Reference Services Provision in the Libraries of Nigeria

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Abstract – *Paper discusses about the reference services in the libraries of Nigeria, reference services are personal assistance eagerly given to library users in pursuit of information by a librarian in charge of reference section (Madu & Ezeani, 2010:47 ed.). Librarians are to assist their users in conducting research into specific topics, and also assist in the selection of recreational reading materials. They in other words, render reference services in terms of assisting clueless users who are not knowledgeable in effective library search. These enable users appreciate reading, enhance their reading habits and see libraries, especially public libraries as indispensable.*

Keywords: Reference Service, Nigerian Libraries, Librarianship, Information Services, Current Awareness Service.

Introduction

Librarianship is an aspect of information provision and dissemination that deals with the effective and efficient provision of information on demand and in anticipation to its users. In other words, they provide information and its sources at the "finger-tips" and "door-steps" of its users/clientele. Librarians are to assist their users in conducting research into specific topics, and also assist in the selection of recreational reading materials. They in other words, render reference services in terms of assisting clueless users who are not knowledgeable in effective library search. These enable users appreciate reading, enhance their reading habits and see libraries, especially public libraries as indispensable.

Reference services are personal assistance eagerly given to library users in pursuit of information by a librarian in charge of reference section (Madu & Ezeani, 2010:47 ed.). Reference services are personal assistance given by libraries to users who are in pursuit of information. Its services rendered to its users include reader education, meeting users request for specific information and assistance, and the management of the use and loan of library materials and equipments (Dhar, 2010:206). The library's reference section headed the reference librarian, is an important section that houses and takes care of important information resources that cannot be given to users on loan. These information resources include Encyclopaedias, Biographies, Gazetteers, Dictionaries, Maps, Almanacs, Newspapers and Journals etc.

Reference services, selecting the right reference source, types of reference sources, where and how to find reference sources, and reference sources available via the Web.

The function of libraries is three-fold. Libraries acquire information, organize that information in a way it can be retrieved, and disseminate the information the library has acquired. Reference services fulfills this last function. Reference services may vary from library to library, but most libraries have an information or reference desk where assistance from a librarian is available. Almost all libraries also provide reference services via the telephone and in many libraries you can email your reference question, or Ask a Librarian, to a reference librarian who will e-mail you back with the answers.

There are three main types of reference assistance:

- Assistance or instruction in the use of the library, including location of materials, use of the catalog, use of computers to access information, and the use of basic reference sources.
- Assistance in identifying library materials needed to answer a question.
- Providing brief, factual answers to questions, such as addresses, statistics, phone numbers, etc. that can be quickly located.

Users on regular basis, present reference queries-questions requiring complex information which cannot be obtained from a single source to libraries. It is expected that libraries that libraries answer these reference queries/questions asked by users. They are also expected to anticipate users' queries so as to readily provide the information resources needed to answer such questions.

Types of Reference Queries

The following are types of reference queries as posited by Ezekwe and Muokebe (2012:35) and Dhar (2010:118), which are anticipated from library users:

- **Straight or Directional Question:** This is a type of question that requires simple answer. Here the users only need to be directed on where the information resources can be found. He may ask questions such as "Where is the Serial section?", Where are the encyclopaedia?" etc.
- **Factual or Ready Reference Questions:** These types of questions are answered with basic knowledge of reference books. The answers to these questions can be found easily. Examples of Factual or Ready reference questions are: Names of inventors of electricity, formular for Sulphuric acid, density of gold etc. Answers to these types of questions can easily be found from reference books places on the reference desk/shelves.
- **Topical or Specific Questions:** These are questions usually posed on topical or burning issues. In answering questions relating to this kind of search, there may be limited amount of information on the topic which may also involve searching a large number of sources of information. Examples of this type of query may include importance of Vitamin-C, Properties of water, background information sources. Examples of long range or advisory queries are current developments in Political Science etc.
- **Long Range or Advisory Questions**: This question seeks the librarian's advice on available information sources. This type of question cannot be answered from one or

two source. Rather, it would require the use of many specialized information sources. Examples of long range or advisory queries are current developments in the manufacturing of cars, history of Law, Economics and Political Science etc. to answer this question, one may have to consult manuscripts, unpublished documents, periodicals, pamphlets, books etc.

The reference librarian must do all he can to ensure he provides answers to the above mentioned reference queries. He must know what is available in his stock and what his users really want. To answer user's queries, especially the difficult ones, the users on their part should be able to explain the meaning of the subject to the librarian. This will help reduce the waste of the users' time and also the provision of inaccurate information.

Reference Services Provided in Libraries

The following are the reference services provided in the libraries.
1. **Information Services:** This service can also be called Referral Service. This is the process of identifying resources and agencies with special services or information needed by library users or information seekers, and the ability of the libraries, from time to time, to refer these users to these agencies or organizations for the purpose of satisfying their information need. Libraries from time to time receive a good number of reference and information enquiries whose range is usually very long i.e. from general to specific. Majority of reference and information queries by users received at the reference desk can be answered through ready reference tools such as dictionaries, directories, encyclopaedias, handbooks and manuals, atlases and gazetteers, indexes and bibliographies etc.
2. **Bibliographic verification and documentation services:** In organizing reference services, bibliography and documentation services should also be made available. According to Madu (2010) in Madu and Ezeanu (2010:50), bibliographic verification is the use of bibliographic tools for purpose of verifying the correctness and completeness of the used information. He further stressed that these verifications provide information about publications, and to achieve this reference librarian consults and searches both manual and electronic versions of standard bibliographic works. Some bibliographic tools may include abstracts and indexes, gazettes, encyclopaedias, almanacs, catalogues, bibliographies etc. while documentation services may include monthly list of additions, reading lists, documentation list, subject bibliographies etc. on the topics of seminars, conferences, research projects etc; and documentation list of contents (Dhar, 2010:184).
3. **Inter-library loan and document delivery services:** these services are important services due to the rising document prices and budgetary constraints on libraries, which makes them unable to purchase more and new documents. This service is closely related to the bibliographic verification and documentation service. A library that does not have certain required documents among its collection may borrow, through the inter-library loan, from other libraries in the neighbourhood and supply or make available to the users at the earliest and required time. In other words, no single library or information centre can boast of having in its collection all the resources that can be demanded of them. They, to this regard, appreciate the need to look for co-operation from other libraries or information centers in order to provide services to their clientele. After the library has identified its area(s) of need it places a request after a verification done manually in many libraries both within and outside Nigeria. The borrowing and lending process can also take place in the internet for both requesting for and the delivery of inter-library loan materials. In the inter-library loan and document delivery

services, periodical articles can be transmitted instantly. The library can also enjoy the services of inter-library loan in order to enrich the collection and provide improved and qualitative services to users.

4. **Current Awareness Services (CAS):** These services are provided for researchers to acquaint them with recent publications that might help them in their research work. The reference Librarians duty is to make its users aware of latest information relating to their work field. Current Awareness Services (CAS) can be re-packaged to suit the information needs of the users/clientele. Its services can be introduced in the routing of periodicals, abstracting or indexing of documents, circulation of accession lists of newly acquired documents, library bulletin containing all types of useful information etc.

5. **User Education:** It is necessary that the library organizes user education through the reference section. The basic objective of this service is to infuse information seeking habit among the user so they can independently and without help from the reference Librarian, search the information sources in the library.

6. **Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) Services:** This is another form of reference service provided in the library. In some cases, it can be referred to as Current Awareness Services (CAS). It is a user packaged reference services that keeps users abreast of latest information. Many libraries use computerize service methods for disseminating the selective information for the users so as to keep them well informed. This service is mainly for researchers. The Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) alerts a user that a document/material of his interest has been received in the library information centre.

7. **Reprographic Services:** The reprographic facilities in the library fulfills the basic reference and information services such as preservation of reading materials issued on poor quality paper, providing reading materials issued on poor quality paper; reduction of storage problem; increasing the accessibility of documents which are unique or a few in number; providing a means of publication for specialist material that are uneconomic to commercial publishing; and the content of a newly received periodicals may be duplicated (or reproduced in many copies) and sent to the readers for their information.

8. **Computerized Reference Sources:** The internet in this 21st century is an excellent medium for accessing and using reference sources. In a short period of time, the internet has become popular as a source of information in that one can get any information he wants within a short period of time. Madu (2010) in Madu and Ezeani (2010:52) posited that with the use of computers and telecommunication in information handling, we now have access to electronically retrievable information in a wide variety of disciplines. Online reference sites or resources play a very significant role in providing reference and information services to users (Dhar, 2010:186).

The following are categories of online sites that are available on the internet.

- Search engines e.g. Altavista (http://www.altavista-digital.com), Google (http://www.google.com), The Librarian's index to the internet(http://www.lii.org).
- Portal e.g. SOSIG: Social Science Information Gateway(http://www.sosig.ac.uk), RDN: The Resource Discovery Network.
- Popular reference books e.g. Britannica Online (http://www.britannica.com)
- Specialist Website e.g. National Aeronautics and Space Agency (http://www.nasa.gov).

Reference Sources

Reference sources such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, almanacs, atlases, etc. are research tools that can help you with your paper or project. Reference sources provide answers to specific questions, such as brief facts, statistics, and technical instructions; provide background information; or direct you to additional information sources. In most libraries, reference sources do not circulate and are located in a separate reference collection. This practice makes reference sources readily available and easily accessible.

Reference sources are designed to be consulted rather than read through. Their design is generally dependent on the type of information and treatment provided. Reference materials can be arranged alphabetically, topically, or chronologically. Many will contain cross listed information and more than one index. If it is not obvious how a reference source is organized, take a moment to look through the explanatory or how-to-use information, which is usually presented at the beginning of the book, or in HELP screens for online products.

There are thousands of reference sources available that cover practically every subject. Although the term reference "book" is frequently used, reference sources can be books, serials, on-line databases or the Internet. A large part of using reference sources well is choosing the right one.

Despite the wide variety available, reference sources can be categorized into a handful of groups. Think about the kind of information you need and how you will use it. If you are unsure which reference tool is best suited to your information need, a reference librarian will be able to assist you.

Quick guide for selecting the right type of reference source (Collins, 151):

For information about...	Choose...
Words	Dictionaries
General information/Overview of topic	Encyclopedias
Names & addresses of people, organizations, institutions, companies	Directories
Profiles of people	Biographical Dictionaries
Places/Maps	Gazetteers or Atlases
Facts and Statistics	Almanacs
Formula, Tables, How-To-Do-It	Handbooks and Manuals
A person's work	Reviews or Criticisms
Dates, outlines, historical timelines	Historical tables, Chronologies, Historical yearbooks
Periodical Articles	Indexes or Abstracts
Books and other sources	Bibliographies or Guides to Literature...

Attributes of Reference Librarian

The reference Librarian is said to be the image maker of the library (Nwalo, 2003). He will possess a wide range of intellectual interest, desire to assist the users, flair for organizing documents, ability to search literature and adequate knowledge of the resources of the library (Utor, 2008). Considering the rigors of his professional duties, the reference librarian is expected to possess certain qualities that will enhance his performance. Some of these traits are humors whereas others can be taught or enhanced. These basics qualities according to Opara (2006), Ifidion and Ifidion (2008), Clarke (1999) and Utor (2008) among others include:

Versatility: The reference librarian should be an ardent lover of information. The reference librarian can never know enough or be a person of intellectual breadth and depth a generalist and specialist combined in one.

Excellent Communication Skills: The ability to communicate effectively and efficiently as one of attributes a reference librarian should possess. As a front liner the reference librarian come in contact with a number of patrons who come with various queries, and these queries has to be properly understood for the right response to be given.

Receptive: the reference librarian should be friendly and accommodating in order to create the right atmosphere for cordial and effective interaction with library patrons. Ensure that you are approachable and be patient enough to attend the patrons query needs.

Curiosity: The reference librarian must be an information seeker, someone who is persistent in following up queries. He should conduct the necessary resources within and outside his library, so as to keep abreast with current trends and information.

Creative: Some patrons come to the reference librarian with ambiguous and she looked at from different viewpoints in order to arrive at an appreciable solution. The reference librarian should be imaginative and resourceful which will enable him/her to handle difficult circumstances that may arise from time to time.

Information Communication Technology (ICT) Know-how: It is belief that an effective library and information services without basic information communication technology know-how is almost impossible. As one of transforming technologies of the information society, the internet has changed the flow of information, and this has undoubtedly affected the information seeking behavior of our patrons. Reference librarian must keep abreast with current information trend in order to satisfy the information needs of our postmodern patrons.

Factors affecting library reference services
- Inadequate and obsolete reference collection
- Inadequate qualified staff
- Lack of ICT facilities and know-how
- Lack of proper library co-operation
- Inadequate funding
- Inadequate current selective dissemination of information
- Poor communication and telecommunication facilities
- Irregular power supply.

Inadequate and Obsolete Reference Collection: The viability of any given library depends in part of the nature in term of volume and current of available resources for consultation. Baro (2009) citing Ranganathan's five laws of library science says "Books are for use" by this principle, the user should be considered before deciding to acquire library collection.

However, in most developing countries, library reference materials are acquired without proper and adequate consultation with faculty or users needs depending on the purpose for which the library is established closely followed to this is the fact that most library collection are acquired from foreign publishing like Oxford, Macmillan etc which makes acquisition cost expensive and cumbersome at times.

Inadequate Qualified Staff: It is often said that qualify of staff usually reflects on the quality of service delivery. Certain basic attributes earlier mentions is required of an effective reference librarian, sadly enough most reference librarians are lack of these basic qualities partly because of poor training or sheer lack of job satisfaction as some find themselves in the profession as a means of survival.

Lack of ICT Facilities and Know-How: The traditional reference service involves a face-to-face interaction between reference librarians and users. In recent times, libraries have become more sophisticated and more ICT dependent. Virtually, all aspects of library operations are affected by ICT. In most developing countries, libraries have moved away from card catalogues to online catalogues. Similarly most developed countries practices virtual reference services (VRS) where patrons employ computer or other internet technology to communicate with reference staff without being physically present. Ironically, this is not only developing countries. Basically, not only that most libraries lack adequate ICT facilities, the staffs in most cases have little or no knowledge of ICT. This has made library reference service cumbersome and somehow frustrating for the user who is abreast with internet search engines to library resources as these would require more finesse than internet, and most library reference services lack simplicity and this offends post modern sensibilities. It is also important to note that the ease and convenience of the internet convinces library patrons that they are skilled information seekers and do not need the help of reference librarians. This people do not consider the library as portal information in the information society.

Lack of Proper Library Co-operation: There is an established library consortium which enables reference librarians to seek assistance from member libraries. Almemna and Antwi (2002) in Baro (2009) cited a number of such library Consortia in South African i.e. South African Bibliographic and Information Network (SABINET) which was established in 1983, Cape Library Cooperation (CALICD) as established in 1993. The main objectives of these Consortia according to Almemna and Antwi (2002) in Baro (2009) among others are to:
- Support the information needs of clients through cooperation.
- Promote resources-sharing and enhance access to information.
- Facilitate access through shared computer systems and networks.
- Improve information literacy among clients and share training resources and expertise.

Inadequate Funding: In most developing countries like Nigeria, the issuing of library funding has become more worrisome. Inadequate funding has a made number of libraries to lack adequate library collection in terms of volume and current. Funding or the availability of fund also in part affects the kind of library building designed and available storage materials.

If is not an exaggeration perhaps to state that most academic libraries are ghastly becoming shadows of what a library should be due to inadequate funding.

Inadequate Current Selective Dissemination of Information: The current awareness service though carried out in some developing countries nonetheless till lacks proper structuring in terms of formalization. Baro (2009) opined that selective dissemination of information (SDI), if properly carried out, enhances effective reference services. SDI is a programme that informs library users of the availability of information researchers which are of likely interest to them in their search areas. If is done to aid researchers in accomplishing their findings. A formalized SDI service will not only ease the rigors of information search but will also enhance library reference consultation level of patrons.

Poor Communication and Telecommunication Facilities: The communication facilities in use in most developing countries as in Nigerian are faced with an endemic poor service. Utor (2008) lamented that delivery of goods from one point to another takes months no matter how short the distance maybe. This does not favour any kind of prompt service required of a reference services especially of libraries in consortium. This is compounded by the unreliable telecommunication facilities. The introduction of Global satellite mobile communication (GSM) is an impetus to reference services but this is also hundred by network congestion especially during peak hems (Baro, 2009). Similarly, Ajari Salamu and Raji (2003) in Baro (2009) stressed the issue of poor network coverage citing the case in Nigeria where about 70 percent of the population resides in rural areas with little or no telecommunication facilities. This can hinder inter-library reference services among consortium libraries.

Epileptic Power Supply: The world is gradually evolving into virtual Community with the application of cyberspace technology. Today reference librarians not only help their users at the reference desk but also in cyberspace. This is variously referred to as "virtual reference" "e-referred", "real time reference", etc (Opara, 2006). This technology mediated reference service emerging from the wide use of the internet and the development of software capable of providing synchronous services is on the low web in most developing countries. Other than low level of ICT knowledge of most reference librarians and users another major cause of this poor virtual service is epileptic power supply. Baro (2009) pointed out that a stable electricity system is an indispensable infrastructure in the proper functioning of information transfer. However, most developing countries are plaque by endemic poor failure which has continued to hinder efficient virtual reference services.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The place of an efficient library reference services cannot be over-emphasized for the success of any university library. However, it is piteous to note that this service is in a sporadic decline in most developing countries. A number of factors have been identified. It is hope that if these aforementioned problems are improved upon it will go a long way to raise the services; and if the reference librarian and libraries put their possible best to ensure that all the factors mentioned that hindering the reference services are solved.

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