

## **Aspect of intellectual freedom in Nigeria: Status, problems and remedies.**

Doris Ufuoma Aghoghovwia  
Library Department  
College of Education, Warri,  
Delta State, Nigeria.

### **Abstract**

There is a copious understanding which states that no individual or nation can grow above his/her level of awareness. Nigeria is indeed the giant of Africa, but whether her level of intellectual developmental proviso viz a viz the opinions of the individual members of the society can be considered one of the freest amongst nations, is a crucial subject of discuss. It took half a century from her independence for the freedom of Information Act to be enacted. But even years after, its level of adoption, is still a far cry. It is evident that accessing information from parastatals and agencies of the Government is near impossibility. Aside the recalcitrant nature of government officials in divulging information to her citizen, there abound other factors that censor information. These are namely the government, religious, corporate, moral censorship as well as influence of parents, obscenity and gender related issues. This paper proves there is a corresponding relationship between intellectual freedom and level of development of a country. The role played by the American Library Association ALA in technological stride of America and China respectively was highlighted. The Nigerian counterpart was backed to assume similar role for her nation. Librarians were however cautioned to exercise restraint so as not to allow their belief or those of the authors or publishers to influence or lead to rejection of any material or books in their library shelves.

### **Keywords:**

Reorienting mindsets, Democracy, Beliefs, Human right, Intellectual freedom, Informed citizenry.

### **Introduction**

A common adage in Nigeria describes a people bereft of information as deformed. Is it true that traditional education teaches us basic skills and knowledge, but does too little on how to develop our conscious minds? Maybe yes. This is because we are not taught how to intelligently make the biggest decisions of our lives or how to cultivate a burning desire for what we want, how to know if our beliefs are inaccurate and require change. On the other hand, kingdom and Maekae (2013) viewed formal education as the veritable tool in nation building which the human race must undertake in order to attain meaningful advancement of the environment and living standard.

The right to be educated or to know is a requirement for freedom of thought and conscience, freedom of expression and access to information. Freedom of information may be regarded as a subset of freedom of expression

or speech which is a fundamental human rights charter (Omagbemi *et al.*, 2016). Intellectual Freedom (IF), according to Desang (2006), implies the freedom to hold, receive and disseminate ideas without restriction. She describes intellectual freedom as synonymous with the United States brand of democracy which is driven by an informed citizenry well equipped to deal with conflicting ideas and ultimately make wise choices. Whether this applies to Nigerians remains a topical issue even after the freedom of information Act (FOIA) has been passed and signed into Law since 2011. This paper attempts to identify some constraints of (IF), how they can be addressed especially the role librarianship can play in ensuring citizenry have right to receive and dispense information without hitches.

### **Status of Intellectual Freedom in Nigeria**

Intellectual freedom (IF) also conceptualized by Pune (2010) implies the freedom to think one's thought, conceive one's ideas formulate views and express them freely. As enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Right – Article 19:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression. This right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

The Nigerian state which has severally been under the spell of military dictatorship is adifficult terrain when it comes to accessing information in state agencies (Ayode 2011; Omagbemi et al; 2016). Instead of IF, it is the official Secret Act (OSA) which was bequeathed to Nigeria by the Colonial British Administration that is still strictly enforced. This bars civil servants from divulging information to Nigerians. These were worsen by the Evidence Act, the Public Complaints Commission Act, Statistics Act and the Criminal Code, which were promulgated to Protect Vital government Information (VGI). What however defines the term VGI is strictly the preserve of those in power. All these have snow balled into what obtains in Nigeria today, where glaring issues that are supposed to be in public knowledge are held sacrosanct and out of reach of the entire citizenry in defiance of FOIA already signed into law. The issues of remuneration of political office holders and legislators are more speculative than factual, while asset declarations appear to be treated with kids gloves by the ruling class. The reports of the government on the deadly terrorist sects in northeastern part of the country are often deceptive. Several claims made often states that sect have been defeated, only to receive devastating blow from them shortly afterwards. The issue of anti-corruption crusade of the Buhari administration seem to

highlight funds retrievals from individual without a corresponding naming of the persons involved (Roy, 2017). These and many more beclouds the sense of judgment of a section of the citizenry and deny them opportunity to contribute their quota in process of nation building.

### **Challenges of Intellectual Freedom (IF)**

The American Library ALA has implicated two factors as the main bane of intellectual freedom in USA and other parts of the world. These are namely Censorship and anti-intellectual freedom. The ALA labeled these two factors in all its approaches and antecedents as foes that must be laid to rest. Censorship is the suppression or prohibition of any part of books, films, news, music etc that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable or a threat to security (Famous 2011). While anti-intellectual freedom represents everything IF is not. Omagbemi et. al. (2016) opined that IF and freedom of information (FOI) are synonymous essentially as both are deep rooted in the concept of human rights. Yaya *et al* (2013) believed that the examination of books, plays, films, television and radio programmes, news, reports and other forms of communication for the purpose of altering or suppressing ideas found to be objectionable, harmful or offensive is called censorship. Censorship is so classified as prior or post with the former referring to materials banned before publication and later censored after it has been published (Famous, 2011).

There exist also myriads of factors that encourage censorship in Nigeria invoked by threat or insecurity on the state, religious bodies, or institutions or interest of the ruling class.

#### **1. Insecurity of the ruling class**

The incidence of the 1986 letter bomb blast meted on the then editor of the News Watch Magazine (Late Mr. Dele Giwa) remains fresh in the minds of Nigerians. His death according to Tayo( 2018 ), is one of the most high profile

cold blood cases in Nigeria. According to him, it has become one of the cautionary tales for those in pursuit of truth. The ugly event is not unconnected with a purported indictive report which the publisher had against the ruling class as at then. Another case was the banning of a novel titled satanic verses written by Salman Rushdie by Gen. Sanni Abacha military junta among others.

## **2. Insecurity of people of various religious beliefs**

There are two main religious groups in Nigeria notably Christianity and Islamic besides pockets of other bodies. The various leaders of the respective groups detest their members having journals or teaching of the opposite body ( Onyebuchi and Chigozie, 2013 ). Worse of it is the issue of church doctrine which factions from having cordial relationship or allowing their member from consuming literatures belonging to the other. Religions appears to be a sole factor leading to the ban on dissemination of wide range of materials (Yayaet *al.*, 2013).

## **3. Moral censorship**

This kind of censorship is predominantly culture based. The border lines are knitted on primitive traditional work of taboo, or prohibition often linked to ancestral concept or wishes of the deity or goddess (Dafiaghor, 2011).

These are intuitively impressed on the minds of the younger generation by elders of the community or family. Interestingly these prohibitions do not require any form of enforcement to engender conformity as they are well imprinted and internalized and hence become sacrosanct. Notable examples are as follows: Young children when sent on errands, the adult spits on the ground and they are told to return before the sputum dries up or risk losing their nerverl to disease and decay.

Another is the warning of children to desist from drinking fluid from coconut which they say lowers children academic

performance. Most of these concepts are fast eroding even though Nigeria is endowed with multiple socio-cultural entities belief system, she is yet confronted with informed views evolving along or purely Western model (Marshall, 2009).

## **4. Corporate censorship**

This is the use of corporate influence in limiting freedom of expression, achieved through refusal to sell a product or refusal to advertise or allow airtime (Jay, 2000). In similar fashion, Meyers (2018) wrote that pressure was on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to ban a number of Wright-Wing activists and Channels from their platforms. Consequently the most infamous Alex Jones and his conspirational website called 'Infavors' was banned by Apple, Facebook, Spotify, You Tube and Payments Processor Paypal in August 2018. This ban implies that people can gang up against giant corporations and bring them on their knees. The creators of the Nuremberg Files, an anti-abortion website claimed that their site which featured a list of names and addresses of physicians (as well as names of those who were killed by anti-abortion zealots, had a line struck through them). They were of the view that they were entitled to free speech protection, but the Ninth circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the websites contents constituted illegal threats not free speech (NCAC).

## **Aspect of librarianship aiding censorship**

The involvement of the government, community and the librarian in engaging censorship of materials according to Hobbs (2006), ignited the establishment of guidelines for protecting IF (such as the Library bill of Rights. The activity of Librarians as they affect local libraries as follows:

### **1. Labeling**

Local libraries as a matter of Practice make use of Finding Aids to assist Patrons when they go through the shelves (Hobbs, 2006). A common

example is labeling books by genre, such as Western or Mysteries. This kind of labeling is made complex by clients even though some may find it easy to comprehend, the Libraries are obliged to give assistance where the need arises. Should materials comprising profanity or sexual content be labeled? Labels are subjective judgment and it is not the responsibility of the librarian to serve as a rating system. Sometimes access to materials is restricted because they are fragile or likely to be vandalized or stolen. In case materials are separated from the main collection because they are controversial or considered obscene, neither the Library nor the librarian should be responsible for determining who may have access to materials held by the library ( Mann, 2017 ). This does not preclude right to protect fragile materials but access to such documents must be made available to qualified users only.

## **2. Obscenity**

Many art books are thought to contain nude figures. What therefore constitute pornography is a subject of debate. Whether children should be restricted for accessing such materials are issues in libraries.

## **3. Gender/sex:**

Materials which have stereotypical sex roles like 'women as house wives' or homosexuals as 'deviants or beautiful women not romantic' or 'Joy of sex', are serious puzzles. Whether we approve of it or not it is correct to say that many people may not conform to what is considered normal. Thus censoring materials that portray alternative lifestyles is a constraint of intellectual freedom.

## **Role of librarianship in supporting Intellectual Freedom**

The Nigerian Library Association (NLA) must like her ALA counterpart – view IF as a means to understand and achieve progress like the type recorded in China – a country hitherto known for her restrictions and censorship. The NLA has to examine how the ALA helped to

foster a culture of intellectual freedom that paved way for what is known as the Asian Tigers of today. There is need to understudy several documents, memoirs, travel papers, newsletters and essay written about China's censorship, policies in relation to IF. The NLA cannot afford to undermine their expertise through numerous direct and indirect approaches, notably International Library Cooperation and innovative developments in higher education. Special premium should be laid on the development of well-structured University with partnership across the globe. The NLA should keep her policies and procedures current as well as have open lines of communication with local community leaders. This can be achieved by way of ensuring they are familiar with NLA library collection goals and policy.

The local leaders should come to terms with Local Library Policy. Librarians should communicate the library's position on intellectual freedom to the public and finally develop a formal policy to handle complaints (Hobbs, 2006). Yayaet *al*; (2013), warns that librarians being information providers should not censor any information whether such information is not in line with his/her belief or interest. This is because the interest of the clientele, whom Librarians are responsible to, is of great diversity. Any departure from this creed will definitely jeopardize their interest. Bloomberg (2011) simply put up his argument that librarian should not impose their opinion and preference on readers. He summed up his argument with a thought which states that books in the library should not be rejected on account of belief of the author, publisher or Librarian. Knox (2014) sees intellectual freedom as paramount in ALA's mission, suggesting that 5 out of 6 articles of the Library Bill of right regards IF as the panacea to problem posed by censorship and as essential aspect of democracy.

### Conclusion

The status of a nation's Education and freedom of thought, conscience and expression of her citizens are pivotal to the ranking of a nation's level of greatness. This study however found that the Nigerian citizens are bewildered with lack of access these vital tools needed for advancement. Those who dared to voice the truth did not live to tell the story. America and China were two nations cited to have attained greatness. The role played by the ALA in breaking restriction to information and censorship paved way for the attainment of advancement in the aforementioned countries. The NLA was admonished to borrow a leaf from their ALA counterpart in strengthening the Nigerian democracy. This is achievable should they follow their goals and policies.

The basic IF concept behooves that all books have the right to be in the library regardless of Personal opinion or belief of the librarian. Although because of some controversial issues such as religious matters, the state security or sexual matters trending on the social media, there is need for balance. Simply put, the bid to protect IF does not mean that a book cannot be rejected for other selection criteria reasons such as the quality of the material. Much as the reliance on intellectual freedom is key to nation's development, its level of application conspicuously hangs on many balances. Major promoters of censorship include religious beliefs, parental influence and issue regarding morals or superstition besides government and corporate bodies. The librarian who is in the centre of them all must show great deal of professionalism.

That is, they should not impress personal values, belief or curiosity on the library clientele. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made especially in a changing world in terms of technological advancement, and globalization

1. The Library Managers or proprietors, should give routine training and retraining of

Librarians in order to meet the demand or dynamism of the ever changing world.

2. The rights of every Nigerian must surpass provision of formal education to include freedom of expression without challenges.
3. The right to exercise freedom of information Act must be given room to thrive in Nigeria
4. The political elites should abhor gruesome murder of truth rather they should reward sincere forthright report.

### References

- Ayode, S. (2011). Right – Nigeria. Freedom of Information Bill proves elusive. Cited by Omagbemi et al (2016). *Journal of applied Information Science & tech* 9(1).
- Blomberg, P. (2011). Censorship. An exploration of issues, problems and resolutions. *PNLA Quarterly* 75(2) 1-8.
- Dafiaghor, K. F ( 2011 ). Censorship of information and the Nigerian society. *International NGO Journal*, 6(7), 59 – 165. DOI ! : 10 . 5897/ NGO. ISSN 1993 -8225 (c).
- Dresang, E. T. (2006). Intellectual freedom and libraries: complexity and change in the twenty-first.century digital environment. *The Library Quarterly* 76(2), 169 – 192.
- Ezeome E. R. & P.A. Marshal (2009). Informed consent, practices in nigeria. developing world bio-ethics Wiley online 9(3) <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-8847.2008.00234>.
- Famous, D. K. (2011).Censorship of Information and the Nigerian Society. *International NGO Journal* 6(7), 159-165.
- Hobbs, K. (2006). Intellectual Freedom and Censorship. Intellectual Freedom Manual 7<sup>th</sup> edition Chicago office for intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association.
- Jay. T. (2000). *Why we curse: A neuro-psycho-social. theory of speech* John Benjamin. Publishing Company.

- Kingdom, E. O. & Maekae, J. (2013). the role of education in national development – nigeria experience. *European Scientific Journal* Retrieved from <http://eujournal.org/index.php/e>.
- Knox. E .J. M. (2014). Supporting intellectual freedom symbolic capital and practical philosophy in librarianship. *Library Quarterly*, 84(1), 8 – 21.
- Manna. J. D ( 2017 ). Intellectual Freedom, academic freedom and the academic Librarian AAUP American Association Of University Professors. 8 (1).
- Myers, F. (2018). Pay pal’s corporate censorship. spiked podcast spike online.com.  
<Http://www.google.com/amp> NCAC. Hate speech Think Create Explore.  
<Http://ncac.org>.
- Omagbemi, C. O. & Tomori, O. O. (2016). Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and librarianship in Nigeria. *Journal of applied Information Science and Technology*. 9(1), 91-101.
- Onyebuchi. E. E & Chigozie C F ( 2013 ). Islamic fundamentalism and the problem of insecurity in Nigeria : The boko haram phenomenon. *IOSR Journal of humanities and social science* 15(3). pp 4353 eISSN: 2249 - 0837
- Roy P. ( 2017 ). Anti corruption in Nigeria : A political settlement analysis. SOAS University of London. PR 16 @ soas ac. UK. [www.google.com](http://www.google.com).
- Tayo A. ( 2018 ). Dele Giwa and the 32 years old haunting mystery. Pulse ng [www.google.com/amp](http://www.google.com/amp).
- Yaya, J. A; Achonna, Andy, U. & Osisanwo, T. (2013). Censorship and the challenges of library services delivery in Nigeria. *Library Philosophy and Practice* (eJournal). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2421&context=libphilprac>

**Author’s contact:**

Doris Ufuoma Aghoghovwia is with the Library Department, College of Education, Warri, Delta State, Nigeria. Email: aghoghovwiadoris@gmail.com. Cell: +234 8025153975