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POLICY: THE ROLE OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CENTERS IN INFORMATION PROVISION AND ACCESS

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Introduction

Information is defined as a meaningful communication symbols transferred between any two points in human communication or machine networks. It is a multi-disciplinary concept, which means different things to different people, group, culture, concerns, needs, functions and environment (Aina, Mutula and Tiamiyu, 2008; Waje and Waziri, 2003). In view of the importance of information in human life and activities, Ajibero (1998) asserts that not only must there be flow' of information across the nooks and crannies of the country but also such information must be relevant, timely and it must be delivered at the right place; as the value of any piece of information depends on its relevance and the time and place at which it is delivered (Bello, 2006). More so, libraries form an important link in the information life-cycle, and are important institutions for citizen education. Hence access to information is essential to the economic, social and political wealth of the nation, productivity, literacy and democracy. The library and information centers are to ensure that information policies are followed in the provision and access to information.

Policy is thus, a set of ideas or plan of what to do in particular situations that has been agreed by a government, business organizations, individuals etc (Cambridge Learner's Dictionary, 2001). On the other hand, information policy is a set of interrelated principles, laws, guidelines, rules, regulations, and procedures guiding the oversight and management of the information life-cycle: it covers the production, collection, distribution/dissemination, retrieval, use, and retirement, including preservation of information (Hermon and Relyea, 2005). Collectively, policies form a framework that

affects the manner in which an individual in a society and the society itself makes political, economic and social choices. Hence, access and use of information by the populace is a necessity.

As noted by Bello (2006); and Ajibero (2006), the library is as a place where human communication is preserved for prosperity; a fountain of information, and a place for the discovery of new ideas, libraries and information centers therefore plays significant role in provision and access to human knowledge and cultural heritage. This paper thus, discusses policy and the role of libraries and information centers in information provision and access; challenges and problems faced by libraries and information centers in provision and access to information.

The Concept of Information, Information Policy and Access

Aiyepeku (1982) describes information as "means cumulated knowledge in all subjects, in all forms and from all sources that could help its users to make rational decisions"; "data of value in planning, decision-making and the execution of programmes in the public or private sector". Thus, information can be seen as the sum total of processed and unprocessed data which enhances knowledge essential for rational decision making. People seek information for varied reasons. According to Ochogwu (1999), information is a basic resource, as fundamental as food and energy, as its access is one of the fundamental human rights. Chukwu (2002) declared that the growing awareness of information needs on a global scale, mass production of information materials by galloping population ushered in by the art of printing and the discovery of other information handling technologies ensures that man could frilly disseminate his knowledge to all who needed it in spite of distance. Bello (2010) noted that information has always played an important role in human life and as a basic human resources its needs was never a subject of controversy. The free and equal access to information by every member of the society, irrespective of racial, religion, geopolitical, socialeconomic, and political status is as fundamental as human right itself. Accessibility in this regard poses a timely provision of relevant and accurate information to the people at the right place. Users of today's libraries are looking for development information, information that is crucial or necessary for individual and national development. Furthermore, information, as a vital resource for problem solving, decision-making, education and knowledge updating, has no boundaries. Everybody, state and society requires it to achieve their goals and objectives. It is thus, considered as a power resource as equal to other natural resources. In many cases, it is more important than

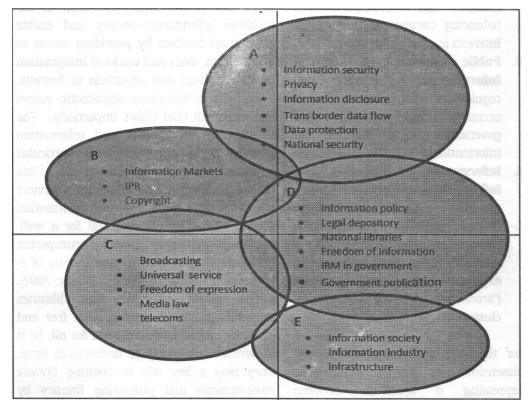
other resources (Karki 2006). Hence, there is growing tendency to access relevant and potential information with no time lost. Bello (2010), in her study observed that oral literatures such as documentaries which are significant to research and learning tools, need to be preserved in order to enhance their usefulness. Thus, libraries, especially the public libraries have the moral obligation to make these documentaries or sponsor their production, as well make them available and accessible to user of various categories with respect to information policy, which determines the kind of information to be collected, organize, store and make available to the populace. According to Hemon and Relyea (2005), information policy concentrate on issues related to internet infrastructure, resources management, and the provision of online services and resources. The internet and its world wide web (www) have become the primary channels for the federal government's dissemination of resources to the public; the public is now global and extends to people of all ages (from youth to the elderly). Ogunsola (2008) explained that policies are crucial to the success of all human endeavors. Policies clarify existing conditions and objectives, and articulate relevant actions and strategies to reach the desired conditions. They also involved taking die necessary actions, evaluating their outcomes and impacts, drawing lessons to guide future conducts and performances, and varying what is (to be) done in the light of the lessons. More so, policies at all times are geared towards the advancement of the security and welfare of the people. These policies may be political, economic, social, environmental, foreign, educational and cultural, etc. Once a policy is formulated, it needs to be implemented with an appropriate implementation strategy for effectiveness. Policy implementation thus, is the process of assembling references (including) allocating resources and utilizing resources (operations), in order to achieve policy objectives. It is important to note at this premise that the essence of policy is to improve the process of information acquisition, organization, storage, and dissemination.

Stone (1996) posit that to respond to the current needs of information access and utilization, policies are required to address the sectors of communication, information, and the new technologies related to these disciplines. However, national policies she noted, whether developed in the North or South has not, on the whole been successful, and this is due to lack of participation of the key stakeholders in the policy formulation process. Libraries and information centers, Karki (2006) noted are to be considered as the foundation to fulfill the objective of Right to information in any country. Such

systems provide the facilities of laboratories for information access to meet the varieties of information needs of heterogeneous users. Both the subject for example, Right to information and library and information systems are interlinked and inter disciplinary to each other. Amonoo and Azubuike (2005) also noted that in order for libraries and information centers to play their rightful role in national information acquisition and organization process, the sector need to be revamped, based on forward-looking policies and programmes. First, library issues should be made core components of national information policies. Funding should be increased for libraries across the board, driven by a changed view that funding of libraries represents a profitable investment in development and public goods. Another important implication is that libraries should be used as agents for bridging the digital divide because they endure wider access to computer hardware and software, the internet, and specialized information network.

Information policy therefore, embraces access to, and use of, information and records, records related the conduct of government, business and provide an audit trail for holding government accountable. It takes place within and among organizations, associations, and other groups. According to Aina (2004), library and information profession borrows from a number of disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, computer sciences, business, management, mathematics, statistics, marketing, etc. Anything that impact on any of these disciplines would have a direct influence on library and information profession. The same thing happens to public policy, because for any public policy by any government or organization to be successful and meaningful, the role of library facilities can never be over emphasized. Libraries enhance productivity of individuals and organizations. Access to the right information is a very critical component in productivity of information workers including the productivity and good decision making of an individual or any organization (Bolt, 1991; Keyes, 1995). Feathers and Sturges (2003) analyzed the model of information policy thus:

Information Policy Model



Culled from Feathers and Sturges, 2003. Market Regulation versus State Control **Information Policy Concept**

- **A. Information Protection:** Regulations and mechanisms controlling information access and disclosure in the public sphere (e.g. official secrecy) and in information markets (e.g. data protection).
- **B. Information Markets:** Laws and regulations that protect investment in the creation of information content (e.g. copyright) and enable market exchange to take place.
- **C. Broadcasting and Telecommunications:** Public policies that regulate the mass media and communications,_ balancing commercial and citizen interests (e.g. universal access).
- **D. Public Access to Official Information**: Policies and regulations that frame citizens' access to information held within government (e.g. freedom of information).
- **E. Information Society and Infrastructure**: Public policy measures to invest (or encourage private sector investment) in the information infrastructure, broadly defined rights of freedom of expression and universal service ('Broadcasting and communications' cluster).

For the sake of convenience, the 'y' dimension can be summarized as expressing a spectrum between unrestricted, open (bottom) and restricted or controlled (top) information flows. The 'x' dimension seems to indicate two distinct information policy roles for the state - as a regulator of information markets (left) and as a major gatherer and disseminator of information itself. The model thus offers a new framework for helping us think first and foremost about the system of values - rather than the specific laws and regulations - that underpin information policy.

Information Services in Library and Information Centers

Libraries are the representatives of social society and aim to serve the society. They contribute to the sound operation of the inclusive information society and enable intellectual freedom by providing access to information, ideas and works of imagination in any medium and regardless of formats. They help to safeguard democratic values and universal civil rights impartially. The unique role of libraries and information services is to respond to the particular questions and needs of individuals. This makes the libraries and information services vital to a democratic and open information society. Libraries are essential for a well-informed citizenry and transparent governance, as well as for the take-up of e-government (Mahmood and Shafique, 2007). Krolak (2005) affirmed that libraries especially public libraries provide free and equitable access to information for all, be it in written, electronic or audiovisual form. They play a key role in creating literate environments and promoting literacy by offering relevant and attractive reading material for all ages and all literacy levels and by offering adult and family literacy classes. They embrace the social responsibility to offer services that bridge social, political and economic barriers, and traditionally make a special effort to extend their service to marginalized people. More so, they assist in finding, using and interpreting appropriate information that opens up opportunities for lifelong learning, literacy enhancement, informed citizenship, recreation, creative imagination, individual research, critical thinking, and ultimately, empowerment in an increasingly complex world.

According to Lawal (2004), Libraries have always been at the center of the university community of scholars and students engaged in seeking the truth through new knowledge by promoting research findings and complementing the requirements of the curricular in pedagogic terms. Libraries are also established primarily to serve the academic and general purposes of the staff and students. They serve as a support

system, providing assistance, encouragement and informal advisement to students and users of the library (Falaye, 2003; Onatola, 2004; Awale-Ale, 2007).

Edoka (2000) gave the following general functions of libraries:

- To provide information materials required for the academic programmes
- To provide research information resources in consonance with the need of users
- To provide information resources for recreation and for personal, self development of users
- To provide study accommodation in a useful variety of locations
- To provide specialized service to appropriate segments of wider community
- To provide protection and security for these collections

Karki (2006) declared that "library and information centers are considered as pilot and life-boat of the new information age. They are providing mainly three types of information requirement of users, whether Right to information Act is enacted or not. Those are factual data, document of a particular author or with a particular title and documents dealing with a particular subject".

Roles of Library and Information Centers in the Provision and Access to Information

The library is conceived with the collection, processing, storage and dissemination of recorded information for the purpose of reading, studying and consultation. In order for a library to attain its goal, many activities are performed by a library which translates into library and information services (Ogmisola, 2008). Krolak, (2005) posit that today; the role of libraries and professional librarians is changing worldwide. They are no longer passive keepers and preservers of books; rather, they have evolved to become facilitators of information and lifelong learning opportunities with emphasis on sources, identifying users need and communicating solutions. Modem libraries he/she further noted, are unfolding the community's learning potential by providing information on community issues, such as health, employment, continuing education and local history. This equitable access to information is essential to enable educated and informed citizens to participate in a democratic global community. Adams (2002:33) observed that in the following years, libraries played an important role in national literacy campaign, using Thailand as an example. In 1980s, more flexible and proactive facilities, often called resource centers, began to emerge as a force in movements for social change and the democratic reconstruction of civil society. These centers began to explore new relationships with their users, valuing local culture, supporting community development, and preserving indigenous knowledge. Public

libraries play the most important role worldwide in helping to bridge the information gap by providing free access to information and communication technologies, particularly the internet. They are inclusive in that they build bridges between individuals at the local level and the global level of knowledge. Thus, access to modem information technology is currently one of the most attractive library services.

IFLA (2006) stressed the active role of libraries in information society by stating that "They built capacity by promoting information literacy and providing support and training for effective use of information resources including information and communication technologies. This is specifically critical in promoting the development agenda because human resources are central to economic progress. In these ways, libraries contribute significantly to addressing the digital divide and the information inequality that results from it. They help to make the Millennium Development Goals a reality, including reduction of poverty. They will do more with quite modest investment".

Ogundipe (2005) in Bello (2010) affirms the role of libraries when he stated that, "libraries are expected to provide information, to provide reference services, educational, guidance, simple classification and explanation of things example, diseases, medicines, or drugs. They provide news, current affairs and world situation through local schools of thoughts. Some libraries are expected to conserve and preserve local artifacts including oral literature which in many developing countries are believed to be essential to scholarship and knowledge of these societies. The libraries are also expected to collect books and journals published locally, either in-depth as national or official depositories". Khan (2006) also believes that the role of library can be seen under the various aspects of social institutions that make up a society. The library is seen to be an agency of communication, preservation of culture as well as an agency of change and economic development. Ideally, users desire an opportunity to a total information environment that is unlimited access to sources of information; information from both the internal and external environment or information without any kind of circumscription; as users of libraries all over the globe want information, irrespective of their format to satisfy their curiosity or other aspects of needs. Amonoo and Azubuike (2005) summarized the role of library thus;

• Libraries create and add value to digital content. This is because they operate at the pivotal points in the value chain of digital content, and content is the lifeblood of the information society. They generate, aggregate, analyze, index, classify, catalogue and disseminate digital content as well as provide access to them through a variety of channels. They also ensure the continuing storage and accessibility of both digitally-born and digital legacy content, as well as facilitate their use within the constraints of the various copyrights regimes.

- They facilitate local and international information networking and knowledge sharing through digitalization and virtualization of access to local and external content, as well as functioning as clearing houses for digital archives of various institutions. They ensure the success of both generic and sectorial e- strategies through the provision of essential technical services that help producers and users leverage the value of content in all economic, political and social sectors, commerce, industry and tourism.
- Libraries provide the best hope for the development of an inclusive Information. Society, as they provide sustainable and affordable public access to ICT, including the internet.
- They enable users to learn to use the internet, and to identify authentic free sites. Successful national digital opportunity programmes involve libraries, as libraries are well positioned to help bridge the skills and economic gaps along with the digital divide through the provision of public access to ICT.

Challenges of Library and Information Centers in the Provision and Access to Information

Libraries are in a very weak position to effectively play their role in provision and access to information due to several reasons. Breadekanp (1996) and Krolack (2005) gave the following problems that militate against provision and access to information by libraries and information centers:

- Lack of funds
- Lack of professional staff
- Irrelevant materials
- Colonial model of librarianship
- Lack of appropriate training opportunities
- Lack of needs analysis
- ICT challenges
- Inappropriate buildings
- Lack of co-operation and a national information policy
- Demoralized management
- Dusty shelves with old and irrelevant books

• Inadequate or no physical development.

These grave situations, Amonoo and Azubuike submitted are perpetuating by the near absence of library activism and advocacy in the region.

Conclusion

Libraries and information centers are social institutions; they play a significant role enhancing the culture of reading and access to information in both digital and non-digital. Keeping this in view, the government can reach the grassroots level through these institutions. Libraries should be the focus of government development information policy plan. Right to information should be incorporated in the constitutions and laws of the country; this will enhance access and use of information as well the nation's economic, social, and political development.

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