

INFORMATION LITERACY FOR LIBRARY SEARCH



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CHAPTER ONE

The Evolution of the Information Society

Felicia E. Etim

The progress of any society is impossible without creative and imaginative utilisation of accumulated information. Modern discoveries and inventions, particularly those reflecting the advancement of science and technology, depend on the rational use of recorded information. Today one of the criteria for categorising a country as developed is the extent to which it develops its information systems at various levels to achieve socio-economic growth.

The Concept of Information

Any definition of the term *information* is confronted with semantic and conceptual perspectives. Information means many things to different people. To some it is news; while to others, information is facts; and yet to others it is essentially data. Information is all around us. It is the staple diet of ardent newspaper readers and the mass audiences of the broadcasting media. Information is directed ceaselessly at the millions of product consumers targeted relentlessly by the advertising industry. Information is disseminated from enquiry desks at bus stations, airports, libraries, information centres and similar public service institutions. In this popularly understood meaning of the term, therefore, information is that which adds to our awareness or understanding of some topic, problem or event. It is variously perceived as facts, intelligence, data, news or knowledge necessary for decision-making.

Information follows a process that involves transmitting the information from a source to a recipient. Information becomes knowledge when it is performing the role of imparting knowledge to an individual, where it reduces uncertainty. Under both circumstances, information is tangible. It becomes something physical when seen as data or documents. A relationship between data, information, knowledge and wisdom can be distinguished in that data is raw and unprocessed, while information is processed data from which meanings arise and is communicated. Knowledge is further processed information that is organised for application. Wisdom is knowledge applied for the benefit of society. Regardless of the form it takes, the essence of information is the conveying of a certain message. The presence of information creates options and sets the stage for meaningful decision-making. Information can be delivered orally, or it can come in visual form as data, text or graphics. It can be stored in books, periodicals, technical reports, pamphlets, microforms, magnetic tapes and other audiovisual formats.

The Information Profession

Man has undergone the process of experimented writing on rocks, stones, metal, clay, paper and recently on electronic devices. The objective has been to give some permanence and objectivity to his thoughts and experiences, to enable him to retrieve the records for use when the need arises, and to hand them on to future generations. Libraries therefore evolved as social institutions to conserve knowledge, to preserve cultural heritage and to provide information. Different types of libraries have tended to emphasise one or more of the social functions. Today the

library as a multimedia resource centre is conceived not as an archive or reading room but as an information centre for accessibility of global knowledge. Librarians and information managers have become veritable mediators between man and a vast array of information resources produced through the generations. The basic objective of their service is to maximise the social utility of recorded knowledge for the benefit of the society. The responsibility of the librarian and information manager lies in the unique custody of the world's recorded knowledge. This involves selection from the universe of records and the acquisition of those records that may be needed by the potential users of the libraries and information centres; to store them for future use; to organise them by creating appropriate bibliographic access controls; to interpret their contents through personalised services; and to disseminate information stored in the records in variety of packages or formats.

The Information Society

Any attempt at defining the information society must at some point address some fundamental issues. Essentially, there has to be anticipated social transformation to a point where information is valued and provides the formative force for the development of the society. The criteria for assessment or evaluation of an evolving information society can be categorised into the following:

Cultural: The cultural value of information is recognized through the promotion of information values in the interest of national development.

- Social:** Information is seen as an enhancer of the quality of life, arising from widespread user access to relevant information.
- Economic:** Information is seen as a key economic factor in the resource, service, commodity and value added for growth and development.
- Technological:** Information communication technology (ICT) is the enabling force for output of information in offices, industries, educational institutions and the home.

Against the backdrop of the above set of criteria, one would define the information society as one in which the quality of life, as well as prospects for social change and economic development, depends increasingly on information and its exploitation. In such a society, living standards, patterns of work and leisure and the education system are all influenced markedly by advances in information. This is evidenced by an increasing array of information-intensive products and services, communicated through a wide range of media. In a narrower sense, the information society can perhaps best be understood as a society that has developed information technology and is learning how to use it.

Emerging Library and Information Services

The rapid pace of development in the field of networked information services has prompted a library and information science (LIS) profession. The technological developments of the past twenty-five years, such as electronic

databases, on-line services, CD-ROMs, and the introduction of the internet, have radically transformed access to information, making information readily available to the user. However, the information overload is such that greater expertise is demanded in retrieving and analysing relevant information. The information field has spread out of the libraries and information centres and has been transformed into an industry that sells, organises and processes information.

In this period of constant change, the library's traditional roles of preserving, cataloguing, classifying and assisting readers are undergoing a transformation. Library schools worldwide have confronted technological challenges and adapted their curricula according to these new developments. In addition, many academic research studies have identified changes that the LIS profession is undergoing. Among the central questions raised are the issues of *disintermediation*. In other words, will the easy access to information completely eliminate the need for the librarian as an intermediary? Also, will there be a transformation of traditional library into a virtual entity with the majority of the information in electronic format?

The major cause for change in the libraries is of course the internet. The world wide web consists of an enormous amount of disorganised information, which may appear easy to use at first glance but can also be confusing. First the vast amount of retrievable information one can obtain from an internet search gives the impression that one has plumbed the depths of available information on a given topic. This is not true because the proportion of available digital content is minute, compared to the amount of printed materials available. Furthermore, many printed resources are so large that complete digital conversion is not possible.

Second, much of what is available on the web does not conform to reasonably accepted standards of validation. A significant amount of web material has been “published” by individuals, without peer review or institutional affiliation.

Third, there is minimal structure and organization of collected information. The information retrieved by a researcher from the internet depends on the adequacy of the search engines and whether librarians can effectively contribute to the area of internet site development. Librarians ideally need to be involved in the structuring of sites. As an information architect, the librarian must work primarily with designers to create a firm foundation for the site, ensuring the logic of the navigational schemes, deciding the content and location of information, defining the parameters for searching the site, defining classification schemes and generally ensuring an overall level of consistency and accuracy.

Librarians can also organise digital materials (such as scanned photos, documents and digitised videotapes) and then decide how people will move from one piece of material to another. For instance, they might link videotape news with a map that shows the location of the story. There is also the role of the analyst/knowledge interpreter, a role that librarians have traditionally shied away from but has recently been in great demand for reference librarians. In an environment where the available information content is expanding so rapidly, users need help in retrieving relevant information and interpreting it.

New jobs are emerging and old jobs are being transformed within the LIS profession. Many new jobs are at corporate libraries and information centres. Special libraries are in demand because companies increasingly recognise that libraries have library professions with excellent research skills, can target the specific needs of each department and

help prevent employees from wasting time surfing the internet. Within the same period, there have been major curriculum changes in the library and information science education around the globe. Six major trends have shaped curricular changes in the LIS programmes:

- LIS curricula are addressing broad-based information environment and problems.
- LIS curricula are gradually, predominantly user-centred.
- LIS schools and programmes are increasing the investment and infusion of information technology.
- LIS programmes are experimenting with the structure of specialisation within the curriculum.
- LIS schools are offering instruction in different formats to provide students with more flexibility.

Today, there is a need for skilled librarians that are specialists in managing, retrieving, filtering and evaluating information. Just as a person walking into a library for the first time must learn to translate the library's design into the ability to find a book on a shelf, anyone using a database or a similar investigative process must have the knowledge of how to maneuver through ICT in their searches for information. Today many users start out searching on their own and then come back to the LIS professional for help and advice when they are tangled in an irrelevant flood of information.

Traditionally, there are two components within the LIS profession. One is collation of information in written, printed and electronic formats. The other component is the intellectual "tool set", where the skills such as cataloguing,

indexing and providing reference services predominate. It is important that library users begin to draw attention away from collections and objects and look at the special services that LIS professionals and their libraries now provide, for example:

- The “ownership/holdings” strategy is being replaced by the “access” strategy, forcing libraries to share materials through consortiums and interlibrary loans.
- As more information becomes available electronically via e-mail and internet access, the on-line reference librarian is seen working from home to ensure that appropriate information reaches the user on time.
- LIS professionals are presenting a more assertive and proactive attitude. They are conducting outreach and making information more available for users.

Conclusion

In this age of information revolution, libraries will remain “society’s memory” as they continue to amass and preserve valuable information for future generations, even in an age where information seems ephemeral. Websites come and go, and evaluating information sources seems increasingly more difficult. But libraries and information centres will survive the information revolution because of the added value their services will continue to prove to users. However, the LIS profession will certainly change, and LIS schools will have to meet the challenges of these

developments and change their study programmes to meet the needs of users in the information society.

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