


**LIBRARY AND INFORMATION
SCIENCE DIGEST**

*Journal of the Nigerian Library Association
Anambra State Chapter*

Volume 7, June 2014.

Article

THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY, LIBRARIES AND USERS' EXPECTATIONS ON INFORMATION SERVICE DELIVERY: ANY PARADIGM SHIFT?

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Abstract

The introduction of information and communication technologies has brought new divergent and alternate ways of seeking and obtaining information easily irrespective of time and place. The development has propelled a great debate on the future of libraries which have traditionally collected and provided access to information to the society. The paper is a review on the effect of technology on the library institution. The paper reviewed users' expectations of libraries in the digital era and presents divergent opinions on the role of libraries in meeting the information needs of the new generation users. While some authors argue that the libraries' relevance is diminishing others see the library as a culturally relevant institution that is needed to facilitate the knowledge society. The paper concludes that understanding users' expectations on information service delivery and meeting these expectations are the only way for libraries to remain relevant way into the future.

Introduction

Library development has moved from early stage of print collections to the 21st century digital resources and virtual libraries which are playing increasing role in providing access to information in all ramifications.

In all these stages of development, users are of central importance and at the core of librarian's attention.

Traditionally, before the advent of the computer and the Internet, the library user relied on the library to collect, organize and create access to information to satisfy his information needs. The library was the main reference and access point to find information on current affairs, history, academics, leisure, research, health news, world affairs, government policies, and many topics of interest to the individual. However, the introduction of information technology has brought new divergent and alternate ways to seek and obtain information. This is influencing the information behavior of the users. The Internet has become the first point of call for people seeking information today with obvious advantages. ALA (2011) in presenting the comparative advantages of digital information access to the information user noted that a potential library patron with a computer and an Internet connection, as well as an iPad, Kindle, or other e-reader, can already gain access to far more books, videos, and music than any public library can provide.

Paradigm shift describes a profound change in a fundamental model, set of assumptions or perceptions of events shared by a group of people (Wikipedia; Kuhn, 1970). Considering the present information landscape of technology and World Wide Web, has there been any paradigm shift in the fundamental assumptions and perceptions of the 21st century information user regarding information delivery and library use?

This paper will explore this question by discussing:

- Library services in the Knowledge Society;
- Users' expectations on information service delivery in the knowledge society; any paradigm shift?
- Perceptions on the prospects for libraries in the technology dominated environment;
- The future of the library.

Library Services in the Knowledge Society

Today's human society is described as embedding knowledge societies. Afgan and Carvalho (2010) define the knowledge society as a human structured organization based on contemporary developed knowledge and representing new quality of life support systems. It is based on the need for knowledge distribution, access to information and the capability to transfer information into knowledge. UNESCO (2005) also noted that knowledge societies are about capabilities to identify, produce, process,

transform, disseminate and use information to build and apply knowledge for human development. Knowledge distribution is one of the essential requirements of the knowledge society. It has to be based on equity and non-discrimination, justice and solidarity (Afgan & Carvalho, 2010).

Knowledge society is contrasted with information society which is linked with technological innovations or breakthroughs. As emphasized by UNESCO (2005), the concept of knowledge societies is more all-embracing and more conducive to empowerment than the concept of technology and connectivity, which often dominates debates on the information society.

The library is an essential resource to support the creation of a knowledge society. It is a central place for knowledge transfer and distribution. It also has the capabilities to identify, produce, process, transform, disseminate and use information to build and apply knowledge for human development. This is done in equitable non-discrimination, justice and solidarity manner according to UNESCO projections.

National Knowledge Commission (2007) stated that libraries and librarians have to recognize their social functions and their critical roles in creating a knowledge society. The library and information sector is committed to support the creation of a knowledge society by providing equitable, high quality, cost-effective access to information and knowledge to meet the informational, educational, recreational and cultural needs of the community. Danish Agency for Library and Media (nd) noted that in the knowledge society the public library's efforts to further enlightenment, education and cultural activity is more important than ever before. This means that access to information is important, and even though the Internet is a rich source of information, the citizen's access to the Internet is not sufficient to ensure a value-creating knowledge development. The libraries' physical and digital collections continue to be a vital knowledge base. It is more important now than before to make the libraries' offers visible, attractive and as far as possible available via the Internet.

While acknowledging these roles it has been pointed out that the library's capacity to function in the knowledge society is diminishing following the emergence of many media that perform equal roles with various advantages over the traditional library. These new media have been critical in shaping the information behavior of the new century user. Macgregor (2005) observed, "The major difficulties confronting the 21st

century informatics community lie in the behavior of the digital information user (or consumer). The proliferation of electronic information especially via the web has increased user access to information in its various permutations." Following these developments, what are they perceptions and expectations of users to current information services offered by libraries?

Users' Information Needs and Expectations in the Knowledge Society; and Paradigms Shift?

In carrying out their roles in society, libraries serve a number of key functions which have remained basically the same throughout the history of library services.

Levien (2011) listed some of the functions as:

- **Collect** - Select, acquire, organize, curate, retain and maintain collections of physical media, including text, audio, video, and multimedia, and virtual collections of online media.
- **Circulate** - Provide media from its physical collections to library patrons and to other libraries, or provide access to selected online resources to which the library subscribes.
- **Borrow** - Obtain media from other libraries for local patrons.
- **Provide reference service** - Help patrons find information both in locally maintained collections of materials and in the many resources available online.
- **Provide reading rooms** - Offer a quiet, safe place to browse for and use media from the local collections and to work individually on homework or other projects.

However, the Internet and World Wide Web is shaping the expectation of the 21st century user as regards information access and retrieval. Expectations are viewed as desires or wants of consumers; the term refers to what a service firm should ideally provide (Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, & Zeithaml, 1993; Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, Berry, 1988). Users' expectations on information service delivery can be viewed in two ways; Users' expectations on services and users' expectation on resource availability. Many writers are of the view that user's expectations of prompt and comprehensive service in the library remain the same. According to Lowry (2010), the paradigm shift is found in the organization and delivery of information not in libraries. Writing in support of this, Schmidt (2006) was of the opinion that users still want basic services - competence, reliability, responsiveness, timeliness, honesty and a caring approach. They want assistance with information access, and to be able to read materials in both print and

online formats. They want to use library resources effectively with minimum effort and in a timely manner.

In terms of expectations on information access, Tee (nd). Reported that the traditional library model is based on the concept of “acquire-catalogue-store-lend”, but what users in the flexible learning environment now demand is something quite different – “discover-locate-request and deliver”. He listed some of the challenges faced by library managers in trying to serve a new generation of techno-savvy users known as the Millennial to include: the availability of search engines which provide alternative pathways to digital information resources, programmes to digitize analogue materials by non-traditional providers to library services, such as Google and Microsoft, the ability of publishers or producers of digital information resources to bypass libraries and target end users directly through pay-per-view services, social networking and virtual world sites where the Millennial gather. Also Abbott and Sutherland (2008) noted that the Net generation typically depends on the Internet to find new information as well as to self publish their own material via blogs and other networking services such as Flickr, MySpace, YouTube and Facebook. They do not seek out the more complicated text-based library catalogues and databases of scholarly online journals preferring the simplicity of Google despite the limitations.

Gardner and Eng (2005) conducted survey of Generation Y students to evaluate the impact of four characteristics ascribed to this generation on library services. Generation Y students: have great expectations, expect customization, are technology veterans and Utilize new communications. Generations Y students expect services will be available 24/7 in a variety of modes. They prefer doing research online and expect customization of technology and research to support their needs. They don't see the Internet and technology as tools but as integral parts of their lives. Research is done with an ATM attitude – fast and easy. Griffiths and Brophy (2005) also posited that student's use of search engines now influences their perception and expectation of other electronic resources. He characterized user expectations of the digital library as – all information, in all formats, immediately accessible through simple searching. Many libraries have been transformed through serious adoption of ICT to meet these expectations of the new age users. However, despite these efforts, various writers both professional and users express a lot of opinions and writings on prospects for libraries in the new competitive technology dominated environment.

Perceptions on the Prospects for Libraries in the Technology Dominated Environment

There is a great debate on the future of the library. This has been subject of discussion and debate and the central theme of many conferences and workshops worldwide. Librarianship is presented a profession at a crossroads in the 21st century. Library literature suggests that there is a true paradigm shift in the information environment in which libraries operate. These paradigm shifts are also presented as having both negative and positive impact on library services and librarians. The traditional library services are widely reported to be on the decline while web-based services are increasing at an astronomical speed. According to Coffman (2012), the library's role has been supplanted by Google, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Apple, and others which now offer access to millions of titles from their sites – all of which can be accessed at the touch of a button. In fact, with more than 15million title scanned, Google Books already outranks most of the world's print collections. So patrons will no longer need to turn to libraries to find titles that are a little more esoteric or were published long ago. If they want eBooks, Google and the principal retailers can already offer access to a much richer selection of titles, and much more easily and conveniently than libraries have ever been able to offer in print.

Librarians' bewilderments on the new information environment can be gouged from the quantity and theme of writings on the role of libraries in the new environment. While some of the writings are outright negative and pessimistic and present technology as ominous threat to the continual existence of the library, others see the digital environment as a challenging opportunity of which librarians can harness to improve information service delivery.

Warnken (2004) was of the view that "The changes brought about by technology offer new challenges and opportunities, but at the same time they can be perceived as threatening to both libraries and librarians themselves." Koster (2010) posited that "libraries as they are now are cannot meet new user expectations!" New users don't expect libraries, they expect information services. Libraries were once the best way of providing access to information. Instead of taking the defensive position of trying to secure their survival as organization (as is the natural aspiration of organizations) libraries should focus on finding new ways of achieving their original mission. This may even lead to the disappearance of libraries, or rather the replacement of the library organization by other organizational structures. The concept of library may need to be

redefined from “the location of a physical collection” to “a set of information services administered by a group of specialists.” According to JISCInform (2013), Libraries have moved from being the location of search, access and advice to playing a much smaller role within a much larger information landscape. The intimacy between the student or researcher and library has eroded over the last decade as students no longer view the library as the starting point for access to information and content. While this relationship between student and library has become more distant, the expectations students have for accessing information and library services have increased dramatically.

Contrary, some writers perceive technologies as a good development that has improved user services in the library and despite the competition posed by Google system; the core services the library renders to her users will still remain relevant way into the future. Many experts believe that the librarian’s job will become more, not less important in the coming decades as new problems of digital organization and preservation are created and confronted. Indeed, many consider the librarian most qualified to lead efforts to embrace the new media while being the least beholden to profit-making economic models (Bernstein, 2006). According to Herrera (2012), “Libraries are more relevant than ever. They are a place of personal growth and reinvention, a place for help in navigating the information age, a gathering place for civic and cultural engagement and a trusted place for preserving culture.” Drake (2000) noted that librarians are emerging from the chaos of the last few years with new responsibilities and new prestige resulting from their embracing technology and their leadership in its uses. It is not recognized generally that librarians have done more to bring technology to people and to use technology to enhance human activities. The road has not been smooth, and still has a few bumps and potholes, and the prospects are most exciting. Carr (2006) stated that while some, at least, saw the development of global electronic access to information as a threat to the very future of the physical library, others highly saw it as an opportunity to rethink, and to refashion, their library’s services according to what their users needed in what had become users needed in what had become, for the first time, a fast-changing information environment.”

In terms of economic and cultural value, Tee (nd) posited that libraries have one major advantage over “free” web-based information resources. They provide access to expensive scholarly information resources in digital form. In spite of their preferences

for using Google to search for information, the millennial generation students will still have to use the resources provided by their library for some of their coursework and research. It is inconceivable, despite the development of Google Scholar and the desire of some scholarly publishers to bypass libraries, that scholarly resources will be made available free of charge in the foreseeable future. Many millennial will continue to rely on their library to provide them with the scholarly access they need.

The Future of the Library

Technology has created easy access to information, but it has also accentuated the problem of information quality and overload. Librarians have important roles to play now, and in the future in acquiring and directing users to quality information as well as teaching skills that are highly needed to wade through the saturated information superhighway. They should therefore re-evaluate and refashion their services in line with the emerged needs and fashion out ways of meeting these needs using all available technologies and resources. These will be the core roles of the libraries of the future. Hendrix (2010) noted that "some individuals are pessimistic about the future of libraries, but many in the community envision future library services that incorporate new philosophies, new technologies, and new spaces to meet the needs of all users more effectively than ever before. These changes go beyond merely incorporating technological advances to include rethinking the very core of what defines a library-the sense of place, of service, and of community that has characterized the modern library for the last century." In summation, evolution of information and communication technologies should not be seen as a threat to the very future of libraries; librarians should re-evaluate their roles to offer innovative services that will meet expectations of users in the competitive digital environment.

Conclusion

Understanding users' expectations and meeting the expectations is the only way for libraries to remain relevant way into the future. Users' expectations may be changing; this is expected considering the availability of the Internet and the World Wide Web. But library is still used by a good percentage of the patrons whose needs to be access to information have not diminished. Libraries should focus on meeting these needs using all available tools. They should also remain creative as they adopt technology to refashion their services in line with the new trend in information dissemination and delivery.

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