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CHALLENGES IN LIBRARIES & INFORMATION SERVICES IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF CHANGE AND REFORMS

June 12 Cultural Centre, Abeokuta

9 - 15 July, 2005

"GATEWAY 2005"

NIGERIAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

CHALLENGES IN LIBRARIES & INFORMATION SERVICES IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF CHANGE AND REFORMS

A COMPENDIUM OF PAPERS PRESENTED

AT THE

43RD NATIONAL ANNUAL CONFERENCE & AGM

VENUE

JUNE 12 CULTURAL CENTRE, ABEOKUTA

DATE

9 – 15 JULY, 2005

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BENSON IDAHOSA UNIVERSITY VIRTUAL LIBRARY: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This paper examines the usefulness of virtual/digital library in a university. Literature review shows that the idea has been on in the last 20 years, as way of bolstering higher education. Various writers are agreed that this kind of library services needs to be sought after. Virtual/digital libraries have many terms associated with it, including electronic library, library without wall, internet library, library of the future and etc. It portrays the present state of the Virtual Library at Benson Idahosa University, Benin City. The paper concludes that new universities should think virtual libraries. Libraries with less than 40,000 volumes should think of virtual library as it is more advantageous. Benson Idahosa University virtual library has been commended by the National University Commission as the only functioning University-based virtual library.

Introduction

In the history of the world, libraries and librarianship have been important institutions and profession for the cultivation and preservation of human culture. Human knowledge, cultural relevance and temporal development have always determined the kinds of information collected, organized, stored and disseminated. From the Alexandrian and Pergamum Libraries of the ancient world to the Libraries of Congress, British Museum and the Bibliotheque Nationale, these Libraries of print and mixed formats are still the *sine qua non* collections of tne modern Western World. Libraries are part and parcel of the society and changes in the society are easily seen in them. The information and communication technologies (ICT) revolution is turning the world into a global village and the end is unknown . Managing and using Libraries are changing in many ways as a result of improvements in ICT.

The digital or virtual libraries are in the forefront of these improvements in ICT. A virtual library has many names associated with it. It is called "digital library", "electronic library", "community network", "library without walls" or "Library of the Future". Daniels (2002) posits that "it is called "virtual" because in a good electronic wide area networked library, the user enjoys the euphoria of being in distant libraries, and yet he has not physically moved". In other words one experiences a "virtual reality". Among its features is the emphasis of access over ownerships of Library collections. This stems from the assumption that the whole universe of the global information superhighway, is a human resource and heritage, which all who have the necessary infrastructural capabilities – Internet, service provider, server web-site, computers, a good modem, etc. can tap for their own development. It is only within the last two decades that the term "virtual" became applied to libraries that offer access to digital information using ICT including the Internet and World Wide Web (WWW).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term "Virtual Library" as the world now knows it, is a recent development. It has its roots-in the Internet, the World's information superhighway. MacFarlen (1984) had written that information technologies would change the way in which stored and organized information is delivered. He indicated that digital libraries e.g. the world wide web, hold more useful, update and relevant information than the libraries of tertiary institutions. Initially the focus of the virtual library was to aid scholars by organizing information on national networks (Turner, (1990).

Martin (1992) defined the virtual library as a concept of information housed electronically and deliverable without regards to its location or time. Similarly, Nancy Schiller (1992) used the expression "Virtual Library" which she referred to as simply "Libraries in which computer and telecommunications technologies make access to a wide range of information resources possible." Thus the virtual library brings together technologically the resources of numerous Libraries and information

services with the users . Von Wahide (1993) states that the virtual library is a metaphor for the networked library because he (Von Wahide 1993) states that the term scholars workstation "came into vogue, and research libraries collaborated with Coalition for Networked Information (CNI), CAUSE, and Educom to create the "Virtual Library", in which scholars working at their desks have access through networks to a vast range of electronic information resources.

Others who have written about the virtual library include Walters (1998) and Borgman (1999). Leverna M. (2000) stated that the term "virtual library" became a standard way of describing Libraries that offer access to digital information using a variety of network including the Internet and the W.W.W She also indicated that other terms that have been used interchangeably with Virtual Library include "Library without walls", "electronic Library", or a digital Library". In other words, a Virtual Library, can be referred to as a concept of information housed electronically and deliverable without regard to its location or time.

Daniel (2002) sees it as a library of electronic/digital format at different sites which can be accessed by means of information and telecommunication technologies. Mohammed (2003) defined it as a collection of electronically stored information resources which can be accessed physically and remotely by Information Communication Technologies. To Mshelia (2004) the Virtual Library is the panacea for dynamic and effective handling of information.

In Nigeria, as stated by Ya'u, Y.Z (2003), the development of virtual library started in October 2001 when the President of the country made a request to the 31st General Conference of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It agreed to help Nigeria plan a virtual library for higher educational institutions. The idea was to stock the low capacity of their libraries with relevant books and literature through ICTs.

ADVANTAGES OF VIRTUAL LIBRARY

It is saving in space. It does not require big and costly definitive or non-definitive buildings. Nor does it need kilometers of shelves to store prints and non-prints. *A virtual library is a library* in which information of all kinds can be stored, analyzed, manipulated, duplicated and communicated with ease. In many ways the virtual library has changed the way students and researchers do research. It presents a new paradigm of library service. A further advantage is stated by Tolbott (1995): "If a particular subject field does not have e-journals(electronic journals) I believe that researchers in these fields are falling behind."

The virtual library would solve the paucity of teaching and research materials in the libraries of institutions of higher education in the country. It would also allow the institutions and local researchers to have heir own research outputs with the global community. It would ensure the preservation of our cultural heritages in a more durable form. The uniqueness of the virtual library is that it is space less. In other words, what is required is the conversion of own library collection into electronic formats and placed on the internet to be accessed by anybody anywhere. Each institution would contribute its own unique content and charge others for this . The importance of virtual library in higher education in Nigeria has been set out by Daniel (2002:59). Libraries costs more to build than the setting up of a virtual library and its housing (Lesk 2005). Thus a virtual library's advantages include better access to traditional materials, easier preservation, extension of library services and saving of space.

DISADVANTAGES AND PROBLEMS

Lack of constant power supply as experienced in Nigeria is a serious drawback. The backbone of a virtual library is availability of power supply at all times to cool the air conditioners, to cool the machines, to make the hard wares and softwares work. Technical know-how is few and far between, instability of staffers and insufficient computer-literate manpower are the others. The main object of a virtual library is to reduce operational cost. But instead a lot of cost is incurred because of high import

tariffs on hardwares, softwares and spares. Installation, maintenance and processing costs are generally high (Ojo-Igbinoba 1995:161).

In Nigeria the ICT infrastructure is poorly developed. The ICT skills are very inadequate. It will, therefore, not be easy building and managing virtual libraries. There are payments to be made for access and download documents electronically. There are connectivity costs. Who bears the cost? The end user? The institution? Or the government? There is heavy investment for hard and softwares. How does the developer recoup funds for infrastructural development in an environment where users have been used to a library system in which use is largely free? Or shall we forever depend on donors? To move from such a paradigm to a fee-paying system would task stakeholders, especially end users who would be mostly students. Funding and obsolescence of software are others.

COST

In 2001 the WWW. Virtual library.com estimated that the installation and running cost of a virtual academic library in a University (say BIU Nigeria) is a mere 0.015% of the cost of establishing a University academic library and less than 2% of the running cost. While virtual library has great advantages it is not cheap to establish and repairs can be costly. When BIU Virtual Library's internet facility was hit by lightening recently it required N2m to effect repairs and this was only for one item However, new universities are urged to think " Virtual Library" for its enormous savings over time.

VIRTUAL LIBRARY IN NIGERIA

The virtual or digital library in Nigeria is still at infancy stage. The federal government launched the national virtual/ digital library project in 2002 and was slated to take place in phases between 2001 and 2010. It has as its aim the provision of an equitable, cost effective, enhanced access to national and international library and information resources and to share locally available resources with libraries based on ICT. As at March 2005 only three non-university based virtual libraries in Nigeria are known. A model virtual (digital) library has been established at the National Universities Commission (NUC) and will be the

hub of the University-based virtual libraries. The others are National Board for Colleges of Education and National Open University.

Of the University –based virtual libraries only that of Benson Idahosa University (BIU) Benin city, is reported to be up and functioning. Many other universities have internet connectivity which enhance their teaching, learning research, library, information and managerial functions. The provision of virtual library in BIU has enhanced its academic functions to such an extent that its virtual library-backed newly matured 12 academic programmes presented to NUC in 2005 were all accredited at the first attempt. The 12 programmes accredited spread across faculties of Art and Education, Social and Management Sciences as well as faculty of Basic and Applied Sciences which have been running in the institution for about four years (The Nigerian Observer p6-April 15, 2005).

BENSON IDAHOSA UNIVERSITY (BIU)

BIU started as Christian Faith University (CFU) in 1994. It was in affiliation with some renown Nigerian Universities – University of Benin, Benin City and Edo state University, now Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, On 18 Sept 1999 CFU was renamed BIU in honour of its visionary Founder, Archbishop Benson Idahosa of blessed memory. On February 2002 BIU received the approval and grant of operational licence by the NUC on behalf of the federal government as a full fledge university. BIU has some 2400 students and offers 44 undergraduate disciplines, diploma and post graduate programmes in four faculties of Arts and Education, Basic and Applied Sciences, Law and social and management Sciences. A College of Medicine is in the pipe line.

BIU VISION AND MISSION

The vision and mission of an institution cannot be divorced from its objectives. The vision and mission of BIU flowed from the mandate given the founder to "raise up an army of professionals and academics who would go in Christ's name to the ends of the world...". Thus the University expects to raise academics, processionals and entrepreneurs who will be effective disciples for Christ by excelling through their

training in their professional fields by high performance in interdisciplinary research, addressing national and international problems... and becoming a store house of knowledge to be used for the benefit to mankind on Christian ethical principles and thus change Nigeria. Hence the choice of a Virtual Library rather than the conventional type.

BIU VIRTUAL LIBRARY

In line with the above, BIU Library has been stocked with the state-of-the -art equipment. It occupies a three-storey building. It is an airconditioned library with additional ceiling fans and rugged wall-to-wall. It thus provides maximum comfort for serious academic work. It is truely the "heart" of its university. It has no card catalogue cabinets but On-line Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) with CDS/ISIS software comprising four computers. Based on the vision and mission of the University and in line with its "Academic Excellence with Godliness", the university set up a virtual/digital library in order to flow along with the world of ICT and globalization of information. Its virtual/digital library system has 22 computers, all connected to the internet through its V-Sat. The V-sat is mounted on the roof of the Library. The university library with its V-sat facility which makes research activities easy for the university's faculty and students has been rated as the only one virtual/digital library in the country (*The Nigerian Observer)* p6 15th April-05)

Through its virtual library the university library has access to national and international books and journals through the following databases: BIU eduportal books on-line; Nigeria Virtual Library, EBSCO-HOST- Religion and philosophy collection, Academic search premier, the world's largest multi-disciplinary database, full text for nearly 4,700 publications; ERIC: The Educational Resource Information Centre contains more than 2200 digests ATLA: Religious database with ATLA serials, Communication and Mass Media provides a robust and in depth research, *Humanities Abstracts:* This database cites articles from over 500 periodicals, including scholarly journals in diverse areas of humanities. Others include databases in the sciences, social and management sciences, etc

CONCLUSION

The establishment of a virtual library in every universities in this country is a necessity. The University is known for teaching, research and community service. The trend in virtual/digital library makes research work for both staff and students more current and enjoyable; the virtual library will solve our problems of preservation, Library space and make information more available to users. It is recommended that as more universities are being licensed by the NUC to operate, the establishment of virtual/digital will help them to boost their collections as they cannot acquire all the hard copies of text books and journals. Most importantly, they cannot depend on hard copies alone in this era of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for both staff and students' research work in order to meet their NUC accreditation as this was the experience of Benson Idahosa University Benin City, Edo state. Technology has created new positions, new Library jobs such as Web Master, electronic resources Librarian, distance learning librarian and Information Literacy Librarian which did not exist before the ICT revolution began 20 years ago. Library schools should provide both formal and informal continuing education programmes to help experienced and practicing Librarians study and improve their knowledge of ICT e.g. competence in Internet applications, search engines, electronic resources and virtual/digital library services in order to stay current

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