

Digital Libraries in Nigeria in the Era of Global Change: A Perspective of the Major Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The world is witnessing a rapid and progressive transformation as a result of IT revolution, which has predominated all aspects of societal development. One of such transformations has manifested in the form of digital libraries. The evolution of digital libraries has ensured the emergence of global networked environment that has dramatically changed the face of libraries, their functions, services as well as their storage and delivery systems. In this perspective, the paper examines the status of digital libraries in Nigeria. It also analyzes the Nigerian information environment within the context of an escalating situation in terms of funding, infrastructure, and ICT policy. The paper concludes that if digital libraries in Nigeria are to survive, drastic and progressive action needs to be taken to overcome some of the aforementioned issues. Governments and sponsoring bodies of libraries must provide all the necessary funding and support for library development especially the digital libraries.

KEY WORDS

Libraries; Digital Libraries-Challenges; Global Era; Nigeria.

PAPER TYPE *Conceptual*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development and advancement in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has led to profound and progressive changes in all spheres of human endeavor. This of course includes the information profession and its environment. Interestingly, the emerging information environment at the global level now focuses more on the opportunities offered by the emerging ICTs that facilitate easy access to electronic information resources. Many writers nowadays are of the opinion that the world is now a global village due to the strong influence and impact of the ICTs. Therefore, the application of ICTs such as computers, Internet, e-mail as well as other networked technologies etc. has opened up new and wider possibilities and opportunities to global library and information services and products which the traditional library can not provide. This is evident by the

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evolution and emergence of virtual, digital, or libraries without borders. **Mutula (2004)** has noted that the digital library has evolved from conventional poly-media library characterized by the collections being in various formats with little automation.

Today, the contemporary trends in library and information services in the 21st century is heavily characterized with dramatic and dynamic shift from traditional library to digital, or virtual libraries as the case may be especially in the area of Internet technology where information resources can be shared conveniently, easily and in large volume or quantities. **Berry (1996)** observes that the world is rapidly being transformed by the proliferation of information resources available through new distribution networks which makes libraries to become less important for the materials they collect and house, and more important for what kind of materials they are able to obtain in response to users requests. **Lesk (2005)** asserted that a digital library can be searched for any phrase; it can be accessed all over the world; and it can be copied without error as such they address traditional problems of finding information, of delivering it to users, and of preserving it for future.

It is clear from the foregoing that the unprecedented growth of the universe of digital information resources, as well as the ever increasing number of Internet users across the world has enriched libraries and provide them with an avenue for transition from print to electronic resources. Similarly, it has offered them a broader opportunity of expanding their services and functions in a very cost effective manner.

DIGITAL LIBRARIES

The concept of “digital libraries” has been described by scholars and writers alike in different ways. In other words the concept means many things to many experts. However, **Gbaje (2007)** has observed that the electronic library, digital library and virtual libraries are used synonymously despite the existence of some differences among the three terms. **Arms (2000)** cited in **Abubakar (2009)** defined digital library as a “managed collection of information, with associated services, where information is stored in digital formats and accessible over a network”. The **Digital Library Federation (1998)** considered digital libraries as “organizations that provide the resources, including the specialized staff, to select, structure, offer intellectual access to, interpret, distribute, preserve the integrity of, and ensure the persistence over time of collections of digital works so that they are readily and economically available for use by a defined community or set of communities”. **Rosenberg (2006)** from her own part views the digital library as a library where users access resources by electronic means and where information is delivered to users electronically.

DIGITAL LIBRARIES IN NIGERIA

Most countries across the world are striving to establish digital libraries. African countries are not exception. However, **Mutula (2004)** observed that the problem of funding that face most African information environment has had a devastating effect to the development of digital libraries in the continent. Nevertheless, **Rosenberg (2006)** studied the state of digitization in university libraries in Sub-Saharan Africa and found that university libraries in Africa have progressed towards establishing digital library services at various speeds and levels. However, her research also discovered that all e-developments in Africa tend to depend heavily on external funding which is as a result of lack of proper funding affecting most libraries.

In Africa and Nigeria in particular the issue of digital libraries is still at an infancy level. While in other parts of the world the development of such libraries has reached an advanced stage. **Abubakar (2009)** has noted that in the United States of America and other developed countries more funds and efforts are spent on digital libraries.

With a population of 140 million people, Nigeria is the largest country in Africa and accounts for 47 percent of West Africa's population (**World Bank, 2010**). Nigeria is a very diverse nation. Its diversity is manifested in the area of its geographical features, land mass, varied topography and climatic conditions, peoples and cultures all of which spreads across its 36 States and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Although very rich in natural resources, its economy has been considered to be backward. According to **Obanya (2003)** cited in **Diso (2008)** despite the fact that Nigeria has a huge natural (agricultural and mineral) resources, two-thirds of its population struggles to survive on less than one dollar per day.

The state of library and information environment in Nigeria is not very encouraging. This is because it is limited by the existence of widespread poverty, high illiteracy rate, poor funding of education and libraries, lack of infrastructures, as well as large scale corruption that has eating deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian society. These and many more factors tend to create a very hostile and unpleasant information environment. The top priority of most Nigerians is on survival.

The above situation aptly presents a clear picture of the contemporary Nigerian society which is peculiar in nature, and within which libraries including digital libraries are expected to function. However, libraries in Nigeria are expected to provide an organized access to information and knowledge and more importantly in the form of a digital library due to the shift in paradigm for obvious reasons.

Digital libraries development in Nigeria is quite a recent phenomenon. **Ogunsola (2005)** reported that the Federal Ministry of Education had

embarked on the establishment of National Virtual (Digital) Library project with the aim of sharing locally-available resources with libraries all over the world using digital technology.

However, despite the aforementioned effort, **Gbaje (2007)** observed that the National Universities Commission Virtual Library Project initiated in early 2002, the National Board for Colleges of Education Virtual Library, the National Open University Library Project and the UNESCO Virtual Library Pilot Project initiated in 2003 were some of the various initiatives by the Nigerian Ministry of Education regarding Virtual (Digital) libraries for higher institutions in Nigeria, but yet none of the efforts had yielded any functional virtual (digital) library at that time.

Furthermore, in recent years there has been a tremendous progress in the area of telecommunications industry in Nigeria, which perhaps can be considered a good omen and a viable avenue for establishing a sound and a vibrant digital library system in the country. **Ndukwe (2005)** reported that the Nigerian ICT industry had been boosted with millions of telephone lines that were connected. This shows a record achievement when compared with the total subscriber level of less than half a million in July, 2001. Also Internet service has grown steadily as Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and cyber café operators continue to expand (**Diso, 2005**).

Besides, the rapid growth of the telecommunications industry in Nigeria, another recent success story in digital library development in the country was reported by **IT News Africa (2010)** which stated that the Mobile Telephone Networks (MTN) Nigeria had successfully deployed and commissioned digital libraries in three (3) Universities in Nigeria. The three universities are the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, the University of Lagos and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The fourth one which has been billed for commissioning early this year is to be established at the University of Benin.

CHALLENGES

The preceding section has glaringly exposed the digital library situation in Nigeria. However, the development, and sustainability of digital libraries in Nigeria is severely challenged by the following:

- Gross under funding of libraries and education, as well as their near total neglect is one of such issues of serious concern. In addition, the resources and facilities of most libraries in Nigeria have deteriorated to a very low level, at times even non existence due to the aforementioned reason. Many libraries have no e-mail, fax, telephone and computer based services (**Fabunmali, 2009**). Also most libraries in Nigeria are mere ghosts of their former self and in deplorable conditions. Perhaps one

could wonder what will be the future of digital libraries in a country characterized with the above scaring and chaotic situation.

- Another major constraint to digital libraries in Nigeria is the existence of erratic and epileptic power supply. Nigeria is a country characterized with constant power outage. This tends to have negative effects on all developmental projects, and clearly portrays a potential danger. Digital libraries cannot survive in this kind of unfortunate condition.
- Developing and sustaining a viable digital library system is heavily reliant on the provision of proper ICT infrastructure. **Diso (2005)** has noted that Nigeria is severely disadvantaged in the area of ICT components such as the hardware, software, international bandwidth services, e.t.c. all of which constitute a barrier to digital libraries. Although there is an impressive and steady progress in the telecommunications sector in Nigeria in recent years, a lot of efforts need to be made to ensure its sustainability.
- Another major hindrance to the success of digital libraries in Nigeria in this era of global change is the unstable nature of the National Information Technology Policy that was approved in 2001. **Diso (2008)** observed that despite the national effort to promote ICTs that culminated in the setting up of the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), which was saddled with the responsibility of implementing the National Information Technology Policy, nothing much has been achieved regarding the IT policy. This has an adverse effect to all digital library initiatives in Nigeria.
- Finally, there is also the lack of comprehensive and adequate knowledge of ICTs among most Nigerian information professionals. This of course is inimical to the success of digital libraries in Nigeria, more importantly now when the world is moving towards a knowledge base society where ICTs serves as drivers.

PROSPECTS

The above issues constitute some of the major stumbling block to the success of digital libraries in Nigeria. However, within this context this paper highly recommends that:

- Nigerian Government should give absolute priority to the information sector which is one of the key sectors for societal development. Adequate funds should be provided to libraries for their development and functioning. Also all digital library

initiatives should be wholeheartedly supported. The country can not continuously be left behind in this fast era of global change.

- The need for involving information professionals in all digital library initiatives. There is the need to intensify the training of such professionals in the area of ICTs, particularly on digitization, digital technologies, as well as web based skills, which are all essential prerequisites for digital library services.
- Nigerian government should as a matter of urgency address the problems of infrastructures such as electricity and telecommunication networks. The future of digital libraries in Nigeria will look so bleak if there is no adequate electricity supply. Also emphasis should be given to the accessibility and subscription of electronic information resources, locally relevant digitized information resources, as well as free web based information items by digital libraries in Nigeria.
- Adequate provision of proper ICT infrastructures such as hardware, software, and international bandwidth e.t.c. should also be given utmost concern. The need for Nigerian libraries to double their efforts in seeking for more funding and support towards the establishment of digital libraries and the upgrading of the existing ones.

CONCLUSION

As the world is geared and heading towards a knowledge society, the roles of digital libraries will continue to evolve in this fast changing world without borders. To conclude, it is imperative to state the digital libraries have become powerful tools for providing access to networked global information resources. Therefore, if Nigeria is to play an active role in the global village, the issue of digital library development should not be handle with kid gloves. All hands must be on deck to overcome some of the major challenges and frustrations raised by this paper. But certainly a lot needs to be done.

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