Internet Services and Academic Libraries: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to identify and discuss the usefulness of Internet in the life of academic libraries. It also identifies and critically discusses the negative influences posed by the use of Internet as a great medium of intellectual communication and also appraises its suitability within the Nigerian context.

Design/Methodology: The exploratory approach was used for this study: First, a conceptual framework was examined so as to identify the relationship existing between internet and academic libraries. This was followed by the examination of the benefits, social problems imposed and the way forward.

Findings: The paper found out that for an enhanced utilization of Internet to prop up library and academic development which are pertinent to social interaction, peace, and balanced cognition, a group of vigilant users are necessary. Governments, University administrators, and librarians who support positive maximization of Internet gains are imperative.

Practical Implications: National development through academic libraries is endangered in an environment where there is no human face in the management and utilization of digital academic libraries. This is because it will reduce the moral and academic standard of the people and breed educated criminals who visit libraries only to do mischief.

Originality/Value: The value of this paper lies in its identification and discussion of the vital factors that tend to inhibit effective use of the Internet in academic libraries. It also articulated the imperatives and innovative strategies for increasing the potency of Internet use in academic libraries.

Key Words: Internet problems; Internet services; academic libraries; libraries, values of Internet.

Paper Type: Conceptual

Introduction

At the initial experience, the Internet may appear to be baffling, incomprehensible, mystic and enigmatic, but with a steady interest and untwining of its processes, it becomes a thin of joy that enhances socio-intellectual development. Since its inception, millions of people are hooked to it. It has influenced communication systems, radically affected research and learning, and greatly helped to constrict the world into a global village. It has been in a constant state of change and development, thereby lending itself to extensive and massive use globally. The Internet has shown marked potential benefits in the production, preservation and dissemination of information in libraries especially academic libraries. Many people have written about its origin, meaning and the facilities it offers without concisely looking at its usefulness and its negative influences in academic libraries in Nigeria. This paper is, therefore, designed to examine the conceptual definitions of Internet, and critically appraise its usefulness and negative influences, intent on discussing ways out of those influences.

Conceptual Definitions of Internet

If one were to ask for a one-sentence definition of the internet, one is likely to get a variety of answers. For instance, for developers, the internet is seen to be a protocol stack and computing model for transport control protocol / Internet protocol (TCP/IP) while for those on businesses, it is a technology bug on promises but sometimes short on deliverables. For consumers, Internet is an incredible resource for information, communication and connectivity. To them, it appears mind bogging, frustrating,

and at other time incredibly empowering (Bride, 1998). To Ekemezie and Ngene (2004) Internet is a global network of computer networks that are available to everyone that has a personal computer and a means of connecting to it. Cawkel (1993) and Ojo-Igbionoba (1997) described it as a large computer networks formed out of thousands of interconnected networks, and which support a whole range of service such as electronic mail, file transfer protocol, database access, etc. Williams (2000) defines Internet as a huge international network made up of many smaller networks linked together like a spider web.

The above views held differently by different people depict that internet is one of the technological concepts or phenomena that means something very different to many different people. Internet is simply a vast network of computers that connect many institutions, businesses, and individuals. It is usually referred to as a network of networks where millions of computers worldwide are interconnected and the information sources in each computer made available to all users who have access to Internet. Internet is an information super high way.

Simply put, academic libraries are those libraries that serve such institutions as Colleges of Education, Polytechnics, Monotechnics and Universities. They stock large and different materials for the institutions' teaching and learning. According to Ugwuanyi (2009) they are sites of intensive intellectual work and contemplation. As such they hardly can hold enough especially at this age of information proliferation. They must therefore get hooked to the Net and enjoy the outcomes of information globalization.

Benefits of Internet

Internet helps academic libraries in their bid to uphold their institutions' teachings, learning, publishing and research objectives. Many of these libraries obtain their digital collections in the Internet and are readily accessible. Through this, they have access to the vast array of resources like technical reports, dissertations, journals, books, articles, etc. The usefulness of Internet can hardly be overstated; it has enviably demonstrated its invaluable benefits to academic libraries as can be seen in the discussions below.

It provides a wide variety of useful information: Internet's richness and global applicability is

very stunning. This is why within a decade of its appearance, it has become a worldwide phenomenon that has automatically changed the way we interact and learn. Appraising the usefulness of Internet to libraries, Jegede (1995) stated that Internet has successfully combined the knowledge of universities, libraries, art galleries, government departments, scientists, searchers, and up to thirty million individual companies. Continuing, he stated the obvious importance of African libraries joining the Internet as communicating, exchanging and seeking, disseminating information and educational resources. Corroborating this, Annan (2004) observed that in only a few years, the Internet has revolutionized trade, health, education, and indeed, the very fabric of human communication and exchange. All these portray the great potentials of Internet in academic libraries, some of which are yet to manifest.

Internet is a powerful search tool for library users: As a powerful search tool for retrieval and dissemination of information, Internet is like a conglomeration of thousands of libraries merged together, and there is nothing one cannot find from it. Millions of topics, subjects and files are available in the net and as such a great relief for researchers. Internet has helped to make research easier, more interesting and more collaborative. For people who are investigating into different topics, Internet is a good point of access for materials. University lecturers, students and other library users, access from the Internet databases that are related to their lectures, homework and projects. Emphasizing this, Owalabi and Attama (2007) enjoined academic libraries in developing countries especially in Africa not to ignore the potentials of Internet in order to bring up their teachings to a globally accepted standard.

Internet facilities and services are often reliable: The Internet apart from being a renewal and search instrument, the web pages and services which it offers are often reliable sources of information dissemination. Lending credence to this, Yumba (1997) advised that academic libraries ought to create web pages where they can publicize all sorts of information for their clientele. Such information should include uploading their catalogue entries, electronic journals, on-going research activities available.s

Internet is a powerful medium for publishing: In terms of publishing, Internet is most relevant, and publishers are highly using it for presenting

the contents of newspapers, magazines, and books. As a result of such electronic publishing, the publishers make a great savings in terms of printing paper and distribution costs. Moreover, up-dating information on the net is more instantaneous and current than on the paper. Speaking on Internet publishing, Annan (2004) observed that in managing, promoting and protecting its presence in our lives, we need to be no less creative than those who invented it. There is a greater need today for publishing than before, scholars want to report their scientific findings expeditiously, the Internet has been of great help in this regard as all the processes involved in traditional or manual publishing are usually circumvented.

Internet aids creation and easy transmission of knowledge: Internet makes data transmission faster and therefore, enables one to access information from all over the world. Through this, knowledge has grown widely. In consonance with this, Christian mirror (2006) observed that experts in information technology stated that advancement in knowledge between A.D 2005 doubled the growth knowledge between 1975 and 2000.They have equally projected that in another two or three years, growths in knowledge will double that of the last five years. This global growth and expanse in knowledge is due to Internet development. Speaking on the importance of internet knowledge transmission, Ki-moon (2007) observed that internet has become the backbone of our globalize world. He further stated it has become a powerful tool even in the United Nations' mission to promote peace and security, development of human rights, particularly in the flows of information and knowledge that it enables. The potentials of internet to enrich the skills and understandings of library users have helped to lessen poverty and improve the living standard of citizens in developing countries. For this, academic institutions, national and international bodies have seen Internet usage to be a top priority in the agenda of different decision-making bodies

Internet enables academic libraries to download files, texts, graphics or programmes from public data libraries stored on host computers in academic and commercial institutions. Corroborating this, Bride (1998) gives the gains of Internet thus;

- Sending mails to friends, academic and commercial institution anywhere in the world. Messages are delivered almost immediately, and cost no more than the price of a few seconds telephone time.

- Taking part in group discussions, either in real time chat rooms or through articles in newsgroups. Pursue a special interest, hobby or obsession, through one of the thousands of newsgroups, from around the world where ideas, advice and files are exchanged.

- Watching video clips, viewing exhibitions in art galleries and museums and looking through cameras thousands of miles away are the possibilities the Internet offers.

- Getting the latest national and international news weather reports, stock market prices and financial advice, travel information and booking of flights can be done online.

- Joining in multiplayer games; contributing to interactive art and graffiti sessions.

- Going shopping for books, CDs, gifts, insurance, PCs, software, even for the week's groceries if you live near a virtual supermarket can all be done with the Internet

- Looking up information in an increasing number of reference books, such as the World Wide Web virtual library and the CIA world face books can be done with the Internet

- Performing keyword searches on electronic libraries to find papers that contain references on your chosen topic and one search scans the linked world.

Commending the usefulness of Internet, especially in academics, Ezeani (2010:17 stated thus:

The Internet facilitates education in several ways. Lecturers can teach students via Internet in the form of e-learning and other online distance education programmes. Lecturers can read the works of their supervisees, correct and send back same to them via the e-mail as file attachments. Examinations can be conducted through the Net and results released through the same means. It is also one of the fasted

ways of reporting research findings to the world.

Much more than the above are the benefits of the Internet to the growth and development of education and academic libraries globally. This is because every day, someone somewhere adds something new to the Internet, thereby making it a point of convergence for all learning.

Internet Problems

Considering Internet's full potential as a tool for news, education, communications, entertainment and research, one gets poised to adjudge it to be vice-free, of total and incalculable significance in academic libraries. Yet, internet is never without some problems that might cast doubts in the minds of some people as to its full utilization and usefulness. Below are some of the problems which the use of internet has brought into academic libraries.

Posting of unedited and invalidated information: Internet provides useful and copious resources for intellectual work in academic libraries. Yet, it harbours a great deal of misinformation which cause enmity, wrangling and damage. According to Chete, Chiemeke and Oboerhiri (2010), information on the Internet assumes very diverse forms, such as phoney business rumours to spur or induce stock activity, bogus or false quotations or actions attributed to public figures, fabricated medical breakthroughs citing names of respected or non-existent researchers. It also includes malicious rumours designed to defame individuals, vengeful flames against companies from dissatisfied customers and employees, and so on.

Many of the material posted on the Internet may be misleading, inaccurate, or even fraudulent. This is because many or these materials posted never pass through professional editors and some writers are not specialists in the areas they are writing. Many people, therefore, tend to doubt the accuracy and appropriateness of the information usually found on the Net.

Showing of pornographic material: Today, many parents cry out bitterly against the violent acts and, or pornographic films given out on the Internet. Of course, the greatest challenge of our time is the increasing exposure of our youth to pornography and other unwholesome values on the Net. This has become a source of great worry to educators, librarians, parents, and to governments. This exposure becomes more annoying when it is shown almost all over the Internet so that even those not interested in it are directly or indirectly led into such sites even when searching on different subjects. By this, it becomes very difficult for students to avoid complete exposure to erotic materials. This accordingly influences youthful passion for sexual violence such as nudity, rape and many other terrible moral declines among the youths (Christian Mirror, 2006). The Internet is therefore creating a more downward trend in our moral regeneration and rectitude.

Problems of Hackers: Another great source of concern for Internet users includes the issue of security. There are some mischievous programmers called hackers. They very often break into large computers using stolen passwords and security loopholes to steal information, transfer money to their accounts and carry out a lot of other criminal activities (Ekemezie and Ngene, 2004). They do enormous and incredible amount of damage if they dare break into one's account. This occurs only to computers that are networked.

Internet is very derailing to the young minds: Following different services which Internet offers, many students are constantly hooked to it and very often led astray. They digress and move away from their original intention for surfing the Net. The social media such as face book, and to go which are very common in Nigeria can be addictive, making students spend so much time on them even when classes or lectures are going on. Moreover, because of the copious and galaxy nature of information in the Net, students usually waste their time only to make nothing out of it. Even where they sometimes access useful and relevant information, they get confused arranging it because of the information glut.

Software itself can sometimes become a great danger on the Net: Programmes known as viruses-mail bombs, Trojan horses and worms are spread rapidly through the internet. They enter into all the internet-based computers and cause damages to data on the systems that are receiving them. Computer viruses are simply small programmes that hijack a computer and use it (Computer) to reduce and spread themselves (Ekemezie and Ngene, 2004). As they attach themselves to computer programmes and data files, they spread by copying themselves into floppy disks, unto the hard disks and across networks. There are hundreds of different viruses, and more are daily being

created by people only to damage other people's computers and files.

Internet vitiates the powers and efficacy of copyright laws: Since a lot can be posted to and retrieved from the net, there is the great tendency for many writers to commit plagiarism. Plagiarism which has to do with the other people's intellectual work without due acknowledgement has become enormous as a result of indiscriminate use of Internet facilities. Plagiarism and free access to some copyrighted works not only reduces the power of copyright laws but strongly undermines the intellectual growth and creativity of the people.

Recommendations for Solutions

The above discussions depict that in spite of the Internet's huge gains to the modern society, its negative impact on the users of academic libraries are very staggering. However, the benefits far outweigh its negative influences, especially when the under listed recommendations are critically taken into considerations.

Learning to assess the authenticity of the materials being accessed: Students and other Internet users should not imbibe holistically whatever they see on the Net without considering the authors educational standard, his field of specialty, whether the material passed through peer review mechanism, etc. There is also the need for internet users in academic libraries to be taught, during user education courses, how to assess the authenticity and reputation of the materials or information available on the Net. This will help to reduce the amount of inaccurate and misleading information found on the Net.

Librarians and paraprofessionals have to be at alert: Alertness on the part of library workers is vital so as to stop students and other users from visiting prohibited websites for pornographic and blue films. To help curtail the surfing and use of pornographic and blue films, governments should not only censure them but also arrest and jail any user found visiting such websites or using such materials. All the stake holders in the upbringing of children have to throw in their weight into stopping such nefarious acts by reporting users who navigate or aid visits to such websites.

Barricading unauthorized users from breaking into one's system: To forestall the actions of hackers taking place, it is necessary to use passwords to log on to a computer system and also to change it from time to time. Installation of firewalls that help to barricade an unauthorized use of software and hardware is another veritable means of protection against hackers.

Academic library users should be reminded that time is their greatest resource: This will help them not to waste this irrecoverable and limited asset. Many internet users get themselves hooked on for a whole day without specific objectives. In such a situation instead of the Internet being a leverage to academic success, it becomes a retrogressive agent. Internet users should be conscious of time to attend to other things calling for attention. Nigerian Copyright Commission (NCC) has to be strengthened by the Government. For copyright abuses, especially plagiarism to be drastically reduced, the NCC has to be greatly empowered by the law. When fully empowered, it will be able to arrest, prosecute and jail without delay anyone found contravening copyright and Internet laws. Once a great interest is taken in detecting culprits and allowing the law to take its course, creators of the intellectual property posted to the Net will be protected.

Installation of antivirus: To help settle the destructive effects of viruses in Internet-hooked computers, the need for running or installation of antivirus programmes that can scan the hard disk looking for viruses becomes pertinent. There is also the need to have regular antivirus update to safeguard software programmes.

With the application of the above-recommended discourse designed to assuage the negative effects or doubts being cast on the Net by many people, Internet will ever be used in libraries. This use will continue to be greatest in academic libraries where utmost currency and immediate delivery are the watchwords in teaching, learning and research. Hence, in his contribution to Internet existence, KI-Moon (2007) advocated for a common understanding of how we can maximize the opportunities it offers, how we can use it for benefit of all nation and peoples, and how we can address risks and challenges.

Conclusion

Internet as a source of information has become a household word all over the world. This is because of its wonderful services in the promotion of research, teaching, and learning. It has not only revolutionized the teaching and

learning standards but has also made the world a global village. Its presence and extent of utilization appears to be the only yardstick for measuring a library's viability and modernity. In the present knowledge economy, Internet has become the pivot of information collection, preservation and dissemination. This paper discussed the conceptual definitions of Internet. It also examined its usefulness to academic libraries, its negative influences, and at the end x-rayed the ways of vitiating these influences.

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