

AN APPRAISAL OF REFERENCE AND USERS' SERVICES IN THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The paper takes a general look at the Reference and Users' Services of the National Library of Nigeria. It goes further to identify the various resources available and examines the activities in the Public Services Department (PSD). The challenges facing the department are highlighted and suggestions are proffered on how to improve service delivery.

Keywords: Reference Service; National Library of Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The mandate of the National Library of Nigeria according to the legal instrument that established it includes the provision of necessary support for intellectual efforts in all activities that are directed towards progress and development, and ensuring the availability of a comprehensive collection and full access to it. Against this background, the National Library of Nigeria is expected to assemble and maintain a comprehensive collection of resources for unrestricted access.

Library operations generally are by nature, service oriented, this is reflected in the referral services rendered by libraries. Considering the enormity of the responsibilities of the National Library of Nigeria, it becomes imperative to examine the Reference and Users' Services offered in the institution, having in mind that Reference Service is the crux of all library activities.

Concept of Reference Service

Reference services involve providing answers to questions asked by library users. A reader has an information need, he comes to the library and presents the request. The reference librarian in return strives to provide an answer to the question from the information resources in his library and sometimes in another library.

Hutchins (1944) asserts that reference work includes the direct, personal aid within a library to persons in search of information. Ifidon (1979) operationally defines reference work/service as the personal assistance

given by librarians to individual readers who are in pursuit of information. This involves not only locating the materials where the required information can be found but also locating the information and sorting out what information is relevant from a mass of information.

Reference service to Edo (2000) is the personal assistance given by the librarian to individuals in search of information for whatever purpose, as well as various library activities deliberately designed to facilitate easy provision of information. To Krishan (1980), it is rather difficult to find a definition of reference service which would be generally acceptable. He explained that different persons have defined it differently; therefore he concluded that reference service is what a reference librarian does. The question now is who is a reference librarian?

To answer the question above, Santer (2000) explained that the reference librarian is the person who provides reference service. Such a person is expected to possess a wide range of intellectual skills and desire to assist the users, flair for organizing documents, ability to search literature, ability to communicate fluently and adequate knowledge of the resources of the library. The role of a reference librarian can not be over emphasized as the reputation of a modern library to a large extent depends on the ability of the librarian to meet up with current challenges of quality reference service provision.

Public Services Department (PSD)

The Public Services Department (formerly, Reference and Users' Services Department) is one of the five professional departments in the National Library of Nigeria. PSD is a major department that renders reference services to the public. Major reference activities are offered in the five sections of the department. These sections are the Nigeriana section, Foreign Monographs section, Serials section, the Resource Centre/Internet Café and Government Documents Section. The department is the image-maker of the National Library. It serves as a link between the National Library and the general public. This department provides direct personal aid within the library to person/persons in search of information for whatever purpose. It also engages in various library activities aimed at making information easily accessible. It serves a large spectrum of clientele which includes students, teachers, researchers, business-men, politicians, professionals, retired persons, neo-literates etc.

Materials/Resources Available for Reference Work in the Public Services Department of the National Library of Nigeria.

The reference materials available are many and varied; they can be categorized as print and non-print materials.

A. Print Materials: These include:-

- *Encyclopedias* - (General & specialized)
- *Dictionaries* (General & specialized)
- *Fact Sources*
- *Directories*
- *Bibliographies*
- *Catalogues*
- *Serials* (newspapers, journals & magazines)
- *Indexes and Abstracts*
- *Government Publications*

B. Non-Print or Audio Visual Resources:

These include:

- Computers
- Internet
- Sound and Film Projector
- CD-ROMs
- Microfilms
- Photocopying Machines

Reference Services offered in the Public Services Department

The Public Services Department (PSD) is a professional department in the National Library of Nigeria. The department is manned by efficient staff who attend to the information needs of the users. As the image maker of the apex Library, the staff are very polite to users in line with the professional ethics of librarianship. The department houses materials for in-library use only, convenient seating spaces are provided where users can consult the reference materials. The reference services offered are discussed below.

- **Answering users' query:** The primary function of a reference department of any library is to answer users' queries. There are two kinds of reference queries: quick reference query and research query. A Quick Reference Query as the name suggests refers to a situation where a library client needs an instant response. A user for example may simply want to know when 'President Ibrahim Babangida' came to power. Even where the reference librarian knows the answer, it is good practice to respond to the question professionally, and in doing that the reference librarian may consult reference materials such as the

Nigerian Year-Book, to make the information authentic. A Research Query needs a longer time to answer than a quick reference query. For example, a user may demand to know the youngest out of all the American Presidents. The reference librarian may not be able to give an instant response but needs time to consult sources like "who is who" in the United States or books on American history, in order to supply the accurate information to the user.

➤ **User Education:** From time to time, students from primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions on e-library visit's to the department are taken on library orientation to enable them know ways of using the library effectively. Library users are equally taught how to make use of the library catalogue and other specialized reference materials effectively.

➤ **Compilation of Bibliographies:** Bibliographies are constantly compiled for clientele use. These bibliographies are often subject based. A bibliography is a location, verification, and identification instrument besides being itself a documentation source which facilitates easy information retrieval in various subject fields.

➤ **indexing and Abstracting:** Indexing entails the systematic listing of the essential contents of a document for the purpose of speedy information retrieval. The staff of this department compiles indexes on important materials for which no index was provided at the time of publication. All indexes compiled are kept in appropriately labeled files. Abstract on the other hand is the condensed version of an original text. Abstracts of important documents in the library are made available to users to facilitate information retrieval. With the use of the abstract, the library user can determine whether or not the original document will meet his/her information needs.

➤ **Inter-Library Loan Service:** Hardly can any library meet all the information needs of her clientele. It is the responsibility of this department to arrange for inter-library loan. Union catalogues indicate the resources of different libraries involved in inter-library cooperation. National Union Catalogue, Accession Lists etc make resource sharing possible and help the librarian to satisfy the diverse information needs of users.

➤ **Current Awareness Services:** It is the responsibility of PSD to provide Current Awareness Services (CAS) to the clientele. Current Awareness Services include, Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI), Publication of Current Contents, and the publication of a list of arrivals”.

➤ **Referral Service:** Library patrons often have needs that books will not meet. They sometimes need the services of groups or agencies for specific reasons. For example, a client who wants his document authenticated for presentation at an embassy might come to the library for assistance. It is the duty of the reference librarian to offer a referral service by directing the clientele to the Federal Ministry of External Affairs where such service is obtainable.

➤ **Subpoena:** Subpoena is the process whereby the establishment (NLN) presents documents deposited through Legal Depository Act when subpoenaed or asked to do so by a court action. In such a situation, a librarian of the library presents the said document to the court to prove its authenticity while a certified copy of the document is deposited in the court.

Internet Services in PSD

In the past, the Print media formed the core of library collections in many libraries and information systems. With advancement in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the trend is towards digital information. The Internet has the potential to radically change information delivery services. The internet is the gateway for libraries and information centres to enter the electronic information era. Vast resources are available on the internet that can be accessed to satisfy the information needs of various users. Some of the important resources available on the internet include electronic books, electronic journals, dictionaries, directories, library catalogues, databases, professional user groups, search tools like yahoo and Google, E-mail facilities, etc.

The Internet cafe, otherwise known as the National Library Resource Centre is a major unit in PSD. The Centre renders a cost effective access to a broad range of information on the web. The VSAT powered system installed, with the facility for 14 users simultaneously afford users the opportunity to make on-line bibliographic information search. The internet permits accessibility

to bibliographic records of millions of books as well as the details of the collections for academic and research libraries around the world. The internet also facilitates verification and validation of bibliographic information, compilation of bibliographies and comparing of subject specialties in libraries locally and globally and other information search is possible with the use of various search tools. Other services rendered include scanning and printing of documents, assisting the users to satisfy their information needs. The internet is a powerful tool for participating in the global information race, hence the incorporation of internet service into the daily routines of modern libraries for the provision of information services that were not possible in the pre-Internet days.

CHALLENGES

A number of challenges militating against effective service delivery were identified. Prominent among these challenges are:

1. **Obsolete books:** In view of the fast growing development in information trends and needs, the users of this library are not satisfied with the collections of the library, especially the Nigeriana collection which are mostly obsolete.
2. **Unsuitable reading atmosphere:** The library location in a busy area is found to be unsuitable as the noise pollution from the environment tend to disturb the library users. Another major problem is the inadequate reading furniture and space.
3. **Epileptic internet services:** Technical problems and incessant electricity power failure make the internet service provision very unsteady and epileptic in nature.
4. **Lack of knowledge of the existence of some information resources:** Users are not aware of some information resources available in the library, it was discovered that the catalogue card of some of the books on the shelves are missing from the catalogue cabinet which means that there is no indication of the availability of such materials.
5. **Low application of ICT to library routines:** The major library routines are done manually, the library is in the process of automation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the growing importance of electronic resources and as the proportion of library activities worldwide goes more digital, the collection development policies of the National Library of Nigeria should be revised to accommodate the new information resources. The face to face user/librarian interaction is good but can no longer meet the challenges of the current development in ICT. Therefore, there is need for the National Library of Nigeria to take up the responsibility of linking up the other state branches to the internet.

The National Library of Nigeria being the apex library in Nigeria should also speed up effort to be fully automated so as not to be left out of the global digital race. Automation will solve the problem of inadequate knowledge of existing reference materials in the library since the whole stock of the library could be easily accessed on the system in an automated setting. In addition, training of librarians on ICT application skills should be given priority by the management and there is also the need to acquire more ICT equipment in the National Library of Nigeria.

The library should improve her collection by way of stocking the library with latest and relevant reference collections. Also provision should be made to update and possibly replace the obsolete reference materials to meet the users' diverse information needs.

The movement to the apex library's ultra modern permanent structure will address the problem of unsuitable library location, inadequate reading space and furniture; this will be a reality as soon as work is completed on the new site.

The provision of serviceable and reliable alternative to electricity power supply is very important. A stable alternative power supply will make for a better reading atmosphere and the maximum utilization of the internet facility will be equally made possible.

CONCLUSION

An equitable, timely and accurate information delivery service is a mandate for Nigeria's apex library. It is therefore imperative for the management of the establishment to harness all necessary resources to enhance service delivery. Automation of the various library operations will help the National Library of Nigeria to catch up with the modern trends in Information and Communication

Technology (ICT) applications in librarianship, which will no doubt enhance information service delivery. Librarians cannot afford to be left behind in this global information age, hence the need for them to equip themselves with relevant ICT skills so that they can be well prepared for the task ahead.

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