

Libraries and Public Information Management in Nigeria's Democratic Dispensation

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores the roles which libraries could play in the management of public information in Nigeria's democratic dispensation. The importance of free-flow of information to the attainment of sustainable democracy was stressed.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The approach adopted for this study was library research which communed with a brief over-view of Nigeria's experience in democracy since independence.

Findings: The paper identified pubic school academic and special library as critical institution for the realization of stable and reliable democracy in Nigeria.

Practical Implications: The practical implication of this paper is that the information role of librarian in the furtherance of democratic principle and values in Nigeria is connected to the fact that democracy can only be built and developed where there is well organized and coordinated sources of information.

Originality/Value: it's values lies in the paper's articulation of problems militating against affective library and information services to the Nigerian public. It also proffers strategies to overcome such obstacles.

Keywords: Librarians, Libraries, Public information, management, democracy, Nigeria

Paper Type: General review

Introduction

All types of libraries were believed to be depositories of one form of information resources or the other, from their earliest ages. Thus, we have public, academic, special and school libraries etc. The role which these libraries could play in information management for the sustenance of our thriving democracy cannot be over-emphasized. This is because the library in Nigerian context still remains the only institution where everybody covered by the "community of users" of each library is provided with unhindered access to information services of that library almost free of charge, in most cases. This justifies the need for our present day governments to provide the needed financial backing to all types of libraries in order that all the citizens of this country could be served with information about developments in governments' circles and their active participation in the democratic process.

It is not only in a democracy where information is essential and serves as an effective tool for its

realization but also, in all aspects of human endeavours. Consequently, all human activities, be it on social, cultural, political, scientific and technological aspects etc., depend on information to thrive in accordance with set standards and expectations. This is why Bitagi (2009 p.4) observed that "information is currently regarded as the fifth factor of production, in addition to the age long existing ones of land, capital, labour and entrepreneurship".

The management of information so as to be able to retrieve and utilize it quickly at the time it is needed has become imperative in order to achieve desired goals and their subsequent development. This follows that in a modern society, especially a democratically ruled state like Nigeria, the lack of adequate desired information in the conduct of its activities, such as those on active and positive participation in the democratic process etc, will stagnate. Eze (1999 p.2) corroborated this view when he argued that "a society becomes morbid and motionless when information flow stagnates".

Information in the context of this paper could be an idea, news or data which makes it possible for politicians to either maintain, change or improve upon their present method of acquiring power, utilizing it and subsequently ruling Nigeria or part there-off in such a way that there will be peace, stability in the polity and national development. On the other hand, information is that which provide a guide and empowers the electorates to elect, return or reject politicians for particular positions by the power of voting. The role of individual libraries and librarians in Nigeria towards attaining the onerous objectives is the focus of this paper.

Democracy in Nigeria: A brief Over View

Democracy, according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English (1999 p. 308) is “a system of government by the whole population (of a country) usually through elected representatives”. This connote that a democratic government such as the one practiced in Nigeria today should be elected by all Nigerians who are qualified to do so under the provisions of democratic principles or laws. That is to say that all Nigerias must have a say on who governs them and how they should be governed. Ijatuyi and Adebayo (2006 p. 61) noted that democratization is “the process of forming a government in which the sovereign power resides in the people and is exercised either directly by them or officers elected by them”. A popular agitation by majority of the citizens is that democracy should be a government of the people, by the people for the people.

Meanwhile, Ake in Atake and Dodo (2010 p.16) believes that “what is being foisted on Africa is a version of liberal democracy, reduced to the crude simplicity of multi-party elections which is not really conducive to political stability, rule of law and democracy”. In view of that Atake and Dodo (2010 p.16) urged Nigerians, (and) indeed Africans to demand for unpopular empowerment and electoral democracy, since according to the duo, “unpopular empowerment is being driven by the interest of the ordinary people because it empowers them, makes government more accountable and less corruptible as well as brings public policy more in alignment with social needs”. They added that “unpopular empowerment would ensure that government at whatever levels are responsive to the legitimate expectations of the citizenry through continuous and purposeful investment in their health, education and productivity so as to

make them more competitive in every sphere”. These authors seems to buy the idea of the authors cited above since the present Nigeria’s democracy is characterized by corruption and care free attitude about the state of the masses.

Today, Nigeria at its golden age of 50 has witnessed some attempts of democratizing. Before now however, and accept in two or three occasions i.e 1960-1965, 1979-1983 and a three months break in 1993, Nigeria has been subjected to the whims and caprices of the Nigerian military dictatorship. Under this situation, the army dictated the direction which this country and its people moved. However, since there was no participation from the masses of this country, even the army as an institution did not agree with itself. That was why there were frequent coup-de-tats or take overs of one military government from the other. The actual two occasions where the masses had the opportunity to participate in governance were subjected to what we may call military supervision. The fear of the military therefore, did not allow the politicians to do the jobs for which they were elected. It was a situation of grab, I grab before the next military incursion. Their failure to perform to expectations therefore, ended in the takeover of their governments.

From 1999 however, it seems or looks as if the military has restricted its activities to the barracks and participating more in the protection of the borders of this country and related security issues which are supposed to be their primary assignment and objective. With this situation on ground, there is some amount of certainty that democracy in Nigeria may have come to stay. There is also the hope that despite political crises here and there, the system will nature into maturity with time. To achieve this maturity in the polity, all hands must be on deck to ensure that democracy thrives efficiently and effectively. This is why we, as librarians must put our heads together to fashion out ways of forestalling future military incursions and join hands with colleagues in other professions and Nigerian public in working towards achieving a workable, stable and reliable democracy in Nigeria.

The Library and Public Information Management

Librarianship is a versatile profession. The library and librarians therefore, have something to do or say in all spheres of human activity.

That is why in democracy, it is viewed that the contribution of the library and librarians is a necessary impetus for effective and efficient performance of the politicians or democrats, maintenance and sustenance of the system. In this direction, Ijatuyi and Adebayo (2006) observed that

"the library is a service and information centre where the sum total or even most of human civilization and development in print and non-print media is stocked and organized systematically for the use of all the citizens in the course of their quest for information, knowledge, learning, teaching, research, recreation and entertainment" (p.60).

The events that led to a change from military dictatorship to democracy in Nigeria in 1999 calls for active participation of librarians not only to ensure that the military does not actively come back to power in this country again but also ensure that the democratic system is adequately supported by the required information resources and services that will keep it alive, functional and to live up to expectations. The organs of democracy to be targeted by the library and librarians include political parties, the politicians, the electorates, the government of the day and indeed, the body charged with the responsibility of conducting acceptable elections – the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The role of the library should be to provide all the information resources and services that will facilitate these organs to take informed decisions and actions that will improve upon the social, cultural, economic, political, scientific and cultural development of the Nigerian nation through election of credible representatives in various tiers of government. That is to say that the political parties and politicians need information about how to convince the electorates to vote for them while the electorates themselves, based on the electioneering campaign promises of the duo also need adequate information to be able to decide those parties and politicians to actually vote for. The judges in the court of law also need information to interpret legal books and actions of the people etc so as to maintain some amount of consistency in judging cases. It is assumed that with adequate information, no elected representative, electorate and or judge will either be disappointed or regret, taking the decision he/she has taken. The only institution that remain unutilized fully for the attainment of this

national objective is the library. Below is a summary of the expected roles of types of libraries to participate in the exercise.

1. The Public Library

The public library has often been likened to the people's university. This is because first and foremost, it is not limited to use by any category of users. Mamman (1999 p.65) quoted the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1949) as having declared that the public library is "the local centre of information making all kinds of knowledge and information readily available to its users. The services of the library are provided on basis of equality of access for all regardless of age, religion, nationality, language and social status...". From this position, the public library is well positioned to provide services to all irrespective of one's political leaning. Secondly, the public library acquires for use, all materials published under the sun to ensure that all her customers (users) always meet with materials that satisfy their respective needs. In order to support Nigeria's democracy therefore, public libraries across the country, in addition to their traditional roles of lending and reference services, compilation and dissemination of bibliographies, abstracts and indexes, accessions lists, current contents etc which are all intended to enlighten the users about what is currently available for their use, there is need to dig into the archives to unravel all documents relating to past democratic experiences and practices of Nigeria since independence and provide translation services of such documents to our teeming qualified voters and politicians alike so as to avoid same and similar mistakes of why they failed. All documents emanating from INEC and political parties must be translated into the various local languages and made available to all public libraries and information centres for distribution to members of their communities of influence. In addition to these, the audio visual sections of public libraries should produce posters, newspaper cuttings and show relevant films that educate all stakeholders on what to do and how to do it in the political arena.

From the above analysis, the public library should be adequately equipped to meet with the current challenges and expectations of an ideal democratic governance. In this direction, Bitagi (1995) asserted that "a well equipped library system in a true national democracy plays the

role of affording the actors in the political arena, including the executive, legislature, judiciary and indeed the general public access to required information which will make it possible for everybody to contribute positively to the nation's democratic process and its development".

In a bid to achieve the above objective by the public library also, Bitagi went on to urge each state government to provide enough funds for the establishment of libraries in the nook and cranny of the state, equip these libraries with adequate and reliable sources of information, including modern electronic gadgets such as computers, radios, film projectors etc and employment of qualified and experienced manpower who would be ready to serve and not served. Such staff must be ready to live and provide library and information services in rural communities. Up till today, these views are still relevant since most of our public libraries across the country are not performing to expectations as far as support for sustainable democracy is concerned in Nigeria.

2. School and Academic Libraries

The primary and secondary level of education everywhere in the world form the basic foundation upon which every form of education is built. For example, the National Policy on Education (NPE) (2004 p.14) pointed out that "primary level, in particular, is that upon which the rest of education system is built and that it is the key to the success or failure of the whole system". Similarly, Udo (1999 p.110) observed that "libraries and or education facilitate democracy since it is knowledge that engenders, liberates and ushers in or set the stage for the birth of democracy. It is therefore not surprising that democratized nations have well developed libraries". In our own setting and in support of the NPE, Udo (1999 p.110) further posited that "the school library is (also) the foundation on which all other libraries are built. Obviously, if the foundation is faulty, the construction is bound to suffer some defects". The point which Udo is trying to drive home is that for any meaningful library and information service and management to be effective and efficient in a democratic setting like ours, it is pertinent that democratic intuition and awareness be imbibed at the early stage of one's life so as to ensure the institutionalization of democratic culture. This notion calls for the introduction of "political culture" in our schools' curricula with adequate

supportive information resources in the schools' libraries. It is the belief here that just like other subjects taught in the class, when a child is taught some elements of democracy at this level and he gets to read more about it in the library, he will grow up with positive ideas of what democracy entails. This will also serve as a guide when eventually he finds himself involved in practicing it. The teaching of political culture and provision of information resources that are relevant to democracy should continue through the secondary level though in advanced form since students at this level are old enough to practice some elements of democracy through students' unionism.

At the tertiary level of education, that is in Universities, Polytechnics, Monotechnics and Colleges of Education, beneficiaries are considered to be matured and therefore, education is geared towards the full development of human personality and is also the key to democracy and development. The main business of education at this level is therefore, to gather, organize and disseminate knowledge and skills form the past (to the present) (Udo, 1999 p.111). At this level also, democracy is actually put into practice. The role of the library in providing information resources that are relevant and related to democratic principles and practices becomes imperative in order to increase the knowledge of students on the subject matter.

From the foregone, it should be realized that provision of information resources and management is emphasized because if our governments succeeds, education from primary level is intended for all the citizens of this country. Thus, if there is that formal introduction of democracy to pupils and students and supported by adequate and reliable information resources, the effort of coming to participate in democracy for national development becomes relatively simple. Unfortunately however, despite the provisions of the NPE (2004 p.53) that "since libraries constitute one of the most important educational services, proprietors of school shall also provide functional libraries ... and provide for training of librarians...", most state governments have not consciously worked towards the realization of this prescribed objective. Consequently, most public schools have nothing near to what can be called school libraries. In most public schools, libraries are lacking white yet, where effort is made to establish one, the absence or lack of qualified professionals to man it reduces it to glorified

reading room. On the other hand, the NPE (2004 p.53) provision that "state and local governments shall establish public libraries and actively promote readership" has not been strictly adhered to. When some states have succeeded in erecting state library headquarters, little or no effort is made to establish functional branches of this library at all the local government areas of the state. More pathetically, the collections of some state libraries are not only inadequate but also often fail to meet the objectives of providing information resources and services for all targeted community of users. It is therefore the position of these authors that a revolutionary approach be taken by all state governments and implementers of government policies, in particular, that relevant provisions in our laws and decrees made for the establishment of various libraries are actualized. In that direction, Bitagi (1995 p.12) called for the recognition of libraries in Nigeria in such a way that they could meet with various users demands. That is juxtapositioning of library service with any form of meaningful education and national life.

3. Special Libraries

The discussion on this section, in the context of this write-up is limited to libraries maintained by the three arms of government – the executive, legislature and the judiciary. This is because these libraries provide basic and necessary information to expedite decision-making in government business. This is done under two headings – government and law libraries.

Government Libraries

These are libraries that are attached to ministries and extra ministerial agencies. Unlike the public libraries, these libraries are expected to provide specific information rather than documents containing the information, though they also provide information resources to users. Government libraries, according to Uche (1999 p.32) are "primarily set up to facilitate access of government functionaries to all types of materials that contain vital information required for responsive governance and accelerated national development. Government libraries can therefore serve as veritable vehicles for the sustenance of democracy". To achieve desired objectives, these libraries will, in addition to providing traditional functions of acquiring, processing and dissemination of library materials, provide effective and active information services such as identification of users' information needs by creating user

profiles through which to bombard them with pieces of information. This could be achieved through providing Current Awareness Services (CAS), Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI), Indexing and abstracting services, document delivery services and a host of others which are all intended to bring needed information to the door step of the needy. Sources of information to be acquired by government libraries which will form the foundation upon which these services will be based should include memoranda, circulars, newspapers, personal contacts, government publications (such as) development plans, budget papers, congressional reports, hanzard, white papers of reports of commissions of enquiry, laws, indexes, abstracts to government sources, gazettes, newspapers, magazines, conference proceedings, and electronic government information sources (Uche, 1999). Others include Civil Service Rules (SCR), Financial Regulations (FR), text and reference books such as dictionaries and encyclopedias.

Law Libraries

Law libraries are of many types. Utor (1999 p.15) and Malomo (1999 p.20) noted that "law libraries are classified into various types depending on which establishment they are meant to serve". Thus, we have academic and research law libraries in institutions of higher learning, federal and states Ministry of Justice/Courts libraries, private law libraries, public libraries with collection of law materials and parliamentary or legislative libraries. Irrespective of this classification, Malomo (1999 p.20) argued that "the principle and mode of operation are the same because they (all) stock the same contents – law books, and now the introduction of the computer to retrieve legal information through electronic devices". Malomo further noted that "law libraries take their stock form three sources, namely decided cases in form of law reports, statutes enacted by parliament or the ruling body empowered to make laws and legal opinions inform of textbooks and journals by legal writers". The important aspect of law library collections should be the acquisition of all law information resources that permeate equal judgment and decision taking for same or similar offenses. In Nigeria for example, cases emanating as a result of rigging elections in Kano State must be treated equally as that of Niger State, if rigging is actually established in the two cases.

In all types of libraries, librarians must be adequately trained to provide prompt information service to facilitate quick decision making and taking by the parliament and judiciary.

Expectations from the Librarians

The efficient management of public information in a democratic setting requires that professionals must be up and doing in providing information services to all the stakeholders in order to play their roles diligently. The information role to be played by librarians in the up-liftment of democracy in Nigeria is an attribute of the fact that democracy can only be built and developed where there is a well organized and coordinated source of information and where people, both the participants, observers and voters are adequately informed. To achieve this noble objective, Bitagi (1995 p.12) argued that "librarians must not only provide information to participants in politics but must also participate in it". This, according to the author is necessary because it makes it possible for them to articulate views and discuss issues of direct interest to the profession so as to ensure that not only is a sound foundation laid as regards our expectations but also to be seen as actually involved in the planning of achieving the type of democracy we desire". Bitagi's observation assumes the fact that the library and librarians must not, as they use to be, left out in the scheme of things when the agenda of democracy is being drawn up. For example, if librarians were there as elected senators and members of the national assembly when the 1999 constitution was amended or even at the National constitutional conference of 1999, they would probably been able to argue for the type of ideal library network for an equally ideal democracy. It is therefore, the belief of these authors that the present democratic dispensation can only be sustained where there is adequate free-flow of information. Librarians and information specialists must play great roles to ensure the attainment of this great objective. We must shift from our present passive and reactive positions to proactive status to ensure that, all being equal, Nigerians, whether they are politicians, electorates and or observers are provided with needed information to move Nigeria forward to the extent of achieving the expected national development in all sectors of national economy.

The Relevance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

ICT has permeated all spheres of human activities. Its role in enhancing library and information services in realizing a dependable and sustainable democracy in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. Odufuwa (2006 p.100) described ICT as "a range of technologies for gathering, storing, retrieving, processing, analyzing and transmitting information". ICTs are therefore multi-functional equipment that makes it possible to perform expected library functions with relative ease, more massively, avoid repetition of functions, time and cost saving in addition to the fact that it is more accurate in the performance of desired functions. The use of ICTs in libraries will also facilitate networking of similar libraries, for example, those in the state houses of assembly or judiciary and thus permeate sharing of ideas and documents. The extent to which such services will enhance our democratic dispensation cannot be over exaggerated. However, for some basic reasons, Malomo (1999 p.25) observed that "talking about automation in a law library, we may call it a missing link in the training of law librarians and in practice". Malomo's observation is critical to many libraries in Nigeria. This calls for positive change in the attitude of government, organizations and individuals providing one form or the other of library and information resources and services.

Problems Militating against Effective Library and Information Services to the Nigerian Public

The major problem confronting library and information service as far as its contribution to democratic development is concerned, is the failure of all tiers of government, organizations and individuals to recognize the fact that libraries could play significant roles in achieving desired national objectives.

Linked to the above, and resultant effect of lack of recognition, all types of libraries are underfunded. This lead to dilapidated library structures in some cases, out dated information resources and poor service delivery in most cases. Brain drain which results into unqualified library staff is also occasioned by inadequate financial support for our libraries.

The poor reading habit of Nigerians generally is a factor inhibiting the utilization of library resources even if they (libraries) are equipped

with most current information resources. A friend once noted that if you want to hide something against most Nigerians, hide it in a book. They will never find it.

The culture of writing on individual experiences and disciplines is still a Herculean task in Nigeria. This leads to scarcity of current information resources not only on democracy but also on all sectors of national economy.

The insufficient utilization of ICT facilities leaves us with inadequate sharing of ideas, results of findings in research and other relevant documents that we need from other people and places.

The librarians have capitalized on the inadequacies of our governments, organizations and individuals to provide limited service to the citizens of this country.

Recommendations

Library and information services need to be accorded due recognition it deserves by all the tiers of governments stakeholders in politics and all Nigerians.

All tiers of government should provide annual budget for the development of all types of libraries. Budgeted amount must be released and used for the purpose it is meant.

Nigerians must be sensitized on the need to read and write for the development of their various endeavours.

The directive of publish or perish should be extended to all professionals in other professions.

Librarians must provide maximum service not only to ensure the sustenance of our young democracy but also for the development of all sectors of national economy.

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