The first responder librarian as a guide to the information-vulnerable members of the society

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Abstract
Information is a vital commodity upon which humans depend for daily functioning. The 21st century is marked with tremendous production and use of information leading to information explosion. However, there are arguably those who are not opportune to benefit from the snippet of over-flowing information, and based their decision-making on hearsay and just any available information regardless of their information need. This study explored the situation of such persons information-vulnerable members of the society. The study exalted information and the importance in human life. Furthermore, using the stratified variables of information users, the study explained the vulnerability of members of the society who are missing in the chain of information consumption. The role of the library was explored as well as the means of extending library services to these set of people. In conclusion, the study explained that the role of the librarians extends not only those who have expressed information need, but also those who are unaware that they need information to thrive, it was therefore, concluded that librarians must assume first-responder position to provide carefully planned first-aid information services to those that need them in the society.

Keywords: Library, information, information need, information users, information-vulnerable, first-responder librarian

Introduction

Information is crucial and critical to human development and the modern world is, indeed, saturated with information from different sources and in different forms particularly in the face of information technology. However, many persons wallow in ignorance because they do not have access to current and authentic information, useful resources and trusted information sources and they lack guidance in their information consumption pattern. These persons belong to the group referred to as information-vulnerable members of the society.

With a preponderance of information in the modern world, it has become necessary for the librarian to evolve and become an information provider with a difference. It is for the foregoing that this chapter will examine the importance of information and the library support services that the librarian can provide to change the life of the information-vulnerable members of the society for the better and impact on his community.

Importance of information

From time immemorial, information has played an indispensable role as the driving force for the development of man and his environment. Information is an essential resource to the individual, government and other institutional entities. Information plays a significant role in the empowerment of man in his bid to attain goals for developmental purposes. *Business dictionary* defines information as "data that is accurate, timely, specific and organized for a purpose, presented within a context that gives it meaning and relevance". Information is power. It is

paramount in every human action. Information predisposes the mind to sound decision-making and equips the individual with coping and problem-solving ability.

Information is essential, particularly in the modern society because every aspect of human life depends largely on access to and use of effective information. Indeed, information has been considered an economic commodity for competitive advantage in a dynamic society. It is for the foregoing that Tahir, Mahmood and Shafique (2008) state that the contemporary era is termed 'information era' and that the creation, management, and use of information increase physical and cognitive processes. The use of information has fostered human development in different countries and created the divide between developed, developing and underdeveloped nations. Even the Bible acknowledges the importance of information in human experience. It is stated in Hosea that "my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge, because thou hast rejected knowledge" (Hosea 4:6, King James Version).

Relevance of a library
The library has been variously defined as a factory that produces and delivers information in all formats to its numerous clientele. For such information to be meaningful, it must be accurate, timely, complete and relevant (Emasealu & Popoola, 2016). Accurate information provides a reliable and valid representation of reality. Indeed, the cost of inaccurate information can be extremely high. It is, therefore, necessary for the user or individual to know the right information to get at a particular time in order to accomplish the purpose for which it is needed.

Although the various types of libraries that exist include academic, national, public and special library, the library services provided by the modern professional librarian transcends the provision of information through books and audio-visuals to include information transferred through verbal communication, particularly in non-literate communities.

Social stratification of information users
It is important to underscore the social stratification of information users in the society. Information users vary and relying on concepts in psychology they could be categorized under four stratifications: Star, Clique, Rejectee and Isolatee. The first category of Star information users is made up of information elites who have all the information they need but continue to seek for more information for their self-improvement. This group makes up the prosumer members of the society as they engage in constant use and creation of information. Their motivation for information is intrinsic and primarily predicted by the need for self-development.

The second is the Clique category and it is made up of information segregationists who consistently seek particular information and disregard other information types regardless of their importance. This group unwittingly, perhaps, subscribes to the saying 'make your circle small' and this is detrimental to growth in the upwardly mobile contemporary world. The Clique category is mostly found among people of the same line of trade, business, occupation, or profession and their motivation for information is usually sustained by the economic gains accruing from their chosen career. This category is also found among professionals in academic disciplines where the phenomenon of 'publish or perish' or publishing for the sake of promotion is prevalent. The campaign for inter-disciplinary collaboration

among scholars has been encouraged to arrest the clique syndrome among scholars.

The third group of information users is the information-static category called Rejectee. Persons in this stratification stick to information acquired during formal educational training or learning experience and do not consciously aspire to seek new information for further development. This group, which could be regarded as the dangerous-asset of the society, assumes that their old manner of approach is sufficient to outwit any other approach. They do not see the need to improve upon previously learned experiences and, therefore, do not engage in the activity of information seeking for the advancement of human society. However, they must understand that the essence of making progress in life through groundbreaking knowledge should replace antiquated approach to solving the problems of man.

The fourth and last group is the Isolatee, the information-vulnerable category, which peopled by those who merely live on what the day brings and do not see the need to consciously seek information for daily activities and personal growth. Persons in this category, because they do not consciously access information, appear to exist in a vacuum in a world of abundant information. They avidly consume negative information with ease. It is in this group that the effects of fake news, rumours, conspiracy theories, and the like are strongly felt. It is important and crucial, therefore, to carry out a campaign on information for lifelong learning to persons of this stratification.

Unarguably, information asserts itself in diverse forms and categories as well as cuts across every facet of life. Public libraries, for instance, serve the purpose of educating the public and encouraging lifelong learning. While school libraries encourage reading proficiency and provide special information which is delivered through guidance and counselling services to prepare the mind of young adolescents towards utilizing information for meaningful and purposeful growth, the isolatees miss out from these forms of information services and base their life-decision on hear-say information which often prove dangerous.

Paradigm shift in library information dissemination

Information needs is a generic expression, which should not be limited to the information needs of only those who can recognize the particular information they require. If information services are focused only on those who can identify their information needs, then the lofty Millennium Development Goal of mass literacy, for instance, will not be achieved. The emphasis here is that the behaviour of seeking information has transformed over the years causing librarians to rethink library services in order to satisfy not only identified information needs of individuals but also to introduce services that will accommodate the information-vulnerable. It is in this regard that the librarian assumes the position of first responder to guide, educate and counsel those who are ignorant of the importance of information in their daily functioning by providing them strategic information services also known as grassroots information services.

With modernity, the information business has become ubiquitous and the library is now inundated with information and communication technologies (Emasealu and Umeozor, 2016). As a response to this global experience, the library is reinventing itself by reassessing its service portfolio through the development of expertise for full participation in shaping

contemporary essential library services (Association of Research Libraries, 2009). The advent of web development in modern times has equally helped to redefine the philosophy of the library by shifting focus from content-based to client-based librarianship. Consequently, the focus is no longer on the number of physical materials a library can boast of but also the type, behaviour and needs of the client. The client or library user has become the central partner or stakeholder in the business of librarianship. Indeed, in its contemporary definition, the librarian is no longer "the stern, be-spectacled, cardigan-clad, shushing, and stereotyped individual, but now, more than ever, an information mediator and strategist between existing myriad information resources and users" (Hillenbrand 2005). The modern librarian is aware that there is a paradigm shift, which now makes the information-vulnerable member of the society the centre of focus and his role as a professional librarian, crucial. Indeed, the info-situation of the society and communication technology has introduced the concept of prosumer, conditioning librarians as information professionals to evolve or dissolve. The modern librarian is aware that the 21st century illiterates are not merely those who cannot read and write but those who cannot learn, unlearn, relearn and improve upon previously learned experience (Toffler, n.d.).

The information-vulnerable members of the society

Unarguably, there is information explosion in the contemporary world. However, a yawning gap exists between available and required information. The situation is more precarious because there are persons who do not have access to snippets of information flowing from the table of the prevailing information overload. These persons do not have access to current and genuine information, useful resources and trusted information sources and they lack guidance in their information consumption pattern. Put simply, they lack the basic information that can empower them for their betterment and the attainment of economic and socio-political goals. These persons constitute the group referred to as information-vulnerable members of the society. They are vulnerable not only because they do not have access to useful information, or that information is not available in their environment, but because they are unaware of the need for quality information. The group exists in every stratum of society whether in urban or rural areas. It is worrisome that they are often oblivious they require quality information for their very survival. Instead, they wallow in ignorance. The information-vulnerable are dwelling and living among their peers in a contemporary setting that is predominantly powered by information. Unfortunately, members of this group of information-vulnerable are not privy to the needed information. The information-vulnerable members of society have been identified as the sources of damnable occurrences with disastrous consequences in the world (Mirchevski, 2020).

The vulnerable library users may be more in rural communities than urban centres and the reason for this can be traced to the observation that in most countries, rural areas compared to urban centres, are superior in population and in landmass. Adimorah (1993) notes that in Africa, for instance, the rural dwellers form up to 80% of the population but with an alarming illiteracy rate of 70%. In the pursuit of sustainable national development, however, rural communities, compared with urban centres, are often at a disadvantage because policies are usually formulated in urban centres

most often without proper consideration for the peculiar needs of the rural setting. Mda (1993) comments on this discriminatory relationship between urban and rural places when he states that there are usually "wide gaps in the distribution of services and of wealth between rural areas and towns." According to Hedebro (1982), scholars in the field of development communication, recognizing the relegation of rural communities to the background, have paid special attention to systematizing communication in order to enhance self-reliance, promote equity, check problems arising from communication gaps and stimulate rural participation in the search for national growth.

Against the background of efforts to sensitize rural communities to meaningful development through community information services, the first responder librarian, as a professional information provider, must come to the rescue.

The first responder librarian
First responders are at the forefront of health emergencies. When an emergency call is received, first responders reach the victim urgently to administer first aid in order to stabilize the victim, and prep such a victim for instant evacuation to a nearby hospital or health facility. Without first responders a lot of vulnerable situations would not be saved. In a parallel manner, librarians are at the forefront of helping information-vulnerable by providing carefully planned information services. In this vein, librarians have established different library types to cater for the identified information needs of the different categories of users and, in particular, the information needs of information-vulnerable members. It is in this regard that the 21st century librarian is seen not only as a mediator,

mediating between information sources and users, but also as first responder service personnel in information emergencies (Kwanya, Stiwell, & Underwood, 2015).

The first responder librarian as a guide to the information-vulnerable individuals
Although every individual needs information to thrive, the vulnerable information user needs information more in order to achieve competitive advantage in a modern world where access to required, necessary and vital quality information can be said to be at par with such basic human needs as air, water and other natural resources. It has been expressed in this chapter that many of those who are information-vulnerable may not be even aware that they need quality information and, as such, wallow in ignorance. Therefore, it behoves the modern librarian to design services, which will help in the dissemination of information to all groups of information users and, in particular, the information-vulnerable user. To perform this task, the librarian must bear in mind that information can only be effective when it is accurate, verifiable, timely, carefully selected, categorized, and meaningfully presented for the benefit of the different users. In order to provide information to the vulnerable, this chapter identifies three grassroots information service approaches the first respondent librarian can adopt and these are technology attack, village square and community service.

Technology attack approach
Ceci (2021) states that 140 million of the Nigerian population uses smartphones, and that at least 51.59% actually use the internet services. This trend presupposes that technology has provided a reliable means of getting information across to the people and that the people themselves, by having

access to these devices, are readily empowered to receive information. The first responder librarian must take full advantage of this modern technology and utilize such social media platforms as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Telegram among others to reach out to the numerous remote library users. This will be very effective when used for the benefit of those who can comprehend written information.

The village square approach
Man is not an island onto himself but lives in a social environment characterized by daily human interactions such as churches, village meetings and moonlight gathering. The Librarian should utilize the opportunity provided by such social gathering to sensitize individuals on the need to recognize, access and utilize information as a critical survival pack of the 21st century. In a parallel vein, such interactions would provide a good opportunity to give vital information for sustained learning. Using this method, the librarian can determine the unexpressed but important information needs of the people and then do a follow-up by providing them adequate information.

Community service approach
The community service approach involves creating a form of local reading club at the convenience of community members. A centre can be dedicated to this to enable members of the community gain access to information crucial for their daily living. This could take the form of mass outreach expressed in printed tracts to educate members of a community on chosen topics that affect their daily livelihood.

The three approaches examined here are vital to the modern librarian in responding to the information needs of the information-vulnerable user. The

range of issues that can be addressed is infinite and they include the following:

- Teaching civic education
- Health campaign
- Creating political awareness
- Addressing moral issues
- Providing information on economic empowerment and skills acquisition
- Tackling security challenges and
- Engaging in global concerns such as climate change and MDG goals.

Conclusion
This chapter underscores the importance of information as an indispensable force in every facet of human existence. It identifies the library as a workshop that produces, stores and delivers information in different forms to engender individual and societal development. The different levels of social stratification of information users have been described as *star*, *clique*, *rejectee* and *isolatee*.

Against the background that the modern world is strongly characterized by information technology, the chapter argues that the role of the modern librarian has changed from providing traditional librarianship in formal structural settings to that of an information mediator who responds to the information needs of the vulnerable library user by adopting the *Technology Attack* approach. In this regard, the librarian must take advantage of the social media and handheld devices. The chapter equally submits that the modern librarian should use the informal *Village Square* and *Community Service* approaches to community information dissemination.

These approaches, if used effectively, would address the critical issues of teaching civic education,

carrying out health campaign, creating political awareness, addressing moral issues, providing information on economic empowerment and skills acquisition programmes, tackling issues of insecurity and engaging in global concerns.

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