LIBRARY POLICIES FOR 21ST CENTURY REFERENCE SERVICE DELIVERY: ITS IMPLICATION FOR POST COVID-19 ERA

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ABSTRACT: *In the 21st century, the internet has become a powerful, popular and more essential channel for the delivery of reference services and it is rapidly gaining wide patronage. In order to key into this new concept, libraries have resorted to leveraging digital technologies to meet the information needs and demands of the 21st century seekers in this era. However, to freely and confidently utilise the digital technologies in reference service delivery, there is a need to have policies which will guide the reference service delivery and the technologies to adopt. This paper discussed the library policies for 21st century reference service delivery and its implication for present day information seekers that will enhance reference services. It also explained the five laws of library science as applicable to reference services in this period, the information sources required and the way forward.*

KEYWORDS: Library Policies for 21st Century Reference Service Delivery: Its Implication for Post Covid-19 Era

INTRODUCTION

Reference service at the library is one of the most vital and visible expressions of the library's purpose and mission and it is key to the library's service role as a centre for information dissemination for research and independent learning. Library's reference service, which now involves the application of computer systems and networks, requires both the information service provider and the user to be skilled in Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) to make better and easier use of the information resources found in reference libraries. The adoption of digital reference service remains the reason for the non-closure of libraries even in this period of COVID-19 pandemic.

Effective reference service delivery is a function of policy as it provides guides in which services are provided. Library policies are rules, laws and/or statements whether written or orally communicated that direct and guide the management and utility of library resources and services including reference services. It is imperative that reference services be guided with policies to address the application of digital reference services. By emphasizing real-time reference service, the library's goal becomes better to offer service to information seekers at the place where they are, when they have an information query to make.

Reference services are information consultations in which library staff recommend, interpret, evaluate, and use information resources to help others to meet particular information needs. Due to the digital lifestyle, reference services in the 21st century require the development and maintenance of digital research collections, research guides, meta data, databases, websites, search engines, etc., that patrons can use independently, in-house or remotely, to satisfy their information needs. The general service aim of reference services is to meet the information needs of library users who incidentally are faculty members, students, staff and other patrons in the right, ethical and professional manner. In addition, reference libraries provide instruction for patrons to become more independent in their use of library resources. These benefits of digital reference services in this period can be actualized by using the instrumentality of library policies for information dissemination. This paper therefore, explores the possibility of library policy for digital reference service delivery in the 21st century.

Library

The library is the primary academic information resource centre for the university. It promotes learning, supports teaching, and enhances scholarly research and creative activities by building collections and providing expert services and innovative access to information. According to Obi (2021), the library has been described differently, including a storehouse of knowledge, knowledge of compendium, heartbeat of scholarship, citadel of knowledge, repository of culture of a people, social institution and information centre. However, Obi (2013) defined a library as the collection, processing, storage and dissemination of recorded information in print and non-print format for the purpose of reading, studying and consultation. In order for a library to attain this goal, many activities are performed by staff which translate into the library's information services. The library as a service rendering organization is established with various sections or units to ensure the attainment of the library's objective of getting knowledge to solve information problems and one of such sections established in the library for the purpose of disseminating information is the

reference services section. Every section of the library is usually governed by policy formulation and implementation (Enang & Okwu, 2021).

Library Policies

Policy is a regulatory instrument which guides and regulates the activities, programmes and services of any organization. When policies have been adopted by a library's governing agents in a formal process and are consistent with local, state, and federal laws, they become enforceable (American Library Association, 2019).

Library policy serves as a guide to the operations and management of libraries. It serves to maintain standards and avoid inconsistencies. It is used to measure the extent to which a library performs its functions and meets its objectives as well as its systems and services (Ahmadu Bello University, 2019). Library and information science policy is a set of decisions taken by a government, through appropriate laws and regulations to orient the harmonious development of information transfer activities in order to satisfy the information needs. Library and information science policy originates as a result of developments in the society. Today's society is known as an information society which requires information at every step of the way. To meet up with the information requirements of today's society, libraries must gear up with relevant policies to solve the information needs of 21st century users. It is paramount to note that the progress of any nation depends on the information generation, dissemination and use. Due to the increasing demand for information, the need for policy formulation and implementation becomes necessary for collecting, storing and organizing electronic and non-electronic information in the reference section of the libraries. Without written policy, a library may suffer from self-inflicted harm and become a place where anything goes and every staff to his or her own conscience. Policy formulation and implementation is therefore required for the library to deliver effective services. Policy formulation and implementation helps to guide library services to solve problems and prevent further occurrence of errors in the system (Enang & Okwu, 2021).

Generally, library policies cover information access, borrowing privileges, cash handling, audit, circulation of material, collection development, cooperation with other libraries and information provision, disaster plans, drug-free workplace, electronic access, exhibition and display of materials, fines and fees, intellectual freedom, inter library loan, internet acceptable use, provision of library equipment and supplies for public use, public relations, and service to schools, homes and other institutions, including prison and extension services.

Five Laws of Library Science as Applicable to Reference Services in 21st century

The five laws of library science as proposed by S.R. Ranganathan in 1931 which provided the principles of operating a library system are regarded as policies upon which library reference services could be offered in a rightful, ethical and professional manner with emphasis on the development and change in the 21st century, and serve as response to societal change. The five laws of library science truly represent the set of norms, precepts and guides to good practice of reference services and librarianship in general. These laws are:

1.   Books Are for Use

2.   Every Reader His Book

3.   Every Book Its Reader

4.   Save the Time of the Reader

5.   The library is a Growing Organism

Books Are for Use: This implies that books kept in the library are for use because they were kept for use. By emphasizing use, the author focused attention to access related issues such as library's location, loan policies, hours and days of operation as well as the quality of staffing and library furniture, temperature control and lighting. This, applicable to reference service, implies that information resources in print and non-print formats must be made available for use in the reference library, thereby enabling the reference librarian to be flexible on reference service delivery.

Every Reader His Book: This law stresses that every reader has the right to get books of his or her interest. This is because reference librarians serve a wide collection of patrons, no matter their age, race or economic status, every individual from all social strata is entitled to reference services. It is the policy of the library to consider each individual information query to be of equal merit regardless of the demographic traits of the patron. This should therefore guide the reference librarians to ensure ethics and professionalism that protect readers from being marginalized.

Every Book Its Reader: By this law, every book in the library should have a reader. Thus, reference libraries could devise methods to ensure that each book finds appropriate readers. This is achieved by ensuring that every reader has access to electronic information resources. This has been made easier with the emergence of ICT and the development of electronic resources such as e-books, e-journals, etc. In response to the fifth law which states that the library is a growing organism, it will also serve as a positive response to the challenge of information dissemination in this COVID-19 pandemic era.

Save the Time of the Reader: This law recognizes that part of the excellence of reference service is the ability to meet the needs of library users efficiently. A library user is assumed to be a busy person and will be satisfied if he gets the needed services within the minimum possible time. By this law, reference librarians are expected to be committed to providing users' needs without wasting the users' time. As a result, libraries provide easy access point and reference services to cater for users' needs quickly.

The library is a Growing Organism: A library is a social institution that keeps growing. This growth is dependent on the dynamism of the society. The library is expected to grow in readership, staff, information resources, and mode of service delivery. Thus, reference libraries should maintain an up-to-date, relevant and readily accessible working collection of reference materials in electronic and print format that should be provided regardless of whether the patron has come to the library, telephoned, e-mailed or engaged in an online chat session. This law guides libraries and reference librarians to adopt emerging and innovative technologies in reference service delivery as well as evidence of growth.

Application of ICT to the 21st Reference Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Due to the emergence and proliferation of new media and mobile technologies as well as digitization, the information needs and seeking behaviour of users have changed. Users now seek digital information which they can access from the comfort of their homes. Consequently, reference services, even in this period of COVID-19 pandemic, have transformed to meeting the information needs of the 21st century information seekers by adopting digital reference services. Reference services now include digital and/or virtual reference services which involve the use of Information and Communications Technology tools.

Internet-Based Question and Answer Services

Lankes et al. (2007) defined digital reference services as 'internet-based question and answer services' that provide a link with users and individuals who have special skills or expertise in a particular subject. Digital reference services are usually referred to as a network of expertise, mediation and resources put at the disposition of a user seeking answers in an online networked environment. Tools such as subject gateways, e-mail, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and electronic libraries as well as interactive tools like instant messaging, virtual reference desk, and ask-me, are replacing the conventional means of offering reference services such as post, phone or person-to-person reference enquiries. The reference librarian now can either provide an answer to a query, links to resources or links to a professional or subject expert using interactive tools like web 2.0 which allows a reference interview online. Berube (2003), as cited in Oluwabiyi (2017), sees digital reference services as a network of expertise intermediating and placing an information resource at the disposal of someone seeking answers in an online environment. Digital reference service can provide support for users who find online tools and resources unfamiliar, difficult to learn, or insufficient to answer their information needs. It can provide valuable user feedback to collection builders so that they can build their resources and maximize their investment in content creation.

Telephone Reference Service: This type of service is usually limited to supplying the kind of information that is readily available and does not require extensive searching. It may be accurately imparted over the telephone. Ready reference services are also provided via telephone for questions that can be answered within one minute while the patron waits. Call back services are also provided the same day for questions that require more than one minute to answer using telephone.

Web Access to OPAC: Libraries now are giving access to electronic Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) interfaces. This OPAC makes it easier for users to search and utilise information resources. OPAC is a digital type of library inventory that is used to gain access to materials in the library. WebPACweb version of OPAC is accessible on web browsers and OPAC is usually accessible within the library. They are both used for reference services as they both provide easy access to information using a search term which could be by class mark, accession number, authors' name, title of the book or material, or a combination of both.

Online Instruction: Instructing new students or potential users of the library has changed due to the proliferation of digital technologies. There is now usage of online based bibliographic or user education methods to enhance the use of electronic information

resources. For example, libraries are now using online instructional exercises, such as virtual tours, through library resources. All of these tools are applied to deliver effective digital reference services in a COVID-19 period.

Other Library Services Aimed At Enhancing Effective Reference Services

Information Literacy Services: Vellaichamy (2017) defined information literacy skills as the ability to search, locate, evaluate and use information or facts to create useful knowledge. However, information literacy services are the services provided by the library to equip them with the knowledge and skills to identify their information needs, seek for their information needs, retrieve their information needs and ethically use the retrieved information. Sasikala and Dhanraju (2011), as cited in Ilogho and Nkiko (2014), noted that most often, 100 level students are as ignorant as those that have never entered the four walls of a university. However, information literacy education will equip them with requisite research skills to use the library. A number of undergraduates have had to contract out serious research projects and assignments due to lack of the necessary research skills. Others plagiarize and copy the work of authors and past projects without acknowledging such works, even in this age of unlimited information. Information literacy skills become one of the needed search skills to acquire, evaluate, use and communicate information.

Subject Gateways: A gateway is defined as a facility that allows easier access to network based resources in a given subject area. Gateways provide a simple search facility and a much-enhanced service through a resource database and indexes, which can be searched through a web based interface. Information provided by gateways is catalogued by hand. Gateways cover a wide range of subjects. Preparing subject guides has been an intellectual activity for reference librarians. Such guides are normally prepared in consultation with the subject experts or by a subject librarian, who picks up the sources after careful evaluation. Subject gateways are provided to enable users to retrieve information that are relevant to their subjects. This helps to save the time of the user.

Current Awareness Services

Current Awareness Services is the dissemination of the newly acquired information in the library that is aimed at keeping users informed in their fields of basic interest as well as in related subjects. It is a system of getting knowledge on recent developments and especially those developments which relate to the special interest of the individual. This takes the form of periodic listing of publications, monographs and/or periodical articles within given subject areas. These are made available to the library's clienteles.

Selective Dissemination of the Information (**SDI**)**:** This Service is part of current awareness service but the difference is that SDI is geared towards the needs of particular individuals. Its service is aimed at meeting the specific information needs of specific individuals. The reference librarian, here, is expected to have the profile of the individuals especially with respect to the subject of interest. This will enable the librarian to send across a document which he knows is relevant to the information sought for.

Information Sources Required for 21st Reference Service Delivery

ICT has changed the mode of service delivery and has also improved the sources for contemporary service delivery in libraries. The sources that are ICT driven require ICT tools

for accessibility. Some of these sources are already subscribed and are available in libraries while others can be sourced from other sources such as an institutional repository. Information sources for 21st century reference services include:

Subject Databases: Abubakar and Akor (2007) described database as a regularly updated digital file of digitized information resources including images, statistics, bibliographic records, full-text documents, abstracts, directory entries related to a specific subject or field, consisting of records of uniform format organized for ease of access and retrieval, usually managed with the use of database management system software. It is equally important to note that Databases can be online or offline.

Online Databases: This is an organised collection of information on a particular subject or multi-disciplinary subject made available online and usually accessed via the internet. They include Proquest, Health Inter-network Access to Research, HINARI), Directory of Open Access Repositories (OPEN DOAR), Elsevier, Science Direct, EbscoHost, and Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture (AGORA).

Offline Databases: These are databases that can be accessed without internet connections. They can appear in the form of CD-ROM or via a website which does not require internet access. For example, granary is an offline database that can be accessed without the internet. Here, students have the opportunity of accessing millions of digital educational resources without having internet connections. However, this database has to be subscribed to by an institution in order for users to have access to the resources. Dame Patience Goodluck Jonathan Automated Library, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education is subscribed to these databases and both students and staff utilise electronic information contained in the offline databases. Reference librarians also utilise these databases to provide answers to users' query in this period of COVID-19 pandemic.

Institutional Repository: Institutional Repository (IR) according to Lynch (2003) is a set of services that a university offers to the members of the academic community for the management and dissemination of digital materials created by the institution and its community members. Jain (2015) acknowledged Institutional Repository (IR) as a digital research archive consisting of accessible collections of scholarly work that represent the intellectual capital of an institution. University contents like bulletins, seminar presentations, conferences and workshops, inaugural lectures, lecture notes, past questions, minutes of past meetings, journal articles, books, news and events all constitute the contents of an institutional repository, emanating from a network of units, institutes, departments, faculties and even from other institutions, perhaps for the benefits of university community. This is a formidable reference source to answer a reference query even in a COVID-19 era.

Crowdsourcing: Crowdsourcing, as it is called is using the wisdom of the crowd and with the right knowledge to solve tricky problems and providing localized information. Crowds are not just collections of internet users, they are often experts or professionals in a particular discipline who are expected to have degrees and/or experience with regards to crowdsourcing task. Crowdsourcing being the collective mobilization of ideas, time, expertise, can be used to provide digital reference services. The intellectual potentials of the crowd can be leveraged in so many ways, this Howe (2008) identified as collective intelligence, where the wisdom of the crowd is used to solve problem, crowd creation, where the use of creative potentials of

users is applied to solve problems and crowd voting, using gathering of opinion and judgment of internet users on a subject to solve problem.

Metadata: Metadata is data about data, which further describes other data, explains the data and directs the location of the data as well as giving access for the data to be retrieved. Metadata records comprise attributes or elements that describe an entity or information resource. For example, a library catalogue contains metadata records that have elements used in describing information resources like a book, by author, title, date of publication, ISBN, class mark, and also indicating the location of the resource on the shelf. Just as the library catalogue record describes other data and, as a result, can be called data about data and be referred to as metadata, database records from abstracting and indexing services can therefore be equally referred to as metadata. In this case, it can be described as a record of digital information resources accessible and retrievable across networks. Metadata according to Ashikuzzaman (2018) can be descriptive, describing and identifying a resource such as title, abstract, author and keywords. It could also be structural, indicating how compound objects are put together, for example, how pages are ordered to form chapters. It can as well be administrative, providing information to help manage a resource such as when and how it was created, the file type and other technical information for who can access it.

Challenges of Reference Services in the 21st Century

A big challenge facing reference services according to Madu et al. (2018) is the inability of reference librarians to utilize new technologies to provide reference services and give library users improved access to reference sources. Some other challenges are:

Poor Policy Implementation: Policy is easily stated but implementation is usually difficult. It is in this regard that Madu et al. (2018) stated that one of the issues about policies and decisions is inadequate or improper implementations of policies made. The unsuccessful implementation of the digital reference services or virtual library initiatives is attributed to lack of policy implementation.

Poor Internet Connectivity: 21st century reference services are characterized by the use of the internet. Regrettably, one of the major hindrances to provision or utility of virtual reference services among academic libraries in Nigeria is poor internet connectivity. Chigbu and Dim (2012) attributed the poor development of internet services in Africa to the inefficient telecommunication and power supply.

Insufficient Information Literacy Skills: The inability to identify users information needs, locate the information and deliver the same to users is one of the major problems of reference services. Similarly, Anyira (2011) opined that while availability of the electronic and internet devices is one requirement, availability of competent librarians to use them is another major one in virtual reference services. Unfortunately, some professional librarians lack the requisite technological literacy and competence needed for a 21st century library service.

Inadequate Power and Energy: Digital or virtual references services cannot be feasible without electricity. The power situation in Nigeria is worrisome. This according to Madu et al. (2018) is due to inadequate megawatts which is necessary to drive technology application in various aspects of the nation's economy. Consequently, this according to Adepetun (2012) has led to the use of alternative sources of energy, which appears more expensive and in some cases not adequate and suitable for a greater number of computers in virtual systems.

Poor Funding: Adoption of 21st century library services requires a high budget because it is capital intensive but most academic libraries in Nigeria are suffering from poor funding which amounts to ineffective reference services.

Non-Functional Library Website or Social Media Account: Library websites and social media are formidable tools used in rendering digital or virtual references services, but most academic libraries have websites that are not functional, and some that manage to have social media accounts rarely use them. This affects digital reference service delivery in the 21st century characterized by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Difficulties Reading Computer Screens: Digital materials are accessed and read through computer screens. Some people are still struggling to adapt to the use of soft copies. They rather have a preference for printed materials. For reference services to be effective in the 21st century, both information service providers (librarians) and information service consumers (patrons) must leverage computers and digital materials.

Poor Communications Skills: Poor communication makes knowledge sharing difficult. Rendering reference services in the 21st century involves interaction between the reference librarian and the patron. Thus, using unethical and inappropriate communication patterns becomes difficult to achieve effective reference service delivery.

WAY FORWARD

Policy Implementation: Having policies stated is not enough. For policies to be feasible, there must be implementation. Hence, librarians should strive to adopt the various library policies that will guide and enhance service delivery in the areas of challenges mentioned above. Specifically, there has to be remedy in the following areas of reference service delivery such as:

Communication Skills: Communication and interactions bring people together and build trust as well as enable them to open up for business. According to Pospelova et al. (2018), active participation in the communication process can enable librarians to establish strong collaborations with users. Similarly, reference librarians are expected to know how to interact, negotiate, articulate and be outspoken. Due to interactions with the public, librarians are seen as public relations officers; hence, they should possess both oral and written communication skills as well as interpersonal communication skills.

Teaching Skills: To deliver reference services effectively and efficiently in the 21st century, librarians are expected to know how to explain an in-depth complicated issue. They will have to do so for a layman to understand the technical and logical part of reference services.

Provision of Better Internet Connectivity: Twenty-first century reference services are characterized by the use of the internet. Ensuring better internet connectivity becomes a non-compromising option for the delivery of reference services in the 21st century, even in this period of COVID-19 pandemic.

Leveraging Library Website and Social Media: Almost every library user uses the internet and social media. The internet and social media have become trendy ways of seeking

information. Hence, libraries should have dedicated functional websites and social media accounts to render reference services to users.

Information Literacy Skills: There has to be a proactive step towards enhancing information literacy skills to make effective use of information resources (print and non-print) of the reference library.

Adequate Power and Energy: Provision of adequate power and energy is very necessary if there must be a robust reference service delivery in the 21st century. It is therefore expedient to provide constant and quality energy to deliver better reference services.

Proper Funding: Adoption of 21st century reference library services requires a high budget because it is capital intensive.

CONCLUSION

Policies serve as guides for the administration and management of any system. On the other hand, library policies guide the effective management of library resources and services including reference services. The 21st century reference service delivery requires proactive steps towards adopting information sources required for 21st reference service delivery and steps towards eradicating perceived challenges of reference service delivery. The application of digital or virtual environments to deliver effective reference services even in this period of COVID-19 pandemic becomes inevitable. This means that reference service delivery has to be taken to the digital dimension and expected to be covered by library policies. If reference library policies are adhered to, reference services will be rendered ethically, professionally, effectively and efficiently. It is therefore necessary for libraries to create relevant reference policies using digital or virtual environments to render reference services in this 21st century amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

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