

Library and Information Services to the Visually Impaired-The Role of Academic Libraries

BIBLIOTHÈQUE ET LES SERVICES D'INFORMATION POUR LES MALVOYANTS - LE RÔLE DES BIBLIOTHÈQUES UNIVERSITAIRES

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Abstract: Libraries have a moral obligation to make information available to all categories of users regardless of their gender, age, race, political affiliation or disability. However, a lot of people have limited access to information materials most especially in developing countries like Nigeria. A review of the literature shows that library and information services to the visually impaired in Nigeria is largely undertaken by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Years of underfunding and neglect has weakened the functionality of the public libraries in this regard. Using the interview method, the study assessed library and information provision to the visually impaired by academic libraries across the country. The findings revealed that none of the libraries surveyed has Braille book, talking books, talking newspaper and assistive technologies were not available in the libraries. The only materials that were available were a few audio books. The study suggested some practical solutions to improving library and information services to the visually handicapped in Nigeria.

Key words: Visually impaired; Library and information services; Nigeria; Academic libraries; Assistive technology; Information; Social inclusion

Résumé: Les bibliothèques ont une obligation morale de rendre l'information accessible à toutes les catégories d'utilisateurs, indépendamment de leur sexe, âge, race, appartenance politique ou d'un handicap. Cependant, beaucoup de gens ont un accès limité aux documents d'information plus particulièrement dans les pays en développement comme le Nigeria. Une revue de la littérature montre que le service d'information et les bibliothèques pour les malvoyants au Nigeria est en grande partie menées par les agences non gouvernementales (NGO). Aa cet égard, les années de sous-financement et de la négligence a affaibli la fonctionnalité des bibliothèques

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publiques. En utilisant la méthode de l'entretien, l'étude a évalué la bibliothèques et la disposition des informations pour des malvoyants par des bibliothèques universitaires à travers le pays. Les résultats ont révélé qu'aucun des bibliothèques interrogées a un livre en braille, livres sonores, journaux parlants et de technologies d'assistance ne sont pas disponibles dans les bibliothèques. Les seuls matériaux qui étaient disponibles étaient quelques livres audio. L'étude suggère quelques solutions pratiques pour améliorer la bibliothèque et les services de l'information pour les malvoyants au Nigeria.

Mots clés: Déficience visuelle; Bibliothèque et services d'information; Le Nigeria; Les bibliothèques universitaires; Technologie d'aides; L'information; L'inclusion sociale

1. INTRODUCTION

Libraries and librarians provide access to essential information that people need to participate in the emerging information society. Therefore, they have a moral obligation to make information available to all categories of users regardless of their gender, age, race, political affiliation or disability. Such inclusive, non discriminatory service however still remains the ideal rather than the norm as some people remain underserved in terms of access to information. Among this disadvantaged group are the visually impaired. According to Friend (2009), 'visually impaired' is a general term used to describe people who are partially-sighted or completely blind. The term will be used in a similar sense throughout this paper.

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2009) statistics, there are about 314 million visually impaired people globally with 45 million totally blind. 87% of the visually impaired live in developing countries and women and people above 50 years of age are at higher risk. Although visually impaired people cannot read the conventional print; they have the right to information and the right to read information in formats that are accessible to them. The onus is on librarians to make information available in alternative formats like audio, Braille or large prints that can be easily accessed by the visually impaired.

Due to advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), information is now available in different formats that can be accessed through various media. Nevertheless, Friend (2009) asserted that less than 5% of the information materials available to sighted library users are accessible to the visually impaired. The pertinent question then is what is the level of library and information provision to the visually impaired in a developing country like Nigeria? How can information services to the visually impaired be improved? What roles do public and academic libraries have to play to ensure an inclusive library and information service to the visually impaired in Nigeria? These are the questions addressed by the present study.

2. INFORMATION NEED AND INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOUR OF THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED: A THEORETICAL MODEL

Tester (1992) defined information need as the lack of appropriate information on which to base choices that could lead to benefits or services that may improve people's well being. Wilson (1981) developed a model of information need and information seeking behavior on the argument that both concepts are closely related and should be studied together. According to Wilson, information need is a secondary need that results from an individual's efforts to satisfy his basic human needs. These needs could be physiological such as food, clothing and shelter; affective, such as the need for achievement, self expression and self-actualization or cognitive, such as the need to learn a skill. Three elements- the person himself or herself, the roles that he has to perform at the workplace or in the society and the physical, political, economic, social-cultural and the general work environment of the individual define the contexts for the basic and the resultant information needs.

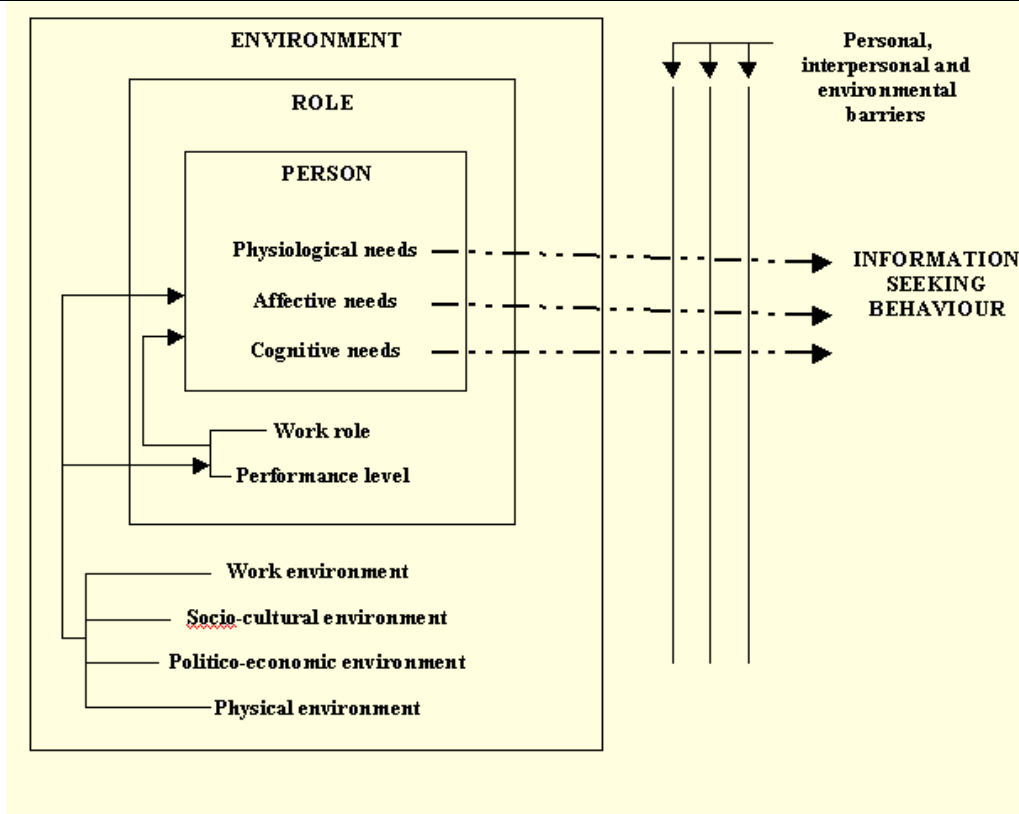


Figure 1: Model of Information Need and Information Seeking Behaviour. Wilson (1981)

Wilson's model can be used to explain the information need and information behaviour of the visually impaired. According to Moya, Owino and Ogenga (1986) cited by Moahi and Monau (1993), the information needs of the disabled relate to education, job opportunities, careers, politics, economy, social-cultural events as well as those that can help them better understand and cope with their disabilities. Williamson (1995) in a study of the information seeking behaviour of the elderly found that information pertaining to health and career opportunities ranked highest in their information needs. Similarly, Ajogwu (2000) reported that educational information need is scored highest by the visually impaired in Nigeria, followed by vocational and recreational information need. In essence, information need of the visually impaired tend more towards satisfaction of the physiological, affective and cognitive needs.

With respect to barriers in information seeking, the visually impaired are constrained by personal, interpersonal and environmental barriers. Personal barrier could result from ignorance of the information services available and may be a reason why the library is underutilized by the visually impaired (Davies, Wisdom and Creaser, 2001, Zahra, 1994). Besides, individual differences in terms of gender, age or information competence could affect information seeking behaviour of the visually impaired. Life circumstances, such as being alone or having a family, working, or being unemployed, or retired, the type of vision impairment involved, as well as individual information-seeking preferences, all influence the ways in which people seek information. Furthermore, information seeking behaviour of visually impaired people can be limited by interpersonal barriers. Studies have shown that the visually impaired depend more on interpersonal sources than media and institutional sources (Williamson, Schauder & Bow, 2000). Therefore, librarians and other information service providers must be ready to break the interpersonal barriers in order to uphold the tenets of the profession.

The social, political and economic environment of the visually impaired also constitutes barriers to their information seeking. Access to Information and Communication Technology is a major determinant of how information rich or information poor a country is. The developing countries are disadvantaged in terms of access to information infrastructure and this greatly limits their capacity to meet the information needs of the visually impaired (Rowland, 2008) The visually impaired, like other handicapped people suffer social

discrimination and cultural bias that negatively impact on their information seeking behaviour. People who are physically challenged are generally viewed as abnormal and are often excluded from the mainstream of public services including library and information provision.

This discriminatory attitude stems from the society's perception of disability. A perception that is based on the medical or traditional model of disability sees disability as an individual's problem. It is a reactive model that describes people with any form of impairment in terms of their deficiencies and what they cannot do. (Dutch and Muddiman, 2001, French and Swain, n.d.) On the other hand, the social model of disability sees the disabled as people who have the capacity to contribute meaningfully to social development and blames the society for imposing cultural, material, structural and attitudinal barriers that prevent them from reaching their potentials. The model advocates equal rights and opportunity for the disabled in terms of access to education, health services, employment, information and other public services.

3. LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES AVAILABLE TO THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

Libraries and information centers around the world have developed specialized information services to meet the library and information needs of their visually impaired clientele. These include:

(1) Braille books- Braille is a system of reading and writing whereby raised dots are used to represent letters which are read by touch. Braille books are appropriate for users who have both visual and hearing impairment.

(2) Talking books- these are audio versions of books that could be recorded on cassettes, CD-ROM, DVD and on the internet as e-books. Talking books are preferred by majority of the visually impaired (Getz, 2003).

(3) Talking newspapers- audio recordings of news articles in the dailies.

(4) Large printed materials- these are documents printed in large fonts for use by partially sighted users.

Libraries are also taking advantage of advances in ICTs to increase information access for the visually impaired. A broad range of ICTs otherwise called adaptive or assistive technologies are now available to provide access to information in electronic databases and on the internet, giving blind users equal opportunity as the sighted. These innovative technologies include:

(1) Screen magnifier- this is a software that allows text or graphics on computer screen to be magnified up to sixteen times the original.

(2) Screen reader: a software that reads out the content of a document to the reader.

(3) Voice recognition software: this allows the user to input data into the computer by voice.

4. LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES TO THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED: THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

Libraries play an important role as vehicles of formal and informal education. Specifically, public libraries are established to support individual's drive for self-development and lifelong learning. They help to preserve people's right to information by providing access to a collection that is wide enough to accommodate the interests of their heterogeneous users. Unfortunately, library and information services to the visually impaired are almost non-existent in developing countries (Anaba, n.d.). In his review, Rowland (2008) noted that of all the countries in Africa, only South Africa has a well developed, functional library for the visually impaired despite the fact that there are nearly 7 million blind people on the continent. The state or public libraries in Nigeria are too under funded to be relevant and the visually impaired are left out of whatever form of services are available in these libraries. Atinmo (2007) observed that only three out of the 36 state libraries in the federation have library and information services to the blind.

In Nigeria, library and information services to the visually impaired are largely undertaken by Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Government intervention on the other is very minimal and focuses more on establishment of special education schools where teachers of physically handicapped children are trained rather than provision library materials for the visually impaired (Atinmo, 2007). The NGOs are highly committed to the education and empowerment of the visually impaired students. They produce textbooks in Braille and sell them to blind secondary school students at cost price of the printed copies.

In spite of their efforts, the NGOs are unable to meet the growing demand for Braille books due to inadequate funding, most of them depend on donations and Braille production is cost intensive, requiring about three times the cost of conventional print. Atinmo's survey of Braille reading facilities available in the special schools also revealed that the library and information needs of the students cannot be adequately met with the few brailing facilities available there.

In order to ascertain the level of library and information services available to the visually impaired in academic libraries in Nigeria, the researcher conducted a telephone interview of chief librarians in some Nigerian universities. Only the librarians whose phone numbers could be accessed were included in the study. On the whole, a total of fourteen librarians from both public and private universities representing the six geopolitical zones were included in the survey. of all the academic libraries in Nigeria would have been more appropriate but for constraints of time and funding. Below is the list of the names of the universities whose librarians were interviewed.

- (1) Adekunle Alalade Library, Babcock University
- (2) University of Lagos (UNILAG) Library
- (3) Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library, Obafemi Awolowo University
- (4) Tai Solarin University of Education Library
- (5) Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan
- (6) University of Agriculture, Abeokuta (UNAAB) Library
- (7) Library Ladoke Akintola University of Technology (LAUTECH) Library
- (8) University of Ado Ekiti Library
- (9) University of Maiduguri Library
- (10) Federal University of Technology Owerri (FUTO) Library
- (11) Kogi state University Library
- (12) Ebonyi State University Library
- (13) University of Nigeria, Nsukka Library
- (14) Redeemers University library.

Table 1-a: Library and Information Services Available to the Visually Impaired in Academic Libraries in Nigeria

S/N	Name of Library	Library and Information Services				
		Braille Books	Talking Books	Audio Books	Talking Newspapers	Assistive Technologies
1	Babcock University Library	No	No-	Yes	No	No
2	University of Lagos Library	No	No-	Yes	No	No
3	Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library, OAU	No	No-	Yes	No	No
4	Tai Solarin University of Education Library	No	No-	Yes	No	No
5	Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan	No	No-	Yes	No	No
6	University of Agriculture, Abeokuta Library	No	No-	Yes	No	No

Table 1-b: Library and Information Services Available to the Visually Impaired in Academic Libraries in Nigeria

S/N	Name of Library	Library and Information Services				
		Braille Books	Talking Books	Audio Books	Talking Newspapers	Assistive Technologies
7	Ladoke Akintola University of Technology Library	No	No-	Yes	No	No
8	University of Ado Ekiti Library	No	No-	Yes	No	No
9	University of Maiduguri Library	No	No-	Yes	No	No
10	Federal University of Technology Owerri	No	No-	Yes	No	No
11	Kogi state University	No	No-	Yes	No	No
12	Ebonyi State University	No	No-	Yes	No	No
13	University of Nigeria, Nsukka Library	No	No-	Yes	No	No
14	Redeemers University Library					

From Table 1 above shows that none of the libraries surveyed has Braille book, talking books, talking newspaper and assistive technologies. The only materials that were available were audio books which according to the librarians were not acquired to serve the visually impaired. As a matter of fact, most of the audio materials came with textbooks and encyclopedia that the libraries acquired. In essence, the academic libraries lack most of the materials that can be accessed by visually impaired users. The reason for this was that the libraries have never had to face the challenge of serving blind students. Apparently, there is an urgent need to improve the current level of library and information services available to the visually impaired in Nigeria.

5. STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES TO THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED IN NIGERIA

The challenge of providing equitable library and information services to the visually impaired is one that can only be tackled with the involvement and cooperation of all stakeholders. Government, state and academic libraries, NGOs and other agencies serving visually handicapped people must play their own parts in order to achieve this noble objective. Consequently, the following are suggested for policy implementation:

(1) Adequate funding of state libraries- The Nigerian government must wake up to its responsibility of funding the state libraries so that they can fulfill their mandate of enlightening and empowering the citizenry through provision of essential information.

(2) Policy review- The public and academic libraries need to review their policies to reflect their commitment to library and information provision to the visually impaired. A formal, documented policy is important because it will serve as a guide in acquisition, budget allocation and staff training. It will equally help to define the relationship of the library with other agencies serving the visually impaired.

(3) Networking- No single school or library can adequately cater for the information needs of the visually impaired. Therefore, it is important that all the institutions serving the blind in Nigeria come together to form a national network. This will afford them the opportunity of sharing their resources and collections in interlibrary loan arrangement. Also, by forming a national network, they will be better positioned to attract international donors.

(4) Training and Retraining of Librarians- training is necessary for optimum performance. Therefore, librarians should be trained on how to relate to visually impaired clients. Studies have shown visually impaired people use more of interpersonal medium when seeking information. It is therefore important that librarians be given periodic training on how best to serve this category of users. In the same vein, schools of

library and information science should review their curriculum to include training on special library service to the visually impaired.

(5) Production of talking books- in order to reduce the cost of producing information in accessible format while increasing the information materials available to the visually impaired, efforts must be made towards production of talking books. Such a project could be undertaken by institutions that have functional studios such as Babcock University and the University of Ibadan. The project will require collaboration between the university library, the department of information science or information management as the case may be and the mass communication department. Students of the two academic departments could be involved in the project as part of their training.

(6) Investment in assistive technology- Assistive technologies are opening up new possibilities for the visually impaired. Academic and public libraries must prioritize investing in them so that their blind clientele can also benefit from the wealth of resources available on the World Wide Web.

6. CONCLUSION

Access to information and knowledge has never been more critical than in the present information age. Those who lack access to essential information are excluded from participating actively in social, political, and economic activities. The visually impaired, especially those living in the developing countries like Nigeria have been marginalized for too long because of the dearth of accessible materials. Therefore, Nigerian academic libraries in collaboration with other stakeholders must stand up to their moral responsibility in ensuring an inclusive and equitable library and information services to the visually impaired.

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