

Virtual Library: A remote access to the content and services of virtual libraries for effective acquisition of information resources

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Abstract

Most of the Libraries today, offer a wide range of on-line services to their users. And now the internet and the web technologies are not new thing to any academia hence, it is the time for the library to be virtual and develop its online presence in order to further facilitate and enrich the educational processes. In this direction, Virtual Libraries provide a new way of serving the new generation users of the libraries. Virtual libraries provide a new vision of libraries for the 21st century library users. This paper provides an overview of a Virtual Library System. It narrates purposes, features, functions, and Virtual Library Environment. Virtual Library on lifelong Learning has also has been emphasized. It also enumerates principles of development of Virtual Library Collection and advantages of Virtual Libraries.

Keywords: Virtual Library, Remote access, Selection, Acquisition

Introduction

The explosive growth and use of the web has made it less difficult for any individual site to be seen, or for any individual patron to make sense of it. As patrons continue to make greater use of the internet, librarians now use web sites as a means to facilitate access to specific Internet and other digital resources. Library website supports users in their information tasks, hence it has been identified as a platform for library to recommend sites and point users to relevant and current electronic information resources. Wright (2004) asserted that a library's web page is the most common vehicle for the delivery of information. With the availability of Internet and with the growing number of internet,

library users will prefer to visit the library's virtual website more often than visit its physical location. Library website creates an information environment where the provision of information resources and services is no longer constrained by time and place. Supporting this assertion, Joo et.al (2011) posited that a library website plays a role of an extension and augmentation of a traditional physical library, and offers a variety of library services such as electronic resource, access online catalogue and online reference services.

Virtual Library can be referred to as another kind of digital library which provides access to information that is available elsewhere. Librarians have used this term for a decade or more to denote a library environment that provides access to distributed information in electronic format through sources provided. The virtual Library is a library with Virtual environment, is environment where users are able to locate and access information resources either from the library intranet site or over the Internet, it is a library where it is very possible and easy for users to stay in their comfort zone and access whatever material or information resources they wish to make use of and can also contact staff by phone and e-mail for more request. Koganuramath (2007). The purpose of the Virtual Library is to underpin learning and acquisition of knowledge that will provide more solid basis for education and to enhance quality of life by drawing on digital availability (preferably on-line) books, materials and journals through ICT-based tools. A Virtual Library provides remote (on-line or CD-ROM-based) access to a variety of national and international content learning materials such as books, journals, magazines and newspapers. Services that were traditionally offered by libraries and other information centres are now being carried out digitally. Virtual Libraries thus combine materials in electronic format with an electronic network that ensures access to and delivery of those materials, and for virtual library to become effective educational tool in the public service, it must respond to the needs of and provide affordable access for the prospective library users, students, teachers, researchers and the academia. Odejikun(2001), posited that in electronic library approach, users find more information at minimal cost and in less time, the negligible fact is that e-library initiative has become indispensable to libraries in the provision of timely information to users and in fact, to the progress of librarianship as a profession, in which academic libraries must not be an exception. This therefore underscores the need for academic library staff to be fully ICT compliant; library approach has already begun to exert massive transformation of libraries services in developed countries. Therefore, academic libraries in developing countries especially in Nigeria, should not give the impression either that they do not know of the e- library to improve their services. There are a number of components for successful service delivery in the virtual environment.

1. Maintain interaction with clientele: The Virtual Library needs to maintain a human presence by balancing both telephone and e-mail contact. Using e-mail exclusively changes the users' services style that users are accustomed to and increases the likelihood of lengthy correspondence.

2. Continued Visibility: The Virtual Library has to maintain an everyday presence in the environment by activities including: posting new items on the Internet home page, writing feature articles for the newsletter etc. and inviting people into the library when they are travelling within the vicinity.
3. Policies and Agreements: Users are often unsure of the services boundaries in the virtual environment. Highly visible policies outlining the virtual library's role and service, level agreement means both parties have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The virtual library's service level agreements and policies detail the services provided by the library, clients' obligations, request turnaround times and borrowing privileges.

Virtual Library and Lifelong Learning

The use of multimedia system is embedded part of the process of lifelong learning through the Virtual Library. The Virtual Library appears to offer substantial benefits to lifelong learners over both formal study and conventional open learning. Virtual lectures in particular provide an advance interactive learning tool with distinct advantages in terms of engagement and flexibility. Students benefits from the interactivity of the environment and its self-assessment facilities. They also welcome being able to study in their own pace. The virtual lectures have a number of advantages including interactivity, adaptation, simulation, demonstration and integration. They facilitate active learning rather than the more passive learning associated with conventional open learning materials. The Virtual Library aims to be subject neutral.

Selection and Acquisition of Materials for E-Resource Sharing

Copyright is an extremely important aspect of selection process in order for the items to be digitized and distributed for the public on the internet; you should be sincere that they are in the public domain and you are making a fair use of the materials for digitization, resource sharing in this age is far more critical and problematic than acquisition in the traditional method of acquisition. In digitization of material for resource sharing, acquisition does not necessary come after selection. Rather materials that are digitized would usually be those that are not already in the collection, arrangements are made with an institution that has it digitized for sharing of the required digital contents through collaboration.

Therefore, when electronic library is fully in operation, digital/electronic library can latch on the global trend by carefully studying the catalogue of those institutions that have already digitized their content and seek collaboration. Moreover, it is hoped that management of academic libraries will fund e-library and digitize project and in terms of skills, the library should employ train and equip personnel with necessary skills to support the technology. It may therefore be more profitable for Nigerian libraries that have already been digitized rather than embarking on fresh digitization, except in case of local history and memorable Akintunde (2006).

Provision of System Librarian to take care of e-resources

Digital information system management refers to the overall competencies, knowledge know-how, skills and attitudes necessary to create, organize, store, retrieve and disseminate digital information in e-libraries for resource sharing among other duties. System librarian with acquired proficiency skills can play meaningful and leading role in networked information society of the millennium. He will add values and can make e-library truly useful and user friendly. Therefore, to describe the role of the e-libraries according to Ogunsola (2004), the following concepts are considered. Digital Library Act as Symbolic Human Machine, Navigation and filtering, Multimedia search. On-line cataloguing and indexing continue to evolve. The digital/information librarian's role is increasingly towards offering consultancy to the users in the efforts in providing digital reference, navigating, searching and retrieval of digital information through web documents that span the universal digital library. Digital librarians are therefore, an embodiment of digital information professional who ensures that digital libraries are used effectively and with ease. The adoption of the new technology, methodology and learning paradigms with which librarian and library services must be followed.

Functions of a Virtual Library

The function of a Virtual Library is to ensure the systematic development of the means to collect, store, and organize information and knowledge in digital form and to provide easy and affordable access to it around the clock from various locations. In general, a virtual Library should:

1. Provide ICT-based access to a range of digitally available publications for educational purposes available in the public and from other sources.
2. Provide access to distance education materials;
3. Contribute to the efficient delivery of information to students, researchers and teachers of all universities and other educational institutions;
4. Strengthen communication and collaboration between and among the researchers, library and educational communities, nationally, regionally and internationally.
5. Offer lifelong learning opportunities.

Advantages of Virtual Libraries

1. Virtual libraries provide immediate access to a range of resources not available in physical collection. Virtual libraries allow unprecedented access to information and ideas. "A paradigm shift takes place from libraries as facilitators of access to all kinds of information, provided by anybody, located anywhere in the world, accessible at any time".
2. Physical libraries operate with designated hours, virtual libraries are available anytime and anywhere where there is internet connection.
3. Virtual libraries offer opportunities for learning that are not possible in their physical counterparts. Virtual libraries complement other virtual learning

environments, such as those provided in distance education and courses offered online, and like virtual learning environments, providing flexibility of time and place.

4. Virtual libraries often contain more up-to-date information than physical collections. Their sources can be searched more efficiently than those in physical libraries, and the information they contain can be updated more frequently.
5. Well-designed virtual library collections are organized and managed to increase productivity and efficiency of the users.
6. Virtual libraries empower the users and promote informal learning.
7. Virtual libraries can be customized for particular schools, grades, and subjects. This variety of formats in presentation and navigation is quite different from that of a physical library.

Thus, virtual libraries support specific communities of interest, thereby, creating global communities of learners. The main function of a library website is to inform library users about the library information and services. This was the concepts behind the design of the early library website as reported by blummer (2007), who noted that the early 1990s website were tool of communication, providing the university community with information about the collections and services available in the physical library. These types of information still remain pertinent and should be available in any effective library website. As libraries continue to make greater use of the internet, librarians now use website as a means to provide web based library and information services, as well as facilitate access to both print and non-print resources. Most academic institutions will have the link to the library home page very visible at the institutions home. Bao (2000) posited that the location of a library home page link on its parent institution's home page will determine the visibility of a library and will affect the effective use of the library online. The home page is the most important page on most websites, and gets more page views than any other page. Library home page contains vital information which also serves as a gate way to the information resources and services the library provides its patron. It starts with navigational tools like menus that enable users to scan menu options until they recognize what they are looking for. Navigational aids or tools define all links that can help users to make better use of the website and to find relevant information in a quick and simple manner. Providing users with good navigational tools is done by structuring contents to facilitate the journey regardless of path chosen. Supporting the good use of navigational tools farnum (2002), also asserts that the top navigation bar can be used for global navigation and includes links to resources that users would want to access from anywhere in the site, while side bars are often used for local navigation, which show the users what topics are nearby within a division of the site.

In addition to navigational tools an effective library website will have links to the library online catalogue where available as well as an internal search engine. Internal search engine has been identified as another helpful navigational aid for library sites that present

large amount of information, as it allows users to locate information at the sites quickly and easily. Placing a help web page link in the upper right corner of every page will help users when they need help (Jasek 2004). The importance of search engine on a website is collaborated by Nielson and Tahir (2002), and Wright (2004) who posited that search feature is one of the two items users seek immediately upon entering the site.

An effective library website use links to facilitate access to library's holdings, including subscribed databases, institutional based, licensed databases, course reserved and open access data bases. According to Madhusudhan and Nagabhushabam (2011), the web-based reference services provided by libraries includes electronic document delivery services, electronic current awareness services, electronic selective dissemination of information services, we-based reference tools, electronic research guides, virtual reference. By late 1990s many American libraries moved their collections and services onto the library website (Blummer, 2007). However, in a study conducted on the 'provision of online information services by academic libraries in Nigeria' Gbaje (2007) reported that no academic library in Nigeria provided its patrons with the following web based services; online information literacy instruction, online course serve, online reference services, remote access to online catalogue, weblog and online document delivery. In an attempt to provide additional value added service libraries have introduce web 2.0 services and facilitate access to this services through their library websites. Web 2.0 has made it possible to invite web users to share, collaborate, and contribute in the creation of information instead of the traditional one-way form of web authoring. Abram (2005) posited that web 2.0 is the collection of server-based solutions that have allowed the web to become a publishing platform. Supporting this assertion, Liu (2008) also stated that the website is no longer just information about the library and online collection services but a virtual place that may be customizable, allow for personalization and remix ability, invite user's engagement and interaction, and support online communities through tools such as blogs, wikis, and tagging. Hanson and Cervone (2007) identified Wiki, blog, Really Simple Syndication (RSS), Instant Messaging (IM) and podcast as the prominent Web 2.0 tools for academic Libraries. The importance of using web 2.0 by the library was listed to include collaboration, customization, communication, knowledge generation, and sharing.

Conclusion

Virtual libraries are facing big challenges in their efforts to build a foundation for sustainable, on-going effort. To develop a successful Virtual Library System several components such as, library-based, open and cooperatively developed content and software within a centralized, focused, cooperative organizational efforts are necessary. Virtual library has to support the users' community, by providing accurate, reliable, and affordable access to all the desired scholarly and educational electronic/internet resources. Several virtual libraries have claimed the vital new areas in scholarly and

educational information service by way of technological provisions. Virtual libraries are the new version of the libraries for the future. The development of virtual library will take place when libraries transform themselves into three dimensional electronic information centres. It will be possible when data storage, data representation and image processing technologies mature to cope with the great amounts of graphically represented data held by the virtual libraries.

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