21st CENTURY LIBRARIANS AND EFFECTIVE INFORMATION SERVICE DELIVERY

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Abstract

This article describes the nature of the 21st century and the changing role of academic libraries in the new millennium. It sheds light on the development of hybrid libraries as a panacea for meeting the information needs of twenty first century library users who exhibit much dexterity in using new technologies. It further explores emerging trends in information provision which can be employed by 21st century librarians to reposition the academic library for effective service delivery. Lack of competency, lack of technology literacy and inadequate power supply were highlighted as some of the challenges that hinder effective service delivery. The article submits that librarians should make efforts to acquire 21st century skills through personal training so as to be relevant and defend their profession since funds mapped for training are not always adequate.

Keywords: service delivery; librarians, academic libraries; information needs.

Introduction

It is a known fact that libraries have witnessed significant changes in recent years. This change which is brought about by information and communication technologies has impacted on the mode of providing information services. The traditional methods of information dissemination have given way to electronic means of communication. While the developments and application of ICT in library operations have improved and facilitated the dissemination of information and access, it has equally provided new roles in information provision, dissemination and transfer. The librarian no longer plays a passive role rather he assumes an active role. He is no longer a custodian of books but

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the gate way to a myriad of information sources. Haber (2011) posits that while providing books was a standalone function for libraries throughout the last few centuries, their offerings have evolved with the digital age to meet the changing needs of their patrons.

Academic libraries in Nigeria are not divorced from this technology revolution. As information providers, they are constantly under pressure to provide relevant sources of information to their immediate communities. Technology enables change and technology enforces change. According to Bales (1999), librarians, staff and patrons must make a number of adjustments as a result of any library automation project, whether it is an original implementation or a migration. One key area is the relationship between people and technology. People have to change the way they behave and think to work effectively in an automated environment.

This means that academic libraries are compelled to incorporate digital sources in order to remain at the fore of information provision and dissemination. Nowadays, students and faculty have developed greater preference for electronic information than manually driven systems. The increased availability of digital information has caused students to find alternative means of study and research with the aid of laptops and cell phones. Digital technology has reduced the importance and usage of libraries in developing countries. Ugah (2007) asserts that the acquisition of information online using PC's such as laptops and palmtops and even phones is proving to be detrimental to academic libraries in terms of patronage.

Patrons no longer depend on the academic library as an essential part of their learning and research rather they are beginning to see the library as one of those facilities a university or college should have. Libraries must of a necessity strive to retain their patrons and be at the peak of providing information sources that suit the demands of present day information seekers. There is need therefore to

ensure that the academic library continues to soar high in information generation, provision and dissemination. The library cannot function effectively without the librarians who are the human resources that determine effectiveness in service delivery. It is against this background that this article aims to suggest to 21st century library professionals useful tips that could improve library services.

Nature of the 21st century

The 21st century is the millennium of information. It is also seen as the era of explosion of information output and information sources. It is known as the beginning of knowledge age. New patterns of work and new business practices have developed as a result; new kinds of work with new and different skills are required. In this century, the meaning of knowledge has changed. Knowledge is no longer what is stored in the minds of experts, represented in books and classified in disciplines. It is now thought of as being like a form of energy, as a system of networks and flows – something that does things or makes things happen. In the knowledge age, change not stability is a given. Knowledge age workers need to be able to locate, assess and represent new information quickly. They need to communicate this to others. They need to be adaptable, creative and innovative and be able to understand things as a system or big picture level.

In the 21st century academic library, the emergence of ICT has redefined the library's role. Print materials are no longer sufficient to store information. CD-ROM databases, electronic document delivery, automated cataloguing, circulation systems and online information retrieval (OPAC) have become the order of the day. Eguavoen (2011) citing Ostrow (1998) admits that the advent of the internet , digitization and the ability to access library and research materials from remote locations have also created dramatic changes by the end of the 20th century. Ramzan (2004) asserts that developments like expert systems, wireless networks, virtual collections, interactive Web interfaces, virtual reference

services, and personal Web portals bring about greater changes since the start of the new millennium. Moghaddam (2009) is of the view that as information technologies, information systems and information networks have been developing. This century has also witnessed a dramatic change in users' information seeking pattern. Byamugisha (2010) adds that the patrons' expectations for a distance service delivery across library services have increased; patrons have come to expect a wide variety of automated push and or pull services from libraries and from a distance.

Nigerian academic libraries in the 21st century are gradually changing to fit into their clients' information seeking patterns. The situation has brought about the establishment of digital libraries to compliment traditional ones. This is evidenced in the attempt to digitize library resources to cater for the information needs of new generation users that is, the 21st century library users who exhibit much dexterity in using new sources and new technologies.

The 21st century librarian

As the traditional custodian of information, librarians in the 21st century need to be aware of these significant changes and as such employ their technological knowhow and intellectual masterpiece in order to retain the leading role of the academic libraries in supporting teaching, learning and research. This means that the 21st century librarian will have to be armed with competent skills that will enhance the provision of effective library services to meet client's changing information needs.

Literature abound on the competencies and skills needed for the 21st century library professional. Tennant (1999) identifies important personal traits : the capacity to learn constantly and quickly; flexibility; innate skepticism; propensity to take risks; abiding public service perspective; good interpersonal skills; skill at enabling and fostering change; and capacity for and desire to work

independently. Omekwu (2003), mentions basic knowledge of computers and their capabilities; Competency with search engines; internet facilities; e-mail; internet navigator tools, web browsers and web file formats; database software; internet development and management know-how. Also, some of the 21ˢᵗ century skills according to Krishnan (2011) include communication and collaboration, creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, media literacy, ICT literacy, flexibility and adaptability. The skills aforementioned are familiar with us; the challenge is how to harness these skills for effective library services.

21ˢᵗ century librarians and effective information service delivery:

The human resource is a vital aspect of any organization. The success or failure of any organization depends to a large extent on the human capacity. The librarian of the 21ˢᵗ century is changing with the changing environment which is a consequent of ICT. Moghaddam (2009) notes that one of the vital elements of success and dynamism is specialized human resources viz librarians. LaRue

(2012) firmly believes that the library's most powerful asset is its professional staff. According to him, librarians have the power to change lives and build community- but to do this, they have to leave their desks, leave their buildings and show the community what a powerful tool they are. Tanawade (2011) observed that it is time to publicize ourselves, our professionalism, and the skills we have to offer. From the foregoing, the librarian of the 21ˢᵗ century is no longer one that sits behind the reference desk answering mere reference questions but rather an active marketer who sells the library's products and services to his community at every opportunity. He packages current information sources and delivers on point. This strategy serves as his bait to attract clients and by doing so; he according to Tanawade (2011) ―fixes the idea in their minds that the library is source of incalculable value."

The 21ˢᵗ century librarian is an information warehouse, one with a desperate zeal to impact positively on his environment. He is at home with modern technological infrastructure. According to Ikhemuemhe (2005), if librarians are to continue to make substantial contributions as information disseminators, they will have to understand and exploit ICT infrastructure and emerging technologies in delivering services to their clientele. In repositioning the academic library for effective information service delivery, the roles of the 21ˢᵗ century librarian will include the following:

Advocacy: In the current dispensation, users no longer seek information in the library. The reverse has become the case where the library goes out to render information services to users. To achieve this, the librarian has to look out for opportunities to connect and interact with his varied users. He therefore employs his interpersonal skills strategies to connect with administrators, faculty and students. During meetings, he can brief faculty on current publications and their terms of accessibility. By this, acts as a strong advocate for the library which is a vital organ of the university.

Use of social media: The library is in the business of connecting people with information. Web 2.0 technologies have brought new roles for library professionals. Web 2.0 tools such as facebook, twitter, blogs, online groups which are also known as social media have made it possible for people to actually connect to one another through the internet. Khan and Bhatti (2012) put it thus; social media provides more opportunity to reach your community, target specific audiences, and give them a chance to interact with your library. By using social media, libraries can engage their clients on issues of interest and enable them make inputs especially as it affects library services. This can improve the library's image.

Mobile phones: Mobile devices like cell phones have improved communication and enhanced the way information is being created, delivered and accessed. The 21ˢᵗ century librarian can provide effective library services through mobile telephones like the GSM (Global Systems for Mobile Communication). In support of teaching and research, the use of SMS (Short Message Services) can be employed to answer reference queries, and alert users on new arrivals and upcoming events in the university calendar e.g public holidays, university matriculation, lecture free week etc. This could be flashed through a facility called —broadcast‖ where one text message is sent to all the library contacts listed in the address book on the mobile phone at once. (Iwhiwhu, Ruteyan & Eghwubare, 2010).

Information packaging: Packaging of information in various formats has become the norm in the digital era. This has created new opportunities for the library to provide value added services in the academic environment. Users of the 21ˢᵗ century are at home with electronic sources of information which permit multiple use of a material by different users at the same time. To exploit this advantage, the librarian can develop and preserve research output of his institution through digitizing projects, theses and dissertations. In collaboration with the university ICT center, an institutional repository can be created to host these projects on the universities‘ website. While their visibility is guaranteed on the website, their access and retrieval remains the sole responsibility of the library.

Reference service: Reference service is the assistance given to a user in search of information in a library. In the Nigerian situation, many users shy away from the catalogue because they do not know how to use it. Some are oblivious of the importance of a catalogue in the retrieval process. Their inability to locate the needed information could cause frustration and apathy to library use. Reference

service is the core of librarianship and should not be relegated. Ibegbulam (2000) observes that reference services no longer center on one-on-one service delivered face-to-face in the library.

 The quality of a good reference service depends on the competency and skill of the reference librarian. The 21st century librarian employs his in-depth knowledge and search strategy to meet user information needs. He does not just point to a row of shelves rather he involves himself in the search process. He is not satisfied until he has satisfied his client. By so doing, he improves his knowledge as well as the image of the library.

Partnership: Librarians in the 21st century can partner with academic units to teach their students information literacy skills so that they can become effective users of information. Ashoor (2000) posits that developing information literacy skills should be the main goal of the library's instructional programs. Information literacy is the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze and use information. IL equips students with the critical skills necessary to become independent lifelong learners. It includes the technological skills needed to use the modern library as a gateway to information. Libraries inform as well as empower users to become resourceful. When users acquire the right knowledge, they are empowered to become useful citizens. In partnership with relevant units, the academic library can create an activity center for users to acquire extra skills. Such skills include sewing, baking, hair dressing, decorations, poultry or fish farming. This has the advantage of adding value to the library.

Challenges to Effective Information Service Delivery in the 21ST century.

Lack of competency: some librarians in Nigeria are not competent to take on the challenging role of the 21st century information service delivery. They are averse to technology and perceive the application of computers to library work as an

aberration. This being the case, they are reluctant to embrace new technology. Tanawade (2011) asserts that many librarians lack confidence in the face of increasing information technology. This slows service delivery and retards productivity. Hayati and Jowkar (2008) opine that the most problematic factors which slow down the adoption of information technologies stem from unfamiliarity of academic librarians and users with computers and searching databases.

Lack of technology literacy: Some professional librarians lack the requisite technological literacy needed for a 21ˢᵗ century library service. Technological literacy can be viewed as the ability to responsibly use appropriate technology to communicate, solve problems, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, design and create information to improve learning in all subject areas and acquire lifelong knowledge and skills in the 21ˢᵗ century. Edem (2008), states that the major challenge facing the 21ˢᵗ century library is not underfunding but the poor performance of librarians and information professionals in the developing countries as a result of poor ICT skills.

Lack of basic skills in the use of information technology has become a clog to better library services. Anyira (2011) adds that librarians without a well developed ICT skill cannot render effective library services, thus, lack of skills among librarians constitute a major obstacle to service delivery in the 21st century.

Poor internet connectivity: In a digital library, the internet plays a primary role in digital information but equitable access to the internet in Nigerian academic libraries is yet to be realized. The existing internet connections for most people are slow. Olabude (2007) states that there are many constraints that led to the poor internet development in Africa, one of this is the initial capital outlay to install internet facilities. This is because almost all the African countries are

experiencing huge debts and foreign exchange required to purchase the facilities are lacking. Chigbu and Dim (2012) further asserts that there is no efficient telecommunication and power supply base to serve as spring board for the development of internet services in Africa. Where they are available, the expensive nature of the services is another huge factor.

Inadequate power supply: The Nigerian power situation is in deplorable condition. There is constant power outage which has frustrated effective provision of information services. Most libraries rely on alternative source of electricity such as power generating machines to function. However, these machines are fraught with problems of maintenance, high cost of diesel and petrol. The resultant effect has been the provision of epileptic services. According to Adepetun (2012), the pangs of power supply crisis in the country have found expression in the expenditure profile, as most organizations expend huge amount of money providing alternative power supply. These alternatives include generators, solar system, green technology, turbine gas among others. The library as an organization is not divorced from this anomaly. Effective information service delivery cannot thrive in this type of scenario.

Poor funding: Money is the tendon that attaches the academic library to effective information service provision. Money is needed for the acquisition of information and communication technology equipment, for internet subscriptions, staff training, emolument and maintenance. The strength of a library lies in its information resources both print and online. Funds are needed to cater for a whole range of services in the library of the 21st century yet government subventions in the education sector are not adequate. Nwalo (2000), states that problems inhibiting IT applications by African libraries include apathy and inadequate government funding. Funding is essential to excellent library services.

Suffice it to say that, scarcity of funds has always been a primary hindrance to several noble pursuits.

Conclusion

The emergence of information and communication technologies has brought a paradigm shift for academic libraries. ICT has enhanced access, research and communication. This means that it has become a very useful tool in academic libraries whose mission is to support teaching, learning and research. This being the case, professional librarians in the 21ˢᵗ century are expected to exploit the opportunities brought about by ICT to ensure that academic libraries are repositioned to be 21ˢᵗ century compliant and remain the hub of information provision, generation and dissemination.

In view of this, the following recommendations were made:

- Training of librarians in the 21ˢᵗ century should be given priority. This is because the success or failure of a library service depends on the caliber of staff.

- Funds earmarked for staff training and development in the universities should not be tampered with and should be released promptly when the need arises. Experiences have shown that staffs scheduled for training sometimes do not attend because of insufficient funds.

- In the face of dwindling budgetary cuts, librarians in the 21ˢᵗ century should make personal efforts to improve their skills in order to defend

    their profession. As information providers in the 21ˢᵗ century, they are expected to be competent and knowledgeable. Therefore, it is

    recommended that computer literacy skills, metadata skills, information literacy skills etc should be acquired. These skills are needed to effectively serve users and remain at the top.

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