

Access to Information: the Role of Public Libraries in Nigerian Society

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Access to information: the role of public libraries in Nigerian society. Information is a basic human right and is absolutely important in the development of any society. Access to information means unhindered access to information. In today's society, access to information is required at any point in time for the citizens, since it is a catalyst for social, economic and political development as well as for good decision making. Access to Information is access to Internet and it is a means for overcoming inequality of information in the society. With Information and communication technology, the means of accessing information also changed. Many users go to the public library for internet access and The Internet allows the users have access to vast quantities of Information for them to choose with the right skills. In this paper, access to Information was discussed in depth from the following perspective: Access to Information. Freedom of Information, Information Literacy Skills and the Role of Public Libraries, Internet Access, Challenges, Conclusions and Recommendation were made.

Keywords: Information Access, information society, information literacy, public libraries, Internet Access, Freedom of Information.

INTRODUCTION

A library is a place where individuals access information and ideas. Libraries are not to be regarded just as a place for reading, according to Rubin (2010) they exist in many countries across the world and are often considered an essential part of having an educated and literate population. Information is an important resource which is essential for the progress of any individual and that of a nation,

so access to right or relevantly updated information to its users is required at the right time for any literate society. Information has been defined by Business Dictionary. Com as follows:

Data that (a) has been verified to be accurate and timely (b) is specific and organized for a purpose,(c) is presented within a context that gives it meaning and relevance,(d) that can lead to an increase in understanding and decrease in uncertainty. We can see from this definition that information has no substitute when it comes to national development. Any information society requires information at every step.

Access to information means unhindered access to-all the citizens which reflect the interest of the citizenry. It also refers to the means and mode through which information is made available by providing entire range of possibilities for making Information and information services available to the public.

According to Onatola (2004) "The advent of Christian missionary activities to Western and Eastern part of Nigeria led the early founding of some secondary schools and even tertiary educational Institution. AS far back as 1910, most of these schools have Libraries affiliated to them towards assisting the parent Institutions to achieve their set Objectives. With the implementation of the 1948 edict for the founding of a college of university of London in Ibadan (now university of Ibadan)" He went further to observed slow pace of development of libraries in all the defunct regions (now broken into states) of the federal Republic of Nigeria was associated with under listed three main factors: Problem of illiteracy, Ignorance on the Government side and Inadequate funding. Academic and School libraries were the first set of Libraries to be established. Public Libraries came later, which was traced back to the 1953 UNESCO Seminar held at the University of Ibadan and the UNESCO Seminar brought about the establishment of Public Libraries in the three defunct regions of Nigeria.(Defunct Eastern Region of Nigeria, Defunct Western Region of Nigeria and Defunct Northern Region).They essentially provides access to knowledge , Information and works of imagination through a range of resources and services that are meant to be equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, disability, economic and employment status, and educational attainment (obinyan, obinyan, Aidenojie 2011). Public libraries help to empower people in the enrichment, orientation and development of the citizens towards inculcating national pride and right sense of national culture.

In today's society, access to information is required at any point in time for the citizens. Oyeronke, (2012) confirms that Access to Information is very crucial; it accelerates the level of individual advancement as well as corporate educational development. Access to Information focuses on the rights of individual to have access to the information at the right time. Its importance is also seen as a determining factor to economic, social and political development of any nation irrespective of their culture, ethnicity, language etc. Davis and Davidson (1991) said that nations would prosper or falter depending on their investment in building an information infrastructure and since human knowledge improvement presupposes information flow and sharing, the collective intellectual abilities of a nation, its human capital will also depends on access to information. The citizens' needs detailed and accurate information that will help them contribute meaningfully in the growth and development of the society.

In this information age, information is treated as an economic resource or as a catalyst to development and for making good decision. Martins (1995) confirms this by defining information society as a society in which the quality of life as well as prospects for social change and economic development depends upon access to information to meet their needs and requirements whether the resources are in print, non-print/ electronic or in any format. It is in line with this that the IFLA International Manifesto (1994) asserts that unhindered access to information is essential to Freedom, equality and global understanding. Public libraries performing their roles train citizens who try to interact with these formats while trying to seek information. Public Libraries are a worldwide phenomenon. They exist in different societies, in differing cultures and at different stages of development. Although the varied contexts in which they operate inevitably result in the differences in the services they provide and the way those services are delivered (Obinyan, Obinyan, & Aidenojie 2011). In Nigeria the scenario is different. Emojoroh (2005) conducted a study on the roles and effectiveness of Public Libraries in nation building in Nigeria and found that Nigerian Public Libraries are performing poorly in most aspects due to appalling resources.

Access to Information is also access to internet With the emergence of ICT (Information and Communication Technology), the internet has become another means of accessing information thereby overcoming inequality of information in a society. Internet which is the biggest communication revolution since the advent of the printed books has opened up information access to citizenry in all fields and

walks of life. It is a perfect medium to explore for anyone involved in Information processing, dissemination and easy retrieval. With information and communication technology, there is a wide gap or disparity in the availability, access and utilization of information between the developed and developing nations which gave rise to the concept of Digital divide. Orakpor (2007) confirms that the Libraries can bank on the Internet for the right information for users, in the right form and at the right time.

With the emergence of Information and communication technology, the means of accessing information also changed as many users go to the library to have internet access. The Public libraries are positioned to provide and promote access to information which will translate to development of the society. Omekwu (2006) observed that" Nigerian Libraries are mainly without functional web access. The connection of ICT Platforms to Libraries, archives, museums, rural areas and educational Institutions are virtually not available" With the exponential growth of information, most information is in electronic format and they are accessed online anywhere and anytime making access to information easy and fast.

Access to information with the role of public libraries is discussed under the following subheadings;

- Information and Access to Information
- PUBLIC LIBRARIES
- Information literacy skills
- Freedom of information
- Internet access

INFORMATION AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Access to Information is a basic right of the citizens and a pre-condition to a developed community and nation. According to world summit on the society (2003), Access to information and knowledge is the ability for all to contribute information, ideas and knowledge essential in an inclusive information society. They went further to reaffirm that sharing and strengthening of global knowledge for development can be enhanced by removing barriers to equitable access to information for economic, social, political, cultural and educational activities, by facilitating access to public domain and the use of internet access. Zapata (1994) agrees with other authors that Access to information through public libraries,

empowers every citizen and also embrace the notion of social inclusion as the librarian will become an active change agent in the society.

The public libraries and the internet are means of accessing information. A great volume of materials emanates at exponential rate every day and most of them are not accessible due to policies on ground, arrangement of information resources and the dissemination and retrieval method. This means that the availability of information does not necessarily mean it's accessible. Access to information ensures that access to all library and information sources no matter the format should be made available to users. Accessing information invariably means bridging the gap between the developed and the developing nation.

Information is link for national development as suggested by Achitabnimo (2007).

He

pointed out that for a nation to develop, it needs to have and provide relevant, updated and adequate information.

Access to information is important, people need information to develop their potentials through education and training to succeed in business, to enrich their cultural experience and to take control of their daily lives. According to Kanba Manir (2009), the concept of information has been generally and universally viewed as a basic resource which all people use to improve their condition of living and is essential to economic development of any nation. Opeke (2004) reaffirmed the importance of information by saying that information has received a wide spread acceptance as the essential feature of production, consumption and exchange in this era. The world has entered an era where the source of wealth and power is increasingly from information and human mental creativity as compared to physical resources.

Information has to be made available to use. Access to information ensures access to all library and information sources ranging from both print and electronic resource. Zapata (1994) opined that access to information through libraries empowers every citizen and also embrace the nation of social inclusion and the library becomes an active change agent in society.

Today, there is an exponential growth in knowledge and Information. It has been the traditional responsibilities of libraries to collect, organize, preserve and retrieve vast information available. In view of this, Hinderson (1992) listed the advantages of ICT in library services to include:

- Provision of speedy and easy access to information
- Provision of remote Access to Users.
- Provision of round the Clock Access to Users.
- Access to unlimited Information from different Sources.
- Provision of flexibility to be used by any Individual according to his/her requirements
- The facility for the reformatting and combination of data from different sources.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Nwokocha (2004) defines Public Library as being¹¹ established to serve the generality of the residents of the community or town where it is located. Compared to other Libraries it has about the most heterogeneous clientele as there is no restriction as to who can use it. however Odim (1990) have the same attributes with Nwokocha (2004) but went further to argue that the Public Library "Must be really accessible and its door open for free and equal use by all members of the community regardless of race, colour, nationality, age, sex, religion, status, or education/'

Public Library is a learning centre where people can take part in learning activities, discuss and share knowledge and information. The main function of public Library in Nigeria is the provision of Information contained in books, newspapers, magazines, journals, and audio-visual to users according to their needs. They also provide an avenue for recreation and relaxation. Public Libraries in developed countries perform the same functions but with some additional which include postal services for citizens living in remote farm houses, establishment and provision of library and information services to potential users such as Prisoners, Hospital Patients and the handicapped but in Nigerian situations it is not so. There are the problems of inadequate funding, training and retraining of staff, Illiteracy rate of the citizens' high, outdated and irrelevant collections of the public Libraries and lack of recognition on the part of government to know the importance of Libraries to economic, social, educational and national development of the country. The public library is positioned to provide and promote access to information which will translate to development of the society.

Public libraries provide access to wide range of information sources both in print and electronic. According to Aguolu and Aguolu (2002), resources may be available in the library and even identified bibliographically as relevant to ones

subject of interest, but the users may not be able to lay hands on them. The more accessible the sources are, the more likely they are to be used. They went further to say that, the sources may be available but access to it is prevented for one reason or the other. In the same study, they revealed that efforts are being made worldwide to promote access to information through the use of public library.

The library catalogue whether manual or electronic remains a guide to Library users and the Librarian as well develop several other access points through which library users can locate needed information. The idea behind this is to have access to information. Adeleke (2005) asserts that if the library is to contribute to the advancement of knowledge, it must not only provide resources but also ensure access and effective use of resources. Roberson (2005) views a library as an institution that manages the intellectual products that individuals can gain access. In line with this, IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1997) reaffirms that Public Library is the local gateway to Knowledge, provides a basic condition for Lifelong learning, independent decision making and cultural development of the Individual and social groups.

INFORMATION LITERACY SKILLS

Many literatures indicate that the society is in critical need for information literacy skills. According to American library Association (1989) Information literacy is the ability to recognize when Information is needed and have the ability to locate evaluate and use effectively the needed information. The American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (1989) explains" Ultimately, Information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how Knowledge is organized, how to find Information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the Information needed for any task or decision at hand." ACRL (2000) defined information Literacy as the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze and use information. Information Literacy is important owing to the amount of information that is available in this information society.. For users to be Information literate, they must have computer literacy, Information technology literacy, Library skills and Information skills. (Bruce 1997}. The Public Library is positioned to provide and promote access to Information and knowledge. These skills empower the citizenry

with the critical skills which will help them to become independent lifelong learners.

Information Literacy concept evolved from several basic library concepts such as library instruction, bibliographic education, user education and Information literacy Programmes. Information Literacy is important owing to the amount of information that is available in contemporary society. Simply being exposed to great deal of Information will not make people informed citizens unless they have these skills to learn how to use the Information. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and cultural Organisation (UNESCO 2004) opined that Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling Individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. Information Literacy Skills are helpful to everybody in order to carry out their occupations efficiently and successfully.

Literacy promotes training of citizens on the power of use of information resources and information. Training is not only for citizens but also for new staff of public library to use ICT effectively. This in conformity with the views of Johnson and Drebber (2003} and Anator and Filson (2004} They explain that Information literacy is a social need and assess for effective use of the huge amount of Information in today's information society.

Libraries will actively support the development of individual information skills through education and partnership thereby encouraging and supporting learning at all levels.

Having information literacy skills enables individuals to become literate the society.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Access to information is referred to as Freedom to information which refers to citizen's right to access information. Freedom of information supports the universal right to information and knowledge that provides information that is updated, reliable, balanced and appropriate to the needs of the society. Access to right information brings about economic, social and democratic development and equity. Access to information guarantees every person the right to obtain information. Sebina (2005) examines access to information and their enabling

legislation and identified that Freedom of information Acts presents challenges, prospects and opportunities for records managers.

The concept of Freedom of information came forth from the basic right to freedom of expression enshrined in the universal declaration of Human Rights (1948). This right is an important aspect of the universal guarantee of freedom of information which includes the right to seek and to receive as well as to impact information. The African Charter on Human Rights, (UDHR 1948). Article 19 of the declaration states that: Everyone has the right to freedom of Information.

Literature on the origin and implementation of Freedom of information in Nigeria is scarce because the law is relatively new in Nigeria passed only in 2011. However some researchers have contributed meaningfully on the law. There is constitutional provision for free access to Information to all citizens of Nigeria. According to Aminu, et al (2011)" the long awaited Freedom of Information Bill has gained approval by the National Assembly and assented by Mr President and thus become a Law. The question still is h,ow free is the Freedom of Information Act 2011 and what are its implications on records and office security Management." The Act indicated that every citizen of Nigeria is entitled to have access to any records under the control of the Government or Public Institution provided he applies for and has no specific interest to the Information being applied for. With the enactment of this law, it believed that there will be access to records of security Management without being subjected to intimidation, threat and molestation. Although it wanders me how one will apply for access to records without' having personal interest unless being sent by his employer.

Ossai-Ugbah (2012), Anyanwu, Akanwu and Ossai-Onah (2013) opined that Freedom of information facilitates open government by having access to government data, information records & files and also documents of any form.

Kuunifaa (2011) state that access to information and transparency of governance is essential to ensuring accountability and prevents corruption. According to Glenn (1990), Information can be construed to be the "blood and oxygen" of democratic society and in a democratic society, the public is expected to have access to information of interest to the individual. The Freedom of Information made it clear on how information records can be obtained such as right to access to records

especially those under security classification and when it is refused, how redress will be followed immediately.

INTERNET ACCESS

Many scholars have defined the concept of internet. Capron and Johnson,(2004) noted that the Internet span the globe, connecting government, educational, and commercial Institutions and private Individuals. He also added that this has reduced the whole world to global village. Internet is very useful by allowing users to access vast quantities of information and communication with everyone around the World, (Eyitayo2008).She added that this has become the most popular way of locating and retrieving Information. This Position is shared by Otchere (2006) who stated that the Internet has improved life globally due to its ability to facilitate instant distribution and access to Information. In this Information Age, you can finish writing your research paper without entering the four corners of any Library. The Internet is a major learning, teaching, and research tools for a community to interact with no matter the remoteness of the societies. It is one of the new and emerging technologies that have tremendous impact on how human activities are conducted. Ojedokun (2001) pointed out that Internet has broken down barriers of communication and Information access from anywhere in the world. He maintained that the internet allows the users to have access to updated information on social, economic, political and development. IFLA (2002) proclaimed unhindered access to all which is essential to freedom equality, global understanding and peace. Public Libraries provide essential gateways to the internet, for some they offer convenience, guidance and assistance, while for others they are the only available access points.

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Public libraries collect and preserve a wide range of materials relating to the society or all groups or individuals. It performs their roles with a view to providing and enhancing access to information in the society without discrimination. As a gateway to information, knowledge and culture, its aim is to provide timely accurate, current and reliable information to the society. Olowu (2004) posted that libraries provide access to information to satisfy the user's information need.

Provision of Access to Information using various mode and means in the public libraries is an integral part of the national socio-economic development and improvement of the general quality of life (Kilbat 1990).In this case the Public Library is playing the role of a cultural and communication centre.

The role of public libraries should be seen in the development of the society and its citizens. The Public Libraries should extend their services to rural areas. Developing knowledge successfully in today's information and knowledge based society (Oyeronke). Public libraries help in facilitating the planning and implementation of learning programmes that will equip users with the skills necessary to succeed in a changing society. The public library providing information resources for learning and research Public libraries are important in the development of information society. The economic role played will be dependent on the access to information because national development is very much influenced by the amount of available information.(Nwosu and Ogbomo 2010)

The role of public libraries as a place for people to gain Information Technology skills is a welcome idea in the capacity building. The public library promotes information literacy by providing training programmes for lifelong learning. The training of the citizenry in Information technology application and utilization as it relates to e-library, e-commerce, and e-governance and e- health. They should be seen as a prominent asset "in the advancement of e -learning and youth engagement

The public library also plays a vital role by: providing access to a wide range of library and information resources both in prints and electronic that appeals to all categories of users. This provision of Access to Information tries to bridge the gap between the information rich and the poor. They are charged with the responsibility of acquiring, disseminating, organizing and administering information. They also enable users to access copyrighted and public domain works and to exercise their rights under the exceptions and limitations to creator's rights in the law.

CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH ACCESS TO INFORMATION

There are a lot of problems that makes information not accessible. Opara (2008) examined the challenges of public Libraries in Nigeria and discovered that the tempo of Public Library development in the country in the years immediately after independence and after the Nigerian civil war could not be sustained due to inadequate financial support by the establishing authorities, demoralized and inadequate workforce, and inadequate accommodation. etc There are other challenges like poverty, Illiteracy, lack of awareness of the need for information, geographical distance between nations and underdevelopment and lack of basic of infrastructure like electricity, Also lack of funds on the part of the government contributes to challenges associated with access to information. Olowu (2004) identified natural and artificial barriers to access to information as the inability of the citizens to have access to electronic information due to networking internet connectivity. Internet access in Public Libraries are not really encouraging because non-availability of funds. Lack of access to the right information at the right time deprives people of their right for the enhancement of social status and development in life. The developing countries also flooded with irrelevant and out dated materials that do not appeal to readers. (Onatola, 2004).

Many Public Libraries in Africa in particular Nigeria is underfunded because of low priority accorded libraries by decision makers in the Government. Lack of awareness of the need for information is the problem of information poverty. The Public Libraries should mount book fair, book exhibition and displays to show the range of information materials available in the library for usage. The citizens will need to acquire the skill to search for information they need.

The issue of staff incompetency, Issak (2009) advocated the training and retraining of Library Personnel on a regular basis in order for them to stay relevant to the needs of their communities. The new and older Staffs do not know how to use internet to surf information. Therefore training is required for them to provide unhindered access to the users.

Most of the culturally and historical book collection can be damaged due to its life span.

Without appropriate copyright law put in place for the public libraries, such books can lost hindering access to information by depriving future generations to use it.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has attempted to look into Access to Information from different perspectives. Public Libraries have moral right to provide access to information to all which can be used as a form of self empowerment, economic, educational and nation development. It has also shown the role of the Public Libraries which is suppose to help in accessing information provision of required materials and Information Literacy Programmes required by its community users in order to achieve the best Use of Information accesses.

Public library opens doors to equitable access to information and knowledge to its citizens and it also have the potential to play a significant role in supporting and contributing to achieving socio-economic development since it is expected to provide people oriented information resources and services that will enable access to information and broaden the mind of the citizens.

Most Public Libraries in the world are getting connected to the Internet and Nigerian public Libraries should not be left behind in this development. There is urgent need for more development of our Information resources by getting connected to the global information resources available to the whole library community users in the world.

The recommendations are as follows:

Public Libraries should strive to acquire Information resources both in print and electronic format on social, economic, political and educational development that are current and relevant to making the communities to be literate.

Public libraries need to be adequately supported and funded by government and none governmental agencies in the country. Better funding of Public libraries by federal and State Governments are necessary as this will enable them cope with Internet interconnectivity, infrastructures and acquisition of current Information resources. Internet access enable libraries to locate information stored in other computers around the world in the web.(websites)Also adequate electricity supply should be made available.

Public libraries need to be thorough in retrieval devices that will enable access to information

Incompetent staff should be trained and retrained to enable them to serve the communities better in the areas of teaching of Information Literacy skills and the provision of access points for Information retrieval.

Public Libraries should be vested with the power to reproduce old and worn out materials that is of interest to the society, culturally, historical or otherwise.

The government needs to improve and facilitate the use of Internet among Individuals and groups in the societies to ensure accessibility and quality use of Internet services. There is also the need for the education of the community as to how they can effectively use the Internet services to improve themselves and to take decision.

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