**Minimising information communication challenges in a Parliamentary Library environment; a case for Parliament of Uganda Library**

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## ABSTRACT

*The Members of Parliament (MPs) encounter many challenges namely poor reading culture, information overload and poor IT skills in their everyday life while in search for information. As a result, the library had to devise innovative ways of effectively communicating information to MPs and staff of Parliament. Using some of the existing Telecommunications networks, the library initiated unique communication service aimed at reaching its clients. Information in form of Short Message Service (SMS) were packaged and sent through the e-mail accounts to their mobile telephone lines. The paper discusses the sms innovation the library put in place to communicate information to MPs.*

## INTRODUCTION

Information and communication are integral part of human society. The use of Technology changed the way the human society communicated through the years. For example, the invention of the printing press introduced communication on a massive scale, through newspapers and magazines, though some societies still make use of speech, drama, painting, song or dance to retrieve and/ or present information. More recent technological innovations have increased further the reach and speed of communication. These new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can be grouped into three categories:

• The technologies that use **computers**, which have become indispensable in modern societies for to processing data and saving time and effort,

• **Telecommunications technologies** that utilize telephones (with fax) and the broadcasting of radio and television, often through satellites, and

• **Networking technologies**, of which the best known is the Internet, but which has extended to mobile phone technology, Voice Over IP telephony (VOIP), satellite communications, and other forms of communication that are still in their infancy.

For this paper, I have taken the meaning of the word Communication from the definition published in a book by Green (1996) as "the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information as by speech, signals, writing, or behaviour (pp 21). This is because this definition seems more relevant to my arguments or the situation. The World Bank (2006) reported the contribution that the ICT makes in the world and especially on its *potential for reducing poverty and fostering growth in developing countries*. The most recent technology in Uganda is the mobile telephone technology and the Internet. By connecting people to places according to the World Bank (2006), ICT has played a vital role in national, regional, and global development and holds enormous promise for the future. The Parliament of Uganda Library has acquired a sizable ICT tools that are being used to communicate with the library clientele especially the MPs. However, MPs face a number of challenges in the use of these tools.

**Parliamentary Library**
The Parliamentary Library was established in 1999 with the support from the USAID project. It is now one of the two divisions of the department of Library and Research. The department was created as a result of the restructuring exercise of 2004. The Library generally follows an Open Access arrangement to facilitate users to browse and pick the documents themselves. There is also the Closed Access arrangement, but only applies to rare and valuable documents, and valuable new books or editions on demand. Information requests are addressed to the library staff at the Reference Desk.

Staff and the Members of Parliament are principal users of the Library. *Information requests* from the public have to be approved by the Clerk to Parliament due to security reasons. However, permission or clearance can also be sought from the Public Relations office behalf of the Clerk before the doors are open to the public

The following Information Services therefore are provided: Ready Information Service, Reference Service, Online Information Service, Scanning and Photocopying Service, Borrowing/ Book Loans service. Information services other than those above for Members and Staff of Parliament can be sought from the Subject specialists in the Research Division.

There are 19 personal computers connected to the local area network in the library. Seven of them are used by the library staff. The library enjoys full Internet connectivity. Users can search both Internet and CD-ROMs in the library. Members of Parliament also have access to PCs in their offices through which they can access Internet. The Library becomes a point of connection for MPs for the Internet services when there is the problem of the IT skills among MPs.

A variety of on-line and external sources enrich the information services provided. For example, the Library Information System Koha can be accessed with the help of the library staff at the Reference Desk. Koha is a free open source integrated library system (ILS) for automating a public lending library. It has all of the basic features needed to run a library – including but not limited to handling:

a) A database of library users;
b) An online public access catalogue (OPAC) of the library's holdings;
c) Book budgets;
d) Borrower requests for library items;
e) Issuing books to borrowers and returning books to the collection;
f) Management of subscriptions to periodical publications;
g) Orders from vendors;
h) Transfers between library branches;

The library applies only a, b, d and e above because staff have not mastered all the modules of the system. A consultant is being sought to conduct the training for all the modules.

Koha supports MARC 21 and UNIMARC bibliographic records. MARC is an early markup language for handling the data and metadata that describe library materials.

## COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES
For the last eight years that I have worked in the parliamentary library, I have observed a number of challenges that the MPs face in their everyday life in search for information. Under this section, these challenges have been described.

### Reading Culture in Uganda
Uganda is a land locked country where the total adult literacy rate is 67% according to a report by UNICEF[1].

Literacy is defined in UNESCO's Education for All Global Monitoring Report (EFA GMR) (2005) as "the ability to read and write, with understanding, a short simple sentence about one's everyday life". UNESCO's EFA GMR 2006 put it as "a context-bound continuum of reading, writing and numeracy skills, acquired and developed through processes of learning and application, in schools and in other settings appropriate to youth and adults." While the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) Abstracts (2007) defines literacy as the ability to write and read with understanding in any language. The UBOS Abstracts(2007 quotes the Uganda Household Survey literacy rates as over 69% among persons aged 10 years and above.

MPs are among that category of Ugandans whose literacy rate is over 60% since the entry point to the Parliamentary race according to Article 80(1)(c)) of the Uganda Constitution (1995) requires an equivalent of thirteen (13) years of formal education. The challenge as highlighted by Magara (2005) is that while "Libraries encourage children and parents to have a love for books, to have a love for literature and to want to read and practice the reading skills", it is undermined by their absence as pointed out by Ikoja (2003 )through this excerpt "most municipal councils, districts and schools do not have libraries", so public library came to fill in this vacuum, however, Ikoja (2003) further illustrates that public libraries too are constrained as they; "…are poorly stocked, most of them are in dilapidated state, the information is not up-to-date, some materials are too technical for an ordinary reader and the libraries are under-funded." On the other part, public libraries are inadequate and insufficient due many other reasons. The

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[1] www.unicef.org/infobycountry/uganda_staistics.html

decentralization policy of government that handed the management of public libraries to local governments (LGs) is one of them. LGs have competing interests on their funds. Hansson & Kawalya (2007) show the general problems facing the library development in Uganda and in particular Ikoja (2003) brings out the clear picture. In the two scenarios, having poor library policies and under capitation leads the LGs to re-priotise their development plans. Instead of for example re-stocking the libraries, the need to repair roads or provide health services takes precedence and the library needs foregone. Just looking at the Monthly release to LGs for Wage, Non wage and Development funds for March 2008 in the New Vision Newspaper[2], one finds that the release of funds for Public Libraries for that month was very little.

This implies therefore that those Ugandans who manage to go through the thick and thin to develop love for books get discouraged and de-motivated when they enter the poorly stocked, dilapidated public libraries and hence develop poor reading culture in Uganda, for which Members and Staff of Parliament of Uganda are part. This explains why the MPs have poor reading habits on becoming Members of Parliament. This situation tends to foster a poor reading culture that stays on till someone becomes of age.

Although they have poor reading habits, politicians of which MPs again are part, recognise and appreciate the importance of libraries and more especially the public libraries for which Parliamentary Library is one. It has been found out that "*In relation to the work of the government, politicians confirmed that public libraries provide the ideal institution for both democratic and accountable governance that encourages development and information to the local government systems, disseminate government policies to the public as well as initiating and implementing government programs.*"[3] As a reservoir for information, the parliamentary library plays its rightful role in that direction despite the challenge by our main users- MPs.

**User Information Overload challenges**
Information overload refers to having more information available to us than we can readily assimilate (Carlson[4], 2003). One form in which this challenge manifests itself is in the Computer mediated communication particularly the e-mails. E-mails tend to lack information richness and the social presence. Kimble, Grimshaw & Hildreth (1998) define social presence as the degree to which a communication medium conveys the physical presence and non verbal and social cues of participants, and information richness as the extent to which media are able to bridge different frames of reference, makes issues less ambiguous, provide immediate feedback, transmit multiple cues, involve several senses, transmit language variety, or provide opportunities for learning in a given time interval. Hitherto, this has effect on the users' person to person communication. Looking at the e-mails of MPs when the librarian's assistance is sought, pages and pages of e-mails that have not yet been read welcome you. In fact it is evident that it may not be useful to send members messages through e-mails as they do not read them at all. Sometimes the mails fill the inbox requiring deletion of some of the mails. On the other hand, sometimes MPs get to know that their e-mail accounts are full when people wishing to communicate with them make follow ups by phone to enquire about an issue they earlier sent to them for which

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[2] New Vision, Monday April 17, 2008, pp.26
[3] Ikoja, John Robert. "Public library politics: the Ugandan perspective
[4] http://eprints.rclis.org/archive/00002248/01/Information_Overload.pdf

they find that mails had been bouncing back. In part, this could be attributed to Spam mails and other unnecessary mail, viruses and their inability to differentiate spam from necessary mails.

On the other hand, looking at their pigeon holes where in addition to their incoming correspondences, reports from various sources await them for attention. It is found out that documents are always stuck in there that one can't imagine when they ever read. This is another challenge the MPs meet in addition to poor reading culture. In part, this could be attributed to possible poor work methods.

**Poor IT skills**
At the library, MPs do always come for librarians to assist them with the management of their e-mails accounts, if not read them when they are not within the precincts of Parliament. While writing their own reports, or any other correspondences, MPs also need our assistance which other departments can not give. Should there be a need for any information from the Internet, they leave their PCs connected for them in their offices and come for assistance in the library. Parliament has tried to ameliorate this problem by organizing some training for the MPs but due to their work methods, they either never attend or are busy with a committee work elsewhere. This is another challenge faced by the library users particularly MPs.

**USE OF ICT TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION FOR UGANDA PARLIAMENTARY LIBRARY USERS**
To mitigate the challenges faced by the librarians in their attempts to popularise the library services, to pass across information to users and to arouse interest within the users so that services of the library become part of the user and be used, a new service was designed. This was hoped would achieve the goal and it worked. The service employs the mobile phone technology together with the electronic mail system to deliver sms to users. Since the mobile phone is part of the everyday life, it is a sure way of ensuring the information reaches the Users as they would open the sms and read what is in the inbox.

**Telecommunications Networks in Uganda**
There are many licensed communications service providers in Uganda. But for this paper, mobile phone networks are considered. There are now 5 mobile phone companies in operation namely; MTN (U) Limited, Uganda Telecom Limited (UTL online), Celtel Uganda and Warid Telecom Uganda[5]

Circumstances under which librarians would want to communicate with the users are many and varied among which include;

- The fact that user profiles for some users are available. Whenever information is secured, there is a need to communicate to the intended users as part of our selective dissemination of information service. The specific categories under this bullet are Committees, and individuals who are interested in an issue or those interested in their professional areas.

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5 Source: http://www.ucc.co.ug/licensing/ictOperators.php

- Announcements such as to notify users about closure of the library for cleaning and stocktaking among others. It may also be to announce new arrivals, and for various meetings such as those of Parliamentary Caucuses among others.

- Reminding users of overdue books still in their possession.

How then does this service work? Of the five mobile telephone networks available, this service works only on the MTN and on the UTL mobile phone lines. We have not yet explored how to use the others.

The starting point is the e-mail account of a librarian wishing to communicate to users. Every bona fide user of the library is assigned an e-mail account. These accounts are of two types; individual accounts and group accounts. Group accounts are used to communicate to a particular group, e.g. a committee.

The second requirement is that users are connected to one of the two mobile phone companies MTN or UTL. A database of telephone numbers is created for all the users in their various categories namely, individuals, Committees, Caucuses, Parties, and special interest groups. Telephone codes for the various mobile phone companies are as follows;
MTN: (039), (077), (078), UTL: (071), Celtel: (075), Warid: (070)

The way this service works then is that, while assisting users, a librarian has to have an e-mail account and a user mobile phone lines database. This database is then converted to phone e-mail addresses database put together in files indicating the caucuses, all the users file, party or committees the members belong to. In case of messages to individuals, the person's telephone number is picked and the corresponding phone e-mail address is coined and a message sent to that individual.  Hence;

- MTN lines will have the e-mail address like [mtnline@mtnconnect.co.ug](mailto:mtnline@mtnconnect.co.ug)

- UTL lines will have the addresses <utlline@sms.ugandatelecom.com>

Examples:
MTN lines 0392949559, 0772488937, 0782101115 convert to 0392949559@mtnconnect.co.ug, 0772488937@mtnconnect.co.ug, 0782101115@mtnconnect.co.ug respectively. UTL line 0712530992 coverts to 0712530992@sms.ugandatelecom.com.

A message is then composed and consequently sent to the phones of designated users as illustrated in the figure 2 below.
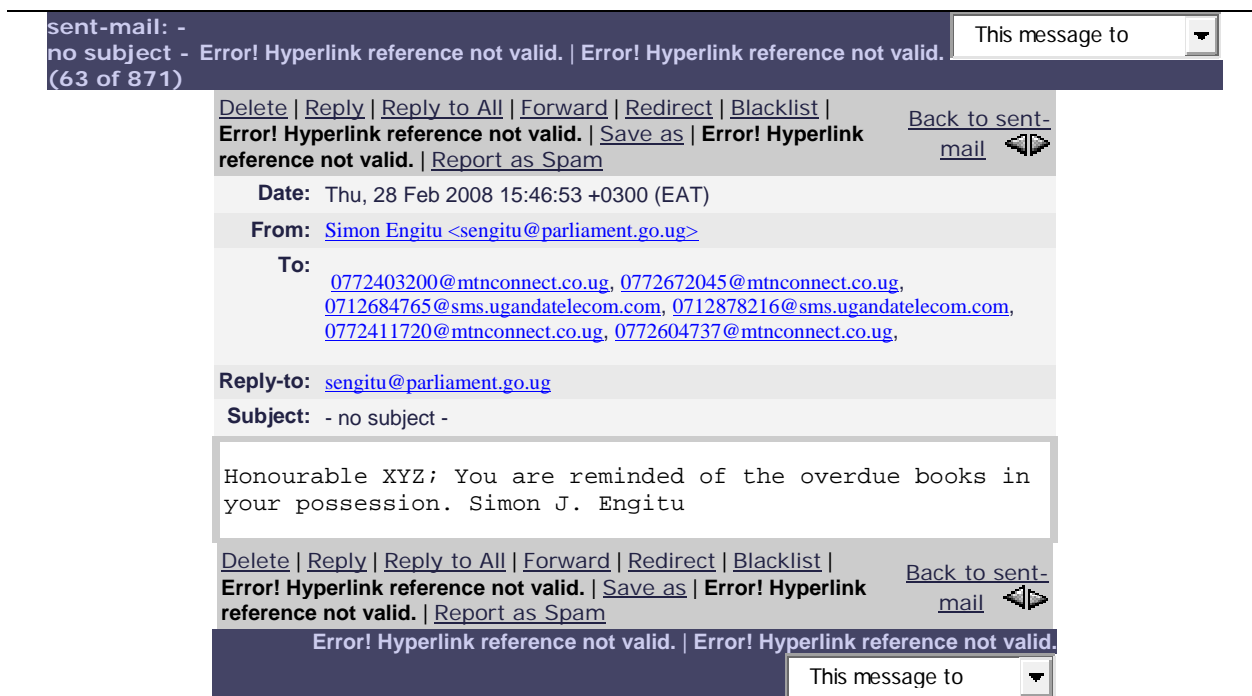
## Intranet

Another way to counter the challenges of communicating information to our users is the use of the Intranet. The volumes of research outputs generated by parliament and the department of Library and Research in particular are uploaded into the Intranet. This is due to the fact that users are more attracted to using computers for information than the print format. As a new technology available, the computer room is always full and the computers occupied though MPs skills are wanting even after repeated computer training by parliament. Files are created for various categories of information emanating from Parliament so that users access it. In the process of assisting them, librarians show users the information in the Intranet, which they find useful.

## Conclusion

With the challenges faced by the Uganda Parliamentary Library Users, notably the poor reading culture, information overload and poor IT skills, the library's innovation helped in ensuring that information can be successfully communicated to MPs and staff of Parliament. These challenges whose roots have been traced to have emanated from the way libraries discouraged the young people from developing love for books, for literature and to have a want to reading, are attributed to have played a role in making MPs to what they are now. The libraries are under funded, poorly stocked and are dilapidated despite sizeable literacy levels in the country. With little urge for reading, the amounts of information MPs receive add on the problems.

New information and communication technologies have to be utilised to see that MPs are encouraged to receive information. The SMS information service had to be designed and based on the fact that MPs had picked interest in using computers and the Internet in particular, the Intranet service was also utilised.

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