

The Changing Role of Librarians in the Digital Age

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Introduction

In the Digital Age, librarians can no longer be simply information providers or the keepers of knowledge. Technological changes and the use of electronically stored and retrieval information systems have changed the way students and researchers are able to access, retrieve and use information. The instantaneous access to information through the Internet has made vast amounts of information and data available to anyone with a computer, a modem and a provider.

Digital information is changing the role of librarians radically: No longer are they to wait for students to ask for assistance in finding information in a place called a library. Their new role makes it imperative for them to provide services and instructions regardless of place, time or format.

A librarian or information professional must be able to participate actively in the educational process rather than gathering and disseminating information to the public through workshops, orientations, training etc. They must ensure that there is effective and efficient flow of information from the generators to users of information in the digital environment. This is a complex communication chain with libraries and information systems playing an important, even critical, role. The information professional must be able to address the changing and challenging environment for libraries and information systems and services in the Digital Age with an emphasis on examining contemporary problems, advances and solutions.

It is no longer possible for them to act without being continuously abreast of new methods and techniques and without being informed regularly about new trends and approaches. Furthermore, to make the service and development of information systems successful, librarians need to understand how people relate to information in every social situation. Librarians must also be able to relate their clientele to the information needed, independent of the location and which media the information can be found. Librarians must be able to educate users on the myriad of 'good' and 'bad' information on the Internet. They are expected to help sieve the 'good' information from the 'bad'. They need to be managers of information.

LIBRARIANSHIP IN THE DIGITAL AGE

In ancient times, there was no definite place that could be called a library; records were scattered and most of the time consumed by fire. According to Eboka (2000) records that formed part of early libraries fall into four categories:

- Temple collections;
- Government or royal archives;
- Organised business or economic records; and
- Family or genealogical papers.

Traditional librarianship is all about sitting down in the midst of books and expecting people to come and read. If they do not come, then, the librarian closes at the end of the day. This is the daily ritual. But a modern-day librarian in the Digital Age must be sound in the storage, retrieval and dissemination of information with the aid of information communication technology (ICT). This may be through computer, internet, E-mail, CD-ROM, slides, teaching aids, telephones, including the global system of mobile telecommunications (GSM), fax machines, etc. Archival materials could be stored on CD-ROMs for easy retrieval and dissemination to prospective users. Librarians can now conveniently store archival materials on CD-ROMs. CD-ROMs are highly compatible with most computers; this means vital information can be preserved and retrieved easily when needed. Information and communication are veritable tools in the development of cities and rural areas. Information must be available to all; be it scientific, technical, economic, social, institutional, administrative, legal, historical or cultural information. In fact, information is useful only when it is available; that is, when users have access to it in the appropriate form and

language. This means information must be communicated among the various users with appropriate facilities during exchange. The concern of information professionals in the Digital Age could be found in the following areas:

- Agriculture -- Information on the best agricultural practices;
- Health -- Health management information system;
- Education -- E-Learning, distance learning education;
- Economics -- E-commerce;
- Politics--- E- Governance. Political education; and
- Software development.

Ekpo (2001) observes that information is highly essential for individuals, households, government, and corporate organisations. Therefore, Information Technology, which makes it easy to diffuse knowledge has to be handled professionally by librarians and other information professionals to guide users on their information needs at all times. Among the basic tasks of information professionals are:

- Provision of information to users;
- Help users find information; and
- Facilitate dialogue among users of their services.

What is happening to librarians, therefore, can be called a paradigm shift, and it is transforming them from armchair librarians to thoroughbred information professionals who now provide information services to users in different locations. The change has helped them to break the barriers of place, time or format. For instance, a librarian could have specific instruction on preservation of agricultural products. The onus is on her to source for the materials on this and make it available to users through e-mail, CD-ROMs, or telephone, etc. Gone are the days when librarians expect users to read only books on the shelves and go away. Thioune et al (2003) corroborate this, saying ICT can be used to solve multifarious problems that confront individuals. It also can be used to access specific information for various needs that are peculiar to individuals.

Librarianship is all about education. This means that, as information professionals, librarians should not be left out in all forms of educational process. Educational planners should involve them in the design of school curricula. This would enable them to recommend relevant textbooks, and materials for students and their teachers. Two aspects of the required training are Internet handling and use of computer. It would be a serious oversight to assume that all users are well equipped with IT skills. Nothing can be farther from the truth. Moreover, users have to be trained on in-house style or the arrangement and location of most of these IT equipment in the library or information centres. This approach would encourage an effective and efficient flow of information from generators to users. Users' education is equally paramount if we expect optimal utilisation of resources and overall maintenance of ICT equipment because of their huge cost.

The adoption of distance learning education by some African countries is a text case for librarians because they are central to the success of the programme. Of course, as we know, this programme involves students receiving lectures through ICT. Librarians should be able to operate a virtual library in this project. They are expected to handle different queries and requests on various issues.

In this Digital Age, libraries should be fully automated and librarians must be involved in the design and implementation of any programme that bothers on this. If they are left out, it would be a difficult because any equipment supplied without their approval may pose a serious problem for them. In addition, as information professionals, they must be able to develop suitable software for their libraries. With the availability of digital equipment, information professionals must be able to delve into contemporary problems such as globalisation, ethnic conflicts, gender issue, HIV/AIDS, political upheavals, war, divorce, birth control, etc. They should be able to help proffer reasonable solutions to all these because of the avalanche of information and apparatus at their disposal. For instance, a librarian could prove to be invaluable in a boundary dispute or chieftaincy tussle if he could provide relevant materials to the appropriate authority. We need not forget the use of Geographic Information System (GIS). The equipment is good in land mediation and management, natural resources management and infrastructure development.

The use of Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) could be a useful development for disseminating information to rural dwellers. GSM could be used to inform the farmers on market information that would assist them to sell their produce at a higher profit. Furthermore, information could be provided on how to use solar energy to power the television set, pump water, dry fruits and vegetables or grind cereals, as well as rear livestock and maintain public health, etc.

Evaluation of information should be carried out periodically in to determine the impact of information that has been disseminated at any period. This effort may involve the use of questionnaire, interactive session, telephone conversation/ teleconference and other means. Through this, librarians would know the success of information already disseminated. Bimber (2003) agrees with this. According to him:

...Panel designs or quasiexperimental evidence tracking individuals' knowledge over time could be used to test for effects of the information revolution...several useful cross-sectional surveys repeated every year or two can be used to provide repeated snapshots of the public's use of the internet.

We need not forget that information provision is capital intensive and for information professionals to know the impact of what they have provided, evaluating such service has to be diligently carried out periodically. Informational professionals must be able to guide the users in the choice of media to use for their task.

As trained managers of information, they must handle information management professionally because it is both delicate and sensitive. Information management could make or mar any administration, hence good information managers constantly collect, sieve, package and disseminate data to the right people. Information professionals, therefore, are the pivot on which all the activities of governance rotate. Information has to be properly streamlined to avoid creating confusion. For instance, any act of misinformation on the stock exchange market could lead to immediate liquidation of several companies. Therefore, information professionals must provide accurate data to put things in the right perspectives.

Conclusion

Information professionals should be well informed on new inventions in ICT. The profession parades an array of people from diverse backgrounds such as engineering, communication, computer, electronics and other fields. Librarians can team up with other professionals to develop new technologies. More than ever before, librarians must make themselves more relevant in this Digital Age.

References

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