The Provision of Library and Information Services in Developing Nations: Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century

Ngozi B. Ukachi

Main Library, University of Lagos, Akoka- Yaba, Lagos. Nigeria
ukachingozi2001@yahoo.com

Abstract

Purpose: *This paper set out to critically examine the challenges faced by libraries and librarians in Nigeria in their services provision to users in this era known for information explosion and the use of Information and Communication Technologies in information handling processes.*

Design/Methodology/Approach: *The approach adopted for this study was library research which an over-view of Developing Nations meeting the challenges of the 21st century.*

Findings: *The paper identified information literacy, training and food interpersonal and communication skills as vital for librarians to be relevant and functional in the 21st century. They also require technical competencies such as ability to embrace change, comfort in the online environment, ability to troubleshoot and learn new technologies, and ability to keep up with new ideas in technology and librarianship.*

Practical Implications: *the 21st century ear of advances in ICT should be accepted by librarians as opportunities for libraries and librarians to showcase themselves for greater relevance in the information age.*

Originality/Value: *The paper's value lies in its submission strategies that will ensure that librarians meet the challenges of the 21st century which include automation of libraries, training of librarians and promotion of information literacy among others.*

Keywords: Library and Information services, Skills and technical competencies, Challenges, Nigeria

Paper Type: General review

Introduction

The 21st century has ushered in a lot of changes in the way and manner in which library and information services are carried out. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are now adopted in the provision of library and information services. The users on their own side had experienced increased awareness on the relevance of information in their daily activities, and this has affected the way they perceive and utilize information just like the information professionals who had equally experienced increase on information availability on virtually all fields and facets of life, thus, the information handling and communication processes had also dramatically changed. Titangos and Jan (2006) documented that library profession is at a crossroad in the 21st century as traditional library service appear to be on the decline while new technology based services are on the rise. All these are resultant effects of technological developments and information explosion that is being experienced since late 19th century as a result of series of developmental activities and researches being undertaken by various stakeholders.

The Concept of Library in the 21st Century

A library traditionally was seen as a building that houses a collection of books and other materials; a depository built to contain books and other materials for reading and study (Word Net Search-3.0). This definition did not take into cognizance the existence of electronic / digitized materials which are accessed electronically, even from remote areas, outside of the library building.

However, a library in the 21st century can be defined as an institution or source that provides unhindered access to information and information services that satisfies the clientele's actual and potential information needs. This definition brings into cognizance the dual nature of the library as a 'space' and a 'place'. It implies that libraries can equally be virtual besides its traditional nature. IFLA (2003) elaborately defined a library in the 21st century

as a place of wide-eyed discovery; a tool for life-long learning; a bank of ideas and inspiration; a source of answers to factual questions; a place to acquire new skills; a community centre; a local studies resource and; a place of sheer pleasure and enjoyment. The above definition implies that a 21st century library must have the capacity to actually provide varying formation and services capable of developing and enhancing the knowledge and intellectual base of its patrons.

Challenges of Library and Information Service Provision in the 21st Century

The provision of library and information services to a large extent is dependent upon the kind of library in question. The information services provided by the various types of libraries are usually community of user oriented, that is, each library provides information targeted at satisfying the information needs of its unique community of users. For instance, while the academic libraries are concentrating on providing information and services that will cater for the study and research needs of the various faculties established in their institutions, the national library, as the legal depository centre ensures that it collects, preserves and makes available to users the national publishing output of the country as well as foreign publishing on the country. The public libraries serve the general public (children, adults, rural people, etc) and most often provides materials relating to the history and development of its locality. Special libraries on the other hand, provide services targeted specially at satisfying its parent organization.

Whichever type of library that is involved, the generally and paramount goal of all is, the provision of effective library and information services. Libraries are neither ignorant of the challenges posed by the presence of Information technology and the Internet in this 21st century nor unaware of the challenges in library and information service provision posed by the advent of information explosion as well as the increase in users' awareness of information sources availability other than the library. The way users perceive and utilize information has drastically changed. According to West Sussex Country Council (2010), modern technology has changed the way many people use libraries. Self service check-in and check-out systems are already being used, and are set to grow. There is

this assumption by users that Internet is alternate to library and, can be substituted for the library. These challenges bring many questions to mind when one begins to ruminate on ways of providing library and information services that will adequately satisfy the needs of users in this 21st century. Such questions include but, not limited to:

1. Do the libraries have these Information Technology facilities available?
2. Do the libraries have librarians that possess the technical know-how to man these facilities?
3. Do the libraries have adequate numbers of staff who possess adequate IT skills to search, sift, organize, store and manage the information sourced and retrieved electronically?

The response to these questions will influence the steps to be taken in ensuring that users are provided with adequate library and information services in this 21st century.

Skills and Technical Competencies Requirement of 21st Century Librarians

There are several skills required of librarians to be relevant and function effectively in this 21st century. These skills can generally be categorized into;

a. *Information literacy / ICT skills:* these skills are required to function effectively as Search Intermediaries, Information Technology Facilitators, Interface Designers, Knowledge Managers, Sifter of Information Resources, etc.

b. *Training skill:* this is needed to train users on how to effectively utilize the various library resources. For librarians to optimally function as Information Literacy Educators, End-User Trainers and also carryout general library user education effectively, this skill is an underlying factor.

c. *Good interpersonal and communication skill:* because library activities involve service providers (Librarians) and users with different socio-economic, cultural and religious backgrounds and orientations, the librarians are required to possess this skill to be able to know how best to approach each user.

In addition to these skills, there are basic technical competences required of librarians in this information age. Farkas (2006) documented them as follows:

1. ***Ability to embrace change:*** patron populations are rapidly changing as are the technologies for serving them. We need to be able to look at how we are serving our patrons and to change our strategies if what we are doing is not working (or is not the best we could be doing). Change should be looked upon as an exciting thing – as a positive thing. We should fear "not being able to provide the best services to our patrons much more than we should fear change".

2. ***Comfort in the online medium:*** Librarians need to do so much online these days, way beyond basic catalog and database searching (which sure isn't easy either). Librarians have to be able to use search engines and use them well. They need to be able to find quality online resources. They need to help patrons set up e-mail and teach basic Internet skills. They need to be able to troubleshoot problems users are having accessing online library resources. You just can't provide reference services without basic Internet and search skills.

3. ***Ability to troubleshoot new technologies:*** As libraries get new computers, printers, scanners, etc. Librarians need to learn how to troubleshoot them. Librarians should be able to play with the technologies in the library, to learn what problems commonly come up, and to fix them if necessary.

4. ***Ability to easily learn new technologies:*** Learning about technology is definitely a skill. People need to learn how to use new technologies without having to ask other people for help all the time. It's easier to learn and master the technologies by just casually playing with it and consulting the documentations if there are things that one finds confusing.

5. ***Ability to keep up with new ideas in technology and librarianship (enthusiasm for learning):*** Keeping up with new technology is often not an explicitly listed part of one's basic weekly job duties, but its importance can't be stressed enough. Five years ago, few people were talking about blogs in libraries, but now so many libraries are using this tool to provide services to patrons. We need to be able to keep up with what's new in technology and what libraries are (or could be) doing with it.

Ways of Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century

Having noted that there are challenges inherent in the provision of library and information services in the 21st century, another question that now needs to be answered is, what roles and services should libraries in Nigeria render to their users to be able to remain relevant even in the face of the challenges posed by the 21st century? The simple answer is that libraries should grasp the opportunity presented by the application of these new technologies that is now the order of the day, to revolutionize their service rendering processes. The following are instances on how to go about it.

a. Automation of the library

This is a prerequisite requirement in being part of library and information services provider in the 21st century. Electronic resources can never be accessed or utilized in a library that is yet to be automated. More so, in the era of inadequate funding of libraries which is a common phenomenon in Nigeria, automating the library with Internet access will give room for libraries to establish consortium or go into collaboration in the areas of materials acquisition, exchange, etc, thus, spending less resources. Automation also gives room for improved customer service by helping to take some of the workload off librarians and other staff members in the areas of acquisitions, cataloging and circulation, which in turn allows them to better serve their patrons. This extra time can lead to more programs being facilitated in the library and also make library staff available to assist users who are having trouble researching or finding the right information. Castek (nd) also confirmed that automation of the library allows for an improvement in the variety, amount and quality of materials that are available in the library's collection.

b. *Training the library staff*

Training of library staff members on the effective utilization of the new technologies in library and information services is a relevant step to success in Information Technology (IT) use. The availability of these technologies in the library without the availability of skilled staff members to man them will tantamount to waste of time, money and effort. Various studies such as ones conducted by Aduwa-Ogiegbaen and Iyanu (2005), Edom (2007) and, Ukachi (2008), identified lack of skilled manpower as one of the factors militating against effective utilization of IT facilities in libraries in Nigeria. This particular problem should be given the required attention if libraries in Nigeria want to overcome the challenges of library and information service provision in the 21st century.

c. **Acquisition of electronic resources**

Consequent upon the information explosion recently experienced, information materials are now presented in various formats – Printed and Electronic formats. Furthermore, the relevance of electronic information resources over the printed counterpart can never be over emphasized. Ray and Day (1998) acknowledged that electronic information resources are often faster than consulting print indexes, especially when searching retrospectively, and they are more straight forward when wishing to use combinations of keywords. They open up the possibility of searching multiple files at one time, a feat accomplished more easily than when using printed equivalents. They are also updated more often than printed tools.

Libraries in Nigeria should expand their materials acquisition to include electronic resources; they should concentrate less on the acquisition of printed resources. In other words, all information service providers must perceive their work in the dual nature of the global environment. That duality operates in traditional and technological paradigms. The traditional paradigm is the familiar library terrain. In this paradigm, physical books and other information resources are acquired, stored, accessed and used in the library during service hours. The traditional model is therefore limited by time, space and the number of resources or nature of services or what library budget can afford. The technological paradigm on the other hand is not limited by time and space but rather seamless, dynamic, interactive and integrative.

d. *Promoting Information literacy*

Today, the acceptance of information literacy education as a library function has broadened considerably and the term represents a convergence of interests in the need to educate those who must live and work in our information society. The ability to access and use information effectively is a key enabler for society as a whole. According to Butterworth (1996) as cited by Bundy (2000) information literacy allows us to do three vital things. First, it is a prerequisite for participative citizenship. Secondly, information literacy is required for the production of new knowledge, on which the future economic success of the country depends. Thirdly, it is needed to solve global problems which threaten the planet and the survival of civilization.

Promoting information literacy, both formally and informally, has to be a pervasive concern of libraries in 21st century society. This is not just for libraries found in educational institutions. It is also for special libraries in their day to day client service provision. And it is also very much for public libraries, because if they do not help to address the issue for the Nigerian people at large, who will? Assuming a responsibility for fostering an information literate citizenry should be a new concept for public libraries, as a number of academic libraries in Nigeria are already showing evidence of doing so. Since the main goals of libraries is the satisfaction of the information needs of users, mere provision of resources for users who do not have adequate knowledge on how to effectively utilize them will result into having information illiterate citizenry. To promote effective utilization of information materials, libraries in Nigeria should get themselves actively involved in information literacy education programmes. Promoting and facilitating an information literate citizenry, whether at the student, public, or corporate level, is a key professional responsibility of libraries in this 21st century.

e. *Periodic user's study*

Libraries exist because of the presence of information users. Just like earlier stated, the reason for the existence of libraries is to cater and satisfy the varying information needs of these users. The knowledge of the information needs of users is a precondition to efficient delivery of library and information services

them. This is to say that the ability to ascertain what actually they need will enhance the provision of services that will satisfy the user's needs, especially in this era of information explosion. Libraries in Nigeria should embrace periodic user study as one of the strategies of meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

f. Organizing workshops and outreach programmes

Organization of workshops and outreaches geared towards addressing the needs of users is another way of meeting the challenges of the 21st century, especially for public and health libraries. During such programmes, it is expected that some information which currently existed in printed format, could be repackaged into audio or eve audio-visual format for better understanding by the expected audience. This will influence better appreciation of the library and information services by the users.

g. Digitization of local content

Digitization of local content enables a community's heritage of intellectual property to be available at the local, regional, national and global level. It involves conversion of materials currently held in traditional formats into digital format as well as provision of new modes of access to cultural heritage material in libraries, archives and museums in Nigeria. The purpose of this project is usually to enable public libraries, archives and museums to provide access for citizens to their cultural holdings and to provide citizens with access to relevant local content. At the same time, the materials are equally saved from destruction and preserved for future use through this process.

h. Users as partners in library services

Studies such as the one by Oseghale (2008) on "Faculty Opinion as Collection Evaluation Method" have shown that users' participation in library services such as selection of library materials impacts the library positively. Nigerian libraries should embrace the involvement of library users in the selection processes, the designing and implementation of some library services and, encourage feedback from users. This however is tended to avert the possibility of ending/ coming up with a product or design that will not be appreciated by the users thus, not satisfying their needs.

i. Cybrarian services

Rao and Babu (2001), pointed out that for libraries to meet up with the challenges of the 21st century, they must have the ability to provide services such as: search intermediary services, facilitator services, end-user trainer/ educator services, knowledge manager and, sifter of information services. This implies that libraries should not just concentrate on the provision of the traditional services of acquisition, cataloguing and classification, circulation and, preservation of library resources but should go ahead to show users that the present proliferation of information as well as the presence of information technology has made libraries more relevant as distillers of information.

j. Library cooperation and resource sharing

The paradigm shift from being "all alone" to "cooperating with others" is now a global phenomenon which libraries globally cannot afford to ignore. The common saying that "No Man is an Island" is no longer contentious in all aspect of life's activities. The inadequate funding library syndrome being experienced in the developing economies which have adversely affected their extent of information resources acquisition alongside staff training has made library cooperation very essential in achieving effective library service provision. Furthermore, the currently experienced information explosion in published output, increase in bibliographic access of literature through Internet and off-line databases on CDs, along with high cost of information resources had made it virtually impossible for libraries and information centres to fulfill information needs of their clientele. Under such squeezing situation the best option left with the libraries is to optimize their resources through extensive sharing (Tanvir, 2005). This cooperation could take the form of Interlibrary loan, book exchange, staff exchange programme, etc.

Conclusion

The 21st century era of proliferation of information and adoption of technologies in the provision of library and information services should be welcomed and embraced by libraries and librarians. Rather than seeing them as challenges, they should be seen and accepted as presenting opportunities for libraries and librarians to showcase themselves and do exploit in this information age.

References

Aduwa-Ogiegbaen, S.E. and Iyanu, E.O.S (2005) Using Information Technology in Secondary Schools in Nigeria: problem and prospects. Educational technology and Society. 8 (1) 104-112.

Bundy, A (2000) Drowning in Information, Starved for Knowledge: Information Literacy, not technology, is the issue. http://www.vala.org.au/vala2000pdf/Bunday.PDF. Accesses on 07/01/10

Castek, J (.....) What are the benefits of Library Automation.

http://www.ehow.com/list_5744754_benefits-library-automation_html. Accessed on 08/01/10

Edom, B.O. (2007) An Assessment of the Problems of the use of ICT Facilities in Information Sourcing and Retrieval by the Academic Staff in Nigerian Universities. The Information Technologist 4 (2) 113-127

Farkas, M. (2006) Skills for the 21st Century Librarian. http://www.meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/2006/07/17/skills-for-the-21st-century-librarian. Accessed on 06/01/10

IFLA (2003) Information for all: the Key Roles of Libraries in the Information Society; being a report prepared for World Summit on the Information Society, held at Geneva, Switzerland. http://www.ifla-deutschland.de/de/downloads/keynote_tise-Suedafrica.pdfl Accessed on 04/01/10

Rao, N.K. and Babu, K.H (2001) Role of Librarians in Internet and WWW Environment The Information Scientist. 4 (1) http://www.inform.nu/Articles/vo14/v4n1p025-034 Pdf. Accessed on 05/01/10

Ray, K. and Day, J (1998) Student Attitude Towards Electronic Information Resources. Information Research. 4 (2). http://informationr.net/ir/4-2/paper54.html

Tanvir, A. (2005) Need for resource sharing and networking of libraries. Available: http://www.Parc.gov.pk/articles/resource_sharing.html

Read more: http://www.faqs.org/periodicals/201007/2125344071.html#ixzz1DHZWOVQ8

Titangos, Hui-Lan H and Jan D (2007) Library Innovations in the 21st Century: an International perspective. Chinese Librarianship. http://www.iclc.us/cliej/c123Titan gosJan.htm. Accesses on 21/12/09

Ukachi, N.B (2008) Utilization of Information Communication Technologies in Reference Services of Academic Libraries: threats and challenges. The Information Technologist. 5 (2) 62-69

West, Sussex Country Council (2010) West, Sussex Country Council Plan to Deliver 21st Century Library Services. http://www.egovmonitor,com/node/32442. Accessed on 06/01/10

Wordnet Search -3.3. http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=library. Accessed On 04/01/10