

## **LIBRARIES: FACILITATORS OF KNOWLEDGE GENERATION**

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### **Introduction**

I need not describe what a library is since most of us here are librarians, but for the purpose of this paper, we must have a definition that is all inclusive. I prefer to refer to a library as "a place where print, digital and other non-print materials are collected, organized and made available for access and use". Thus, a library is expected to have materials such as printed and electronic books, printed and electronic journals, audio tapes, videotapes, maps, documents, CDs, cassettes, manuscripts, slides, microfilm, microfiche, realia, etc, and the equipment needed for accessing the various formats of information. These materials are managed by professional librarians and other workers in the library. The library may be made of walls, where these materials are stored; or it could be virtual, where all the information needed is stored on a computer with Internet facilities, which will be accessible to its registered users. The ultimate aim of a library is to provide information, which when accessed and used could lead to knowledge generation and national development. The library is therefore best placed among other institutions to facilitate knowledge generation since the main business of a library is to provide information to its users, which is heterogeneous.

The library is expected to serve the following groups of people: kindergartens, students, professors, policy makers, professionals, politicians, the rural people, physically challenged persons, illiterates, neo-literates, farmers, fishermen, chiefs; artisans; miscreants, etc. These groups of user, and more, could be serviced with information and knowledge by any of the following types of libraries: academic libraries, special libraries, school libraries, government libraries, public libraries, national libraries, etc.

### **What is Knowledge?**

In the information continuum, knowledge occupies a prominent position. Data is the raw material of information that has no context and thus, meaningless. When

the data is processed, it becomes information, and at this stage, meaning is given to the data and it becomes usable. Knowledge is the next in the hierarchy as it is information combined with understanding and capability. Knowledge evolves from experience based on recurring patterns and enables one to predict events more accurately. Lee and Young (2000) stated that "Information is transformed into knowledge when it is interpreted and applied to specific situation" By means of the obtained knowledge it is possible to make decisions in complex and uncertain environment. The last in the information continuum is wisdom which enables human beings to make inventions that will be of benefit to the mankind.

When users have access to information and become knowledgeable, or they access and use the documented knowledge of others, they are more innovative and creative, and the society benefits and grows, economically, technologically and in all facets. Of course the society will develop and grow. This is why it is important to make information constantly available to the society. Evers and Gerke (2005) have described knowledge as the main driving force for innovation and development. The World Bank (1999) reported that the difference between developing countries and industrialized countries can be attributed to knowledge. In the same World bank report it was reported that about 80% of knowledge created is from the industrialized countries. Tise (1999) described knowledge generation as essential to the process of development. She stated that knowledge was expected to alleviate poverty and deprivation, promote innovation and change and serves as a catalyst for national development. Thus, local institutions in Africa responsible for generating knowledge in the form of research must be supported by libraries to ensure that information is made available constantly.

There are two main types of knowledge: explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is expressed in terms of number, words and drawings; hence it is called documented knowledge. Because it is documented it is easily communicated, shared and transferred. It could either be disseminated in the form of print or digitally. Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, is mainly personal experience which is not documented. It resides in peoples' minds. It includes personal beliefs, perspectives and values. It is not easily transferrable. However, it is well known that both types of knowledge are useful to the society hence a new field in the information profession called the knowledge management has emerged. Owing to the importance of knowledge in innovation and creativity, many library schools including those in Africa have incorporated knowledge management into their curricula.

In this paper we are concerned with knowledge and its generation. Housel and Bell (2001) provided a broad definition of knowledge as an ideational, (i.e., conceptual rather than physical) construct generated through the agency of the human mind”

### **Motivation for this seminar**

As a President of a library association I know that the concern of any professional association like the Ghana Library Association is to develop its members professionally so that they can provide optimum services to their clientele. Thus, an association must be constantly involved in the professional development of its members at an affordable price. This is when the association becomes relevant to members of the profession, otherwise it will fizzle out. How can we survive under the sustained competition from other institutions, especially now with the popularization of the Internet globally?. Have we outlived our usefulness? Perhaps I may share with you some of the ill feelings against the profession. Some will say librarians just put books on the shelves and no more. Others will say they graduated from the university with first class honours without visiting or using the library. Even some of the students in library schools do ask what is special in librarianship that one will spend four or five years as the case may be to study. Even before the era of the Internet, the society already had a poor perception of the profession. With the advent of the Internet, the situation has become more critical as almost every educated person now has some knowledge of Internet use. What can we do to ensure that our jobs are not eroded while we remain relevant as well.

### **Librarian as a facilitator in knowledge generation**

As a result of industrial revolution there was exponential growth in information, which has now resulted in the phenomenon called the information explosion. This is further aggravated by the advent of the Internet which contains seamless information. Utilizing this information has been made possible through ICT technologies, which ensure that information is obtained within a short time. It is important, however, for librarians to be equipped with skills in the use of these technologies. Because of the avalanche of information in the different fields, it is virtually impossible for any user to keep track of all information in his/her field. Since the advent of the Internet, information has grown in leaps and bounds. The complaint now is that there is too much information. A search on any search engine, whether simple or complex will yield millions of documents. Thus, there is constant need for refining the information search to ensure that a manageable volume of information is provided. Fortunately, the Internet and the world wide web have provided a number of tools that can assist the librarian to provide and disseminate information to users.

The library's role is to organize information in such a way that a user can access information needed instantly. In order to have access easily to information, experts have devised a tool termed metadata, which is simply data that describes the characteristics of the content of an original work just like the normal catalogue we are all familiar with; but metadata is more sophisticated than catalogue in terms of its utility. According to Milstead and Fieldman (1999), metadata allows a user to have information access through labeling of contents of a document consistently and allows the user to follow and find the information in one place.

Rao and Babu (2001) have highlighted the changing environment of librarianship profession “The environment in which librarians work is changing in terms of greater access to a range of information, increased speed in acquiring information, greater complexity in locating, analyzing and linking information, constantly changing technology and adaptation, lack of standardization of both hardware and software, continuous learning for users and staff, management of financial investment for technology.”

Morris (1999) also stated the need for librarians to be knowledgeable in certain areas in the information field. He opined that librarian must be equipped “with technical skills such as knowledge of HTML, programming languages, knowledge of hardware basics and troubleshooting, understanding of software programs, and the skill to search, display, and retrieve data effectively in a variety of information retrieval systems.”

According to Schreiber and Moring (1997) the facilitator does not solve the total information problems of users. He addresses the communications and information needs of the users in one way or another and makes an identification of resources for fulfilling the needs of users. Facilitation involves finding, analyzing, synthesizing, packaging and dissemination information, thus the role of the facilitator is to filter information geared towards the needs of the user.

The traditional librarian makes the document in a library available to its users through the catalogue, which may include card catalogue, online catalogue, etc. The ultimate aim is facilitate access of information to the user, however, the role is much more complex in a worldwide environment. Rao and Babu (2001) have stated that “ the traditional librarian has to play the role of facilitator in identification, gathering and arranging information infrastructure such as network access, software access, licenses and passwords to use charged resources like FirstSearch, UnCover, Ovid etc. They listed the strengths of librarians in navigating the information stack and providing information to users as follows:

### ***Strengths***

- By the nature of their profession, librarians are service oriented.
- Librarians are able to identify, evaluate and organize print as well as electronic information resources.
- Librarians understand what the user wants and are very close to the user information requirements than other professionals.
- Librarians are able to train users to search and retrieve information, which is a part of user education in his profession.
- Librarians believe in the value of information sharing and networking.
- Librarians are experienced in knowledge management concepts, which are most identical to the classification, cataloguing, documentation, storing and making information available on networks.
- Last, but not least, 'human touch' they can impart.

### ***Weaknesses***

The weaknesses as given by Smee et.al. 1999) are as follows:

- The general feeling of the librarians is that they are threatened by technological change.
- Librarians lack same level of technical knowledge in dealing with computer hardware, software, etc. as the concerned professionals.
- Librarians are no longer acting as controllers of information especially while using Internet.
- They are struggling with the user's false perception that the Internet can meet all information needs.
- Librarians need to interact with knowledgeable users and IT professionals to understand their specific needs and to add value to their products. (Smee et.al, 1999).

## **Library Associations and Capacity Building of Librarians**

There is no doubt that the librarian has a major role to play in facilitating generation of knowledge. However, there are constraints as already stated above. The major inhibitions to a librarian serving as facilitator in response to the changing scenario /environment are the lack of skills, coupled with lack of capacity building structures in the libraries. No training institution can equip its trainees with all what is required for the librarian to function effectively forever. This profession is dynamic. There are changes in technology, demands of users are becoming more sophisticated. New things are happening on a daily basis, thus, continuing education for librarians is a “sine qua non” in the profession. This is where the library association comes in. For example, the use of Web 2.0 tools in navigating for information on the Internet has been well acclaimed. Through the use of Web 2.0 tools one is able to disseminate information to users thus enhancing information delivery. These tools include blogs, Wikis, RSS (Really Simple Syndication or Rich site summary) social networking websites such as face book, twitters. These tools have made information delivery to users easy as it enhances content creation and content sharing. This will ensure information access. Unfortunately in recent studies done in Nigeria it was found that a large number of librarians are not even aware of the existence of these tools (Atulomah, 2010; Anyaoku, et. al. 2012). Also, it is important for librarians to be able to construct metadata so that it will facilitate access to information by their users.

It is equally important for librarians to be knowledgeable in information literacy. This will enable librarians to teach their users on how to search and locate information. With this, knowledge could be generated and used for the development of the society.

Research is an important aspect of knowledge creation and dissemination. it is in recognition of this that librarians in academic libraries are regarded as academic staff. It is important that librarians are constantly involved in research so that they will be in a position to generate knowledge. They will also be able to improve the image of the professionals as partners in the field of knowledge generation. This is why library associations must be actively involved in the professional development of their members in this aspect.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The Ghana Library Association, like others in Africa, should decide whether it wants to be a social association or professional association which should be fully involved in the professional development of its members. It should not be cosmetic. Facilitating knowledge generation should be the focus of library

Associations in developing countries, especially in Africa. For example, why the Nigerian Library Association has been involved in many capacity building workshops the motivation has always been for profit and not the development of members per se. Averagely it costs about 200 US dollars to register for a workshop in Nigeria and by the time you add the cost of transportation and boarding and feeding it will be almost 500 US dollars. Very few libraries in Africa can afford to sponsor their staff to such workshops, so it is the same group of people who are from financially vibrant libraries that can afford to attend these workshops. I will suggest that library associations should launch funds for various capacity building workshops on an annual basis, where wealthy individuals, corporate bodies, etc, will be asked to donate funds to the association for the purpose of organizing capacity building workshops. Thus, the association will be in a position to subsidize capacity building workshops for their members, so that many more people will attend and also promote knowledge generation and dissemination.

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