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# User-Centred Library Services in the Twenty First Century Knowledge Societies

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***ABSTRACT***

***Purpose:*** *This paper examined the concept of the knowledge society and its characteristics as well as knowledge usage in the twenty-first-century knowledge societies. It also highlighted the change in the role of library service providers as regards the infusion of information technology into information retrieval systems and radical referencing in libraries which gave birth to user-centred library services discussed extensively in this paper. Salient issues were considered in the implementation of user-centred library service approach in the twenty-first-century knowledge societies.*

***Design/Methodology & Approach:*** *The methodology adopted was contextual analysis that involved the review of materials ranging from publications, textbooks and the relevant internet sources.*

***Implication:*** *The neglect of the user-centred library service approach by the Libraries and Library Information System (LIS) professionals would render their functions ineffective and become irrelevant in the present-day information explosion age.*

***Originality/Value:*** *This paper concludes that the user-centred library service-approach has made library information science professionals assume the new roles such as an intermediary, facilitator, end-user training, web organiser and designer, researcher, interface designer, knowledge manager/professional and sifter of information resources.*

***Keywords:*** *Knowledge Societies, Libraries, User-Centred Library Services, Twenty-First Century Knowledge Societies.*

***Paper Type:*** *Conceptual research.*

## Introduction

Knowledge is information and educational skills acquired through experience; information acceptable to individuals that could be put to use for profit or add value to the individual. It can thus be said that information not accessible to people and profitable to the individual cannot be classified as knowledge. Meadows, D. (1972), asserts that knowledge cannot exist in a void, people or group of individuals must exit and interact with available information for knowledge to exist and be useful. Knowledge could also be perceived as a human facility resulting from interpreted information; understanding that germinates from a combination of data, information, experience and individual interpretation. (www.businessdictionary.com). Thus society is crucial for knowledge to thrive. A Society is the aggregate of people living together in a more or less ordered community. They share cultural beliefs and ideologies in common.

In the past, the control knowledge goes hand in hand with serious inequality, exclusion and social conflict. Knowledge was long the exclusive domain of the tight cycles of wise men and initiated few characterised by secrecy. However, there is now a change in the exclusiveness of knowledge in the present age of enlightenment, the demand for democracy, the concept of openness and the gradual emergence of public forum for knowledge: which fostered the spread of ideas of universality, liberty and equality. Also, the diffusion of knowledge through books, printing press as well as education for all through schools and universities has changed the outlook of the present-day knowledge society Kochen, (1971). Furthermore, the information age has brought about the idea of the present-day information society which is based on a technological breakthrough. Thus, today the concept of knowledge societies encompasses much broader social, ethical and political dimensions. From the foregoing, what is knowledge society?

## Knowledge Societies

Today's human society is described as embedding knowledge societies which are based on the need for knowledge distribution, access to information and capability to transform information to knowledge. Afgan and Carvalho (2010) defined knowledge society as a human structured organisation based on contemporary developed knowledge and representing the new quality of life support systems. UNESCO, (2005) also noted that knowledge societies are about capabilities to identify, produce, process, transform, disseminate

and use the information to build and apply knowledge for human development. Lor P. J. and Britz J. J. (2006) further defined knowledge societies as societies that operate within the paradigm of the economics of information. It values human capital as the prime input to production and innovation. Knowledge societies are nurtured by diversities and capacities. Certainly, every society has its own knowledge assets thus, the various forms of knowledge and culture are always used in building any society in the twenty-first century. It is, therefore, necessary to work towards connecting all forms of information technological development, acquisition and dissemination of knowledge to enhance the twenty-first-century knowledge societies. For the knowledge societies of the twenty-first century, it is imperative to foster knowledge sharing. It should be able to integrate all its members (information user) and promote new forms of solidarity for both present and future generation where knowledge is a public good available to each individual (user) for development.

Ochogwu, M. 2009, categorised information users into four in a society. The first category of information users are professionals such as medical practitioner, engineers, lawyers and agriculturist among others. The second category of information users are along institutional lines such as tertiary institutions, secondary and primary schools. The third group constitutes users along geographical locations while the fourth category is referred to as disadvantaged information users. They are disadvantaged because their access to information centres is restricted. They include the physically challenged (the deaf, dumb, blind and cripple), and those in prisons, hospitals and orphanage homes.

Besides, according to Dike (2007), knowledge societies have the following characteristics:

1. They are pluralistic and culturally diverse.
2. Democratic societies by all and for all.
3. They are learning societies.
4.Knowledge societies foster full human development.
5. They build better features.

Thus, to foster the dissemination of knowledge as a public good to those categories of information users in any knowledge society, the importance of library and library services cannot be overemphasised.

**Libraries**

Collection of written knowledge and information in the repository is a practise as old as civilisation itself. The name such of repository became the library. The word library is derived from the word "liber" meaning book which can be described as an organised collection of published and unpublished books and audiovisual materials with the aid of services of library staff who can provide and interpret such materials as required to meet the needs of its users. Libraries are regarded as agencies through which sources of information, accumulated knowledge and experiences are selected, acquired, organised, preserved and disseminated to library users. Accordingly, Onwubiko and Uzoigwe (2004) defined the library as an information centre located in an organisation, institute, agency, industry etc to satisfy the information needs of the individual client and the realisation of the broad goals and objectives of the parent organisation.

Libraries traditionally have played a significant role in education and giving access to information and knowledge to different users (clientele). The different library performs different functions to both potential and existing users. The vast information resources available in libraries ensure different access to scholarly information for the members of the knowledge societies. According to Abdulsalami et al. (2013) libraries have acquired great importance in knowledge societies. Libraries which have been previously referred to as the purveyor of information, custodian of knowledge and the house of learning play vital role in the development of any society by catering for the information needs of thousands of people within a particular community. The main goal of a library, therefore, is to acquire, process, organise, preserve and provide easy access to its users in the most convenient way to knowledge and information. According to Leheman, (2011), the future of library will be as a dynamic knowledge centre where not only the librarian, the books (whether real or virtual) and the users engage in the interchange of ideas. Hence, the satisfaction derived from the use of libraries is dependent on its resources, personnel and their zeal in service provision by Library Information Science professionals.

**User-Centred Library Services In Knowledge Societies**

Ochogwu, M. (2007) in his critical assessment of the nature of library services provided by Library Information Science (LIS) professionals in Nigeria, classified information service providers into three. These three categories no doubt reflect the nature of library service providers in most of the world, especially in

developing countries. The first categories are the passive information providers who care very little if their services are beneficial to library users in knowledge societies. The second group are the reactive information providers who provide services to users on demand. It is however note worthy to state that library information users seldom demand the assistance of LIS professional when they have alternative information source such as the internet in the present information explosion age. The third group are the proactive library service providers who not only diagnose the information needs of library clientele in knowledge societies but also customise such services. This third group of library service providers, though few, are necessary if the library is to remain relevant information resource centres in this information explosion age.

Gone are the days when library and information scientists sit in their offices (libraries or school libraries) waiting for patrons to come enquiring for information. A more dynamic approach has to be inculcated into the practice of librarianship. The role of the Library and LIS professionals has to change from the posture of the patient dog (passive) to the aggressive dog (proactive). To buttress these, Friedman and Marrone (2009) stated that, "the time has come when LIS professionals adopt an approach called Radical Referencing (RR) which tends to break down barriers to information thus connecting users with quality information regardless of their inability". The interconnection of the world through the use of the internet and the web has changed the fundamental roles, culture, and paradigm of libraries and LIS professionals/librarians. In the prevailing situation, the librarian is called to assume new roles and perform task like guiding, facilitating, sifting information resources and preserving the access to information.

Consequently, the collaboration with computer and information technology scientists, in the design and maintenance of information access systems for the effective use of internet and web in the interest of information seekers in knowledge societies has become imperative for the librarians. Thus, the need for education and retraining of LIS professionals in providing proactive service to clientele in the twenty-first-century knowledge society cannot be overemphasised. This is so in an information explosion age when LIS professionals must make contact with their target audience. This is because the proactive service providers offer user-centred service thereby encouraging library patronage.

According to Dinesh, K. Gupta and Ashok, J. (2002), information users in knowledge societies are the centre entities in all types of libraries. They further express that the characteristics of information users in knowledge societies makeup and indeed a central element in the development of user-centred library services. Hence, the need to incorporate elements of user centredness is imperative for qualitative library services. The elements of user-centred library services according to Williams, K. (1992) comprise diagnoses of library user information needs, prescription of information sources, implementation and evaluation.

**Elements of User-Centred Library Services In The Twenty-First Century Knowledge Societies**

The four main elements of user-centred library services are:

1, Diagnoses of user information needs.
2. Prescription of information sources.
3. Implementation.
4. Evaluation.

**Diagnoses of User Information Needs**

For user-centred library services in knowledge societies, diagnoses of information needs typically occur through a communication process with the individual information user. It is usually called "the reference interview." This enables the library service provider to identify library users' needs and recommend appropriate information sources. According to Williams, K (1992), the primary purpose of the reference interview is to help answer some questions. Answers to the question(s) clarify the problem(s) of the library user and provide the user with type and amount of information needed. He also identified what the library service provider wants to learn/know which are:

1. What kind of information is needed?
2. How much information is needed; a simple fact, a book, or mass materials?
3. How is the information going to be used; for a talk, to answer a question or as resource materials?
4. What degree of sophistication is required; a beginning article or an advance monograph?
5. How much time does the user have to search for the information?
6. When is the information needed?

The reference interview provides a good beginning for the process of diagnosing information needs crucial to user-centred library services in the present day knowledge societies to prescribe accurate information sources to meet the needs of the information users.

**Prescription of Information Sources**

The library service provider/LIS professional at this point on a one to one relationship with the information user will prescribe appropriate information sources to satisfy the diagnosed needs. On the other hand as a professional, the library service provider could approach the prescription process from an organisational perspective; that is intending to service the need of a single user but rather the entire information user group, the individual user needs to be diagnosed belongs to. The prescription is used to create an organisation of information sources customised in its design, collection and services to fit the characteristics behaviours and idiosyncrasies of that specific user group. The library service provider from this point moves to the implementation of the agreed prescription to meet the information need of the user.

**Implementation**

The implementation is the organisation and application of the information sources prescribed by the user-centred service provided. At the individual level, the implementation brings the clientele/information user and the needed information sources together. This requires that the service provider/LIS professionals know the various information sources and services that are available within the system as well as elsewhere. The advancement of information technology, interlibrary collaboration across distance and geographical boundaries is made possible by the user-centred library service provider. In this professional phase, the librarian must determine the users' preference of delivery which the later is comfortable with and best satisfies the clientele's information need. Thus, the library service provider must address some important issues at this level to package and deliver the needed information sources to the clientele satisfactorily in the present-day twenty-first-century knowledge societies.

**Important Issues in the Implementation of User-Centred Library Services of the Twenty-First Century Knowledge Societies.**

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the picture of library service providers or Librarianship has rapidly changed under the influence of advances in the computer and communication fields. The paper collections have given place to networked, computer resident, user searchable collection like bibliographic databases, Online Public Access Catalogues (OPAC) obliterating the need for information users to visit the library building. With the digitalisation of an ever-increasing number of collections and advances made in computer/ communication hardware and software, seamless access to digitised information located in geographically diverse locations has become a reality. The walls of the library are thus pulled down and a "Virtual Library" in Cyber Space came into existence.

The Virtual Library brought with it varieties in the form of digitalising not only printed materials but also pictures, maps, scenarios, paintings and sounds, presenting them in a theatre-like environment. This development has a far-reaching implication on the information providers to user-centred approach to library services in the twenty-first century knowledge societies. For librarians/LIS professionals who have been information providers centuries ago, the digitalisation of the ever-increasing number of collections and advances in the use of networked computer systems linked to the cyberspace, now allow them to use modern tools for information retrieval. These tools provide quicker, more complete and more sophisticated service to information users. Databases and reference sources can now be queried via the internet and World Wide Web (www). Besides, remote library catalogues are available on the desktop; newsgroup and mailing lists provide the opportunity to discuss mutual concerns quickly. Electronic mails allow librarians to find out and contact those who might help solve the problems. Perhaps no innovation has impacted the library profession to such a great extent as the internet.

Hence, the need to consider other important issues the bother on user satisfaction is crucial for libraries to be relevant as information service centres in the twenty-first century knowledge societies. These issues according to Gupta, Dinesh, K, and Jain, S. L. (1996) include:

1. A novel approach in information service delivery to library patrons.
2. Everyone should serve library information users in user-centred services.
3. Meeting individual user's need efficiently.
4. Customisation of clientele's need.
5. Information users seek benefits, not products.
6. Interaction between the library service provider and users.
7. Helping library information users.
8. Staying close to library information users.

**Novel Approach in Information Service Delivery to Library Patrons.** The role of the library and library information system professionals has changed from the posture of passive to the proactive agency. This is so in information explosion age when library service providers must make contact with their target base. This implies that library staff, irrespective of their status, adopt the Radical

Referencing (RR) approach and take to the street if the need arises to sell information that is crucial to their target population in the twenty-first-century knowledge society. The RR approach is effectively implemented with the aid of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Thus, LIS professionals through the network can communicate with their target audience via the internet to deliver satisfactorily information sources needed by information users. Every library staff is expected to use the user-centred approach to serve information users.

**Everyone Should Serve Library Information User in User-Centred Services.** The library staff could be categorised into two according to Wiersema, F. (1997); support personnel (technical staff) and contact personnel (frontline staff). The library user seldom sees the support staff. The contact staff is the interface between library services and information users. Both categories of library staff are responsible for the service quality of user-centred library services. The library clientele like other services customers in organisations expects the value to be gained from library services as well as recognition, attention and appreciation for their individual needs and clear desire of self-expression. Therefore, in user-centred library services, the clientele is everyone's responsibility in the twenty-first-century knowledge society. Learning from the service strategies of the commercial organisation several libraries are now concentrating and developing customer-oriented strategies. The focus of such customer-orientated strategies is on distinctive competencies, value delivery, customer-defined quality, relationship management, continuous improvement and customer focus organisational culture to efficiently meet individual user needs.

**Meeting Individual User's Need Efficiently.** One major problem libraries face today, is the clientele's expectation in terms of service delivery by way of response from library staff. User's focussed activity suggests that the user should be treated as an individual amid a large number of library user at a time. The LIS professional in the implementation phase of the user-centred services responds appropriately to each individually expressed needs, to meet the clientele's information needs efficiently and quickly in this age of information explosion (Pinder, C. and Melling, M. 1996).

**Customisation of Cslientele's Need.** The fact is that all service strategies today is going into customisation. Customisation implies getting clienteles to teach the librarian/LIS professionals what they want, remember it and give it back to them as specific individual packages (Peppers, D. 1995). Librarians, therefore, are involved in a high degree of customisation. Quite often, the degree of customisation is a measure of service quality or trust agreement tailored to meet the clientele's specific needs. Every creation and delivery of library and information services involves the participation of clienteles to a great extent. For the librarian, every service activity is taken as an opportunity to service clientele in an improved way, as it is easier to satisfy a person already in the library than to source for new clientele (Gupta, D. k. 2000). Hence, the need for the implementation of user-centred library services through customisation of users need cannot be overemphasised in the twenty-first-century knowledge societies if librarians will continue to remain relevant in the present-day information explosion age.

**Information Users Seek Benefits Not Products.** The library service providers in the twenty-first-century knowledge societies must always take into cognisance the benefit library users are to derive from patronage when implementing/packing the prescribed information sources for the diagnosed user need. This is important because library information users are mainly interested in the basket of benefits or utilities one gets while consuming library services. Wiersema, F. (1997) asserts that the benefits users seek for in library services are; ready and convenient access to information, a good stock of recent information sources for a loan, lively and engaging environment among others. These make user-centred library services offer to attract more patronage from clienteles in the twenty-first-century knowledge societies.

**Interaction between Library Service Provider and Users.** The contact between the librarian and library users is the heart of the service interaction. It is ultimately the person to person contact that will make or mar the relationship between the clientele and the librarian. Face to face contact offers the best way to exchange information, solve problems and establish a long term relationship. Therefore, librarians of the age employing the user-centred approach in the implementation, take interpersonal

effectively (Coote, H. 1994).

**Helping Library Information Users.** The effectiveness of library services provided is measured by the ability of the information user to make good use o f the available information

sources. In the past, most LIS professionals believe simply that putting library resources at the disposal of clientele is sufficient but now, the librarian practising user-centred library services strategy, ensures that the clientele makes the best of the available information sources. This is so because many times library users are reluctant to admit incompetence, inferiority and dependent on others in the accessing and utilisation of library resources in this era of technologically driven information sources. Therefore, the key to effectiveness in library services is for the LIS professionals to anticipate situations in which library users might need help and make sure that they can be helped by library staff to satisfy their information needs through staying close to the library clienteles.

**Staying Close to Library Information Users.**

Probably the most important management fundamentals being ignored in the past in librarianship is staying close to the library users to satisfy their needs and anticipate their wants. In too many libraries, no attention to given users' wishes, likes and preferences in services. Today, LIS professionals would only remain relevant in this era of internet services by staying close to the users. Library users can intimate librarians on how best to provide complete solutions to their needs. Being close to library users according to Wiersema, F (1997) would afford the librarian to become a trainer of end-users on modern Information Retrieval (IR) method.

When the above important issues that bother on user satisfaction are considered in a library user-centred approach services while implementing prescribed sources, the LIS professionals and indeed the library would remain relevant as information service centres in the twenty-first-century knowledge societies.

**Evaluation**

The last element of user-centred services is evaluation. After the library information service has been implemented, the outcome must be assessed in terms of library users' satisfaction. An unsatisfactory resolution of the original library user's need will trigger a repetition of the entire cycle or partial amendment of the sequence. Methods of collecting and analysing data for evaluation range from simple verbal inquiries to sophisticate quantitative and qualitative analyses. This last phase affords the library service providers to retain and sustain the patronage of library users in the present dispensation of information explosion age.

**Conclusion**

The library services rendered by LIS in the twenty-first-century knowledge societies are a far departure from the traditional roles of librarians in the twentieth century. This is as a result of the application of technology in global information management and consequently information explosion via the internet. The technological development and the infusion of ICT in the information retrieval system in library services in the twenty-first century has changed the traditional role of the librarian from acquiring, organising , preserving library resource besides helping readers in locating information needed to assume the new roles such as intermediary, facilitator, end-user trainer , web organiser and designer, researcher, interface designer, knowledge manager/professional and sifter of information resources. The continued relevance of libraries as information resource centres in the present day knowledge societies is therefore dependent on library service providers' adaptation of societies which has recorded wide acceptance by library clienteles. Hence it may be deduced that library service providers, through training and retraining on RR and IR systems, are indispensable because they would have the necessary qualifications to attend to the information needs of library users in the present day knowledge societies.

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