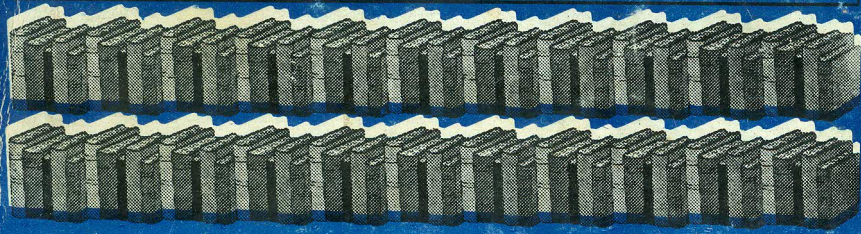


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## THE ROLE OF LIBRARIANS IN DIGITAL LIBRARIES

BY

MICHAEL ALFRED OBAJE

*(Natural Sciences Librarian)**University Of Jos Library**Nigeria***ABSTRACT**

*The role of libraries is being transformed by the information revolution in both information technology and access. New technology is of course, very powerful and brings an imperialistic thrust not only into librarianship but also into every day life. The new challenges created by information and communication technology have commanded attention and have made up a large part of recent literature about librarians and electronic libraries. The struggle of librarians to cope with the dynamic changes brought by technology is real. This paper discusses what is a digital library and the role of librarians in digital library environment Technology alone will not solve the information problem. Librarians need to understand the true nature of their role and their relationships to the training and needs of library users. Development in library, information and communication technology are affecting the traditional role of Librarians.*

**Introduction**

New technology has penetrated every facet of library service, and every staff member has to know something about technology. This has affected how library staff interacts with users and new roles are built on old ones. Librarians and library administrators alike realize that in order to meet users needs, most staff have to be available and trained to provide resources in both traditional print and digital formats. Many librarians have integrated technology into their jobs without any change in their job description or title. Reference librarian for example, uses the Internet, the online library catalog, and online databases to help patrons locate materials, which has been the job; the change is in the tools he uses. Librarians have always played a key role in education. Librarian's role has traditionally been more of the builder of library collection. Today, in the digital

age, librarians can no longer be simply information providers or the keepers of knowledge, the instantaneous access of information through the internet has made vast amounts of information and data available to anyone with a computer, a modem and a provider. Digital information is changing the role of librarians from a person who students ask for assistance in finding information in a place called a library to someone who needs to provide services and instruction regardless of place, time or format.

### **What is a digital library?**

There is no commonly accepted or straightforward standard definition rather, there are many:

### **Definitions of Digital Library**

In defining the digital library, Drabenstott offers 14 definitions, published between 1987 and 1993. The commonalities of these different definitions are summed up as follows:

- The digital library is not a single entity;
- The digital library requires technology to link the resources of libraries and information services;
- Transparent to end users are the linkages between the libraries and information services.
- Universal access to digital libraries and information services is a goal.
- Digital libraries are not limited to document surrogates; they extend to digital artifacts that cannot be represented or distributed in printed formats

Kenneth (1984) defined the characteristics of the electronic library as follows:

- Management of resources with a computer
- The ability to link the information provider with information seeker via electronic channels.
- The ability for staff to intervene in the electronic transaction when requested by the information seeker
- The ability to store, organize and transmit information to the information seeker via electronic channels.

A digital library is a library in which information is digitized and is made available in electronic format through a library network, and from which users can obtain access to and retrieve information regardless of place and time. A library becomes

digital when majority of its resources are being held in electronic form.

In a digital library, librarians 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.

### **The Role of Librarians in Digital Libraries**

Rappel (1997) identifies a number of roles that academic librarians must assume such as fostering partnerships, providing outreach to students, supporting academic disciplines, teaching and facilitating information access.

Abbas (1997) summarizes the role of librarians in a digital age as:

- Gateway to future and to the past
- Knowledge manager/worker
- Organizers of networked resources
- Advocates for information policy development
- Community partners
- Sifters of information resources
- Collaborators with technology resource providers
- Technicians
- Individual information consultants

Librarians in a digital library will perform a role of guiding users through an overwhelming myriad of information resources in both print and electronic format, teaching users to be better able to navigate through the maze of information resources. The challenge that librarians face as knowledge navigators is to link information to the process of acquiring knowledge from that information.

Ferguson (1997) quotes David Pescovitz as saying (in a wired article) “no software application will replace a good reference librarian any time soon”

In Matson’s article titled “Do Digital libraries Need Librarian”? she outlines three roles of librarian in the digital age to be:

- The librarian as enhanced service provide in a proactive manner.
- The librarian as guru of copyright licensing and electronic distributor, i.e., the understanding of what users and organizations actually want to do with information.
- The librarian as system interface designer, making use of experience with how library users request use and process information

A librarian is required to be skilled, responsive humanist; able to assess individual needs and respond with information that serves the patron’s needs. Librarians are no longer considered as simply conservators of information; the emphasis

now is on the dissemination of information. For this reason, librarians need to be aware of the various forms, how they are disseminated, and how they best serve a particular information needs.

Librarians must collaborate with computer and information scientists in the design, organization, development and maintenance of electronic library repositories, interfaces and network.

Librarians role as educators have changed from someone who gathers information and makes it available only to the public through workshops or orientations into individuals who actively participate in the educational process and building on-line courses for instructors. The digital information age has enhanced librarians roles to knowledge navigators and instructors teaching the discipline called information literacy. Librarians are required to provide access to quality and valid information to support on-line instruction as well as provide on-line instruction both indirectly in the form of guides and on-line tutorials.

Librarians need to be managers of information access, designers of systems in conjunction with programmers, technicians, and service providers when working with users.

With the establishment of digital libraries, librarians have the opportunity to break away from the stereotypes of the past and define themselves in the information environments and services of the future. Librarians' roles have shifted from emphasis on acquisition, preservation and storage to an emphasis on teaching, consulting, researching preserving democratic access to information, and collaborating with computer and information scientists in the design and maintenance of information access systems.

Librarians have moved to the beginning of the information cycle, playing a more substantial role in the information creation process.

In the digital library the roles of publishers as information packages and information distribution facilitators and the traditional role of libraries as store houses of information will be de-emphasized as Librarians play important roles as organizer, reviewers, and guardians of intellectual property. Librarians take part in the formation of copyright law and in the application of the law in the digital library.

Librarians are actively involved in the information selection, acquisition and organization as well as the design of search engine and user interface (librarian as system interface designer) and training the trainers:



## Conclusion

Librarians have important roles in the networked information environment, the experience and expertise of librarians will be invaluable for helping in the design of requisite software and hardware and above all, for mediating, electronically and at a distance, between the information and the user. Their traditional role of assisting and instructing users will continue, seeking to forestall user alienation, endeavor to put a human face on information technology, collaborating with users and information seekers, playing an intermediary role, and providing value-added information services

We are in a world of information overload where information is not stored in every one's desk but stored in a distributed fashion across the network and the methods of accessing continues to improve readjusting the roles of librarians.

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