

SPECIAL LIBRARY SERVICES IN NIGERIA: AREAS OF TECHNOLOGICAL APPLICATION

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Abstract

The paper highlights the functions of special librarians and the traditional ways of achieving them. The current trend of technological application has been identified while forms of technology applicable to Nigerian special libraries and areas of application have been treated. The paper concludes by urging librarians to accept the challenges posed by technology as a task that must be done.

Introduction

There is increasing emphasis on the application of technology to processes and services offered by special libraries in Nigeria. This is necessary because according to Idowu and Mabawonku (1999:27) it makes it possible to acquire better control and manipulation of their work environments through the use of automated information systems.

The role of the special librarian, just like those of his colleagues in other types of libraries is to locate, select, acquire, organise, preserve and disseminate information to the library's clientele. The difference between the two is however obvious because in addition to the above responsibilities, the special librarian is expected to provide specific, current, and relevant information basically necessary to enhance the efficient and effective performance of the clientele on their respective duties and consequently the attainment of the goals and objectives of the parent organization. It is therefore reasonable to think that the special librarian will use all the means available at his disposal to discharge these tasking responsibilities.

Conventionally, the special librarians have employed the use of various means of methods of getting information across to the user. In this regard Afolabi (1989:12-24) and Gates (1990:195-204) enumerated the traditional functions of special librarians to include:

Building the basic collection, circulation services, selective dissemination of information, bibliographic survey and literature searching, photocopying services, interlibrary cooperation, information analysis, bibliographic services (bibliographies, index, abstracts), current archival services.

It is in the light of attendant difficulties and slowness in the performance of these duties traditionally that made Mohammed (1994:26) to observe that the role of special libraries should not be limited to the provision of information resources alone. He argued that the resources are provided in special libraries so that they should provide the basis upon which required information could be provided easily, quickly and accurately to the user.

Based on the above recommendation, it can be assumed, and rightly too, that for easy, quick, and accurate provision of special library functions, modern technology must be employed. When we talk of technological application to libraries in Nigeria for now, we mean the use to which computers and other electronic gadgets could be put to provide required services more quantitatively, qualitatively accurately, efficiently and effectively. In theory literature abound that attempts have been made by some special libraries in Nigeria. A follow up of these literature and efforts are replete with tales of flop and unsuccessful implementation. Nevertheless, Lawani *et al* (1991:1) have told us about the success story of the automation of International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) Ibadan Library and Documentation centre since 1985. Idowu and Mabawonku (1999:32) have also reported the success story of Federal Agricultural Coordination Unit (FACU) in 1992; Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) in 1986; and the Raw Materials Research and Development Council library in 1987. It is worthy of note that these are positive development in special librarianship yet, majority of special libraries in Nigeria remains unautomated for one reason or the other.

Forms of Technology Applicable to Nigerian Special Libraries

A variety of forms of technology exist in the world today that are made purposely for effective handling of information and management of various library processes. But Uko (1984:3-9) identified the computer as the most widely used in automating libraries in Nigeria. According to him, in any discussion of application of

modern technology in the library, the first thing that comes to mind is the computer. The computers, because of its multi purpose nature has been defined in a variety of ways. Uko (1984:6) defined it as "a mechanical, electric or electronic machine for carrying out especially complex calculation". Perhaps the definition that best suit the purpose of special library functions is that which was given by French (1996:3). Simply put, he said "a computer is a device that processes data to produce further data or information". French (1963) also summarizes the working of the computer to include the following:

- (1) Input-accepting data from outside for processing with –
- (2) Storage-holding data internally before, during and after processing.
- (3) Processing – performs operations on the data it holds within and,
- (4) Output – produces data from within for external use.

The above views were supported by Oketunji (1999:1) when he quoted the American library Association as saying that Information Technology (IT) is the application of computers and other technology to the acquisition, organization, storage, retrieval and dissemination of information.

The most convenient aspect of using computers is that the librarian doesn't necessarily need to be a computer analyst or programmer before its use in the library. He only need to be fairly knowledgeable even if it is at the intellectual level as we have it in the class so as to be able to direct the affairs of the system. Also, when acquired a computer for library use, the librarian should consult computer specialist for advice as regards the capacity and other details of the system that may be appropriate for his library before final acquisition. These basic and necessary information could also be confirmed from the vendor.

Areas of Technological Application in Special Library Services

There is no gain saying that the computer is a multipurpose machine particularly in the area of storage and retrieval of information. Without mincing words, it can be safely argued that computers could be used in carrying out every process and services by the special library. However, to be cost and space effective, it may not be wise to use it for every bit of operation in the library. It is in the light of this that Uko (1985:5) identified some relevant areas where computers could be applied in the library. These areas include acquisitions, cataloguing (technical services), circulation, and serial control.

Acquisitions

Acquisitions exercise in any type of library and particularly in special library is a cumbersome activity involving selections, checking of materials recommended by the various departments, ordering procedures and receiving new materials in the library which involves a lot of activities among which include checking that what is ordered that is supplied, by the right author, publisher, price and in their right edition. It should be noted that when these procedures are conventionally done, there are bound to be several mistakes ranging from multiple ordering of some titles to delay in providing necessary reports. More often, these activities are repetitive. When computer is employed to discharge these functions, great speed and accuracy is ensured. It also saves a great deal of time. Other services whose performance are enhanced include producing reminder letters to the vendor, cancellation of order notices, printing of order slips and providing financial report even at very short notices. The use of computer also facilitate producing accession list of the library's new and entire holding.

Technical Services

Technical services embodies cataloguing and classification of new materials. Cataloguing is a process of describing each material as a given object in such a way that one can be distinguished from the other. The process involves identifying and recording the author, full title, edition, place of publication, publisher, date and other relevant information regarding to the physical nature and the ISBN etc.

Classification on the other hand involves determining the specific subject which the material belongs and assigning call marks representing that subject.

These twin functions may be characterized by series of errors which according to Uko (1984:5) may not be of the pen alone but also of the head. With the use of computers, these errors could be easily eliminated in addition to printing several catalogues easily that could be used by different users in different places within the same library and at the same time.

Additionally, a computerized cataloguing system enables the use of a centrally produced bibliographic records. Lawani *et al* (1991:4) in relation to this said that the main computer containing all bibliographic data is kept in the library while various locations such as departments or sections are provided with terminals. The advantage that accrues with this is that it does not only save a lot of time, but also ensures uniformity of

cataloguing procedures and practice as well as making it possible to access information from the library even if the library is closed.

Circulation

The major functions carried out in the circulation section of a special library include registration of users, charging and discharging, reservation, sending reminders and overdue notices, and keeping daily, weekly, monthly and annual statistics of the use of the library. Most of these activities are routine and repetitive and done on continuous basis. The possibility of doing one thing many times is likely. For example, one can register a user two times or miscalculate the total number of users per month. Computerized system ensures efficiency in the handling of these functions. The problem of a user borrowing more than his entitlement and loss of books could be eliminated. It is in the effort to curtail stealing in the library that I recommend a computer which has an in-built alarm. This device raises alarm once attempt is made to seal out a book.

Serials Control

The problem with the serials are much the same as those of books. These ranges from their selection to ultimate utilization. Since they are even more costly, current and relevant, the computerization of process and services from serials is very necessary since they constitute the bulk of the special library collection.

Networking

In developing countries such as Nigeria there is much reliance on foreign publications especially those in the area of science and technology. For obvious reasons however, it has not been possible for special libraries to acquire all that they need for their users. To serve their users effectively therefore, there is the need for special libraries to cooperate with each other so that their resources can be shared. Networking of special libraries provides that the resources of one library could be made available for use by the clientele of another library. Jalloh B (1999:3) observed that networking is necessary because it provides the opportunity to share in the benefit of the computer rather than being left out completely either because of lack of capital or human resources.

Other Areas of Application of Technology

The most important aspect of special librarianship is to make himself relevant to the organization or community served. In that direction, the special librarian tries as much as he could to bring information to the door step of the user. In the words of Silva (1970:53), since the special library serves the need of a particular clientele... it should make known to its users materials or information just received. For this reason, the computerization of the following functions, to enhance accuracy and speed is recommended. These include selective dissemination of information, compilation of various types of bibliographies, and abstracting services, accession list, and news bulletin.

Conclusion

The goal of any special library is to maximize its efforts and capabilities to most effectively serve its clientele. Consequently, its success enhances performance and attainment of the goals and objectives of the parent organization. Through the conventional means, it can achieve very little. More so, a revolution of information technology is occurring now. It is a revolution that will essentially shatter the effectiveness of conventional approaches and it will undoubtedly lead to profound changes in special libraries, librarians functions, and user expectations. The future is up to us as leaders in the profession. I urge all of us to seize the initiative, lead these changes and not allow ourselves to be dragged about by them. We must accept this challenge as a task that must be done.

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