

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

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Abstract

As a country, a lot of information is generated but not well managed thus making information difficult to obtain. Access is also a problem due to the manual system some libraries generally use. This paper discusses today's emerging issues that affect information access. It explains that the public domain is shrinking because of extended terms of copyright protection, resulting in less content for creators to build upon and less content for the benefit of society. It notes the role librarians need to play to correct the situation. Reference is made to Copyright and Intellectual Property, The Right to Information Bill and Library Automation as issues that affect availability of information. It further states that information overload and pollution are what we expect to experience in the information age and that information literacy is essential for the optimum use of the deluge of information from the Internet. It states that the recently introduced educational reforms should be seen as an opportunity to resolve some of the issues addressed. It then recommends that a National Commission on Libraries be established because issues relating to information and libraries are not restricted to Education alone but cut across other Ministries, Departments and Agencies, such as; Local Government, Communications, Information and District Assemblies. A separate infrastructure is not required as libraries already exist and can be developed to help all citizens function in the information society. The paper concludes with the demand that librarians take charge with the help of the Ghana Library Association and carry out their mandate so that libraries can play a more effective role in the information society.

KEYWORDS: KNOWLEDGE, COPYRIGHT, INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY,
INFORMATION LITERACY

Introduction

Information provision and management are key to development at all levels: international, national, institutional and individual. If the Ghana Library Association (GLA) is to continue to become relevant, then it must be seen to be addressing today's emerging educational, cultural, health and socio economic issues, by playing a leading role in facilitating and creating an effective and efficient information society. The topic for the lecture is in line with the topical issue of the theme of the last congress of the GLA in December 2006 in Accra; "Information for Development." The critical role of libraries was apparent and needed to be given more prominence especially in line with developments taking place today in Ghana as we celebrate 50 years of existence as a nation and 45 years of existence as an Association. The topic is relevant not only nationally but also worldwide. It is especially timely, given the momentum generated by the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) for activities designed to build an Information Society.

The information and knowledge age is in its high gear. Librarians, the oldest in the information profession must take control. The question is how do we do this, when all that is documented about libraries in the country is a litany of woes? This paper discusses today's emerging issues that affect information access and how librarians are to take the lead carrying all members and stakeholders working together to make the information society a reality for all. But first let us be clear on the meaning of the key words in this lecture. They are: **Information, Knowledge, Information Society.**

What is Information? What is Knowledge?

According to Jain & Nfila (2006), information is refined data and knowledge is refined information. In other words, knowledge is derived from information and hence the popular saying that "Information is knowledge and knowledge is power and those who have it will always be ahead of those who do not have it." To this statement, normally our profession responds that information can only be provided when it exists but when information has not been properly packaged and stored, it cannot be made available. Libraries exist to do exactly that and also to ensure equity of access to information.

The Information Society

The Information Society is a term denoting the highest possible level of societal development in which the most important and vital value is information. Even though society began as agrarian and later developed into the industrial society, information has always been important and has contributed significantly to the advancement of society. The difference now is that it is being acknowledged as the most important indicator of development. Adika's (2006) illustration of Finland's rapid elevation to the highest level is an example of such a development using information.

Azubuike (2005) reiterates The IBM Community Development Foundation's definition of the information society as "a society characterized by a high level of information intensity in the everyday life of most citizens, in most organizations and workplaces; by the use of common or compatible technology for a wide range of personal, social, educational and business activities and by the ability to transmit, receive and exchange digital data rapidly between places irrespective of distance."

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is a United Nation's initiative to make the Information Society a reality for all. The Summit was two-phased. The first phase took place from 10th to 12th December, 2003 in Geneva, and the second from 16th to 18th November, 2005 in Tunis, Tunisia. Representatives of all countries including Ghana took part in the proceedings.

The common vision of the WSIS, is a "people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life" (WSIS, 2003).

Two documents were prepared and adopted, namely:

1. The Declaration of Principles which elaborates the global vision for bridging the digital divide and promoting equitable access to knowledge, information and ICTs to all; and
2. The Plan of Action which outlines the necessary actions for the implementation of the principles that promotes the Information Society at the national, regional and international levels (WSIS, 2005).

A summary of the Plan of Action and concrete action lines are as follows:

1. The role of public governance authorities and all stakeholders in the promotion of ICTs for development:

Governments, as well as private sector, civil society, the United Nations and other international organizations have an important role and responsibility in the development of the Information Society and, as appropriate, in decision-making processes. Building a people-centred Information Society is a joint effort which requires cooperation and partnership among all stakeholders.

2. Information and communication infrastructure: An essential foundation for an inclusive Information Society

Well-developed information and communication network infrastructure and applications can accelerate the social and economic progress of countries and the well-being of all individuals, communities and peoples.

3. Access to information and knowledge:

The ability for all to access and contribute information, ideas and knowledge is essential in an inclusive Information Society.

4. Capacity building:

Each person should have the opportunity to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge in order to understand, participate actively in, and benefit fully from the Information Society and the knowledge economy.

5. Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs:

Strengthening the trust framework, including information security and network security, authentication, privacy and consumer protection, is a prerequisite for the development of the Information Society and for building confidence among users of ICTs.

6. Enabling environment:

An enabling environment at national and international levels is essential for the Information Society. ICTs should be used as an important tool for good governance.

7. ICT Applications: Benefits in all aspects of life:

It can support sustainable development, in the fields of public administration, business, education and training, health, employment, environment, agriculture and science within the framework of national e-strategies. This would include actions within the following sectors:

- E-governance;
- E-business;
- E-learning;
- E-health;
- E-employment;
- E-environment;
- E-agriculture; and
- E-science.

8. Cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content:

Cultural diversity is the common heritage of humankind. The Information Society should be founded on and stimulate respect for cultural identity, cultural and linguistic diversity, traditions and religions, and foster dialogue among cultures and civilizations.

9. Media:

Principles of freedom of the press and freedom of information are essential to the Information Society.

10. Ethical dimensions of the Information Society:

The Information Society should respect peace and uphold the fundamental values of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, shared responsibility, and respect for nature.

11. International and regional cooperation:

The Information Society is intrinsically global in nature and national efforts need to be supported by effective international and regional cooperation among governments, the private sector, civil society and other stakeholders including the international financial institutions.

Azubuike (2005) reports that the expected specific commitments made and goals to be met by national governments and the world community make the Summit one of the most important events we in the library community should concern ourselves with – at the national and international levels. WSIS provides a definite opportunity for librarians to collaborate with the ICT community, administrators, politicians, the business community, other information professionals as well as all the people we serve, in order to move our contributions to a higher level.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and the various national library delegates and groups, who attended the WSIS, the views and priorities of the library community, including the crucial role played by libraries and information centres, are provided in adopted documents. IFLA had two (2) Pre-World Summit Conferences to ensure that the library world was adequately prepared. The first one took place in Geneva from the 3rd to 4th November, 2003 under the theme, "Libraries at the heart of the Information Society". The 2nd Pre-Conference took place in Bibliotheca, Alexandria, Egypt from 10th to 11th November, 2005 under the theme: "Libraries: Information Society in Action".

Our challenge now is to pick up from where the Summit ended. The challenge is to have improved access to essential information and knowledge at all intellectual and production levels of society without which no nation can meet any of the internationally-agreed development goals and objectives, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, 2007).

The Value of Information

In order to be knowledgeable, educators and students require information. Information promotes advancement in medical, scientific and technological development. Information enables a scientist to make new inventions. Increased agricultural output requires information. In other words, food security can be improved through access to timely information for determining optimal harvesting times, locating sources of surplus, distribution channels and storage facilities. Information is used to assist technologists and industrialists to identify new technologies for their industry. In the health sector, information is vital as new discoveries are made by the minute. Alemna (2006), Adjei (2006), Abekah-Nkrumah (2006), Azunu (2006), Kedem (2006) and Domfeh (2006) all mention the need of information for national development, health care, finance, governance, and environment respectively. As such, we expect information to be universal and easily accessible.

Issues Affecting Access

This is the information and knowledge age yet, there is information shortage. This is as a result of the:

- shrinking of the content in the public domain;
- inability of government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) to document and organize the information they produce;
- predominance of the manual system in processing information; and
- delay in applying IT to improve access to information in all libraries.

On the other side is the Internet, with its influx of information but inadequate available skills to exploit effectively the abundant resources. But why are we experiencing information shortage in an information age? To answer this question, I will discuss copyright and intellectual property issues and how they affect access to information. The Right to Information Bill and difficulties in accessing information due to the fact that information is not organized are also examined here.

Copyright and Intellectual Property

Copyright protects intellectual property with its famous symbol © and accompanying statement "All rights reserved." These are very familiar words in publications known to all, especially librarians, but what do they mean? They refer to the exclusive right granted to the "author" to copy, adapt, distribute, publicly perform, publicly display the work of authorship, such as literary works, databases, musical works, sound recordings, photographs, other still images, motion pictures and other audiovisual works (WIKIPEDIA, 2007). This means that no other person can make use of the work without formal acknowledgement or payment to the author. In libraries, archives and information science, it is the copyright of publications that is our major concern.

A typical case in Ghana shows blatant disrespect of copyright. Asamoah-Hassan & Bannerman (2006) recount an incident that was reported at a copyright workshop, of an author who discovered that a book he had authored was being printed by a private printer and sold on the market without his permission or being paid a cedi. The author told a gut- wrenching story about how he tried in vain to seek redress. His pleas turned into threats when the printer went on printing and selling despite his threat to go to court. When the author eventually did go to court, the fine the printer paid was so small that he was discouraged.

The state of affairs in the music industry is even worse with pirates making more money at the expense of the artiste/composer /musician/singer etc. They are vocal as regards the copyright issues and as such, sympathy is normally with them.

In Ghana, the rewarding system is not well developed and therefore authors do not normally make much money out of their creative and intellectual efforts. One hears of huge sums of money being paid to rights holders in the developed world. It does not happen here.

The issue here therefore is that users already have access to these works and pay almost nothing. If authors are not protected, they will not be motivated to create more

works and there would be a dearth of knowledge for national development. Authors do not understand the “noise” from users wanting access when they are already pirating their works.

Encouraging creativity and investment in the literary industry by paying authors their due is one argument used by Copy Ghana to levy users. Copy Ghana is a reprographic rights organization in Ghana representing literary rights owners. Copy Ghana signs an agreement which legally permits students, lecturers and workers in the university to do what they have been doing, that is, photocopying literary works for studies or research and payment of an annual token fee of GH¢1 per student. Methodist University College, Ghana and a few other universities have signed the agreement. I know for a fact that all public universities and some private universities have refused to sign the agreement. As librarians we need to ask, what about the fair use component of the Copyright law?

The problem of users pirating works of authors has developed because some librarians allow the making of too many copies of books and periodical articles for interlibrary loan, students, etc. and publishers are concerned with loss of income. The copyright law permits libraries to make individual copies of most copyrighted works, but not in such large quantities as to substitute for a subscription or purchase of the item.

How Copyright and Intellectual Property Rights restrict access to information

IFLA Committee on Copyright and other Legal Matters (2006) states that,

“A rich public domain and fair access to copyright protected material enhances creativity and the production of new works. It is often assumed that economic growth benefits from ever stronger intellectual property rights, while some concession must be made to copyright exceptions for purely social reasons. In fact this is a false dichotomy. Many industries require access to copyright material for the purposes of research and development, education, software or hardware interoperability. A lack of reasonable access can actually hurt economic growth.”

Do not get me wrong. Howse (2005) reiterates the view that, librarians recognize the need for effective copyright laws and the rights of creators and other copyright owners to safeguard their rights and to obtain a fair economic return for their work. In their everyday work, library and information professionals have been taught to act as the interface between rights holders and users and seek fair play for both. Librarians have the duty to care for and allow access to other people’s copyright works and are required to take all possible steps to protect the use of such material, whilst, at the same time,

ensuring that the rights and privileges of users are also safeguarded. Librarians are therefore true custodians of the public interest.

Librarians are advocating for **balanced** copyright laws. They also wish to promote continued growth of the creative arts, authorship, progress in science, etc of individuals, by making sure that at least for a limited time, authors and inventors have the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries. I emphasise 'limited'. By rewarding individuals for their creative and innovative efforts, society benefits but thereafter, the work should be in the public domain free and accessible to anybody in the world.

Content in the Public Domain

Content in the public domain means works that have never been copyrighted or that are no longer within the term of protection under the applicable intellectual property laws.

A rich public domain is an essential element for the growth of the Information Society. Works in the public domain are not subject to any restrictions and may be freely used without permission for commercial and non-commercial purposes. The public domain is part of the common cultural and intellectual heritage of humanity and is the major source of inspiration, imagination and discovery for creators. It is important for access to knowledge and must be accessible for the benefit of creators, inventors, universities and research centres. It is therefore important. The standard of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) is that, works transfer to the public domain 50 years after the death of the author. A report submitted by IFLA, the Library Copyright Alliance (LCA), and the Electronic Information for Libraries Network (eIFL.net) revealed that recently certain developing and transition countries including Ghana have even exceeded these long levels of protection. For example, Mexico (life + 100 years), Côte d'Ivoire (life + 99 years), and Ghana (life + 70 years). In Ghana, this was done amidst protests from concerned citizens and regrettably, silence from librarians.

In essence, this new extension means it would take longer for works to reach the public domain where society benefits. If a particular work is in the public domain in 2007 it means its author died in 1937 or earlier. Researchers must therefore rely on older out-of-copyright and more out-of-date materials which impede academic research. The other option is to expend resources and cost in tracing right holders to obtain permission or buy licenses. Librarians must stand guard to prevent a further extension of copyright protection.

The fight for balanced copyright laws is being done on national and international levels.

The Electronic Information for Libraries Network (**eIFL.net**) is an international foundation advocating availability of electronic information for libraries in developing countries. It has launched a new service, working closely with IFLA on international copyright and intellectual property matters. It aims to build capacity and expertise amongst the eIFL library community in the 50 developing countries who are recipients of its services. To this end, regional workshops have been organized by eIFL.net and supported financially by the UNESCO Information for All Programmes. This programme is responsible for Action line C3 of the Action Plans drawn up at WSIS, which is, Access to information and knowledge. The workshop in Africa, took place in Uganda. I had the singular honour to participate in the workshop organized for the former Soviet Union and the Middle East in Ukraine when I missed the Uganda one. The essence of the workshop according to Teresa Hackett, Project Manager of eIFL-IP is that Librarians must defend the interests of students, researchers and the general public who use the library. We must ensure that copyright is an enabler of access to knowledge, not a barrier.

Libraries all over the world are working to save older and often endangered materials that are in the public domain through digitization. After a year of discussion and negotiations, the University of Oxford has concluded a mass digitization agreement with Google. Their focus is materials in the public domain. Yahoo has also unveiled a project to digitize books in the public domain. Pauli (2006) mentions that Microsoft has signed a digitization agreement with Kirtas Technologies, a digital scanning specialist. This will enable Microsoft forge ahead with its Live Book Portal. These efforts have been successful after a series of court cases. Libraries in Ghana will soon be part of the digitization process when we digitize our local content, cultural heritage and scientific information. The public domain will be the source of information for the project so we need to forge links with the Copyright Office to prevent further extension of the copyright period so that the public domain would be enriched.

Right to Information Bill, 2005

The Right to Information Bill caters for information in Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs). It states clearly in the introduction to the Bill, "to provide for the right of access to information held by a government agency subject to the exemptions that are necessary and consistent with protection of the public interest and the operation of a democratic society...." As indicated in Section 60 of the Bill "this act does not apply to information held by national archives, libraries and museums to which the public has access." It is in view of this statement that The Right to Information Bill appears to be for only journalists, but this is not the case.

There are limitations on the ability of libraries to serve the needs and interests of their users if there is no free flow of information. It is to enforce the fundamental human right of right to information in article 21 section 1 clause f of the Constitution, that the Right to Information Bill was considered, so that there would be free flow of information. It is also meant to sustain our democratic governance by empowering the public to make an informed contribution to governance. It is only when people are adequately informed that they can make the right decisions.

The philosophy underlining any legislation on information is to ensure that all citizens have access to information that must be in the public domain (Boadu-Ayeboafah, 2003).

Statutory rights of access are of little use if reliable records are not created in the first place. For example, an important section of the Bill deals with the production of information by sector ministries. It explicitly demands that every year, up to date, official information should be compiled and published. If this is done, there would soon be a massive influx of information. But as we know, as the information piles up, searching and retrieval become a problem. Equally, if the records cannot be found when needed or if arrangements for their eventual archiving or management are inadequate, statutory rights of access will also be of little use.

Ofori-Tinkorang (2005) echoes what the library profession stands for, namely, that there should be effective management of records that might become the object of request from civil society to make information access a reality. He mentions that specifically, every public authority should maintain all records duly catalogued and indexed in a manner and form which facilitates the right to information under this Bill and ensure all records that are appropriate to be computerized are, within a reasonable time and subject to availability of resources, computerized and connected through a network all over the country on different systems so that access to such records is facilitated.

I must admit that some attempts have been made to provide information on Ghana. This is in the right direction. I once had a request from an august visitor coming to Ghana to send him any publication on Ghana before arrival in the country. The person assumed wrongly that all information about Ghana could be only found in books. I proudly sent him the Ghana website address and he quickly mailed back his satisfaction with the information he found.

Unfortunately, not all information can be found on the website. In that case, an application needs to be made for information to the Information Officer of the sector. The position is provided in the Act. This officer might not necessarily be a librarian with the ability to catalogue and manage the information at the Agency. Some government ministries, departments and agencies have in fact employed librarians in their libraries. The libraries in the MDAs are called special libraries and they have an onerous responsibility to see this through. This is because a lot of information is being produced but not well managed making information difficult to obtain.

Library Automation

Some of the difficulties in accessing information are largely due to the fact that information is hidden as a result of the manual system in processing information. In school libraries, special libraries in government departments, university libraries and public libraries, the situation is no different. Access to information will be enhanced if libraries are automated.

Library automation focuses on delivering electronic content and documents via networks with the goal to provide timely and unimpeded access to a broad range of scholarly information. This will improve access to library resources and services both virtually and temporally.

To progress with implementation of library automation, basic ICT infrastructure such as networking, electrical power and bandwidth require upgrading. ICT is considered as the pipe through which information would flow. It is an essential foundation of the Information Society as indicated in Action line 2 of the WSIS plan of action. It allows people anywhere in the world to access information and knowledge almost instantaneously. One of the specific targets of WSIS is that all universities, colleges, polytechnics, secondary and primary schools be connected using ICT. Another target is for all libraries, archives, museums, etc also to be connected.

Ghana has made strides in that direction as regards the tertiary institutions. For instance, all public universities in Ghana are working on their ICT infrastructure through funding from the Teaching and Learning Innovation Fund (TALIF) and Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY). Some private universities and polytechnics are also building their ICT infrastructure.

Public university libraries have for years have to select a library management system that will enable their collections remain online and also to ensure a smooth interface between their collections and the information on the Internet and databases the libraries

have access to. This will then be the information that will flow through the pipes being built as described by Bryne (2006), the President of IFLA.

The University of Ghana, Legon, with the assistance of CCNY, has the millennium version of Innovative Interface Incorporated. The University of Education, Winneba (UEW) is also purchasing the VIRTUA from Visionary Technology Library Solutions (VTLS) with funding from the GETFund. Other public and private universities have opted for Alexandria and Library Soft library management system respectively for their libraries. Other systems are being considered and with Z39.50 standard for searching across catalogues, it is possible for anyone to access information in any library.

Information Overload

The vast amount of information available from the Internet is commonly described as Information Overload. It is more like what we expect to experience in the information age. When the public domain is enriched with digitized information, when all MDAs fulfill their obligations to publish the information they generate, when all libraries are automated to complement what the Internet provides, it will contribute to the influx of information on the Internet where all citizens go to acquire information. In view of the amazing amount of useful information on the web, users of the 21st century expect information they need right at their desks.

And the question on a number of lips is this: Do we need libraries now that we have the Internet? It is easy to answer 'yes'. Shirman, (2007) names 33 reasons why libraries and librarians are still extremely important. This is summarized as follows:

1. Not everything is available on the Internet. Google Book Search, Yahoo and Microsoft recognize this. That's why they are undertaking the huge task of digitizing millions of books from the world's largest libraries. These projects exclude copyrighted works. The current copyright law protects works for 70 years beyond the death of the author;
2. Although a great deal of information is available on the desk top of anyone with a computer linked to the Internet, much of it is disorganized, not authentic and some of it is of course dangerous. Not that that is a bad thing. The oceans of information, uncertainty and spontaneity on the web can provide an exciting, enriching experience. But if you need to limit your search to logically indexed resources that have been published and then vetted by a professional staff, then the library is still your best bet; and
3. Much of the information that is authoritative is available only in return for payment. Thus users need to access materials through libraries which have skilled staff to

search efficiently, are able to identify authentic sites and can obtain access to paid-for sources through site licenses.

This is exactly what the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Ghana (CARLIGH) has done since the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI) ended in Ghana in 2004. Members pay a fixed fee for access to databases which would have been higher had they paid for them individually. Other interested libraries are invited to join, whereupon they would be provided with the usernames and passwords. CCNY has paid UEW's subscription for 3 years. TALIF is assisting with the payment of 2007 subscription for members of CARLIGH who have paid their dues which is quite minimal.

Shimmon (1996), quoting Tony Blair stated that "The information superhighway should not just benefit the affluent or the metropolitan. ... But just as books are available from public libraries, the benefits of the superhighway must be there for everyone. This is a real chance for equality of opportunity..." Libraries make the difference.

Information literacy

We know that simply having a computer and an Internet connection is not enough. The current situation puts emphasis only on the development of information technology. This is not enough to survive in the information society because getting the right information at the right time can be both difficult and costly. 'Making information available' used to mean 'retrieval upon request'. Today it means much more. It means teaching users how to:

- Analyse their information needs;
- Sift through the maze in order to get the needed information;
- Evaluate the information acquired; and
- Use and communicate information in all its various formats for problem solving and decision-making

Information literacy is not just a simple application of information technology or the ability to use the library but rather the fundamentals of education (Lee, 2006).

The American Library Association (1989) states that:

"To be information literate, a person must be able to recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information".

Users must be information literate to be able to make effective use of this vast range of information. This skill will enable them to adapt to the rapidly changing environment as the ability to use information has become crucial in today's society and will continue to become more so. This skill should be in the curricula of every institution and should be imparted by librarians in association with teachers. Skilled librarians and good libraries ensure that everyone in the community has equal opportunity to participate in society. Such libraries must have a broad range of information resources for schools, businesses, government and everyone so that they can succeed in the information age.

Ghana Educational Reform

The educational reform has come at an opportune time to address the situation regarding libraries. The President's Committee on the Review of Educational Reforms in Ghana set up in 2002 under the chairmanship of Professor Jophus Anamuah-Mensah, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Education, Winneba made a number of recommendations under "Library and Information Services in Education" some of which are as follows:

1. The Ghana Library Board should be adequately funded and staffed;
2. District Assemblies with the support of the GETFund should establish and fund basic school and community libraries and in addition provide ICT facilities to among others facilitate distance learning and non-formal education;
3. First and second cycle schools should have library periods on their time tables;
4. The Department of Information Studies of the University of Ghana should be supported by government to expand its training facilities to train librarians for public, community, academic, school and college libraries;
5. All tertiary institutions should allocate a minimum of 15% of their Annual budget to their libraries in order to maximize resource sharing;
6. A Directorate for school and college libraries should be created at the Ministry of Education to be responsible for school and college libraries.

These recommendations were accepted in a white paper issued by the government in 2004. In it, the government acknowledged the important role that library and information services play in the educational system.

Some of these recommendations on libraries are being taken care of in The Draft Education Bill to be presented to Parliament.

In the Draft Education Bill, Under "Tertiary Education and Library Services" there is a section "which provides for the establishment of a Council for Library and Information

Services consisting of School Library and Resource Centres and Directorates. The functions of the Council are:

- Advise the Minister on library and educational information policies;
- Harmonise library activities within a network system;
- Offer leadership and act as a focal point for library and information services.

The heading is misleading as it does not cater for libraries in tertiary institutions. The Bill will bring considerable improvement in school libraries in particular which are appalling in their present state. Some institutions do not even have libraries with disastrous consequences.

Listen to some of the screaming headlines within the single month of March in the national newspapers.

“Minister advocates establishing libraries to arrest poor language in schools”
(Hammond, 2007, p14)

“Encourage students to ask questions–Dr Otabil” Students should think through problems rather than listen and produce the same information given them (Viala, 2007, p11)

“Discourage students from reading only for exams–Prof. Adarkwa” (Owusu-Antwi, 2007, p11)

Improvements mean well equipped libraries with books and computers with online access where students can find alternative information to enrich what the teacher has taught them.

I once had the opportunity to address the Conference of Heads of Assisted Secondary Schools (CHASS) on the need for them to contribute something in the form of institutional dues to the Ghana Library Association. After politely listening to my brief presentation one member asked “What are you doing to improve our libraries. We do not know what is happening to our libraries. Staff do not appear to know what they are about” We all know what they mean. Library staff with no training cannot expect to perform efficiently. The schools need to employ qualified librarians or they must train personnel who man their libraries. Fortunately the Educational Reform takes care of them.

The establishment of a focal point for libraries in the Bill clearly excludes libraries in the tertiary institutions, government Ministries, Department and Agencies, and also libraries established by the district councils and other private bodies. A focal point for all libraries is needed.

The Way Forward

It is quite clear that issues related to libraries cut across several spheres in the country and when adequately addressed, will bring great benefits to the country. Libraries have a task of embracing the ICT revolution to ensure that users have access to technology that facilitates the retrieval of information both within and outside the library. The responsibility is to take the lead in training users/citizens to be information literate to make use of the vast information, which are hallmarks of the information society. In short, libraries need to position themselves to play the critical role ordained in the information society. HOW DO WE DO THIS?

1. Do not reinvent the wheel

We have built buildings to house libraries and trained librarians to provide access. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel by building separate structures to cater for the Information Society. The global network of libraries with more than 2.5 billion users is already at the heart of the Information Society (Bryne, 2005). What we are advocating for first, is extending library networks in an organized way. Instead of what we have now, where the Ghana Library Board has its library networks and the District Assemblies are also establishing their own network without reference to the existing network. We need to ensure the formulation of appropriate library policy or library legislation to guarantee the consolidation of libraries and their role in the Information Society. WSIS Plan of Action requires that National Library Associations be involved in the provision of standard library services for all by the year 2015. Libraries with the necessary infrastructure and networking will be the bedrock for the Information Society.

2. Get a focal point

First, a focal point is needed. The National Commission on Libraries, a policy level body, is being proposed to plan and develop recommendations in response to issues affecting access to information and also to ensure an effective and efficient library system for the nation. This is a call made by several colleagues, including Alemna, (2005) in his inaugural lecture as a Fellow of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences.

The Ghana Library Association's initial reaction to all issues affecting access to information was to advocate for the passing of a law; the National Library Bill.

Efforts towards the establishment of a National Library for Ghana started in the early 1960s and resulted in the very significant development of the establishment of the George Padmore Research Library on African Affairs by the Ghana Library Board. This Library has come to be appropriately regarded as the nucleus of Ghana's National Library (Alemna, 2006). Since then, a proposal and a draft bill for the National Library were submitted

after months of brainstorming by key librarians assembled by the Ghana Library Board and the Ghana Library Association with official prompting from the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports.

Circumstances have dictated a new direction and the priority now is a National Commission on Libraries, whose duties will include seeing to the establishment of a National Library. Asamoah-Hassan (2006) at the Annual General Meeting of the Ghana Library Association repeated the need for a National Commission on Libraries and the Minister of Education, Science and Sports has responded positively to it in a letter to the President of the Ghana Library Association requesting;

“a proposal spelling out the basis for the establishment of a National Commission for my study. This will enable the Ministry take a decision on the matter and make a recommendation to cabinet for policy approval for its establishment.”

The proposal has been duly submitted as my first task as the President of the Ghana Library Association. Some of the key issues raised in the proposal are:

- A body with the power to cut across all boundaries is required to coordinate the various sectors that libraries operate;
- The Education Reform Review Committee made recommendations on libraries which are being taken care of in The Education Bill currently about to be presented to Parliament. The National Commission on Libraries will ensure that the recommendations in the form of the input to the section on Libraries fit in a wider context and are not implemented in isolation of libraries at the national level; and
- It is necessary to put a body in place to ensure that libraries at the various levels and categories perform effectively to ensure an unbroken chain in the informational and educational needs of the citizenry. It will also ensure that all libraries in the country perform to acceptable international standards.

3. Educate and Train Librarians

Adika (2006) reiterates the view that information professionals need to play an active part in the process towards the knowledge economy. As libraries are put on a high pedestal in the information society, librarians require high level skills, knowledge and expertise to manage information. Library staff need to be trained to appreciate the

enormous responsibilities on their shoulders. The Ghana Library Association has plans through its Education and Research Committee to do that.

GLA has laid down a plan in conjunction with the Department of Information Studies, University of Ghana, Legon for continuous education programmes. Focus will be on ICT, information literacy, proposal writing, copyright etc.

Staff of the school libraries will require special attention. With the new accreditation system of the Ghana Library Association now in place, they are not even associate members. This is the lowest level of personnel manning libraries and this is the conception of a number of people of what a librarian is. If libraries are to play a key role in the information society, attention must also be paid to this category of staff.

The University of Ghana offers Diploma in Information Studies Programme at its City Campus in Accra and its main Campus and the course is offered at weekends. Some junior staff in the universities have taken the opportunity to upgrade themselves. With the assistance from the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, our colleagues in secondary schools and teacher training colleges should do the same.

4. Forge partnerships

Librarians need to reach out to professions and stakeholders with similar interest such as archivists, ICT staff, teachers, authors, publishers, museographers, the Ghana Reading Association and Ghana Book Development Council.

The infrastructure and equipment are what the ICT staff focus on and so librarians, teachers, journalists, archivists, museographers, publishers etc are responsible for the creation and management of information that flows through them. Hence, the need for collaboration and partnerships with all persons associated with the provision and management of information. In short, we need to team up with all stakeholders in order to achieve progress.

Interestingly, librarians and archivists are both trained by the Department of Information Studies and yet when they graduate and find themselves working in the same organization, they shy away from each other. Other library associations accord them membership status. Examples are Cameroon, Gambia, Nigeria and South Africa. The GLA has taken preliminary steps towards opening up the Association to them.

5. Embark on a wide advocacy campaign

Libraries and librarians are critical to the effort of making information part and parcel of all lives. We must demonstrate the value of libraries and librarians. Members should know that help is available “@ your library”. This is an international symbol adopted by IFLA in partnership with the American Library Association (ALA). It is a global campaign where one can use ideas and resources created by others tailored to one’s own specific needs to promote different aspects of libraries. It is designed to showcase the unique and vital roles played by public, school, academic, and special libraries worldwide (Fact sheet, 2007). The GLA will show the way in this regard.

6. Communicate with members

The GLA has structures in place to communicate with members. This includes the Newsletter, the Journal, AGM and very soon, a website. Council is working hard to make use of the structures to continually inform members about developments so that they are kept in tune with progress and challenges in the profession both nationally and internationally. Librarians need to know what other colleagues are doing so as to ensure best practices.

Conclusion

I will conclude with IFLA’s vision which reflects that of the profession, which is, that libraries and information services are essential to effective operation of the inclusive information society where everyone will be able to create, access, use and share information and knowledge without any hindrance or restriction. Librarians are expected to be leaders to charge in like the fire brigade without brakes carrying all members and stakeholders working together towards a single goal. At the same time, they should put through needed pragmatic reforms with full conviction and bravery. This would certainly suggest a brighter future for libraries and information professionals in the performance of their vital role in the information society. Akst (2005), rightly mentions that “Libraries will remain the physical and intellectual custodians of human memory.”

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