Envisioning the future role of librarians: skills, services and information resources

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to conceptualize the future of academic libraries in the era of new user needs, new skills for staff and services offered. The literature shows the evolution of new technologies and the implications they have on the staff, library services and new user needs. The discussions in this paper are surrounded by conceptualization of what the library products and services will be in future academic libraries. It also looks at future studies that explore opportunities for librarians to advance their professional role.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a literature-based conceptual paper that draws on a wide range of literature that hypothetically looks at the future roles of professional librarians, the collection, services and the evolution of technology on the new user needs.

Findings – The library today will give the basis for the future librarian’s role, the emerging user needs and impact of service delivery. Technological advances have also affected the establishment of library systems and services offered. The emerging future roles will generally depend on how advanced the libraries are in the region or country including Kenya.

Originality/value – This paper adds a flexible approach to the skills, services as a role of future librarians.

Keywords Kenya, Academic libraries, Library education, E-resources, New user needs, Technology/librarian roles

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Traditional academic libraries for many years were about physical space, users and print collection on the shelves. Hence, an academic library was defined as a building that stores books and other collections for users to access. These collections were permanently found on the shelf stacks of libraries. This physical status of the collection is evident in many university and college libraries in Kenya; they still have stacks containing thousands of print books. The progressive trend of library collection shows that the format of information resources has progressively changed to other electronic formats. Librarians urgently need to research on the future outlook of the library collection both in print and electronic format and new services to be offered going forward. The futurist theories of Berry et al. (n.d.) state that in order to look at the future, people have to look into the past, present trends and directions leading to the future. That is very true of the library system in Kenya where librarians have to seriously look at traditional library systems and what they entailed, then review the modern library system and the changes or improvements that have been achieved and finally project what is there for the future library system.

Long before the establishment of the internet, most information was only availed in print books and, hence, the library was seen as the main source of information. That is not the case today, where information is available in a variety of formats within and beyond the library. This has generated new roles for librarians in academic libraries that include organizing and enabling access to electronic information resources and offering more interactive user services. This paper explores what new skills, information resources and services are currently offered in the academic libraries in Kenya looking into the future.
Librarians’ role today and in the future

Library services

The perpetual role in Kenyan university library is to provide scholarly access to selected, relevant information resources that will meet the expectations of users. This has been enabled by libraries transitioning from automating their functions to utilizing information technology to enhance access, retrieval and use of information by the library community. Librarians have a key role as educators: train their clients on internet use, access to e-journals and take them through the web-based instructions and online tutorials. This calls for expertise knowledge and familiarity with information resources and ability to create awareness on the side of the librarian.

Academic libraries that are well-established need to collaborate with faculty staff and students to provide support for scholarly publishing and enable open access repositories for their research outputs (Mikkelsen and McMunn-letango, 2015). Many students struggle to read academic texts they have been asked to use for their own research and they also have challenges to distinguish between opinions and facts in relation to their research work. These challenges are noticeable in many of universities even in Kenya. Dawn Childress (2011) states that Mendeley and Zotero tutorials guide the students on how to use citation/research tools that empower them to organize their reference citations, store, share their data and discover new opportunities. Academic libraries in Kenya, for example, Egerton University, Kenyatta University and many more offer tutorials like Zotero, Mendeley to enable students and other academic staff to use these research tools. This new invention help students and researchers to systematically organize their research work.

The library can then install anti-plagiarism software to monitor the research work by their students to detect any plagiarism or duplication of research work.

Library professionals have gone extra miles in the advanced technologies: for example, creating mobile websites where the library community can access the online public access catalogue via mobile-optimized websites, for example, Egerton University library – Kenya, research databases, institutional repositories and mobile access to eBooks though this is still a challenge in most of the universities in Kenya.

Since the traditional environment, the roles of librarians have been closely related to their responsibilities including collection development and marketing the library products and services. It is true that many roles have been improved by emerging technologies rather than being abandoned. Some of them include online cataloguing and classification of information resources, NETOPACs (online access catalogues) circulation services information searches (Chepkwony, 2012). These traditional roles are transitioning gradually to be in line with the emerging technologies. In monitoring and evaluation of library services today, more should be focused on library impact than outcomes (Daralipnton, 2012).

This can be done through evolving strategies for user service delivery in the context of students’ outcomes (Thorpes et al., 2016). Librarians today ensure access to information resources through available technology for all users. The future academic library is pegged on many successful models of the library that are in place today and changes that justify their place in future. It is true that the role of the librarians still exists into the future, only that their roles will be justified by the way they advance their role of enabling searches, access, retrieval and organization of information for the technologically oriented users. Egerton University, Kenyatta University and many more are currently using library management systems to fulfill many of the librarians’ roles and also automate most of the library services. It is anticipated that future library systems in Kenya like in those developed countries will enter into cooperative processes for cataloguing and classification of information resources with other libraries in the region through various levels of networking. These will enable them share their experiences and generate new innovations. The reality at the moment is that each
university library in Kenya does its own cataloguing and classification of information resources and there is no centralized cataloguing and classification of information resources.

In order for institutions including the libraries to remain relevant, they must evaluate their place in the world increasingly taking online direction (Hendrix, 2010). This is evident where digitization is changing the landscape of information access and use. The future libraries will see more of digitized collection and improved methods of data storage and retrieval.

It is anticipated that the future academic library will offer users places that encourage participatory learning and allow construction of information from a variety of sources, communicate and share information to the users. They will also create purpose-designed spaces/hubs for group interactions and discussions. Many academic libraries have maintained their virtual presence in addition to the physical space (Smith, 2016).

The prescriptive theories of the future academic library need to have insights into what roles should change or be abandoned in predicting the future academic library. Libraries today can no longer work in isolation in the world of Google and mobile internet access. The internet has helped many scholars get almost all educational information they need and it is not surprising to hear a user make these remark “I have been in this university for four years but have not stepped in the library!” If the academic library will be locked in the traditional approach to the collection and services, then the trend will be that users will move faster than the library itself. User-centered perception on effectiveness of library staff performance is important and can actually help to improve on many areas of the library profession. This will be done when academic libraries use the emerging technologies and integrate them into library service delivery models (ALIA Futures, 2014).

Some of the emerging technologies in the university libraries in Kenya include EZ proxy to authenticate off-campus access to databases, journals purchased or licensed to the specific university in Kenya. This will help the students and researchers access and utilize the e-resources they need with ease. Instant group messaging to the library users, blogs and many more are some of the library service delivery models. The academic libraries have gone through a great transformation in terms of the social infrastructures they provide while diversifying the library services and experiences (Arup, 2015).

**Librarian skills created by user needs**

The new generation of library users has aptitude knowledge shaped by new technologies and the internet. This user community has become more complex and competitive depending on the information explosion, that is, there beyond the library walls. So future librarians will need to keep abreast with adequate knowledge of advancing technologies in the profession and in line with the students, researchers and scholars’ information needs. There are indications that traditional technical knowledge and skills in the library are still varied (Chow et al., 2011). Most university libraries in Kenya are working hard to ensure their in-house operations including circulation control, cataloging processes, serial control and acquisition procedures are more enabled through new technologies using library softwares for automation. In order to deliver content to the patrons and in the right format, librarians are using semantic technologies to develop library portals that facilitate users’ searches, access and retrieval of information resources. It is evident that these portals will help library to provide effective services to the users.

Boydston and Leysen (2014) state those technological advances in scholarly communication have facilitated the paradigm shift from paper based to electronic book. This is evident in the new format of eBooks available in the library today. The implication of this shift is in academic libraries where the librarians’ responsibilities are evolving by the day. The librarians skills for improving the information management systems, the user services and infrastructures for organizing knowledge are still pertinent, what is likely to change is the
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Technicalities of performing all the mentioned activities. The digital literacy in the context of academic libraries has become essential as they offer services through a range of media and manage information in different media formats. In Kenya, for example, Egerton University, Kenyatta University, Nairobi University and many other public and private university libraries manage their websites together with the portal content and administration of specific information resources as well as grant access to users or specific groups. Many of these libraries are conducting intensive literacy skills to their users especially on access and retrieval of e-resources.

So one can say that the basic skills and cultures of the library have not changed and not even in future. The future librarian will still need to integrate some of the traditional skills with information technologies. This will be done by evaluating existing professional standards, developing of the skills to meet user needs in a pro-active way and implementing the changes where need be. Xia (2013) observes that due to the different perspectives in information services, the new skills should bridge the gaps of user preferences, satisfaction and expectations, thus ensuring a balance between user and librarians perspectives of the services. This calls for individual academic libraries in Kenya to conduct similar research to find the missing gaps in their library services. Librarians now and in future will need to be equipped with high-level knowledge, skills for research, and digital literacy to ensure effective service delivery.

In the era of various social media, library professionals are establishing their relevance by filtering and collating relevant information that they can provide whenever or wherever needed by using the technological devices and networks available to them. Some of the academic libraries in Kenya have been using social networks to market information services offered and even support open and distant learning programs. E-referencing as one of the services has been very successful in bringing a closer interaction between the librarian and users.

The advantage of electronic communication in e-referencing, for example, includes access to multiple information resources, greater availability of electronic resources, social networks, and mobile tools, virtual learning and availability of services via internet to users at their point of need. Eysenbach (2008) observes a new term “apomediation” in the Library 3.0 environment to replace this term by “intermediary”, i.e., librarians will be standby while users access information without users going through reference librarian! Web 3.0 and Web 4.0 are anticipated to engage librarians, the users, and subject experts on the federated information networks highway paths. It is also possible for the Library 3.0 and 4.0 to turn the unorganized web of information into a systematic and usable body of knowledge. There are other progressive developments in the Web 3.0 and 4.0 that include 3D printing, maker spaces and language technologies.

Other skills for the librarians will include engaging publishers, preservation agencies and other stakeholders to establish sustainable preservation models for the digital content. Currently academic libraries are creating institutional repositories, for example, through Dspace and others to enable this successful venture. The collaboration will help the library to evaluate the outcome in terms of users’ access, retrieval and use of information for research and development.

Training for library profesional development and renewed skills

The library and information science (LIS) programs have integrated more of information and communication technology that will improve service delivery in Africa like many other parts of the world. Kavulya (2007) argues that LIS practice today includes website development techniques, digitization processes, internet use and evaluation and many more. So the quality of teaching in library science programs should be improved to be in line with the technological changes in the world.
Library staff training

Many university libraries in Africa have had staff training and development programs that include on the job training, membership of professional associations, attending workshops, seminars and conferences. The effective training and acquisition of new skills in these Kenyan universities will determine how successful the librarians' role will be in the world of information to be able to compete with other librarians in the world.

There is also need for survey on the emerging training gaps/needs and the data collected will be used then to strengthen the staff training programs already established. The research findings that were conducted in five selected university libraries in Ghana indicate that even though staff development gives promotion and positions to its staff, this alone did not contribute to staff effectiveness (Mac-Anthony and Walt, 2016).

The staff training in essence is intended to strengthen capabilities of library to achieve its mission in the increasing technological era while creating an intellectual framework for understanding, finding, evaluating and enabling access of information resources. The library training programs need to be improved to include curriculum that takes care of intensive information literacy skills for library staff and also the library new and emerging technologies. Ezra states that due to continuous technological advancement and other changes in the information environment, there are new competencies needed by information professionals today and in future. It is important for the library to consider new multi-disciplinary approaches to their new skills. This will be possible through advocacy to employ graduates with subject matter and strong technological skills from other disciplines. The library then will have a combination of “embedded” librarians that will encompass traditional librarianship, technological education and subject matter expertise, if they are to contribute to the teaching and learning transformations. Other skills will include knowledge management in areas of institutional repositories, digitization of information resources, web designs and web semantics.

It is important to note that university libraries in Kenya are currently developing and enabling access of locally produced digital resources including theses and other research works through their institutional repositories, for example, Egerton University, Kenya has created an institutional repository for scholarly and research output to the wider community. It is anticipated that in the future this will enhance scholarly collaboration with the global research community. Librarians today and in future need to develop campus-wide information literacy initiatives to facilitate ongoing involvement in the teaching and learning process. This will improve the student learning and research outcomes.

Emerging e-resources

The focus of what constitutes library information resources is changing with the advent of emerging technologies. Today’s library collection is characterized by an electronic environment and a community with new information needs. It is anticipated that future collection will continue to include print and e-collection aligned to education and research needs of the academic institutions especially in the developing countries. Several collaborative initiatives have been conducted in Kenya that include Kenya Library and Information Services Consortium (KLISC) that enables libraries collectively e-resources through annual subscription. Today, several academic libraries including Egerton University benefited from the KLISC and other publisher e-resource databases, for example, Springer and many others.

In the new paradigm shift of electronic resources, the library professionals participate in the learning, research and knowledge processes for the academic faculties but how well this is done can be established through collaboration with the faculties, students and conducting numerous surveys.
Librarians, Kasalu and Ojiambo (2015), now and in future need to actively support, promote and enable digital content creation for users in education and research. Some of the promotional approaches that they will adopt include digital media, podcasts, e-mail lists blogs and more library workshops to promote digital content. The new library user trend shows that in the future there will be more preference for e-resources and this being a new phenomenon, librarians be equipped with skills and training on subscription, legal contracts agreements and licensing models for the e-resources. Lili (2009) states that due to the great uncertainties surrounding emerging technologies and their high costs, academic libraries are cautious about supporting emerging technologies but there are no other options but to take technological advancements head on. Decisions about electronic resources in academic libraries have become a must to be included in the context of the total library collection. The academic libraries have no option but to move with the times and embrace the new model of information resources and the new user needs.

Today, there are many acquisition models for the resources like consortium annual subscription, demand-driven acquisitions and patron-driven acquisition, title by title selection module librarians will need skills to do the evaluation of these subscription models and which ones are likely to benefit individual libraries (Garofalo, 2016). In the annual subscription of eBooks what happens when a number of eBooks/journals are dropped from the databases without prior notice? Many academic libraries in Kenya have had the challenge of tracking the stability of the eBooks from one provider to another; they are also not notified when one title ceases publishing.

These are challenges caused by publishers pulling out their content from one vendor to another and many a times it goes unnoticed. Schonfeld and Guthrie (2007) observe that in the academic faculties, teaching and learning environment has been transformed by the evolving digital technologies and this has trickled down to the library information services and the collection itself. Libraries have to keep pace with this new digital environment that deals with information users who are believed to be well versed with new digital technologies. As libraries advance mode of information resources to eBooks and e-journals, the future librarians will need to understand the online database, be able to measure users online activities and other duties related to electronic resources management systems. In situations where database users have no digital rights management, the librarians will assist them to have online access to book content where they can download book chapters on their tablets/e-readers. There will be need to develop regular trainings to develop skills needed for the regular and changing e-resource management techniques. England and Thomas (2016) observe that much needs to be done for theoretical and practical knowledge of e-resource subscriptions, assessment of these resources and the procurement procedures for the same.

Librarians will have to deal with many challenges of e-resources including: digital storage for e-resources that are constantly superseded by new hardwares and softwares, information for users on e-journal platforms migration from one publisher to another to include account administration interfaces and rights. Other major challenges that future librarians will have to deal include tracking title stability of eBooks from one publisher/provider to another, how librarians can follow the publishing trend to discover which collection is only in print format or which ones have been migrated to electronic format and how this has impacted on the book budgets. Future librarians will deal with, for example, loss of back files to e-journals and titles that may disappear from negotiated and licensed packages or even moved to another publishing agency. On the same, the academic staff and the students need to know of these changes in the book collection so that when they are not able to find a journal/ebook that they had used years back, they will be advised on what other options are available.

The traditional academic libraries purchased print books, did subscription to print journals and owned them. The librarian today needs to fully understand the licensing
models including the laws, contracts and agreement with the publishers or suppliers/vendors for the e-resources. The new business models in the e-environment have various models of acquisition of electronic resources, for example, “the big deal and packages” the question is, are librarians equipped with skills and knowledge of contract, licensing and publisher negotiations of e-resources. Also what determines the price of the e-resources, is it the content, the pricing models which include leasing or buying the content?

At the moment, Kenya like many other developing countries is faced with many challenges on e-resources including high subscription costs, little awareness of electronic alternative to the print resource and lack of adequate knowledge of content negotiation and licensing models of the e-resources (Kupryte et al., 2013).

Future librarians will also need exhaustive knowledge and skills to understand new user needs in the electronic environment, authentication of e-resources to the library and its users, they will need to understand what are the user obligations and restrictions under the licensing and legal contracts. This will also include data exportation, requirements for pass words/IP addresses, terms of licensing, termination and also whether there are confidentiality obligations or not. Librarians need to critically negotiate on suppliers/publishers models of e-resources, databases and there should be goodwill and ability for academic institutions to work together with the publishers/vendors for the negotiated deals. Academic libraries are faced with challenges of adequate knowledge of supply models for e-resources and the databases.

It is time, they create new librarian’s position like electronic resources coordinators who will collaborate with other e-resource database coordinators to evaluate vendors/suppliers and publishers of electronic resources and this will be a new job description. This cadre of librarians will be well versed with what is entailed in the subscription and legal contracts for e-resources. This calls for more training and professional development on electronic resource management and innovations (England and Thomas, 2016). The budget constraints could impact negatively on libraries ability to engage new initiatives like dealing with publishers of e-resources (Saunders, 2015). The current bundles “package” model of electronic resources seems not to be benefiting many libraries since some of the titles included may not be relevant to the academic programs offered in the specific university. The usage statistics of many of these databases have shown that there are titles which have not even been used by the users yet a big amount of the budget had gone toward subscription of the same. Future librarians will need to collaborate with the relevant academic faculties for a thorough check on which titles have relevant content then have more trial periods where they can now be able to make a conclusive decision whether to do subscription for the same. The currency fluctuation and inflexible publishers bundling strategies are some of the major challenges librarians will continue dealing with especially in the developing world.

Despite the place for future librarians being uncertain, there will be expanded innovations and discoveries in the profession. This will include collaboration with other communities, for example, institutional repository, consortiums for e-resources, publishers, vendors and even authors. In creation of metadata for information resources, Resource Description and Access (RDA) is transitioning from AACR2 and it is anticipated to be adaptable to the newly emerging data structures. The new responsibility for bibliographic data creation in RDA justifies the librarians’ skills that will be needed in future. The challenge is likely to be the meeting point for librarians with publishers and vendors who have now taken on board the responsibility for bibliographic data creation.

Conclusion
Librarians need to continuously advance their professional skills to be in line with the technological advancement. Radical changes will need to be done on librarians’ professional skills and their educational development. The future needs of different academic libraries
will vary by regions or countries. There is a need for more collaborative workshops that can be attended by library stakeholders with background knowledge in library designs, operations and management of libraries. This will enable collaborative decision making and learning from each other. The academic library of the future will need to develop collaborative acquisition strategies for e-resources, where duplication of these resources will be reduced, such that what one library has acquired can be shared with the other collaborating libraries. Re-designing of library facilities and services will free up library space for users and conduct more efficient collection practices which will include e-collection and enable them to identify more collaborative and shared projects with other academic libraries within the region.

The future looks at a time when librarians and other information professionals will play a major role in the digital realm to sort, organize, analyze and categorize information from the internet to help users learn about what sites to trust and which ones not to trust. They will also need to evaluate their role and outcomes of working with researchers through their research life cycle: this can be through providing specific knowledge by disciplines to include information searching, archiving and monitoring developments in the publishing world.

The future libraries should maintain both print and digital formats of information resources since both are complimentary not interchangeable formats. Some disciplines like literature and they depend more so on the print book. The physical library will see a future where users will come to the library not only to borrow print books but to write books, do their research with the help of the professional librarians who will also enable them access the databases, Google books relevant to their area of research taking note that these are the future authors of books. The librarians play an active catalyst role to connect users with the resources they need and relevant researchers they need in their studies and research. It is eminent that they will continue to expand their e-resources while advancing their skills to deal with the emerging formats of e-resources.

The way forward for future librarians’ role is to continue having discussion groups, webcast, virtual chats sessions, bright talk sessions and webinars to share experiences globally and come up with a consensus on way forward. There should be frequent conferences and workshops where librarians can discuss their experiences today and projections for the future. There will be need to establish strong professional bodies that coordinate professional networking and communication that enhances professional development. Technological advancement will continue to be significant factor in the future of library profession. Future librarians will need to focus on the impact of the libraries rather than the outcomes of the services that will be offered.

References


Further reading


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