The Professional Challenges of the Cataloguer in a Digital Environment: Notes from Nnamdi Azikiwe Library

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Abstract

One of the strong arguments in literature about information and communication technology (ICT) is that it is redefining the librarian's job. The article written from the background of the author's experiences as the chief Cataloguer of the University of Nigeria Nsukka Library argues that one of the pillars upon which the librarianship profession stands is Cataloguing, Classification and Indexing. ICT has not changed the way the cataloguer does his work; rather it has accentuated the need for the cataloguer to be tactically and technically sound. The article is of the opinion that ICT rather than reduce the workload of the cataloguer has increase it. It suggested the need for training and sabbaticals for the staff to improve their competence in the ICT era.

Introduction

The computer scientist since the middle of the 20th century has been able to influence the thinking of people and professions on the way information is generated, and communicated/disseminated. Librarians whose domain is in the area of information acquisition, storage and dissemination seem to be the worst hit in this new revolution known as information and communication technology (ICT). The argument in the literature of librarianship has been how to embrace this new revolution. Some say we must think like the computer scientist if we have to operate in this age. Others even say that in distant time computer scientist will take over the job of the librarian. In the face of this onslaught many a professional are confused. What actually is the scene like?
Information Technology and the Library

Information and communication technology has come to stay in the libraries in respect of automation and/or computerization. For libraries, it is not a matter of free choice between equal and unequal alternatives. This is not the time to argue if our involvement in the use and manipulation of IT is a matter of choice or an imperative. Adams (1986), Malholt (1987) and a host of others made it clear that libraries and librarians must come to terms with the use of ICT in their operations if they hope to fit properly into the profession now and in the future.

Equally, one does not think that this is the time to argue if changes in society, especially technological changes hitherto affected or affects the operations of the library. Shera (1971), Ogunsheyie (1976) and Aiyepetu (1993) have done this job excellently for us. The fact remains that the profession has transformed substantially due to changes in the way the society operates. Knopp (1984) and Sullivan (1991) discussed the effects, which changes in ICT brought to library operations. It is necessary to note that increasing advances in ICT has accelerated the rate at which information is generated and disseminated to the extent that it requires much tact and techniques to keep pace with it. The tact one would argue is the ability of the librarians to improve their professional competence to suit the realities of the present day. The technique is the ability to manipulate and operate those technologies that help in the generation, storage and dissemination of information.

Research Questions and Objectives

Having in mind the basic problems raised in the introductory part of this work, some basic questions need to be answered. In what ways has information and communication technologies affects the work of a Cataloguer? Has these technologies in any way threatened the cataloguer's professional task or is it only a complement to his work? More fundamentally, has information and communication technologies changed the basic principles upon which the cataloguer does his work?

This paper is designed to achieve two objectives: to show that advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) is only a compliment to the tools used by the cataloguer to do his/her work. It has
In no way taken over the job of the cataloguer. More fundamentally the paper is designed to show that with commitment and resourcefulness on the part of cataloguers in Nigerian University, Libraries ICT could be adapted to solve our peculiar needs in our Libraries.

It is important to note that while this paper is based on the experience of cataloguing activities in the Nnamdi Azikiwe Library. It is hoped it will serve as a reference point to other Libraries that [are yet to have such experiences] less advantaged then Nnamdi Azikiwe Library.

Information Technologies and Cataloguing

In the traditional communication process, libraries (in whatever form they are organized) have provided a permanent reservoir of information, which is the basis of structuring our knowledge process. It has always been a guaranteed source of access to or repository of knowledge generated as a result of academic interactions. Knowledge is organized in libraries for dissemination. These help to create a directory of publications “at the local institutional level and also at the larger national level” (Parekh, 2000:157).

Cataloguing is simply the description of documents to make it easy for a searcher to identify the documents in a collection when seen. On the other hand classification is the description of a document with a view to representing it at a specific location among the collections of a system. Given the above definitions it could be seen that any library could choose a systematic way of cataloguing materials in its system. Since librarianship is a profession, there has to be a standard way of describing documents to give them an acceptable format internationally, irrespective of where the document is produced or the subject it is treating. This is the argument of Tiamiyu (2003:29), when he noted that a universal standard approach to document description helps to foster uniformity in how indexing (catalogues) describe documents.

A lot of classification procedures and rules have been developed by groups and individuals. The most popular among these are Universal Decimal Classification (UDC), Library of Congress Classification Scheme (LC), Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC), Colon Classification and Bliss. These have standardized their subject
hierarchies that most libraries adopt them as standard classification schemes. The Anglo-American Cataloguing Rule (AACR), which is now in its second edition, is the standard rule for document description (cataloguing).

One of the questions this paper is addressing its mind is, has information technologies changed the basic principles upon which the cataloguer does his work? The answer is simply no. The cataloguer has to catalogue his book based on the AACR principles and use any of the classification schemes to assign subjects and class marks to them. Technology has nothing to do with this and it is clear that it will not affect it in the near future. It is after the cataloguer has finished with his work that technology comes in. This paper accepts the argument of Adeyemi (2001:2), that cataloguing is a professional function for which there is no substitute for the human being. Technology can only assist; it cannot replace the intellectual rigor of capturing the essential details, which are required to identify a specific item within a collection.

In what ways then has information and communication technologies affected the work of a cataloguer? The United Nations in 1993 while assessing the social consequences of advances in information technologies stated inter alia:

One of the most visible consequences of such advances (new technologies) has been the knitting together of all parts of the world, whether newsgathering, data flows, financial transactions or the exchange of other types of information. The new technologies have effectively broken down national boundaries with regard to flow of information (p.176).

The implication of this is that information technologies are changing the way information is stored and disseminated not necessarily the way it is processed in library terms. The notion of virtual library is a reality (Daniel, 2002). It is now clear that good libraries are not those that subscribe to and store multimillion volumes of books, journals, serials etc in their local collections, but rather those (libraries) that are accessible to information in electronic databases and those that are linked to
information network of electronic information systems. This situation is summarized by Parekh (2000:159) thus:

"In the past the librarian unlike most professionals has been associated with a place, the library a building. In the future the librarian will be a vector searching for and establishing connections. The library in which he works is more a state of the mind than a location. It is a set of neural connectors”

The implication of this to the cataloguer is that in addition to his professional competence he must add computer literacy and competence. The cataloguer must be able to work with the new information technologies to develop machine-readable catalogues that can be accessed in remote locations. The cataloguer must come to terms with the idea of the digital library. He should understand that his clientele are no longer the immediate students and academics in his work environment, but the entire universe of students and academics world over. He should equally work towards making other relevant catalogues in the information world available to his immediate clientele.

In the actual sense, the emerging technologies have not threatened the cataloguer's job but have only added additional responsibilities to his job. He now has to design programmes that will enable him translate his manual work into the digital form. This might sound strange, but actually the cataloguer's entire initial task has to be manually produced before it is digitized. Akintude (2003) noted that products and services on the web are first produced manually and then continuously updated by their creators. In our common experience all the inputs into the computer (either in TINLIB or X-LIB) have to be manually produced on a designed worksheet before they are digitized. This means additional work for the cataloguer.

How Then Does These Technologies Affect Us Presently?

Ingwersen (1999) discussing the role of librarians in organizing digital information outlined four major channels or access lines concerned
with knowledge and associated with library acquisition and the dissemination/retrieval/use of information. These include:

(a) Traditional access to and provision of information only by means of representation of documents or information objects (i.e. library catalogues and bibliographic databases – the bibliographic access aspects).

(b) Existing physical access to non-electronic documents – by being in the library or by getting copy delivered directly to the user. The physical access to remote electronic documents or event via bibliographic access and unstructured (chaotic) distributed networks, i.e. like presently on the World Wide Web;

(c) The feature-based intellectual access to structured and managed digital library collection

(d) The conceptual intellectual access primarily made possible by knowledge of the visitor demands and professional intervention and construction.

These four domains fall within the reach of the professional work of a cataloguer. By the development and state of libraries in Nigeria the first two are within our reach. These entail giving a good bibliographic access to our users who use our library for research purposes. To this end cataloguing section of the Nnamdi Azikiwe Library has among many inadequacies been trying to live up to expectations. Since the installation of the X-LIB software for libraries, we have been digitizing our catalogue records. The major problem here is that of the Systems Unit. The network server is never on for a considerable length of period. Since we cannot work when the server is down, the digitization process cannot proceed at a reasonable pace. In fact, in the last one year, the server has hardly been operative for twenty days due to one reason or the other. When the server is on light will constitute a major headache. We all know how frequent light is. Now when light is on, the stabilizer will not carry the computers. One wonders how we can build our data in a situation like this.
As a result of lack of typist and cyclostyle materials to produce the catalogue cards, we decided to use the librarians and the programmer in the unit to digitize the process of catalogue card production. Books are now fed into a template designed to fit into the normal catalogue card when produced. These cards have not been produced because we want to make a request to the library management for the procurement of a software known as database manager. This software will among other things help in sorting and filling of the cards in the system before they are printed. The cataloguer is now faced with three major assignments in the cataloguing room. The actual physical cataloguing of books using the X-LIB software and the digitization of the production of the catalogue cards. When work seems to be moving at a slow pace, it is because the information and communication technology age has added a lot of responsibilities to the cataloguer.

What Does the Future Hold for the Cataloguer?

The new information age has strictly divided the work of the information professional into two, creating access to, and the communication (dissemination) of information. Access creation is within the domain of the former technical services and collection development task of the librarian (Ilogbunam & Olorunsola: 2001). This implies that the library of the future should be able to structure its workforce to create good access base for its users starting from its selection/acquisition stage. This access should be based on locally available documents. Locally produced books, journals, dissertations, reports, etc should be sought for and indexed, catalogued and classified properly. Our cataloguing and indexing should no longer be based on imaginary subject listing but on user need. Indexing theory has suggested the “aboutness” theory as the most feasible means of creating access for users. The “user aboutness” mode of indexing is hereby suggested for adoption by Nigerian libraries.

User aboutness incorporates the user’s context of what a document is about. In this regard a user is brought into contact with documents (by an indexer), which has the potential to enlarge his present state of knowledge. This might look abstract but it is real. The present information age is user centered and so we must know our users needs before we go for acquisition and access creation. Ingwersen (1992) and Soergel (1985) treated the aboutness theory of indexing in relative details.
Soetgel argued that indexers should lay more emphases on request oriented indexing. This means that the indexer/cataloguer should be able to know his users and their information needs.

It is clear that in this information and communication technology age, it is not just cataloguing, it is cataloguing for whom? We must restructure our systems in the near future to be able to understand our clientele and catalogue for them.

Summary, Recommendations and Conclusions

Summary

One of the strong arguments in the literature about information and communication technology is that it is redefining the librarian's job. Parekh (2000) argued extensively on this redefinition. Ferguson and Weckert (1998) noted that the librarian's job has been reduced to:

(a) Diagnosing information needs,
(b) Diagnosing information products and services, and
(c) Structuring information.

The argument of this paper is that, in whatever way the redefining or redesigning is taking place, it has not affected the fundamental ways a librarian (Cataloguer) does his job. One of the pillars upon which the librarianship profession stands is on cataloguing, classification and indexing. This resulted in the need to organize information in a meaningful way that it can be accessible to the user. The explosion of information as a result of information and communication technologies has accentuated this need and has necessitated that we use the same means to organize these information in the way it can be meaningfully used by our teaming clientele.

This paper has equally argued that the emerging technologies have accentuated the work of the librarian that it requires much tact and techniques to keep pace with the profession. The tact is the ability of the librarians to improve their professional competence. This implies that as librarians we must be at home with the basic art and science behind our
profession. If the words of Adeyemi (2000:2) that cataloguing and classification "constitute the scientific base for the librarian's claim to professionalism is true" then librarians must not shy away from this part of our profession, if they wish to belong to the profession. The information age is the era where professionals must show class in indexing, cataloguing and classification.

The technique is the ability to manipulate and operate those technologies that help in the generation, storage and dissemination of information. One certainty of the new environment that we are operating is that librarians must be computer literate. While we are required to have passing knowledge of computer and other information and communication technologies, some librarians will need to have in-depth knowledge of computer and associated technologies. Training is seriously needed in this direction. It is a fact that some or most of our librarians hear of computers and fiddles with them, many are not actually knowledgeable in the principles and operations of the computer.

Recommendations

Based on the arguments of this paper the following recommendations are made.

a. Library managements are advised to designs programmes aimed at training librarians to become competent indexers and cataloguers.

b. Library managements should be able to come up with a guided policy on staff training in the application of information and communication technology to library service. For a start, I will suggest that libraries fashion out a 32-hour internal training course for every librarian designed to take the librarian through the principles of computing and information organization using the new technologies. This is what some academic libraries do to improve their staff competence (Akintunde, 2002:11); (Jagboro, 2003:50) and (Akintunde, 2003:82). The seriousness attached to this programme by the library management will ensure its success.
Library managements should workout collaborative sabbaticals for staff in some Nigerian University Libraries or elsewhere that is known to have done much work in the area of library automation for them to gain first hand on the job experience.

d. Library management are to put in place a ten-year phased plan aimed at achieving full automation of their libraries. This policy which should be well documented and made available to staff should be monitored and evaluated on an annual bases.

Conclusions

On a final note, it is clear that the dream is real and the reality of information and communication technologies is here with us. We cannot wish it away. Base on this the following conclusions are drawn from the arguments of this paper.

a. That information and communication technologies have not changed the way a cataloguer does his work because the AACR and the Standard Classification Schemes are still the fundamental tools, which a cataloguer uses for his/her work.

b. For the cataloguer to be relevant in the ICT era he should be able to develop machine readable catalogues that can be accessed in remote locations, because in this ICT age the clientele of the cataloguer are no longer the immediate students and academics in his work environment, but the entire universe of students and academics world over. He should equally work towards making other relevant catalogues in the information world available to his immediate clientele.

c. In the ICT era the cataloguers' function has been virtually reduced to creating access to and the communication (dissemination) of information to users. Access creation in the view of this paper should be based on locally available documents such as books, journals, theses, dissertations etc.
References


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