

# Information Professionals in Nigeria: Optimism and Innovation in the Face of Staggering Inadequacies

by Ifeanyi Njoku

## Information Professionals in a Globalized World

The environment in which information professionals have to perform is changing significantly due to economic, social, demographic, political, educational and technological developments. The revolution in computers, communications and content in the past two or three decades has had a dramatic impact on the information profession and information professionals. Society continues to become more paperless, evolving away from formal, paper-based communication patterns to electronic information exchange. Information technology has removed geographic barriers and pushed us toward an information-intensive, networked society. Information professionals in Nigeria and many African countries are faced with this reality, but the ability of individuals and institutions to adjust to the changing information society often depends on where one is practicing. The distinctions between urban and rural information environments are particularly stark.

### Challenges

A survey of information science in Nigeria reveals a catalog of problems and gaps. These include a towering infrastructural inadequacy, seemingly insurmountable problems of human and financial resources, lack of access to necessary information and resources for learning, and poor communication among key players in the library schools in Nigeria.

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The most acute problem arises from an erratic power supply. Personal computer users are the greatest sufferers as very often they cannot justify spending large sums of money (sometimes more than the cost of the computers themselves) on stabilizers and an uninterruptible power supply (UPS). The depth of frustration when the power supply fails three or four times within a two-hour session or remains down for an hour – or for a whole day – has to be experienced to be appreciated.

Restrictions abound in access to government information and people still see information as an exclusive possession that cannot be shared. The culture of reading and writing is at a low point in Nigeria and most African countries, so there is a scarcity of published materials, especially on informatics. Information resources available in Nigeria are mostly imported from Europe, America and Asia in all areas of life.

The challenges facing the profession in Nigeria and Africa as a whole are linked to the following:

- Energy crises – frequent power interruptions restrict all computer-related activities
- Poor communications infrastructure
- Poor funding – information and communication technology (ICT) are available only to a few privileged workplaces in private sector organizations, universities, research institutes and a few government establishments
- Lack of recognition of the profession – until recently, the profession was seen as reserved for people with little or no ambition and for those who were not intelligent enough to gain admission to another course of study

- Poor standardization of the practice of the profession – no accreditation, no best practices
- Lack of credentialing in the profession – anyone can be employed to do the work of a librarian and there is no set standard as to what competencies are necessary to be a qualified information scientist/librarian
- Many library schools teach a traditional library curriculum – information science and technology are still at the budding stage
- Non-acceptance of librarians by some other information professionals
- Ill-equipped workplace – compensation, physical environment and available resources are poor
- Discord among various information professions – clashes in activities, roles and functions often lead to conflicts and bitter rivalry as evidenced by recent acrimonious wrangling between the Nigerian Communication Commission and NigComSat over function and roles

### Reasons for Optimism

There is optimism that, with the inauguration of the Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria in 2004, the profession will be better positioned to achieve giant strides. The LRCN “is charged among other things to ‘determine who is a librarian, maintain discipline within the profession, determine standards of knowledge and skills to be attained by persons seeking to become registered as librarians and maintain a register of librarians.’” [1]

Liberalization of information and communication technology in Nigeria has recorded remarkable changes. Access to information and communication technologies is expanding rapidly with the telecommunication subscriber base hitting over 40 million, just three years after the liberalization. Prices of ICT hardware and infrastructure are crashing rapidly, resulting in more accessibility by a greater number of the people.

Various initiatives by different agencies in the region have resulted in deliberate efforts toward increasing information literacy (which is disappointingly poor among information professionals). Initiatives such as encouraging the use of computers in the workplace and participating in One Laptop per Child [2] along with the launch of the Nigerian satellite early in

the year (NigComSat) are not only widening access but also bringing information closer to the people.

Though the region is still experiencing a significant bandwidth and energy crisis, this conundrum will, we hope, be resolved now that the Nigerian government seems to be paying attention to the problems. New energy policies have been enacted that enable the licensing of independent power providers (IPP) to provide electricity to augment what the federal government can provide. With NigComSat and its licensing by the Nigeria Communication Commission, it is believed that in a short while many connectivity problems in Nigeria will be solved. Internet connectivity will get faster, affordable and more reliable, and telecommunications will be greatly enhanced.

Recently, the Nigerian.ng domain name was made available free of charge to encourage local content on the web. A vital open source community now exists in Nigeria leading to the development of the first Nigerian Linux (Operating System) – distro wazobia Linux. The Nigerian Network Group (NGNUG) is also actively engaged in education, capacity building and development aimed at enhancing network building and expansion nationwide.

Recent pronouncements by the federal government of Nigeria have identified special allowances for information professionals in the new salary structure framework. These increased benefits should have the attendant consequence of encouraging training and capacity development in the information sector.

Information professionals in Nigeria are also networked with others outside the boundaries of our country. There are regional associations, like the West Africa Library Association, for librarians, information scientists and technologists. Many Nigerians in this profession are also gainfully employed outside the country and they have always formed a strong link and network between their countries of abode and information professionals in Nigeria.

Concerted efforts, hard work and the revolution of ICT are gradually bringing the information profession from a fringe vocation back into the mainstream of respected and indispensable professions. But we are not there yet.

NJOKU, continued

### ASIS&T Members Can Be a Tremendous Resource

There are several ways that ASIS&T members can provide benefits to the region either independently or through partnerships with local organizations. Some of the suggestions below require funding, but many can be achieved with only a little energy and time for the benefit of your colleagues in Nigeria:

- Create awareness on updates in the profession through an online forum
- Network with associations for information scientists in Nigeria (and other developing countries)
- Provide general and direct advice on issues related to information science and technology
- Provide online education resources
- Expose information professionals in this region to what is happening around the world through organizing study tours, workshops, conferences which the professionals can attend on subsidized rates

- Invite professionals in Africa to join your associations at reduced membership dues
- Encourage the availability of scholarships in LIS programs and conferences for information scientists from all over the world
- Provide grants to professionals from developing countries for the conduct of research relevant to their environments, such as on access to communication infrastructure and services and impact assessment of information provision on the economy.

Information professionals in Nigeria face great basic challenges in the form of inadequate power and infrastructure, poor credibility within society and information climates that inhibit the sharing of information that would enable the profession, and its contributions to Nigerian society, to advance more rapidly. But there are recent developments that have begun to turn the tide, and expertise from ASIS&T colleagues can help move things forward more deliberately and successfully. ■

### Resources Mentioned in the Article

- [1] Nigerian Library Association. (2006). *Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria*. Retrieved December 8, 2007, from [www.nla-ng.org/nlalrc.html](http://www.nla-ng.org/nlalrc.html)
- [2] One Laptop per Child (OLPC) Foundation. (2007). *One laptop per child*. Retrieved December 8, 2007, from <http://laptop.org/>