

The Reference Librarian as a Partner in Community Service in Nigeria

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Abstract:

This paper examines the situation in Nigeria concerning reference services in Nigerian libraries, as well as the role of the Reference Librarians in providing Community Information Services in Nigeria. Information services provided were examined in relation to the information needs of both rural and urban Nigerian dwellers. The paper shows that the reference services provided by Reference Librarians are largely inadequate, especially in rural areas which have a good proportion of the Nigerian populace. Apparently, the rural populace which deserve special attention is not adequately taken care of by the budgetary provision of the libraries. The administrative structure from State Government to Ward level presents a good platform for implementing effective community service by the Reference Librarian in Nigeria. Library and Information Professionals should endeavour to re-define their roles and methods according to Community Information needs and Reference Librarians should be specially trained and equipped to reach all community members according to their needs, taking advantage of ICT, thus making the positive impact of Reference Librarians greatly felt in Nigeria.

Keywords: Reference Librarian, Reference Services, Partner, Community Service, Nigeria

Introduction

Libraries exist in order to provide users with information resources to satisfy their information needs. Information resources are made accessible mainly through cataloguing and indexing services by the Readers Services Division of libraries. A greater part of all the services provided in libraries is normally performed by the Reference Unit of the library.

Reference service could be defined as the culmination of all library activities aimed at facilitating the use of the library and its resources. Reference service in libraries often involves direct, personal assistance to readers seeking information. Libraries acquire, organize and disseminate information. Reference services particularly fulfill the function of dissemination. Reference services may involve use of an Information Desk, the telephone, email and other communication channels for patrons and reference librarians to entertain reference questions and their answers.

Three main types of reference assistance in Nigeria:

- Assistance or instruction in the use of the library, including location of materials, use of the catalog, use of computers to access information, and the use of basic reference sources.
- Assistance in identifying library materials needed to answer a question.
- Providing brief, factual answers to questions, such as addresses, statistics, phone numbers, etc. that can be quickly located.

Community Information Services

The concept of community information service as a library-based activity is aimed at meeting everyday information needs of the general public (Aliyu, 2014). Apart from Public libraries that usually serve the general public, other types of libraries are also expected to provide community information services to the host community. Library-based community information services are still not visible in Nigerian Communities both in urban and rural areas. Probably, this is because the general public is hardly up to date on effective use of the library and its resources, and that for too long the library has been associated with provision of information derived from printed sources such as books. Rasmussen (1979) defined community information service as a service to satisfy citizens' requirements for information for their economic, social, cultural and leisure activities. In the same vein, Kempson (1990) described community information service as service which assists individuals or groups to solve daily problems emanating from their homes or working places. The service is therefore aimed at providing information to improve the well-being of the populace. Put differently, community reference service involves sending librarians out into the community to work closely with members of the community, conduct onsite reference interviews, appreciate problems and information needs and answer their questions. This process helps the librarians stay informed on the needs, goals and aspirations of the community; this allows the librarians to showcase their skills and services in various ways, and provide expert and informed assistance at little or no additional cost to the community.

Community reference integrates librarians into the community and highlights the skills and services librarians offer. This unique outreach creates a valuable partnership between communities and the library profession and promotes synergy between them at a time when there is need for communities

to support the creation and funding of local libraries. As libraries in developing countries like Nigeria face steep budget cuts, the library needs to reinvest itself to stay relevant and create a library culture; and as librarians must strategize to obtain their community's support community reference service which allows them to showcase their skills and services to the public plays a vital role.

Reference Librarian and Community Service in Nigeria

Modern library is a collection of sources like reference materials, books relating to school curriculum, general books not relating to a specific subject area, periodicals, newspapers, audiovisual materials, government publications and electronic resources such as e-books, e-journals, e-databases, e-newspapers, CD-ROM, etc. These resources enable libraries to play a crucial role in the success of lifelong education of communities and society in general.

In Nigeria and other developing countries of Africa, government objectives include (a) life-long education for the citizens as the basis for the nation's educational policy (b) emphasis on the use and improvement of modern educational techniques at all levels of the educational system (c) the structuring of education system to develop the practice of self-learning (d) making the people to become actively literate and generally well-informed and (e) the introduction of universal basic and compulsory education for all citizens (National Policy on Education, 1981). In this regard, the African Network Campaign for Education for All (ANCEFA) stresses the need for investment in formal education and non-formal education like adult literacy programmes and youth training centres to tackle the literacy crisis (Olanrewaju, 2009). These objectives can only be achieved if the various libraries in Nigeria, such as Academic, Public, School, National, Special, Rural and Mobile libraries are well-stocked and equipped with adequate information resources that would improve the literacy level of the general public, especially the rural people across the country. The relevance of the reference librarians in Nigeria as partners in community services in this regard can be examined in the following context:

School Library

The need for government and other stakeholders to improve the school library services and their roles in providing life-long education for pupils and students in primary and secondary schools in Nigeria has been severally stressed (Bonny, 2000; Daja, 2013; Bitagi et al., 2014 and Oyedum et al., 2014). School libraries in Nigeria are expected to promote teaching and learning in the parent institutions but, because of inadequate library facilities and resources, their impact on the pupils and students leaves much room for improvement, especially in the rural communities where public libraries are not located.

Provision of library and information services in Africa to date has focused more on urban areas, with serious neglect of rural non-literate masses (Ezekiel and Saleh, 2014). Probably, this is because the policy makers often exhibit the notion that libraries generally are not on their priority list, how much

less libraries for rural areas. Although there is no definite government policy on school library services a school library should, as much as possible, make its resources and services available to all residents of the community on equal terms, regardless of occupation, creed, age, class or political inclination (Idris, 2001).

Moreover, it is the responsibility of the village school library to ensure that the products of universal basic education and adult literacy programmes in rural areas do not lapse into illiteracy soon after the completion of their formal courses. Provision of recreational reading materials which are related to the people's cultural background will interest people with limited knowledge and local interest. This will make reading for the people a pleasurable activity and not like another school assignment. The mobile libraries, where they are available should assist the school libraries to provide information services to the rural dwellers. The importance of child development cannot be over-emphasized. Every child irrespective of his residential place needs books and library to develop in life. Thus, adequate and well equipped school libraries are necessary to improve the living standard of the rural dwellers.

Mobile Libraries

Bookmobile is library service that can be used to reach the rural dwellers especially where a library building is not physically located in the community. Abolaji (2009) stated that wherever a library building is not practical in any community, the bookmobile is an instrument that can be used to extend library services to every nook and cranny of the community to enable all segments of a society enjoy library services. Bookmobile service was introduced in Nigeria by the regional governments in the 1960s and 1970s, but this service has not been fully discharged by the Reference Librarians in Nigeria. According to Okiy (2004) mobile library service was launched in order to extend library services to everyone in the Niger Delta States of Nigeria, irrespective of location. By the end of 1977, this service had a fleet of five vans with a total book stock of 12,500 volumes. The vans operated 220 service points in 140 towns and villages. Other library services provided by the state library service included prison and hospital trolley services, films for children, and reference services. Unfortunately these services are no longer in existence in the Niger Delta States (Ebiwolate, 2010).

The bookmobile should operate as an integral part of the public library system. Services such as charging and discharging of books to readers and enrolment of new readers are performed at bookmobile centres. Bookmobile also includes reference materials for rendering reference services. It is desirable to provide services during evening hours because services should be offered at a time convenient to the majority of the people. Services on Saturdays may be popular in some communities and should be encouraged. If, however, a bookmobile service is not feasible in a given area, due to constraints such as inaccessibility of the place by easy means of transport, book-boxes should be stationed in centrally located premises like schools, churches, mosques and town-halls. In such a situation, a teacher or some other interested and responsible person should be asked to take care of the lending services.

Rural Libraries

Although efforts have been made by some libraries to provide community service to rural dwellers, especially in information dissemination adequate attention has not been paid to library services in the rural areas of Nigeria (Agboola, 2000; Ikhizama and Okojie, 2001). Some librarians argue that because it is not yet possible to adequately serve the city dwellers that have the educational capacity to use library services, serving the rural dwellers who are mostly illiterate would be a misdirection of efforts (Aboyade, 1987). For Reference Librarians to provide this service they need to visit the rural areas to identify the information needs of the people in various communities. Also important to mention is that telephone is another important tool that has been used to provide library services in the rural areas. In this regard, telephone reference service includes all the calls that a library receives from its patrons. These calls may be request for direction, library hours or other library services. Regardless of the level of reference service executed, every telephone call plays an important role in library services, and this can be critical in a rural setting where this role is intensified by the library's geographical isolation from patrons and large libraries.

Villagers could also benefit from other non-formal aspects of information, such as sitting down in a relaxed atmosphere and listening to someone read to them just as children enjoyed traditional folk tales by moonlight. Abolaji (2009) also opines that reading or listening can play an important role in the beneficial use of leisure, and the library in a rural setting can make conscious effort to inculcate in rural dwellers a taste for books and reading.

University Libraries

Some university libraries in Nigeria have tried to extend reference services to different sections of their communities. The Leisure Reading Collection (LRC) established around 1967 by University of Ife Library was an idea copied from the University of Ibadan where it already existed. The collection covered all subject areas like history, biography, science, religion and philosophy. The extension services within and outside the university community ended up being inculcated in the reading and library use habit in those patrons. The reference service was aimed to provide to the community members information and reference service in order to improve their life standard. The Librarians also succeeded in developing in the patrons effective library use by teaching them the skills and techniques of using different collections.

Apart from developing Leisure Reading Collection, today most Nigerian academic institutions have electronic libraries; and universities are in the forefront of this new race for information. University libraries also have Reprographic Sections where photocopying services are obtained. Members of the communities where the Nigerian universities are located use this resource a great deal. In this section the people make photocopies of documents such as birth certificate, drivers' license, and academic

certificate. Lamination of the original copies of such certificates is also done in the section. By this effort the libraries bring town and gown of their communities together.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Community Service

Globally libraries are increasingly more interactive than passive. The advent of ICT into the library has completely changed the face of librarianship to more of a social networking centre. This is the only way one can attract young audience to use the library outside reading to pass examinations (Akinbulumo, 2008). Public libraries in the developing countries now have restaurants, snacks shops and computer games for the young audience as well as the adults. The new innovation has shot up the number of young people that use or make the library their second home, which has reduced crime rates in some of the countries.

Libraries now have the quiet library reading area and the interactive areas which may have computers for browsing as well as a vending machine in that section from which one can buy drinks and biscuits.

In Nigeria, access to Internet services always draws different categories of users in various locations of the universities to the e-library services available in these libraries. The users include faculty members, administrative/technical staff and office assistants. Staff and students use the resources on the Internet for assignments and research work. It is a common sight to see these categories of users in the e-libraries downloading information from the Internet. Technicians, Clerks, and Office Assistants who do not normally use the resources of other sections of the library such as Reference and Circulation Sections meet at the e-libraries to send and receive messages from their friends and relatives at home and abroad via e-mail. Apart from reading hard copy version of the newspapers users come on a daily basis to read newspapers electronically. This is one effective method in which the university libraries in Nigeria serve as unifying factors in the communities where they are located. According to Agbaji (2014), electronic library services provided by two academic libraries in Nigeria showed that 79.4% of the respondents use the e-library for e-newspapers, 87.3% use it to access bibliographic database, 90.5% use it to access e-books while, 98.5% use it to access e-journals in the university libraries studied.

Service to Prison Inmates and Hospitalized Patients

Although the library cannot directly restore good health to the sick, or release a prisoner, or restore youth to the old, there are other ways the library can help these people. Reading can make time fly faster than lying down for hours on the hospital bed. Some long-term patients may be interested in serious reading for the first time while they are in hospital, since they may have more leisure hours now than they ever had. If they are served some library resources to read, they would appreciate this service and may continue to use the library when they recover. Moreover, some patients might have been used to reading (e.g. newspapers for current affairs) or regular library users before they were

hospitalized. This category of patients should not be denied library services because they are now in the hospital. By extending their services to the sick Nigerian libraries would enable non-users of the libraries to become aware of the existence of the libraries. Library Assistants in different Nigerian libraries, at the instant of the Reference Librarians, can take a trolley of books and current newspapers to different wards in the hospitals at regular intervals to cater for the patients.

This service should also be extended to prison inmates who include illiterates, semi-literates and highly educated people. Some well-educated and notable scholars have written interesting and fast-selling books while in prison. A glaring example is Nigeria's Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, who wrote "The Man Died" while in prison. Therefore, for reformation, rehabilitation and reintegration, prison inmates should be provided with library services like other members of the society.

Until recently, most of the prisons and correctional institutions for the young in Nigeria have no libraries of their own. However, this is now being addressed, and the first ultra-modern reading room and literacy centre for prison inmates was commissioned in 2001 by a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). The literacy centre is equipped with the state-of-the-art books and computer hardware and software to enable the inmates benefit from the literacy empowerment goal of the NGO (Unagha, 2008, Usoro and Usanga, 2007, Okiy, 2004 and Onukaogu, 2001).

Services to the Aged

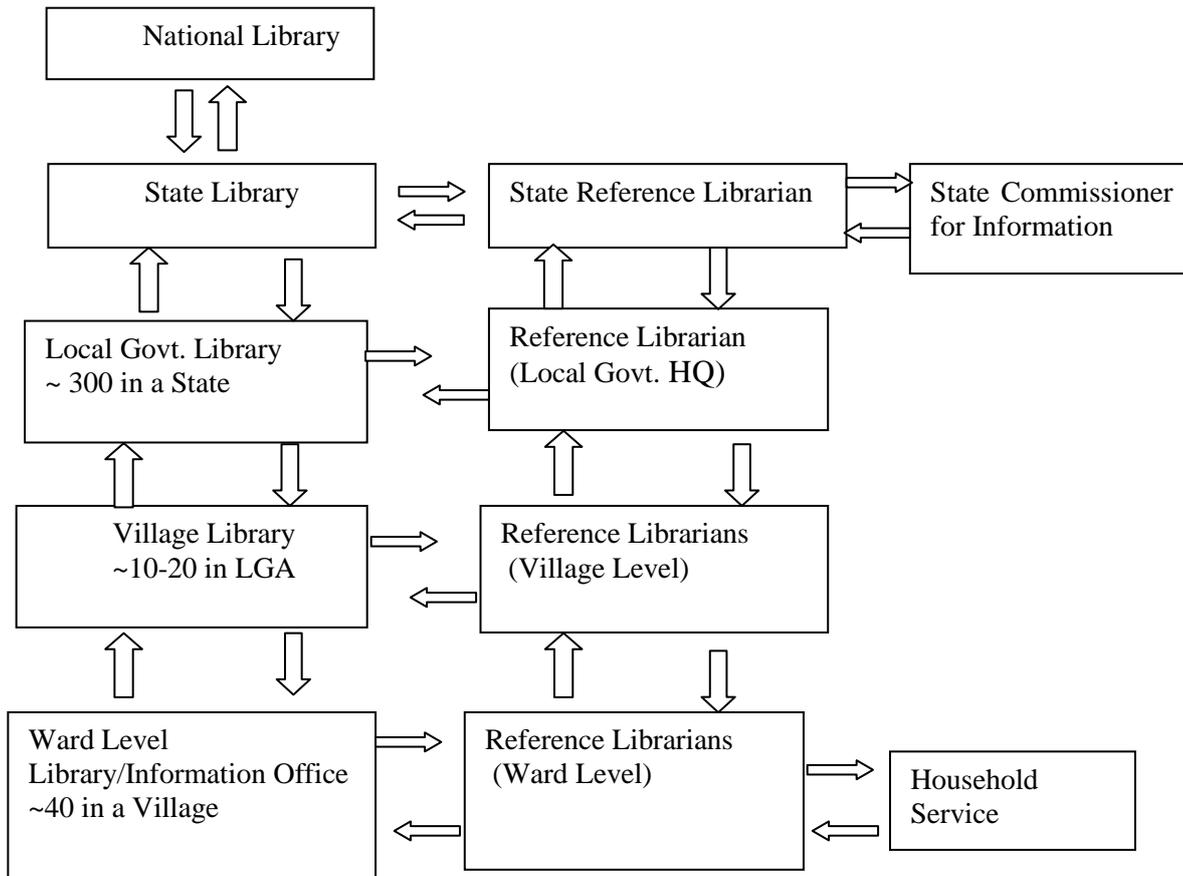
The public library can help the aged to obtain needed information or pass their leisure hours with greater contentment by extending its services to them. This can take the form of providing them with books, newspapers, magazines and video cassettes which they can listen to in their private homes. The library can synergize with philanthropic organizations in charge of old peoples' home to actualize this goal which can greatly enhance such people's last days of life.

Services to the Physically Handicapped

The Reference Librarians should endeavor to make their presence felt by the physically disadvantaged in order to make them develop the ability left in them and encourage such individuals to accept disability and make the best of the situation they found themselves in. The library can help this category of people in two ways. First, by employing the physically handicapped wherever the handicap does not prevent them from performing behind-the-scene routine tasks. This enables the handicapped to augment their means of livelihood and allows the normal library staff to concentrate on technical and more professional duties. Secondly, literacy classes should be provided for the visually handicapped in the community as part of the public library services. A professional librarian could be trained on the use of the Braille for teaching and learning. Talking-books, tape and players could also be used to enable the librarian place the right book in the right hand at the right time.

The Way Forward

As illustrated below, the administrative structure from state government to ward level can be used to implement effective community service by the reference librarians in Nigeria.



Proposed Nigerian Model for Effective Reference Service

- A. Reference Librarians at state levels should be in constant touch with the Commissioner for Information and the State Libraries, should also maintain contact with National Library, to enable libraries render effective community services to people living in the states.
- B. Reference Librarian at Local Government Headquarters liaises with the counterparts at State levels and the Local Government Libraries to ensure that people at village levels in the Local Government Areas obtain expected state-of-the-art community services. Local Government Libraries should maintain effective contact with libraries at village levels to ensure that the latter are adequately supported to render optimal services. However, in urban areas the Local Government Reference Librarians may only ensure that people in the Local Government Areas are adequately served, depending on the general literacy level.
- C. Village Reference Librarian liaises with the village library and the Local Government Reference Librarian to ensure that optimal reference services are rendered to people in the village.

- D. At the ward level, especially in rural areas, the scenario can be very different and more challenging: poorest and least educated individuals with poor or zero ICT compliance; youth in secondary schools who have not seen a computer before but are expected to write and pass computer-based joint matriculation examination before gaining admission to a tertiary institution to further their education in Nigeria; people who may not have access to the radio or television and are totally ignorant of the social, legal and health consequences of what they do or what they do not do in their environment.

The constraints and challenges in a rural setting are enormous and innumerable, and the Reference Librarian at that level must be recognized as performing special duties. He must interact with the village library unit, ward level library unit which should also double as grassroots information officer, and various households in the ward to render vital reference services as may be required. He must be specially trained and equipped to deliver despite these challenges.

Conclusion

Library services are essential to the educational, political, and social development of the rural population. The general public in Nigeria are the ones that need community services and from the foregoing the Reference Librarians in different kinds of libraries can provide community services in both the urban and rural areas. Community services can be achieved if the available libraries in Nigeria should continue to provide good services to the students, the researchers, the pleasure-seekers, the disadvantaged and the illiterate farmers and fishermen. Everybody needs information to live a standard life. The Federal, State, and Local Governments in Nigeria are therefore expected to equip the libraries with ICT facilities so that the Reference Librarians would be in a position to effectively reach lives of rural and urban communities with effective library services.

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