

The Role of Libraries in Bridging Digital Divide and Creating Information Society in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study takes a look at information society as one characterized by access to and use of information communication technologies and where information activities are the dominant economic and occupational endeavour. Such that the Gross National Product of the country is largely dependent on the information economy. However, it is rightly observed that Nigeria is yet to attain an information society due to digital divide brought about by factors such as: low internet broadband, epileptic electricity supply and inadequate information communication training. It concludes by advocating that libraries as institutions of development can take the bull by the horn to bridge the digital divide through adequate training of librarians in ICT skills, establishment of public libraries in rural areas and adequate political will by government at all levels to create the information society.

Keywords: *Digital Divide, Digital literacy, Information Society, Information Communication Technologies, Libraries, Nigeria.*

INTRODUCTION

The information society is one where the creation, distribution, uses, integration and manipulation of information is a very important economic, political and cultural endeavour. This is done in a manner that information work improves the livelihood of individuals, families, and indeed the State, such that information activities contribute majorly to the Gross National Product (GNP) of the country. The main aim of the information society is to gain competitive advantage nationally and internationally by using information communication technologies (ICT) in a creative and productive way to enhance the national income. Its economic counterpart is the knowledge economy resulting from individuals acquiring a high level of intellectualism and ICT skills, whereby wealth is created through the economic exploitation of information activities. Really, people who have the means to participate in this form of society are sometimes referred to as digital citizens (Beniger, 1986). More worrisome is the fact that more than fifty years after the discovery of oil in Nigeria, Nigerians still lack the requisite technological skills to exploit the crude, which is still dominated by foreign multinational companies such as Agip, Chevron, Exxon Mobil and Shell among others. This is happening at this time when the drilling and exploitation of crude oil is driven mainly by the information and communication technology skills. The term digital divide became popular in the late 1990s among concerned parties such as governments, policy makers, academicians and advocacy groups. The digital divide or the digital split is a social concept referring to the different amount of information available and

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accessible between those who have access to the internet, especially broadband access and those who do not have access. Generally, digital divide is determined by access to information and communications technologies and to media that the different segments of society can use. With regards to internet, the access is only one aspect. Other aspects of considerable importance are the quality of connection, as well as the availability of access at an affordable cost and quality. It is envisaged that when youths are adequately skilled in information communication skills, they will be able to drive the exploration, exploitation, production and marketing of crude petroleum products as well as the gas industry. Nigeria has one of the highest gas reserves in the world, yet could not make ordinary cooking gas readily and cheaply available for its citizens, thus worsening the poverty index of majority of the people of the country. This cannot and should not be allowed to continue. The library as an institution must therefore come in to ameliorate this unbecoming scenario. It is even unthinkable that while Nigeria exports its crude oil cheaply to other countries, it imports refined petroleum products at exorbitant prices to satisfy the petroleum products needs of its citizens. The library therefore have very critical roles to play in bringing economic order to Nigeria's economic disorder, while ensuring that Nigerians are fully engaged in productive information endeavour that will contribute largely to its Gross National Product. Thus, the main objective of this work is to find out what role libraries could play in bridging the digital divide between countries of the North who have the ICT and its skills and those of the South who do not have. This is with a view to creating an information society in Nigeria; which invariably will lead to the reduction of unemployment or even under – employment among majority of Nigerian youths; thus, stemming the present restiveness and violence being perpetrated by youths in various parts of the country, especially the North East.

Characteristics of the Information Society

Writing on the characteristics of the information society, Drucker (2002) argues that the information society represent a transition from an economy based on material goods to one based on knowledge. In other words, what drives the information society is acquisition of knowledge and skills which enhances the people's income. However, Porat (1977) distinguishes a primary – information goods and services that are directly used in the production, distribution or processing of information and a secondary sector – information services produced for internal consumption by government and non – information firms, as the information economy. Thus the total value of the primary and secondary information sector to the GNP is an indicator of the information economy. Based on such indicators, the information society has been defined as a society where more than half of the GNP is produced or generated through information activities, and more than half of the employees are active in the information economy. In the modern world, information has the power to transform the lives of people and nations. The concept of information society is connected to this fact. Indeed, access to information resources and sources is crucial, and it is influenced by many factors. Balance among the factors is essential to shrinking the digital divide (Rao, 2006).

In information society, living standards, patterns of work and leisure, the education system and the marketplace are influenced significantly by advances in information and knowledge. This is evidenced by a marked array of information intensive products and services, communicated through a wide range of information communication media. The information society is driven by information communication technologies, along with new skills for the population, government support and sustainability (Rao, 2006). Rao opines that ICTs can be seen as an instrument or an industry. ICTs are expanding into developing countries, but there is a wide gap between those who can afford and access it, and those who cannot.

In the developed countries, the internet is a mainstream medium, but this is still not the case in developing nations. There are 500 million internet users in the world, of which 80 percent are in the developed world, while only two percent of the people in the developing countries have access to the internet (Rao, 2006). As well, ICTs can influence the lives of poor people in developing countries in different ways. Though, it might take time before the impact is visible. Implementation has different implications for different areas of the country, and these factors must be taken into account when attempting to measure impact. The internet had hosted social networks, community networks and e-document initiatives.

Challenges for accessing the internet include: inadequate access, poor electricity, high costs, lack of ICT skills, lack of infrastructure and sustainability issues (Neelameghan, 1999). In the information society, ICT has affected all aspects of life in both positive and negative ways. This has led to the consideration of information ethics. Geldof (2005) notes that introducing ICTs is a social process. For instance, ICT has the potential to help poor women to improve their lives, but women are also vulnerable and may need protection from the negative aspects of ICT, as with human trafficking via the internet.

According to Abdulwahab and Umma (n.d.) digital divide can exist between those living in rural areas and those living in urban areas. Even within the urban areas, digital divide exists between those living in slums and those living in highbrow areas. In the same vein, digital divide occurs between those who are literate and those who are not. Clearly also, digital divide occurs between the developed countries and those in developing or under – developed countries. As well, digital divide exists between people of different social, educational and economic strata. While those in the upper economic and social groups have access to ICTs, those on the lower scale do not have access.

Libraries therefore play very significant role in bridging the digital divide, that is, the gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ in the digital age. For instance, libraries provide free access to workstations and internet services to those who could not otherwise access these resources. Also, libraries provide training and assistance to those who lack information communication technology skills or who have difficulty utilizing internet services. Research shows that users use library computers to conduct research, write resumes, keep in touch with family and friends and complete assignments for school or work. Provision of computers for public use is a very important function that libraries perform and invariably this lead to high user satisfaction and demand. Furthermore, According to IFLA (2003), libraries are key actors in providing unhindered access to essential information resources for economic and cultural advancement of society. In so doing, they contribute

effectively to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom, safeguarding democratic values and universal civil rights. Also, they encourage social inclusion, by striving to serve all those in their user communities regardless of age, gender, economic or employment status, literacy or technical skills, cultural or ethnic origin, religious or political beliefs, physical or mental ability.

Provision of Digital Literacy by Libraries

Digital literacy means the ability to locate, evaluate, and use digital information. The digitally literate can effectively and efficiently find the information they seek, evaluate that information and use that information most appropriately. Indeed, the American Library Association (1989) notes that the ability to recognize what information is needed and when to use it are additional components of digital literacy. The Library readily provides the forum for digital literacy to take place. With the presence of Librarians who are ICT savvy and several computer workstations, users are taught how to access, locate, manipulate, organize and use digital information.

Digital literacy also includes the ability to effectively utilize several ranges of information communication technologies such as computers, mobile devices, cable, satellite, radio and internet enabled services such as facebook, blogs, twitter, and YouTube. These different components of digital literacy are of equal importance. Without access, individuals cannot develop digital literacy and without digital literacy, they cannot gain maximum benefit from online information resources. Thus, the information communication technology training offered by libraries are an important component of the services they provide to the community and a re – assuring contribution to bridging the digital divide. Really, ICT skills are essential for developing a competitive workforce. Through libraries and Librarians effort of teaching users how to find and use the information they need, use ICT technology devices; use the internet and internet – enabled technologies and services and enhance their knowledge; they are building the next generation of workforce. The workforce that will primarily be based on information activities who will then be creating a greater income for the information economy.

Libraries Bridging the Digital Divide

In an information and internet – driven age, where information resources, and information services are increasingly available online, individuals without access to computers, ipads, ipods, iphones or the internet are at a considerable disadvantage. Therefore, they would lack the ability to access information resources or the knowledge to use these resources efficiently and effectively. This dearth of ability or knowledge is likely to have a negative impact on their ability to succeed by limiting their access to employment and E – government resources, educational achievement as well as informational and recreational resources. Consequently, libraries play very significant role in providing people with both access to computers and internet as well as instruction in the use of information resources; thus helping to bridge these digital gaps. In fact, IFLA/UNESCO Manifesto for Digital Libraries (2005) notes that bridging the digital divide is a key factor in achieving the Millennium

Development Goals of the United Nations. Indeed, access to information resources and the means of information communication technologies support agriculture, education, health as much as cultural and economic development. The dissemination of information enables citizens to participate in life – long learning and education. Information about the world’s achievements allows everyone to participate constructively in the developments of their own social environment. Equal access to the cultural and scientific heritage of mankind is every person’s right and helps promote learning and understanding of the richness and diversity of the world, not only for the present generation but also for generations yet unborn. Libraries have indeed been long essential institutions in fostering peace and human values. Libraries now operate digitally and their digital services open up a new channel to the universe of knowledge and information, connecting cultures across geographical, economic and social boundaries.

Challenges Faced by Libraries in Bridging Digital Divide in Nigeria

Despite the benefits of libraries in bridging the digital divide, libraries face serious challenges as they provide access to digital information resources. In keeping pace with the ever evolving information communication technologies, libraries often lack sufficient funding, resources and technical support to upgrade computer hardware, software and internet connections. Librarians and staff members must seek training continuously in information communication technologies to keep abreast of developments in this rapidly changing sector. Involvement in training and re – training will enable libraries to assist users and also help librarians in trouble-shooting the different equipment.

Furthermore, there are not enough libraries, especially public libraries in Nigeria. Most of the public libraries are located and found usually in the State capitals, with very few or none located in the rural areas, where most of the mass of the country’s population resides. Therefore, by the deliberate policy of government, there is the digital divide already created, where rural dwellers do not have access to computers and other information communication technologies. In fact, even the public libraries located in the State capitals that should have enough ICTs for patrons use, usually do not have, or have only very few, that cannot service the entirety of the users.

Another major challenge in Nigeria is the issue of internet broadband. In most cases, the internet services, including Web 2. 0 services which cover social networking including facebook, twitter, and blogs are poor, because the broadband is low. The internet services providers are yet to have the proper infrastructure, adequate ICT skills, political will, consumer care and consumer protection mechanisms that will enable them provide patrons with good internet access. As well, there is the challenge of electricity in Nigeria. Whereas a country like South Africa with a population of about 45 million people generates up to 50,000 megawatts of electricity, Nigeria, with a population of over 180 million people only generates 4,000 megawatts. It is a well known fact that ICT is firmly driven by the availability of electricity. Therefore, inadequate power supply has continued to militate against access to information communication technologies. This leads to widening the digital divide between Nigeria and countries that do not have electricity challenges.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigeria has all the potentials to become a full fledged information society and this can be attained within a very short period of time. However, the country need to improve its infrastructural facilities in the areas of developing the modern information communication technologies, establishing several public libraries across the country, duely run by qualified librarians with requisite ICT skills, and expand its internet broadband facilities. Also, there is need to develop the online information resources. In this regard, strengthening the country's Freedom of Information Act (FOI) will facilitate the availability of e-government, e-economic, e-agriculture, e-health and other information resources.

Given the nature and ownership structure of libraries, especially public libraries in Nigeria, it is envisaged that government at all levels: Federal, State and Local must through the National, State and Local government assemblies put in place relevant laws and policies that will lead to the establishment of libraries in the 774 local government areas in the country. These libraries must be manned by librarians who are adequately skilled in ICT and digital literacy. Furthermore, the Federal Government need to demonstrate the political will to ameliorate the lingering inadequate power supply in the country. This could be done by completely privatizing all aspects of the electricity supply chain from generation companies to transmission as well as distribution companies. This will ensure availability of adequate electricity to power the various information communication technologies.

As well, to bridge the digital divide, the issue of internet broadband must be seriously considered. If need be the expertise of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) may be sought so that the country is able to have enough internet broadband to power its information economy. Also, the Nigerian Library Association (NLA) and the Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) must constitute very powerful advocacy group; reminding government at all tiers to go information way. If this tempo is sustained, it is envisaged that majority of Nigerian youths will gain employment in the information sector. Definitely, when the youths are fully engaged, it will reduce the menace of insecurity such as Boko Haram and other vices that continually unleash violence and terror in the country.

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