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Bridging the Digital Divide: The Potential Role of the National Library of Nigeria

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Abstract

National Library of Nigeria as the apex library of the nation and committed to freedom of access to information and promotion of lifelong learning has the potential role of bridging the digital divide affecting the country, thereby enhancing Nigerians participation in the knowledge and information society. Provision of access to information resources, dissemination of information and provision of means of communication supports every sphere of human endeavour and enhance the citizens' opportunity to participate in life-long learning and education. Bridging the digital divide has been identified as a key factor in achieving the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations. In the digital age, the ability to effectively use Information and Communication Technology is seen as one of the basic skills required to live a meaningful, enlightened, and productive life. The phrase "digital divide" has been applied to the gap that exists in most countries between those with ready access to the tools of information and communication technologies (ICTs), and those without such access or skills. This paper discusses the causes of digital divide and the potential roles of the National Library of Nigeria in bridging the digital divide in Nigeria, which among others include provision of internet connectivity through virtual library services and being used to actualize Universal Service Provision Fund (USPF) agenda on e-library services; provision of local content and national portals; playing leadership and advocacy role in soliciting funds; getting familiar with Nigerian business environment; active involvement in library legal/regulatory matters; providing policy agenda and moral/ethical framework for professional practice. The work concludes that unless appropriate measures are taken in Nigeria generally there will be a total neglect of the poor who do not have access to information and communication technology at this knowledge age.

Keywords: Digital Divide, Bridging, National Library of Nigeria.

1.0 Introduction

A lot has been written on digital divide, conferences and seminars are held on it, websites have been set up to deal with the subject. Parker (2003) opined that Librarians are also taking it seriously and IFLA had organized brainstorming session in order to identify strategic priorities for IFLA in which the major concern was mostly in bridging the digital divided or narrowing it.

Libraries in their commitment to freedom of access to information and promotion of life-long learning are central to bridging the digital divide with services provided to all regardless of age, race, language, social status, etc. Presently, professional librarians are recognized as information disseminators or communicators rather than custodians of information. Through National Libraries, people can access information resources and databases from remote areas. National Library of Nigeria can play significant roles in bridging the digital divide. Though digitization process of local content of National Library of Nigeria seems to be slow, people can access databases for their research work and other information needs as there are virtual library services, e-library services and internet connectivity at the headquarters and the branches. These bridge the gap of people of different social status in information access as National Library is the Library of the last resort and the last hope of the poor who cannot afford the acquisition of Information Technology and Communication infrastructure.

Over one hundred and eighty national libraries are found in different countries of the world, with varied origin and functions. UNESCO Guidelines for Legislation for National Library Services in Lor (2003), defined a national library as an institution, primarily funded by the "state"; responsible

for comprehensively collecting, bibliographically recording, preserving and making available the documentary heritage originating from or relating to its country; and which furthers the effective and efficient functioning of the country's libraries through the management of important national collections, provision of an infrastructure, and coordination of activities in the country's library and information system, international liaison, and playing leadership role. These responsibilities are formally recognized, usually in the country's legislation. The Guidelines specifies three national library "orientations" which are not mutually exclusive are identified and can be summarized as follows:

Heritage, which portrays that learned scholars and researchers are the primary clients; with the strategic emphasis is on collections.

Infrastructure, which portrays that primary clients are other libraries with the strategic emphasis is on national leadership.

Comprehensive national service; which portrays that the primary clients are the people; with the strategic emphasis is on service delivery to end users.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Clarifications

Recent developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the society today have, while making our life easier, created a social divide. It has also widened the gap between the rich and the poor, the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. In other words, new technologies, while improving our life in many ways have created what is called the 'digital divide'. Lor (2003) also maintained that the term "digital divide" is said to have been coined by a former United

States Assistant Secretary for Commerce, Telecommunications and Communication – Larry Irving. It refers to the gap between those who can benefit from digital technology and those who cannot. Accordingly, work on the digital divide has tended to slot people into a dichotomous model of technology “haves” and “have nots” (Selwyn, 2004). The American Library Association's Office for Information Technology Policy defines the digital divide as differences due to geography, race, economic status, gender and physical inability in access to information through the Internet and other information technologies and services, and also in the skills, knowledge and abilities to use the information, the internet and other technologies (ALA, 2002). The digital divide creates a vicious cycle: Those without economic means cannot access the Internet to take part in, and benefit from these economic activities. Ani, Uchendu and Atseye (2007) are of the same view that digital divide is simply defined as the gap that exists between those who have and those who do not have access to the modern ICT such as the telephones, computers, Internet and related services. This gap includes imbalances in terms of access to Internet infrastructure, information and knowledge, and equality of opportunity depending on income, race, ethnicity, gender or other similar criteria.

Rice and Katz (2003) asserted that digital divide may be classified based on gender, income, and race groups, and by locations. Digital divide also refers to the disparity between societies and nations. Digital divide' explains the fact that there are classes of two people in the world today as result of technology: those people who have access to, and the capability to use modern information technology and people who do not. Abubakar (2012) affirmed that "Digital Divide" is a phenomenon which creates gap between people who possess regular access to technology, (such as computers and their related functions like ability to get to the

internet) and those who do not have access. The situation requires digital literacy and being able to use other ICT facilities and infrastructure effectively, to meet the information needs of the people. Ukpebor and Emorjoho (2012) asserted that in Nigeria, there is disparity in the level of accessibility to Information and Communication Technology between private and public sectors of the economy and socio-economic status has played more significant role in widening the digital gap. The divide also exists between the educated and the uneducated, between economic classes, and globally, between the more and less industrially developed nations.

Libraries are places where anyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and people to achieve their full potential in promoting sustainable development and improving quality of life. Librarians as information communicators are so crucial to the overall ability for all to access and contribute information, ideas and knowledge. This is because libraries especially National Library of Nigeria provides a gateway to information worldwide and some businesses have always looked up to libraries for information, especially in the developed parts of the world, whereas for many in the developing countries, considering libraries as an important part of the local "support system" for business and economic development is new (ECA, 2006).

2.2 Background information of the National Library of Nigeria

The National Library of Nigeria is the apex library of the nation and serves as the focal point of the nation's information, bibliographic and documentation system. In this role, it is responsible for preserving in all formats, the record of intellectual output of Nigerians. It pursues the key objective of making information accessible to the citizenry. The establishment of the National

Library of Nigeria was approved by the decision of the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1961. The National Library Act was passed by parliament in 1964 and the library was officially declared open on November 6, 1964 by Hon. T.O.S Benson, the then Federal Minister for Information. The National Library Act, (1964) was revised and replaced by the National Library Act (No. 29) of 1970 to accommodate more functions, which include conferment of legal deposit power on the library for the collection of all materials manifestations of the intellectual output of Nigeria; and production of National Bibliography of Nigeria (NBN).

For grass root Library and information service and in conformity with the enabling Act, National Library of Nigeria is mandated to have a branch office in all the States of the Federation, sited at the state capital. At present, there are twenty-five branches in the country. The branches are in the following States: Abia, Adamawa, Bauchi, Benue, Cross River, Edo, Enugu, Gombe, Imo, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kwara, Lagos, Nasarawa, Niger, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Oyo, Plateau, Rivers (presently out of service), Sokoto, Taraba and Yobe. The National Library headquarters is in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The National Library has two (2) corporate departments comprising the Human Resource and Administration Department; Finance and Accounts Department; and six (6) professional departments comprising the Planning, Research and Statistics Department; Collection Development and Processing Department; National Bibliographic Control Department; Public Services Department (Northern Operations); Public Services Department (Southern Operations); and Virtual Library Services Department.

National library is the intellectual memory of the nation. It is the Bibliographic Control Agency of the nation and is

responsible for the National Bibliographic Control in the Universal Bibliographic Network aimed at achieving Universal Availability of Publications. The vision of the National Library is “to ensure the building of an informed and enlightened citizenry through the provision of information resources that are readily available and easily accessible”, while the mission is “to acquire, process, organize, disseminate as well as provide links to information resources to all Nigerians for their educational pursuits and for informed decision making”. The institution is charged among others, with the following statutory functions: To assemble, maintain and extend to users, a collection of books, periodicals, pamphlets, newspapers, maps, musical scores, films and recordings as the Board considers appropriate for the library of highest standing; To establish and maintain a branch of the national library of Nigeria in each state of the Federation; To make such arrangements as the Board considers appropriate with respect to the exchange of matter included in the aforesaid, the preparation and publication of catalogues, indexes and similar aids, the provision of assistance to other persons in the organization of libraries and with respect to the manner of using facilities under the control of libraries; To make recommendations and give advice on library development or organization to any department or agency of government of the Federation or a State or to any local government authority; To make the facilities of the National Library available to members of the public and others on proper terms; and To be responsible for the development of National Bibliography of Nigeria and national bibliographical services, either in a national bibliographical centre or elsewhere.

2.3 Causes of Digital Divide

Studies have reported factors which cause digital divide like low income and other

financial limitations, lower-quality and/or high-priced connections, low level of education, lack of digital literacy, limited access to quality ICT content, the cost and affordability of ICT and lack of knowledge and understanding of the technology in many developing countries. It is noted Library development has not been a priority of governments in the developing countries. Governments struggle to provide basic human needs like food, water, health, electricity, sanitation, transportation, and other amenities resulting to libraries being grossly affected by inadequate funding; lack of appropriate technology, inadequate trained manpower, and poor literacy rates. Consequent upon lack of suitable technologies, trained manpower, and inadequate financial resources, most libraries in the developing countries do not even have fully developed and up to date OPACs, full-fledged automated library management systems, and digital libraries. Thus, libraries in the developing countries are lagging behind in ICT access and skills. Singh (2007) asserted that the following factors are responsible for the problems of digital divide in developing countries: infrastructural barriers, literacy skills barriers, economic barriers and content barriers. While Ukpebor and Emojorho (2012) averred that in Africa, inequitable access to the internet is attributable to the state of ICT infrastructure and lack of adequate investment in the society that support the new technology.

2.4 Potential Roles of National Library of Nigeria in Bridging the Digital Divide

National Library as the apex library of any nation has a lot of roles to play in bridging the digital divide affecting any country. In corroboration, Singh (2007) opined that libraries with the commitment to freedom of access to information and promotion to life-long learning are fundamental to bridging the digital divide where all the services are

provided to all regardless of age, race, and language. Thus, the author suggested that a fundamental requirement for reducing the digital divide in countries is to give priority to the development of their communication infrastructure and provide universal and affordable access to information to individuals in all geographical areas of the country. Lor (2003) opined that what National Libraries should do to assist in narrowing the digital divide depends on factors such as their primary orientation (heritage, infrastructure or comprehensive national service, made clear in the UNESCO Guidelines), their resources, and their position and influence in the national system of library and information services. Thus, the following are the potential roles of National Library of Nigeria in bridging the digital divide in Nigeria borrowing from Lor (2003) in his study on national libraries and the digital divide.

Internet Connectivity: National Library of Nigeria has established virtual library services department which provides internet access and services to the citizenry and performs two complementary roles of cooperative subscription to foreign databases to gain from economies of scale; and creation of local content so as to contribute to the pool of world knowledge. National library could also be used to actualize the dreams of the federal government as is seen in the Universal Service Provision Fund (USPF) programme on e-library services in which eighteen branches of the National Library were used to reach Nigerians in the various states of the federation. In addition, National library of Nigeria in emphasizing the infrastructure orientation could play a significant leadership role in the area of standardization and providing specifications for suitable workstations and software, and could equally develop or commission certain types of software for instance, systems for cataloguing and classification, bibliographic control,

bibliographic networking and resource sharing, which could be evident in online national union catalogue (ONUC).

2.5 National Library becoming an active partner in NgREN

Atah (2014) opined that Nigerian Research and Education Network (NgREN) was commissioned on Tuesday 8th July, 2014, a private network consortium that connects education and research institutions directly to one another, other Research and Education Networks (RENs) and the 'Commercial' or 'Commodity' Internet. It is a specialized ISP dedicated to supporting the needs of research and education communities of Nigeria and aimed at providing basic nationwide connectivity platform to link participating institutions on which a host e-services are provided and shared among participating libraries; uses ICT to drive inter-institutional communication, collaboration and shared access to knowledge across national and international boundaries, and is internet independent. Presently, twenty-nine (29) institutions are connected, but unfortunately, National Library of Nigeria is not among the foundation members. It is hoped that National Library of Nigeria should leverage the consortium and avail herself the opportunity of tapping the benefits derivable from the consortium.

Capacity Building

'Human resource development particularly in the field of education, research, and skills training in information and communications technologies has proven to be a key factor in narrowing the digital divide between one country and another and between sectors of a national population' (WIPO, 2012). Lor (2002) emphasized that National Libraries in most developing countries experience keen shortage of IT staff and even National Libraries in more developed countries cannot easily attract and retain highly skilled IT staff.

However, National Library of Nigeria having established virtual library services, benefitting from the USPF programme of e-library and having internet connectivity at the headquarters and the branches, has a number of IT experts though not adequate, and continues to develop more staff on the required skills. The library has benefitted from donations of ICT infrastructure from TETFund and could equally access resources such as grant funding, which can make a useful contribution to research and development in areas such as retrospective conversion, digitization of the local content, online assignment of ISBN, ISSN, online CIP processing, electronic legal deposit, the preservation of born-digital documents and providing training opportunities to build national expertise. National Library of Nigeria should strive to attract and retain more ICT personnel.

Local Content

The main thrust of local content involves adding to the critical mass of national content available on the web, and this is an area in which National libraries and National Library of Nigeria in particular can make a major contribution. It involves making the National Library's Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC), national bibliography of Nigeria, and Online National Union Catalogue (ONUC) among others available on the web, thereby giving bibliographic access to its collections. National Library of Nigeria is doing much in this regard through retrospective conversion of her resources to digital format and it is an ongoing exercise. It is a further and more significant step in providing digitized full-text content through digitization programmes focusing on the national heritage: manuscripts of historical importance, early printed works, maps, photographs, sound recordings, motion pictures, newspapers and others. This role of National Library of Nigeria emphasizes the

heritage orientation.

National Portals

National Library of Nigeria could bridge the digital divide by providing national portals to digital information resources, with particular emphasis on information relevant to Nigeria and her citizens. However, as earlier stated, National Library of Nigeria is working assiduously on digitizing her local content. Jackson in Lor (2003) asserted that if the resources are carefully evaluated, selected and organized, such portals can add a great deal of value by effortlessly integrating rapid and powerful access to a wide range of resources, and in essence creating a virtual library. It is also observed that in the developing world, national libraries have a particular role of adding to the digital content on the Internet, and ensuring that indigenous languages, cultures and concerns are reflected, while in developing countries, with limited resources, projects on digitization are usually selective. The author however, suggested that the selection of material for digitization should be focused on cultural, heritage and nation-building objectives and school curricula, and could include documents now held by former colonial powers and also legislation and government information. Mutula (2002) also suggested that national libraries can add to local content by recording, documenting and digitizing oral history and indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is local knowledge, unique to every culture or society, where it forms the basis for local decision making and problem solving in agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, and many other activities. Lor (2002) suggested that indigenous knowledge could be made subject to legal deposit and National libraries should play the role of its preservation, accessibility and appreciation, as it is a national treasure which has been grossly ignored and underestimated. In addition, the National

Library of Nigeria should not neglect the country's electronic heritage of born-digital material as more and more journals are now being published electronically. The National Library needs to collect these and ensure that they do not disappear from the Internet after a few years. Thus, National Library of Nigeria collects the URL from the publishers of such documents for accessibility. Web sites are an important reflection of national politics and culture, but they are very ephemeral and National Library of Nigeria should ensure that the website is maintained and accessible.

Community Service

National Library of Nigeria has the responsibility to ensure that her services reflect the needs of all the facets of the Nigerian society. This implies that the content provided in digitized form should as far as possible be in all the country's languages, and should be relevant to minorities and disadvantaged groups like the handicapped, new literate and illiterate. In some countries library services to the blind or visually challenged are provided by the National Library but in Nigeria, National Library of Nigeria has not extended its services to the handicapped such as the visually challenged. It is obvious that new digital technology may open more opportunities for users with disabilities, but to provide these opportunities will require the National Library of Nigeria to establish handicapped unit in the library and make an investment in specialized hardware and software. The National Library of Nigeria is equally charged with the responsibility of promoting literacy / information literacy through collecting, evaluating and making available literacy materials and reading matters for the newly literate, developing, piloting and coordinating literacy programmes, such as readership promotion campaign; promoting indigenous writing and publishing, and coordinating book development policy among others, which

enhances participation in the knowledge society.

Playing Leadership and Advocacy Role in Soliciting Fund

It is extremely difficult to see the Director / Chief Executive Officer or National Librarian with adequate funds to pilot the affairs of the library. However, National Library of Nigeria has the capacity and expertise to provide leadership role, to solicit fund for itself and other libraries in Nigeria by putting forward a grant proposal to Foundations or Foreign Donor Agencies and also playing advocacy role by assisting in persuading government to make more funding available to the country's libraries and information centres. Lor (2003) affirmed that it however, depends on the status of the Director / Chief Executive Officer (National Librarian) and on the relationship of the National Library with other organs of the federal government.

Familiar with Nigeria Business Environment

Some businesses have always looked up to libraries for information and libraries are important for business information and economic development. Thus, National Library of Nigeria needs to be familiar with the Nigeria's business environment in order to be able to provide appropriate information services to the private sector that will assist them in their activities.

Active Involvement in Library Legal / Regulatory Matters

As the National Library Act of 1970 empowers the National Library of Nigeria to coordinate the activities of other libraries in Nigeria, the National Library could in conjunction with the Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria play an advocacy role, coordinating inputs from the other libraries in the country and putting forward well-motivated proposals for appropriate

adjustments to laws and regulations. Most relevant areas may include copyright issues, encouragement of indigenous publishing, assisting in harmonizing library education curriculum, and promotion of information literacy and readership.

Policy Agenda

In addition to playing an advocacy role, the National Library of Nigeria should play a leadership role in engaging the country's library professionals to participate in national information/knowledge society debates and initiatives. In many developing countries public information agencies utilizing modern ICTs, are being set without the involvement of librarians, who could have made useful and valuable contributions. This leads not only to the marginalization of libraries and librarians, but also to costly duplication of efforts. This could be seen from the Ministry of Education in Nigeria carrying out readership promotion campaign tagged 'Bring Back the Book' of President Goodluck Jonathan. Libraries should be central to the information/knowledge society, and the National Library of Nigeria needs to take the lead to make sure that libraries in her country do not miss golden opportunities to help bridge the digital divide.

Ensuring Moral/Ethical Framework in Service Delivery

National Library of Nigeria should provide national leadership in the promotion and defense of freedom of access to information and freedom of expression. This should be evident in information service delivery to clients and in the management of her human resources, and by setting an example through the application of sound democratic and ethical principles.

Conclusion

National Library of Nigeria contributes immensely in bridging the digital divide as the apex library and library of the

last resort, which is capable of assisting the poor who cannot afford to acquire ICT tools. The potential roles of the National library of Nigeria in bridging the digital divide or at least narrowing it has been extensively discussed. Thus, the National Library Board, The Director/Chief Executive Officer (National librarian) and his management team should consider the institution's strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis the digital divide and take appropriate measures enunciated to ensure that digital divide is abridged or at least narrowed in Nigeria to enhance the opportunity of Nigerians' effective participation in the information and knowledge society. National Library of Nigeria should equally take advantage of the NgREN consortium to be able to serve her numerous users with the adequate bandwidth which the consortium boasts of. It is imperative to note that unless appropriate measures are taken in Nigeria there will be a total neglect of the poor masses that do not have access to technology at this knowledge age and the apex library should take the lead.

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