

**LIBRARIANS' ROLES IN FACILITATING UTILISATION OF ONLINE REFERENCE RESOURCES FOR EFFECTIVE RESEARCH****By****Ike, Patricia Chika.****and****Ugwuanyi, Linus Ikechukwu.****Abstract**

This paper investigated the role of librarians in facilitating utilization of online reference resources for effective research. The highlights of the paper include examination of online reference sources in which some online reference resources were discussed; utilization of online reference resources, along with some challenges that affect online reference sources utilization; librarian's role in facilitating utilization of online reference resources for effective research were also pointed out. Strategies to be adopted to ameliorate the problems of online reference sources utilization which include consistently improving and finding better ways to provide customized information, guidance and instruction to the users they serve were also examined. It was recommended among other things that librarians should make self-study a part of their daily life so as to be able to take initiatives and devise ways of improving, deepening and refreshing their knowledge and skills of online reference sources, create more awareness and guide users on how best to make use of online reference sources for effective research.

**Key Words:** Librarian, Facilitator, Utilisation, Online reference resources, Effective research.

**Introduction**

The term online reference sources may be understood in different ways using different names. For this study, online reference sources will be seen as digital sources consulted by librarians in providing personal assistance to information seekers in terms of meeting their specific needs. In Library services, failure to locate any required information is capable of leading to user frustration. A satisfied user serves as a public relations officer for the Library. Thus assistance to readers is a great task that embraces an enormous range and variety of activities. Unlike other Library materials, online reference resources /materials are so special in the sense that they contain facts that have been brought together from many sources and

are always organized for easy and quick use. Furthermore, online reference resources are not read from cover to cover but are used as sources of finding precise information. Considering the nature of these resources, the need for persons/Librarians who have the passion for humanity service is very important if only patrons/clienteles could make good use of these rich resources.

It is very unfortunate that some online reference resources stay for long without been consulted. Many Libraries has acquired good number of reference resources, including online reference sources. It is a good thing to acquire these materials but is more important to utilize them. The researchers want a situation where these materials do not have to be wasted without being fully utilized by information seekers in addressing their information needs. The role of Librarian in facilitating the utilization of online reference resources for effective research is the focus of this paper.

### **Online Reference Resources: What are they?**

Reference services are services provided by libraries whereby patrons are assisted in the location and retrieval of information relevant to their information needs. Reference services helps to establish contact between a user and the right document at the right time, thereby saving the time of the user Binti (2012). Also Aboyade in Doo. A.P.et al (2015) opined that reference services is the totality or the culmination of all library activities aimed at facilitating the use of library and its resources.

Reference resources are research tools that can help to provide answers to specific questions or direct you to additional information sources and are designed to be consulted rather than read through. Popoola et al in Makinde (2017) viewed reference sources as those

information bearing materials in print and electronic formats used in the library to answer specific and direct questions just as textbooks, journals, indexes, abstracts, newspapers, CD-ROMS, databases, etc. The print and non-print materials used in satisfying reference queries are called Reference resources. Reference sources can be books, serials, on-line databases or information found on the internet.

The term online reference sources may be understood in different ways using different names. Analysis of various definitions of online reference sources pointed out that they are used interchangeable with electronic, digital reference sources. According to Tofi S.T,et al (2020), they are also known as digital reference sources which are accessed through electronic system and computer networks. Okoro in Tofi S.T. (2020) also viewed online reference sources as reference work published online. They are materials or tools that are used to conduct library reference services online or via computer. Online reference resources provide 24-hour access to information on any subject from any location as they are now easily found via goggle or any other search engines. According to Pressely L. et al, online reference resources can be updated more regularly to be more current, include newer topics, and can go into more details because there is no space constraint. As the name implies, they are materials or resources that can only be referred to for a definite piece of information and cannot be read from cover to cover. Online reference resources are authoritative works that help one locate information about people, facts and ideas. These sources can help one find the date of an important event, major achievement of an individual or organization, or a definition of a term or concept.

Online reference resources can be a great place to start research, especially when starting out with an unfamiliar field because they provide quick authoritative introduction to a

topic. They are also where one return when he needs to look up formulas, facts, definitions and other standard details; they tend to pack a lot of information into simple, easy-to-use package. They offer summarized factual information in a clear and organised way. Abudulhi & Manze in David-West (2019) Stated that the value of online reference resources is inestimable to users who need them to obtain relevant information and are very important tools needed for proper functioning of academic libraries. The provision of online reference services seeks to fulfil the greater mission of the library by helping users to convincingly access and use information through reference resources in the library.

### **Types of Online Reference Resources Needed for Research**

There are many types of online reference sources. According to American society for indexing (2020). They include the following:

**Online Thesaurus:** A good example is ERIC Thesaurus. This is a national education database of bibliographic citation and digests, sponsored by the U.S department of education. This online version of the ERIC Thesaurur provides immediate search access to portion of the ERIC database.

**Online dictionaries:** Dictionaries are like encyclopedia but instead of providing a contextual background to a subject a dictionary list terms in alphabetical order and gives each words meaning.

**Thesauri;** Thesauri provide synonyms for words with related meanings.

**Bibliographies;** Bibliography help provide information about various ideas by providing reference to books, films or recordings that deal with the topic.

**Handbook & Manual;** These contains practical information on o topic.

**Almanacs;** Almanacs include calendars, basic facts, and statistical information about people, places and events.

**Biographical Sources;** Biographies and other biographical sources contain biographical information about individuals such as birth and death dates and major accomplishments in a certain field.

**Atlases & Gazetteers;** Atlases and gazetteers are two sources that you can primarily think about as related to geography. Both provide a variety of maps and historical geographical information.

**Directories;** Directories include information about people or organisations such as addresses, contact information, company services and products and sometimes biographical information or company histories. Due to the internet, directories are less common than they use to be, but sometimes still answer questions you can't answer on the web.

**Online Encyclopedias:** This is use to gather background information and keywords about your research topic. Subject encyclopedia can be especially useful starting points. Typical examples include:

- **Britannica Online:** This offers the world's first online encyclopedia; the Britannica online has the advantage of accessing articles not yet in print. <https://www.eb.com>.
- Amazon.com books website provide access to greater selection of books of over one million titles which is seachable by keywords, author,title or subject; <http://www.amazon.com>

There are also online journals such as Ingentia journals, which provides access to bibliographical information from more than 550 journals from academic press as well as ARL Directory of Electronic journals produced by Association of Research Libraries which gives information on electronic journals and newsletter along with the details of the subscription.

### **Utilization of online reference resources.**

Utilization refers to the extent researchers/library users exploit and benefit from reference resources in different formats to satisfy their information needs. It is also the action of using something, i.e. making practical and effective use of it. The use of online reference sources is aimed at broadening the range of available information resources and adding value to the content by making them accessible through digital means so that researchers, information seekers can access them anytime. Mucai in Makinde (2017) stated that utilization is taking advantage of an item and benefiting from it. Utilization determines the quantity and quality of information obtained and consequently, the quality of research output of users.

Effective utilization by researchers enhances knowledge and overall academic performance. Effective utilization of online reference resources is key to the sources of research in any discipline and librarians play the central role in making information available and accessible. Online reference resources are typically used in two different ways. One use is to get background information on a topic that you are researching. The other way it tends to be used is to find specific facts to support a point being made in a paper.

The importance of information in the life of every living individual seeking solution to problem cannot be overemphasized. This explains why Libraries acquire and organize a

wide range of information materials including online reference resources. Online reference resources are utilized through the guide of Librarians because they are meant for specific and quick information and not to be read all through i.e. from page to page. Despite the vital role that online reference sources play in research, its utilization is still at low extent. This agrees with the findings of Doo et al (2015) in her study that, the study population utilized the available online references resources to a moderate extent and that their purpose of utilization is for research works. Also reviews carried on extant on literature in the area of availability and utilization of online reference sources show that online reference sources is well available but its utilization by information seekers was low, Tofi et al (2020). Going further, Oyewumi et al (2020) found out that library users are aware of existence of online reference resources but that majority of users utilized these resources for knowledge acquisition.

### **Challenges of Effective Utilization of Online Reference Resources**

In spite of perceived availability of online reference sources, their benefits to patrons appear to be hampered by different factors (Aldubuisi and Udo, 2013). Despite the fact that electronic shift has helped to alleviate some of the problems and costs previously associated with printed material, Lucky in Asom, et al(2017) observed that it has also presented its own obstacles, such as those of ICT infrastructure and internet connectivity. Locating and accessing scholarly information online, rather than in print form, requires a very different set of skills and new approaches to academic resources. In most cases most of these digital storage media require apparatus to make them readable. With change in technology, their hardware and software become obsolete thereby shortening their useful life span.

In line with Asom's affirmation, Ugwu et al (2017) opined that there exist some challenges that affect online reference sources utilization. Some of these challenges as pointed out by him include: poor information technology infrastructure development; lack of knowledge on how to use online reference sources; lack of facilities; Lack of time and awareness; large mass of irrelevant information and the need to filter the result from search; delay in downloading the result; inadequate or lack of search skills; inaccessibility of some electronic resources and difficulties in navigating through electronic sources, and high cost of internet connectivity.

The authors also are of the opinion that challenges which border on insufficient computers with internet facilities, incessant power outage, slow internet infrastructure and difficulty in finding relevant information also militates against the utilization of online reference resources by patrons.

### **Librarian's Role in Facilitating Utilization of Online Reference Resources**

Traditionally, librarian is known as a person working in the library building carrying out the tasks like acquiring, organising, presenting the printed documents besides helping the readers in locating the information needed by them. In the last decades of the twentieth century this picture has rapidly changed under the influence of advances in computer and communication fields (Rao, et al., 2001). The role of librarians in utilization of reference resources is as significant as the role of librarian in other academic area. From the beginning of librarianship, the role of the librarian has been defined by the patrons need for human mediation (Wolf, 2010). Librarians have a major role to play in the utilization of reference resources.



- Librarians apply critical thinking skills, emotional intelligence, teaching ability and question analysis to connect the user with appropriate resources and also bring sources and seekers together Chibu et al in (Arua 2015).
- Librarian interprets the online reference resources to users. In the performance of his/her job, the librarian is expected to use the total resources of the library and also the resources available outside. The outside resources may include an individual or an institution or a library/documentation centre/information centre. Due to the availability of modern technology, it is becoming increasingly possible to use outside resources effectively.
- Librarians helps a researcher from coming up with a good question to ask, to finding useful sources, to evaluating websites, further as libraries add electronic version of reference sources, a librarian can help a researcher navigate both the print and online reference collections to find just the piece of information he/she needs.
- Librarians train users to search and retrieve information which is a part of user education in his profession, the demand for searches by librarian have not decreased. End users having been trained and having performed some of their searching process especially on internet. So a more educated user who continues to perform simple searches on his own behalf, returns to the librarian to perform the more complex search, hence librarian perform the role of search intermediary.
- Librarian's acts as facilitator- the availability of electronic documents on internet and the support extended by internet to access these document have recently increased tremendously.

- Librarian put their traditional skill of locating, evaluating and organizing the information to immense use in the creation, development and content filling of a web site, which provides access to external resources, where web pages specific to their discipline are available.
- Librarian can play the role of data mining or sifter- the internet and web provide access to vast information resources, the skilled librarian helps users make sense and order of the resources.

**Recommendation.**

1. Librarian should demonstrate growth and interest through continuing development of professional knowledge and abilities, also to update their skill in the digital world/library. This will help the librarian to better meet the information needs of researchers.
2. Librarian should provide programmes that could train their students on up to-date-21th century skills of information communication technologies (ICTs), this will help to solve the problems of ICTs skill among patrons.
3. The use of online reference sources should be given more attention by librarian during orientation for users. Librarian should create awareness of availability of new e-reference sources or addition of new database for users. This will enhance users' use of the e-resources.
4. Librarians should ensure that digital reference resources are up-to-date so as to encourage patrons to use the resources for research and information acquisition.
5. There should be a digital platform that will help librarians to engage with users in various channels such as Instant Messaging, whatsApp, and Online Chat.

6. The advances in technology have resulted in reference resources users with different expectations along with more access points to information. For librarians to compete with ever evolving virtual media, they must now be prepared to join social media generation because patrons/reference resources users now contact librarians via text messaging, e-mail, facebook, twitter etc.

7. Librarian should not only acquaint themselves but also gain a degree of proficiency to effectively guide and train the information seekers in the use of online reference sources.

## **Conclusion**

The role of librarians in effective utilization of online reference sources cannot be dispersed because they have the necessary qualification and historically the first to attend to the information needs of researchers/information seekers. The importance of online reference sources cannot be overemphasized in research activities; it is highly beneficial and indispensable for researchers/information seekers to achieve their research purposes and information needs. Information seekers satisfaction with online reference resources should be of paramount concern to librarians because poor satisfaction will negatively affect the users' research and subsequent use of the online reference resources.

## **References**

- Arua, G.N. (2015). Encounter with the library: a use of library guide for Schools, colleges, polytechnics and universities. Nsukka; Chuka-Educational.
- Asom, F. & Suleiman, M. (2017). The Incursion of digital information resources and services for effective service delivery in University libraries in Nigeria. *Global best practices in library and information service in contemporary era*.p.232-242.
- Binta, N.A.(2012). Importance of reference services for users. [referencephsusm.wordpress.com](http://referencephsusm.wordpress.com).

- David-west Boma(2019). Availability and Utilization of reference sources in academic libraries. <https://www.researchgate.net>.
- Doo, A, P. & Aliyu, M. (2015). Utilization of reference resources and services by users of Benue state public library Makurdi. *Information Impact*, 6(1) <https://www.ajol.info/https://guides.library.ucla.edu>. p.51-60.
- Makinde, O.T, Aba, J. & Ugah, A.D.(2017). Accessibility and utilization of reference resources by fisheries undergraduate students' of university libraries in North Central, Nigeria. *Journal of applied information science and technology*, 10(3). 48-55. <https://www.jaistonline.org>.
- Online Reference Resources. Roger Williams University Library (2021) <https://rwv.Libguides.com/encyclopedias>.
- Onyam, I.D.(2020). Nature and Characteristics of Reference materials, book chapter in perspectives and issues in reference and information services in libraries, Sochie; Enugu.p.127-136.
- Oyewumi, F.A, Owegboro, B., Opele, J.K. & Adewara, J.O.(2020). Library users satisfaction with the use of digital information services in University of Ilorin, Nigeria. *Jewel Journal of Librarianship*15 (1) 135-147.
- Pressely, Lauren & Yun, Audra Eagle (2013). Sources in research like a librarian. <https://cloud.lib.wfv.edu>.
- Rao, K.N. & Babu,K.H.(2001). Role of librarian in internet and world wide web Environment, 4(1).
- Tofi, S.T. et al. (2020) Utilization of digital reference resources and services by postgraduate students in university libraries in Benue state, Nigeria. *International journal of research and innovation in social science (IJRISS)*, 4(6) 72-84. <https://www.rsisinternational.org>.
- Ugwu, C. I. & Orsu, E. N. (2017). Challenges of utilization of online information resources by undergraduate students: implications for information services. *Library philosophy and practice (e-journal) summer*. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/1668>.
- Wolf, J.A. & Naylor T. D.(2010). The role of the Academic reference librarian in the learning commons. *Digital commons @ university of Nebraska-lincoln*, 50(2). 108-113 <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libraryscience>.