

Libraries as Dynamic Tools for Social Justice in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper focuses on libraries as dynamic tools for social justice in the society. The paper examines the contributions of information to national development, and it also emphasizes the need for libraries and information centres to make information accessible to the community to enable the public make informed decisions. The paper also provides a theoretical conceptualization of social justice and discusses its ideals such as egalitarianism, balance of power, social advocacy and public service. The paper highlights the common psycho-social problems such as violence, sexuality, crime, detention without trial, prison congestion, child abuse, mental health, poverty, rape, gender issues and so on, bedeviling the African society and the need for libraries to champion the crusade towards their eradication. The paper deals extensively with how libraries can be involved in community services to showcase the ideals of social justice through the creation of awareness and enlightenment services to the community using the internet, print and electronic media, through the acquisition of relevant materials that address social justice, through sponsorship of seminars, debates and symposia on social issues. The paper concludes with useful recommendations that can enhance and support libraries as tools for social justice in Nigeria.

Keywords: libraries, role, social, justice, Nigeria

Introduction

Libraries, irrespective of their typology, basically have similar roles to play to their clients. All libraries are engaged in information gathering, packaging, processing, storage, dissemination and retrieval. Information is the raw materials for all libraries. This is because the significance of information to the development of society cannot be easily over-emphasized. Information, according to Aiyepku (1982) is important in making rational decisions because of the indispensability of information in the development of society. According to Uhegbu (2001), information promotes national development by enhancing educational objectives, and the library is one of the agents of information transfer. Information is therefore power. Accessibility to information is accessibility to power. Information emboldens the timid; it enlightens the uneducated

minds; it enhances self-esteem and self-concept of individuals. Information provides a veritable platform for the uninformed to be liberated from the claws and tentacles of societal oppression. That is why Lankes (2016) says that “a library should be a participatory platform that allows a community to share passions, expertise, and resources.”

According to Oguntunde et al. (2018), Njoku (2019), Blanchard and Husted (2019) and World Report (2020), Nigeria and indeed the African society are currently being plagued and overwhelmed with a lot of psycho-social problems such as increase in crime rate, unlawful detention by the police, police brutalization, problems of police protection, prison congestion, court system on trial, gender issues, violence against women, increase in rape against women and minors, child abuse, adolescents’ uncontrollable aggression, cohabitation, sexuality and sexual deviance, pornography, drug abuse, poverty/hunger, homelessness, ethnicity, religious intolerance/insurgency, farmer-herder clashes, Niger Delta militancy, nepotism, unemployment, environmental degradation, mental health and immigration among others.

Ubong (2013) citing Preston (1992) opines that social injustice can lead to civil unrest if not addressed. This is because when the people are denied of and are excluded from their inalienable rights of security, social amenities such as electricity, housing and good roads, civil unrest is inevitable especially when some segments of the society are enjoying same. Odinioha (2014) citing Gil (1998) identifies inequality of citizens instead of equality of citizens, domination and exploitation instead of liberty of citizens, selfishness and individualism instead of individuality of citizens, disregard for community instead of collective orientation and mutualism, and competition instead of cooperation as matrices of unjust societies. Libraries should express their social relevance in the community by reducing these social problems confronting society. Kabeer (2000) discusses the issue of social exclusion and discrimination in society as forms of social injustice, especially gender discrimination against women, ethnicity and the disadvantaged people such as beggars, lepers and the poor.

Librarians should be knowledgeable about current social issues in society. According to Sasi (2016), the public library provides and disseminates socio-cultural and recreational information to all sections of society. This is done without any discrimination to any sector of society as that is the foundation of social justice. Libraries should be seen to be agents of social justice in all ramifications. Academic, research and public libraries in Nigeria have common responsibilities to their communities. One of such is the provision of social justice among other services. According to White (2012),

As gateways to knowledge and culture, libraries play a fundamental role in society. The resources and services they offer create opportunities for learning, support literacy and education, and help shape the new ideas and perspectives that are central to a creative and innovative society. They also help ensure an authentic record of knowledge created and accumulated by past generations. In a world without libraries, it would be difficult to advance research and human knowledge or preserve the world's cumulative knowledge and heritage for future generations. Libraries are keenly aware of the need to maintain the balance between protecting the rights of authors and safeguarding the wider public interest.

Concept of Social Justice

One of the ideals of social justice is egalitarianism, and that is one of the philosophies of the Nigerian National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004). The policy envisages a just and an egalitarian society. That is well couched in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 1999) under the social objectives of the Nigerian Constitution, which states that the State social order is founded on ideals of Freedom, Equality and Justice. In furtherance of the social order:

1. every citizen shall have equality of rights, obligations and opportunities before the law
2. the sanctity of the human person shall be recognized and human dignity shall be maintained and enhanced
3. governmental actions shall be humane
4. exploitation of human or natural resources in any form whatsoever for reasons, other than the good of the community, shall be prevented
5. the independence, impartiality and integrity of courts of law, and easy accessibility thereto shall be secured and maintained.
6. the State shall direct its policy towards ensuring that:
 - A. all citizens, without discrimination on any group whatsoever, have the opportunity for securing adequate means of livelihood as well as adequate opportunity to secure suitable employment
 - B. conditions of work are just and humane, and that there are adequate facilities for leisure and for social, religious and cultural life
 - C. the health, safety and welfare of all persons in employment are safeguarded and not endangered or abused
 - D. there are adequate medical and health facilities for all persons
 - E. there is equal pay for equal work without discrimination on account of sex, or on any other ground whatsoever

- F. children, young persons and the aged are protected against any exploitation whatsoever, and against moral and material neglect
- G. provision is made for public assistance in deserving cases or other conditions of need
- H. the evolution and promotion of family life is encouraged.

In order to have social justice in the society, members of the community must have access to freedom, equality and justice in all spheres of life irrespective of their race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, language, economic status, social justice, employment status, political affinities and educational status. Any society that lacks all these is not practicing social justice.

According to Andersen (2018), another ideal of social justice is balance of power. In an egalitarian society, nobody should be the custodian of power or else it will lead to authoritarianism and fascism. Balance of power presupposes that the three arms of government, Legislature, Executive and Judiciary, must share their powers equally in such a way that there will be checks and balances. This then flows to all other organs of government from the local government level to the federal level including all institutions. The concept of balance of power specifies the limits of one's power so that there will not be any abuse. In case of abuse of power, there are provisions for seeking redress.

Social justice also thrives on the philosophy of social advocacy (Ngulube, 2019). The African society, like any other society, encourages some forms of advocacy. In Nigeria, for instance, the Civil Rights Activists, the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), Women in Academics, Women Advocacy groups and other groups with similar philosophies have been involved in advocacy and in the defence of human rights; where rights have been violated; such groups have taken up such cases. The society today is peopled with some defenceless, homeless and unenlightened people. For such categories of people, social advocacy is necessary. Libraries should therefore be engaged in social advocacy by speaking up to enlighten the society. Libraries should support seminars and debates on social justice locally and nationally. They should partner and collaborate with civil societies on how to stand for the defence of the poor and the destitute in the society.

Libraries and social justice

One of the critical roles of librarians is that they should be familiar with their communities and their common social problems. An unknowledgeable librarian is deformed and incapacitated in helping his society. If the library must be made relevant socially, the librarian should be socially active and alive to its immediate community. He should see himself as a member of the society. Consequently, he should empathize

with the people's social problems, and be determined to provide assistance. The nexus between the library and social justice is further underscored by the Australian Library and Information Association (2013) when it said that "the libraries of the last 200 years have included a strong thread of social justice...libraries are now also gateways to the online world, and librarians the finders of knowledge in electronic space as well as in the stacks."

Information Accessibility

Accessibility to information is another responsibility that the libraries are expected to provide to the society. Libraries should endeavour to break all obstacles that hinder the communities from having access to information. Such obstacles include illiteracy, technologies, language difficulties, lack of good roads, and so on. Lack of information is equal to lack of power. Libraries should work hard to reach even the remotest communities with information. Public libraries should improve on their mobile library vans, and take information to the communities. Tri-cycles can also be purchased to reach places that motor vehicles cannot reach.

Education and Enlightenment

Libraries should also educate the communities on the concept of social justice and its significance to the society. This can be done through the mass media, internet and personal contacts. Most Nigerians are not aware of their constitutional rights, privileges and limits (Shehu, Osman and Othman, 2016). Libraries should take the lead in creating adequate awareness by sensitizing the public on these even in the people's local dialects to enhance maximum coverage. Librarians can be newspaper columnists on the issues of social justice. They can also educate the public on the radio and television on how libraries can assist them on issues of social justice. Also, libraries should acquire materials that tease out social justice issues. Attempts should be made to translate, where they are not available, the materials to the local dialects of the people. The distribution of such materials should be made free or cheap to buy so that a large number of people will have access to information on social justice. More public libraries should be built in every local government area of the State, and equipped with current and adequate information on social justice (Goulding, 2016). School libraries should also be adequately stocked with books and periodicals on social justice, so that teenagers will be amply armed with information in the primary and secondary schools.

Information Dissemination

Besides, not all the information materials in circulation on social justice are adequate and reliable. Some of those publications are mere propagandas. It behooves on libraries to provide the public with adequate, reliable, and incontrovertible information on social justice (Saunders, 2017). Libraries must, therefore, not allow themselves to be

used as propagandists, but as reliable information providers and agents of transformation in the society through information dissemination. The acquisition policy of libraries should be devoid of politics and sentiments so that the quality of the library's collections is not in any way compromised.

Social Science Databases

In addition, subscription to these relevant databases on social justice should be adequately pursued and publicized by libraries to their clientele: ATLA Religion, CQ Researcher, Education for Justice, GreenFile, Peace Research Abstracts, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (PQDT) Global and SocINDEX with Full Text. These reference e-books on social justice are also relevant: Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy, Encyclopedia of Gender and Society and Human Trafficking. Besides, the following social justice websites are also relevant: Consumer Action, RHIN: Refugee Health Information Network, Social Psychology Network, Teaching Tolerance and World Food Situation (Cabrini University, 2020). Other social science databases include JSTOR, Academic Search Premier, Humanities and Social Sciences Collection and LexisNexis Practical Guidance Social Justice Pacific by The University of Notre Dame Library, Australia. EBSCOHOST is another invaluable social science database that can be acquired by university libraries.

Posters

Posters are very important instructional materials and they are very educative, informative and instructive. They are revolutionary tools in the hands of human rights activists for protesting against all forms of social injustice in the society. They can be made colourful and attractive with potent messages and displayed both in the library environment and in the public space to inform as well as to campaign against social injustice. That is why Osa and Musser (2004) opine that educational librarians should develop collections that are 'visually stimulating.' Such posters can carry some of the following messages:

1. Black Lives Matter.
2. Say No To Rape.
3. Justice Delayed is Justice Denied.
4. Blackness is Not a Crime.
5. Don't Discriminate Against the Girl-Child.
6. Women are Not Second Class Citizens.
7. Wives are Not Punching Bags.
8. Say No to Domestic Violence Against Women.
9. Female Circumcision is Barbaric.
10. Stop Child Marriage.
11. Let the Child have Right to Education.
12. Live and Let Live.
13. End Police Brutality.
14. Justice for Sale.
15. Know Justice, Know Peace. No Justice, No Peace.
16. My Skin is Not a Virus.
17. No to Ethnic Cleansing.
18. Stand Up for Your Right.
19. Say No to Vote Buying
20. End SARS Now.

Social justice books and writers

Law libraries in Nigerian Universities and Institutes should be current in their collections on social justice. Adequate and current law reports and reference legal materials on social justice should be acquired on regular basis. Legal practitioners and civil right activists will depend heavily on library's law collections to prepare their briefs and lecture notes. Libraries should also assist their clients in providing them with information sources on social justice. Where there are not available, the library should assist through inter library lending services. Where book loans are not possible, reprographic and photocopying services should be provided to enable users have copies of the information that they need. The following books will be good reads on social injustice:

1. *The Healing of America: A Global Quest for Better, Cheaper, and Fairer Health Care* by T.R. Reid.
2. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander.
3. *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn.
4. *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* by Valeria Luiselli.
5. *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* by Barbara Ehrenreich.
6. *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* by Angela Y. Davis.

7. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde.
8. *Blueprint for Revolution: How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men, and Other Nonviolent Techniques to Galvanize Communities, Overthrow Dictators, or Simply Change the World* by Srdja Popovic and Matthew Miller.
9. *The War on Choice: The Right-Wing Attack on Women's Rights and How to Fight Back* by Gloria Feldt.
10. *We Should All Be Feminists* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
11. *Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture and What We Can Do About It* by Kate Harding.
12. *The Female of the Species* by Mindy McGinnis
13. *Girl Mans Up* by M-E Girard
14. *Girl Made of Stars* by Ashley Herring Blake
15. *Black Brother, Black Brother* by Jewell Parker Rhodes
16. *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson
17. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot.
18. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee.
19. *Animal Farm* by George Orwell.
20. *1984* by George Orwell.
21. *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio.
22. *The Ginseng Hunter* by Jeff Talarigo.
23. *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver.
24. *The Lorax* by Dr Theodor Seuss

Books by the following foremost radical authors and social justice crusaders can also be acquired: James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, Alex Haley, Octavia Butler, Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Gani Fawehinmi, Niyi Osundare, Olu Obafemi, Ahmed Yerima, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugi wa Thiongo'o, Gbemisola Adeoti and a host of others. Their creative works, inaugural lectures, seminar papers, public speeches and essays are indispensable for readers on social justice. A particular section should be created in the library for Africana and Nigeriana materials on social justice to give focus to the subject as well as to make accessibility and information retrieval easy.

Online Library Club

Libraries can also create online library clubs and social media platforms to promote social and academic interactions among their clientele. These platforms will give them the opportunities to contribute to the current and trending issues in society especially issues that bother on social injustice which are capable of jeopardizing their educational careers and the general interests of society. Akporhonor and Fasae (2020) emphasise the importance of social media applications such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, Youtube, LinkedIn, Myspace, Zoom, Twitter, Diggs, Flickr, Skype etc. in

promoting library services. Their study confirms the works of Shihab (2015) and Adewoyin, Onuoha and Ikonne (2017) who establish the use of social media among librarians. Such online platforms or library blogs should be adequately and strictly monitored to prevent them from being abused or hijacked by mischievous elements in the society and among the library clientele. That is why Connaway (2015) says that “librarians have an opportunity to become part of users’ social networks and to put resources in the context of users’ information needs.” This initiative will foster the spirit of unity and oneness among the youths and promote reading culture and writing skills. It will also be an opportunity for the club members to exhibit their talents and discover their potential gifts and recover their latent endowments.

The world is today known as a global village. This is as a result of the transformation that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have brought to every facet of life. According to the Australian Library and Information Association (2013), “we already live in a 365/24/7 society, where, somewhere in the world, there is always someone awake and online with whom we can interact.” This has also affected the packaging, processing and dissemination of information in libraries and information centres. Digital libraries are set to replace the traditional libraries, and librarians are being asked to update their skills before they become obsolete (Akporhonor & Fasae, 2020). Therefore, libraries should consider how to deliver internet information services to communities. Where internet services are not possible, information can still be delivered to them in the traditional way.

Libraries should develop a robust relationship and collaboration between the institution and the host community where the institution is located. Such a genial relationship will facilitate information dissemination. For information to get to the grassroots, libraries should interact with the traditional heads of the communities such that any useful information can be disseminated to the public through the traditional town criers who have access to every home and street in the communities. Information through them can reach the entire community before the sun rises and faster too.

Conclusion

Librarians should see the roles of libraries in today’s world as a paradigm shift in order to become socially relevant to the community. Libraries should be vigorously engaged in community service. That is why Tancheva et al. (2016) say that “in order to become the hub of an academic’s work, the library needs to provide connections - between activities, and between people.” They should consider partnership and collaboration with civil societies and relevant organisations who share the same ideologies with them. Sponsorship should also be sorted out. There are some non-governmental organizations, national and international organizations that are ready to fund such community-based services on social justice. Libraries should build strong relationship

with such organizations and approach them for sponsorship and funds. Government should increase budgetary allocations to government-owned libraries to enhance their collection development drives. This will assist Nigerian libraries to become relevant as dynamic tools for social justice.

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