Information is power, an indispensable tool for development which enables government to achieve the following:

- Take decisions that are responsive to societal needs and development.
- Relate properly with their counterpart in other counties on specific issues.
- Contribute their quota to global development alongside other nations of the world.
- Keep abreast with the current happening in the world which variably give the political actors the opportunity to forge ahead in their development endeavours.
- Formulate key policies for national development (Uche, 1999).

Information as Power and a Resource

In this modem and information propelled society, information is power. It is a liquid asset. The most important singular variable which differentiate and determine whether a country is in the first, second, third or fourth world rating and the dichotomy between the world's Northern and Southern hemispheres is contingent on the amount of information either side possesses or has access to and utilizes for its citizenry (Daniel, 1999). Library and Information Science deals with information and its aims are to provide and organize information in a systematic basis in order to further teaching, learning, research and national development and to save the time of users (Ifidon, 2006) avers that in the developed countries, information and information technology are consciously and productively used; with their wealth of information resources, economist, industrialist and engineers find the answers to perplexing development problems thus saving two precious commodities-money and time.

In Nigeria, there are book paucity and cost implications of other information sources are not cheap. There is lack of national information policy as well as lack of appreciation on the part of policy and decision makers on the role of information and information technology in nation's infrastructure and national development. Hence, there is need to

train and re-train the information managers and/or librarians in order to cope with the changing trends in their profession.

The Digital Environment

Digitization is a process in the building of digital environment. Since the later part of the 20th century, it has become a fact that the world is living in a "digital environment" that is, one that embodies a 'law of codes' that brings nations and individuals together in a global market featuring access to information through electronic devices. Urban (2002) also stresses that it is an excellent tool for increasing access to resources, preserving the original through reduced handling and providing far superior access.

The use of computers and communication technologies in information handling and processing has arisen because of the increased workload in coping with information explosion. In order to keep pace with this trend, ICTs are utilized to process information with greater speed and accuracy than manual processing.

Access to the information processed by these technologies is instant and could be accessible over long distances regardless of where the information is processed (Aina, 2004).

Indeed, digitization is one of the new trends in librarianship today, and to build a digital library requires that the content of a collection must be available electronically. Digitization is therefore, the conversion of information from analogue to digital format, and it has had a far reaching impact on the practice of librarianship, practical activities of libraries and other information institution and services (Kajberg and Lorring 2005). Digitization is also the turning of information into binary units. It refers to the process of translating a piece of information such as books, sound recordings, pictures or videos into bits. Bits are the fundamental units of information in a computer. It is therefore a critical transitional step from traditional to electronic library (Ndor 2007).

Librarianship: A Profession in Transition

Library Science as a profession or body of knowledge has grown from its custodian role to an information role. Historically, the early practitioners were concerned with the classification and cataloguing of books and non-book materials, and to guard them jealously. But after the Second World War, the consequent proliferation of technologists, authors and scientists gave rise to information explosion and much quest for information contained in these books. The World War II increased the rate of activities

and the production of information leading to explosion. Information explosion created the need to accumulate and organize information for decision making and which has led to the impossibility of individuals to read and remember all the literatures that are of important. It also created the economic impossibility of individuals and their organizations to process them for later retrieval of those resources that are of interest.

Moreover, the inadequacies of the traditional library methods and tools in coping effectively with the detailed requirement of individuals in identifying and searching information pertinent to a given enquiry gave rise to information science. That is, the use of computers, the internet and lastly the advent of digital or virtual library which makes use of both the computer and internet services. That is, libraries in which computers and telecommunication technologies make access to a wide range of information resources possible. In other words, the user enjoys the euphoria of being in distant libraries but yet has not physically moved (Daniel 2003). Thus, this transition from physical library to digital or virtual library has opened up tremendous opportunities for research, education and learning, and has impacted on librarianship as a profession.

Information Science is the same with library science qualitatively, except with sophistication in order to cope with the changes which have occurred in the environment. Information science is thus, concerned with the application of modem techniques for information gathering, storage, and retrieval as opposed to the traditional techniques which is just satisfied with the classification, cataloguing, and guarding of books and non-book materials. Simply put, information science involves the utilization of information and computer technology to enhance the acquisition, processing, storage and retrieval of information resources in various physical formats.

Prospects
The library profession has really changed in the recent past and it is really exciting these days to be a librarian. The librarian in an information-based and digital environment is currently technologically savvy and driven by the commitment to assist people in finding and using information effectively. It is instructive to note that librarians are now involved in the same kinds of work that they have always done except that they now perform those works in new ways and with new tools. For instance, searching a textbook index is the same as searching an online index except with the additional sophistication involved. Librarians in the digital environment require new knowledge,

skills and attitude to cope with the complexity of the 21st century needs of the profession. Such librarians need sufficient knowledge about the new technologies or ICT not only to use it in the work environment but also to guide others especially, library users.

Equally important, is the knowledge of man about human relationships. Librarians need to understand patrons not only with what they say, but also through their body language. This means that librarians need to know how to listen to their users in order to answer their questions. The modem librarian must be articulate, persuasive, and use active listening techniques in order to elicit the information needs of the users.

Another area of knowledge is the importance of the new librarian being intellectually engaged and active. He must be in a position to share knowledge with other professionals rather than being in a world of his own. In other words, the librarian in the digital environment must "know something about everything". This professional knowledge may include the ability to conduct research and initiate good writings for publications. The new librarian should have knowledge of collection -development, knowledge of literature search and business knowledge, including the ability to create a business model or a plan for marketing services or business communication.

Simply put, he is an entrepreneurial librarian who can think strategically and politically. The new librarian must be creative and manifest the ability to work collaboratively. The modem librarian must be optimistic, enthusiastic, courageous, and confident and display some sense of humor, empathy, sympathy, patience, altruism and intellectual curiosity. These qualities of knowledge skills and attitudes must also include a sense of values and standards; a public services orientation and above all, a commitment to the fundamental value of unrestricted access to information as against the value of traditional librarianship which restricted access to information.

The older generation librarians in the present digital environment must have the eagerness and willingness to share their wealth of knowledge with others and mentor the junior colleagues and peers. As an Indian Proverb says "a candle loses nothing by lighting others". Therefore, mentoring allows the individuals to give something back to the profession while strengthening the organization and ultimately the profession.

The 21st century librarians should try to compare notes, exchange ideas through cross-fertilization of information, social osmosis and strive to teach, mentor their juniors and colleagues and guide users to develop information literacy skills so that they can become skillful and critical consumers of information with a zest for life-long learning (Hanson 2005).

In this virtual library age, it is important to remember that libraries are no longer contained within the physical walls of library buildings. The virtual library environment has broken the library walls. What we have instead is library-without-walls in which at homes, access to library materials is the vogue. With this premise in mind, the acquisition of computer skills and technological ability is not only a sine qua non but also a desiderata.

According to Lomax (2005), librarians of the 21st century must prepare themselves through education and experience, and make effort to keep abreast of new technological advances. They must be flexible, enthusiastic, have good management skills, must be service oriented and have excellent interpersonal skills. They must have the drive to learn and continue to learn since learning has no upper limit. Continuing education can include attending professional conferences, workshops and seminars or taking additional degrees. It could also include the reading of journals, books or interaction with professionals. Librarians of the 21st century need to be masters of the art of librarianship, master learners, communicators, educators and coach masters (Boff and Singer 2005). They must strive to provide the best information at the least possible time, using their skills as leaders in a world contending with information explosion. These positions according to Lomax (2005) seem indicative of the ever-increasing presence of technology and electronic resources in the libraries today and the need for all librarians to be well prepared to function in that environment. Whoever fails to join the moving train will be left behind.

Challenges
- Inadequate and unreliable telecommunication network.
- The need for training and retraining of library staff
- Epileptic power supply
- Underfunding of the university and its library

- The need for several phases of reorganization and restructuring of workflow and responsibilities in the transition between traditional library function and technology- driven functions
- Technological obsolescence
- Uncertainties in the provision of spare parts.

Recommendations

If libraries and librarians want to flourish and thrive in the present competitive environment, they must first of all acquire the necessary training and be prepared to compete while collaborating with their colleagues. Librarians, especially academic librarians must assert themselves in the institutions and be willing to be judged with the same standard as the rest of the academics. Gone are the days when librarians are shelf-dusters and book lenders. Their job is becoming more challenging and technical that they are expected to be at par if not ahead of others in whichever work environment that they find themselves. In view of this, they are expected to be adequately trained. Apart from the formal trainings they acquired before employment, regular in-service training such as seminars, workshops and conferences of this nature will be of immense help.

The National University Commission (NUC) should formally design ICT curriculum content for Nigerian institutions offering library and information science as core courses. This is to prepare them for the challenges ahead of them after graduation where most of their functions will be computer based. Also, the Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) in collaboration with NUC should aim at accrediting library and information science programmes in training institutions in Nigeria as suggested by Okojie (2010). This is because it is only through the use of the ICTs that these libraries and the librarians could be able to cope with the societal needs.

Since the purpose of education is to enable the individuals deal with the various situations of life. Lawal (2003) posits that curriculum development in various institutions where librarians are trained should place more emphasis on the need for the application of ICTs in librarianship to make them relevant to the practice in the modem society. In his own views, Ogundipe (2005), puts it that Education for comparative libraiianship has to accept the dual responsibility of training for local services as well as for international services because we are part of a world of information system.

Conclusion

The training and retraining of these professionals is necessary since human memory and reasoning can never be equated with that of machines. The profession will only continue to advance and flourish when those who use these machines are trained because the value of human touch is still irreplaceable. The qualities of human touch and face-to-face interaction are still very appealing and cannot be reproduced or replaced by machine or technology. That remains the reality.

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