



The Development and Challenges of Virtual Library Services in Nigerian Colleges of Education

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Abstract

Purpose: *Information handling has become so dynamic today that the development of virtual libraries seems to be the only way out for our academic institutions worldwide. Unfortunately virtual libraries are almost non-existent in many academic institutions. The paper focuses on the conceptualization of the opportunities, challenges, problems and threats faced in the development of virtual libraries with particular reference to the Nigerian Colleges of Education.*

Methodology/Approach: *The existing system of virtual libraries in Nigeria has been evaluated and has been discussed from different dimensions.*

Findings: *The need for improved virtual library environment is highly related to enlightenment of various societal elements in Nigeria.*

Keywords: *Virtual libraries; Digital libraries; Virtual libraries- Nigeria; Tertiary education-Nigeria; Colleges of Education-Nigeria; Information communication technology*

Paper Type: *Conceptual*

Introduction

The academic libraries play a unique role in coordinating and supporting teaching, learning and research. They are the nerve centres, the life wires and an indispensable part of an institute. Ideally “no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1989), and if the child is the centre of the educational system, the teacher is the pivot to the educational progress (Ukeja, 1991). The magnetic pole from which both get their support is the library. Without the libraries an institute is dead in terms of knowledge generation and dissemination. The traditional function of the library as place for storage and preservation of material has changed dramatically. The resulting information explosion and the information overload are posing difficulties in accessing information. Hence, the library now lays more emphasis on information exchange and user satisfaction. In this new perspective, library services in tertiary institutions are shifting from traditional set up to a modern method of information dissemination. The

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technological innovation in informatics and communication has revolutionized the capacity to store, transmit, access and use information in an extremely sophisticated and efficient manner and a virtual library is playing the key role in achieving this goal. The information age has permeated all aspects of human existence and has brought certain challenges to the world of modern information technology transforming the library sector to a greater extent. It is the dream of many academic libraries to be part of this growing phenomenon of virtual library globally which offers remote access to wide range of information products that may be local, national or even international in coverage. Hence, one can proudly say the world has now come to apply what libraries have desired to do in the most efficient and effective manner. There are lots of opportunities, challenges and problems facing the development of virtual libraries in colleges of education ranging from poor funding, inadequate power supply and the like in Nigeria.

Virtual libraries have become the most urgent necessity in tertiary institutions in whole of the world and particularly in Nigeria.

Objectives

- To examine the concept of virtual library and its opportunities for institutions of higher learning
- To identify some of the challenges and threats confronting colleges of education in Nigeria

Conceptualization /Concept of virtual library

The first serious study of what is called virtual or digital library was carried out in Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the 1960s under the leadership of J.R.C. Licklider who discussed the concept of virtual libraries in his book entitled, *"libraries of the future"*. This remarkable book describes the design of what is called *"precognitive system for the year 2000"*. It envisaged digital libraries based around *"information processing schemata"*, that would be free from the physical constraint of book and library shelves (as cited in Arms, 2000). Guihua (2002), reports that the concept was again reintroduced at the International Federation of Library Associations & Institutions (IFLA) conference of 1996, which was held in Peking, China. At the conference, Qinghai University demonstrated the IBM Digital library plan.

Schiller, in 1992 was one of the first writers to use the expression *"virtual library"* and defined it as "library in which telecommunication technologies make access to a wide range of information resources possible". Today, the same concept is referred to as *'digital library'* or *'electronic library'* or *'information superhighway'*; *'future library'* or *'universal library'* (Daniel 2002; Mshelia 2004). It is called *'virtual'*

because it is a good electronic wide area networked library in which the user enjoys the excitement of being at distant places and yet is not physically involved. Some of the terms used to refer to virtual library clearly describe the nature and characteristics of a virtual library.

Daniel (2002) defines virtual library as a collection of library resources in digital format at various locations which can be accessed and used with great ease using computer and telecommunication technologies. A virtual library is based on a set of databases of information for library resources. Electronic materials can include all digital material as well as a variety of analogue formats that require the use of electronic equipment. The term electronic, according to **Tennant (1999)** encompass all those materials that can be held by a digital library and it's therefore more inclusive. This description of digital library views digital as consisting of digital material and services. Digital services in this context are delivered diligently over computer networks. According to **Paschal (2002)** both digital and electronic libraries can be referred to as virtual libraries if they exist only virtually. Thus, the virtual library is understood as an information centre without a physical location or building that does not restricts hours of opening and access to resources.

The concept of internet on the other hand is regarded as a powerful tool and as "*network of networks*" by **Ross (2000)**. The real spirit of the internet is the willingness and ability to share information with others so that others might be benefitted. ICT, as defined by **American Library Association (1983)** is "the application of computers and other technology to the acquisition, organization, storage, retrieval and dissemination of information". ICT is the "electronic means of capturing, processing, storing and disseminating information" (**Ayakoha, 2000**). All these definitions use terms familiar to libraries, for example, capture, process, store and disseminate information. Hence, virtual libraries harness digital technology and the internet to search, collect, organize, store and distribute cultural, historical, scientific, and technological information.

The Development of Virtual Libraries in Nigerian Colleges of Education

Virtual libraries in Nigeria were designed in three phases. The first phase (2001- 2003) involved Nigerian Universities while as the second phase (2002-2005) catered Colleges of Education and Polytechnics. The third phase (2007-2010), was meant for other levels of Education System and Public libraries. The 3 phase target of virtual library services for the Colleges of Education in the country however left more questions than success. The National University Commission (NUC) along with National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) are the two powerful bodies catering for the needs of tertiary institutions in the country. The **NCCE (1994)** recommended that the college library shall be allocated a

minimum of ten percent (10%) of the college recurrent expenditure yearly. Research, however has shown that these policies have been implemented more on paper than in practice. Such allocation was never honoured. College libraries need adequate funding to ensure continuous growth and development.

Many of the print materials, for example, older historical documents are deteriorating quickly and can hardly be managed effectively. Moreover, they are not in good condition that can warrant users to make consultations. Therefore, the inadequate maintenance of library collection as well as poor quality of library resources for teaching, learning and research has become a thing of concern. In addition, books and journals are not current, resulting in poor quality lecture notes and research work. Besides there is the lack of awareness of current state of knowledge in various fields. These and many other reasons have made it necessary for Colleges of Education to embrace the virtual libraries initiative.

The major objectives of the 2nd phase of the virtual library project are admirable and should be pursued vigorously. This will aid and transform teaching, learning and research to a more viable and effective method to our Colleges of Education. The Federal Ministry of Education Workshop on the Blue print for a Virtual library for Nigeria justified the need for immediate implementation of a Nigerian Virtual Library.

Owing to the seemingly influx of virtual libraries globally, the Federal Ministry of Education and other sister agencies such as Educational Trust Fund (ETF); National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) etc. are thus making moves towards implementing virtual libraries in Nigerian tertiary institutions. With the aid of a virtual library project institutional libraries through websites (www.nigeriavirtuallibrary.com) can now access most journals, books and other library resources.

Prospects and Objectives of Virtual Libraries

The prospects and objectives include:

- To improve the quality of teaching and research in institutions of higher learning through the provision of current books, journals and other library services.
- To enhance the access of academic libraries serving higher educational communities in Nigeria to global resources.
- To enhance scholarship, research and lifelong learning through the establishment of permanent access to shared digital archival collections.
- To provide guidance to academic libraries on applying appropriate technologies of digital library resources.

Opportunities Provided By Virtual Libraries

Virtual libraries are today providing new opportunities for the academic sector.

- New types of learning and education have now emerged; distant learning and teaching in institutions with programs whose content and structure is geared to highly individualized form of learning.
- Through the global information infrastructure accessible to all, more people have access to external learning resources.
- Virtual libraries give an alternative to researchers and scholars especially in Nigeria to traditional scholarly content.
- Library functions done manually are now being automated.
- Librarians who have acquired new digital skills and expertise are given recognition as search experts and information specialists because they aid users in locating and accessing information.
- Virtual libraries offers the opportunity of sharing knowledge through online databases more efficiently.

Challenges of Virtual Libraries

The development of ICT in libraries has not only increased and broadened the impact of information at our doorsteps but placed more emphasis on efficient services. Their application as virtual libraries is raising some concerns and challenges for the profession. These include:

- The copyright management and legal deposit are of concern to libraries, authors, and publishers for the fact that virtual libraries can be accessed from anywhere and copied as many times as possible and manipulated in several ways. How can copyright privileges of authors and publishers be protected? Copyright laws that will be respected nationally and internationally must quickly be put in place to avoid, what in some cases may be called plagiarism or piracy.
- Library professionals themselves must make efforts to acquire new skills in the area of ICT to enable them move along the digital path.
- How will legal deposit law be enforced? Will national libraries now lose their relevance?
- Effective ways of preserving new information media/formats must be found.
- There is also a need to find ways of preventing access to pornographic materials and criminal technologies which litter the internet particularly workstations located in library.
- The library is still expected to provide access to information resources through online catalogues, indexes and database including full text e-resources through connections to local, regional and global networks. This is to be done by securing material for students, academics and

staff through inter-library loan and other resource sharing arrangements.

- Computer systems are capital intensive and need funds to keep the project going.
- Academic libraries must continue to identify their roles in contributing to institutional goals and objectives in areas of teaching, learning and research.
- There is need for greater commitment within academic circles by librarians to undertake training and retraining in computer literacy. One must be literate in print and also in electronic environment. Skills acquired will help librarians to stand as mediators of access to information.
- Shortage of managerial and technical expertise in Nigeria must be addressed. It is important because it will enable full exploitation of information based systems such as virtual libraries. Information available on the web is enormous and many users are still not able to use the web efficiently.

Threats/problems

- Due to proliferation of virtual libraries, library and information services are losing their form in the organizations they serve. They are no longer indispensable to users.
- Librarians themselves have to acquire new skills and expertise more than ever before in the area of ICT.
- One of the greatest threats to ICT in Nigeria today is sustainable electric power supply. The unreliable power supply will definitely hamper effective operations of the virtual libraries. Illiteracy is another threat in the sense that many people are not yet computer literate. In addition, cost of equipments and lack of adequate manpower and infrastructure are also another factors to hinder the development of virtual libraries in Nigeria.
- Not many colleges of education have automated their library collection.
- Online service is recognized as major service in academic libraries; yet virtual library services are grossly underdeveloped. It is therefore crucial that virtual library development be given urgent attention to enhance virtual library services.
- Although virtual libraries have great potential to deliver information, the major problem is how to improve ICT infrastructure in Nigeria. Telecommunication infrastructure remains the backbone for the application of a wide range of communication and multimedia services. Africa could be considered as virtually out of the picture as far as telecommunication is concerned as its share of world

telephone lines being a meager (2%) in 1992. This has considerably improved with the introduction of GSM. It was found out that Africa is the only continent in the world where almost no telecommunication equipment is manufactured and almost all the material are used without local participation.

Suggestions for the Way Forward

- The need for a stable and constant power supply is necessary in this gesture.
- There is need for greater commitment by library within the academic circles to undertake training and retraining in computer literacy programmes by attending seminars, workshop and conferences.
- Libraries should develop techniques in lobbying the chief executives of their institution, the government and even the politicians for adequate funding.
- In addition to organizations like World Bank, Education Trust Fund (ETF) has been doing a lot for libraries. Yet, more and more of such efforts in the area of funding, training and technological support need to be emphasized.
- Librarians can still look for support from donor agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), IGOs and friends of the libraries in order to achieve the desired goal in Colleges of Education and Institutions of higher learning in general.

Conclusion

Effective teaching and learning cannot take place without adequate provision of library resources. The technological advancements in a new information system – ICT has revolutionized education and learning processes from the traditional method of information dissemination to a new leaf called *virtual library*. If libraries in our tertiary institutions are to be relevant, librarians should make effort to explore the modern technologies and be prepared to go along with the new revolution.

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