

NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES AMONG ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Networking form part of the fabric of library activities today. This growing importance is responsible for the progressive change of emphasis in the effort of libraries to meet the dynamic needs of patrons. This paper is thus a discourse on the need for proper networking among academic libraries in Nigeria for effective and efficient service delivery. It examined the critical areas where academic libraries could network, the local content advantage of Nigerian libraries and the strategic factors for successful networking. Challenges facing networking among academic libraries and the prospects were highlighted. Recommendations on the way to enhance the development of networking among academic libraries were also discussed.

Keywords: Academic libraries, Information providers, Local content, Networking, Social networking, Resource sharing

Introduction

Library cooperation, resource sharing and networking are synonymous terms used interchangeably to mean cooperative or collaborative activities of participating libraries in the exchange of information. This became imperative as a result of the exponential growth in information generation, which made the task of collection, organization and retrieval of information very difficult and also the impossibility of any library acquiring all the information resources it needs. This has necessitated libraries to come together to cooperate and share resources. This cooperation and resource sharing is made more effective and efficient through electronic networking.

Networking today has broadened to include the areas of service and content issues since networking has become increasingly the hob of research and learning and the delivery of general services. Today networking is progressively providing the platform for new ways of interactions and information sourcing. Today, futures are been discussed in an environment influenced by networking (Dempsey, 1999). Information providers must rise to take up the challenge to be relevant in the ever changing dynamic information driven world since people and

institutions from different spheres now depend on flows of data which join people and organizations the world over.

Omekwu (2004) stated that information professionals are critical factors in the successful evolution and operation of effective information networks. As network initiators, they must provide strategic vision for the take-off of the network project. As implemented, they ensure functional effectiveness of the network. Klobas (1999) thus sees professionals in networked information resources environment as educators, information managers, and information management consultants, custodians of information and library facilities, information providers and change agents.

Interestingly, information providers from the Western world have embraced this challenge of networked information professionals and sharing of resources. However, in Africa, with particular reference to Nigeria, the response is slow. In Nigeria there are no reliable data regarding how many people use social networking sites, although marketing research indicates that these sites are growing in popularity worldwide (ComScore, 2007). According to Oladina (n.d.) findings generally show that professional in Nigerian workplaces are using networking tools mostly for entertainment purposes. He thus recommended that employers and management of workplaces can channel these employees interest to use these tools to foster collaboration, communication, file sharing, feedback, marketing, public relations and education in their domains depending on what sectors they belong to.

This paper is thus set out to identify strategic areas of networking, the benefits, the problems, and make suggestions on the way forward for information providers in Nigeria.

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The Concept of Networking

Networking has been variously defined. Mannan and Bose (1998) is of the view that networking is information/resource sharing through computers and telecommunication links which transmit information or data from one library to another. Networking is the exchange of information, and experiences for research, professional or social purposes. Networking among information providers can thus be said to be a structured type of cooperation in which different information providers are connected by electronic or other means to promote inter-library loans of materials, in-service training, access to remotely domiciled materials and general sharing of resources.

Social networking sites: These are web-based services that allow individuals to either construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, or articulate

a list of other users with whom they share a common view, and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Critical Areas for Networking among academic libraries in Nigeria

Different authors have listed strategic areas of networking. According to UNESCO (1985) both functions and activities could be networked. The functions that are amenable to networking include Cooperative acquisition; Assignment of specialization in material acquisition; Co-oriented subscription; Exchange of duplicate holding; Cooperative cataloguing; Inter-library loan; Reciprocal borrowing privileges; and Reference and/or referral service. The activities which can also be considered for networking include Union catalogue of books and periodicals; Indexing and abstracting services; List of new arrivals or accessions/acquisitions lists; Bibliography development; Network newsletters; Directories and inventories; Manuals; Translation service; User interest survey; Joint research project; In-service personnel training; Workshop and meetings; Marketing of network services; Photocopying service etc. Other veritable areas for networking are Gift and exchange of library materials; Holding of seminars and international conferences; Sharing of databases; Exchange of staff; Sharing of expertise in answering reference inquiries; and Exchange of new ideas in Information and Communication Technology, etc. Academic libraries in Nigeria can also network among themselves and at the international level in a number of functions and activities for the purpose of resource sharing.

The Local Content Advantage of Academic libraries and Information Providers

The rich Indigenous Knowledge (IK) abundant in academic libraries and information providers across the country can serve as a large source of local collections that can be digitized and shared among information providers in Nigeria. These enormous local resources which have been collected over the years and domiciled in the various host academic libraries and information providers are presently inaccessible to other libraries and information providers in Nigeria and the international community.

In Nigerian university libraries these local contents include: theses and dissertations, documents, leaflets, research reports, seminar papers, inaugural/public lectures, off prints, library and faculty publications on and -about the university especially from the visitors, chancellors, pro-chancellors, vice chancellors, and officers of the universities, university rules and regulations, academic briefs, strategic plans, digest of statistics, students handbooks, publications from staff unions, e.g. Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU), and Association of University Technologists of Nigeria (ASUTON), religious groups and approved student societies/organizations.

Activities from adjoining university's host communities like cultural festivals, annual festivals, right of passages including marriage, burial and birth rites, age grade systems, title taking etc could also be beneficially shared among information providers in a networked environment.

Strategic Factors for Successful Networking

There are some established factors that have to be in place to facilitate an effective and efficient network and networking among academic libraries in Nigeria. The following facilities are prerequisite for successful networking viz.

- i. Appropriate legal framework
- ii. Relevant and clearly defined common objective
- iii. Policies
- iv. Procedures of the network
- v. Adequate staffing of academic libraries
- vi. Adequate funding of academic libraries
- vii. Commitment on the part of stakeholders
- viii. Improved state of information and communication technology
- ix. Institutional support
- x. Effective coordination (Cobblah, 2004)

The above stated factors are either lacking or crossly inadequate where they exist hence there are no properly coordinated networking among academic libraries in Nigeria. There is thus a need for librarians to come together to draw up a clearly defined common objectives, policies, procedures of the network and legal framework. The heads of academic libraries should ensure adequate staffing of libraries. Each university management must give their full support in both financial and staff empowerment. The funding institutions must make provisions for adequate funding and improved state of information and communication technology. All stakeholders must show full commitment for efficient and effective networking.

Mannan and Bose (1999) however are of the view that the under-listed are the major factors affecting networking/resource sharing of libraries.

- i. Availability of computerized databases
- ii. Availability of communication facilities (computer, telephone, satellite communication, reprography, fax, e-mail, etc.)
- iii. Standardization of library organizational practice
- iv. Availability of financial resources
- v. Efficiency in the governance of network
- vi. Basic agreement

In Nigeria, the following factors need also be guaranteed for successful networking among academic libraries.

- i. Adequate library collections
- ii. The right political will by both the funding agencies and heads of libraries
- iii. Genuine understanding among academic librarians i.e. the genuine desire to collaborate.
- iv. Adequate power supply.

Benefit of Networking among Information Providers

Cobblah (2004) stated that networking in library and information system provides a wider access to library collections improves public and technical services and enhances operations by sharing resources, reducing duplications and offering more cost effective services. Dempsey (1999) is of the view that it leads to the emergence of self-archiving on the part of authors, direct article supply on the part of publishers, and subscription agents are stepping into a developing niche as aggregators.

Bender (2003) states that collaboration enhances learning by helping students "understand questions, develop arguments, and share meaning and conclusions among a community of learners. Boulos et al. (2006) find collaborative activity to be "an important component for success in web-based environments". Brown and Bussert (2007) conclude that student learning will increase due to personal engagement, use of preferred learning styles, and application to daily life. Spira et al., (2002) is of the view that through networking devices knowledge and ideas are shared, new partnerships are formed and creative sparks are lit. Governments have also begun to use networking tools for timeliness and exchanges with the public and the initiative might herald an increasingly important approach to government service delivery (e-government, 2004 report).

Networking can generally be said to be of great benefit to all stakeholders involved -the individual, the institution, the society, and the information provider. Dampsey (1999) is of the view that in a shared network space, providers, users, and intermediaries are all in active relation, changing the balance of use. For the individual, networking provides a central archive of a person's work and also increases the dissemination and impact of the individual research work. It also enhances his profile and self esteem. For the Institution, it provides opportunity for sharing experiences, creating sources for library resources, developing strategic alliances, facilitating and promoting collaboration and cooperation so

that libraries can improve and expand access and distribution of information resources, training and development of professional librarians (Cobblah, 2004).

Problems Militating Against Network and Networking among Information Providers in Nigeria

Cobblah (2004) listed the problems hindering networking of African libraries and information providers. In Nigeria however, several other problems exist as listed below

- i. **Inadequate funding:** There is generally inadequate funding of academic libraries across the country. Networking is a capital intensive project that requires the strong support of owner institution for it to be effective and efficient. The poor funding of academic libraries is as a result of the inadequate funding of the parent institutions in Nigeria.
- ii. **Lack of training:** lack of adequate training is another problem affecting networking among academic libraries. Most academic libraries lack the necessary structures and resources to train stakeholders in the art, principles and practices of networking.
- iii. **Poor communication:** Another factor that hinders networking among academic libraries is poor communication network in Nigeria. Members in a network find it difficult to communicate because of ineffective network.
- iv. **Inadequate collections:** The collections of academic libraries in Nigeria are poor compared to their counterparts in the western countries, where different types of networks exist among information providers. For networking to be effective, the participating libraries and must have adequate resources to share with one another.
- v. **Inadequate tools for networking:** Academic libraries are handicapped by the lack of the necessary tools for networking in Nigeria. Tools like the Union Catalogue, Translation Services, etc must be available before effective networking among information providers can be effectively established.
- vi. **Lack of expertise:** Insufficient number of qualified professional staff negatively affects networking among academic libraries in Nigeria. Expertise and dedication to duty are key issues in libraries undertaking networking. The right number and kind of staff is a compulsory requirement.
- vii. **Technical infrastructure:** Another factor hindering networking among academic libraries is the lack of technical infrastructure like telecommunication facilities, electricity, etc.
- viii. **Lack of coordination:** Lack of proper coordination hinders the formation of networks. There are no proper management structures in place to coordinate networking projects among academic libraries in Nigeria.

University libraries are supposed to set up a supervisory committee to monitor/coordinate networking projects amongst them.

- ix. **Lack of understanding:** There is a general lack of understanding and agreement among information providers on the type of network and networking projects (Cobbah, 2004). Academic libraries need to have a common front on issues like choosing networking software and formatting of collections to make for easy networking and other policy issues.
- x. **Lack of legal framework:** The absence of a legal framework is another problem hindering networking among academic libraries in Nigeria
- xi. **Lack of political will:** The lack of the required political will is a major problem hindering academic libraries from networking. For a country like Nigeria that need to urgently develop the information sector for the general development of the country, there is the need for an effective legislation backing the establishment of networks and networking among information providers. This is very necessary since most libraries are owned by the government.

Suggestions on the Way to improve networking among information Providers in Nigeria

i. Creating a database of members

There should be identification and compilation of present and potential information providers in Nigeria. Members should be duly registered and a database of members should be maintained. Information providers should be encouraged to register to boost the membership strength. The Committee of University Librarians of Nigeria (CULNU) is well placed to coordinate this programme.

ii. Creating document on information providers in Nigeria

It is very important to have a strong association of information providers in Nigeria with a well structured and documented write up which will be used as working document for the association. This document should explain the status, rules and regulations, aims and objectives for the association. The document which should be drafted by members of the association can be a source for securing funding for the association's programmes.

iii. Enhancing delivery of document

Information providers in Nigeria should enhance national network resource sharing. Information providers in all the geo-political zones and states levels should also enhance zonal and state networks respectively for resource sharing. An effective and efficient lending service through which members could exchange information resources should be established.

iv. **Promoting electronic networking and sub-networking**

Information providers in Nigeria should create a national mailing list. E-mail contacts should be maintained. Zonal sub-networking should also be encouraged and managed by a committee set up amongst members in the zone. This zonal committee should represent the zone in the national committee. Member institution information providers should be encouraged to create a website for the institution. Website should also be created at the zonal and national levels. The institutional websites should be linked to the zonal websites and the zonal websites connected to the national website. Modalities should be set for the purchase of common library management software. This will ensure a favourable bargain, provide better security and support cost-effective solutions. The issue of maintenance and other problems that may arise from the use of the software will receive a collective effort.

v. **Capacity building**

There is the need for members of information providers in Nigeria to share their ideas and experiences gained from both on the job and workshops, seminars and conferences. Both the national and zonal associations can organize workshops and conferences to enable members rub minds. Members should be encouraged to participate in international workshops, seminars and conferences to gain additional knowledge on challenges and developments on information providers in other countries and continents.

vi. **Database acquisition**

There has to be cooperation in the acquisition of databases. Information providers in Nigeria should unite in this area so as to obtain favourable acquisition and maintenance agreement. Sharing activities like this allows scale economies to be realized.

vii. **Adequate publicity**

The programmes of information providers association in Nigeria have to be widely publicized in the country and beyond. This will help to attract greater participant and partnership from within and outside the country.

viii. **Creating a coordinating committee**

Each participating institution need the support of other institutions to meet its own peculiar need, thus there is the need for a coordinating committee which will work out modalities for effective coordination and pursue it vigorously to ensure adherence and efficiency.

ix. **Adequate government and institutional support**

Government and parent institutions have to support information providers adequately to enable them fulfill their very important role. These supports may come in the form of grants to automate and digitize academic libraries.

x. **Donor support**

There is the need for donor agencies to support information providers in Nigeria. To gain this support, information providers need to have a common front,

organize relevant national programmes, streamline their activities and ensure proper accountability.

Conclusion

Operating in a shared environment with a range of other organizations offers points of contact, comparison, collaboration, competition and self improvement. Networking thus presents a platform to offer the user competitive services that places the position of information providers very invaluable. As the information seeking behaviour of the user continues to change, Nigerian academic libraries must remain dynamic to the needs of their patrons. Academic libraries have selected, acquired, organized and disseminated information for all aspects of human endeavour for the benefit of their present and future patrons. They have preserved historical records, tradition and culture and supported individual and groups to achieve their aims and shape their future.

Today there is a new perception in the demand of users to meeting challenging environmental and societal requirements. This demand has necessitated a paradigm shift in the way and method academic libraries meet their needs. Academic libraries are now developing their roles across shared network spaces and physical places. Technology is dynamic and since we now live in a networked space, libraries must seize the challenge and be relevant within it. If Nigerian academic libraries have to provide current and effective services - with the demand of the time - within this space, to maintain their legacy, they must build rich interconnected services, based on emerging content infrastructure.

This paper thus highlights the need for a strong national and zonal networking amongst academic libraries. Though challenges exist, the benefits accruable from it make it a must application for the future of the information profession. It is hoped that the suggestions adduced here for implementation of a successful networking if applied will help academic libraries in Nigeria to remain relevant in meeting the ever dynamic needs of users.

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