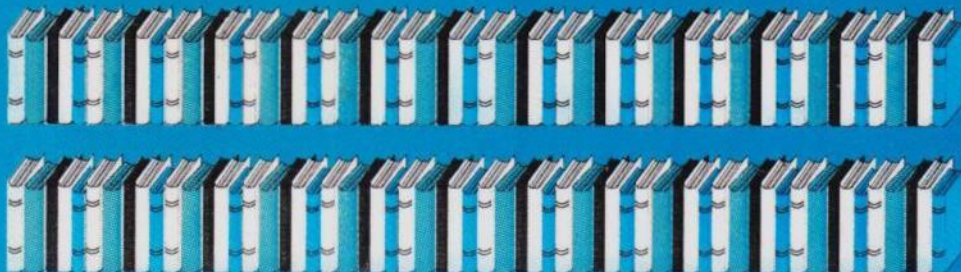
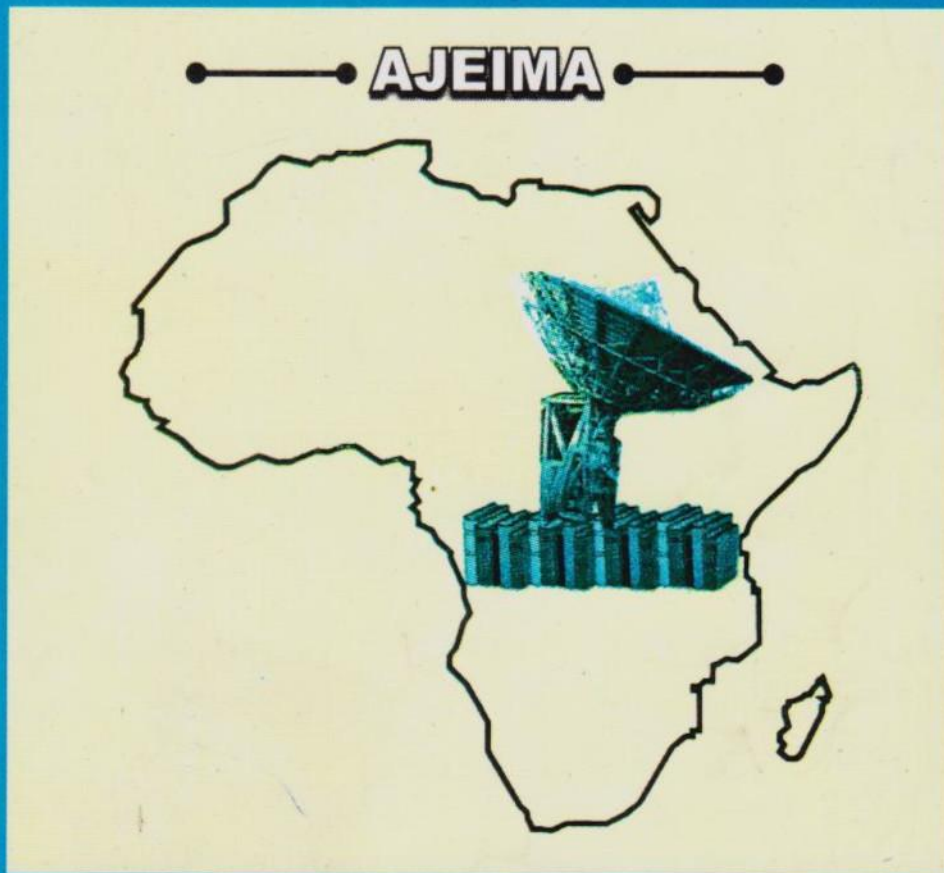


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The E-Library: Implications and Challenges on User Patronage in Nigerian Academic Libraries in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The emergence of the internet has changed the traditional ways of doing things in business, health, legal, administration, and the education sector, which library forms a part is not an exception. This paper investigates and seeks to highlight the implications and challenges of the e-library on user patronage. The myriad of problems associated with the provision and utilisation of e-library services in Nigerian academic libraries are highlighted with solutions proffered by way of recommendations. Included also are the challenging roles of e-library services in the 21st century which academic librarians being at the centre, must equip themselves for and brace-up with if they must fulfil their roles creditably.

Introduction

In this era of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), there is growing need for future generations, that is, students at various higher learning institutions and the generality of the reading public to be more receptive and adaptive to new technology. When this technological respectability is instilled in students and the reading public, their adaptiveness and receptability will be enhanced greatly. This will invariably make these group of people better equipped to comprehend the usefulness of a new technology adoption, exploitation and exploration. Therefore, one of the ways by which academic institutions can introduce the adoption of this new technology is through emphasizing students' use of the 'e-library' as reference points for their course work, assignments and researches, this way, user patronage will be enhanced.

The electronic library is generally being referred to as "digital library", "online library" or "virtual library", "community network", or simply as "library without walls". For the purpose of this paper, these terms are therefore considered as mutually exclusive and will be used interchangeably. The emergence of the virtual library system in the 21st century, as stated by Atkinson (1991) is redefining and extending the traditional definition of library and has rendered the definition of a library with respect to a particular 'locality', or 'particular institution' or 'geographical region' inappropriate'. Nigerian academic libraries must therefore equip themselves with the prevailing challenges of providing people with the right information in the context of the global village, which is only achievable through access to ICT. In encouraging the efficient use of the electronic library, there's need for educational administrators as well as librarians to understand the implications and

challenges of the e-library on user patronage.

The Concept of Electronic Library

The existence of the internet has brought the emergence of electronic libraries capable of handing down information to the users. Sometimes, "electronic libraries", "digital libraries" and "virtual libraries" are used interchangeably. Garuba and Dimowo (2006), gave a virtual definition of an electronic (digital) library as "the properties which contain anything, without quality control, no entry barriers, objects not located in a physical or logical place, not organized, no authority control, highly dynamic objects, very transients, no concept of author, free restricted access, services performed by artificial intelligence, no human specialists (librarians), and no-defined user group. This implies that electronic libraries create an instant access to library collections anywhere in the world.

Electronic library services may be defined as the library resources and services that are provided electronically to patrons, usually over the internet. Such services provided electronically include access to library catalogues, online magazines, online question and answers services, interlibrary loans and remote patron authentication. Collectively, these electronic services create a "virtual" public access library that is available to patrons anywhere in the region, from library to home. Igbaria and Hvan (1995) asserted that "e-library is a web-based gateway to the collections and services of the entire library system, both physical and electronic". This implies that central to the e-library is the library catalogue which allows users to search the library's holdings on a variety of access points (author, title, subject, keyword etc) in both basic and advanced search modes. The e-library also provides online recalls, link to full-text when available (through imbedded

URLS) and views personal account information.

According to Oyeneke (2007) "the e-library technology makes available the research collection of libraries that are not available to researchers or users in hard copy". He further asserted that it is possible for a scholar or researcher to have full text of journals, reference works, textbooks, databases, theses and dissertations at very minimal cost and time frame, provided such resources are available on-line. This is to say that the "collections" section of the e-library provides access to the contents of about 58,000 electronic journals, over 2,5000 regional, national and international newspapers, electronic books, online indexes and abstracts and several thousands recommended scholarly websites arranged by subject. The "service" section of the e-library also provides interactive forums thereby making users to request assistance or interact with staff at a variety of service points.

In his view of what a virtual library is, Anaeme (2006) defined a virtual library (e-library) as "a collection of library resources (based on a set of database information) in electronic/digital format at various location which can be assessed and used with great ease using computer information, telecommunication technologies for the purpose of teaching, studying, researching, learning, leisure and decision-making", the above assertion seeks to enumerate the various function of the electronic library. Other uses of the e-library therefore include book loans, overdue fines, submitting interlibrary loan requests, contacting subject specialists by e-mail, submitting an e-reserve list or viewing e-reserve materials, requesting that items be purchased for the collections and recalling an item checked out to another user and creating room for the use of a library video in the classroom.

Implications and Challenges of the e-library on User Patronage in Academic Libraries in the 21st Century

Since the library is a growing organism and the computer, an indispensable tool, now available to librarians for improved service delivery to their clientele, there is therefore the need for librarians to rise to the challenges posed by a digital library in order to enhance user patronage of such a library. Among the various implications of the e-library system on user patronage in Nigerian academic libraries are:

- (a) Librarians acquire some computer knowledge on the use of the e-library, this will invariably mean that they aid users on ways to access website.
- (b) It facilitates local, regional, national and world-wide access to numerous bibliographic, numeric and textual databases for scholars and professionals although merely providing bibliographic citations without the capability of making available the information materials can be frustrating to the user.
- (c) It allows millions of users to explore the internet and fully experiencing integrated text, graphics images and sounds with the aid of the user friendly world wide web (WWW) browsing software, though many users are faced with the problem of accessing the Microsoft internet explorer.
- (d) The internet is fast weighing out the traditional mode of book retrieval as users have no more need for physical books because orders are made over the internet under specified conditions.

- (e) e-library patrons are researchers and professionals who are not only seeking for ways of securing and processing information but better ways of evaluating, reviewing information as well as synthesizing literature.
- (f) E-library expands, assesses and continuously improves the library's reference services with emphasis on electronic reference to boost user participation.
- (g) The e-library expands and improves a library's physical infrastructure to support a new technological and computer based mode of researching.
- (h) The e-library ensures efficiency and straight forward access to journal literature and articles for use by patrons.

Since the electronic library is an aspect of an information delivery service, there is therefore a need for librarians to brace up with, the challenges posed through sending information resources from one location or point to the other electronically. Generally, some of the major challenges of the e-library system in the 21st century include:

(a) Funding

Lack of funds is a major constraint facing the establishment of the e-library system in Nigeria academic libraries. With the current economic uprising, many university libraries can afford to embrace the e-library system. Oyeneke (2007) rightly asserted that "contributing to this problem is the un-cooperative attitude of governmental authorities regarding the non-release of funds to sponsor the acquisition of these resources in the educational sector in Nigeria". The intervention of

Education Trust Fund (ETF) and the Petroleum Development Trust Fund (PDTF) to fund the university libraries is a welcome development.

(b) Inadequate infrastructure

Poor infrastructure to support the integration of the electronic library services manifests in the lack of national ICT policy, poor power supply, inadequate number of computers and their peripherals, low internet connectivity, etc. there is absence of stand-by generators for most libraries and the power supply from the Power holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN), is an illusion. In most institutions where the facilities exist, users are given limited access, not only by the limited number of internet service points, but also the time allotted them. Inadequate technological infrastructure is also evident in technical faults and other network configuration problems.

(c) Expertise

Inadequate training and retraining of library staff hinders the effective use of ICT in libraries. Staff training is a *sine qua non* for libraries and librarians to improve their ICT competence enhance systems management and encourage the education of students in ICT knowledge and skills.

Creating enlightenment programmes by way of current awareness services is crucial as most students gain admission to higher institutions without any ICT skills. In congruent, Ochogwu (1997) stated that "a large proportion of staff and students are not active users of their library systems and services and there is therefore the crucial need for user education programmes targeted

towards these groups of users". Capacity building through seminars, workshops and conferences, in the area of computer technology and Management Information Services is crucial for librarians. This will enhance their utilization of the opportunities that ICT offers. It will also enable librarians as information managers to double as system analysts.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The fast evolving Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and their applications in academic library services delivery in the 21st century largely depend on the interest and efforts of librarians. Librarians must therefore be proactive and also understand that the library environment is dynamic with its array in variation from technology, education, economics and socio-cultural forces. To fully equip themselves, they must brace up with the emerging challenges. From the above, the following are recommended.

- a. The virtual library project embarked upon in Nigeria under the auspices of the National library of Nigeria should be well-funded to ensure their success.
- b. Library managements should embark on an information dissemination programme to highlight the importance of the electronic resources available on the websites to all users
- c. Researchers in varied fields of endeavour should be encouraged to become the change agents by directing them to websites that will help them access information in various fields.
- d. Government should fund academic libraries to purchase computers, connect them online and create awareness programmes that will enable users' source for information online.
- e. Nigerian academic libraries should seek legal backing of the government to digitize their resources to enhance global access.
- f. Negotiation and access rights by Nigerian academic libraries must also take into cognizance the right to create print formats of the electronic publications particularly journals for retrospective searching and inter-library loan services.
- g. Academic libraries must emphasize the use of modern technologies rather than traditional modes of storage, organization and retrieval of information so as to keep in line with the challenges of ICT in the 21st century.
- h. There has to be collaboration amongst institutions to encourage unlimited electronic use of resources globally, libraries in academic institutions in Nigeria should collaborate with one another and with institutions like Federal Ministry of Education and the National Universities Commission in order to merge functions, share resources, exchange and disseminate information.
- i. Efforts should be made by government to provide adequate technological infrastructure to foster an ICT friendly environment. Such infrastructures should include adequate communication facilities, constant electricity supply since government has liberalized the telecommunication industry which has in turn created competition and increasdata and information transfer.

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