

## **DROWNING IN INFORMATION AND THIRSTING FOR KNOWLEDGE: THE INFORMATION PROFESSIONAL'S DILEMMA**

CLEMENT ENTSUA-MENSAH  
*President, Ghana Library Association*

Mr. Chairman, Immediate Past President of the Ghana Library Association, Distinguished Council Members, Professional Colleagues, Invited Guests and Our friends from the Media Houses, it is indeed an honour and a privilege to address you as the 14<sup>th</sup> President of the Ghana Library Association since the Association was inaugurated in 1962. However, this is the third in the Association's history that a Presidential Inaugural lecture is being delivered since it was instituted in 1993 by Mr. E.S. Asiedu.

Mr. Chairman, being the first president of this august Association to be elected in absentia one expects that I should have felt some sense of elation, or at least pleasure for the honour done me, but that has not been the case. What I have felt since is a heightening sense of responsibility of leading the Association into the next millenium. At a time that one has just changed jobs the pressure on me to handle these two positions and perform creditably to the admiration of my employers and members of the Association is quite immense. But I wish to take this opportunity to assure you that I have accepted the challenge and hope that with your cooperation, the Council which I have the pleasure to lead will not disappoint you.

Mr. Chairman, in our everyday life two complaints that one hears quite often but which directly contradict each other are "We are not receiving enough information" and "too much information is thrown at us". The first complaint is a common saying we hear especially among the business community where access to information is one of the basic pre-requisites for the success of the enterprise. Here, the quality, speed and efficiency of their work suffer due to the lack of relevant information. The same accusation is commonly made against management by workers whenever there is dispute between them. In most cases the workers feel that management hardly pass on relevant information to them.

On the other hand the second complaint which has to do with having too much information to cope with, is a typical expression one hears among top executives especially members of Corporate Boards. It is also offered as a cover-up by some officials who have not read the documents for meetings they are attending. What this means is that people are unable to take in all the information that is meant for them even though rational choice theories of information use assumes that people gather and use information because it contributes to their

decision making efforts. In one situation we are talking about lack of information and in another we are being overloaded with information. This is the paradoxical situation which confronts people whose responsibility it is to provide information and it is this that forms the basis of my lecture today. Consequently, I have chosen as the theme "*Drowning in information and thirsting for knowledge: the Information Professional's dilemma*". The information professionals I am referring to are the librarians, information scientists, information managers, and all those who are responsible for mediating between information sources and end-users.

Mr. Chairman, the situation I have referred to above has been described as paradoxical by *Koniger and Janowitz (1995)*, in that, we cannot solve the problem of not receiving enough information by simply producing "more" information. This will certainly worsen the second problem of too much information being thrown at people. According to them, the problem has come about as a result of the fact that all the information processing methods that we have learnt about are inadequate for the rapid growth in the quantity and the fast changes in the ways of processing information. In this regard, the mass of information that is already available does not get to the people who need it and is therefore rendered useless making it difficult for them to draw any knowledge from it.

The growth in the amount of information has increased for a number of rea-

sons including the general increase in business communication, the present trend in globalisation as well as increased research activities. The result of all these has been that people can no longer develop effective personal strategies for managing information. Therefore, faced with the onslaught of information and several information channels they are unable to develop simple routines to enable them cope.

**Information and Society:** When delivering the 9<sup>th</sup> Institute of Scientific Information (ISI) Lecture in London in September 1995, the lecturer *David Puttman* asked whether it was really true that information constituted the most significant distinguishing characteristic of our time looking at the way we produced, processed, and traded in it. In response to this, I will state that information is the foundation on which modern society is built. It is all powerful, pervasive and increasingly the commodity most sought after, and the tremendous volume at which it is accumulating is a natural consequence of our movement towards an information society. This is a society in which information and data play a central and critical role for the support of virtually all forms of decision-making. What this means is that the use of information is not only central to social development but also to organisational management - nay, even to the growth and well-being of the individual person.

Mr. Chairman, one of life's larger concerns is finding information about anything. The information may be passed on orally, contained in a printed mate-

rial or may be in electronic format and as society becomes more complex and sophisticated the volume and complexity of information in circulation increase accordingly. Information is quite central to our daily lives and we all handle a great deal of it, however, because we do so naturally it does not arouse any curiosity. According to *Cawkell (1986)*, ordinary people's needs for information are primarily about living, and it ranks low as a commodity upon which disposable incomes are spent.

The acquisition of information beyond the needs of daily living has something to do with education, with which also comes increasing curiosity. Education, in the opinion of *Michael Fitzgerald (1997)*, is primarily about acquiring the confidence to learn, to ask questions, to understand, to know, to dream and to realise one's aspirations. It is also the cornerstone for the construction of the global information society. Therefore, to be successful in that society, one needs more education and since libraries constitute an indispensable component in the educational process because they contribute towards the complete training of individuals, their development should be taken quite seriously. They are fine places for everybody to find out about everything and occupy a very important place in the cultural, educational and scientific infrastructure of the country. Libraries serve as gateways to an enlightened world, and find their main focus in the fields of interactive publishing and lifelong learning by providing access to information.

Mr. Chairman, written materials still

constitute the primary source of knowledge. The amounts and types of written information that people acquire, transform and store, reflect both the character of information sources in their respective fields as well as their individual working habits. Thus, books remain both as instrument of reflection and as irreplaceable tools for literacy and education in all countries, rich and poor. According to the Director-General of UNESCO, *Dr. Federico Mayor*, books have been the medium of choice providing an opening on to the imaginative world of others and enabling us to enrich ourselves with their creativity ever since the invention of printing. They are thus a worldwide key to the development of the individual. We read for pleasure, we read for information and in pursuit of knowledge, to improve ourselves, to explore and test ideas, to search and research, to be entertained and amused, and to understand society.

Governments all over the world are increasingly recognizing that a prosperous society in which human dignity is respected can only be created with a highly trained and well-informed population as well as sound educational system and very good libraries.

**Information and Knowledge:** Generally, the term information refers to gathered data that has been put into meaningful and useful context and communicated to a recipient to make a decision. Thus, data becomes information, information becomes knowledge, knowledge, if we are lucky becomes wisdom. Each of these transformations

requires people, and the people require help. Libraries, therefore, play a very crucial role in converting data into information, information into knowledge, and knowledge into wisdom by providing the means to seek a better future, an increasingly more enlightened world where such universal aspirations are reinforced, enhanced and converted into reality. Finally, Mr. Chairman, libraries are one of the building blocks of local information and knowledge infrastructure which is necessary to support the knowledge-based activities. Although knowledge is not always immediately obtainable or applicable, it needs to be gathered, digested, organised and stored for future use. Lack of information leads to a situation where people tend to know very little. As we are all aware, a little learning is a bad thing because there is a basic amount of knowledge less than which it cannot be acted upon. If a recipient of information knows very little and has little ability, he or she can do very little even with the little knowledge. On other hand, if the recipient knows a lot and he or she can deal with complex detail, then from just a small amount of information the one can be able to create something [Broadbent, 1992].

Increasingly, we find that all aspects of our life are influenced by, relate to or even become totally dependent on information. The information value chain transforms data into information and information into knowledge as people develop the concepts, add experience and package the information as it moves along a chain [Skrzeszewski and Cubberley, 1997]. The chain involves

authors, editors, publishers, agents, libraries and users. Each of these plays a unique role in producing and disseminating information even though they may not always be apparent to the everyday information consumer. In this chain, the interface between publishers who organise the whole process of presenting the required information services to users and ensure that maximum added value is given to published information, and information providers who manage the cost-effective use of published information for the benefit of their patrons remain crucial to the effective utilisation of knowledge [Gotze, 1988].

**Information Overload:** Mr Chairman, more and more information is being published every year and this makes it difficult for readers, researchers and users of information to know what has been done, where it has been published as well as its relevance to them. Thus, information overload is not only a pervasive problem for the career professionals today, but also, to all manner of people who use information. The relationship between supply and accessibility of information is unprecedented in terms of significance and scale. Regardless of income or education, many people are overwhelmed by an information overload of political claims, legislation, news and general aggravation. Not only are we overloaded with information, we are also overloaded with the task of choosing the information to make our choices. In effect, there is more information than a person can handle.

Every human being possesses a certain

capacity for processing information by reducing the input to a workable amount through filtering and selecting what is needed. According to *Christopher Burns*, under conditions of information overload the ability to make decisions is lost in a circus of coping mechanisms which resolve themselves in a re-inforcement of pre-conceived notions. Under such circumstances one is said to be suffering from the conditions of analysis paralysis or the disease of paralysis of analysis. An example of this condition was the accident that occurred at the nuclear reactor at Three Mile Island in 1979. The accident was preceded by several years in which information about potential hazards was collected and reported but neither was it organised in a useful manner nor acted on.

According to *Paul Waddington (1997)*, from a study carried out by Reuters in 1996 among the business community in the United Kingdom, many users of information cannot perceive the need for information service on their desk or why information should be managed. They see information as a problem, but see it as something which should be dealt with by others. However, once information overload is seen as a problem, people are motivated to find a solution.

Information as it is found today can easily overwhelm and disable its "users" as a high proportion of it can be useless, meaningless or inaccurate. Users of information, therefore, need to learn how to sort through and assess information, and it is the distinctive role

of libraries to help organise the information that has been produced and to facilitate access to it. Unfortunately, what most information providers have failed to do is to identify the information needs of ordinary people, presumably believing that they do not constitute a market. But access to information and for that matter knowledge has increasingly become a precondition for citizens to be able to function in society, therefore, it is the responsibility of information providers to make knowledge readily available to those who need it.

**Access to Information:** Mr. Chairman, even though the printing technology was used to increase the supply of information considerably, as to whether the surge in supply led to increase in the number of users of information is something that we are not too sure about. Studies have shown that people tend to use the source of information most accessible to them even though it has been realised that it might not provide them with the most complete answer. The operative concept here is the provision of effective access to information and this is judged within the context of the user's ability to satisfy his needs in a relatively short time [*Entsua-Mensah, 1989*]. However, a delay seems to occur between the increase of information on one hand and access to and dissemination on the other hand. It is on the basis of this that the library must transcend its present role as producer and purveyor of knowledge and information by acting as a gateway to a wide range and variety of information resources and services which are in con-

stant flux.

The operations in libraries depend on the availability of information professionals who are more reliable when it comes to determining which information is relevant. In general, people value customized or specialized information service, and this makes mediated information exchanges differ qualitatively from unmediated exchanges. This is the challenge facing information professionals whose responsibilities include making information accessible to users, and taking steps to ensure that there is equity of access to information and to knowledge and learning.

Majority of people are denied access to information because either they cannot afford it or that the information is only available in formats they cannot use since the mechanisms for providing information have been developed and earmarked for the major urban market. Of course, these developments negate the whole concept of universal access which in the opinion of Park, carries an implicit theoretical assumption that the key to the successful realization of information society lies in the adequate provision for the widest public the "access" to information technologies. The question then is how do we provide access to information to our brothers and sisters in the rural areas? It is not all that simple. However, since the library is one of the means for acquiring knowledge and insight for the free exchange of views and ideas, it is my humble submission that we take a serious and critical look at the rural and community libraries as well as the in-

formation centres and re-orient their focus to play the role as information access points to the wider communities. The staff manning these facilities should be well trained to enable them to be quite familiar with information sources and be in the position to teach the people how to make use of the resources.

**Technological Developments:** The written word which has held prime position for centuries as the medium of communicating news, facts and figures, ideas and knowledge is giving way to the multimedia age. Libraries are now facing new challenges, and some of us wonder how we are going to manage to keep storing and cataloguing and making accessible the ever-increasing volumes of print on paper, let alone invest in the storage and delivery of the frighteningly diverse output of information in electronic form. Developments in information and communications technologies are leading us into a major new cycle of growth, a completely different cycle with absolutely no precedent in history. The computer revolution has both helped us to manage the proliferation of recorded information and exacerbated the problem of over-supply [Cronin, 1986].

Now with the digital revolution increasingly becoming global and integrated, the flows of data and information have changed and so have the technologies for handling them, which have also been greatly enhanced. The Internet provides rapid, seamless communication among millions of locations and make finding information relatively easy

[*Entsua-Mensah, 1998*]. Its strength lies in the huge quantity of information available on it, which can be searched for and retrieved without leaving one's desk. Users of information have been told that everything they need is available on the internet and with a click of a mouse they would get whatever they need. How information providers react to this phenomenon will determine whether they are seen as a cutting edge or a charming anachronism, since the endusers may not be familiar with the basic tools for getting information that we take for granted [*Bates, 1997*]. For many endusers, their first few experiences surfing the internet leave them feeling overwhelmed with their information options. They realise they do not have the time to look for the best information. They either settle for the first source they find or decide that although it is interesting it is not worth the time needed to become or stay proficient.

Even though many have questioned the need to build libraries now that developments in information and communications technologies have made it easy for people to be wired to the web, Langenberg argues that as more technology is provided, more people come into the libraries since the technologies are neither replacing collections nor with remote access available, discouraging people from the facilities. Rather, the technologies are serving to encourage individuals to come into the libraries where there is activity of people together accessing and using information, and manipulating and turning that into knowledge. In all these it is the infor-

mation professional who provides the much needed assistance either by understanding the information context and designing content products to deliver the information effectively, or by helping the end-user directly.

**Information Professionals:** In his exhortation to information professionals, the new Secretary General of IFLA, *Ross Shimmon*, admonished that we should take advantage of the growing recognition worldwide of the importance of information and knowledge and the skills necessary for their creative exploitation. As information professionals we must not fall into the trap of assuming that everyone knows how to do this uniquely. We must make sure that libraries support learners in finding information they seek. The profession of librarianship, according to Wood, stands accused, and the critics say that librarians have lost sight of their fundamental *raison d'être* to provide information and knowledge for all, to give equal opportunities and access to all citizens. A classic case arising out of this observation is the fact that the average Ghanaian does not perceive the Public Library as an influential component of the socio-political system. Hence, the notion of an effective public library service assumes the character of a dream. To erase this kind of impression, it is up to us information professionals to publicise our libraries to the general public. This we can do by developing our libraries into outward looking and more proactive resource centres that underpin our knowledge and play more active part in helping to improve accessibility to information.

I will be the first to concede that as professionals we have not articulated the problems facing library development in the country more forcefully to policy-makers. We have to ensure that libraries receive their due recognition and play an active role in shaping the country's future in the next millennium.

**Conclusion:** Inarguably, the technologies of the information society give us a better chance than we have ever had to shape our future in whatever way we want. Available to us as information professionals are technologies that can change the way we work. The emergence of various computer-based technologies of which the internet is one is revolutionising the reach and impact of information. The Internet offers incredible power to provide users with information and data of unprecedented timeless, accuracy, depth and breadth. However, hand-in-hand with the ease of use of the medium goes its abuse since the content is much less regulated or documented because the technology is not yet mature.

Although some individuals and organisations are experiencing an "information overload", information providers are trying to supply still more information in richer, more navigable, multi-media formats. What we need to do is to ensure that the library's fundamental contribution to social well-being and economic prosperity is maintained and indeed extended, and that full use is made of the qualities that libraries have embodied throughout history of being a place for people to meet,

discover and enjoy.

Writing in his New York Times Column which is syndicated on the Internet, Bill Gate stated that libraries are a smart way to subsidise public access to information because the investment benefits a community of people on a completely even-handed basis.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, as information professionals, we need to equip ourselves with the requisite intellectual and professional skills to be able to face the challenges and the opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If we fail to do that then, when the much heralded information society emerges on the other side of the current revolution in communications technology, libraries will either have a significant future or be marginalised. THANK YOU.

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