

# Libraries and Facilitation of Public Access to Information in Nigerian Society

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study examined the level of libraries' involvement in facilitating public access to information, strategies used, challenges faced, and best practices used.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Descriptive survey design was used. A structured online survey on a four-point scale was designed and used as instrument for data collection. A total of two hundred copies were dispatched to librarians from all types of libraries through librarians' online mailing groups. Data were analysed using statistical analysis of simple frequency, percentages and mean scores. A bench mark of 2.5 was used to accept or reject results.

**Key findings:** It was discovered that every type of library is involved in the facilitation of public access to information with different strategies. The challenges include lack of funds, inadequate skills and insufficient infrastructure.

**Research limitation(s):** The research did not record any response from research libraries, which otherwise would have added value in drawing conclusions.

**Practical implication(s).** The erroneous disposition that only public library facilitates public access to information has been cleared as every library indicated its strategies in enhancing services. Every library has a parent institution, host community and affiliations that require open access to information.

**Contribution to knowledge:** It shows the involvement of all types of libraries and librarians in engaging all sectors of the society as important factor in information service delivery.

**Paper type:** Research

**Keywords:** Facilitation; Libraries; Public access to information; Inclusive participation; Nigeria.

## Introduction

The modern society today is characterized by diverse needs. The most important is access to information. It is a critical resource germane to every sphere of life and is needed for individual and collective enlightenment and advancement. Libraries of all types (e.g. public, academic, special, national) have the core mission of storing and

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organizing information so that it can be accessed by their patrons (Atkinson, 2018). They facilitate public access to information regardless of any discrimination. (ALA, 2018; IFLA, 2016). The notion is to ensure community involvement, personal productivity and enablement for people to make informed decisions that can improve their lives.

Access to information is explained by IFLA (2017) as the rights and capacity to use, create, and share information in ways that are meaningful to each individual, community or organization. It is about making contact with and using information not only by individuals but also by corporate bodies and the government. The unhindered contact with accurate, timely and relevant data can lead to increased understanding and reduction in uncertainty, when libraries practically facilitate with global perspective and strong understanding of local needs for holistic development. The procedure for enhancing the information process is through facilitation, which holds the entire resources together from the beginning to the end. Hence, libraries as facilitators create spaces for safe participation and provision of access to information with a great display of information content expertise (Smith & Chilocote, 2018).

The new level of involvement and changing roles of librarians, irrespective of type, have entrusted in them the need to accelerate human development, inclusive spaces with professional experiences and evaluations (Drotner, 2015; Igaroola, 2017; OsuchukwuandAyeeni, 2017). Libraries have been raising the expectations about information access through various programs for the users. According to American Library Association (ALA, 2015), libraries have long been champions of free and equitable access to information and education. The human and economic development is closely associated with the level of information accessibility in the society. Hence, libraries provide diverse information services that stimulate contribution and participation for national integration. This is because information bridges the gap between knowledge and ignorance.

In Nigeria, there are different types of libraries serving varieties of people in different locations. The Library Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) survey revealed that there are 316 public libraries in Nigeria (2017). There are also school libraries, academic libraries, research libraries, and special libraries all over the country. These libraries have responsibilities of creating access to information for immediate users and host communities for the retrieval and dissemination of information. It is on this basis that LRCN paid a courtesy visit to the Minister of Communication Technology to explore areas of collaboration with the Ministry and its agencies on ICT interventions in various universities,

secondary schools, public libraries and other service centres. This reflects the critical need of presenting libraries as great facilitators of information of all times. It is against this background that this study examines the activities of libraries in facilitating public access to information in Nigeria.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The right of access can be fulfilled only when libraries facilitate open access. It is the ability to facilitate this important factor that will make people to participate and contribute to development in decisions that affect them. Since libraries are at the forefront of access to information, there is a need to assess facilitation in Nigerian society. Public access to information seems to be in the prerogative of public library only not considering the academic, special, school, national and research libraries. Oltmann (2009) claimed that access to information remains, for the most part under-conceptualized and infrequently studied in library and information science (LIS) and in other academic disciplines. This paper thus, seeks to bridge this gap by covering all types of libraries in their involvement, roles and challenges with best practices.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Find out libraries' involvement in facilitating public access to information in Nigeria.
2. Examine the strategies used in facilitating public access to information in Nigeria.
3. Ascertain the challenges libraries encounter in facilitating public access to information in Nigeria.
4. Identify the best practices for facilitation of public access to information.

### **Literature Review**

An unhindered access to information is essential in any developmental process for individuals and nations. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2017), in the context of the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda, believes that increasing access to information and knowledge across society supports sustainable development and improves people's lives. Based on this, access to information continues to be an issue in the library and information discipline, as it is the basic and fundamental tenet upon which all library policies, activities, operations and resources are built upon (Obasi, 2015).

Libraries have gotten to the level, where ownership of information dissemination is taken with stimulating skills for successful outcomes. According to Oltmann (2009) an initial level of access to information begets competence in accessing and utilizing further information. This is the current stage of libraries where combinations of intellectual, physical and social elements are integrated for strategic facilitation of access for growth. Libraries now advocate and form partnership with government, agencies, organizations and institutions in order to retain the best aspect of incorporating new services in an era of information explosion (Fagbola, Uzoigwe, & Ajegbomogun, 2011; Obasi, 2015). This is to demonstrate how access to information and libraries contribute to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Bertolini, 2017). It calls for flexibility and versatility in changing the face of libraries into strategic information facilitators.

Studies have proved that libraries play important roles and adopt effective strategies as facilitators and components of empowering social, economic and political development to enhance public access to information. ALA (2015) in its digital inclusion survey reported that libraries are building digitally inclusive communities. Oyeronke (2012) and Oltmann (2009) affirmed that libraries' roles for access to information help curb unemployment by providing the timely and accurate access to participate and contribute to national development. They also include organizing trainings and workshop on digital and information literacy skills, provision of opportunities for learning, personal development and creativity, supporting formal and informal learning as well as taking advantage of preventative health program. However, so many factors hamper library facilitation and make information not to be publicly accessed. For instance, demoralized and inadequate workforce, inadequate accommodation, lack of basic infrastructure like electricity, lack of funds, illiteracy, lack of awareness of the need for information, poor lighting, non-conducive ambience, poor networking and internet connectivity, challenge effective access to information (Opara, 2008). On the same view, Mugwisi, Jiyane, and Fombad (2016) stated that limited funding, shortage of skills and knowledge, technology and time, among others, are challenges limiting provision of information services in the libraries.

Access to information services remains a key factor in community growth, empowerment, stability and independence which libraries must foster despite challenges. Issak (2009) pointed out that training and retraining of library personnel will enhance access to relevant information needs of the people. Libraries must adhere to core values of effective facilitations even in the face of challenges.

## Methodology

This study opted survey research method. Population of the study consisted of librarians in academic, special, school, public, national and research libraries in Nigeria. A structured questionnaire was prepared and administered online via Google docs for data collection. A total of two hundred copies were dispatched to librarians from all types of libraries through librarians' online groups. Four librarians' online groups, namely The groups were Library Advocacy Group of Nigeria, Library Matters Group, Anambra State Chapter WhatsApp group and Ondo State Chapter WhatsApp group, were sampled purposively. The responses were measured on a four-point scale of very involved (VI), moderately involved (MI), fairly involved (FI) and not involved (NI). The second aspect was rated on strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D) and strongly disagree (SD). There was a return rate of 69%. A benchmark of 2.5 mean score was used to accept or reject results.

## Results

Table 1. Demographic Information of Respondents (n=138)

Type of library	Frequency	Percentage
Academic	98	71.0
Public	14	10.1
Special	12	8.7
National	5	3.6
School	9	6.5
<b>Qualification</b>		
HND	19	13.8
BLIS	37	26.8
MLIS	70	50.7
PHD	12	8.7
<b>Age</b>		
Below 25 years	8	5.8
26-35	58	42.0
36-45	47	34.1
46-55	17	12.3
56 and above	8	5.8
<b>Years of experience</b>		
Below 5 years	38	27.5
6-10 years	51	37.0
11-15 years	25	18.1
16-20	12	8.7
21 years and above	12	8.7
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	62	44.9
Female	76	55.1

Table 1 shows that the respondents are well spread across all types of libraries. However, the greatest number of respondents are from academic library (71%) followed by public library (10.1%). There was no respondent from research library. The educational qualification shows that MLIS is rated highest above others (50.7%) followed by BLIS (26.8%), Higher National Diploma (HND) (13.8%) and PhD holders (8.7%). The years of experience shows that 37% of the respondents have worked between 6-10 years followed by 27.5% (below five years), 18.1% (between 11 -16 years), and 8.7% (16 years and above). The data also shows that more than half of the respondents are females (55.1%) compared to 44.9% males. The demographic information shows well classification of respondents with credible data who are in good position to attest to the queries of the questionnaire.

Table 2. Level of Involvement of Libraries in Facilitating Public Access to Information (n=138)

Item	VI	MI	FI	NI	Mean	Decision
1. Creation of awareness of information to all spheres of life	65 (47.1%)	48 (34.8%)	23 (16.7%)	2 (1.4%)	3.28	Accepted
2. Provision of public access to information at little or no fee	74 (53.6%)	46 (33.3%)	18 (13%)	8 (5.8%)	3.46	Accepted
3. Training and re-training staff on information provision	48 (34.8%)	42 (30.4%)	27 (19.6%)	1 (0.72%)	2.70	Accepted
4. Advocating for policies and practices that strengthen public rights to access information	34 (24.6%)	59 (42.8%)	35 (25.4%)	10 (7.2%)	2.84	Accepted

Table 2 shows 53.6% of libraries were very involved in provision of public access to information, 33.3% were moderately involved, 13% fairly involved and 1.4% not involved. In creating awareness of information to all spheres 47.1% rated highest as very involved. The other high rated items for very involved were training and retraining of staff on information provision and advocacies for policies and practices were 34.8% and 24.6% respectively. The creation of awareness, training and retraining of staff and advocacy cross the mean bench mark indicate that libraries are involved in strategies that facilitate access to information.

Table 3. Strategies Used by Libraries in Facilitating Public Access to Information (n=138)

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
1. Acquisition of updated and relevant information resources in print and non-print	70 (50.7%)	64 (46.4%)	4 (2.9%)	-	3.48	Accepted
2. Provision of infrastructural and technological information facilities	68 (49.3%)	58 (42.0%)	8 (5.8%)	4 (2.9%)	3.38	Accepted
3. Ensuring library staff are friendly and can be approached for any information	75 (54.3%)	60 (43.5%)	3 (2.2%)	-	3.52	Accepted
4. Organizing trainings and workshop on digital and information literacy skills	48 (34.8%)	57 (41.3%)	18 (13.0%)	15 (10.9%)	3.0	Accepted
4. Ensuring a conducive library ambience	72 (52.2%)	56 (40.6%)	8 (5.8%)	2 (1.4%)	3.43	Accepted
6. Provision of information software that are usable, even by audiences with specialized needs	38 (27.5%)	46 (33.3%)	38 (27.5%)	6 (4.3%)	2.70	Accepted
7. Supporting formal and informal learning and literacy development for all ages	38 (27.5%)	66 (47.8%)	34 (24.6%)	-	3.02	Accepted
8. Provision of opportunities for learning, personal development and creativity through programs of events and activities	48 (34.8%)	72 (52.2%)	12 (8.7%)	6 (4.3%)	3.17	Accepted

Table 3 shows that libraries in Nigeria use different strategies in enhancing public access to information with the accepted benchmark of over 2.5 mean scores in the options given. Respondents' strongly-agreed strategies were acquisition of updated and relevant resources (50.7%), provision of infrastructure and technological information resources (49.3%), ensuring that library staff are friendly and approachable (54.3%) and ensuring ambience environment (52.2%). They also agree on organizing trainings and workshop (41.3%), provision of information software (33.3%), supporting formal and informal learning spaces (47.8%) and provision of opportunities for learning, personal development and creativity (52.2%). The mean scores above 2.50 substantiate the findings.

*Table 4. Challenges Militating Against Facilitating Public Access to Information by Libraries (n=138)*

<b>Item</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Decision</b>
1. Inadequate financial support by authorities	74 (53.6%)	48 (34.8%)	12 (8.7%)	4 (2.9%)	3.39	Accepted
2. Poor lighting and low ambience	36 (26.1%)	54 (39.1%)	40 (29.0%)	8 (5.8%)	2.86	Accepted
3. Demoralized and inadequate workforce	44 (31.9%)	64 (46.4%)	30 (21.7%)	-	3.10	Accepted
4. Insufficient infrastructural and facilities	40 (29.0%)	64 (46.4%)	26 (18.8%)	8 (5.8%)	2.99	Accepted
5. Poor internet connectivity	65 (47.1%)	50 (36.2%)	16 (11.6%)	7 (5.1%)	3.25	Accepted
6. Inadequacy of facilitation skills	26 (18.8%)	72 (52.2%)	36 (26.1%)	4 (2.9%)	2.87	Accepted
7. Low capacity building and updates on national and global issues	32 (23.2%)	82 (59.4%)	24 (17.4%)	-	3.06	Accepted
8. Indifference by some library staff	40 (29.0%)	76 (55.1%)	22 (15.9%)	-	3.13	Accepted
9. Poor policy and strategic plans in libraries	38 (27.5%)	66 (47.8%)	26 (18.8%)	8 (5.8%)	2.97	Accepted

In Table 4, the data indicated strong agreement to inadequate financial support (53.6%) and insufficient internet connectivity (47.1%) as greatest challenges besieging the effective facilitation of public access to information. The data also agreed with demoralized and inadequate

workforce (46.4%) and insufficient of infrastructural facilities (46.4%), inadequacy of facilitation skills (52.2%), low capacity building (59.4%), indifference by some library staff (55.1%) and poor policy and strategic plans 47.8%.

The benchmark mean score of above 2.5 showed the rate of accepted responses which indicated the challenges of libraries in Nigeria in facilitation of public access to information.

Table 5. Best Practices for Libraries as Facilitator of Public Access to Information (n=138)

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
1. Advocate for policies and practices that maintain or strengthen the public's right to access information	60 (43.5%)	78 (56.5%)	-	-	3.43	Accepted
2. Develop and make available educational programs and information resources to assist the general public in accessing digital information	70 (50.7%)	62 (44.9%)	4 (2.9%)	2 (1.4%)	3.45	Accepted
3. Monitor and response to technological and policy challenges to public access to information	54 (39.1%)	78 (56.5%)	6 (4.3%)	-	3.35	Accepted
4. Support educational programs, information resources and consulting services to support librarians in providing effective services for public access to information.	68 (49.3%)	66 (47.8%)	2 (1.4%)	2 (1.4%)	3.45	Accepted
5. Encourage research in all dimensions of public access to information	60 (43.5%)	78 (56.5%)	-	-	3.43	Accepted

Table 5 sets out the recommended best practices for libraries as facilitator of public access to information. Respondents agreed with the suggested items with the greatest ranking of advocacy for policies and practices that maintain or strengthen the public rights, monitor and response to technological and encourage research in all dimensions of public access to information at 56.5% respectively. Thus, all the outline best practices were accepted based on the benchmark.

## **Discussion**

The demographic data (Table 1) indicated an overview of all types of libraries in facilitating public access to information. The fact that majority of the respondents are from academic libraries shows that facilitation of public access to information is not the sole responsibility of the public library. This has shown that every library has obligations of facilitating access to information for that is the core mission of library to create and share information (Atkinson, 2018; & IFLA, 2018). However, there was no response from research library which may reduce the chances of access to information by the specialized users. The responses of over 50% of the respondents having MLIS indicates the determined experiences, skills and technical know-how of performing the right duties of information facilitation. Also, data revealed that the younger librarians are more in number showing promising future of facilitation processes.

The indication on the level of involvement of libraries in facilitation of information (Table 2) disclosed responses above the 2.5 benchmark showing creation of awareness and importance, provision of access, advocacy, training and retraining among others. This buttresses the statement that libraries as facilitators create spaces for safe participation and provision of access to information with a great display of information content expertise (Smith & Chilocote, 2018). This implies that libraries must form partnership with government, agencies, host communities, organizations and institutions in order to incorporate new services in an era of information explosion (Fagbola, Uzoigwe, & Ajegbomogun, 2011; Obasi, 2015).

Clearly, the roles of the libraries have gone beyond the simple services of lending and discharging books together with traditional services, only. This has been confirmed in Table 3 with the accepted benchmark. Perhaps this trend might be the reason why ALA (2015) emphasized the digital inclusive communities as parts of the roles of the library, empowering social, economic and political development. Thus, the implication is that the integration of wide societal needs as parts of libraries' roles will curb unemployment, provide timely and accurate information and inform decision making.

Conversely, the factors affecting facilitation of public access to information by libraries (Table 4) as regards the decision based on the benchmark indicates a contradiction of the global agenda where no one should be left behind even in information dissemination. When there is no fund, demoralized work force, lack of facilitation skills and capacity among others (Jiyane & Fombad, 2016), there will be limitation in access to information. The responses (Table 5) showed the librarians' agreement

on support and development of educational programs and research among others. Indeed, enabling environments with the right skill will yield the desired impact on information facilitation for national growth.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to look into libraries as facilitation of public access to information in the Nigerian society not only from the public libraries perspective but all types of libraries. Libraries have the moral obligation of facilitating public access to information and ensuring equitable access to information and knowledge by all its citizens. This is the essence of facilitation, moving beyond the ordinary services to wide range of connections and social inclusions. Thus, this study discovered that:

1. Every library is involved in the facilitation of public access to information. No one library has the monopoly of facilitating access to information
2. All the libraries play important roles of creating awareness, supporting programs, training users and free services to attain facilitation of public access. Although, roles to people with special needs are discovered to be low
3. There are many challenges to facilitation of public access which includes, funding, lack of infrastructure, skills, capacity, etc. These hamper effective information facilitation
4. The best practices to help libraries in facilitation of public access are advocacy, develop and support educational programs, monitoring and response to technological and policy changes as well as encourage research.

### **Implications of the Findings**

This study has shown the importance of facilitation of public access to information as an important means of contributing to national growth. What this implies is that libraries must live up to the expectation of their establishment in service to humanity and society. The erroneous disposition that public access to information is meant for public libraries alone should be dissipated as every library has a parent institution, host community and affiliations. All these groups belong to the nation that exists from its policies and regulations, thus, necessitates that they must know what goes on to enable improve their lives. Libraries must thus begin now to connect and collaborate with government and agencies who have information needed to be disseminated to every user. This is very important as not adhering to this will alienate library from the people they

are meant to come close to and from the good services they are meant to render. This profession does not need to go into extinct and label unwanted. Libraries and librarians must wake up.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made based on the findings

1. Libraries, irrespective of type should enhance its information management system to create, organize and share usable information with the people.
2. The notion of ascribing particular type of information to a particular library should be discouraged. A librarian is for all first before belonging to a particular library. When librarians begin to believe in that assertion, it will make them function successfully
3. Library management should continually ensure conducive library ambience, creating programs that enrich and build up members of the society. This is a sure means of facilitating public access to information.
4. Library management should explore more channels of generating funds for the library. They can do this by writing proposals, collaborating with other organization for joint activities which induces cost sharing and result oriented
5. Librarians should continue to train and retrain themselves. Regular update and continue professional development will make them relevant and champions in facilitate the provision of public access to information.
6. Libraries should adopt and put to practice all the best practices enumerated in this study to ensure visibility, importance and acceptance by the populace.

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