

THE SPECIAL LIBRARY AS A REPOSITORY OF KNOWLEDGE: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

Purpose: *The paper discussed the challenges and prospects of the special library as a repository of knowledge.*

Design/Methodology/Approach: *The paper is an opinion and conceptual work involving an extensive review of related and relevant literature that was used to look into the challenges and prospects of the special library as a repository of knowledge.*

Findings: *This paper established that poor funding, epileptic electric, inadequate manpower, inadequate ICT facilities, availability of outdated collections, poor maintenance culture, negligence or negative attitude on the part of the management of the parent bodies, and lack of a proper standard for operating special libraries as part of the challenges affecting the special library functions as a repository of knowledge. The paper established that the integration of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) in library house-keeping functions, increasing power supply for round the clock services, increased internet connectivity, and broadband for digital services envisage and depict bright prospects for the special libraries as repositories of knowledge.*

Practical Implications: *Because there are a bright prospect and future for the special library existence, it is recommended that there is a need to create policies and standards to improve the services. The policies and standards include the inclusion of special library in the parent body's annual budgetary allocation, including the librarians in the incentives and motivation packages, and ensuring that quality and modern infrastructures and facilities are put in place in the special library.*

Originality/Value: *It is recommended in the study that the management should allocate money to purchase and procure adequate working tools and facilities (ICTs) to ease library house-keeping duties for effective service delivery; create large spaces for the special library and also equip it with modern library and aesthetic facilities; yearly allocate fund to acquire new and current information resources; encourage, support, and sponsor librarians to embark on continuous professional development (CPD) programs, and frequently, the librarians should conduct community analysis to determine a user's or group of users' information needs for specific and tailored service delivery.*

Keywords: Special Libraries, Repositories of Knowledge, Prospects, Challenges

Paper Type: *Conceptual*

Introduction

Information is an important factor/ variable that thrives and sustains every field of human endeavor, profession, or businesses. Therefore, the provision of specialized and tailored information services is very important in private and government institutions, industries, agencies, centers, departments, ministries, outfits, and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs). It is incumbent on information centers such as the library to fit into this role. A library established and funded by any of the aforementioned bodies is called a special library

or information center. Ashikuzzaman (2013) posits that a special library collects updated and comprehensive information on the subject concerned with the parent organization and disseminates the information promptly to the people associated with the organization on-demand and in anticipation. The special library started when the few large enterprises - private, public and quasi-public organizations began to offer interest and employment to skilled persons to gather and arrange printed materials, out of which they began to supply their parent organizations with the latest

Information and relevant activities. The first special libraries established in Nigeria were those of the high court and Ministry of Justice, Lagos with the initial collection of colonial law books in 1900, followed by the establishment of the Department of Agriculture Research Library in 1910 at Moar plantation Ibadan in (Ojo-Igbinoba, 1995).

A special library is established and funded to provide specialized and tailored information services based on the objectives, goals, services, functions, and interests of the parent body. Jegede and Towolawi (2010) declare that a special library collects, organizes, preserves, and disseminates information to their particular users. A special library as pointed out by Okoro (1999) is a mission-oriented library that ranges from a public-funded scientific and technical research library to the private sector corporate information center. A special library is an important entity and establishment in agencies, ministries, educations, and research centers, etc because it fosters the objectives and goals of the parent organizations by providing current information and information services tailored to individual user's information needs.

The functions of the special library are to select, acquire, organize, store, and preserve information and information resources in manual and electronic formats in line with objectives, interests, goals, products, and services of the funding body. A special library is generally concerned with literature of a particular subject or a group of subjects and extends its facilities to a particular type of clientele (Asghar & Shafique, 2012). Online Computer Library Center [OCLC] (2020) declares that the collections in a special library are often heavily weighted to one area of interest in support of a specific user's base. Murray (2013) pointed out that a special library often provides highly customized selection and analysis of information. A special library provides specialized information resources on a particular subject, serves a specialized and limited clientele, and delivers specialized services to that clientele (LUCIDEA, 2020). As one of its statutory functions, a special library serves as the information hub of the parent body where users

come for personal assistance on their information needs.

Users in a special are not the general populace, however, they are defined and members of the parent body such as the staff, students, customers, stakeholders, partners, researchers, family members or relations of the staff, etc. Murray (2013) argues that although a special library serves a well-defined clientele, such as the employees of a corporation, members of an association, or students and faculty of a department, they may also allow access to other researchers or provide interlibrary loans. In the view of Bilawar (2013), a special library is established to serve the needs of clientele groups such as scientists, economists, statisticians, lawyers, doctors, engineers, traders, entrepreneurs, administrators, bankers, military and paramilitary members, etc. A special library serves a particular population, such as the blind and physically handicapped, while others are dedicated to special collections, such as the Library of Congress or a presidential library; or established in work in places such as corporations, hospitals, the military, museums, law firms, advertising agencies, professional associations, private businesses, and the government (American Library Association [ALA], 2020). Based on the identified important roles special libraries play in organizations and institutions, it was imperative to look into the challenges and prospects of the special library as a repository of knowledge.

Types of the Special Library Based on the Parent Organizations

In line with Okoro (1991), these are the various types of a special library:

- a. **Research Libraries:** These are found in research and educational institutes and centers such as the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), Ibadan, Federal Institute of Industrial Research (FIRO), Oshodi, Lagos, Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER), Ibadan, Project Development Institute (PRODA), Enugu, National Centre for Energy Research & Development, University of Nigeria Nsukka, etc.

- b. **Legislative and Ministerial Libraries:** These are special libraries established in the various legislative chambers (senate, federal house of representative, and state house of assemblies), and civil service ministries.
 - c. **Financial Institutions Libraries:** They are established in the business and finance institutions such as banks that include the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), commercial banks and savings and loans, stock brokering firms, insurance firms, etc.
 - d. **Print Media Libraries:** They are special libraries established in print media houses such as newspaper publishers and magazine publishers such as Thisday, Guardian, Daily Trust, and Sun newspapers, Ovation Magazine, etc.
 - e. **Mass Media Libraries:** These are special libraries situated within mass media institutions such as radio stations, television stations, multimedia firms, social media firms, etc.
 - f. **Judicial Libraries:** These are special libraries established in judicial and law institutions such as state and federal courts and law chambers.
- b. **Parent organization:** A special library is found in the environment of an organization or institution, usually away from public access such as office building, industrial complex, research center, etc. The special library could be established, funded, and managed by a private business such as firm, company, or industry, or in a government-owned institution, parastatals, industry, ministry, or agency. Some others serve federal, state, community, or municipal governments or quasi-government agencies, ministries, and parastatals.
 - c. **Users' community:** A special library serves a well-defined group of users. In most cases, the users are mainly people associated with the organization that owns the library, such as the staff, clients/patrons, researchers, sponsors, partners, and relations of the staff. These users are limited to those serving the interest of the parent organization.
 - d. **Service coverage:** The services of a special library are oriented to a particular field, services, products, or profession that the parent organization is involved in. The field or profession of the parent organization could be advertising, marketing, banking and finance, broadcasting, military, research, law, pharmaceuticals, electronics, aerospace, chemistry, medicine, agriculture, government ministries, agencies, and parastatals, etc; therefore, the services of the special library would be confined and channeled to that particular area.
 - e. **Size:** A special library is usually established in small complexes, the spatial consideration is usually small often the size of a room, small halls, etc. The staff size is always few and the collections or resources are always small in size. The size of a special library is determined by the available space the parent organization has, the financial status of the parent organization, and the estimated user community the library is expected to serve.

Distinguishing Characteristics of the Special Library

The following characteristics distinguish a special library from the other types of libraries (academic, public, school. etc):

- a. **Information services are specific and tailored:** A special library provides tailored and special services based on individual users or groups of users' information needs. This is unlike the other libraries that provide general services to the users' community. By conducting community analysis, the special library determines the specific information each library user or group of users need, and then strategies on the convenient method of meeting those identified needs. The special library selects and acquires information resources based on the identified and specific information needs of each user or group of users.

- f. **Presence of mainly library professionals:** Unlike other libraries, the special libraries employ mainly if not only library professionals to manage and man the library daily house-keeping functions.

Functions of the Special Library as a Repository of Knowledge

The primary functions of the special library are:

- a. Selection and acquisition of information materials based on the fields and interests of the establishing body.
- b. Processing and organizing information resources in a systematic order with relevant tools for easy access, location, and use. These include accessioning, stamping, cataloging, classification, and shelving of the information resources.
- c. Provision of Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) services to users in line with their subject interests and requirements.
- d. Provision of Current Awareness Services (CAS) to acquaint users with recent collections, information, and literature in their areas of interest.
- e. Conducting literature searches for users, especially, the researchers and those embarking on field works.
- f. Provision of indexing and abstracting services to users to save their time when looking for information or information resources.
- g. Provision of document delivery services to users in their offices and places of work, this could be done manually or digitally.
- h. Provision of personal assistance to the users physically or digitally which includes the use of social media handles.
- i. Subscribing to online journals and databases for the parent institutions. This includes ensuring that the management does not waste any funds on fee-based journals and databases by subscribing to the Directory of Open Access for journals, books, databases, etc.

- j. Preservation and conservation of information and information resources.
- k. Periodically publishing library bulletins and newsletters either weekly or monthly, etc, to keep users up-to-date with the latest information or happening in their field or profession.
- l. Compilation of bibliography.
- m. Charging and discharging of information resources to users.
- n. Provision of security technologies and securing information and library resources from theft and vandalism.
- o. Provision of the desired information to users in their convenient languages and convenience.
- p. Provision of internet and digital library services at the comfort of the users' offices or homes.

Challenges Affecting the Special Library as a Repository of Knowledge

It is interesting to note that the 21st-century special library has advanced and improved its information services to foster and promote its parent institution's goals and objectives. However, like other libraries, it is faced with challenges that often beset the effectiveness of the services it provides. The following are some of the challenges affecting the special library:

- a. **Reduced value of the special library:** In reality, the special library should be an information center and the epicenter of research that provides all needed information services in an organization it is established. However, in practicality, the reverse is the case. The management and the users do not see the special library from that point of view. Generally, some of them have poor orientation and knowledge of the importance of the library. The majority of the users prefer sourcing for information on their own without consulting the services or assistance of the information professionals in the library, specifically, with the use of the Internet.

- b. **Inadequate manpower:** It can be observed that in a special library, the staff strength is usually deficient and low. Although the special library is usually small in size, few librarians are employed to man the daily library house-keeping functions; in some cases, no para-professional or casual staff are employed.
- c. **Inadequate ICT facilities:** It has been noticed that the management of the parent body where a special is found focus more monetary resources equipping other departments and offices with information technologies for enhanced services; whereas, the special library is neglected. In most cases, the librarians are still struggling with manual tools in carrying out library house-keeping functions.
- d. **Outdated collections:** It is noticeable that the statutory functions of selecting and acquiring information resources usually take place at the early stage when the library was established. Over the years, such functions hardly take place anymore or are overlooked. This is why the collections of a special library could be outdated, obsolete, and few in numbers.
- e. **Poor funding:** Like other libraries, the special library is also suffering and dealing with poor funding issues. Often the library is neglected in the yearly budgetary allocation of the parent body. This situation has inhibited the services in terms of adequacy of information resources, adequacy of resources needed to carry out library house-keeping functions, and functionality of the library.
- f. **Poor power supply:** Epileptic power supply persists in third world nations. This is adversely affecting the life and services of the special library. Even the use of electric power generators as alternative sources of power are inhibited by high cost and scarcity of petroleum resources.
- g. **Poor maintenance culture:** The government-owned special library is often neglected and abandoned with little efforts to improve the infrastructure. In some cases, the available infrastructures are not maintained, preserved, or taking proper care to ensure their long life-span. This is followed by the inability to reequip them with new and modern versions.
- h. **The attitude of the management of the parent bodies:** It is has been observed that the special library suffers neglect from the management of the parent bodies. In most cases, attention is given to the equipping of the special library at the time it was established; afterward, the management shows no concern for improving the condition of the library. The special library is often ignored in the yearly budgetary allocations, policies, and managerial decisions. In some cases, when the issues of the library are raised at the managerial level they are swept under the carpet.
- i. **State of the library complex or halls:** The special library is usually situated in a small space such as a room, hall, or small house like the bookshop. Although a special library complex or hall could have aesthetic consideration in its design and renovation, it is usually in a small space.
- j. **No proper standard:** In African nations like Nigeria; the activities in a special library are not regulated, dictated, or standardized as it is with the academic and public libraries. What the librarian(s) do and how they carry out their duties are not monitored and evaluated to ensure ethical practices, standards, and quality.

Prospects of a Special Library as a Repository of Knowledge

While these challenges abound, there are still lots of prospects and future for the existence of the special library in Nigeria. As a repository of knowledge, the special library must reposition its services to meet up with modern-day best practices in library service provision. The best practices involve embracing Information and Communications Technology (ICT) innovations, adopting new concepts, approaches, and methods in information service delivery. Scholastica, (2017) identifies the changing roles of the special library as, libraries as consumers,

libraries as intermediaries and aggregators, libraries as publishers, libraries as educators, libraries as R&D organizations, libraries as entrepreneurs, libraries as policy advocates, etc. Bender (1998) observes that librarians in special libraries provide the information age for the knowledge-based organization by responding with a sense of urgency to critical information needs.

Today, the special library has advanced its services by integrating Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in library house-keeping functions. Many special libraries are leaving no stone unturned towards embracing internet services which will in turn enhance e-library or digital library services. Many of the special libraries have automated their services by acquiring and subscribing to integrated library software (ILS). In the same vein, many special libraries have acquired and subscribed to online databases, electronic journals, electronic books, and digital reference resources. Because of these advancements, it is lucid that there are bright prospects and future for the special library such as:

- a. With the increasing need for specific information and information services, more special libraries will be established in private and government educational and research centers, agencies, industries, ministries, parastatals, etc.
- b. There is no doubt that the power sector is receiving greater funding and infrastructure development, this will ensure that there is a provision of regular electric power supply for the various sectors of the economy which will also impact the ICT and special library services.
- c. With increased ICT integration in service provision in parent bodies, the special libraries will adequately be equipped with ICT facilities for effective service provision.
- d. With the improvement of library curriculum by the library schools and Nigerian Universities' Commission (NUC) that include advanced courses such as library automation, social media use in library services, digital library service,

research data management, information technology systems, etc, the librarians will be adequately equipped to be information experts, webmasters, IT experts, media specialist, etc to work in special libraries.

- e. With the recognition of librarians in the academic cadre or scale, librarians working in special libraries will receive equivalent payment like librarians in other libraries, this will reduce the turnover rate in special libraries.

Conclusion

A special library is an important unit in research institutions, government agencies, ministries and parastatals, and private institutions because it provides special and tailored information services to the users. From the discourse, it was established that the distinguishing characteristics of a special library are that it provides tailored and special services oriented to a particular field or profession that the parent organization is involved in, is established in the environment or building where its parent body operate usually away from the public access, it serves a well-defined group of users, is usually small in size, etc. The functions of a special library are to select, acquire, organize information material, provide special services such as Current Awareness Services, literature search, indexing and abstracting services, document delivery services, personal assistance, digital library services, subscription to online journals, and databases, etc. The challenges affecting special libraries are: devalue of the special libraries, inadequate manpower, inadequate ICT facilities, outdated collections, poor funding, poor power supply, poor maintenance culture, etc. There are bright prospects and future for the special library in the area of improved ICT integration in library services and digital library services, the establishment of more special libraries, increased power supply, increased budgetary allocation for infrastructural development, etc.

Recommendations

In line with the facts in the discourse, the following recommendations were made:

- a. The management should allocate money to purchase and procure adequate working tools and facilities (ICTs) to ease library house-keeping duties for effective service delivery;
- b. The management should create large spaces for the special library and also equip it with modern library and aesthetic facilities such as furniture, shelves, chairs, tables, lightening facilities, rest-rooms, signage, floor plans, pipe-born water, air conditioners, fans, etc;
- c. Yearly, the management should allocate fund to acquire new and current information resources;
- d. Frequently, the librarians should conduct community analysis to determine a user's or group of users' information needs for specific and tailored service delivery;
- e. The management should recruit only qualified library professionals who are registered with Librarians' Registrations Council of Nigeria (LRCN) in the special library.
- f. As much as possible, the librarians should organize workshops and library programs to sensitize the management body and users on the functions, activities, roles, and efforts the library is making or has made to ensure effective information service delivery in terms of new collections, new facilities, and tools, new programs, etc.
- g. The management body should encourage, support, and sponsor librarians to embark on continuous professional development (CPD) programs such as enrolling for advanced degrees, participating in conferences, workshops, training, and re-training programs, and engaging in scholarly publications.
- h. The management body should allocate money to acquire ICT facilities for electronic or digital library services, and reprographic services.
- i. Librarians in special libraries should form an umbrella body or association in Nigeria to promote their welfare and interest.
- j. Library complexes and the building must adhere to security plans, while functional fire extinguishers must be placed in strategic places;
- k. Antivirus software must be optimally used and updated from time to time to preserve and secure digital resources.

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