VIRTUAL LIBRARY: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS
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ABSTRACT
The work examines the concept of virtual library, its evolution and functionalities. Reasons for virtual libraries and their advantages over the traditional library system are highlighted. The goals of virtual library as well as its drawbacks were also examined. The concept of virtual class and its modus operandi were considered, as well as the intellectual property issues. Although virtual libraries have excellent electronic information resource, it is found not to be a total replacement for the traditional library system.

Keywords: E-Library, Virtual Class, World Wide Web, Information Technology.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Although traditional libraries are necessarily filled with numerous rows of shelves burgeoning weighty tones, they are still dynamic growing information centers that provide access to rich materials. Modern libraries are equipped with rows of computer workstations in addition to book multimedia storage. Trained personnel make themselves readily available to assist library users in finding materials of their needs. The demanding nature of the work has driven librarians to rapid growth in their chosen profession. Modern technology has thus made it possible for libraries to provide users with virtual services. Although still in its developmental stage, virtual libraries are fast becoming global data banks for researchers, providing them with the ability to access any information of their need, anywhere in the world. This include articles from electronic journals (e-journals), e-newspapers, e-newsletters, as well as entire books, movies, recordings, and other mixed-media resources. Academic and well equipped public libraries are already partnering with publishers to provide virtual resources to their users, providing reliable and exhaustive information such that researchers can sit right in their homes and offices and see, and hear what they want with or without the aid of a librarian.

The establishment, management and support of virtual libraries require at all stages, skillful knowledgeable support of library staff (www.glis.utexas.edu). Libraries that engage in virtual services must therefore provide with the requisite knowledge and skill. In fact it is fast becoming part of life school curricula, especially in developed countries. It is sometimes necessary, especially in academic libraries, to merge virtual library services with the existing print-based services in other to provide cohesive information service to the user.
2.0 THE CONCEPT OF VIRTUAL LIBRARY

Virtual library, otherwise called e-library, is a system of documenting information by which the accesses information that resides solely in electronic format on computer networks without respect to any physical location of the information. It is generally independent of the number of electronic information resources or number of simultaneously accessing users. A virtual library is a creation of the convergence of telecommunication and computer technologies, which explains why it is sometimes called electronic or digital library. Terms such as desktop library, or virtual library, and information superhighway are sometimes used. All these names attempt to describe the nature and character of the library.

Virtual library services are fast growing with the rapid growth of the medium known as World Wide Web (www). It is now well known that virtual library is invariably the most comprehensive and valuable source of information in the modern world.

Virtual library did not in fact start with the advent of the internet. It had started evolving by mid 1980s. Both private and public libraries had initiated improvements on long term projects to facilitate easy access to their continually expanding hard-copy collections. Libraries were among the first users of alternative media, such as microfiche and microfilm tapes, sound recordings and electronic files which were precursors of today’s online commercial database systems (Behr, 2004). The early technology focused on the creation of electronic card catalogs called Online Public Access Catalogs (OPAC). In 1980, OPAC replaced the traditional card catalogs in many academic, public and special libraries. Libraries also engaged in further cost-effective co-operative efforts to facilitate resource sharing, expand access to specific subjects beyond the walls of an individual library. Technology advances in the growth of electronic databases of subject-specific information such as Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), and the database for Physics, Electronics and Computers (INSPEC). These electronic databases now became important information tools for libraries.

Today the technology industry is fast heralding the death of books, especially as the latest technology, the CD-ROM is introduced. CD publishers now acknowledge that they have been broad-siding by movement towards the internet, with user interest having been transferred to the latest form of virtual library.

2.1 Reasons for Virtual Library

The speed of electronic data processors in accessing information readily meets with the fast trend in modern age. Learning online (e-learning) is preferred to the traditional face-to-face method of teaching. In a class room due mainly to the growing number of students. Reasons of distance, lack of sufficient space and facilities to accommodate large number of students are readily obvious.

There are pedagogical benefits both to the students and the instructor. The ease of updating the content, flexibility of designs, and the possibility of reuse by others constitute significant benefits. E-learning with the aid of improved information technology has facilitated the development of distance learning programs by higher institutions of learning. The students have easy access to the relevant websites and can conveniently engage in study at any time, any place and at their own pace. Since student is allowed to learn at his own pace, his intellectual quotient is readily boosted to a high level.

As a universal library, e-library is ubiquitous. Readers from different locations can simultaneously have a single electronic copy. Copies can be delivered with electronic speed, and can also be re-formatted to meet the needs of the user. Further, the system is user friendly; a person wishing to use e-library need not be a computer wizard, nor must he own a computer and a telephone line, given the rapid spread of cyber space. A researcher needs to know is the website of the organization he wishes to access.

2.0 Virtual Class

http://www.internationaljournalofaist.8m.com/about.html

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This is a method of teaching and organizing lectures outside the four walls of the normal class concept of a lecture room. It involves learning on-line by use of relevant software, internet web services, CD’s and recorded cassettes. It is usually employed when virtual lectures are preferred to traditional face-to-face teaching method, especially in distance or satellite learning programs.

The world wide web provides new opportunities for distance education via the internet. The web, combined with other network tools, can be used to create e-learning environment to bring together community of learners for interactive education. It provides the user with the opportunity to search for and obtain information on any topic of interest from any part of the world. The web and other internet-based collaborative tools have significantly enhanced the ability to train and educate electronically. Whether material is a stand-alone tutorial or a full-fledged on-line workshop, the web provides significant functionalities in transmitting information to the student or researcher as well as providing a forum for exchange. When integrated with tools such as newsgroups, annotation facilities, and teleconferencing, the web can greatly increase students level of involvement in the training environment (Hiltz, 1986). The web provides an effective mechanism for integrating many of these tools into a single interface and thus provides an ideal tool for information which in itself is rapidly changing. The web serves to revolutionise some areas of study through increased opportunities for learning as well as alternative formats for information sourcing.

It is clear that the internet, with the ability to connect people and information around the world, is already making a significant impact on education at all levels. The lofty goal of interconnected global house across remote corners of the world is getting closer. Virtual classroom/libraries are being create educating scientists, engineers, and mathematicians as well as providing a ready-made databank researchers.

4.0 GOALS OF VIRTUAL LIBRARY

Virtual libraries provide relevant information and facilities to meet the users needs. These include:

1. Information of general relevance for undergraduates and post-graduate students such as study handbooks, rules and regulations, etc.
2. Information specific to individual courses known as resources; such as course documents, reading lecture handouts, etc.
3. Message and discussion boards (called forums). There exist forums for each topic, where researchers can post messages, questions and comments about the topic, as well as general форums which can be used for messages of relevance to all students.
4. A tutorial sign-up facility. This enables the user to sign up for tutorials electronically.
5. On-line questionnaires. From time to time, the user may be asked to complete questionnaires either in relation to specific courses or about general aspects of the student experience.

The goals of virtual libraries can thus be summarized as follows (Hsiang et al, 1997):

a. To support better research environments
b. To create self-motivated educational environment.
c. To satisfy curiosity and life-long learning of the general public.
d. To improve teaching and assignments through the incorporation of library materials.
e. To provide opportunities for students and scholars to conduct research from personal computer workstations located right in their homes, offices and laboratories at their own pace and convenience.
f. To offer the reader unique opportunities that are unconfined either by the limited resources in particular traditional libraries or by their schedules of operation.
5.0 THE DRAWBACKS

Although the internet provides thousands of lists that form 'potential' sources of information, finding needed information quickly and downloading in an acceptable format is an altogether different matter. Efforts are however continuously made to ease this difficulty.

The internet is often no more than a temporary host to only the most current information on any topic. Also, on-line courses require much lecture preparations and copy editing time. Time is also needed to create websites.

The creation of a digital library is usually a very challenging and complex task (Philip, 1999). For example, the Library of Congress initiated a digital library project with the goal of converting one million books into digital format that will be accessible on the world wide web. It made a collection of approximately 110 million items with more than 20 million in storage that were yet to be catalogued. An anticipated conversion rate of 5,000 books per year - a mere 5% per cent of the library's collection exclusive of any new acquisitions.

Cost and time are not the only issues. The internet is an information free-for-all, with no standard organizational structure mandate. While traditional library users know that they are likely to find the information necessary to fulfill their needs, virtual library users, on the other hand, can count on no assurance.

Another advantage of traditional libraries is on copyright. Books are rarely found on the digital shelves of virtual libraries.

Finally, while a virtual library can be an excellent electronic information resource, it is not a replace for the traditional library.

5.1 Intellectual Property Issue

Information about books abounds on the internet, but transferring their contents to an on-line environment erases the required distinction between the publisher, writer, owner and the consumer. In the traditional environment, the act of copying and distributing materials is quite easy, and as such creates problems for the already controversial area of 'fair use' rights. Distribution on the internet is global once materials appear in a virtual library, its duplication cannot be controlled. Efforts are however made to achieve some measure of control. It is now possible to lock an on-line document only accessed by the prospective user on request.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Virtual library services have indeed revolutionized research work and have brought the entire community into one research family; especially with the invention of World Wide Web (www). There are many advantages associated with virtual learning. While it is already widely used in the developed countries, the concept of virtual class is yet uncommon to the developing world. It must however be as a welcome alternative to learning for the fast growing human population of the world, and especially for the developing countries.

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