

Redefining Reference and Information Services in Nigerian University Libraries: A Digital Paradigm

By

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Abstract

The paper examined the need for digitization and/or digital operation of reference and information services in Nigerian university libraries. It discussed the concept of digital reference service vis-à-vis traditional reference service and reviewed the potential for digital reference service in university libraries. The paper also highlighted the advantages of digital reference service as well as the challenges militating against digital operation of reference and information services in Nigerian university libraries. Among recommendations made for effective digitization and/or digital operation of reference and information services include the need for adequate funding of these libraries, provision of ICT resources, organization of ICT workshops for staff or training and retraining of staff in ICT services, provision of regular power supply or alternative source of energy, and recruitment of qualified library staff.

Keywords: reference and information services, digital reference service, traditional reference service, university libraries.

Introduction

The basic role of the library is to serve the objectives of its parent institution. This entails providing essential services to its clientele that would help them in meeting their various information needs. A university library, therefore, exists to serve the objectives of the university community. It is an academic library attached to a university which is aimed at promoting the teaching, learning and research needs of the university community. These teaching, learning and research needs are all information services. A university library should be able to carry out the following functions: teaching, research, publication, conservation of knowledge and ideas, and extension services (Kumar, 2006). Kumar (2006) emphasizes that university libraries perform the following functions in order to fulfill their mission of supporting the educational objectives of their parent institutions: selection and acquisition of learning resources (both print and non-print), organization of acquired resources (cataloguing and classification), documentation and bibliographical services, user education

programmes (including readers' advisory services), orientation courses and lectures, research support, consultancy services, administration and management. It is worthy to note that the manner in which these services are carried out determines the extent of satisfaction of the library patrons.

The major focus of this paper is reference and information services in university libraries. For university libraries to effectively perform the functions enumerated above, their reference and information service roles must be redefined to meet the current digital age. Reference and information services have really come to stay in libraries but they are much more pronounced in academic libraries. They refer to the personal assistance rendered to library users who are in search of information resources in order to meet their various information needs. What matters most in reference and information services is the manner in which they are carried out and how fast they are able to meet the needs of library patrons. In most Nigerian universities, reference and information services are largely offered traditionally. That is if they are obtainable at all.

The glaring truth is that these services are poorly rendered as a result of the library personnel employed to do the job or poor and/or outdated information resources. In view of this, there needs to be a paradigm shift from the traditional mode of offering reference and information services to the digital mode. This would ensure effectiveness and efficiency of these services in university libraries. More so, the information age has brought a great deal of transformation in the way reference and information services are carried out in that information resources in the library have become increasingly accessible electronically (Kadir, Dollah & Singh, 2006). In this regard, many university libraries are now switching over to the new paradigm of reference and information services in order to meet the information needs of their various patrons.

Digital reference service involves using computer-based medium to provide information services to library users. The most important thing about it is that it is fast and reliable and it is available 24/7. In developed countries of the world, digital reference service has taken over its traditional counterpart as information seekers can submit their queries anytime and the answers to these queries are provided by online reference librarians. However, this is not so in developing countries where there is a dearth of technological resources to carry out this service. Even in places where these

resources are provided, the aim is defeated by a myriad of problems such as epileptic power supply, lack of trained personnel, to mention but a few.

The thrust of this paper is to examine the need for digital reference service in Nigerian university libraries. Even though it also takes a look at the traditional reference service, it places emphasis on how the digital reference service has become the preferred option. The paper would dwell on the following: the concept of reference and information services, traditional reference service, digital reference service, challenges militating against digital operation of reference services in Nigerian university libraries, recommendations and conclusion.

The concept of reference and information services

Reference and information services have been variously defined but all the definitions point to one thing: personal assistance given to library users to meet their information needs. Ranganathan defined reference service as a personal service to each reader in helping him to find the documents answering the interest at the moment pin-pointedly, exhaustively and expeditiously. The three adverbs “pin-pointedly,” “exhaustively,” and “expeditiously” apply to Ranganathan’s laws of librarianship. The implication here is that in rendering reference service, librarians must ensure that the services are exactly or precisely what the users need at the moment and they must be thorough and timely. Ifidon and Ifidon (2008) posit that reference and information services refer to the direct personal assistance given by librarians to library patrons who are in pursuit of information for whatever purpose. According to them, it involves not only directing the user to the location of the material where the information can be found or the identification and selection of materials related to a particular information need and the provision of a piece of brief factual information but also locating what information is relevant from a mass of relevant and irrelevant information.

The process also involves practical help, community education, outreach services and referrals. In this case, the librarian who provides this service must ensure that the information so provided is relevant, especially in this age of information explosion. In a similar vein, Edoka (2000) defines reference service as the personal assistance given by librarian to individuals in search of information for whatever purpose as well as various library

activities deliberately designed to facilitate easy accessibility of information.

According to Bopp and Smith (2001), historians of modern reference service usually trace the modern concepts of reference work to Samuel Green's 1876 paper entitled "Personal Relations Between Librarians and Readers" which was later published in *American Library Journal* (now *Library Journal*). They argue that it is doubtful whether or not Samuel Green invented the idea of reference for library users, but he was the first to speak publicly about the concept and was the first to discuss it in writing. In both his speech to the first meeting of the American Library Association (ALA) and his article, Green emphasized the need for librarians to actively assist members of their communities in using library resources because the public is not trained to find information. The publication of Green's article helped to popularize the new concept of reference service. In his article (1876), Green introduced four main functions of reference service which remain as the tenets of reference and information services today: instructing patrons on how to use the library; answering patron queries; aiding the patrons in selecting resources; and promoting the library within the community. Green pointed out that although catalogues and indexes are valuable, most users require instruction in their use. Users must be guided in selecting the books that best meet their information needs. He also noted the importance of human relations in the personal assistance process where librarians must be "easy to get at and pleasant to talk with." They must be approachable and mingle freely with users and help them in every way.

According to Kadir et al (2006), many changes have taken place since the publication of Green's first article. In their opinion, technological advancement has brought significant changes into the reference and information services environment. Citing Grohs, Reed and Allan (2003), they contend that:

Technological innovation has played a key role in reference librarianship in the second half of the twentieth century. During the 1960's, libraries began to explore new technologies such as microfilm and microfiche, tapes and sound recordings. The 1970's brought about full-text databases such as LEXIS and WESTLAW in the field of law. The 1980's brought about significant changes with the emergence of electronic card catalogues in many academic, public, and special libraries. Eventually, the electronic catalogue databases became the online public access catalogues

(OPACs) providing local as well as remote access. Another major change in the process of storage, retrieval and dissemination of information was brought by the invention of CD-ROMs. By the late 1990's, many libraries moved from CD-ROM to providing databases through the internet (Para. 21).

In the course of this study, both the traditional and digital reference services will be discussed. Though the traditional reference service is gradually phasing out, many Nigerian university libraries still use it or combine it with digital reference service.

Traditional reference service

Traditional reference service is also known as face-to-face or in-person reference and information services. This kind of reference service involves face-to-face interaction between the user and the reference librarian. In this kind of reference service, the user approaches the reference librarian with his question, and the reference librarian conducts what is known as a reference interview on him to find out what he wants before assisting him. Harrod's Librarians' Glossary (1995) defines reference interview as the initial discussion between an enquirer and the library or information staff to determine exactly what level and quantity of information would be appropriate as a response to the query made.

Kadir et al (2006) argue that before the advent of digital reference service (DRS), which was orchestrated by the globalization of information brought about by information and communications technology (ICT), reference services traditionally have been offered by a person at a designated desk within the library building, over the telephone and through correspondence. The reference librarian handles all types of queries, from directional questions to in-depth research. Kadir et al (2006) opine that the role of the reference librarian is primarily to answer patron queries and secondarily to provide readers' advisory services. In like manner, Ranganathan based his five laws of library science on the traditional reference service. In his argument, reference service aims to establish the right contact between the right reader and the right book at the right time. Furthermore, a collection of library resources would not be fully utilized unless the reference librarian makes conscious efforts to help the readers exploit the resources in the library. This personal service would lead to greater use of books.

To make traditional reference service more viable, Ifidon and Ifidon (2008) contend that in setting up traditional reference and

information services unit, library managers should bear in mind whether the services should be centralized or decentralized. Centralization means offering the reference and information services from a single point or section of the library while decentralization means offering the services from all points or sections of the library. It is noteworthy that despite the technological revolution brought about by the Information Superhighway, traditional reference and information services still remain a force to reckon with. In this regard, Grandfield and Robertson (2008) as well as Luo (2008) have argued that face-to-face reference or traditional reference desk continues to be the mostly used reference service and at the same time, the first choice in getting help in the library.

Straiton (1999) avers that traditional and digital reference services would continue to co-exist. Also, Oder (2001) contends that both services are needed because each provides a specific type of service. For instance, questions that require more interaction and are detail-oriented are better handled in person, whereas ready-reference questions are better suited to chat, and questions that require longer research are best answered using e-mail (Oder, 2001). He notes that providing this variety of reference services is important, since patrons process information in different ways.

Digital reference service (DRS)

Digital reference service is also referred to as virtual reference service or electronic reference service. It can also be called web-based reference services or computerized reference services. Unlike traditional reference service, virtual reference service allows patrons to submit questions and receive answers via the internet or other electronic means. For digital reference service to work in university libraries, the libraries must be digitized. In essence, digitization of libraries is a gateway towards ensuring effective and efficient reference and information service delivery. Digitization involves converting analog information to digital format. It is important to point out that digital reference and information services are highly needed in university libraries because of the large size of this type of libraries and the objectives of their parent institutions which are mainly the pursuit of research, teaching and learning. So when these libraries are digitized, library patrons would find it easy to visit the libraries at any time to solve their information needs. Alternatively, they can sit in the comfort of their homes and pose their questions via e-mail or other

electronic means to online reference librarians who would attend to their questions.

Lankes (1998) as cited in Kadir, Dollah and Singh (2009) defines reference service as internet-based question and answer services that connect users who possess specialized subject or skill expertise. Also, Bunge (1999) as cited in Kadir et al (2009) categorized reference services into three broad groups:

- information services that involve either finding the required information on behalf of the users, or assisting users in finding information;
- instruction in the use of library resources and services (broadly defined as information literacy skills); and
- user guidance, in which users are guided in selecting the most appropriate information resources and services.

To meet the information needs of users in changing technological environment, digital reference service is a natural solution which is supposed to be an advancement of the traditional reference service. Digital reference service uses the internet to allow people to connect with a librarian. In the process of providing digital reference service, the reference librarian receives question via e-mail or web interface, identifies the query and then decides appropriate course of action. He then analyses the request and gets the type of information required (Chandwani, Kewalramani & Mahavidyalaya, 2019). Essentially, digital reference service developed and expanded as a result of technological innovations, and many libraries embraced it as a quicker means of assisting library users.

In this direction, Zanin-Yost (2004) opines that one of the simplest types of digital/virtual reference service is online access to libraries' catalogues. According to him, digital/virtual reference service developed from the interest in using available technology to provide better access for users, and patrons can be assisted remotely, and in many cases, 24 hours every day of the week. The advantage digital reference service has over the traditional reference service is that library patrons must not go to the library before they can make use of the service. They can even access the services from the comfort of their homes any day anytime.

The first type of digital reference was e-mail (Wassik, 1999). It was first used by academic libraries which were the first to provide

digital reference services in the early 1980's (Gross, McClure & Lankes, 2001). In 1984, the University of Maryland Health Services Library and the Health Science Library at the University of Washington, both in the United States, launched a service called *Electronic Access to Reference Services* (EARS), one of the earliest DRS in the United States, which provided reference service via e-mail (Still & Campbell, 1993). Three years later, the libraries at Indiana University developed an e-mail system called LIRN (Libraries Information and Reference Network), which was menu-driven and part of a network system (Still & Campbell, 1993). More so, ASKERIC, developed in 1992 as a project of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information and Technology, began to offer digital reference services, and according its director, Lankes (2000), the usage had increased 20 percent annually since then (Zanin-Yost, 2004). By 1999, 75 percent of the 122 libraries of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and 45 percent of academic libraries offered digital reference services via e-mail or a web-based system (Fritch & Mandernack, 2001). Consequently, digital reference services became important and effective resources for meeting the information needs of thousands of users. Also, the number of user requests for these services had continued to increase. By the end of 1990's, 99 percent of 70 academic libraries offered e-mail reference and 29 percent offered real-time reference services (Tenopir, 2001).

Of major interest was that the year 2000 ushered in live reference in academic libraries with the use of chat or commercial call centre software to communicate with users in real time. In addition, Wells and Hanson (2003) note that collaboration has kept pace with technology with the implementation of regional and international reference services. For instance, the Library of Congress began its Collaborative Digital Reference Service Projects to test the provision of professional library-quality reference service to users anytime anywhere (24 hours per day, 7 days per week), through an international digital network of libraries.

A fact that cannot be disputed about digital reference service is the ease, comfort and confidence which it accords the patrons in their search for information. It has made information storage, retrieval and dissemination easier. Library users all over the world can now access information through hundreds of thousands of journals and e-books available in form of databases on the internet. Such databases include: EBSCOHOST, Journal Storage (JSTOR),

African Journal Online (AJOL), Science Direct, American Online (AOL), Nigerian National University Commission's Virtual Library, and Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Others are Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture (AGORA), Joint Academic Network of Britain (JANET), Health Internet Access to Research (HINARI), MEDLINE, an online version of Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System (MEDLARS), offered by the US National Library of Medicine and adopted by the National Library of Medicine (NLM), etc.

It is important to note that the exponential growth of digital reference sources available on the internet has prompted many university libraries to digitize theses and dissertations emanating from their institutions. For instance, Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife and University of Jos Library have embarked on an African-wide project to digitize their theses and dissertations through the Association of African Universities Database of African Theses and Dissertations (DATAD) project (Jagboro, 2007).

According to Berube (2003), a digital reference transaction will usually include the following elements:

- The user of the service;
- The interface (e-mail, web form, chat, video-conference, etc);
- Electronic resources (including electronic or CD-based resources, web resources, local digitized materials, etc) as well as print resources; and
- The information professionals.

The above elements could be seen as a precondition for effective digital or virtual reference services.

Models of digital reference

Digital or virtual reference service has been categorized into two models: asynchronous and synchronous (McClennen, 2002). Asynchronous digital reference is where a patron submits a question through e-mail and web form and the librarian responds at a later time. It involves the use of FAQs (Frequently asked questions), e-resources, which comprise subject guides, lists, journals, and other contents, and e-mail, which may be form-based or addressed-based. Pomerantz, Nicolson, Belanger & Lankes (2004) argue that since the invention of the World Wide Web, there has been a great increase in the number of reference services utilizing asynchronous electronic communication media to conduct

the reference transaction. Examples of asynchronous digital reference service include: e-mail, web forms, and Ask-A-services. Also used in asynchronous reference transactions are Web 2.0 tools such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Second Life, Twitter, blogs and media or resource sharing, wherein library clients may seek 24/7 help from the reference librarian with a time delay response. On the other hand, synchronous digital reference transaction is where a patron communicates directly with a reference librarian in real-time using web chat applications as chat reference, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), video conferencing or web-camera services, short messaging system (SMS), Instant Messaging (IM) and digital reference robots.

Challenges militating against digital operation of reference and information services in Nigerian university libraries

There are myriads of problems confronting digital operation of reference and information services in Nigerian university libraries. These include: paucity of funds, lack of organization of ICT workshops for staff or lack of training and retraining of staff, lack of ICT resources, poor power supply, poor staffing or unqualified library staff, lukewarm attitude of library clientele, poor follow-up services, etc.

Paucity of funds

Insufficient funds have always been a major problem in every establishment or organization and libraries are not left out. Owing to this, university libraries are particularly hampered in their work of promoting teaching, research, learning and extension services by inadequate funding. Anafulu (1996) as cited in Igbo and Dike (2006) avers that without adequate financial support, the library cannot effectively play the role of organization and administration of collection, staff maintenance, procurement of equipment, satisfaction of user expectation and evaluation of services. It is important to note that most university libraries make budgetary provisions for only print resources, leaving out digital or ICT resources. This has become a major challenge to digital operation of reference and information services and other essential services in Nigerian university libraries.

Lack of organization of ICT workshops for staff or training and retraining of staff

Apart from the fact that most university library management do not organize ICT workshop for their staff, many library staff have

refused to embrace technological changes. In this regard, Ifidon and Ifidon (2008) have argued that librarians' refusal to embrace technological changes is a major problem facing effective reference and information service delivery in university libraries.

Lack of ICT/digital resources

Lack of ICT/digital resources in Nigerian university libraries affects digital operation of reference and information services. For university libraries to function effectively, they should be equipped with adequate ICT/digital resources in order to meet the varying information needs of their clientele.

Poor power supply

Poor power supply or lack of regular power supply adversely affects digital reference and information services. This is as a result of the fact that steady or uninterrupted power supply is needed to maintain this type of library service. This is worsened by the fact that most university library management do not even make provision for alternative power supply.

Poor staffing or unqualified library staff

Most university library management do not take cognizance of the fact that the information age has changed the course of library services. In view of this, they often recruit library personnel who are not ICT-compliant. This affects digital operation of reference and information services.

Lukewarm attitude of library clientele

Indifferent attitude of library patrons to the ICT resources in the library discourages the library management/staff in providing or offering digital reference services. As a result of the proliferation of smart phones and other digital gadgets, most library patrons feel they do not have any need for the library.

Poor follow-up services

Lack of follow-up or poor follow-up services affect digital reference and information services in university libraries. Most reference librarians do not follow up the reference services they offer to their clientele to find out if they are satisfied or not. According to Reference and User Services Association (RUSA, 2004), the reference transaction does not stop where the librarian leaves the patron. The librarian is expected to find out or determine if the patron is satisfied with the results of the search and if not, should refer him to other sources within or outside the library when

the sources are not available within the library.

Recommendations

Based on the challenges confronting digital reference and information services in Nigerian university libraries, the following recommendations are made:

- ❖ Government should address the issue of funding in Nigerian university libraries for improved library services. Also, library managers should ensure judicious use of funds allocated to their libraries.
- ❖ Libraries should organize ICT workshops or training for their staff for improved digital library services.
- ❖ Library managers should make use of the available funds to concentrate more on the procurement of ICT/digital resources for improved digital library services.
- ❖ Government should address the issue of poor power supply in the country. In addition to this, every library should make budgetary provision for alternative source of power instead of relying on the epileptic power supply in the country.
- ❖ Library managers should recruit more of ICT-compliant staff who can easily adapt to the demands of the information age.
- ❖ Library personnel should sensitize their various clientele to the need to use their ICT or digital libraries for quicker results.
- ❖ Reference librarians should cultivate the culture of follow-up services to ensure that library users get the best results.

Conclusion

Reference and information services can be redefined for improved service delivery to the library clientele. Though the traditional reference service is still in place, the shift to the digital paradigm has transformed library services. It has made reference work easier in that users can now have access to various databases on the internet to meet their various information needs. More so, they need not always visit the library for their needs to be met. They can sit in the comfort of their homes and engage in online chat with reference librarians in the case of difficult reference queries. To this end, many Nigerian university libraries are quickly embracing digital library services in order not to be left behind in the new scheme of things. However, government should do more in the area of provision of funds to university libraries in order to ensure sustainable digital library services in these universities.

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