Redefining Public Libraries in The Digital Age in Nigeria: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The digital era has transformed how individuals' access and engage with information, posing both challenges and opportunities for public libraries. In Kano State, Nigeria, libraries face issues such as inadequate funding, limited access to digital resources, outdated collections and a lack of skilled personnel. These challenges hinder their ability to meet users' evolving needs and maintain relevance. However, the digital age also offers libraries new avenues for growth, including digital and e-learning services, strategic partnerships, smart library technologies, and outreach programs. By embracing technological advancements, fostering community engagement and advocating for sustainable funding, libraries can redefine their roles as dynamic centers of lifelong learning, knowledge dissemination and community development. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing public libraries in Kano State, highlighting strategies for sustaining public library relevance in a rapidly changing information landscape. The study underscores the importance of innovative services, digital transformation and collaboration to ensure public libraries continue to serve as vital knowledge hubs in the 21st century.

Keywords: Digital Transformation, Library Challenges, Library Opportunities Lifelong Learning, Public Libraries,

Introduction

The digital era has revolutionised access to information, transforming the way individuals seek knowledge and learn. As technology advances, the relevance of public libraries is often questioned. However, public libraries remain indispensable pillars of lifelong learning, offering diverse resources and services that go beyond digital convenience. According to Aina (2014) public libraries in Nigeria play a critical role in supporting education and community development by providing access to information resources that empower citizens. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2017) further highlights that public libraries are central to lifelong learning, equipping individuals with skills for a rapidly changing world.

Despite this critical role, public libraries face significant challenges in the digital age. Many public libraries in developing countries, including Nigeria, struggle with inadequate funding, outdated collections and limited access to digital resources. Additionally, public perceptions often undermine their relevance in the face of Internet access. On the other hand, technological advancements present new opportunities for public libraries to redefine their roles, adapt to user needs and thrive as centers of innovation and learning. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the evolving role of public libraries, the challenges they face, and the strategies needed to ensure their relevance in the digital era.

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The Evolving Role of Public Libraries in the Digital Age

Public libraries have transitioned from traditional book-lending institutions to dynamic centers of knowledge creation, lifelong learning and community development. In the 21st century, public libraries are expected to provide more than books; they serve as hubs for digital literacy, research, innovation and cultural preservation. As supported by Johnson (2016) modern public libraries foster intellectual freedom and equitable access to information through e-resources, online databases and digital archives.

Public libraries in advanced countries have leveraged digital transformation to remain relevant. For instance, the British Library's "Living Knowledge" strategy focuses on connecting users worldwide through digital services, ensuring remote access to vast collections. Similarly, the New York Public Library's Digital Collections offer free access to over 900,000 items, including historical maps and multimedia resources (NYPL, 2021). In Nigeria, public libraries are increasingly integrating e-learning tools and digital literacy programs to meet users' evolving needs, though challenges remain (Aina, 2014).

Challenges Facing Public Libraries in the Digital Era

Public libraries faced with a range of challenges, particularly in developing nations. Key issues include declining patronage, inadequate funding, outdated collections and limited access to technology. According to Aina (2014) many Nigerian public libraries struggle to meet users' needs due to underfunding, lack of infrastructure and insufficient digital resources. In addition, some members of the public perceive public libraries as obsolete in a digital-first world (IFLA, 2017).

Staff training and capacity building are also major concerns. The lack of skilled personnel to manage digital services limits the ability of public libraries to provide effective information services. As stated by Onyenachi (2018) many public libraries in Africa faced with a skills gap, with staff lacking expertise in modern information services, digital literacy, and electronic resource management.

Here are additional challenges identified by various authors that hinder the adoption of digital services in many public libraries especially in Nigeria:

1. **Inadequate ICT Infrastructure and Internet Connectivity**

   Most public libraries, particularly in developing regions, face significant challenges due to limited or unreliable Internet access, which hinders the adoption of digital services. This issue is particularly severe in rural areas, where Internet connectivity is often slow, unstable or unavailable. As a result, users struggle to access online resources, e-books and digital databases essential for research and learning. For instance, many Nigerian public libraries operate with inadequate bandwidth, making digital services inefficient and frustrating for users (Ejedafiru, 2010). Inadequate and reliable Internet access limits the potential of public libraries to provide seamless access to electronic resources, impeding efforts to promote digital literacy and lifelong learning.

2. **Low Digital Literacy Among Users**

   Many public library users often lack the necessary skills to effectively navigate digital tools, online databases and electronic information resources. This digital illiteracy limits their ability to access, evaluate and use information efficiently. Compounding the issue, many public libraries face challenges in providing consistent and well-funded training programmes. These initiatives, when available, are often sporadic and insufficient, leading to poor user experience and underutilisation of digital resources (Mabawonku, 2018). These

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skills gap significantly hinders the goal of promoting digital literacy and lifelong learning in library communities. (Mabawonku, 2018).

3. **Lack of Skilled Personnel**

Public libraries often face a shortage of trained librarians and IT experts who can effectively manage digital resources, provide digital literacy training and support users in navigating electronic information services. This skills gap limits the ability of public libraries to fully integrate and optimise digital solutions. Additionally, some public library staff members remain resistant to change, preferring traditional services over adopting new technologies and digital tools. This resistance can hinder the digital transformation of public libraries, affecting their relevance and efficiency in the digital age (Aina, 2014).

4. **Policy and Regulatory Issues**

The absence of comprehensive public library policies that address the integration of ICT and digital services remains a significant challenge for public libraries. Without clear policies and guidelines, public libraries struggle to effectively incorporate digital resources, e-learning tools and online services into their offerings. This policy gap often results in inconsistent service delivery and a lack of strategic direction. Moreover, inadequate government support and inconsistent policy frameworks further hinder progress, limiting the ability of public libraries to meet the evolving needs of users. The failure to prioritise library development and digital integration has led to underutilised resources, outdated services and an inability to keep pace with technological advancements. According to Omekwu and Echezona (2008) the absence of strong policy support undermines the potential of public libraries to promote digital literacy,

lifelong learning and community development. Addressing these policy gaps is essential for public libraries to remain relevant in the digital era.

5. **High Cost of Digital Resources and Software Licensing**

Public libraries often struggle to afford expensive subscription fees for e-resources, software and databases, limiting their ability to provide users with comprehensive access to digital information. Many public libraries in developing countries, including Nigeria, operate on constrained budgets, making it difficult to invest in essential digital tools and services. This financial challenge prevents public libraries from subscribing to reputable scholarly databases, electronic journals and other digital resources that are crucial for research and learning. Compounding the issue, open access initiatives are limited, resulting in restricted availability of high-quality resources, especially for users in underserved communities. According to Okon (2017) inadequate funding and the high cost of digital resources undermine the effectiveness of public libraries in providing equitable access to information, hindering their role in promoting lifelong learning and digital literacy. Expanding open access initiatives and increasing funding support are essential to address these challenges.

6. **Digital Divide and Accessibility Challenges**

Socioeconomic factors significantly limit access to digital resources for disadvantaged and rural communities. Many individuals in these areas lack the financial means to afford personal devices, Internet subscriptions and other digital tools necessary for accessing online public library services. Consequently, they are excluded from the benefits of digital information, hindering

efforts to promote equitable access to knowledge. Additionally, people with disabilities face unique challenges when accessing public library services due to the unavailability of assistive technologies, such as screen readers, Braille displays and adaptive software. The lack of inclusive services and resources in many public libraries creates a barrier to information access, preventing persons with disabilities from fully participating in lifelong learning and digital literacy initiatives. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2017) emphasises that public libraries should adopt inclusive practices and invest in assistive technologies to meet the needs of all users, particularly the underserved and marginalised.

7. **Security and Privacy Concerns**

Cybersecurity threats pose a significant risk to public library data and user information, as public libraries increasingly adopt digital services and online resources. Issues such as data breaches, hacking and malware attacks can compromise sensitive user data, including personal details and borrowing histories. Without strong cybersecurity measures, public libraries become vulnerable to cyberattacks that may disrupt services and damage user trust. Additionally, many users are reluctant to utilise digital library services due to concerns over privacy and data security. They fear that their online activities, such as e-book borrowings or research interests may be tracked or misused. Johnson (2016) emphasises that ensuring user privacy and strengthening cybersecurity frameworks are critical for maintaining trust and encouraging wider adoption of digital library resources. Implementing secure authentication methods, encrypting user data and educating patrons on safe digital practices can help public libraries

mitigate these risks and enhance user confidence in online services.

Opportunities for Libraries to Thrive

The digital era presents public libraries with unique opportunities for growth and transformation. By embracing technology, public libraries can offer digital services, online databases, e-books and virtual programmes. Effective partnerships with educational institutions, technology firms and community organisations can further enhance their service delivery.

For example, the British Library has adopted digital transformation to expand access and provide innovative services. Nigerian public libraries can replicate this approach by developing online repositories, providing remote access to collections and promoting digital literacy.

1. **Expansion of Digital and E-learning Services:** As highlighted by IFLA (2017) public libraries have the opportunity to enhance their relevance in the digital era by offering a wide range of digital and e-learning services. This includes providing access to e-books, audiobooks, online courses and other digital resources that cater to diverse user needs. The adoption of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) digital repositories and e-learning platforms enables public libraries to support self-paced and lifelong learning. According to the (IFLA, 2017) integrating digital resources allows public libraries to reach a broader audience, including remote users and deliver tailored services that foster continuous education. For instance, public libraries can create digital skills development programmes, offer virtual research assistance and provide access to scholarly databases and online journals. These digital services empower users to engage in personal and professional growth, bridging knowledge gaps and promoting inclusive access to information. By

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embracing e-learning and digital transformation, public libraries can strengthen their role as indispensable centers for knowledge, research and lifelong learning in the 21st century.

2. **Collaboration with educational institutions:** This presents a valuable opportunity for public libraries to enhance their services and strengthen their role in supporting education and research. By forming strategic partnerships with universities, colleges and schools' libraries can gain access to academic databases, research materials and specialised resources. These collaborations can also facilitate the sharing of expertise, joint research projects and inter-library loans, providing users with a broader range of information services. For example, the British Library works closely with educational institutions to offer research support, promote scholarly communication and deliver innovative services that meet the needs of students and researchers (Johnson, 2016). Additionally, Nigerian public libraries can leverage similar partnerships to provide remote access to e-resources, organise educational workshops, and create digital repositories that support lifelong learning. According to Omekwu and Echezona (2008) collaboration with academic institutions can help public libraries stay relevant in the digital era by offering tailored services that meet the educational and research needs of users. This approach not only enhances service delivery but also fosters a culture of learning and knowledge sharing within communities.

3. **Implementation of smart library technologies:** this includes artificial intelligence (AI) cloud computing, and automation, which offers public libraries opportunities to enhance cataloging, retrieval and user services. These technologies streamline operations, provide personalised recommendations and improve access to information. Libraries using smart systems, including RFID, self-checkout kiosks and automated cataloging tools, deliver efficient and user-friendly services (Onyenachi, 2018).

4. **Community Engagement and Outreach Programs:** Public libraries play a crucial role in fostering community development by engaging with diverse user groups and offering tailored outreach programmes. Community engagement initiatives allow public libraries to extend their services beyond physical spaces and reach underserved populations, including rural communities, low-income families and marginalised groups. According to IFLA (2017) public libraries that implement strong outreach programs contribute to social inclusion, literacy development, and lifelong learning.

One effective approach is organising literacy workshops, digital skills training and reading programmes targeted at different age groups. For instance, public libraries in Kenya have successfully launched ICT training programmes that empower community members with essential digital skills (Okon, 2017). Similarly, mobile library services and book donation drives help bridge the knowledge gap in rural areas where access to information is limited.

Public libraries can also collaborate with local organisations, schools and government agencies to host educational seminars, cultural events and career development programmes. Onyenachi (2018) highlights that such collaborations enhance public library visibility and strengthen community ties, making public libraries indispensable hubs of learning and empowerment. By actively engaging with their communities, public libraries can remain relevant and continue to serve as valuable centers for knowledge dissemination and social development.

5. **Government and Private Sector Funding Initiatives:** Sustainable funding is critical for public libraries to effectively

meet the evolving needs of users and remain relevant in the digital era. Government support and private sector partnerships can provide the financial backing needed to enhance public library services, modernise infrastructure and integrate digital resources. According to Omekwu and Echezona (2008) adequate funding is essential for public libraries to implement ICT services, train staff and offer high-quality information services.

Government funding can be directed towards upgrading public library facilities, purchasing digital resources and supporting community outreach programmes. For example, national library policies that prioritise funding for digital services and e-learning initiatives can transform public libraries into modern information hubs. On the other hand, private sector partnerships offer opportunities for corporate sponsorships, grants and collaborations that expand public library resources. Companies can invest in public libraries through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives by providing financial support, donating equipment or sponsoring educational programs.
Successful examples include partnerships between public libraries and tech companies to deliver digital literacy training and offer access to digital tools. Okon (2017) notes that sustained advocacy for increased funding from government and private entities can help public libraries overcome financial constraints and effectively serve their communities. By securing diverse funding sources, public libraries can strengthen their capacity to support lifelong learning and community development.

Strategies for Sustaining Library Relevance

To remain relevant, public libraries should innovate continuously. This requires investments in digital resources, staff training, outreach programmes and marketing. Awareness

campaigns can help reshape public perceptions about public libraries, highlighting their value as digital learning hubs. As noted by Okon (2017) sustained advocacy for government support and policy frameworks is crucial for the long-term survival of public libraries.

To ensure public libraries remain relevant in the digital age, a multifaceted approach is essential. Public libraries should adapt to changing user expectations by embracing digital transformation, enhancing service delivery and strengthening community engagement. According to Johnson (2016) public libraries that leverage technology to deliver innovative and user-centered services are more likely to thrive.

1. **Embrace Digital Transformation:**

    Public libraries should invest in digital resources such as e-books, online databases and multimedia content to cater to users' evolving needs. Developing digital repositories and providing remote access to digital resources can significantly enhance information access. The New York Public Library's Digital Collections, which offer access to over 900,000 items, is a successful example of digital transformation (NYPL, 2021).

2. **Strengthening Community Engagement and Outreach:**

    Public libraries can organise workshops, reading programs, digital literacy training and community events to engage users of all ages. Effective outreach programs ensure public libraries remain valuable community hubs, promoting lifelong learning and social inclusion. For example, public libraries in Kenya run ICT training programs that empower local communities (Okon, 2017).

3. **Develop Strategic Partnerships:**

    Collaborating with educational institutions, government agencies and private organisations can enhance

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resource sharing and service delivery. Such partnerships enable public libraries to access specialised resources, secure funding and offer tailored services. The British Library's collaboration with educational institutions provides research support and enhances public library visibility (Johnson, 2016).

4. **Advocate for Policy Support and Funding:**

Sustained advocacy for government support, policy frameworks and funding are crucial for public library sustainability. Public libraries should engage policymakers and stakeholders to prioritise funding for ICT, digital resources and capacity building. According to Omekwu and Echezona (2008) supportive policies enable public libraries to thrive in the digital era.

5. **Continuous Staff Development:**

Public libraries should prioritise staff training in digital literacy, ICT skills and emerging technologies to deliver quality services. Professional development programmes and workshops can help library staff stay updated on technological advancements. Onyenachi (2018) emphasises that skilled personnel are vital for managing digital resources and providing effective information services.

6. **Leverage Smart Public Library Technologies:**

Implementing artificial intelligence (AI), automation and cloud computing can streamline operations, enhance cataloging and offer personalised services. Public libraries using RFID, self-checkout kiosks and digital management tools provide efficient and user-friendly services (Onyenachi, 2018).

7. **Rebrand Public Library Services and Promote Awareness:**

Public libraries should rebrand themselves as information hubs offering digital services and lifelong learning opportunities. Marketing campaigns, social media engagement and targeted outreach can reshape public perceptions and increase patronage. Okon (2017) highlights that raising awareness of public library services is crucial for sustained relevance.

By adopting these strategies, public libraries can thrive as dynamic centers of knowledge, lifelong learning and community engagement. Adapting to technological advancements and meeting user expectations will ensure public libraries remain invaluable assets in the digital age.

Conclusion

Public Libraries should adapt to technological changes and meet the demands of modern users. By embracing innovation, redefining services and engaging communities, public libraries can remain vital in the digital era. A commitment to lifelong learning, digital empowerment and community engagement is essential for libraries to thrive.

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