

REAPPRAISAL OF THE CONCEPT OF “INFORMATION AGE” AND ITS IMPACT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN SOCIETY AND LIBRARIES IN NIGERIA

Abubakar Mohammed Bitagi *Ph.D*

Abstract

This article examined communication methods from beginning of mankind to the present. The invention of writing and printing were said to have increased the rate of information transfer among individuals and communities even though the extent was still limited by geographical factors. It was observed that with the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) the existing geographical barriers have been reduced to the barest minimum. While the role of information in human development was highlighted, what constitutes information age and its impact on modern society was also discussed. The article further explained the role of information age in enhancing library resources and services. The problems associated with effective application and utilization of ICT facilities in Nigeria were equally discussed and solutions to such problems, among which include generation of new ideas by the Federal and State Governments on how to get the citizens of the country adequately informed on issues that affect them were proffered.

Key words: Information, information age, development, modern society, libraries,

Introduction

Communication between human beings is believed to have started with the creation of Adam and Eve. However, during the period, communication was only verbal or oral. Reading and writing were completely unknown and were just an exclusive reserve of the distant future. As man existed, he could pass on his knowledge to another person who might remember it. Preservation of knowledge at the time depended to a great extent on human memory. In view of that, any knowledge that remained un-communicated to another person went extinct as soon as the possessor passed on. Because of this, Madu and Adeniran

(2005) noted that for thousands of years, basic skills in agriculture, medicine and other necessary arts remained at a primitive level since there was no means to store the relevant information except in the human memory.

The above is a revelation that, in those days there was none or very little amount of communication or exchange of ideas between different communities, since travelling was also difficult. Mohammed (2008) observed that initially, while crude implements were produced from stones and woods for farming, hunting and fighting wars, the means of transport was mainly by trekking.

With the invention of the art of writing and printing coupled with the technology of machines which started with the production of bicycles, motorcycles and then cars etc, the extent of human movement was vastly enhanced. This also guaranteed the exchange of ideas within and outside one community. The art of writing and printing technology, at a time in human development led to a situation of publication explosion which made it impossible for an individual to know all that was published in his area of specialization due to lack of adequate control methods. Publication explosion was not however, a situation where published materials were actually intended for free access by all and sundry. With the advancement of technology, information creation, processing, storage, retrieval and dissemination for utilization knew no bounds. The extent to which this development has reached and its impact on societal advancement is the subject of this write-up.

Information: What it is

Information is seen from various perspectives. It has as many definitions as the number of persons who attempted to define it independently. It could however, be seen as a means through which human beings communicate so as to express a feeling, share ideas and knowledge. Information when adequately disseminated and utilized assist the user to fill in the gap of what he had known and that which he needs to know in order to improve upon his performance in his area of specialization. Information according to Ifukor (2011) is any message or news either read, viewed or told verbally which adds to our awareness or understanding of some topics, problems or events. Longley and Shaun (1989) were also of the view that information is knowledge that was unknown to the receiver prior to its receipt and that it can only be derived by data that is accurate, timely, relevant and unexpected. It is reasonable, at this juncture to conclude that in whichever way information is defined, the definitions point to the fact that it enhances human knowledge a step higher than his former knowledge and therefore increases man's productivity.

Majana and Sebina (2008) corroborated this view when they opined that information occupy the center stage in all disciplines. According to them, this may partly be due to the fact that almost everything which individuals do or which society engages in generates or is driven by information. In Nigeria for example, the increasing recognition and awareness of the role of information as a necessary aspect of what individuals and corporate organizations needs to progress in their various areas of specialization led to a request for legislation of "freedom of information" by journalists. The passage of this bill is intended to provided a legal right of access to all forms of information from any part of the country with the exemption of a very few which the law might have clarified. The implication of passing this bill is that an avenue regime would have been opened to ensure that all Nigerians gain direct access to even official information, yet, the privacy of assessors would be kept secret. However, it is observable that the lack of courage on the part of government to allow the provisions of the bill, as passed to be adequately implemented shows that despite the fact that the world is in the information age where it is created and utilized freely Nigerians are far removed from that reality. Other factors that hinder the realization of this important objective is the level of literacy, necessary awareness and lack of sustainable infrastructure to support the whole idea.

Information Age

Information age has to do with the various ways, means and speed through which mass of information is transferred from one person to another and or community to community with relative ease throughout the world. That is, the processes involved in transferring information from source of its creation to the ultimate user.

In the olden days, various means to communicate ranging from signs to verbal were used. However, in those days the extent to which information could be spread in terms of promptness and area of coverage was very limited. This was because of lack of required infrastructure to support the dissemination act. This situation continued to change from time to time until the invention of writing and printing technology. With the invention of printing technology in particular, the volume and variety of documents produced became numerous and consequently, the procedures of handling them also became pragmatic. The initial attempt made to ensure that people were brought to the knowledge of what existed or published in their areas of specialization did not achieve the desired goals in its entirety. This was through bibliographic control of all published materials. National, international, general and specific bibliographies

were compiled to meet the demand of users. With this however, the intended audience, that is the entire world populace and the speed of delivery could not be readily achieved as initially intended.

The above period was followed by that of information boom. This period is marked by the invention of computers and other communication facilities all aimed at correcting the previous attempts at reaching the entire world populace with a mass of information in all fields of human endeavors and in various forms within the twinkling of an eye. This period is now known and called "information age".

The concept of information age according to Duff, Graig and McNeil (1996) is variously used to also denote "information society" and "digital age". Information age cannot however, be pinned down to a particular year since it is believed to have been developed gradually with its intensity varying from year to year. That is why the authors quoted above observed that despite the frequent appearance of the phrase "information society" in the literature of an impressive range of subject domains, its origin is not widely understood. These authors however, said that many believe that an immediate precursor was the theory of post-industrialism which was epitomized in the title of Masuda's popular monograph "The information society as post industrial society". The authors further observed that in another influential study by Beniger the origin of the information society in some economic and technological developments of the nineteenth century was traced. After this, they cited Berger to have traced the concept much further back, saluting Democritus (Born Circa 460 BC) as the first philosopher of the computer age. They continued by saying that in the same speculative spirit, one could cite the following words of wisdom from an Egyptian papyrus of even greater antiquity (Circa 1600BC) "put writing in your heart that you may protect yourself from hard labour of any kind and be a magistrate of high repute. The scribe is released from manual tasks; it is he who commands". In conclusion however, the authors were of the view that if one deduces from these various claims, he would be left with two main accounts of the origins of the term information society. Both locate invention in the early 1960s and that both also relate closely to the idea of the information industry. The two ideas were said to have originated from the world's most advanced countries of America and Japan.

In more specific terms however, Lallana and Magret (2007) also argued that:

The information age, also commonly known as the computer age or information era is an idea

that the current age will be characterized by the ability of the individual to transfer information freely and to have instant access to knowledge that would have been difficult or impossible to find previously. The idea is heavily linked to the concept of a digital age or digital revolution and carries the ramifications of a shift from traditional industry that industrial revolution brought through industrialization to economy based around the manipulation of information. The period is generally said to have begun in the later half of the 20th century though the particular date varies. The term was widely used around the late 1980s and early 1990s and to the present.

From the above analysis, information age could therefore be said to be the coming together of computers and other electronic and wireless communication facilities to create, store, retrieve and disseminate desired information momentarily and economically to the entire world users in order to maximize production in various sectors of economy.

Information Age and Development of the Society

The extent to which the information age has contributed to the development of the economy and upliftment of livelihood among human beings cannot be over exaggerated. The following are some of the areas where the society has been impacted by the information age:

- a. Job creation is enhanced through the use of various forms of information and communication technologies. A good percentage of people, for example in Nigeria participate in the technical aspect of the information society which translates to using telephone, television or radio sets and computers. In that respect, as we see around, millions are engaged and employed professionally in the information processing and communication fields as programmers, technicians and analysts. Non professional opportunities include employment of sales men for such products as recharge cards, compact disc (CDs), diskette etc. Yet, more people are employed as trainers or teachers in information handling through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

- b. Information age enhances the volume of business to be carried out in a given period of time from the producer to the ultimate consumer, the communication gap is reduced to the barest minimum.
- c. In the banking sector of the economy, not only the varieties of services are increased but the customer is provided with maximum and effective services. The use of ATM, for example, makes it possible for banks to serve their customers for 24 hours in a day.
- d. The efficiency in government business is also enhanced. The ICTs have facilitated the ease of compiling statistical data of employees and eliminating “ghost workers”. Civil servants, under the present dispensation are electronically paid their emoluments.
- e. Interpersonal gap in communication which hitherto existed between individuals in one community and another has since been bridged. This has contributed in promoting social, cultural and religious activities.
- f. Perhaps more importantly, research information and development have increased and become more reliable nationally and internationally. The results of research and development usually form the basis upon which new products are developed.
- g. Of specific mention is the contribution of information age to the media industry. The information industry is built on a certain quality of information flow. The daily newspapers and weekly magazines have several pages which must be filled each day and week to please the expectant subscriber and carry necessary advertisements which serve as major revenue base. The televisions must be able to fill its allocated time daily etc. With explosion of the internet, the media contents appetite continuous to grow rapidly.

In support of the above views, Imhonopi and Urim (2011) observes that generally, the penetration of internet technology in the society has become pervasive, affecting the way we live, interact and communicate today. The authors continue to observe that even social institutions are redefining the way they operate and function in the society as internet and computer facilities are gradually replacing analog and manual modes of operation.

The above mentioned roles attained in the information age are however, not exhaustive as there are so many others.

Information Age and the Library

The library, unlike the other sectors of the national economy is an institution established to provide basically free service to its users irrespective of the type of library. There is no known record in Nigeria of a library that depends solely on the internally generated revenue. Where such revenue is generated, it is too meager to even sustain the source of such services. The library therefore, depends for its survival on the allocation of funds to the mother organization or other sources of funding through government agencies and donors. However, the library, in whichever organization it is established performs an important supplementary role that makes it possible for that organization to realize its aims and objectives in totality. Academic libraries in universities and other tertiary institutions, for example, are established with a view of providing a mass of supplementary information that supports teaching, learning, research and development activities of such institutions. It therefore, behoves on such libraries to select, acquire, organize, store, retrieve and disseminate all the necessary information resources to benefit the user community.

Initially, the above functions of the library were performed manually which made the entire processes cumbersome, time consuming and sometimes leads to unsatisfactory services. In view of this, the information age has come up with ideas that almost all library services, in order to be maximally provided and utilized must be shared between human beings (librarians and information specialists) and machines such as computers and related electronic or communication gadgets. This calls for adequate equipping of our libraries with modern information and communication technologies. Unfortunately however, Emezie, Nwaohiri and James (2009) notes that library development has not been a top priority of (Nigerian) government. Meanwhile, Mohammed (2000) argued that library resources are provided so that they should provide the basis upon which required information could be provided easily, quickly and accurately to the users. It could therefore, be further argued that the major benefit the library system derives from the information age is the automation of its services that is generally enhanced. Madu (2004) explains that library automation provides interconnectivity. The interconnectivity gives the user the opportunity of accessing information contained in one library by the other irrespective of geographical barriers. It is in the light of this observation that Vickery and Vickery (1992) captured the recent trend of information communication when they opined that electronic technology or information technology, as it has come

to be called, the coming together of computers and telecommunications is likely to have a more profound effect (on information transfer) because, in principle, it overcomes the space barriers for a much larger range of information messages. It is also worth mentioning that the uses of telegraph and telephone have had considerable effect in speeding and simplifying the transfer of short messages. This has facilitated the reference service in libraries to a great extent. Additionally, automated libraries are able to provide their users with any type of needed information from any part of the world without necessarily moving out of the library complex.

Information Age: Problems of Effective Application and Utilization of ICT Facilities in Nigeria

Problems affecting effective application and utilization of information and telecommunication facilities abound in the body of librarianship literature to the extent that what one may have to say will amount to repetition. It is however, necessary to repeat as many times as you have not been heard or if your request has not been granted. It is hopeful that one day, our prayers will be answered.

These problems include:

1. The most important factor affecting effective utilization of ICT facilities in Nigeria is lack of infrastructural facilities. Electricity supply where provided is highly erratic and not dependable. Electricity is needed to operate most of the ICT equipment. It must be put into the records that majority of Nigerians that live in rural areas have no access to power supply which therefore, makes it impossible to access information from the internet as sometimes do their colleagues in cities.
2. The poverty level in Nigeria makes it impossible for every individual to acquire the necessary information equipment. Infact, even radios that use battery cannot be acquired and maintained adequately by majority of the people in rural areas.
3. Lack of funding is another aspect that hinders the provision of necessary information service by constituted authorities, such as libraries in Nigeria. In as much as every library would want to go online, the funds to acquire the necessary facilities are not given. That is why Aziagba and Umeazor in Bitagi (2014) notes that principal among factors militating against library development in Nigeria is funding.

4. The insufficient provision of required training to members of staff of various libraries constitutes a cog in the wheel of progress as far as e-literacy is concerned.
5. Lack of awareness of what ICT facilities can do is another problem that needs to be surmounted. For example, at the advent of GSM in Nigeria when you call or answer calls, villagers think that you are performing magic.
6. Where ICT facilities are available and services utilized, the spare parts to recoup damaged ones to normalcy may be lacking and where some spare parts are found, qualified technicians may not be available. It therefore, amount to an eye sore where you will see some of these equipment are dumped permanently due to lack of repair.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made with the hope that when implemented, the generality of Nigerians will have access to desired information needed to perform their respective duties with due diligence and effectiveness expected of them.

1. The federal, state, local government areas and private organizations should go back to the drawing board to come up with ideas that will make provision and utilization of information through information and communication technology mandatory on all citizens of the country. This requires that the literacy level of Nigerians must be highly improved upon. Without the necessary education the much talked about information age will only minimally benefit the entire country in terms of effective productivity in any given area of specialization.
2. Since information is currently regarded as one of the factors of production in some quarters, the government should endeavour to provide necessary funds to acquire and maintain those equipment, such as the computers and related electronics gadgets, for libraries and information centers in all the nooks and crannies of the country.
3. For majority of Nigerians to benefit from the information age, libraries and information centers must go down to the grassroots. That is to say that the state governments in addition to the federal government's effort

of establishing branches of the national library in all state capitals, should ensure that not only the local government areas but also the wards have one form of information center or the other. These libraries and centers should be equipped with both human and material resources to provide the information needs of the citizens in a variety of forms.

4. Finally, the infrastructural development of not only the cities and towns must be improved to a standard level but also such services must be extended to the rural areas. These services include power supply, schools and roads etc.

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