

**PROVIDING CUTTING EDGE VIRTUAL LAW LIBRARY SERVICES IN THE NIGERIAN
LAW SCHOOL: CHALLENGES POSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

OGUNSAKIN ADESUGBA JOSHUA
PRINCIPAL LIBRARIAN, NIGERIAN LAW SCHOOL, LAGOS CAMPUS
adesugbaogunsakin@yahoo.com

&

DODO, MARTINS
LIBRARIAN 1, NIGERIAN LAW SCHOOL, LAGOS CAMPUS
Martinsdodo133@yahoo.com

Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected every sector of the world's economy. The education sector was completely shut down to protect students and staff of the various educational institutions from being infected. Covid-19 pandemic did not just exposed Nigeria's inadequacies in the health sector alone, but also the education sector and its services. The global pandemic has forced the system to fashion out ways through which information resources can be accessed and distributed to the academic community. In a bid to achieve this, some states in Nigeria through the ministry of education have been using the radio, television, and some online resources to engage the students.

Libraries around the world have been working assiduously to provide access to collections and services remotely, often investing time and effort in updating websites and computer systems in order to deal with demand. While many libraries already had a strong virtual presence, many others have now moved to create one in order to continue serving members of the community while maintaining the social distancing rules.

The term virtual library was coined by Nancy Schiller who defined it in 1992 simply as "Libraries in which computer and telecommunication technologies make a wide range of information resources possible" (Gbadamosi, 2008). A virtual library facilitates access to information resources such as databases, electronic journals, alerting services, electronic reference tools, and quality-vetted e-resources (Gbaje, 2007). These resources will need to be managed by librarians and information professionals who understand the users and their information needs. Virtual law library no doubt will improve teaching, learning and research. This framework is therefore a resource for planning an evaluation of the entire system to support the virtual library development in the Nigerian Law School libraries.

The virtual library initiative in Nigeria

It is on record that the need for universal access to information resources has been the yearning and aspiration of librarians and libraries around the globe. Realizing this, the Nigerian government has been making deliberate efforts through the National Universities Commission (NUC), National Virtual Library initiatives and by formulating and implementing relevant information and communication technology policies to facilitate access to relevant and current information for teaching, learning, research and development (Gbaje, 2007).

The virtual library in its complementary nature aims at boosting the capacity of libraries in meeting the information needs of their varied clientele. This will go a long way in providing access to e-journals, e-books and other resources. Beyond what the traditional libraries can offer, virtual libraries break the barrier of time and location to facilitate sharing of scholarly information for academic excellence, a feat which was practically impossible in the past (Adediran & Unuigboje, 2018).

Moving forward to achieving implementation of virtual library services in Nigeria, Gbaje (2007) penned that the NUC was shouldered with the task of building a National Virtual Library Project that will

enhance access to locally-available resources and international library collections for sharing with university libraries all over Nigeria using digital technology. Other functions of the National Virtual Library Project as cited by NUC are:

- i. to improve the quality of teaching and research in institutions of higher learning in Nigeria through the provision of current books, journals and other library resources;
- ii. to enhance access of academic libraries serving the education community in Nigeria to global library and information resources;
- iii. to enhance scholarship, research and lifelong learning through the establishment of permanent access to shared digital archival collections;
- iv. to provide guidance for academic libraries on applying appropriate technologies used in the production of digital library resources; and
- v. to advance the use and usability of globally distributed, networked information resources.

Beautiful as this initiative is, and the well structured guidelines, much is left to be desired on the level of implementation. Has this project achieved its purpose? Your guess is as good as mine. Nigeria is still not there yet. Is the initiative achievable and sustainable? The answer is “yes”. There is a saying that “where there is a will, there is a way.” Nigeria is rich enough to handle this project.

This initiative which was brought to limelight in early 2002 when telecommunication networks were not vibrant stands a better chance of being achieved now that the country can be proud of a robust telecommunication system.

Virtual library environment

Virtual library environment is a concept that has evolved with the growth in telecommunication and Internet networks. The 'virtual library' emulates a 'real' or [traditional] library, but is understood to be a product of the virtual world of the Internet (Burke, 2002). The library as it is being perceived in many quotas in Nigeria is a place where books are managed. The world has gone beyond that. While maintaining the physical library, virtual library is not an option but a necessity if information must be speedily accessed.

While describing how virtual library started in Fountain University Osogbo, Osun state, Nigeria, Ayo, Bello and Oloyede (2018) observed that the virtual library which started with 29 brand-new computer sets, running of internet cables, 30 cardboard furniture paper tables with chair sets, 3 horsepower of air conditioners, 1 server rack, 3 ceiling fans, 2 printers and 2 scanners, 30 uninterrupted power supply, etc. The space for the virtual library was carved out of the main reading room. The lighting was properly and carefully designed by the works department of the institution. The distribution of internet signals to the virtual library was done at the ICT unit of the university. This describes the environment and what one expects to find there.

There has been tremendous change in the last decades in the library environment. The conventional method of serving users has improved from providing services only when the user visits the library, to ensuring speedy access to information remotely irrespective of one's location as long as there is Internet connection. For those who have built this information architecture over the years found it easy to disseminate information to their users during this covid-19 pandemic.

It is worthy of note however, that virtual environment does not exist in abstraction, people manage the system. Someone must upload the information in the computer system, another checks the validity of the content being uploaded, still someone follows up on subscription to be sure people are logged out, and another person negotiates and follows up with the vendor on renewal of subscription. The people involved in these activities are the librarians and the technologist.

Developing a virtual library

Developing or building a virtual library requires certain building blocks for its take off. It is shaped by the needs of the organization or individual otherwise, it will hang on a misplaced priority. Virtual library is that library that is not in real life, it may be a collection of links, data, which are available on a network and accessible via internet (Verma & Verma, 2014). The Internet is the major facilitator of a virtual library.

Gbaje (2007) observed that the building blocks for a virtual library are its digital collections, which are not just a random assemblage of digital objects or uniform resource locators of free web- based resources (URLs). Building digital collections requires traditional library skills, in addition to information and web technology skills.

The processes for building a virtual library are as follows:

a) **Digitization:**

Digitization is the process of converting information resources that are in hard copy (print) into digital format through the use of appropriate hardware and software. Digitization involves the process of making non-digitally created materials available in digital format. This process started in the early day with the retrospective conversion card catalogues into a machine-readable catalog, or better still, Online Public Access Catalogue. However, as at now, books are being converted into machine-readable format for online access.

Digitization takes the following process; selection of collection/materials; scanning, transcribing, and creating markup and an index, creating metadata, quality control by subject specialists, processing images, populating the appropriate digital asset management software (DAM).

The software that makes this process possible is the digital assets software such as DSpace, Eprints, Fedora, and Greenstone collect, index, and provides queries over a catalog of metadata records that are accessible locally and remotely.

b) **Acquisitions of virtual library resources:**

Acquisition of library resources is a collection development function of the librarian. The content of virtual library resources are the e-products that are selected, purchased and stored for remote access. It involves acquiring and maintaining ownership of electronic resources such as databases, e-books and e-journals by ensuring secured licenses.

When electronic resources are subscribed they are stored on a remote server hosted by the vendor or the supplier who authenticates, and grants access to the users. Upon expiration of subscription, access to the database or the electronic resources is denied until renewal is made.

c) **Collection development policy:**

A policy is an official authoritative statement of rules, judgments, decisions and guidelines that are used to (1) define, describe, interpret and prescribe long-range objectives, intentions, functions and procedures; and (2) guide and regulate activities of a group or organization (The Dictionary of Professional Management, 1997).

For a sustainable virtual library service, guidelines must be formally written by library management which will direct the performance of the following functions as suggested by Peggy (2004);

- Selecting materials for acquisition and access
- Weeding or de-selection
- Storage and preservation
- Writing and revising collection development policies
- Community liaison, engagement and outreach responsibilities
- Managing budgets
- Liaison with other libraries and cooperative collection development
- Soliciting funding to supplement allocated collection development funds

Many times over, the discontinuity of library resources subscription is not unconnected with lack of written collection development policy which binds the librarians and the organization when it comes to issues of subscription. The policy will state clearly the quantity, quality, duration, and the cost of items to be purchased per annum. This will reduce the influence of single selector and personal bias, and then sets the tone for a robust information service.

Content is everything that is included in a collection and is held or managed at the same place. As regards to content, the main aim of the virtual library is to identify, locate, create, organize and provide access to complete documents in any format: electronic and digital texts, computer programs, videos, or any multimedia material (Pérez, 2002).

These documents may be stored locally, in other words, placing them in the institution's own servers and databases, or access to them may be obtained off-site, by connecting to the servers where they are located, whether they are commercial or free-access servers. These includes; electronic books, electronic journals, video and audio recordings, specialized or general databases which can be accessed full text.

Furthermore, there are conference papers, articles, electronic books, audio books, and lecture notes of members of faculty on subjects relating to their specialties that can be harnessed to form the content of the virtual library.

Difference between digital and virtual library

Although both digital and virtual library are often used interchangeably due to the fact that both systems depend on the use of computers for the storage, access, and dissemination of information. However, they differ to some extent.

Digital Library

Computerization of library services led to the digitalization of libraries resources and services. Digital library services are fully automated and all resources are in digital form (Verma and Verma, 2014). Digital library is an assemblage of digital computing, storage and communication machinery together with content and software.

Digital library is realized in two ways:

- 1) **Born digital:** This information are digitally created and stored.
- 2) **Digitalized:** Information is in physical formats (print format), with the help of appropriate hardware and software the information is converted into digital format.

Virtual Library

Virtual library provides access to information resources digitally through a network (LAN or WAN) or any other gateway such as the internet at anytime, anywhere as long as there is network connectivity.

The term virtual library is attracted the interest of users because of the increasing medium called the WWW (World Wide Web). The virtual library is the single most reachable and important source of information in the world, and has proven beyond reasonable doubt that information can be accessed as fast as possible.

A collection of links is also a virtual library, these links are not necessary owned by the virtual library. However, the links are maintained, updated and managed as a normal function of the virtual library.

The concept of virtual library is that any person who has a computer and connection to the library networks can access not only the resources of that library, but also variety of information available through national and international network like the Internet and Intranet without being physically present in the library. Worthy of note is that, digital libraries can exist without a virtual library but virtual libraries cannot exist without digital libraries (Gbaje, 2007).

Advantages of virtual library services

Virtual library services have the following advantages to the Nigerian Law School;

1. The quality of the law library will be enhanced.
2. Staff and students will have access to databases for teaching and research.
3. Provision of current electronic books, journals, alert service, online reference tools, quality selected web resources and other library resources.
4. Virtual library enhance scholarship, research and lifelong learning through the establishment of permanent access to shared virtual collections.

5. Access to information is round the clock. No time boundary as obtained in the traditional library system.
6. It is capable of providing multiple accesses to information resources at the same by many users.
7. Provision of keyword search and retrieval of information just with a click of the mouse.
8. While it creates space in the library, the low cost of maintenance compared to the traditional library system is another advantage.

Challenges of building a virtual library

There are challenges associated with the establishment of virtual library services. Some to the challenges include;

- i. Initial cost is high. The cost of hardware, software, communication networks, database subscription, and other equipment is very high.
- ii. Due to high traffic of multimedia transfer and other document leads to low bandwidth and slow network.
- iii. Preference of some users to read print materials that fixing their eyes on electronic devices may lead to under utilization of the resources.
- iv. Obsolescence of technology where incompatibility of software and hardware stalls the progress of service delivery.

Conclusion

In this 21st Century, virtual library plays a leading role in ensuring speedy access to information resources across the global. The outcome of its lack widens the gap between success and backwardness. With the covid-19 experience, it leaves no one with doubt that the time to invest in information superhighway is now. Digital resources are veritable tools propelling teaching, learning and research in every sector of education. Librarians have a duty of making sure that these resources are properly managed for a smooth flow of information access, retrieval, dissemination and use.

References:

- Adediran, P.O, &Unuigboje B.O. (2018). The Role of Virtual Library in Learning Environment. *Information and Knowledge Management*, Vol.8, No.2.
- Ayo, S., Bello, M.A., & Oloyede, N. (2018). The implementation of virtual library project: The Fountain University experience. *Innovare Journal of Education*, Vol. 6, Issue 1.
- Burke, L. (2002). The future role of librarians in the virtual library environment, *The Australian Library Journal*, 51:1, 31-45, DOI: 10.1080/00049670.2002.10755975.
- Gbadamosi, B.O. (2008). Virtual library development: Concept, prospects, and challenges In Colleges of Education in Nigeria, *Journal of Library and Information Science*, Vol. 4:1, pp. 35-44.
- Gbaje, E.S. (2007). Implementing a National Virtual Library for Higher Institutions in Nigeria, *Library and Information Science Research Electronic Journal* Vol.17, Issue 2.
- Okike, B.F. (2020). Information dissemination in an era of pandemic (COVID-19) : Librarians' role, *Library Hi Tech News*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-Print DOI 10.1108/LHTN-04-2020-0040.
- Pérez, A. (2002). Virtual library, a real library. *Biblioteca Virtual de la UOC*.
- Verma, M.K, and Verma, N.K. (2014). Concept of Hybrid, Digital and Virtual Library: A Professional Approach, *INFOLIB*, Vol. 7, NO. 1-4.