



Feature Article**THE CHALLENGE OF READERS SERVICES IN LIBRARIES: THE
CASE OF PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE****Barr. Chris O. Onebunne CLN, FCAI**

The concept of Reader Services is not new to librarians. Therefore, it is not the intention here to repeat the experience in Library Schools. It suffices to say that Reader Services are indeed the essence of any library. For the Public Library, popularly known as the 'Peoples University' the challenge of Readers' Services is overwhelming. This feature article seeks to raise questions and not necessarily solutions but in the end stimulate concrete research by colleagues beyond keeping statistics to arrive at solutions. The challenges are to be viewed in perspectives in order to cope with constraints and the Anambra State Library Board is serving as the motivating environment.

Professional Challenges: At this time of acknowledged information explosion the world over, the efficient interplay between the three main components of any worthwhile library - staff, users and materials (information resources) - is imperative. This poses unlimited professional challenges. The routine referral, general circulation, consultancy, reprographic and even training services become inadequate. Current awareness services are no longer exclusive to Special Libraries. Abstracting services, dailies/periodicals indexing service, and readers advisory services (RAS) are urgently needed in public libraries. But how does the Public Library cope with the staff requirement of these specialized professional services?

Management Challenges: True enough, there is no way any Public Library Management can extricate itself from Readers Services. Basically, Public Libraries are funded from public funds. On the one hand, the financial provision may be too low to

support meaningful Readers Services. On the other hand, available funds could be mismanaged. What becomes the fate of Readers Services under poor financial disposition, whether realistic or man-made, is your *guess* as well as mine. How do we extricate Readers Services from the grips of protocol? The presupposition here is that the apparent/ in built conflict between protocol and realities of the moment is dealing deadly blows on Readers Services. No known Management theory has disputed the need to provide basic working tools to enhance productivity. Bureaucracy, theory x theory y, autocratic and humane leadership etc., are not at variance on the need for conducive working atmosphere. Therefore, Readers Services pose management challenge where basic comfort and security is lacking for staff, users and materials. Readers Services cannot answer for inadequate facilities and cramped responsibilities. In the case of Anambra State Library Board, unpublished sources show that for fifteen years up to 2006, no funds were released for capital projects. How then would Readers Services thrive? In Academic Libraries, a definite percentage of the institutions fund goes to the library and is utilized essentially in Readers Services. It is not so in public libraries.

User-based Challenges: The Public Library is essentially an autonomous entity existing side by side a number of other autonomous entities. Though far from being a school or academic library, the public library is non-the-less patronized by users from schools and institutions of Higher Learning. The population of these institutions and indeed the community at large expand unilaterally without reference to the public library. Mention need be made also of the recent craze for and upsurge of sandwich, weekend, mature and distant learning programmes. It is no secret that no arrangements were made for the indispensable library support services for these programmes. So the public library suddenly finds itself besieged by an overwhelming population pressing forcibly on its Readers Services. How best can the challenge under this perspective be contained? The challenge from the now regular unnotified group visit of school pupils under the Universal Basic Education (UBE) as enveloped in the 6-3-3-4 system of education is worthy of note though being contained. Yet public libraries are under dogs to ETF and not definitely enlisted to benefit.

Extraneous Challenges: It is not an over statement to say that extraneous sources now pose great challenges on Readers Services in Public libraries. The Public Library is a public place and houses public property and so deserves adequate protection by the law enforcement agents at all time. On the contrary, we find our law enforcement

agents manifesting apathy. Reported criminal cases are not taken serious and the same would object to issues being resolved in the unconventional way. Political and personality influences tend to throw challenge on Readers Services from time to time. The present economic depression resulting in a high rate of unemployment has resulted to the presence of a large number of unmotivated users who most of the time manifest criminal tendencies and undesirable social gimmicks. Readers services suffer under the situation because some effective users are overpowered under the circumstances and are either not able to find comfortable places or receive adequate attention while others are scared away from the library. This is certainly not to the best interest of Readers Services. The quality of Readers Services is also being hampered by the prevalent poor mobility system. Referral service which could be rendered through contact with outside is not readily done. The upsurge of GSM is breeding indiscipline on the other hand. Administrative policies tend to cut off Readers Services from external contact after normal office hours even to the point of not being able to secure outside help under emergency. Some of the rural branches are essentially cut off when one considers effective communication. GSM would hardly be a substitute to physical presence having become a veritable instrument for telling lies. How do we solve these extraneous challenges facing Readers' Services?

Support Service as Challenge: Bindery service in any library is essentially a support service for readers services. Under heavy usage by people of diverse backgrounds materials in public libraries readily call for care. Considering the present hard times as well, it is impossible to embark on indiscriminate weeding. Thus, effective functioning of the Bindery is indispensable in readers services. Certainly, where it is non-existent, there is pressing need for it. But where there is a shift in orientation or priority, what do we do? One thing clear is that the quality of Readers Services will be jeopardized and this no doubt is a challenge.

Lethargic Challenges: It is not unusual within an organization to find staff who neither want to keep moving nor give way. Such staff are content occupying their seats and building such air around themselves that one is always scared going near. In some cases, the air is such that you can only go near for something else except that which impinges on the job. Where they care to perform at all, it is always directional - 'go to.., see Mr./Miss....' And never doing anything by themselves. If care is not taken this may degenerate to a situation where EVERYBODY expects SOMEBODY to do SOMETHING

and in the end NOBODY does anything. This is the unproductivity syndrome which starts with one person and it deals devastating blow to qualitative Readers Services.

Indeed, most Readers Services could hardly ever be rendered successfully where the syndrome predominates. How do we fight this challenge to ensure we do not kill our Readers Services ourselves? How do we contain the challenge of support staff essential in Readers Services but rather delight in waiting for salaries and promotions in a group and disrupting services?

Seized/Forgotten Items as Challenge: The Readers Services Department of any library constitutes the main contact points with the users. It is also where most library rules are applied. Occasionally, some items are seized and some of the defaulters fail to come back to claim them. Some items atimes are forgotten by users who do not care and who therefore never come back looking for them. How do we part with such items before or when they constitute nuisance even to Readers Services? How best could the legal implications be contained?

Challenge of Social Malaise: The latest challenge is ‘kidnapping’ as a social malaise. Both the providers and consumers of Readers Services apparently get scared to the marrow. Mutual suspicion gains breeding ground and indiscipline is fertilized additionally under this malaise. Another social malaise is the cancar warm called ‘exam malpractice’. It is seriously eroding the quality of consumers of Readers Services and giving rise to increased mutilation of materials at the rate of 3 to 5 every week from unpublished sources. How best could Readers Services isolate itself from these malaises?

Challenges of Power Outage: Readers Services remain the worst hit by power outage in libraries. Electronically stored/propelled services are extinguished, users comfort reduced to zero, duration/ time frame for service become reduced, and security of life and materials jeopardized. Perhaps there is really little need for any questions here. Rather a serious prayer for the **public power supply** aspect of the **7 points agenda** of the present Federal Government to succeed is preferred.

Conclusion: Nothing has been said and something has been said. Much depends on what positive or negative answers are provided to the questions raised. But whether accepted or not, Readers Services constitute the business of all librarians and to that extent librarians are invited to breast up to the challenge.