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Obstacles to Information Access and Use in Developing Countries

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Introduction

Experts have identified various obstacles to information access and use. Uhegbu (2002:62) identifies five: economic, social, environmental, occupational, and infrastructure. Etim (2000) lists seven, including physical infrastructure, technical, and managerial capabilities, among others, though her work focused mainly on scientific and technological information. This paper will discuss obstacles in the following areas: lack of awareness; inaccessibility; information explosion; bibliographic obstacles: environment; poor infrastructure; declining budgets and rising costs; costs for users; staff attitude toward users; and crime.

Lack of Awareness

Information seekers and users may not know about the resources available. The role of libraries has not always been made clear to information seekers, particularly in developing countries. Ologbonsaiye (1994) identifies and discusses this problem.

Some libraries and librarians have concentrated on traditional resources and services, which may in itself be an obstacle to information access and use (Ologbonsaiye, 1994).

Information access and use can only flourish in a society that appreciates the need for it and where government recognizes that information is the key to national growth and prosperity. Aboyade (1982) observes that even the highly-educated lack awareness of the crucial role that information plays.

Inaccessibility

A library's success depends upon the availability of information resources. It is not enough that they are available, or even bibliographically accessible; they must be physically accessible to those who need them. The growth of knowledge, especially in science and

technology, have turned attention to the problem of bibliographical or intellectual access to recorded knowledge.

There are generally two kinds of failure in library use: stock failure and reader's failure. The former is a library's failure to acquire or produce the material needed by the patron. The reader's failure has two aspects: bibliographical and physical. The bibliographical aspect involves the reader's inability to find the item sought in the library catalogue. The physical aspect is the failure to locate the materials housed in the library. Reasons for inaccessibility have been identified by Aguolu and Aguolu (2002). They are:

- Users do not know precisely what they want; if they do, they cannot articulate their needs accurately to the library staff.
- The bibliographic or intellectual access to the content of the library is inadequate owing to poor indexing system in the library catalogue or of the library collection itself.
- The circulation policy of the library is inefficient, shelving methods are inadvertent, and guides to the library arrangement are lacking.
- Unnecessary physical and administrative barriers are imposed upon the use of the library material by the library management.

Failure to locate on the shelves what has been bibliographically identified in the library catalogue is a common frustration and a challenge to library management. This can be because there is no indication on the library catalogue that an item is lost, sent to the bindery for repairs, weeded, or stolen. Items may be misshelved. Library staff may have removed materials for their private use or that of their relatives, friends, and associates. Other significant variables are discussed by Aguolu (2002). Those included restrictive circulation policies and an inefficient loan system, among others.

Information Explosion

The explosion of information is obviously a challenge to libraries. Recognizing its importance, information is increasingly sought in an increasing number of situations by an increasing number of people (Ugah, 2000). This has increased the volume of available information. The advancement of knowledge is made possible by research by scholars in all fields. Coupled with this is the fusion and fragmentation of disciplines and knowledge. As these break down into smaller segments, the scholarly literature becomes more specialized. In addition, there are thousands of other information packages, e.g., journals, magazines, and newspapers, being turned out by an ever-expanding publishing industry. The electronic media also produce vast volumes of information. The growth of knowledge is related to the growing number, size, and diversity of information transfer packages such as books, journals, technical reports, etc.

As the literature continues to expand, there is a corresponding proliferation of secondary sources, such as indexes and abstracts, which are produced to help control the flood of primary literature. An information seeker now has difficulty navigating the vast ocean of information, much of which he does not need.

The persistence of the scientific journal as a medium of reporting scientific findings, the financial investment in research, and constant scientific and technological discoveries have all helped increase research literature output to a level that overwhelms librarians. The impact is

such that no researcher is any longer able to lay hands on all materials published in his own field if study. Even if that were possible, the volume would be enormous.

Bibliographic Obstacles

Bibliographic obstacles take various forms. In some cases, adequate bibliographic description is lacking, while in others, the bibliographic description is incomplete or incorrect. In many cases, information retrieval devices themselves are lacking. Those devices vary in sophistication and usefulness. They include indexes, abstracts, bibliographies, and catalogues. Their objective is to save the user's time and simplify searching (Banjo 1984). Lack of information retrieval devices is more serious in developing countries like Nigeria, creating a serious obstacle to information access and use. Even when they exist, they lack continuity, are outdated, and do not give a true picture of available current information.

Environment

Perhaps the major obstacle to information access and use is the environment. The principal environmental factors include the polluted air in urban and industrialized cities of the world, wide ranges of temperature, pests, and so on (Ononogbo 2002; Ugah 1993).

A large percentage of information materials are made of paper that has undergone several stage of chemical processing. The demand for paper caused manufacturers to use wood pulp and acid in its production. Sulphur-dioxide and nitrogen dioxide in the increase the acidity and contribute to its deterioration. The ultraviolet rays of the sun also have a negative affect on the quality of paper. Ologbonsaiye (1994) identified noise as another environmental factor. Noise from traffic or other users' conversation can be negative environmental factors, as can noise from library staff or equipment. Uhegbu (2001:66) includes language and location of information as environmental factors.

Poor Infrastructure

Infrastructure is the basic framework of any information organization. Effective information access and use depends on communication facilities such as telephones, Internet, telex, fax, computers, and even postal service, as well as an adequate supply of electricity.

Declining Budgets and Rising Costs

Faced with declining budgets and increasing demands from users, libraries are finding it difficult to acquire both primary and secondary publications to meet such demands. Worldwide inflation and economic recession have drastically increased the cost of publications. Printing and publishing businesses have become extremely capital-intensive. The cost of publication increases at a faster rate than the general rate of inflation. Many publications have been priced out of the reach of individual subscribers and many libraries, with only large libraries able afford them. This reduces access to information. Aguolu and Aguolu (2002) state that, "the high rate of inflation in Nigeria and abroad undermines the acquisitional capacity of libraries." Library materials are ordered from countries with a higher standard of living, and prices of books and journals are fixed for societies with higher levels of income. Foreign exchange restrictions, bureaucratic procedures with import licenses, and customs regulations are among the challenges facing libraries.

Costs for Users

There are a number of costs for users in obtaining access to information. Most government information sources are classified "secret" and may require large sums of money to obtain. Many users cannot afford to travel from one place to another to obtain information. They may not be able to afford photocopying services. Some information is located in rural areas, and obtaining it is an expensive logistical problem, while some is abroad and also expensive to reach. Because of the expense, some information seekers resort to mutilation and theft. These create more obstacles to information access and use.

Staff

Library staff are the means by which service is provided. Quality of service depends on quality of staff. Ifidon (1995) posits that some library staff lack a clear perception of their service mission. Dipeolu (1992) states that some librarians refuse to "soil their hands," casting themselves as administrators, while secretaries, clerks, and messengers minister to library patrons. When professional librarians and other employees fail to make adequate use of their knowledge and skills, access to information is affected.

Crime

Criminal activities are a formidable obstacle to information access and use. They include theft and mutilation of information sources, and assault on staff. This is a serious problem that needs urgent attention. Writing on crime and security in libraries, Ratcliff (1992) finds the situation alarming, not simply because thefts cost money, but because of their cost to scholarship and information access. There has been concern about this issue for some time. Zeiderberg (1987), for example, reports on the situation in the US during the 1980s.

What Are the Solutions?

Experts have suggested solutions. There are no ready-made solutions for every library that can be applied to the obstacles. Information workers must examine the obstacles to information access that are present and put in place solutions that will help eliminate or overcome such obstacles, so that users can have access to the information they require.

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