Forestry - an inter-disciplinary subject and its challenges for libraries. Is there a role for web 2.0 in information management?

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Abstract

Forestry is an inter-disciplinary subject that spans across several disciplines like geography, economics, international trade, climate change, biodiversity conservation, agriculture, entomology and engineering etc. Due to the diverse nature of the subject, forest research is no longer confined to forestry research organizations.

In recent years many forest research institutions are adapting their focus of research to meet this trend and FORIG has recently embarked on an exercise to redefine its research focus and redirect its research into areas like International timber trade and its implications for world trade, illegal logging, climate change, biodiversity conservation, improving rural livelihoods and many others. This re-prioritization of research calls for new and relevant sources of information to be identified and new information products created to support the research process. Several technologies are now being used worldwide to process information, some suited to libraries and information centres some not. The rising cost associated with these new technologies calls for new and innovative ways that are geared towards the use of more open source technologies

This paper looks at two products that have been found to be suitable for the forestry research library in Ghana in view of the current changes being embarked on at FORIG. First a bookmark has been registered on delicious in the name of FORIG library to allow researchers to have instant access to current and up to date references in their respective areas of research. A digital repository has also been created to preserve research work and also to increase its visibility, impacts and use by other scientists around the globe using open source software.

Factors that were considered in the selection of these two technologies included the issue of cost, user friendliness, and its interactive nature.

Keywords: information management, web2.0, forest information

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed dramatic and rapid advances in science and technology that has brought about major changes in practically every area of human endeavor.

These advances have facilitated research linkages between and within disciplines in almost all scientific endeavors. (Kayambazinthu, 2008) This is especially true in the field of forestry where many of the complex researchable problems cut across many disciplines like geography, economics, international trade, climate change, biodiversity conservation, agriculture, entomology, engineering and many others that go far beyond the administrative boundaries of
individual research organizations. Collaborative efforts are currently underway in many forestry research institutions to avoid duplication of efforts and to share information resources.

Efforts have recently been initiated at the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana (FORIG) to realign its research focus with current international research trends. As a result new units and divisions have been formed and other divisions have been fused together. In all three new units and nine new divisions have been established. Research groups have been formed and scientists have been equipped with project management skills that are expected to increase the number of ongoing research projects. Researchers are expected to conduct high quality user focused research of international standards and to publish in international and local journals. Consequently, they must have access to reliable and high quality information to support the research process.

Web 2.0 and its application in Libraries

The 21st century known as the information age has witnessed new advances in the management of information; and libraries have been one of the beneficiary groups to take advantage of this. Many libraries adopted the first revolution web, which was often referred to as static in applications such as OPAC and used it extensively in their libraries activities. As the use of web by libraries grew, newer and more dynamic technologies emerged leading into the evolution of the second web or web 2.0.

Web 2.0 technologies are impacting greatly on library activities worldwide. Web 2.0 includes the use of social networks such as delicious, flickr, myspace, facebook etc.; tagging which essentially enables users to create subject headings for the resource on hand; instant messaging, blogs, wikis, RSS feeds and many more. With web 2.0, library collections are changing and are becoming more interactive and fully accessible to users. Library services are also changing, focusing more on the facilitation of information transfer and literacy rather than providing controlled access to it (Maness, 2006). Web 2.0 is user-centered and interactive and provides an opportunity for multi-media and innovative experience for those who use it.

Despite the obvious advantages that web 2.0 has to offer, many libraries especially in the developing countries are yet to fully adopt the applications as normal library procedure. Reasons that may be assigned to this include the fact that the applications that are often referred to as web 2.0 are being used for social interaction outside of libraries and many find it difficult to envisage how these can be applied to libraries and information management. In addition to this, many librarians especially in the developing world are yet to familiarize themselves with the potentials of web 2.0 for managing libraries. It is however becoming obvious that sooner rather than later, libraries especially those in developing countries would have to come to terms with the fact that they cannot remain static in the face of change and therefore every effort would have to be made to adopt some of these technologies for the benefit of their users.

Application of some web 2.0 technologies at FORIG Library

1) Use of Bookmarks

The complexity of forestry research makes it impossible for research activity to be confined to only one institution. This means that several different organizations are also involved in the forestry research process and are generating relevant information that other organizations and researchers can cite to also support their own research agenda. The current changes going on at
FORIG, calls for the use of additional sources of information to support the research process and to ensure that scientists have access to these information sources many of which can be found on the web.

Out of the many social network applications currently available, the FORIG library has decided that a bookmark would be one of the relatively easier applications that it can handle and has consequently registered a bookmark on delicious at http://del.icio.us/foriglib/. Del.icio.us enables users to share web resources with each other. Several web resources that provide similar and relevant information to the research thrusts of FORIG have been bookmarked and will be made accessible to all researchers at FORIG. The main purpose for doing this is to create a one-stop shop for all relevant information to ensure that researchers spend less time in their search for information. Tags are used to help make searches easier. Due to the interactive nature of social bookmarks, it will be possible for users as well as librarians to recommend books, articles and other relevant resources to be made accessible online.

2) Digital Repositories as a source of information for FORIG scientists

A second technology that is being introduced at FORIG is the use of open access software for creating digital repositories. In simplest terms, a digital repository is where digital content, assets, are stored and can be searched and retrieved for later use (JISC 2005). JISC further goes on to explain that a repository supports mechanisms to import, export, identify, store and retrieve digital assets. According to them putting digital content into a repository enables staff and institutions to then manage and preserve it, and therefore derive maximum value from it. Digital repositories may include research outputs and journal articles, theses, elearning objects and teaching materials or research data. A benefit of institutional repositories is that they enable the free sharing of information, encouraging collaboration and the widespread communication of institutional, education and research activity. (JISC, 2005) It has a great potential to impact positively on the quality of research and the learning experience. The obvious benefits and advantages of having a digital repository in an institution is what encouraged FORIG to develop its own repository using open source software.
Discussion:- Using DSPACE technology at FORIG

FORIG has been in existence for close to 50 years conducting high quality and user focused research for the benefit of the country. It has over the years accumulated a high volume of datasets, research and technical reports, journal articles and other resources. Many of these resources are not usually immediately available when required because they may be located in offices with individual scientists. To make these resources available to its own researchers and to remain visible in international circles, it was decided that a digital repository be established to preserve institutional memory at FORIG using open source software. The high cost of proprietary software and the difficulties in maintaining such software was compelling enough for FORIG to decide on using DSPACE technology which is free.

Policies covering the institutional repository are still being developed but initial considerations include the communities to be developed, what kind of material to include and who can submit the resource to the dspace community. The policy will be developed with the help of all stakeholders so that a workable system can be put in place. Other issues to be considered are training of staff, user education and training and marketing and promotion. This will be done side by side during the implementation process.

References