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Prospects of digital information services in Nigerisn public libraries

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Abstract

This paper explores prospects of digital information services in Nigerian public libraries. The paper identified potential advantages of digital library system as a tool for modern information services. It observes that public library services will not be successful without the adoption and use of digital technologies such as hardware and software components that improve library services. The paper analyzes the concept of digital library, role of public library in digital environment and training need for public librarians in digital service delivery as well as constraints to digital information services in Nigerian public libraries. It provides workable recommendations on how Nigerian public libraries will move forward in the digital environment by formulating digital library policy and standards, user education, provision of adequate training and re-training of staff through seminars, conferences and workshops as well as adequate budget for the purchase of digital technologies and resources for effective service delivery.

Introduction

In the digital era there is increasing dependency by public libraries on digital information due to availability of hardware and software technologies that are being used for content creation and service delivery. Public libraries are always considering the need of their users and new changes in service delivery in order to enhance access to information in digital format. Digital library system has obviously become the tool for enhancing information service in public libraries. Digital library is defined by Library Network of India (2022) as a type of library system that provides around the clock access to digitized information resources. It store, organize and deliver multiple collection of information resources via digital formats. Digital library solve space

challenges in libraries because it did not consume library physical space and at the same time many people from different locations can access the digital resources that are available remotely. These resources include full text, abstracts, audio, video and images. Calhoun (2013) stated that there are different perspectives of the term digital library such as online library, virtual library and library without walls. These concepts are used interchangeably and frequently stand for digital library. Trivedi (2021) listed the features of digital library system as follows:

a. All information resources are in digital format.
b. It contains multimedia resources.
c. It has flexible data and information flows as well as richer contextual metadata.
d. It has massive scholarly content with various validation processes.
e. It has unlimited access points, distributed resources and access control.
f. Information resources can be accessed virtually.
g. Information resources are dynamic and can be updated.
h. Information resources are either available free or fee based in nature.

Utilization of digital library and information services focuses mainly on the need of the general public using available computer technology. The concept utilization of digital library refers to the act of using information resources that are found on the digital library platform. In the digital age, there is massive utilization of digital information resources by users, and libraries are at the centre stage of ensuring that the resources are utilized effectively. Thus, utilization of digital library has impacted the lives of library users and increase interaction among them. Salubi, Okemwa and Nekhwevha (2018) state that when utilizing digital library patrons have the opportunity of retrieving and using information at their own convenience, thereby saving them time and travelling costs, and new choices for answering reference queries. Public libraries are engaged in creating opportunity for their users to study and conduct research by utilizing the digital library. They also use the platform for access to entertainment resources. However, utilization of digital library requires guidance by librarians so that users will search and use the digital resources effectively.

Nevertheless, digital library system has the potential of providing wide range of information resources and services that are created and made available online or offline such as digital repositories and archive of resources. It is therefore reshaping the method of public library services and increasing visibility of contents in various disciplines and topics. Public libraries have the opportunity to use digital library platforms to enhance the quality of their service delivery. Digital library is transforming the way and manner public libraries acquire, organize, store and disseminate information to their users due to growth and development in ICTs. This development according to Barbuti (2020) allows for conversion of traditional resources into digital formats called digitization, and it guarantee long term access to information resources. Therefore, digitization has become a new trend in libraries and a technique of maintaining a huge database of digital contents for wider accessibility and use. Sun and Yuan (2012) described the function of digital library as follows:

a. It provides friendly interface to users.
b. It uses network facilities.
c. It supports library functions.
d. It enhances advanced search, access and retrieval of information.
e. It improves the library operations.
f. It enables one to perform searches that are not practical manually.
g. It protects owners of information
h. It preserves unique collection through digitization.

The Role of Public Libraries in Digital Information Services

Public libraries are solely established to serve the general public by providing them with equal access to information resources and services via traditional and digital methods. Lawson (2016) described public libraries as institutions that serve everyone in the society. They are established and funded by local and state governments or through some other form of community organization. Public libraries provide access to knowledge, information and works of imagination through a range of resources and services and made available to all members of the

community regardless of race nationality, age, gender, religion, language, disability economic and employment status as well as educational attainment. IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994) articulates the functions of public libraries as follows:

a. Creating and strengthening reading habits in children from a very early age.
b. Supporting both individual (self-conducted) and formal education at all levels.
c. Giving everybody the opportunity for personal creative development.
d. Catalyzing the imagination and creativity of children and minors.
e. Promoting the awareness of cultural heritage, arts, scientific achievements and innovation
f. Promoting free and easy access to cultural expression of all performing arts.
g. Encouraging intercultural dialogue and cultural diversity.
h. Encouraging oral traditions.
i. Ensuring easy access to all sorts of community information.
j. Providing appropriate information services to local enterprises, associations and groups.
k. Encouraging the development of computer literacy and information.
l. Promoting literacy activities and programmes for all age groups.

From the foregoing, access to information in public libraries is regarded to be a fundamental human right of all communities without discrimination. More importantly, information in digital formats should be made available to library users without hindrance in public libraries. According to Librarian's Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) (2015) the advances in ICTs in recent years have placed a huge amount of information in digital formats and online connections. Public libraries are now bridging the access gap between the haves and have-nots. In addition, more and more activities are going online and the public libraries need to serve as access points for their communities to use digital resources.

Moreover, public libraries are expected to have a digital library system strategy that would cover the process of planning, implementation and maintenance of digital facilities that are use to provide services. Also, the plan should include the ICT professional that would teach core public library staff how to adapt digital technologies, maintenance procedure and ensuring that the digital platforms support user needs and requirements. This shows that digital library is a

tool that added value, promotes the image of public libraries and support efficient delivery of information (LRCN, 2015).

Adoption of Hardware and Software Management Systems

It is obvious that the changing landscape in information service delivery compelled public libraries to create digital collection of information resources in order to serve the general public in the information age. In the present time library users rely on digital technologies and facilities like computers, tablets and smart phones for access to information. Therefore, public library service will be effective when there are adequate digital facilities. These facilities are mostly the digital technologies that are regarded as key to efficient service delivery. There are some examples of these technology facilities required for successful implementation of digital library system. They comprised Computers, Multimedia Storage Devices, Scanners, Telephone Connectivity, Printers, Power Point Projectors, CDs/DVDs, Digital Radio Sets, High Definition Television Sets, Digital Cameras, Internet Connectivity, Photocopier, Smart Phones, Tablets and Laptops.

Besides the aforementioned facilities there is digital library software used to enhance services in libraries. A software package is adopted by library to store and navigate numerous digital resources like books and multimedia collections. Also, library patrons can use application (App) to borrow digital material such as e-book or e-magazine from the library anywhere regardless of geographic location. Additionally, users can check out digital content using devices like android phones and equally download content for offline access. There are various types of digital library management software available in the information market such as Dspace, Koha, Eprints, Fedora, Evergreen, Wordpress and Greenstone. (Randhawa 2021 and Harilal 2018)

Generally, digital libraries have the same function and goals as the traditional libraries but using different approaches. The overall goal is to render high quality resources to patrons and

to meet their expectations. Cleveland (2021) stated that digital libraries serve particular communities as traditional libraries, though digital libraries will require both the skills of librarians and computer scientists to be viable.

Skills and Knowledge of Public Librarians on Digital Library and Information Services

Skills and knowledge are fundamental to the successful operation of digital library. Therefore, training of public librarians is needed so that they can meet the requirement of providing information services in the digital era. The most important aspect of skills and knowledge acquisition among librarians is to ensure best practices when handling digital information services as well as enhancing user access. Kumari and Mallaiah (2017) observe that librarians require training on Internet application and usage, Microsoft tools, multimedia and programming languages. The knowledge gained through this training is a prerequisite for enhancing service delivery because it would allow public librarians to assist their users in determining the nature of digital information, evaluating the quality of the information, selecting the most accurate digital information as well as using the information ethically and efficiently.

The services of public libraries can adequately be enhanced through digital platforms and systems. Digital platforms and technologies make it easier for libraries to harness the power of information and connect with their users. It helps libraries to show their users that services are much more than books but also through computers and Internet. Thus, digital library system can be seen as a tool that can transform user experience and bring all the value-based information resources to the doorstep.

Despite the potentiality of digital library system in information service delivery, until this time the perception of digital library among public libraries seems to be passive due to so many factors. For example, Daisy (2019) observed that in some countries the digital library services by public libraries haven't been able to keep up to the contemporary realities. As such, public

libraries need to fulfill their purpose like other service agencies. They should be able to open their doors 24/7 via online connections with a free to use service for everyone that has a library card.

Constraints to Digital Information Services in Public Libraries

In Nigerian public libraries most of the constraints digital library and information system are attributed to non-availability of modern technology facilities, lack of adequate skills and strategies or expert technical staff, financial constraint, collection development or lack of subscription to appropriate databases, copyright issues, low speed Internet connectivity, time constraint and lack of support from state governments and general poor administrative support.

Paterson (2007) observed that the prices of computers that are use in libraries are rising. Therefore, libraries face challenges in adaptation and use of applicable computer hardware and software due to price issue. However, while it is common to switch to new computer software or use multiple types of software at a time, hardware is less frequently changed in libraries. Software can easily be created, changed, or deleted, but switching out hardware takes greater skill and is usually more expensive. At a time of setting up a digital library, the cost of hardware is often calculated by taking the overall purchase cost such as shipping, tax, maintenance and support cost for the lifetime of the hardware system, and this is consider as a critical challenge for libraries.

There are challenges related to copyright and licensing issues due to unauthorized copying of digital content. This has been a challenge to successful implementation and use of digital library system. There are more infringements and violations of privacy in digital information setting. Kelly (2016) stated that "digital libraries are hampered by copyright law because, unlike with traditional printed documents, the laws of digital copyright are still being

formed. The re-publishing of material on the web by libraries may require permission from rights holders, and there is a conflict of interest between libraries and the publishers who may wish to create online versions of their acquired content for commercial purposes". Some challenges are attributed to the fact that a number of digital materials are not always created or owned by libraries, the content are mostly subscribed and make available in the public domain. This aspect often imply some restrictions to lending out digital content as well as guideline restrictions on general use such as printing and downloading.

Another basic challenge is the lack of adequate modern skills and knowledge for librarians to manage the digital library system. Many public librarians are not well equipped with the adequate training to utilize the digital system and exploit its benefits. Devex (2013) opined that libraries are facing training challenges because a significant portion of librarians do not have the knowledge, expertise and other capacity needed to use the most advanced digital technology. This issue has often become complicated and problematic for libraries to deliver digital collections. Garrido, Sullivan and Gordon (2012) observe that, the possession of skills and knowledge of digital library system among librarians in contemporary librarianship is essential, and is becoming prerequisite for employment in libraries.

Public libraries are facing financial challenges that hinder them from acquiring the modern digital technologies and systems. Digital library requires enough financial backing and assistance to be functional. Abdussalam Et al (2021) noted that in Nigeria funding issues is recognized to be the major stumbling block for the development of digital libraries. Hence, poor funding of libraries and epileptic implementation of budget has affected the quality of information resources, access, services and use (Ishola, 2014). However, lack of adequate funds has direct link to library's performance in providing digital services. Public libraries that have

smaller budgets will find it difficult to sustain their digital library systems or implement new digital platforms for service delivery.

It is a common phenomenon that subscription to international and reputable databases is critical to the overall function of a digital library. But in Nigeria most public libraries do not have proper digital collection development policy that will cover wide range and reputable online information resources. As such, public libraries were unable to adopt and use global standard regarding acquisition and subscription to digital contents, not to mention covering all disciplines. There is also high cost of digital content due to high exchange rate that serves as crucial challenge to libraries.

Finally, Nigeria has sluggish Internet connection that seriously affects implementation of digital library projects. Libraries with poor Internet connection will not be able to establish online connection with their users. They will not be able to provide public wifi services and assist their users to conduct online searches or find educational materials remotely.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

Digital information services are no doubt an emerging and suitable choice for public libraries in the digital era. Digital library platform presents various advantages to both libraries and users. Therefore, users have an option of using digital library system either in the library or virtually through remote services. Despite these potentialities, public libraries in Nigeria are faced with certain constraints that bedevil digital information services. These constrains include poor Internet connection, lack of adequate funds, poor administrative support and lack of expertise. Therefore, it is recommended that digital library policy and standards should be put in place in Nigerian public libraries. There should be user education on access to digital information,

provision of training and retraining for library staff, adequate budget and subscription to relevant

digital resources and databases.

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