POSITIONING NIGERIAN LIBRARIES AS AGENTS OF CHANGE THROUGH INNOVATION, ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The theoretical paper examines the value of libraries in the society and the role of various types of libraries especially public and academic libraries as agents of change. The strategies that could better position libraries in Nigeria as agent of change are considered from the perspective of innovation, engagement and communication. Challenges that face libraries in Nigeria in performing the expected roles as agent include lack/low marketing of library services library advocacy among others. The paper ends by making some recommendations and advancing the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals as action plan through which libraries in Nigeria can further express their relevance in the area of innovation, engagement and communication.

Keywords: Public Libraries, Academic Libraries, Librarians, Change Agent, Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

From the earliest times, information has been recognised as an essential requirement for the development and sustenance of the human society. Indeed, the need for information has always been felt from as early as when man began to understand the need for recording information and preserving/storing of same by first drawing pictorials on the wall of caves, recording information on clay tablet and papyrus, transitioning to paper with the invention of the printing press, and now recording/storing information with/in sophisticated information and communication technologies. This is because recorded information enables man to understand the relationship between where he is coming from to where he is, and enables him also to plan for where he wants to be in the future (Australia's Chief Scientist, 2012).

Undoubtedly, a series of information pieced sensibly together results to knowledge- a basic ingredient that fuels human and societal development. Given this, it is not out of place to say

that the need for a more systematic way for selection, organisation, preservation, and dissemination of information as well as "places to keep the business, legal, historical, and religious records of civilization(s)" informed the establishment of the earliest libraries (Haider, et al, 2019). The establishment of libraries in itself was revolutionary given that information became location specific and to that extent people knew where to go to meet their information need. From inception therefore, the library was established as an agent of change that housed information materials and making information and information bearing media location specific, albeit for the elite of the society.

However, though revolutionary at the time, the earliest concept of the library was one that described the institution as a storehouse of information resources, and the librarian- a much later concept- as the keeper or custodian of such information (Bowden, 1999). While this view of the role of the library, and the librarian sufficed at the time, it is not entirely tenable today as it projects the library mostly as a quiet and well-organised place to go to for reflection and study. In the same vein, it projects the librarian(s) as a mere middle man between the information content(s) housed in the library and its user; one who does not intrude on the user except when called upon to assist. But libraries and librarians are much more than this. In an age of rapid technological advancement and societal change, the library is expected to be adaptable and relevant as an agent of change In considering the topic, the paper will examine the value of libraries in the society, the role of libraries as agents of change, the challenges in positioning libraries in Nigeria as agent of change, and the strategies needed to position Nigerian libraries as agents of change as well as the challenges that face libraries in this pursuit.

Libraries as Agent of Change

To have a balanced view of how libraries are or can be agents of change, it is important to conceptualize the terms change agent and understand what/who a change agent is. Put simply, "change is the process of causing a function, practice, or thing to become different somehow compared to what it is at present or what it was in the past" (BusinessDictionary, 2018). In essence, when change occurs on an object be it man or thing, there is noticeable difference in its character. It must be noted that change can be positive or negative. The concern of this paper however, is positive change as positive change usually seeks to produce an improvement on the existing or come up with something entirely new that benefits the system.

A change agent on the other hand is an individual or group, who "promotes and supports a new way of doing something within a system, whether it is the use of a new process; the adoption of a new management structure or the transformation of an old business model to a new one" (Rouse, 2017). To be a successful change agent, the group or individual has to have the ability to prioritize, build relations, and have strong communication skills as well as good people skills (Rouse, 2017). The implication is that a change agent is not passive or retrogressive rather; the group/individual is one that is able to observe its/his environment, initiate, implement, and manage change. Therefore, change agents are not disengaged from the environment. On the contrary, they are actively involved or engaged in it to better understand its needs. The group/individual are/is also aware of what happens not only in the immediate environment, but also in the external environment and ensures that the community is benefited through proper positioning or prepared to respond to events in the best way(s) possible. The group/individual innovates and also communicates with the people that matter.

While there is no doubt that libraries are agents of change by virtue of what they are established for, it has to be emphasized that librarians are the engine that drive the process. This is understood from the perspective that since library buildings and material resources are

inanimate, they are not empowered to provide service by themselves. To that extent, all types of libraries can make impactful change as librarians use their skills as information handlers, and knowledge/learning facilitators. Over the years, libraries through the instrumentality of librarians have been playing this role effectively in some climes. In the early 20th century for example, the public library was a catalyst, call it change agent for mass education in the United States of America, and indeed it played a very crucial role in civic education of the American people enabling a lot more people to be able to participate effectively in the society (Encyclopedia.com, 2016).

Today, as the world pushes for sustainable development in the economic, environmental and social spheres of societies, librarians in every country and continent must assist in actualizing this objective through engaging in innovative and impactful community projects/activities. Arguably, librarians in various types of libraries in Nigeria have been active in their communities but a lot more needs to be done if they are to fit the bill of change agent in every sense of the word. Librarians are well aware that in the 21st century, regardless of ownership of information or information bearing contents, the emphasis is getting the information to those who need it as well as the impact of service on user communities. Therefore, it does not matter to people whether it is a library, archive, museum or the digital space, people are interested in what any institution, group or individuals have to offer, and how their needs can be met in the most convenient way possible. IFLA (1999) posits that as change agents, they [libraries] have a role to play in converting data into information, information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom by providing the means to seek a better future, an increasingly more enlightened world... Therefore, the library and librarian that would meet the billing as an agent of change must be able to think outside the box. Such an institution or person must be innovative, able to engage his/her community, and communicate their activities.

Strategies for Proper Positioning of Nigerian Libraries as Agents of Change

While there are many strategies that can be employed to position libraries in Nigeria properly as agents of change, for purposes of this article, three shall be considered: innovation, engagement and communication.

Innovation: Simply defined, innovation means the application of better solutions that meet new requirements, unarticulated needs, or existing market needs (Maranville cited in Wikipedia, 2018). The important phrases in this definition are: (1) application of better solutions, (2) meet new requirements, unarticulated needs, and (3) existing market needs. Innovation does not always imply making something from the scratch. It could mean manipulating an already existing service or product in order to bring about a solution that is totally different from what was. For instance, the responsibility of librarians is not only to provide information but also to facilitate learning. Librarians cannot continue to do it the way they have always done it especially when new trends are unfolding.

While the core responsibility of libraries is to facilitate learning, the peculiar needs and characteristics of the community must be paramount over convention. In agreement, Lankes (2018) posited that "all libraries cannot continue to look and act alike in the face of the needs around us and the peculiarity of our communities. Instead, a librarian's mission is to improve society by facilitating knowledge creation in his or her community; making the lives of the categories of people he/she serves better and more meaningful through learning."

Making space available in the library for trade unions to hold meetings is also a form of innovative service that public libraries can provide to their communities. Another way could be liaising with the leadership of the market union to provide health information to the traders on such subject as how to manage stress, diabetes, hypertension among others. Traders who attend such events can be educated on the roles of public libraries, and that can

arouse their interest about the usefulness of public libraries, and perhaps motivate them to take their children to the library.. Librarians in public libraries, and indeed librarians in general could also provide them information that is uniquely packaged to address their needs in the areas of health, literacy, sanitation, and poverty alleviation among others.

Rendina cited in Osuigwe and Lubbe (2018) have outlined some ways that public librarians can strategize for innovation:

- Think of the services that non-governmental bodies are providing in the community. Seek ways of enlarging that service. Offer them the library space for meetings and activities. Integrate library services into their functions.

- Gather your ideas from everywhere; books, people, conferences, social media, 'steal' from others. Find inspiration from an existing idea, concept or colour. Twist it, re-package it and adapt it to the community culture and needs.

- Use your own unique environment as the starting point. Creativity is to think of something new, innovation is to do something new. All innovations need a change in action and taking risks.

- Seek out network opportunities with other librarians and learn from others.

- Think of information services that will make the library become more connected and relevant to the community.

- Have a second look at the library space. Rearranging the furniture might make the library look more welcoming. Explore the possibilities of creating areas where small groups in the community can meet, talk and brainstorm without disturbing the readers who require quiet solitary learning spaces to study and reflect.

Today in Nigeria, the illiteracy rate is very alarming. It is put conservatively at about 65 million to 75 million (National Bureau of Statistics & United Nations Children's Fund,

2017). In most Nigerian communities, there are individuals who are ill informed, under educated, and miss-informed. There are school drop-outs, prisoners, farmers, market people, widows, touts, school children, mothers, fathers, youths, politicians, market women, pregnant women, physically challenged, homeless, urban dwellers, rural dwellers etc with their unique information needs. There are also many issues bedevilling the society: disease, insecurity, hunger, cultism, teenage pregnancy, self-medication, bad governance, internal displacement, ignorance etc. These various classes require information that is tailored to meet specific need. It is obvious that one cannot provide information to an undergraduate student as one would to an illiterate farmer. How do libraries package information to meet needs, therefore? That is where innovation comes into play. Taking the children for example, a survey carried out on a population of 28,085 children spread across the six geo-political zones of Nigeria by the National Bureau of Statistics and the United Nations Children's Fund (2017) showed that only 5.6% live in households that have 3 or more children's books; 0.5% are from homes where the children have 10 or more books; 47.1% have home-made toys, and 30.1% have toys from a shop or manufactured toys.

Academic libraries also have a role to play as the institution that exists to support the academic objectives of their institutions. That is why the academic library occupies a central position in placement and prominence in academic institutions (Lankes, 2016). There is no gainsaying the fact that higher education institutions are evolving rapidly. In essence, academic librarians should also be innovative by fostering collaborative activities with faculty. Academic libraries will also be providing innovative services when they take the lead in helping students and faculty to acquire knowledge from resources that are both within and beyond the library's own walls. Academic libraries need to strengthen selective dissemination of information and inter library loan? To play some of the innovative roles academic librarians must have the skills that are required.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (2006, p.) articulate "three essential actions libraries must take to achieve the necessary transformation and remain vital forces on campus in the years ahead"

- evolve from institutions perceived primarily as the domain of the book to institutions that users clearly perceive as providing pathways to high-quality information in a variety of media and information sources.

- the culture of libraries and their staff must proceed beyond a mind-set primarily of ownership and control to one that seeks to provide service and guidance in more useful ways, helping users find and use information that may be available through a range of providers, including libraries themselves, in electronic format.

It is worth noting that while public and academic libraries have been discussed above, all types of libraries can innovate. The responsibility of individual libraries and librarians is to find out what can done to benefit the user community.

Engagement

This is concerned with community engagement. The Financial Times (2018) defined community engagement as "the process of working collaboratively with community groups to address issues that impact the well-being of those groups." They went on to say that activities that contribute to community engagement include credible and transparent reporting, town hall meetings and collaborative decision making. Community engagement means being honest with the community, holding meetings with the community to understand their needs and involving them in decision making in matters that affect them. In essence, libraries will play their role as agents of change if they engage more practically with communities and peoples.

While libraries and librarians are still relevant in the 21st century, they must re-define their roles in line with the present realities. This implies that while they cannot forget their role as the place to go to for information, they must lay more emphasis on taking this information outside their walls. In the present dispensation, the new office should have no

walls. The value of the library must include helping people to navigate their way through the maze of information available, making sense of it, and helping people become better informed through information packaging. Libraries must also be able to measure the impact of their services on their communities because unless they are able to measure their services in terms of impact, they would certainly never fully understand whether they are meeting the needs of their community or not. They would also fail to realize when focus shifts and reappraise their service accordingly. For community engagement to be successful there needs to be collaboration with the leaders of the community. There must be dialogue to better inform the library about the needs of their communities. Here again, the library can provide space for town meetings i.e community space where members of the community can hold their meetings, and whenever possible, librarians should be in the meetings.

Communication:

Change no matter how beautiful or beneficial, is not always welcomed by the supposed beneficiary who normally has got used to a particular system or pattern of doing things. In essence, even though the role of libraries as agent of change requires that they reach out to their community with services that will impact their lives, it is important that libraries both educate and communicate their communities on their vision and what they stand to benefit. Proper communication is important because it helps to alleviate fear, dispel suspicion and remove ambiguity. Whatever change libraries want to bring must be communicated at the proper time to the community. It is important to locate and liaise with opinion moulders and key personalities in the community. Once libraries are able to get these people to buy into their visions and ideas, it will not be difficult to get the rest of the community. These people are also important in the area of advocacy especially when they truly see how the library is benefiting their people. Communication also demands accountability especially where funds are involved. Communication is a two-way thing so

libraries should also be open to hearing the views of their community and be willing to take criticisms. The good thing about criticism, especially constructive criticism is that it provides feedback that enables one to improve. Therefore it is important that a system for receiving feedback is put in place. It is also important to communicate results/achievements to funders - governmental and non-governmental bodies – within and outside the country as the case may be. This could motivate them to lend more support.

Challenges Associated with Positioning Nigerian Libraries as Agents of Change

While it is important to highlight how libraries in Nigeria can be positioned to play the expected role as agents of change, it is also important to not lose sight of the fact that there are some factors that hinder them from playing this role successfully.

*Poor/low funding***:** The issue of poor funding is a recurrent challenge to all types of libraries in Nigeria. For instance, Owoeye and John-Okeke (2012) have observed that public libraries funding does not meet the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) standard for public libraries. Public libraries are meant to be at the forefront of change in the society since they are established for the generality of peoples as a learning organisation. As agent of change, they are expected to be actively involved in building informed societies and driving community development. However, funds are required to do this effectively as well as carry out responsibilities such as staff salaries and generally improve the conditions of service of staff, carry out library extension/outreach services among other responsibilities. The story is no different for academic libraries.

In the educational sector, there are changes in technology, research, teaching, and learning methods, and academic libraries are expected to provide innovative services to match these changes. Unfortunately, while there are these changes, academic libraries are being underfunded thereby making it difficult for them to carry out their responsibilities as they should (Okiy, 2014).

Low Marketing of Library Resources and Services: All libraries depend upon their wealth of resources, whether print or electronic to provide services to their user community. Nowadays, as a result of library budget cuts it is difficult for them to acquire all the resources [print and electronic] they want for their users. In view of this, any library that can be an agent of change must be proactive in marketing the available resources and services as well as reaching out to their users. It is important that library managements maximize the funds available to them by ensuring that they not only acquire those resources that are actually needed by their users but also ensure that whatever is available is truly used (Igbokwe, Ezeji and Obidike, 2010). Unfortunately, traditionally libraries in developing countries such as Nigeria have always waited for the user to physically visit the library to satisfy his information need. This is no longer tenable in the digital era where information is not location specific but rather; can be accessed from anywhere at the touch of a button.

Lack of/Low Level Advocacy: As agents of change, "librarians' voices must become audible in convincing everyone including the grassroots, legislators and leaders at all levels on the need to let libraries exist positively" (Osuchukwu, Anyadiegwu, Eneh, and Nzewi, 2015). There is a thin line between advocacy and marketing. Advocacy is a planned, sustained, effort and often concerned with supporting a cause. Advocacy as it has to do with libraries is concerned with speaking up about the services and activities of libraries to the relevant bodies and persons to attract their attention to the work of libraries. It involves communicating to the public and funding bodies the relevance of libraries. Nigerian libraries do not engage in much advocacy work.

Skill Inadequacy among Librarians: In the technological age, library staff must possess the requisite skills and competencies if they hope to make impactful change. They should be able to provide innovative services as well as provide leadership. But it has been revealed that the current computer skills among librarians in Nigeria falls below the expected levels (Aliyu and Umar, 2018)..

Societal Attitude to Libraries: The societal attitude to libraries and librarians constitutes a major challenge to them in their bid to take up their roles as change agents. Cieszynynski cited in Mehrah and Srinivasan (2007) observe that "library representatives have been largely left out of decision making and legal and political policy development that impacts intellectual freedom, surveillance, and other critical issues faced within [the society]."

General Recommendations

Following from the discussions, for a proper positioning of libraries, the following recommendations are made:

1.Marketing of Library Services: Libraries should take the matter of marketing their services as a sacrosanct part of what they do. This will involve them being more in touch with their communities and actively showcasing their worth and impact.

2.Building and Nurturing Community Engagement: Librarians must "move" into their communities rather than expect their communities to come to them. There is also the need to target excluded social groups and communities such as the disadvantaged and vulnerable. Therefore more emphasis needs to be placed on developing community based approaches to library provision and this should pay attention to consultation and partnership with the local community of users.

3.Provision of Innovative Library Services and Programmes: Introducing innovative services such as maker spaces, reading clubs, quiz time, computer appreciation programmes, film shows, debating clubs, dance, drama, games and football for children will go a long way to endear them to their communities. It can be an incentive to the children to visit the library. Provision of information literacy programmes for the adults by public libraries will also advance their relevance and societal perception.

4. LIS Curriculum Review: It is important that LIS programmes are re-jigged and made more broad-based. This will prove useful in having library graduates who think outside the walls of libraries.

5.Training and Retraining of Library Professionals: As the instruments to implement social change, it is important that librarians are adequately trained and competent in technology. Librarians cannot make the required impact in a mostly technology- based world if they are not adept in technology. Therefore, more investment should be made in this direction by library managers and policy makers.

*6.Improved Funding***:** Funding is required to do a lot of things involved in positioning Nigerian libraries as agent of change. This includes provision of library resources and services, training and retraining of library professionals and motivation of library professionals among others. Without improved funding, the likelihood of taking up most of these activities remains very slim.

7.Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

As a reminder, the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) as outlined by the United Nations are:

- GOAL 1: No Poverty
- GOAL 2: Zero Hunger
- GOAL 3: Good Health and Well-being
- GOAL 4: Quality Education
- GOAL 5: Gender Equality
- GOAL 6: Clean Water and Sanitation
- GOAL 7: Affordable and Clean Energy
- GOAL 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- GOAL 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- GOAL 10: Reduced Inequality
- GOAL 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities
- GOAL 12: Responsible Consumption and Production
- GOAL 13: Climate Action
- GOAL 14: Life Below Water
- GOAL 15: Life on Land
- GOAL 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions
- GOAL 17: Partnerships to achieve the Goal

Libraries of any kind and individual librarians can take up any one of these goals and use that as a platform to bring change in their communities. Goal 17 talks about partnerships to achieve the goals implying that the United Nations is depending on individuals, groups, institutions, governmental and non-governmental organisations etc. to partner to achieve these goals. Groups of librarians or libraries can also partner to achieve an identified goal or goals. Partnership may also involve searching out and finding individuals, groups, governmental or non-governmental organisations that are already working in these areas and forming partnerships with them aimed at providing complementary service from the angle of the library.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the subject of libraries as agents of change from the point of view of innovation, engagement and communication. Compelling reasons why libraries and librarians must step up with innovative services that will address actual needs of their communities, the need for engagement with the community, and for communication were highlighted. The factors that challenge the ability of libraries to fulfil their roles were also highlighted. Finally, recommendations and opportunities that may be exploited to provide impactful services were outlined. It is advocated that libraries and librarians in Nigeria go beyond theoretical postulations to provide services that will touch lives if their role as agents of change would be maintained.

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