

Inducing Illumination in Dark Places: The Relevance of Reference Librarian in the Information Age

Magnus Osahon Igbinovia, CLN,
Oluwayinka Esther Solanke and Judith Odanwu Ogbale

ABSTRACT

The present information age is characterized by the influx of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the resultant effect of information explosion. This has changed the 21st century library users as they have become more technologically inclined thus seek faster ways of getting information to meet felt needs. This spurred predictions that the reference librarian charged with the responsibility of rendering personalized information services to library users will no longer be relevant. This paper therefore used a literature based approach to investigate the relevance of reference librarians in the information age. . To achieve this, the authors used sub-headings to explicitly buttress the relevance of the reference librarian in the midst of changing technologies and recommend preferred roles for the reference librarian in a bid to further sustain relevant in the information age. They conclusively asserted that the question of whether or not a reference librarian is relevant in this information age is tantamount to asking whether or not man needs illumination in dark places.

Keywords: Information and Communication Technologies, Information Explosion, Reference librarian, Virtual reference librarian

1. INTRODUCTION

Libraries exist alongside human civilization and as play a vital role in human history. It has embraced enormous changes as human civilization makes necessary. Libraries therefore adjust its services and manners such services are delivered in a bid to meet the changing information needs of man as he transcends in civilization. However, in this era known as the information age the relevance of the reference librarian has been called into question. The information age is characterised by a paradigm shift from traditional industry to an economy based on information computerization coupled with the advent and

subsequent influx of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Thus the information age refers to the era where the availability, accessibility, use and management of information are pivotal to the pursuit of sustainable human civilization.

One major hallmark of the information age is the exponential growth of ICTs. The emerging new information technologies, especially the introduction of personal computers with internet facilities, have come as a welcome relief from the problem of information accessibility at the desired time. This information and communication technologies gradually crept into homes and offices giving access to information from a remote point anywhere, anytime. As a result, library users have become technologically inclined and as such seek faster ways of getting information with which to satisfy their information needs. These information savvy users in an Academic library mainly fall within the age group of those considered by Weiss (1997) to be least supportive of maintaining and building a library, being the least enthusiastic group about the importance of libraries in the digital age.

Tyckoson (1999) recorded that new predictions began to emerge as information technology became available in the household. According to him, the reference librarian-indeed and the entire library would no longer be relevant. He noted that others felt the new technology requires a new means of delivering reference services, especially for those patrons who were not physically present in the library. These predictions, according to him, cited the declining statistics of reference use in libraries of all kinds and all areas of the nations. Tyckoson also noted that in a matter of a few short years, there will arise a long feeling that reference librarians has lost control over their chosen profession. Johnson (2010) also noted that predictions are that "in 30years, libraries would be relegated to a kind of museum where people can go and look up stuff from way back...". These predictions undermine the place of a library and the reference librarian in an academic environment. The resultant effect is that libraries which hitherto are the heart of academic institution of which they pride themselves have been treated with less attention (playing a second fiddle), in terms of usage by patrons and resource allocation by institution's management. Moreover, Prospective library users are perplexed and overwhelmed as a result of information overload. They displayed disturbing ignorance about reference services; because of their limited knowledge on the relevance of the reference librarian in the face of

technological changes in the information age. Hence this present study; to bring to the fore, the relevance of Reference Librarians in the information age.

2. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

While ICTs have been employed by reference librarians to discharge reference services more effectively and efficiently, there still exists the belief among library users (especially the ICTs complaint) that these technologies have given them unrestricted access to a myriad of information on the networks thus making the library and by extension reference librarians obsolete. This belief has negative implications on the level of support the library enjoys from her stakeholders, especially in this era where downsizing of funds allocated to libraries is the order of the day. The focal point of this work which doubles as the main objective of the study is to elucidate the relevance of reference librarians in the information age.

3. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The relevance of Reference Librarians is therefore justified via sub-headings which includes Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), information explosion, the Reference Librarian and the Virtual Reference Librarian.

3.1. Information and Communication Technologies

The information age is fuelled by a revolution in information and Communication Technologies. Information and communication technologies, especially the introduction of computer databases linked online, the attendant Internet and the information super-highway, have come as a welcome relief from the problem of information accessibility (Nwalo & Ohaegbu, 1997). One characteristic of information and Communication technology as represented by the Internet is that individuals and organizations can publish information on the web without necessarily following the rigors of book publishing, editorship, and censorship (Kadiri & Adetoro, 2012). The implication of this is that information with low content quality has flooded the web and will be made available when information users query the web. The onus therefore rests on the reference librarian to evaluate web content and provides for information users reliable information. This is supported by the assertion of RUSA (2003) that librarian assesses and evaluates resources in all formats in terms of objective standards and how well it meets the library's user needs.

The web has brought large amounts of information in many formats and along with it an increase in user expectations for access. Order on the web seems to be decreasing, not

increasing, and this has changed user behaviour. Users no longer expect to get precise responses; they tolerate more noise and backtracking, and more nonsense, (Cleveland & Cleveland, 2001). The reference librarian stands in this gap by creating and/or using metadata to provide precise information to users. Cleveland and Cleveland noted that with this, librarians will be meaningfully involved in an attempt to organise the Internet. Meanwhile, Ifidon & Ifidon (2008) noted that there is a bewildering amount and variety of information on the internet. This can lead to the dreaded information overload with all it implies for poor information retrieved by the uninitiated library user. For despite the increased availability of the information on the internet, access is often affected by practical, legal and financial factors. The services of the reference librarian with his information retrieval (practical) skills, becomes more relevant in this regard also. In addition to these practical skills, he has knowledge on the legal perspectives of information access and being a part of a bigger body (the library), he is able to provide users with information materials that require access only by subscription.

In the 21st century, advances in Information and Communication Technologies have resulted in a change in the character of libraries, librarianship and users which could be described as revolutionary. However, any person that ignores the library in preference for the other sources of information is most likely to miss out on the most useful and authoritative information available in meeting felt needs (Ifidon & Ifidon, 2008) as the reference librarian is professionally equipped to provide users with accurate, authoritative, exact and personalized information.

3.2. Information explosion

Information explosion, information flood, information avalanche or paper explosion, which are the effect of this information age are concepts used interchangeably to depict an upsurge in the world's output of information such that it becomes difficult or almost impossible for any individual or organisation to successfully and completely keep track of information on a particular area of interest . Information explosion could also be seen as the rapid increase in the amount of published information or data and the effects of this abundance. As the amount of available data grows, the problem of managing the information becomes more difficult, which can lead to information overload (Wikipedia, 2014). There were predictions, however, that preceded the concept of information explosion. Among the early predictions was that made by Naisbitt (1982) that the total

amount of scientific information available in the world would double every twenty months and the implication of this will be that every eighteen months, there is added an amount of scientific information equal to all that mankind has stored since the beginning of time. The concept of Information avalanche predicts that by 2020 information will double every 73 days. Around 1,000 books are published internationally every day and the total of all printed knowledge doubles every 5 years.

More information is estimated to have been produced in the last 30 years than in the previous 5,000 (The Reuters Guide to Good Information Strategy, 2000).

According to Auden (1979) in Nwalo & Ohaegbu (1997), "the greatest problem of today is how to teach people to ignore the irrelevant how to refuse to know things, before they are suffocated. For too many facts, are as bad as none at all". While Bopp & Smith (2001) ascertained that anyone who has experienced the frustration of needing information, but being somewhat overwhelmed or confused by the amount available and the complexities of finding what is needed can appreciate the value of personal assistance by an expert in working through these complexities. Thus, navigating through this wide myriad of information to extract relevancies calls for concern and the reference librarian, with his proficiency, has rather come to answer that call than to become irrelevant in the information age. If with information explosion comes information overload, the role of the library and Reference librarian then is not only to ensure that users who need information can obtain it with an appropriate outlay of resources (in terms of time and money), but also to ensure they are not overwhelmed by large amounts of irrelevant matter, (Igbinovia & Solanke, 2015). While library users are challenged to process and analyze information for possible economic value and social gains, Reference services provided in a systematic manner can assist with retrieving, processing and analyzing information. The reference librarian also guards against the spread of misinformation by those mired in ignorance and prejudice (Ifidon & Ifidon, 2008).

Jungwirth (2002) noted that the obvious implication of the information explosion is that there is too much of the information flying around. There is therefore the challenge of confronting the menace of information explosion. He added that this could be done by improving the methodology of seeking data and information and transforming them to knowledge and wisdom and mechanised way of filtering data collected so as to separate data that only distract. This makes the place of a reference librarian imperative and his

relevance beyond doubt. Meanwhile, Lyman & Varian (2000) concluded in their study that it is clear that we are all drowning in a sea of information. The challenge is to learn to swim in that sea, rather than drown in it. Better understanding and better tools are desperately needed if we are to take full advantage of the ever-increasing supply of information. These tools are employed by the reference librarian in a strategic manner in rendering reference service. With the information explosion, information can have a disruptive effect if the flow is not controlled. The challenge, therefore, is to govern electronic materials (which is the idea behind Resource Description and Access); and make information available such that meets the personalized needs of the user. The reference librarian's relevance has thus been emphasized by the phenomenon of information explosion as information users will most likely turn to the expert when information filters fail.

3.3. The reference librarian

The growth of knowledge has witnessed several revolutions from the Polymath Era where information was small enough to be managed by an individual to the information age characterized by the information explosion. The reference librarian is seen as the last polymath of knowledge because they act as a gateway to knowledge i.e. holds the key to all body of knowledge through his information retrieval skills, reference sources (online and in print format). In doing this, the reference librarian delivers reference services that include direct personal assistance, directories, signs, exchange of information culled from a reference source, readers' advisory service, and dissemination of information in anticipation of users needs or interests, and access to electronic information (Guidelines for Information Services, 2000). Adediran (1987) opined that information services are systems and in an attempt to define them one invariably delves into areas of reference service and reference skills. In terms of the services rendered there is the total package concept in which user is handed the information he needs ready and digested. At the other extreme is the concept of services in which the user is given minimal assistance. Igbinovia & Solanke (2015) noted that most seekers of information and ideas, at some time or other, confront barriers to finding what they need. These barriers are due to time limitations, lack of knowledge of what sources exist or how to find and use them, and the sheer size and complexity of the world's information. Thus, the reference librarian's primary task is to help such individuals overcome these barriers and to accomplish their goals using relevant information and ideas. Although the roles of the reference librarian and the services they provide are changing in

dramatic ways, their essence – the provision of assistance to individuals seeking information and ideas – remains stable. However, depending on the needs and goals of the individual, the reference librarian can take difference to the provision of assistance and some of these services offered would include:

- Personal assistance: Entering into a dialogue to determine users' needs and ensure those needs are met. This could include a term paper advising with a student or research consultation assistance with a faculty member
- Teaching: Helping users develop strategies for finding, evaluating, and using print and electronic resources, within the library and beyond, to achieve their goals
- Awareness: Disseminating curated information as a current awareness service to information seekers
- Directories and signs: Ensuring library users are able to locate the information and information services they require
- Verification: Determining whether a user's information about a document (e.g., bibliographic citation) is correct and complete. This has become even more necessary as the quantity of papers expands and the risk of fraud rises, (Igbinovia and Solanke, 2015)

However, Mitchell (2008) in Rehman et al., (2011) asserted reference librarians are actively engaged with the many emerging new processes by which learning occurs. Furthermore, reference librarians in academic and research libraries are actively engaged with the many emerging new processes not only by which learning occurs, but also by which research is done.

3.4. The virtual reference librarian

Those who argue that technology is making the reference librarian obsolete fail to realize that libraries are taking advantage of that same technology to provide and enhance services, develop new community relationships, reach new library users, and enhance the role of the library as an information resource center. A reference librarian in the digital environment provides digital reference services through email, web forms, ask services, chat reference, video-conferencing or web-camera services, digital reference robots, collaborative digital reference services, web-based user education, virtual library tours through Quick time movies in library websites, among others.

4. CONCLUSION

The characteristics and needs of library users are constantly changing in response to societal changes. The task of reference librarians in the present and future is to help users meet their needs by consistently improving and finding better ways to provide customized information, guidance and instruction to the users they serve. Reference librarians are still relevant in the face of trending technologies in this information age, the exponential growth of information and the attendant influx of technology. The question of whether or not a reference librarian is still relevant is tantamount to asking whether or not man needs illumination in dark places.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Relating Prensky's (2001) beliefs about today's students to library users, it is convenient to state that today's library users:

- are no longer the people our library system was designed to serve
- have changed not just incrementally from those of the past, but a big discontinuity has taken place
- represent the first generation to grow up with the new technology – and have spent their lives around it and using it
- think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors.

In line with the foregoing, certain recommendations are made in a bid to sustain the relevance of the reference librarian and keep the flag of libraries flying despite the presence of disruptive innovations that abound in this present information age and these are:

- A more prominent role for reference services, where the services provided are attractive, efficient, evaluated, marketed, integrated, professional, institutionalized, value-based and appropriate (Janes, 2003)
- A tiered reference service, where libraries are linked through collaborative arrangements to share reference responsibilities. Questions will be attempted at the local level, and if unanswered, may be routed to a system, consortial, national or even international level (Singh, 2004)
- Reference services offered from multiple, perhaps differentiated service points with a mix of media and technologies and use of networking and collaboration across administrative and professional lines (Bopp & Smith, 2001)

- Libraries re-orient their collections, services, and facilities to keep pace with these advancements as information needs and expectations are continuously changing in the rapidly changing information scenario (Rehman et al., 2011)
- Rather than remain repositories of information, libraries through the reference librarians should facilitate access (regardless of time and space) which has since taken pre-eminence over ownership
- Encourage library users to participate in the process that serve them or by which their information needs are met by employing Reference Service 2.0 with which they can create and share contents which however will be evaluated and managed by the reference librarian
- An independent information seeker is what the library user wishes to be. Most library users prefer not to speak to a librarian. Most prefer to find what they want their own, even if it is painful and they are not good at it. The job of the information professional, or the reference librarian, then, is to make the finding process as easy and painless as possible (Tennant, 2001) and be vitally involved in creating/designing and managing information systems for library users. This is corroborated by Scherrer (2004) when she mentioned that librarians recognized that patrons increasingly searched the Web to find information, including library information, and they sought to understand how patrons searched for that information. Librarians then built their Web pages, or “front doors,” in an organized fashion to facilitate this searching behaviour
- Riggs & Sabine (1988) in Ifidon & Ifidon (2008) predicted the next phenomenon that will make a dramatic impact on the work of librarians as expert systems. An expert system is an intelligent computer that uses knowledge and inference procedures to solve problems that are difficult enough to require significant human expertise for their solutions... If library applications of expert systems are to function like a human expert, then, they must be able to do things human experts do. They must be able to ask questions, solve problems, explain their reasoning and justify their conclusions. It is thus recommended that libraries embrace such expert systems in rendering more prolific and diversified reference service.

***About Authors**

Magnus Osahon Igbinovia, CLN

Department of Library, Archival and Information Studies

University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Infor.migbinovia@gmail.com

Oluwayinka Esther Solanke

UNIMED Library,

University of Medical Sciences, Ondo State, Nigeria

solankeyinka@gmail.com

Judith Odanwu Ogbole

Library Unit,

University of Jos, Nigeria

adamslove2020@yahoo.com

REFERENCES

1. Adediran, F. (1987). The design and operation of reference systems and information centres. *Nigerian Libraries* 9 (1 and 2). 51-55.
2. Bopp, R., & Smith, L. (2001). *Reference and Information Services*. Libraries Unlimited, Englewood. P.3
3. Cleveland, D., & Cleveland, A. (2001). *Introduction to Indexing and Abstracting*. Libraries Unlimited. U.S.A.
4. Guidelines for Information Service" (2000).
Available: http://www.ala.org/rusa/stnd_consumer.html
5. Ifidon, S., & Ifidon, E. (2008.) *Reference and Information Service in African Libraries*. Spectrum Books Limited. Ibadan
6. Igbinovia, M., and Solanke, E. (2015). Shining a light on the reference librarian role as reference services adapt to users' needs. Elsevier library connect newsletter. June 8.
7. Janes, J., (2002). What is reference for?. Retrieved March 10, 2004 from <http://www..ala.org/ala/rusaaprotools/futureofref/whatreferences.html>
8. Kadiri, J., & Adetoro, N. (2012). Information Explosion and the Challenges of Information and Communication Technology Utilization in Nigerian Libraries and Information Centres. *Ozean Journal of Social Sciences* 5(1),

9. Lyman, P., & Varian, H.R. (2000). *How much information?* Retrieved June 9, 2009 from <http://www.sims.berkeley.edu/research/projects/how-much-info/index.html>
10. Naisbitt, J. (1982). *Megatrends*. New York: Warner Books
11. Nwalo, K. (2012). *Imposition of order in chaos: Cataloguing as the soul of librarianship*. A faculty lecture delivered at the University of Ibadan. Faculty of Education.
12. Nwalo, K., & Ohaegbu, G. (1997). *Classification in Libraries, Archives and Information Centres*. Unpublished.
13. Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants, part II: Do they really think differently? *On the Horizon*, 9 (6), 1-6.
14. Rehman, S., Shafique, F., & Mahmood, K. (2011). A survey of user perception and Satisfaction with reference services in university libraries of Punjab. *Library philosophy and practice (e-journal)*. Available at <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/624>
15. Riggs, D., & Sabine, G. (1988). *Libraries in the 90s: What the leaders expect*. New York: Oryk Press, pp. 173-175
16. RUSA (2003). *Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians*.
17. Scherrer, C. (2004). Reference librarians' perceptions of the issues they face as academic health information professionals. *J Med Libr Assoc*. Apr 2004; 92 (2): 226–232. PMID: PMC385304
18. Singh, D. (2004). *Reference Services in the Digital age*. Paper presented at the Conference on library management in the 21st century at Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines, 29-30 March 2004
19. Tennant M., Butson L., Rezeau M., Tucker P., Boyle, M., & Clayton G. (2001). Customizing for clients: developing a library liaison program from need to plan. *Bull Med Libr Assoc*. 2001. Jan. 89(1):8–20. [[PMC free article](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
20. *The Reuters guide to good information strategy*. (1997). London: Reuters Ltd.
21. Tyckoson Davide. What is the best model for reference service? *Library Trends*, Fall 2001, 52 (2) 183-196.
