

CHANGING ROLE OF LIBRARY PARA-PROFESSIONALS IN CATALOGUING: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Augustine., M. Iheaturu, Ngozi Chima-James & Ifeoma S. Njoku

University Library, Federal University of Technology, Owerri.

ABSTRACT

Librarians are today, changing their work pattern and role in response to the introduction of computers and their related technologies- Information and Communications Technology (ICT) into libraries. Para-professionals in cataloguing are no exception as their role is equally changing in line with demands of the new information environment tagged Information and Communications Technology (ICT). The objective of the paper is therefore to bring into focus the way and manner para-professionals and, in fact, librarians in cataloguing are changing their work patterns in order to remain relevant in the new information environment of which the computer and related technologies constitute the work tool.

INTRODUCTION

Libraries are, today, transforming into modern settings. Librarians are, in turn, changing their work pattern and roles in response to the introduction of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) into libraries. Para-professional librarians in cataloguing are no exception as their role is equally changing in line with the demands of the new information environment, otherwise, tagged ICT, for which the computer is its driving force and which, by concept, is the type of technology, that today, links the computer to the global telecommunications network to make it possible for users to acquire, process, compare, store and disseminate oral, printed and pictorial information. In effect and as Ormes and Dempsey (1997) argue, ICT embraces all the technologies that enable the handling of information facilitates different forms of communication between man and electronic systems and among diverse electronic systems such as radio, cellular phones, computer networks and satellite systems. This type of environment is new and completely different from traditional setting and, as such, is bound to bring about a change in patterns of service and role of para-professional cataloguers who by qualification, are holders of diploma certificate in library and related studies and who in traditional libraries, focused attention on preliminary and/or copy cataloguing, card production and filling, catalogue maintenance, book labeling and finishing. Their role in some libraries extended, even, to original cataloguing and keeping of cataloguing statistics. In effect, their role, in most cases, depended on staffing conditions prevalent in a particular library at any given time.

For the execution of these functions, the para—professional cataloguer employed manual tools as basic instrument. ICT has changed the way these functions are performed.

ICT As A New Work Environment for the Cataloguer

Computers and their related technologies constitute the driving force behind the emergence of the new information environment-an environment that has manifested in libraries

transforming, and use inter-changeably as: modern libraries, computerized libraries, automated libraries, digital libraries, virtual libraries, paperless libraries, libraries-without wall et cetera to depict the new work environment under which transformed libraries, now function. Propelling the development is that computers and their related technologies are machines and packages electronically driven to make work processes easy, fast and efficient unlike use of manual tools that governed work in traditional libraries. This is not the case with ICT as computing, with its inherent potentials for speed and accuracy, efficiency and consistency in data handling, has swept away the exclusivity and inconsistency of traditional catalogues in preference of networks, databases and on-line services- to project the new information environment in which machine-readable cataloguers have taken over the position of card catalogues for easy access electronically. Besides, on-line and database providers have emerged to provide added vigor and strength to the new environment for which their service products include: Compact Disk-Read Only Memory (CD-ROM) and On-line Public Access Catalogue (OPAC). Of these developments, Internet has taken formidable position as the greatest resource ever available to libraries and man in general. Also, many publishers now master their publications in electronic formats-giving rise to CD-ROMs, e-books and e-journals, in fact, to an extent that major bibliographies, indexes and abstracts including key library processing tools like Library of Congress(LC) Subject Headings and Schedules are, today, in two forms-print and electronic. In the main, ICT development is both evolutionary and revolutionary. Potentials of these technologies have proved very attractive and beneficial to the extent that man business and industrial concerns, and corporate institutions, today, employ these technologies in their work processes. Schools colleges, universities and research institutes are not left out as they also use the new technologies in the process of teaching, learning and research. In other words, cost benefits inherent in the new technologies have been a major excitement and attraction making for imminent change from traditional to modern order of work in most areas of human activities. As part of the larger society, libraries and librarians are equally excited and attracted more so, as they are traditionally known to be custodians of information and for them to remain relevant in the new information environment they are equally toeing the line of change. Para-professionals in cataloguing appear to be embracing the change even more than other complementary library staff.

Para-Professional Cataloguers in the Context of ICT Environment

From the foregoing, ICT environment is sophisticated and, by itself, has compelling demand for a change without which a staff falls out of relevance. The compelling force is not farfetched as its operating tools and resources are electronic in nature and not manual tools and print materials of traditional libraries. Thus, with ICT, librarians in general and para-professional cataloguers in particular are now toeing the path of change; cataloguers now handle all of the copy cataloguing and, often, original cataloguing as well. On this development. Johnson (1996) observes that between twenty to twenty five years ago, nearly all cataloguing including copy cataloguing was handled by para-professional librarians but automation, according to him, has helped para-professional rise in position even to supervisory levels. Commenting further, he views that para-professional staff is stretched as they try to meet increasing users' demands to keep up with technological advances and to be

professionally active. The new technologies have been the main instrument responsible for the shift particularly in the core areas of professional activities such as cataloguing tasks which, in most cases, are now undertaken by para-professional staff. The reason remains that the new technologies have brought about new ways of performing task fast and error free including, also, grave concern to libraries and librarians with regard to how to measure up and keep track of emerging developments and potentials they offer. Efforts in the direction have, infact, brought about notable changes in patterns of service vis-à-vis functions para-professionals in cataloguing now perform. Evidence of the change can be seen from a study on: cataloguers in academic libraries: their evolving and expanding roles by Buttler and Garcha(1998) and which aimed at finding out how the job of cataloguers in academic libraries have changed over a period of ten years. The study identified 67 traditional and emerging activities in which academic library cataloguers are involved and list them to include: the change from print to electronic formats, increasing involvement with specialized items, audio-visual materials and digital materials. The study also reveals that professional librarians now use their expertise to edit problematic records, engage in managerial tasks, catalogue and provide authority control of internet resources, do internet training or website design and use Hypertext Mark up Language (HTML).

The role of the cataloguer in digital or, rather, ICT environment, thus, appears enormous infact, more enormous and involving than in traditional libraries. Under the new dispensation the cataloguer uses networks, CD-ROMs, OPAC and Internet facilities et cetera as veritable aids that facilitate his cataloguing tasks as he uses them to verify titles, classify and store materials for retrieval, compile bibliographies and update his catalogues and even, execute information search to help meet users needs. In particular, internet facilities like e-mail, telenet, facsimile and video conferencing, can help him research out: to compare share or exchange information with colleagues and, even, with publishers and friends far and near. Obvious advantage is that catalogues are now electronic in form and maintained not only for the exclusive use of the parent institution as in the case of traditional libraries. The new technologies have even constrained para-professionals in cataloguing to extend their roles to: handling of online reference and instruction, desktop document delivery, use initiated library loan and direct browsing. Another spectacular change relates to learning which occurs when para-professional librarians help users develop information retrieval and evaluation skills in digital or ICT environment. As they do this, they assume greater responsibility for the teaching and learning and even research outcome of their institutions. Paraprofessionals are even researchers when they conduct user studies to assess use needs and expectations or the usability of their digital resources and websites. As they do this, they employ greater variety of methods in their environments. In other words, para-professional librarians in cataloguing or in any other segment of a modern library, exhibit greater responsibility for research methods and skills than in print environment as they now collaborate with a wider range of resources, utilities and people in all sorts of enterprise. The new role extends even to publishing. The role change in this regard manifests when paraprofessional librarians help libraries digitize their collections, host journals that arc born digital and/or assemble students and departmental works on-line. Indeed, the functions being played in this new information age appear, rather, complex and far greater than before. All the same, change has declined

due to integration of some libraries the size of staff has declined due integration of systems and redefinition of functions while others hire staff (experts) to maintain the equipment and software. Educause (2000) has a better account of this in his assertion that overall staff size appears to have been declining slowly over the past five years and, same time, many library systems are hiring more people to maintain the equipment and software. As he further affirmed, libraries are also hiring user interface designers to help develop their websites and researchers to conduct user studies, assess organizational effectiveness and manage library statistics. Clerical positions, as he observed, are being eliminated throughout the library and that new positions are being created and older ones reclassified at higher levels (with higher, salaries) because more sophisticated technical or managerial skills are needed now than in a decade ago. On the basis of the foregoing, therefore, ICT has far reaching implications for education and training for para-professional librarians.

Implications for Education and Training

As already noted, ICT environment is sophisticated unlike traditional library setting. As such, it poses serious education and training demands for staff to be relevant in the system. Invariably, the system calls for personnel with expert knowledge and skill to adequately function in the environment. In this regard, the system demands personnel knowledgeable and skillful in systems operation and management, equipment and software maintenance, programmers and system analysts and website designers. Implicitly, system has to be analysed, programming done, equipment and software evaluated and maintained to ensure proper functioning. For success in this direction, ICT environment demands new orientation in terms of computer education and training in skill and for which, there has been gradual shift from traditional library curriculum to encompass library and information science and/or information technology. The demand has been pursued through discernible strategies that are now in place in many libraries, library schools and library associations. In the circumstance, library schools are revising their curriculum to include courses in library automation; systems development; maintenance and networking to enable their graduates acquire desirable knowledge and skill. On-the-job training and retaining of staff is another strategy modern libraries have adopted to meet the demands for greater familiarity and capability on part of staff to use the system in his/her library. The training and retaining programme is not restricted to serving staff only but is extended to incoming staff whether or not the new staff possess appropriate qualification in library and information science/technology related course.

Conferences, seminars and workshops have equally become veritable avenues available to help para-professional librarians to interact, compare and share experiences, brush and, even, widen their knowledge and skill to face challenges being posed by the new technologies. It is for this purpose that such international library associations like International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), and their national affiliates like Nigerian Library Association (NLA) have, for over one decade, focused the themes of most of their conferences, seminars and workshops on computer related technologies and ICT. Branch or chapters of the associations have also followed suit as well as individual libraries- their main concern being to help staff adjust properly in the new environment. Besides, some institutions and

organizations, today, mount study fellowship and exchange programmes to help staff carry out advanced studies and researches in the area. Some of these institutions and organizations even support students on their programme with scholarship and other incentives. This notwithstanding, the education and training demands are not a simple one as the programme touches on both trainees and trainers alike. Hovde and Hovde (2002) provide an account of what the programme requires as, according to them, education and training of library employees to use the new technologies is an ever evolving task that needs to be performed by people who understand the technology, information literacy, effective training practices and working within organizational cultures. In effect, in order to impact meaningful training on library staff as trainees, trainers on their own part need to have wide exposure and skill expertise. Unfortunately, this has not been the case as the technology is a recent development. In fact, Balas (2000) observes that technology training of academic library employees has received little attention recently relative to the amount of advice given for teaching academic patrons how to use library technology well, and goes on to caution that if employees who have frequent contact with patrons are not well trained in using the technology themselves, they may be hesitant about teaching patrons who have variety of technology-driven needs. More so, for education and training of para-professionals in cataloguing to be effective, as he argues, trainers need to:

- ❖ Understand the structure and know the uses of technology.
- ❖ Know their trainees and be familiar with principles of effective training, and
- ❖ Understand information technology well enough to train others in its use.

ICT thus poses double-barreled demand for knowledge and skill expertise on both trainees and trainers. Inherently, this requires measures to help determine effectiveness of the education and training on both sides (trainees and trainers).

CONCLUSION

The introduction of computers and their related technologies is transforming traditional libraries into modern settings and resulting in changes in work patterns and role of library staff particularly the para-professionals in cataloguing. Availability and use of electronically-driven machines (computers) and library software package: MARC, OPAC, CD-ROM, and internet facilities constitute its major driving force and attraction for change. Because of these, library staff particularly para-professionals in cataloguing are saddled with far greater roles than they performed over a decade ago. To survive, therefore, Para-professional cataloguers and, in fact, other library staff should work hard to embrace the education and training demands and challenges the new information environment poses.

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