

**Вошли ли африканские библиотеки  
в информационное общество и общество знания?  
Are African Libraries in the Knowledge and Information Society?**

**Чи увійшли африканські бібліотеки  
до інформаційного суспільства та суспільства знань?**

*Деннис Очолла*

*Университет Зулуленда, Квандангезва, ЮАР*

*Dennis Ocholla*

*University of Zululand, Kwandangezwa, South Africa*

*Денніс Очолла*

*Університет Зулуленда, Квандангезва, ПАР*

Приводятся концепции общества знания и информационного общества. Определяются роли, функции, проблемы и возможности библиотек в рамках общества знания и информационного общества как в теоретическом, так и в практическом аспекте. Приводятся примеры из африканского библиотечного сообщества и из практики работы конкретных библиотек. Делается вывод, что африканские библиотеки вполне могут интегрироваться в общество знания и информационное общество.

**Ключевые слова:** общество знаний, информационное общество, информационный век, Африка, библиотеки

This paper highlights the concepts of knowledge and information society; interrogate the roles, functions, challenges and opportunities of libraries in the knowledge and information society by using both theoretical and practical discourse based largely on African library environment examples and case studies. Concludes that libraries in Africa can be engines of knowledge and information society.

**Keywords:** knowledge society, information society, information age, Africa, Libraries

Наведено концепції суспільства знань та інформаційного суспільства. Визначено ролі, функції, проблеми та можливості бібліотек у межах суспільства знань та інформаційного суспільства як в теоретичному, так і в практичному аспекті. Наведено приклади із африканської бібліотечної спільноти та практики роботи конкретних бібліотек. Зроблено висновки, що африканські бібліотеки цілком можуть інтегруватись до суспільства знань та інформаційного суспільства.

**Ключові слова:** суспільство знань, інформаційне суспільство, інформаційна епоха, Африка, бібліотеки

## **1. Introduction**

I would like to divide my presentation into four sub-themes. First, I wish to highlight and contextualize the concepts 'knowledge society' (KS) and 'information society' (IS) in order to show how a library space functions in the KS/IS social environment. Second, I intend to provide an overview of libraries in Africa, and then highlight the challenges and note the opportunities for libraries in today's information age. Finally, I will give some concluding remarks and suggest an agenda for the future.

Society has significantly transformed from hunting, agrarian, industrial, post-industrial – information and knowledge societies or third industry or «Third Wave» as Alvin Toffler (1991) puts it. When Daniel Bell conceived the concept Post-Industrial Society he also strongly referred to Information Society (including a mention of knowledge society.), as discussed extensively by Duff (1998) and Moodley (2004) in the 1960's. He came across tendencies such as the 'post-industrial workforce', information flows and the computer and 'information revolution' or «Network Society» as Manuel Castells (1996,1997,1998) put it in his seminal work, «The Information Age». This latter stage (the knowledge and information society) has delivered to contemporary society, through the extensive use of Information and Communication Technology (ICTs), a global/ wired / telematic society increasingly interconnected or networked through a seamless information flow and knowledge sharing that some consider scary and others extremely enlightening. The information and knowledge society is increasingly shaping the present and future societies. There are two strands of definitions of information society and knowledge society. One is

generic, macro and inclusive. Another is specialized, micro, exclusive and largely technocentric. In order to better define the concept information society (that I also feel replicates a lot with knowledge society) I will first go for an inclusive/macro definition to quote the sentiments expressed at the World Summit on Information Society in Geneva and Tunis (2005) by the World leaders.

«information society, is a society that uses digital revolution in ICTs for free flow of information, ideas and knowledge through the internet, wireless technologies and libraries in order to «build a people-centered, 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».

Put another way(micro), the information society is:

«... society which makes extensive use of information networks (meaning systems of IT hardware and services which provide users with delivery and retrieval services in a given area, e. g. electronic mail, directories and video services) and IT (Information technology meaning the hardware, software and methods used for the automatic processing and transfer of data, and skills needed to use them), produces large quantities of information and communication products and services, and has a diversified content industry» (Nassimbeni, 1998:154, citing McColgan of Finland's Council of State).

The concepts of knowledge society and information society are closely related. In Bells words, «knowledge is that which is objectively known, an intellectual property, attached to a name or a group of names and certified by copyright or some other form of social recognition (e. g. publication)» (Bell, 1973:176). I find UNESCO's World Report, «Towards Knowledge Societies» (2005), very comprehensive in defining and contextualizing knowledge societies, where they argue that they are «about capabilities to identify, produce, process, transform, disseminate and use information to build and apply knowledge for human development» (2005: 27). KS is viewed as a source of development because of the recognition and acknowledgment of the importance of human rights, freedom of expression and empowerment, and fight against poverty. They are also viewed in terms of 'digital solidarity' geared towards the bridging of the 'digital divide' caused by limited access to infrastructure or connectivity, affordability, and/or exclusion because of inappropriate 'content'. Libraries, particularly academic libraries, have been popularly referred to as 'temples' of knowledge for centuries. They are therefore expected to play a fundamental role in today's society, mainly by changing their roles and functions. I believe that libraries cannot effectively do this without recognizing the right for people to be informed and the right for one to express one self. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which provides common standards for all nations and information workers, Article 19 stipulates that: «Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers» (UNDHR 1948), Furthermore, Article 27 stipulates that « Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and share in scientific advancement and its benefits». Recognizing such fundamental rights would mean defining and understanding the knowledge society and information society as inclusive as opposed to exclusive and non discriminatory, and would mean not relegating the benefits of IS and KS only to the information elite (as it generally tends to happen due to the 'digital divide'). There is a growing amount of preparedness by African governments to actively partake in the knowledge and information society. For example, most recently has been Africa's endorsement of the World Summit on Information Society resolutions and declarations at both Geneva in 2003 and Tunis (2005), which sketched the way forward in the development of an information and knowledge society. Governments' commitment to an information and knowledge society is instrumental, I believe, by way of supporting libraries to spearhead its development.

## **2. Challenges and Opportunities**

The major challenge for libraries in our society is to reach as many people as possible and make a difference in their lives. I would like to enumerate and highlight a few other challenges.

- Access to information is inhibited by inequalities, some of which originate from marginalisation by geographical location, culture, physical status, race, gender, religion, economic-poverty, political displacement, and freedom of expression.

- Access requires the provision of appropriate content, infrastructure, and bridging the ‘knowledge divide’ by all means possible. Issues stemming from lack of content in indigenous languages, adult education, lack of school libraries and school library policies, and whether and how information literacy should be conducted by libraries also inhibit access
- The technology provision, acquisition, sustainability, use, and impact is also crucial. Is relevant or appropriate technology available in libraries? How far are the libraries networked or tapping into virtual global knowledge? Internet access (essentially a library within a library or virtual library) within libraries has become a major service that libraries increasingly provide and should provide because such access creates a window through which individuals can access virtual knowledge resources, and the window increases the libraries’ capacity to offer more diversified information while encouraging the use of other sources and promoting interest in the library.
- The creation of a learning society by promoting lifelong learning through adult education and training, information literacy, and encouraging apprenticeship and voluntarism is needed. Lifelong learning also means encouraging research, innovation, and publication. Essentially, research creates new knowledge by interrogating existing knowledge and practices and improving products, services, activities and programmes. Innovation is fundamental in the provision of new and unique services or competitive products.
- Finally, there is the problem of content, such as local or indigenous knowledge. Good content should be sensitive to language and cultural diversity and knowledge, and represent local content relevant to community needs. Would the engagement of publishers, writers, distributors, creating local repositories and translations improve on content?

I have recognised some of these challenges from within the context of information accessibility to the marginalised community (Ocholla 2006) and benchmarking library services, performance measurement, policy, adult literacy, information literacy, community libraries and community resource centres. The issue of telecentres (see Snyman and Snyman 2003) is also worth revisiting for facilitating access to ICT.

Bridging the digital divide is both a challenge and an opportunity. Opportunities lie in the availability of publication initiatives that are free of charge, as highlighted by Derek Law (2003:18), as follows:

- ‘Electronic Information For Libraries’ (EIFL), sponsored by the Open Society Institute (OSI), whose aim it is to provide «low–cost access research materials identified by the consortia for North-South transfer as well as encouraging lateral transfer of materials between developing countries and countries in transition». (Law, 2003:18)
- The Health Internet Work Access to Research Initiative (HINARI), which aims to «provide free or very low cost access to scientific journals in biomedical and related social sciences to public institutions in the developing countries».
- The International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) PERI Programme (see [www.inasp.info](http://www.inasp.info)), set up by the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) in 1992 and 2002 by PERI. It has four components (i. e. the acquisition of full text journals, and databases and document delivery; regional and national online services for the dissemination of local research; ICT skills for information literacy; and publishing competencies) aimed at «creating a sustainable environment for the dissemination of research literature».
- The Directory of Open Access Journals – DOA (see [www.ldoaj.org/articles/about](http://www.ldoaj.org/articles/about)) – whose aim it is to increase the «visibility of and simplify access to all open access scientific and scholarly journals whose content is governed by either peer review or some other forms of quality contro»’.
- Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) – a model for cooperative electronic publishing in developing countries that «makes available 164 full text scientific journals». The idea is that the increasing availability of publication initiatives should enable libraries to bring virtual and digital libraries to their libraries and improve collection and accessibility.
- Open Access Initiatives (OAI), where libraries are expected to play a crucial role in the development or hosting of institutional repositories and enable rapid access to scholarly information and knowledge.

Thus, libraries changing role is to participate in scholarly communication by supporting electronic scholarly knowledge products and in so doing, provide and organise digital content through institutional repositories. There is evidence, for example, in Australia (see Horwood, Sullivan, Young and Garner, 2004) and I believe also in South Africa, where such initiatives focusing on the role of libraries in the development of institutional repositories and the benefits arising from the changing functions of libraries (including technical requirements) are represented. I believe that OAI has many advantages stemming from its ability to increase relevancy, use, recognition, advocacy and promotion, accountability, visibility (see Onyancha, 2007a) and access in modern times. It is recognised that such initiatives go hand in hand with issues and knowledge of metadata, communication skills, advocacy and promotion, intellectual property, peer review, mediation, costs, and preservation.

The changing roles of libraries will also create what Jennifer Rowley terms «*knowledge management – the new librarianship...*» (Rowley, 2003). Rowley (2003:438-439), sees the present-future role of the librarian as divided into three areas (at the very least): managing knowledge repositories (e. g. evaluation, filtering, signposting, structuring, facilitating access, repackaging and presenting knowledge); facilitating knowledge flow (e. g. gate keeping); and communication and leveraging value generating capacity (integrates all three).

## Conclusions

Libraries in Africa could potentially spur on the current knowledge and information society. For example, South Africa is endowed with a strong economy and extensive information resources, systems and services (see Mostert, 2005); and has one of the fastest growing information and communication technology infrastructures in Africa. The opportunities for libraries in the information society in Africa lie in information content diversification for inclusivity by, among other things, recognizing cultural and linguistic diversity, and making use of the multiple channels through which one can access information. Africa has burgeoning higher education institutions, and the continent's sensitivity to transformation, redress and equity is growing. Academic libraries [libraries within higher education institutions] in Africa that are relatively well resourced (for example in terms of staffing) should champion modern service delivery in the information society. A strong role can also be played by professional associations at national and regional levels (such as SCECSAL). We believe that regional professional activities support and boost weak national associations through information and knowledge sharing and benchmarking based on the recognition of similarities rather than differences. For example, the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA), which recently (2007) hosted IFLA's annual conference in Durban, is the largest and arguably fastest growing library and information association in Africa. There is tangible interest being shown by government to support library and information development through the adoption and implementation of various policies, legislations and management structures (such as NCLIS in South Africa). The library and information research community is also very vibrant (see Ocholla and Ocholla, 2007 and Onyancha, 2007b), meaning that the country has the potential to transform the challenges cited into opportunities. These achievements should be recognized in order for good practices to be widely supported, shared and implemented.

Doors should be wide open in Africa, as it has occurred in recent years through regional (e. g. SADAC) and continental (e. g. NEPAD) or international (e. g. World Summit on Information Society) initiatives and collaborations, in government and civil society. to discuss, plan, implement and evaluate social interventions and enable libraries to benefit from sustainable, healthy and appropriate practices in order to proactively spearhead the growth of the knowledge and information society. It is worth singling out projects and activities that deal with information literacy, adult education, community information services within public libraries, school and public library services, ICT access and the use of wireless technology, the Open Access Initiative (OAI), institutional repositories, and the review and adoption of the resolutions of the «World Summit on Information Society»; to guide future library development. These should coincide with poverty alleviation, the promotion of freedom of access and freedom of expression, and a general literacy campaign. Suffice to say that a model for engineering the knowledge and information society by libraries is urgently required both within and outside the outlined framework. African libraries, through collaboration and knowledge/ information sharing (as it happens in South African libraries) have the potential to model the libraries of tomorrow. While recognizing and modifying

the resolutions of the Geneva (2003) and the Tunis (2005) World Summit on Information Society for future reference, a library charter on knowledge and information management in Africa within the framework of NEPAD, even on a small scale, should be planned and implemented.

I wish to recommend that we modify and adopt the resolutions of the Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005) World Summit on Information Society in the belief that a library charter on knowledge and information management in Africa would benefit strongly from the Summit's document (see: <http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/7.html>).

Notes. Full paper in PDF, 5700 words, can be obtained from the author or visit <http://www.lis.uzulu.ac.za>

## References

- Bell, D. (1974) *The coming of Post-Industrial Society: A venture in Social Forecasting*, Basic Books, New York
- Castell, M. 1998. *The information age: Economy, society and culture. Vol. III: End of Millennium*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Castell, M. 1997. *The information age: Economy, society and culture. Vol. II: The power of identity*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Catells, M. 1996. *The information age: Economy, society and culture. Vol. 1: The rise of the network society*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Duff, A. S. (1998) Daniel Bell's theory of the information society. *Journal of Information Science*, 24(6),373-393
- Horwood, L., Sullivan, S., Young, E and Garner, J. 2004. OAI compliant institutional repositories and the role of libraries. *Library Management*, Vol. 25, No. 4/5,170-176.
- Ikoja-Odongo, Robert(2008) *School Libraries in Africa*. In, *Global Library and Information Science* Munchen, K. G. Saur Verlag, IFLA Publications( Pre-print)
- Issak, Aissa [compiler]. 2000. *Public libraries in Africa: a report and annotated bibliography*. Oxford: International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP). [Online]. Available: <http://www.inasp.ac.uk>. Accessed 1 May 2006.
- Jordan, Pallo. 2007. *Budget vote speech delivered by Minister of Arts and Culture, Dr PZJordan, MP, National Assembly*. [Online] <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2007/070612345.htm>. Accessed 15 February 2008
- Kigongo-Bukenya, Isaac (2008), *Public Libraries Provision in Africa. The past and the Future*. In, *Global Library and Information Science* Munchen, K. G. Saur Verlag, IFLA Publications ( Pre-print)
- Law Derek, (2004) Bridging the digital divide: a review of current progress. *Library Management*. Volume 25, Number ½,17-21.
- Mchombu, K. J. (2004) *Sharing Knowledge for Community and Transformation: A Handbook 2*. Quebec, Oxfam Canada [Online] Available: [http://www.oxfam.ca/publications/sharing\\_knowledge.htm](http://www.oxfam.ca/publications/sharing_knowledge.htm) Accessed 20 April 2008
- Minishi-Majanja, MK & Ocholla, DN. (2004). Auditing information and communication technologies in library and information science education in Africa. *Education for Information*, 22:187-221.
- Moodley, Sagren (2004), *The 'Information Society': A critical Assessment*. *Mousaion* 22(2),330-254
- Mostert, B. J. (2001) *African public library systems: a literature survey*. LIBRES:library and Information Science Research Electronic Journal Volume 11 Issue 1; March 31[Online] Available: <http://libres.curtin.edu.au/libres11n1/mostert.htm>. Retrieved on 25th Apr 2006
- Mostert, Janneke(2008), *Special Libraries in Africa. Their Status, Development and Challenges*. In, *Global Library and Information Science* Munchen, K. G. Saur Verlag, IFLA Publications ( Pre-print)
- Mostert, JB (2005) *Parliamentary information sources, systems and services in South Africa*. *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science* Vol. 71 (1),51-63
- Nassimbeni, M. (1998), *the information society in South Africa: from global origins to local vision*. *South African Journal of Library and Information Science*, Vol. 66 (4):154-160.
- Nassimbeni, Mary and May, Bev. (2006) *Adult education in South Africa public libraries: a profile of activities*. *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science*, Vol. 72 (1),12-26

- Ocholla Dennis and Bothma Theo (2007) Trends, challenges and opportunities for LIS education and training in Eastern and Southern Africa, *New Library World*, Vol. 108, N. 1/2,55-78
- Ocholla, Dennis N. and Ocholla Lyudmilla (2007) Research in Library and Information Science in South Africa: an analysis of journals research output from 1993-2006. *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science*, Vol. 73(2),109-118
- Ocholla, Dennis N. (2006) Information accessibility by the marginalized communities in South Africa and the role of libraries. In. Susanne Seidelin and Thomas Skov Jensen, (Eds), IFLA/FAIFE Theme Report, World Report Series, Vol. IV, 15-27[Online]. <http://www.lis.uzulu.ac.za/publications.html>. Accessed 15 October 2006
- Onyancha, O. B. (2007a). A Webometric study of selected academic libraries in eastern and southern Africa using a link analysis approach. *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science*, Vol. 73(1): 25-39
- Onyancha, O. B. (2007b). LIS research in Africa: how much is it worth? A citation analysis of the literature, 1986-2006. *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science*, 73(2):95-108
- Onyancha, Omwoyo Bosire and Minishi-Majanja, Mabel K. (2008), Trends and Development of LIS Education and Training in Sub-Saharan Africa. In, *Global Library and Information Science*. Munchen, K. G. Saur Verlag, IFLA Publications (Pre-print)
- Raju, Reggie and Raju, Jaya (2008). The Current State of University Libraries in Africa. In, *Global Library and Information Science* Munchen, K. G. Saur Verlag, IFLA Publications( Pre-print)
- Rosenberg, D. (ed.) (1997). *University libraries in Africa: a review of their current state and future potential*. Three volumes. London: International African Institute
- Rowley, J. (2003), Knowledge management – the new librarianship? From custodians of history to gatekeepers to the future. *Library Management*, Vol. 24, No. 8/9,433-440
- Snyman M. and Snyman, R(2003) Getting information to disadvantaged rural communities: the centre approach. *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science* Vol. 69 (2),95 -107
- Sturges, P., Neill, R. (1990): *The Quiet Struggle. Libraries and Information for Africa*. London. Mansell Publishing Limited
- Toffler, A. (1991), *The Third Wave*. London:Bantam Books. [Also see Online] <http://www.skypoint.com/members/mfinley/toffler.htm>
- Underwood, P. 2002, South Africa: A case Study in the Development Through Information Literacy. White paper prepared for UNESCO, the U. S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, and the National Forum on Information Literacy, for use at the Information Literacy Meeting of Experts, Prague, and The Czech Republic
- UNESCO World Report(2005), *Towards Knowledge Societies*. Paris, UNESCO Publishing. [Online] <http://www.Unesco.org/publications>. Accessed 10 October 2006
- UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 1994. <http://www.ifla.org/VIIIs8/unesco/eng.htm>
- United Nations(1948), *Universal Declaration of Human Right*. [Online]. <http://www.udhr50.org/UN/default.htm> Accessed 14 October 2006
- World Summit on Information Society, Geneva 2003-Tunis 2005. [Online] <http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/7.html>. Accessed 11 October 2006