

Developing Rural Libraries and the Need for Virtual Libraries in Nigeria: Threats and Opportunities

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Abstract

Purpose: Sensitize the government and rural populace on the need to embrace virtual library in public libraries for the purpose of bridging the information gap between the urban and rural communities.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This is an opinion paper which highlights the relevance of technology in public libraries and the need for stakeholders to build and to indigenise our information infrastructure in order to exploit the immense benefits of the constantly changing hardware and software environment.

Findings: Daniel (1986) observed that about 70% of people in Nigeria live in the rural areas and are illiterates. Therefore, a dynamic technologically driven public library services cannot be considered paramount to the development of majority population unless it is firmly rooted to meet their information requirement and also sustain the professional development of librarians and public libraries in general.

Practical Implications: If the rural communities' information requirements are met, the axiom that knowledge is power will come to play. The rural populace cannot be knowledgeable and powerful if they do not have relevant information to empower their thinking and enhance their understanding.

This paper therefore recommends the establishment of virtual libraries to serve public libraries in rural communities.

Originality and Value: Rural communities need to be part of the global digital revolution through which images, text, and graphics are stored, retrieved, and reconfigured limitlessly, making knowledge, information and entertainment available on a scale that would befuddle past generations.

Keywords: Public libraries, rural communities, virtual libraries, Digital revolution, information.

INTRODUCTION

Public library as an institution exists to provide materials which communicate experience and ideas from one person to another and make easily and freely available to all people, the printed and non printed materials. It provides access to knowledge, information and works of imagination through a range of sources and services and is equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, religions, language, disability, economic and employment status and educational attainment (Aboyade, 1984). The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provide a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision, making and cultural development of the individual and social groups (UNESCO, 2004).

Public libraries are designed to provide information on agriculture, building, trade, health care and other aspects of human activities which are required mostly by the rural dwellers because they lack access to other sources of assistance. Adimorah (1990) noted that Nigeria information services are still elitist, serving only 20% of the educated elites group while the 80% illiterate rural dwellers wallow in information deprivation. Adomi (2005) collaborated this when he observed that in the rural communities there is a lack of telecommunications infrastructures, a lack of electricity and a reluctance on the part of internet services providers (ISPS), cybercafé operators and other stakeholders to extend their internet services. Hence, the information environment of this silent majority is yet to record any marked improvement in this period of information explosion.

Virtual library services remain the best approach for libraries to bring about development in rural areas. This can be achieved by providing relevant and up to date information through technology for rural dwellers to enhance their development. Usherwood and Linkley (1999) conclude that libraries can develop social cohesion and help to build individual confidence in playing a social role. Additionally, they refer to the central educational role that public libraries have to play in terms of literacy and reading skills, and the fact that libraries can also have an economic impact. Information is the pivot around which development revolves and for any nation to achieve meaningful and purposeful results, it becomes a vital ingredient to be used in carrying the majority population who live in the rural areas along with its programmes and activities in all social life.

Today's society marked by an acceleration in the use of information technology and the proliferation of information, public libraries have to reassess their tasks in order to ensure that all citizens have access to information. There is the need to make the rural dwellers not only up to their responsibilities but aware of their noble roles to the society they belong. In the wake of information and knowledge explosion which are part of the characteristics of the global village, rural people through different means and media aspire to acquire education at all levels. Today what is required by every Nigerian is digital literacy. This can be defined as the ability of an

individual to identify information required to satisfy his need, know how, to use computers and digital systems to source the information as well as know how to use the information collected to solve a felt need. This is a skill that must be acquired by every rural dweller to be able to fit into the information society.

With the advent of technologies, public libraries should have a dual policy that covers electronic/ digital collections as well as print and non-print materials. One of the most commonly cited reasons for recommending the virtual library has been to better prepare the current generation of library patrons for a workplace where ICTs, particularly computers, the internet and related technologies are becoming more and more ubiquitous (Ejedafirn & Isebe, 2010). There is a general consensus that an effective virtual library services would allow members of the various rural communities and indigenous researches to share their research outputs with the global community as well as ensure the preservation of Nigeria cultural heritage. Ogunsola & Okusaga (2006) opined that the virtual library can be regarded as a child of necessity arising from the need to use technology in accessing the world information over load, or information explosion for human survival and development. It is therefore imperative for public libraries in rural and urban communities in Nigeria to embrace it.

The Impact of Public library on Rural Development

The public Library, a product of modern democracy, and its foremost agent for the integral education of both urban and rural dwellers, is the institution which conserves and organizes human knowledge in order to place it at the service of the community without distinction of profession, creed, class or race. Its objectives shall be:

- i. To offer the public information, books, diverse materials and facilities for the best service of their interest and intellectual requirements.
- ii. To stimulate freedom of expression and a constructive critical attitude towards the solution of social problems.
- iii. To educate man to participate in a creative manner in community life and to promote a better understanding between individuals, groups and nations.
- iv. To extend the activities of the centre's of learning offering new educational possibilities of the people (American Library Association).

In order to fulfill these objectives the public library must enjoy absolute freedom in its task of diffusing culture and ample autonomy to function. Hence, they provide information materials and services for the education and enlightenment of the rural dwellers and the generality of the populace. In Nigeria rural communities are faced with low literacy rate and where written records and electronic information are still very few and oral tradition predominates, and in the absence of information resources in the native languages, particular in science and technology. It becomes imperative that the public libraries should not only serve the literate minority, but should also encourage the illiterate to become literate by providing information resources in various formats.

Public libraries worldwide in recent times, have significantly metamorphosed from purely traditional modeled services delivery system to a more dynamic technologically driver one. For instance, the vocabulary of librarianship is changing: dissemination is being replaced with "communication", repository by "data base", search by "navigation" etc (Aju & Ape, 2011). A critical assessment of library services delivery system especially in the rural areas in Nigeria revealed that, the masses are not accessing, library services adequately, especially women, who constitute 63% of the adult population in Nigeria (Nigerian Population Census, 1992). The poor state of public libraries constantly stare us on the face as we see the underdeveloped library system widen between the urban and rural areas. Hence, the need to carefully develop our public libraries to embrace technology becomes paramount.

Virtual Libraries and Rural Communities

In order to meet up with present challenge of information organization, management, timely location and dissemination to its clients, it is pertinent for public libraries to embrace the changing process from manual to electric automated library services. This will create an opportunity for public library to achieve its sets of predetermined aims and objectives. In Nigeria many universities libraries are only slowly becoming computerized, and at a high cost, public libraries present an opposite scenario, internet access could be a real boom for rural librarianship in the country, farmers in remote, poor areas need to know about disease treatments. Access to current, reliable information at the point of need could make a real difference to the lives of ordinary working people in an agrarian subsistence economy.

Virtual library is used to describe libraries in which computer and telecommunications technologies make access to a wide range of information resources possible. Nancy Schiller quoted by Daniel (2001) was one of the first writers to use the expression "virtual library" which she defined in 1992. Simply as libraries in which computer and telecommunication technologies are used to access wide range of information resources possible. Virtual libraries encompasses all activities that relate to using microcomputers and its peripheral and other

electromagnetic equipment in selecting, acquiring, storing, transferring, and disseminating information within/outside the library building with less effort and work (Obaseki, 2009).

Information is a resource for the growth and development of an individual, an organization or a nation (Ogunrombi & Amadasun, 2009). For good government to achieve meaningful and purposeful results, information becomes a virtual ingredient to be used in carrying the rural majority along. Kagan (1982) in Deut & Yannotta (2005) suggest that the rural library has three functions: to provide information to those individuals responsible for rural development programs; support rural education programs and rural schools; and serve as centre for community education and culture. However, the shift from traditional library operations to a world wide access has become imperative. As noted by Singh (2004) the concept of ownership has been left behind as the emphasis is shifting from building strong local collections for long time use to accessing from current use of electronic materials made available by providers anywhere in the world. The implication for rural libraries is clear, acquiring the necessary technological infrastructure for building a virtual library in rural communities become a sine quanon.

Threats to development of virtual libraries in rural communities

There is widespread poor quality of public library services which manifest in information deprivation to the rural dwellers in Nigeria. Today, access to and use of modern information technology still appears to be a luxury. Beside the growing realization of the relevance of information by the rural dwellers, public libraries are not yet developed to foster dissemination of needed information to rural dwellers through technology.

Ukoh (1988) opined that computer has become such a household word in the developed world that libraries should see it as a great opportunity which should be taken up as soon as possible, but sooner than later. Public libraries in rural areas and indeed other types of libraries in Nigeria, should not give the impression either that we do not know of the capabilities and potentials of virtual system or that we do not need ICT to improve our services.

It must be realized that many public libraries especially in the rural areas faced various problems in their attempts to computerize their library operations. These problems are not really of the public library's working but it is the usual problem confronting all libraries in Nigeria over automation processes, which includes: poor funding of libraries, shortage of manpower, and lack of spare parts, poor telecommunication infrastructure, coupled with the problem of low level of electricity supply.

It is paramount to observe, that to facilitate the development and implementation of national virtual library, the Nigeria Universities Commission (NUC) convened a stakeholder's workshop in Abuja in July 2001 where the blueprint for the project was developed and subsequently approved by the Federal Executive Council in January 2002 (Gbaje, 2007). Eleven universities were selected as pilot centers for the first phase of the project with the hub at NUC. Unfortunately, public libraries were left out, in an effort to identify some of the major threats that had hindered the development of virtual library in rural areas, the researcher therefore concludes that the non inclusion of public libraries in the National Virtual Library project constitute a major setback, coupled with lack of local resources for digitization, computer phobia, constituted the major constraints to development of virtual libraries in rural communities in Nigeria. There is no doubt that these problems have really slowed down the activities of public libraries in rural areas in utilizing the global information and technological innovations for the services of their clientele.

Opportunities of Virtual Libraries to Rural Areas

Building and sustaining virtual libraries in rural communities require the proper technological infrastructure. For the overall development of rural communities, every citizen, regardless of age, life situation should have equal opportunity of access to up to date and relevant information. Okigbo in rural communication campaign agree that the information officer should be sensitive to the rural dwellers and make them aware of their deficiencies, so that they will be prepared to react positively to motivation and persuasion to adopt new agencies. Virtual libraries are the future of rural libraries: they have brought about different ways of accessing information, thereby redefining the role of the public libraries and librarians. Hence, librarians with web technology skills will be needed to facilitate skilled information retrieval and to intervene between the rural dwellers and the information to help them, evaluate what they retrieve. Librarians are now faced with the challenges to acquire web technology skills to augment their traditional skills in order for them to contribute to the success of the virtual library.

Studies have shown that telecommunication infrastructure is a major factor in the deployment of information and communication Technology (ICT), particularly for the implementation of a virtual library. Digital technology offers rural libraries the opportunity to take the lead in assisting rural dwellers, community leaders, in their day to day information needs. Bearing in mind that majority of the rural people still does not have full and automatic access to computers, and the virtual library can be a hub as the provider for these folks.

Virtual libraries only exist virtually, that is the library does not exist "in real life". The collections do

not exist in tangibly form but are electronically accessible in digital format via computers (Reitz, 2004). Hence, access to virtual library services will create an enabling environment for many rural dwellers to turn to the internet to receive information and even read for pleasure instead of visiting the physical library. Virtual library can also be used to provide and maintain a wide variety of library services, including the delivery of multimedia substitutes than the traditional formats.

Way Forward

There is the need to establish a link between the rural communities and technology backed information services in a variety of subject interest. The expectations of the researcher are for public libraries in rural areas to adapt so that they can remain at the forefront of information delivery within their communities. Hence, the proposed information services for rural dwellers in Nigeria by public libraries include the following:

- Support equitable access to information by capitalizing on digital technology.
- Ensure rural library are able to overcome technical barriers to access
- Build consortium among libraries, the education system, the private sector and all levels of government to improve service delivery;
- Initiate policy reforms and modernize the legislative framework
- Seek more grants and other source of funding to upgrade or establish the necessary information infrastructure.

Conclusion

The advantage of reaching people in remote areas and in unusual circumstances through virtual library can be explored as an agent of enlightenment and socialization realizing fully the role of information in all human endeavors. Information is a liquid asset and the world around us is changing very fast, if public libraries in rural communities must fit into this global village, they must accept these changes as inevitable. Rural libraries are therefore encouraged to be part of these changes from the traditional methods to the application of technologies to information storage, generation and delivery.

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