

Chapter 72

Information–Seeking Behaviour of Users in the Digital Libraries’ Environment in Sub–Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the issue of information-seeking behaviour of users in the digital libraries’ environment in sub-Saharan Africa. Information-seeking behaviour may be shaped by the environment in which users seek information. A digital library is still relatively new in sub-Saharan Africa and there is not much known about how the digital library environment may shape the information-seeking behaviour and/or information needs of users. The chapter explores the concept of digital libraries and the nature of the collections and services of digital libraries in comparison to traditional libraries. The chapter also discusses what a library is, the services provided by libraries, and the differences between a traditional library and a digital library. Covered in the chapter also is a brief history of digital libraries. Digital literacy as a factor which may shape the information-seeking behavior of users in a digital library environment is also discussed in the chapter. Information literacy has changed drastically. The digital information literacy that may play a role in socio-economic development in sub-Saharan Africa is no longer the literacy defined as the ability to read and write at a basic level and sign a document. As society is moving from information age to digital age, new definitions of digital information literacy are evolving which include how to access information in digital formats, and how to evaluate information and use it appropriately. Digital information literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning and is common to all disciplines, to all learning environments and to all levels of education. In sub-Saharan Africa, levels of digital information literacy are low due to numerous factors which are also explored in this chapter. Development of digital information literacy in sub-Saharan Africa has been slow compared to the development of information and communication technologies in the region. The chapter discusses the extent to which low levels of digital literacy in sub-Saharan Africa may also be responsible for shaping information-seeking behaviour of users in a digital library environment. The chapter concludes that the major differences between the two types of libraries are mainly to do with technology, rather than a fundamental change in the way libraries operate. This is because digital libraries are still libraries which largely share the same objectives and purposes of the traditional libraries.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3417-4.ch072

INTRODUCTION

Digital libraries are still relatively new in the sub-Saharan Africa region and in the larger Africa. It is still not clear to the users of digital libraries in sub-Saharan Africa whether the new models of libraries are the same or different from the traditional libraries. It is equally not clear the extent to which the digital library environments shape the information-seeking behavior of users in sub-Saharan Africa. According to (Wells, 1938) the concept behind digital libraries has its roots in libraries disseminating 'knowledge for all'. Digital libraries have been known to break the barriers of geographical boundaries to give access to information to all domains and communities (Fox, Suleman, Madalli, & Cassel, 2004). Access to information to all domains and communities in Sub-Saharan Africa is a major challenge. Digital libraries may hold hope for users in sub-Saharan Africa for enabling all to access information though they also have their own challenges unique to sub-Saharan Africa.

Information-Seeking Behavior

Information-seeking behaviour as a broad term that encompasses a set of actions taken by individuals or groups to show their information need, seek information, check and select the information to fulfil their information needs ((Pareek & Rana, 2013). Digital libraries largely depend on information and communication technologies. Modern modes of technology have changed the information environment in which researchers access information and work. (Ge, 2010). Ge further argues that the pursuit of knowledge has been revolutionized, mainly through the vast expansion of data accessible via the Internet. There is no doubt that increased knowledge of the information-seeking behaviours and information environment in which researchers access information is crucial to meeting their information needs. Knowledge of information-seeking behaviour and the environment may enable librarians to design information services which may satisfy information needs of users.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the younger generations seem to have more familiarity with information and communication technologies than the older generations. This perhaps may be applicable everywhere in the world. Dresang (1999) thinks that the environment for youth has changed dramatically in the digital age, but to date, the paradigm for studying the information-seeking behaviour of the youth remains static. Researchers must seek out 'with new eyes' productive informal information seeking behaviour of the youth population. Apparently, the digital environment has drastically shaped the information-seeking behaviour of the youth. Dresang contends thus:

Our current research paradigm suggests that adults study information-seeking strategies of youth for the benefit of youth. We conduct research in situations we create to which youth often come compelled as a "last resort," in which youth may be neither comfortable nor competent, and in which we define the terms of success.... adults might more appropriately study the tactics of already-engaged and experienced youth in informal information-seeking situations to predict successful negotiation for all information seekers. (Dresang, 1999, p. 1123)

Digital Library

What is a digital library and how different is it from the "traditional library?" The term "digital library" seems to be a problematic one (Borgman, 2003) in the sense that as yet, there is no universally accepted

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