

Changing roles of libraries and academic librarians in a knowledge society

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ABSTRACT

The information explosion coupled with the electronic or virtual era has brought great changes to libraries and its working environment. This paper therefore looks at the concept of library within an academic environment. The knowledge society was also described vis-a-vis the changing roles of libraries and librarians. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for librarians to develop their competency skill in information acquisition and provision in a knowledge society. Finally, some recommendations were suggested.

Keywords: Libraries, librarians, academic librarians, knowledge society.

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INTRODUCTION

Libraries traditionally have played a significant role in education and giving access to information and knowledge to different clientele. The different libraries perform different function or services to both the potential and existing users they serve. The multitude of information resources available in libraries ensures different access to scholarly information which in turn enlarges the development possibilities of education culture and research. According to Abdulsalami et al. (2013) libraries acquired a great importance in the knowledge society. Libraries which have been variously referred to as the purveyor of information, the custodian of knowledge, and the house of learning plays a vital role in the development of any society by catering for the information needs of thousands of peoples within a particular community. The main goal of a library therefore is to process, acquire, organize, preserve and provide easy access to its users in the most convenient way to knowledge and information. Leheman (2011) was of the view that the future of library will be as a knowledge center that is dynamic where not only the librarian, the "books" (whether real or virtual) and the users engage in an interchange ideas .The satisfaction derived from the use of library is dependent on the quality of its resources and its personnel and their zeal in service provision.

Academic libraries according to Gunasekera (2010) are described as the "heart" of the learning community

providing a place for students and lecturers to conduct their research, advance knowledge and also to support the goals and aspiration of its parent organization. Academic libraries are and will still remain central to the management of scholarly communication. They are required to fulfill their traditional tasks of information supply and document delivery to enrolled students, lecturers and researchers. According to India (1971) academic library bring books, students and scholars together under conditions which encourage reading for pleasure, self discovery, personal growth and the sharpening of intellectual curiosity. An academic library according to Arora (2008) has the following major functions:

- i) It builds up a need-based, balanced and up-to-date collection of reading material in print as well as electronic form to serve as a reservoir of scholarly literature and information.
- ii) It organizes the collection and creates control system so it can be made use of quickly and conveniently.
- iii) It circulates reading material and also provides access to electronic sources among the readers for use outside the library.
- iv) It provides personal help to the users so that they are able to make optimum use of the resources of the library without any difficulty.

v) It provides the users the bibliographic, translation and reprographic services and thus helps them in their research activities.

vi) As a part of the university set-up, it supports the teaching research and extension programmes of the university through various ways.

Now the library has to develop into an information centre providing access to information that is available not only locally but also nationally and worldwide. By applying and using new technologies and methods, academic libraries can help to advance education and research.

THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY

The concept of a "knowledge society" is often been misinterpreted or confused with that of "information society". According to Evers (2003) information society is considered to be more limited as the application of knowledge of data creates information and information has to be activated or generated by knowledge. Information according to him is the codified result of observation while knowledge entails the capacity to act. According to Burch (2006) knowledge societies includes a dimension of social, cultural, economical, political and institutional transformation and a more pluralistic and developmental perspective regarded as a human process. The Wikipedia on the other hand refers to a knowledge society as a society where knowledge is the primary production resource instead of capital and labour. It may also refer to the use a certain society gives to information: a knowledge society creates, shares, and uses knowledge for the prosperity and well being of its people. For us to be able to understand the concept properly or adequately there is the need to look at the characteristics that makes up a knowledge society.

According to Abdulsalami et al. (2013) development of the information societies has established some necessary conditions for the development of knowledge societies. However, the knowledge society is more empowering and all embracing than the information society. According to them they are pluralistic. While information society focuses on networks and connectivity through the technological advance of ICTs, knowledge society uses these to open access to all to increase utilization of knowledge in all its forms for human development. According to Abdulsalami et al. (2013) it is not merely having ICTs, an abundance of information, global access and networking but using these to construct a desirable society for all that is to construct knowledge societies.

According to Evers (2003), the characteristics of a knowledge society are:

i) Its members have attained a higher average standard of education in comparison to other societies and a growing proportion of its labour force are employed as

knowledge workers, that is, researchers, scientists, information specialists, knowledge managers and related workers.

ii) Its industry produces product with integrated artificial intelligence.

iii) Its organizations – private, government and civil society – are transformed into intelligent, learning organizations.

iv) There is increased organized knowledge in the form of digitized expertise, stored in data banks, expert systems, organizational plans, and other media.

v) There are multiple centres of expertise and poly-centric production of knowledge.

vi) There is a distinct epistemic culture of knowledge production and knowledge utilization.

UNESCO (2004) on the other hand describes a knowledge society as one where growth, development, and innovation are driven by optimal use of information and information products. In knowledge societies:

i) The agricultural and manufacturing sectors become less significant, in favour of service and knowledge-based industries.

ii) Individual opportunity is greatly increased, with mobility being significantly determined by education.

iii) Competition is greater, with enterprises being exposed to global competition and global markets.

iv) Cooperation is an important strategy for organizations and enterprises, in markets and societies with high levels of integration and interdependence.

With recent technological developments, humanity has learned how to mass-produce knowledge, but how will this knowledge be used? The use of ICTs offers us new opportunities to achieve equal and universal access to knowledge and genuine changing in a public knowledge forum, thereby, realizing the idea of democracy and freedom of expression. According to the UNESCO report (2005), these new developments "should be the cornerstone of true knowledge societies, which are a source of human and sustainable development". Societies that set up institutions and organizations enabling people and information to develop without limits and open opportunities for all kinds of knowledge to be mass-produced and mass-utilized are knowledge societies. Lord and Britz (2006) defined knowledge society as a society that operates within the paradigm of the economics of information. It values human capital as the prime input to production and innovation.

Dike (2007) enumerated five features of knowledge societies as thus:

i) Knowledge societies are pluralistic and culturally diverse.

ii) Knowledge societies are democratic societies for all and by all.

iii) Knowledge societies are learning societies.

- iv) Knowledge societies foster full human development.
- v) Knowledge societies build better future.

THE CHANGING ROLES FOR LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS

The information revolution and the growth of the internet and digital technology has caused a dramatic and rapid change in scholarly record, these changing scholarly communication practices are creating both new challenges and opportunities. The challenges according to Rosenblum (2008) include the escalating cost of subscribing to scholarly journals; the explosion of new born-digital content and the corresponding need to manage, describe, and preserve it; and an intellectual property and copyright environment seemingly out of sync with the ways the scholarly community wants to use (and reuse) digital information. They reassess their own roles in supporting the evolving needs and behaviours of their users; they are identifying opportunities to actively shape the scholarly communication environment and are undertaking a range of new initiatives. These initiatives according to Rosenblum (2008) include:

- i) Creating institutional repositories to support the archiving and distribution of a wide range of scholarly and teaching materials produced by lecturers at their institutions.
- ii) Developing digital publishing services to support the design, management and distribution of online journals and monographs.
- iii) Engaging in education, outreach and advocacy activities addressing scholarly communication issues.

According to Abdulsalami et al. (2013), the primary objective of any library is to bring together the man and the documents that would solve his information needs. To do this work the librarian acquires primary literature, store it, organize and control it. He equally performs a secondary function by compiling catalogs and reading list, providing up-to-date comprehensive bibliographic services that allow users identify essential information. With the emergence of ICT in library, electronic information provides librarians with challenges that are not necessarily new. However, as the nature of the librarians' roles change, so does the challenge to keep to the long-standing professional codes of ethics.

NEW ROLES FOR LIBRARIES

Libraries have traditionally focused on acquiring externally produced work to make available to their local communities. Within the information chain, libraries perform an intermediary function between information producers and end-users. This function is performed in

two distinct ways:

- i) For information producers, the library acts as an information clearinghouse. This means that producers do not need to offer their products to individual users, with all the administrative problems and costs involved. This is especially important in the area of journals, where the library takes out a relatively expensive institutional subscription from which materials are further distributed to end users. In many cases (especially in the area of commercial publishing) administrative intermediaries such as booksellers and subscription agents handle the distribution of publications. Through this system the publisher only has to deal with a limited number of purchasers, whereas libraries can handle their acquisitions through a limited number of supplies.
- ii) For the end user, the library is an efficient instrument to make available a limited set of relevant publications out of the entire volume of publications available in the market place. The library acts as a selective filter and quality instrument, making available to the user only those publications which are relevant and of sufficient quality. There is no need for individual users to keep themselves informed about the information market and to acquire materials individually from publishers and other producers. Also, since publications are acquired through library funds, information usually is made available to end users free of cost.

It is therefore necessary for libraries to leave up to expectation in ensuring that the information needs of both the potential and existing users are met and provided in whatever format that will make it easily accessible to them. According Natarajan and Kaliyan (2009), libraries must develop new specialists with skills in areas such as digital content production, new metadata formats, software development and systems administration. It is not surprising that the academic library has witnessed more technological change over the past decade. With the ever-growing electronic availability of information on both national and global networks, many libraries have turned their attention to providing access rather than building local collections.

Similarly, according to Abdulsalami et al. (2013), a pivotal role played by the libraries is that it is one of the factors which help in the development of a society or an even civilization. It caters to the knowledge thirsty minds of thousands of people. With the onset and advancement of technologies, virtual libraries are created. These types of libraries are present in many colleges. Libraries are an integral part of the education system and development and one is incomplete without the other.

NEW ROLES FOR LIBRARIANS

With the advance of the technological revolution,

librarians also will play a major role to provide all types of information in meeting their users expectation. Such roles include:

- i) They will continue to refine their client-centered function as intermediaries and facilitators.
- ii) They must collaborate more with personnel from other departments of the institution. There must be a strong communication and an effective partnership between the institution's library and its computing service. Librarians need technologists' system, computing, network, and other technical expertise, while information technologists can learn much from the library's knowledge of users' needs.
- iii) The main goal of librarians should be to ensure all members of the institution know what information resources are available to them and how the library staff can facilitate access of them, within the physical walls of the library or elsewhere. As users are accessing more and more bibliographic and full-text databases as well as utilizing the vast resources of the Internet from outside the library, librarians will need to reach out to them to offer the help they need.
- iv) Librarians can help in the design of technology based information services and share their intimate knowledge of what users want and need. As an example, the users could benefit greatly from database help screens that have been designed with input from library professionals.
- vi) Librarians need to be polite, friendly and always able to behave in a courteous, patient and tactful manner. They need to give the user their complete attention.
- vii) Librarians must select material according to their users' requirement. Librarians must possess reasonable knowledge of electronic resources and adequate grinding in the techniques of their evaluation and selection.
- viii) Librarians can request a publisher to test out the produce on a trial basis to make decisions about the appropriateness of an electronic resource for his library. Trials periods help eliminate the guesswork in selection of electronic resources. The other option is to visit or talk to other librarians about how a particular electronic resource performs in their library.

CONCLUSION

The roles of the library and the librarian in a knowledge society cannot be underestimated. In this era of information explosion and the increasing virtual access to knowledge, libraries and librarians need to be up-to-date in meeting the information expectation of their users. Challenges brought by this information explosion will make the library and librarians stand up to their professional responsibility to meet with the challenges of information provision in the knowledge society. With this in mind and with the technological improvement every day librarians working in our academic libraries need to

develop and improve on their information technology skills or competencies into meeting with the growing needs of both their existing and potential users.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i) While libraries should move with modern trends of information acquisition librarians on the other hand should develop their competencies in meeting the information explosion challenges.
- ii) Libraries should organize workshop to train both the librarians and users on how to search and access relevant information needed by them.
- iii) Libraries should be remodeled to meet the challenges of information provision in a knowledge society.
- iv) Libraries should provide balanced information resources in (print and non print format) relevant to the activities of its funding body.

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