

The role of information professionals in the digital age: The role of librarians

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In the digital age, librarians can no longer be simply information providers or the keepers of knowledge. The changes in technology using electronically stored and retrieval information has changed the way patrons and students are able to access, retrieve and use information. The instantaneous access of 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 from a person who students ask for assistance in finding information in a place called a library to someone who needs to provide services and instructions regardless of place, time or format.

A librarian or information professional must be able to actively participate in the educational process rather than gathering information and disseminate it 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. 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 information specialists to act without being continuously abreast of new methods and techniques and without being informed regularly about new trends and approaches. Furthermore, librarians have to understand how people relate to information in every social situation, so that the service and development of information systems is successful. 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 teach and educate the users from the myriad of bad and good information on the Internet. Librarians are expected to sieve the good information from the perceived bad information. They need to be managers of information.

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, he closes at the end of the day. This is like a ritual because he does this everyday. 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, Telephone including GSM, Fax machines

etc. 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 in nature. 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 when it is exchanged. The concern of information professionals in the digital age could 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.

---- Social/Culture-- Preservation of archival materials.

----- Politics--- Political education.

---- Software development

Among the basic tasks of information professionals are:

--Provision of information to audiences

■ *Help audiences find information,*

■ *Facilitation of dialogue among audiences.*

There is a paradigm shift from an armchair librarian to an information professional who now provides information services to his clientele in different locations regardless of place, time or format. For instance, a librarian could have specific instruction on preservation of agricultural products. The onus is on the librarian to source for the materials on this and make it available to his clientele through electronic mail, CD- Rom, or Telephone etc. Gone were the days when librarian would be expecting users to only read books on the shelves and go away. Librarianship is all about education. This means librarians, as information professionals should not be left out in all forms of educational process. There is a compelling need on the part of educational planners to involve them in the design of school curricula. This approach would enable them to recommend relevant textbooks, materials, training including workshops for students and lecturers. An aspect of training is in the area of Internet handling; computer use and it would be an oversight to have the notion that all users are well informed in information technologies. This is not true because most of the users are novice when it comes to the use of this equipment to source for information. Moreover, users have to be tutored on in-house style or the arrangement and location of most of these gadgets in the library or information centres. This approach would encourage an effective and efficient flow of information from the generators to users or users education is equally paramount if we expect optimal utilization of resources and overall maintenance of ICT equipments 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. We need not reiterate the nature of the programme which involves students receiving lectures through ICT. Librarians should be able to operate a virtual library in of this project. It is expected that, there would be different queries and request on various issues that must be handled by them.

IN the digital age, libraries should be fully automated. Librarians must be invoved in the design and implementation of any programme that bothers on this. If librarians were

left out, it would be a difficult thing because any equipment supplied without the approval of the librarians may pose a serious problem for them. In addition to this, information professionals must be able to develop software that is suitable for their libraries. With the availability of digital equipment, information professionals must be able to delve into contemporary problems such as globalization, ethnic conflicts, gender issue, HIV/ Aids, political upheavals/war, divorce, Birth control etc. It is expected that reasonable solutions would be proffered on these because of the avalanche of information and apparatus at their disposal. For instance, a librarian could be a good umpire in boundary dispute or chieftaincy tussle only 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 infrastructural development.

The use of GSM could be a welcome development in disseminating information to the rural dwellers. GSM could be used to inform the farmers on market information: this would assist them to sell their produce for a higher profit. Furthermore, training could be organized on how to use solar energy in order to watch the television, pump water, dry fruits and vegetables or grind cereals. Other trainings could be on livestock rearing, public health etc.

Evaluation of information should be carried out periodically in order to feel that 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 be able to know the success or otherwise of various information already disseminated. We need not forget that information provision is capital intensive and for information professionals to know the impact of what they have provided, the task of 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.

Information professionals are supposed to be managers of information. Management of information is such a delicate and sensitive job that has to be handled professionally. Information could be making or mar any administration especially those in the helm of affairs of the nation. Managers of information would constantly collect data, sieve, package and finally disseminate it to the right people. In a situation where an administration, then, he is bound to fail. Information professionals therefore, are the pivot through which all the activities of governance rotates. Information has to be controlled by those who know the nitty gritty of it in order to avert any act of breakdown of law and order. When this is put in place, there would be an enabling environment for development in all sectors of the economy. For instance, any act of misinformation in the stock exchange market could lead to immediate liquidation of several companies. The onus lies on the information professionals as managers of information to provide facts and figures through which things would be put in the right perspectives.

Information professionals should be well informed on new inventions in ICT. The profession parades an array of people from diversified fields be it engineering, communication, computer, electronics and other fields. Librarians can team-up with other professionals to develop new technologies. Librarians must be able to brace up and make themselves relevant in the digital age.