

Law Libraries in Information Age: The Role of Academic Law Librarians

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Abstract

The Information age commonly known as computer age is characterized by rapid technological advancement and information explosion. This technological advancement is the vogue that is now pervading the study, teaching and research into law. A lot of social media tools now exist but the sourcing and usage of these tools by users of law libraries pose serious challenges to law librarians in academic setting. These form the focus of this paper. Recommendations were made on issues thereof.

Keywords: Information Technology, Law Librarian, Legal Education

1. Introduction

Information age is a period beginning in the last quarter of the 20th century when information became easily accessible through publications and through the manipulation of information by computer networks. The term is often applied in relation to the use of cell phones, digital music, high definition television, digital cameras, the internet etc. Information age is also commonly known as computer age or information era. Technological breakthroughs have revolutionised communications and the spread of information (Lallana, 2003). This technological advancement has enhanced free transfer of information and instant access to knowledge which was not possible in the past. All these technologies deal with information storage and transmission. The revolution affects every aspect of human endeavour of which the legal profession is not left out.

Marke (1964) once remarked that the future for law librarianship is highly challenging and exciting, pregnant with the seeds of great changes. We as law librarians must, anticipate these changes and plan for them rather than fear them. We must influence the direction of their course lest they overwhelm us and pass us by. The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is the vogue that is now pervading the study, teaching and research into law. It is an age that is characterized by the processing and conversion of information from the known conventional formats to electronic and digital formats hence, the consequences and challenges are expectedly high (Dada, 2011).

2. Technologies of the Information Age

The technologies that have enabled this free flow of information include the internet. The internet is made up of millions of computers linked together around the world in such a way that information can be sent from any computer to any other, 24 hours a day. These computers can be in homes, schools, universities, government departments or business. They can be any type of computer and may be single personal computers or work stations on a school or a company network (Eyitayo, 2008). When people talk about getting online, it means being connected to the internet. There are resources available on the internet for almost everything of interest. The internet is however different from World Wide Web or the web. The web refers to the collection of information that is accessible on the internet. The information may be in the form of text, pictures and sounds which are arranged logically and stored on computers known as web servers. The three common components associated with the web according to Eyitayo include web browser, web page and website. A web browser is a software program that enables one to view and interact with various resources on the web e.g. Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox and Opera. A web page is a formatted text document that a web browser can display. While a website is a collection of one or more web pages that reside on a single server. The first web page that is displayed when one accesses a website is known as the home page.

2.1 *Why Join the Bandwagon (IT)*

There is a general book famine especially in the area of legal literature in Africa. About 80% of the monographs, law reports and periodicals required for legal education and the administration of justice are of foreign origin. There is the raging factor of insufficient funding. Furthermore, not many teachers of law have the flair or inclination for publishing the results of their research for obvious reason of lack of opportunity and facilities for

publishing. The general consequence is a global decrease in library acquisition processes (Dada, 2011). These problems describe the scenario in most academic law libraries in Nigeria. The problems are raging on unabated and has become a source of worry to libraries, publisher and book sellers. As a result of deficiencies of law books in law libraries in Nigeria, there is a deliberate effort to de-emphasize the reliance on books and other printed matters as primary accessories to legal education as practiced in the developed nations of Europe and North America.

Martins (1999) identified some of the overlooked deficiencies of course books as follows:

- (a) Books are costly to manufacture ship and store. Whereas a CD-ROM can hold the contents of many law reports and textbooks;
- (b) Books are static and soon grow stale- law is dynamic and currency is the essence of its study and practice;
- (c) Being costly, books tend to be configured by their publishers to achieve economics of scale through market aggregation. Print publishers always want to maximize their profits using larger jurisdictions;
- (d) Books are inflexible. It is not easy to alter nor modify the contents of printed books;
- (e) The existence of "Home grown" teaching material locally prepared via mimeograph or more recently photocopy technology, simply underscores the dimensions of these drawbacks as law teachers often resort to self-publication or hand-outs.

Furthermore, books are cumbersome and sometimes too voluminous to use. They quickly get out-of-print and may not always be available on request. In some cases, printed matters may not be user-friendly and in most cases, their contents may reflect not only the author's beliefs and opinion but also his biases. This may negate the cherished principle of objective and independent research.

2.2 Objectives of Information Technology

Dada identified the following as the main objectives of Information Technology:

- (a) To facilitate the storage, retrieval and dissemination of vital legal information for the successful pursuit of legal research and study;
- (b) To facilitate the performance of routine process like the amendment of law (Noter-Up) indexing and abstracting services;
- (c) To serve as a link among the various legal education institutions as well as foster necessary cooperation and working relationship among them. This would also facilitate intellectual resource governing and sharing;
- (d) To assist in the formulation of legal studies syllabi that would have universal acceptability and applicability;
- (e) To support learning and teaching in specialized area of video conferencing, teleconferencing, group discussions, questions and answer sessions and most court trials;
- (f) To generally permit instant access to current information on an extensive scale;
- (g) To stimulate an effective networking of various legal training institutions for the purpose of cross-fertilizing knowledge in various legal discipline;
- (h) To enable large number of students and researchers to have ready access to case law and other legal materials more efficiently than having them queue up for access to a limited number of books in the library;
- (i) To facilitate effective communication between teacher and student particularly in distance learning and continuing education programmes.

3. Social Media Technologies

Social media tools are web based and mobile technologies that can be used to turn communication into an interactive dialogue. They include Wikis, Blogs, RSS, Facebook, Podcast, Twitter, ipad, iphone, ipod, Youtube, 2Go. Germain (2007) identified some applications used in law libraries as law blogs, collaborative encyclopedias, RSS, Free Access to Law Movement and Government Policies.

Law Blogs- a blog (derived from web blog) is a web site made up of posts that are arranged chronologically, and are archived by date and category. A blawg is a Blog on law. Lawyers write on their areas of expertise, law students, law commentators, and law professors particularly like to create and participate in blogs, and list them on their law school web sites as part of their professional activities (Germain 2007). Some even use blog for teaching, with a professor using a blog rather than a casebook to teach a class on the death penalty. Blogs have become useful updating services for various legal specialties, keeping law professionals immediately up to date on developments and issues in their areas of practice. Blogs have acquired a certain status, being cited by court

decisions, and also by law reviews.

3.1 Collaborative Encyclopedia

Wikipedia is the best example of a collaborative encyclopedia where everyone can freely contribute and edit. It is based on the wiki technology. Wikipedia is one of the most visited web sites worldwide.

RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is a syndication format developed by Netscape in 1999, which has become very popular for aggregating updates to blogs and new sites. RSS presents an alternative delivery platform because the user gets only relevant content, is notified automatically when new content arrives, and is not required to learn new technologies. The user can decide which content to subscribe to automatically from the millions of blogs, new service, and content provider offering RSS feeds.

4. Free Access to Law Movement and Government Polices

In many counties of the world, official documents are now available on the internet based on the policy of governments to provide better access to legal information for the public. These efforts are proceeding at the national level in many countries (<http://www.legifrance.gov.fr>). They are also proceeding at the regional level (eg Europe union, African union) and also at the international level in organizations such as United Nations, WIPO, ILO, ICJ etc. These official portals contain an amazing, and ever growing, amount of authoritative information. Universities in developed nations are also helping with effort to create linkages and interconnected global networks. A particular successful venture has resulted in the creation of legal information institute in different parts of the world. The world Legal Information Institute currently comprises 686 databases from 86 countries including 21 international databases in collaboration with members of the Free Access to Law Movement. This movement advocates for those who value free access to law, and realize the fact that most countries still do not have effective facilities for free access to law. The free access to law movement, centered on university-based legal information institutes, is assisting and encouraging the development of free access to law facilities in many counties in the developing world. These countries include Australia, UK and Ireland, Canada, The Commonwealth, Cyprus, Hong Kong, New Zealand, South Africa etc. Nigeria is not yet a partner to this movement.

4.1 Open Access Legal Scholarship

Open access is the electronic publication of scholarly work that is available for free without copyright constraints other than attribution, and where the author keeps the copyright (George, 2005). The movement has arisen in the scientific field because of the high cost of print and electronics publications and the search for an alternative form of publication. In the United States, the problem is less acute, because most academic law journals are student edited law reviews, with a strong learning component for students. They are subsidized by the law schools and cost about and \$50 per year or less. Generally, law librarians can be advocates of greater open access to legal scholarship by educating authors (faculty members) about the importance of retaining copyright rather than assigning it to a journal, which creates barriers to future distribution of their works. Experience here in Nigeria is such that one cannot easily access journal articles (except their abstract) from reputable journal sites such as Emerald and JSTOR.

4.2 Information Technology in Legal Education

Developments and advances in information and communication technology have had important impact on education and teaching and how it may be harnessed by law teachers. Elsewhere the development and deployment of advanced computer assisted learning systems such as Law Courseware and IOLIS have changed dramatically the way students learn, created vast opportunities and ease in information, storage, retrieval and disseminated and facilitated collaborative activities (Abdul, 1999).

4.2.1 Some ICT Platforms and Uses in Legal Education

E-mail Communication

Through electronic mail, resources and questions may be posted to students. It saves the problem of sourcing for the materials physically. One handicap with the email is that it removes the values derived from social contact with students and staff as well as absence of face-to-face discussions.

Diverse Electronic Discussion Forum

An online forum such as facebook enables participants to pose questions and articulate views. Thus it is very suitable for large class academic activity even beyond the teachers and students.

Legal Data Bases

Online legal databases are now being used by many law schools across the world to access legal resources. LEXISNEXIS and WESTLAW are the most common ones. Data bases house a huge amount of data and

knowledge available for teaching and practice upon qualification as a lawyer, since in large measures, legal research will be conducted by lawyers in practice, it is only appropriate that students gain education and training in the university and vocational law school. Moreover, cybercrimes can better be understood and learnt through the IT, being the mechanism through which it is committed, as well as electronically generated evidence (Mamman, 2010).

Video Conferencing

This is an online forum which can inject international and comparative flavour into the curriculum of legal education as it enables guest speakers from long distance to share resources. It can create a global classroom for students from several institutions to participate in the same course, through bilateral and multilateral arrangements. Staff and students from developing countries are thus privileged to share resources with their colleagues in better endowed regions without having to travel and facilitate better understanding of the various legal; models and standards which exist elsewhere.

4.3 Role of the Law Librarian in Information Age

Technology cannot replace human expertise. A library in its fullest sense is more than a building. It is a place where people are served and where people are not only encouraged to interact with the information they are seeking but are helped and guided in their research. Leiter (2007) outlined the role of the law librarian in the electronic environment thus:

- Evaluate the quality of print and electronic information;
- Teach legal research methodology and
- Be seen as core participants in the missions of their institutions.

This is a tall order. Librarians must keep pace with the breakneck speed of emerging technologies and adjust to the new research needs and information use behaviours of students, faculty, judges and lawyers.

4.3.1 Librarians as Expert in Quality Evaluation

As stated above, the internet has a deluge of information some of which are not necessarily or even correct. It is the duty of the law librarians to ensure that accuracy and authenticity matters by telling each researcher with confidence which information to use, reliability of its source as well as ensure that such information is preserved for future use. The new law librarian is seen as the guru of the information age. The law librarian has to be proactive. Quality and reliable information sources have to be pre-arranged before demand for them are made. ICT compliance and constant re-skilling on new IT devices becomes an imperative for quality law library service delivery.

4.3.2 Librarians as Teachers of Legal Research

Information and communication technology has imposed a new role on librarians as educator. Going by the Council of Legal Education requirement, it is duty of the law librarian to provide the appropriate texts and to guide the prospective lawyers how to access information from them. This is a crucial aspect of legal education. In the digital environment, the librarian should show the lead by studying the available web resources in law, their nature, uses and device possible ways of making them accessible to his library users. Since the digital environment is filled with all sorts of information (not filtered), it is his duty to ensure that library users feed on only reliable and authentic information. There are many information service providers competing with the library. Findings information and doing research effectively require different sets of competencies. Law librarians should be the true legal research experts. They are methodological in finding specific information their faculty, students, judges, or lawyers need.

Law is dynamic and varies from culture to culture. The law librarian should always keep abreast of developments in the nation's laws and the various changes and modifications in the international spheres. At the academic setting law librarians are also involved in teaching and research activities aimed at breaking new grounds. They teach subjects such as Use of the Library, Research and Legal Bibliography, Reading Guidance and Counseling, Legal Research and Legal Writing and other legal and non-legal subjects in which they might be interested. They should also as a matter of routine lead staff seminars, organize conferences and give instructions in their professed areas of academic competence. This is in addition to their traditional roles of offering reference and technical services.

Dun (1982) is of view that the law librarian should contribute to public good by publishing "scholarly article". Law librarians are also expected to compile useful bibliographies, directories, manual and guides. They should also compile periodic lists of their accessories and holdings. They should also render assistance in the areas of editing, indexing and abstracting services and to ensure that works published by his institution conform to recognized international styles and standards.

4.3.3 Core Participant in the Mission of their Institution

Faculty of law libraries are often regarded as the laboratory of law students as well as important resource in the

reform of legal education. Both the National Universities commission and the Council of Legal Education recognize this role. It is the duty of the law librarians to provide the appropriate texts and to guide the prospective lawyers how to access information from them. In a digital environment, law librarians have to be proactive and reach out to their library users rather than passively waiting to be asked to help. One cannot be active without being visible.

4.3.4 Advocates for Free Access through Global Networks

Creating a global network of law library association has numerous advantages. There are International Association of Law libraries, Nigerian Association of Law Libraries. Through such a network, personal contacts are formed which may lead to subsequent professional communications and exchanges. Under such forum professional ideas are shared. It allows librarians to have a voice in shaping their own future in an increasingly globalised world of information and services. It provides a potential network of contacts to help retrieve difficult to find legal materials and research assistance as well as controlled vocabulary and Technical Know-how. It positions the associations to seek grants with national and international agencies and organizations, and to seek corporate support.

4.4 Modern Information Technology Skill Necessary for All Librarians

T.H.E Journal (2005) published some 25 technology skills which every librarian should have. These are:

- World Processing Skills
- Spreadsheets Skills
- Database Skills
- Electronic Presentation skills
- Web Navigation skills
- Web site Design skills
- E-mail management skills
- Digital Camera
- Computer Network knowledge Applicable to school system
- File Management and Windows Explorer Skills
- Downloading Software from the Web (knowledge include e Books)
- Installing Computer Software onto a Computer System
- Web CT or Blackboard Teaching skills
- Computer-Related Storage Devices (knowledge: disks, CDS, USB devices, zip disks, DVCS etc)
- Scanner Knowledge
- Knowledge of PDAS
- Deep Web Knowledge
- Educational Copyright Knowledge
- Computer Security Knowledge
- Blogs Knowledge
- RSS Knowledge
- IM knowledge
- Wikis knowledge
- Audio eBooks Knowledge

4.5 Challenges before the Law Librarian with Internet Resources

4.5.1 Reliability of Internet Source

An incredible amount of information is accessible in an easy and convenient way, but it is raw and unfiltered. On the Web currently, there is no organized control of information, so it is hard to know what one is missing or if the information accessed is accurate, authoritative and relevant to one's specific needs. Elis (2006) suggests that in evaluating a web source, the following questions need to be asked and answered with some confidence; what is the source? Is this source reliable? Is it up to date? Is this the official, final version of a text? Can you cite this to a court? For research purposes, it is important to strike a balance between electronic and print sources, and know the strengths and weaknesses of each.

A good way to manage legal information on the internet is to start with reputable web sites. Some of these sites include Findlaw, LexisOne, Law.com, LLRX, HeinOnline, Westlaw etc. Authoritative research guides on the web include:

- Law library of Congress Guide to Law Online
- Global Legal Information Network (GLIN)
- EISIL, the American Society of International Law Web site Research Section.

Two services of note that annotate and classify new web sites of interest are INTUTE: law and Insite. An example of a collaborative search engine application is the new Cornell law library's new legal Research Engine, which helps users find authoritative online legal research guides on every subject by simultaneously searching about twenty different web sites (<http://library.lawschool.cornel.edu/guides/resaerchengine.asp>)

- Current Cites, Resouceshelf and first Monday are general indexes with full text links which are useful current awareness tools (<http://www.lists.wejunction.org/currentictes>).

Worldcat is a valuable web based reference tool to find books on any language by subject. It is a wide ranging union catalog which can be accessed for free since 2006. It contains the holdings of thousands of libraries around the world. With an easy to use interface. It has over 84 million records in its database contributed by over 9,000 libraries around the world (<http://www.WorldCat.org>)

4.5.2 Problems of Fragility and Rapid Technological Obsolesce

Digital information is characterized by fragility and rapid technological obsolescence. The life span of a CD or disk is estimated at 10 to 30 years but its lifespan is further limited by the hardware and software needed to read it. This means that digital information may become obsolete within five years unless it can be refreshed or migrated to a newer technology. Similarly, information on the website can vanish overnight hence the need to include date it was retrieved when citing.

4.5.3 Authenticity of Official Legal Digital Sources

In every country of the world, in an environment where online sources have replaced official print legal information, citizens need to trust the "official word of the law" in the same way they trust print information. Since digital medium is vulnerable to errors in management and control, corruption and tampering, it is of utmost importance to make the digital information both official and authentic. What is at stake is the transmission of official documents "the word of the law" to future generations (<http://www.journla-official.org/fr/>). Some countries have made some safeguard in this regard. In Brazil, the text of legal rules available on the internet must have been previously published in the official gazette. In France the *Journal Official* electronic version is authenticated since 2004 legislations. In the US, the standard method of authentication includes encryption, especially digital signatures and public key infrastructure or similar technology.

4.5.4 Poor Local Content

In Nigeria and many African countries there is serious problem of poor local content on digital information. On the internet, we have few websites. Greater percentage of our information resides in print media. Most Nigerian laws cannot be easily accessed online. The same applies to our law reports.

4.6 Constraints in the Use of ICT in law Libraries

There are a lot of constraints in the use of ICT infrastructure in developing countries like Nigeria. These include:

- (i). Poor electricity supply
- (ii). Poor telecommunication facilities
- (iii). Poor awareness and education in information technology
- (iv). Computer literacy is still at rudimentary level, urban oriented, very elitist and not available to every citizen.
- (v). ICT is more in the hands of commercial and profit yielding venture and less developed in the education sector
- (vi). Paucity of fund- for establishment and maintenance of ICT infrastructure. Government subvention to our universities continues to thin down. Faculties of law libraries in most of the universities in

Nigeria do not have a separate book vote. Thus law has to compete with other disciplines during acquisition.

4.7 Suggestion for Improvement

Enhanced Funding – Granting of viable degree of autonomy to law libraries. That is carving out a book vote for acquisition of law materials different from general university library budget.

ICT Infrastructure – since most academic law libraries in Nigeria still operate the manual system; ICT project in faculty of law libraries should be included as capital project in the EFT, PTDF intervention initiatives. Acquisition, installation and maintenance of iCT infrastructure is capital intensive.

Manpower Training- Training and re-skilling of law library manpower is a sine qua non in any effective IT law library services. As soon as new software and hardware are discovered, adequate training and education of manpower becomes necessary

Consortia Building – No library no matter how richly endowed can provide all the information needs of its users. When law library resources in Nigeria are pulled together through consortia arrangement, information resources in law will be enriched and better services provided. Law library consortia can be organized at NALL level. Library consortia reduce cost, risk and make resources easily available and accessible.

Electricity Supply-Developed nations where IT is fully utilized do not experience the kind of power outage we

witness in Nigeria. Electricity supply is a federal government project. Reform in the Power Sector should be vigorously pursued and result oriented strategies put in place. Alternative power supply is also very important in law libraries.

Subscription to Online Legal Data Bases -Law students in developed nations have long been using LEXISNEXIS and WESTLAW for learning teaching and research. Enough fund and courage is needed to hook on to these legal databases.

Enriching our Local Content-Whereas there is an avalanche of information on the internet, few exist on Nigerian law. Law librarians should be involved in the creation and maintenance of more websites in law.

Mass Digitization of law Materials-Since most information resources in Nigeria are still in print, law librarians should engage in mass digitization of their print resources.

Open Access Legislation-There should be an enabling law emanating from the government geared towards ensuring that most primary and secondary materials on law from Nigeria are accessible (online) free of charge or at a subsidized rate.

5. Conclusion

The challenges posed by advances in information technology on law libraries are enormous but not insurmountable. Law librarians in Nigeria have to brace up to the challenge and embrace this global phenomenon that have enhanced free flow of information and instant transfer of knowledge since there are other competitors in the industry.

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