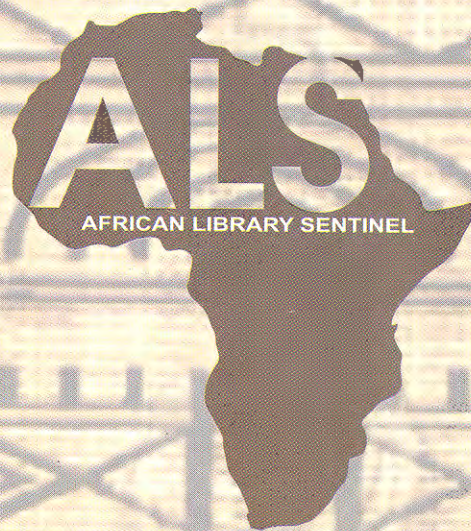


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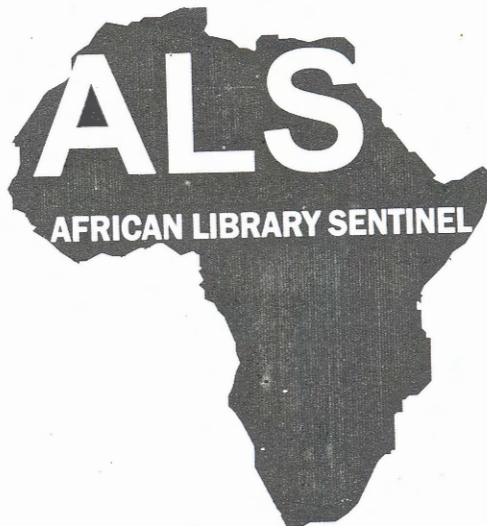


A Journal of Library and Information Science
A bi-annual journal on practices and research in library and
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LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES TO THE DISADVANTAGED GROUPS: THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED AND THE RURAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the centrality of information to the proper development of any individual. It identifies the peculiarity of the Visually Impaired and rural communities in accessing relevant information pivotal to their transformation. Information needs of the Visually Impaired and rural communities were also addressed. Strategies for intervention identified for this disadvantaged group include: proactive attempt at alternative format provisions, advocacy for funding alternative formats, provision of assistive technologies, development of community learning centres, mounting reading sessions, local content documentation and provisional of rural cyber cafes.

INTRODUCTION

The personal, vocational and social development of an individual depends on the amount, quality and accessibility of information available to him. Without access to information, it is impossible for a citizen to have full range of opportunities and services available, let alone participate fully in societal activities (Green, 1986). This view is shared by Kantumoya (1992) that people will not get their due as citizens of present day society unless they have continuous access to relevant information which will guide them into effective action.

The visually impaired have print disability and can only access information through alternative formats such as Braille, large prints, audio or talking books. Since reading is one of life's greatest pleasures that open the door to culture, knowledge and independence, this seemingly disadvantaged group should have same access to books and information as sighted people and a range of innovative alternative formats must be provided to meet these needs.

One of the major problems confronting most developing countries political independence is the transformation of the rural communities (Ojowu, 1982). This

has necessitated the exploration of several strategies and approaches, which have not been able to accomplish their various set goals as expected (Akinbote, 1996). The need to evolve measures capable of widening the opportunity of the rural population to be empowered against poverty, disease, unemployment, and ignorance is pivotal in meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

Statement of the Problem

In Nigeria, it is estimated that the population of the visually impaired is between two to three million. Despite this large number, there is insufficient provision of reading materials in Braille, talking books and large prints, thus jeopardizing their opportunities to read for informal training, personal development, recreation and entertainment. Conversely, over 60% of Nigerians who dwell in rural communities are excluded from the information age due to remoteness and lack of infrastructures. This paper, therefore seeks to identify ways to ensure equality of library and information services to this disadvantaged group.

Review of Literature

Craddock and Wallace (1996) reported that for the blind and partially sighted people, barriers to reading standard print have placed a reliance on alternative formats as a means of attempting to bridge the communication gap. The formats currently used are Braille, audio or talking books, large prints, and electronic text.

A small proportion of users read Braille, but it is a most effective alternative to print for those who use it. Electronic text is however rapidly establishing itself as the generic format since it offers electronic transferability to the range of alternative formats in use. The libraries in Nigeria servicing the visually impaired are grossly ill-equipped to meet up with the aspirations of the blind persons (Basharu, 2002). Due to a comparatively small reading public and the high cost of production, alternative formats have a history of depending on the voluntary sector for their availability.

Library and information provision to the visually impaired in Nigeria, according to Atinmo (2000) is undertaken by:

- Institutions/schools for the visually impaired such as Pacelli School for the Blind, Lagos, Federal College of Education (FCE, Special) Oyo, and Departments of Special Education, Universities of Ibadan and Jos.
- Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and private associations such as Niger-wives, Anglo-Nigerian Welfare Association for the Blind (ANWAB), Nigeria Society for the Blind etc.
- Some state libraries in Oyo, Imo and Abia States.

Onwuchekwa (1999) contends that the visually impaired, among other categories of disabled persons in Nigeria lag behind in the availability and accessibility of adequate, relevant and accurate information. This appears to be a tacit exclusion and marginalization.

Aboyade (1987) in a rural library pilot project, discovered that the cultural purposes of a library were not just limited to and appreciated by the leisured and refined members of the society. But that rural dwellers could actually go and seek the information they needed rather than wallow in ignorance or rely on hearsay. She concludes that an institution like the library would encourage the rural people to seek information to solve some of their problems, when they needed; and if they found such information satisfactory, they were bound to be highly motivated.

The conventional library appears elitist in nature geared to the needs of the literate and the highly educated. Aboyade (1987) advocates that it could be made to serve the information needs of non-literates through the following activities:

- Reinforcement of specific messages
- Repackaging of information
- Acquiring and organizing specialized materials
- Filling an identified information vacuum
- Coordinating all information transfer activities in the rural area.

Hilary Talbot (1998) found that information was not thought of as a topic in its own right among rural dwellers, but it was important to them. Their construction was not of as an end in itself, but as a means to an end, needed for a purpose, often as one of a number of resources drawn in to solve a problem. Information was pervasive to their needs, but elusive as a concept.

Chester and Neelameghan (2006) assert that rural communities in developing as well as developed countries are marginalized and that their information needs are not adequately met, thus they have not been able to productively participate in the development process. Neelameghan (2006) recommends that information professionals and their intermediaries should assist rural communities in the following ways:

- To identify the information they need and/or enable them to identify the types of information they may need.
- To provide them the information they need/seek and/or assist them to identify and use appropriate information sources.
- To enable them to evaluate the information available or provided in relation to the purpose on hand

- To enhance the community's information literacy and
- Assist them to use information and communication devices for interpersonal as well as wider global communication.

In a globalize world driven by information, groups and communities must be fully integrated to benefit maximally from the wealth of the knowledge society. To do otherwise, will amount to both intellectual and social exclusion

Information Needs of the Visually Impaired

A useful starting point is to recognize that visually impaired people need all the information that fully sighted people require. The need to be sufficiently well informed to be able to participate fully as citizens, the need to know about their rights and entitlements, they need information that will enable them to make rational choices, to support them in their work, learning and leisure. The thing that differentiates visually impaired people is the fact that they may need to receive all these information in alternative formats.

In addition to the information needs that they share with everyone else, Cox (1999) opines that visually impaired people need information that relates to their peculiar position and status. This includes information about their condition, aids, equipment and services available as well as self-help or non-governmental organizations interested in them.

Nelson (1999) observes that the need for someone to explain things is particularly acute for blind or severely impaired people who find it difficult to make notes or to store the information received in written or other forms so that they can refer to it later or keep returning to it to check that their interpretation is correct. So, the ability to consult someone who can explain things is critical.

In many cases, family and friends perform the service, advising visually impaired people on how best to proceed (Lyloyd and Thornton, 1998, Manthrop, 1996). The effectiveness of this approach depends on the extent to which the family and friends themselves are well-informed and, clearly, they often are not.

Kerrigan and Gooding (1995) also pointed out that nations are still far from being in a position where visually impaired people are well informed about the world around them due to insufficient provision of information in accessible formats. This lack of awareness can lead to a failure to obtain services or benefits to which visually impaired people are entitled.

Information Needs of Rural Communities

Aboyade (1987) observed that rural people need information on specific supplies required on their farms. They will need to know where, and how to obtain fertilizer, pesticides, seeds, mechanical equipment and other farm inputs through purchase or hiring. Other information needs identified include: information on social amenities, information for political participation, health information, etc.

Strategies for Intervention

- There is need for librarians to be pro-active in attempting to promote an interest in large print, and ensure adequate representation of same in the library stock and its availability at service point level.
- For those with very little or no vision, audio cassette is the most commonly used medium for reading and information. Academic libraries should provide sound-proof rooms, and acquire talking books to give opportunity to this category of users.
- Library services must be organized to deal effectively with the provision of reading and information in the range of alternative formats. The collaboration of producers of alternative formats and librarians should mount concerted advocacy for funding. Multi-national corporations and big banks can be approached to underwrite cost of their production as a corporate social responsibility functions.
- Provision of assistive technologies must be encouraged to enable visual impaired persons to access electronic resources.
- Development of Community Learning/Information Centres in all Local Government Areas. This will provide a grass root platform for teachers, students and community members to have access to information on improved farming techniques, child rights, vocational/entrepreneurial skills, computer training. Such centres should provide audio-visual facilities, repackaged information and most serene environment.
- Mounting reading sessions: the public libraries in the state should collaborate with the Community Learning Centres to organize reading and relaxation sessions. In these sessions, teachers and other resource persons will be invited to read outstanding works of fiction publicly for the enjoyment and entertainment of the audience. This could be read in English or vernacular. It will trigger an unusual interest for reading and enhanced appetite for information.
- Local content documentation: the need to document the rich knowledge prevalent in our cultural heritage through oral tradition must be vigorously pursued. These could be captured in audio tapes and video, properly organized and disseminated to local audience as well as integrated into the

global information system.

- Rural cyber-cafes: State Library Boards need to ensure the procurement of computers and internet connectivity to enable rural communities participate effectively in the emerging flat world. This should be experimented first with communities with electricity and telephone infrastructures.

CONCLUSION

Knowledge must be formalized or made explicit to have significant value to a society. Libraries as a formalized repository of knowledge are duty bound to consciously seek ways to expand the frontiers of information availability and accessibility. The visually impaired and rural communities are disadvantaged in terms of equity of information accessibility. Information professionals should be in the vanguard of advocacy and collaboration to improving their lot.

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