

ENHANCING INFORMATION ACCESSIBILITY FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Building an inclusive society that enables people with disabilities to fully participate in social, economic, and educational activities requires making information accessible. The need of providing information accessibility for individuals with various disabilities like visual, auditory, motor, and cognitive impairments was emphasized in this study. The study looks at ways in which information can be more accessible to people with disabilities through libraries and information centers by providing them access to their resources, making accommodations for them in terms of facilities and equipment, offering referral services, using assistive technologies, etc. The benefits of information accessibility, such as enhancing learning outcomes, greater social inclusion, and independence, were also discussed. From the study, accessibility to information can assist people with disabilities to have equal access to opportunities, assist them in overcoming obstacles on education, employment, and social interaction, increase their level of independence and self-sufficiency, promote social inclusion and community involvement, and adhere to ethical and legal requirements. The study also examines the challenges and barriers to information accessibility by people with disabilities which includes poor policy implementation, ignorance, and technology limitations. Recommendations were provided in light of the study's findings.

Keywords: *Information, Accessibility, Information Accessibility, Disability, Assistive Technology*

Introduction

Every member of any society needs information as a resource for growth and development. A variety of needs, arranged in hierarchical order defined human nature (Maslow, 1943). These needs include physiological needs (such as food, water, and shelter), safety needs (such as security, stability, and protection), love and belonging needs (such as relationships, social connections, and a sense of belonging), esteem needs (such as self-worth, respect, and recognition), and self-actualization needs (such as personal development, creativity, and realizing one's potential). While advancing to more important requirements in the hierarchy, people are motivated to satisfy these needs with information.

Information refers to data that has been meaningfully processed, structured, or arranged to give receivers context, significance, and relevance. It can be disseminated using a variety of media, including text, images, sounds, and symbols, and it can be objective or factual. Information helps people comprehend, make decisions, and solve problems by providing them with knowledge, insights, news, or instructions (World Health Organization, 2019). The notions of communication, knowledge, and understanding are deeply associated with the concept of information which involves the encoding and decoding of data and requires a sender, a message, and a recipient. Information's accuracy, relevance, timeliness, and usability determine its quality and value.

In this current digital era, information has grown in importance due to its daily generation and sharing of enormous amount of data. Effective information management and analysis are now essential competencies in a variety of industries, including business, healthcare, education, and science. Rapid advancements in information technologies have also brought up significant issues with data security, privacy, and the impact of information on society, underscoring the necessity of responsible and moral information practices.

Information Accessibility

Accessibility entails removing obstacles to allow people to interact and take part in daily activities. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), (2018), states that accessibility entails lowering and removing potential obstacles to people's everyday interactions, both physical and digital. The design of goods, equipment, services, and surroundings to be usable by everyone, irrespective of skills or impairments, is another definition of accessibility. Ensuring accessibility

in diverse fields is the goal of numerous national and international laws and initiatives. Among the accessibility aspects are

Information accessibility: This encompasses many issues surrounding availability, accessibility and affordability of information, such as multilingualism, metadata, interoperability, open source software, open content, as well as addressing the special needs of people with disabilities. The new economic and technological environment raises concerns about the erosion of access to certain information and knowledge that has been freely shared in the past which have been use to facilitate scientific research and education.

Physical accessibility: In the real world, this refers to how public areas, transit, buildings, and products are designed so that those with various physical abilities and disabilities, such as wheelchair users and those with mobility problems, can utilize them. (Bury, Seelman, and Albrecht 2020).

Educational accessibility: These ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, can access educational programs, materials, and institutions. The concept of accessibility helps educators create learning settings that give every student the opportunity to advance their knowledge, abilities, and passion for learning. (CAST, 2011). Multiple forms of representation, action and expression involvement in information and knowledge accessibility are provided by the Universal Design for Learning Guidelines.

Communication accessibility: Beukelman and Mirenda (2012), state that communication accessibility makes sure that technologies and methods of communication are usable by everyone in the society and individuals with disabilities, such as those who are blind or visually impaired, deaf or hard of hearing, or who have speech or cognitive impairments.

Simultaneously, developments such as the Internet create an unprecedented opportunity for sharing information as well as promoting linguistic diversity and preserving languages that would otherwise become extinct. (UNESCO, 2023). A recommendation on the use and promotion of multilingualism and universal access to cyberspace was adopted by UNESCO in 2003. It advocates for multilingualism and a fair balance between the public interest and the interests of information rights holders. Consequently, in response, UNESCO has endorsed international initiatives concerning Open Educational Resources (OER), Free and Open Source Software (FOSS), and has launched multiple projects to support multilingualism in cyberspace

and the use of Information and Commutation Technology (ICT) for more equitable access to information, including people with disabilities.

In order to safeguard the rights and dignity of people with disabilities, the United Nations (2006) established the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) by making content more accessible which allows for a wider audience to use and comprehend it. In order to provide their services to the public, libraries and information centers must remove as many obstacles and impediments as they can.

People with Disabilities

Disability is the inability or constraint to execute an activity in a way or within a range that is deemed normal for human beings. It defines a functional constraint of activities such as challenges in learning, seeing, speaking, or hearing, moving or climbing stairs, grasping, reading, eating, taking a shower, excreting waste, etc. as a result of limitation brought on by an impairment. In particular, individuals who suffer from physical, sensory, cognitive, or emotional impairments that may impact their everyday activities and social interactions are collectively referred to as people with disabilities.

According to Atabor (2015), the phrases "disability," "handicapped," "physically challenged," "disabled," and "special needs persons" are used interchangeable. These individuals are in a condition that limits their capacity to engage in social, mental, or physical activities. According to Ananya (2013), people with physical challenges are those who have long-term impairments related to their physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory systems that may prevent them from fully and equally participating in society; as a result, it is important to give them special consideration in order to promote inclusivity in society. Common impairments include loss of vision, deafness, deformities, loss of limbs, mental illness or mental retardation, muscular nervous and sensory disorders.

For a variety of reasons such as education, research, leisure, etc, people with disabilities also require to use the library and information centers so as to cater for or satisfy their information need. They are regarded as unique library patrons. Igwela and Opara (2020) define a special user or patron as a person who requires adaptive equipment (augmented or assisted equipment or resources) in order to use the library's information resources. It is also a circumstance in which an individual is unable to perform tasks that a non-disabled person would deem "normal." Individuals with disabilities are sometimes referred to as "people with special

needs."In the context of library services as identified by Abdelrahman (2016), disability is connected to the needs of people who cannot make use of conventional libraries, library materials and services. They need assistance to navigate through the information materials available in databases and new technologies in libraries which has increased access to communication and information globally. They are regarded as special persons because library services are provided to them with special materials, activities, equipment and care. Special library services are provided to users with disabilities in order to satisfy their information needs.

The International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH), published in 1980 by the World Health Organization (WHO) and quoted in Anyanwu (2020), outlines a conceptual framework for disability that is divided into three parts:

Disability: This is defined as "a limitation or absence (due to impairment) of the capacity to carry out a task in a way or within a range that is deemed typical for a human being." It defines a functional constraint or activity limitation brought on by impairment. For example: trouble seeing, speaking, or hearing; trouble learning; trouble moving or ascending stairs; trouble grasping, reaching, washing, eating, and excreting, etc.

Impairment: "Any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function" is defined as impairment. Examples of these include mental retardation, partial sight, loss of speech, autism, learning disabilities, blindness, deafness, loss of sight in one eye, paralysis of a limb, and amputation of a limb.

Handicap: This is a term used to describe a situation of someone who is in a state of disadvantage, resulting from an impairment or disability that limits or prevents the fulfillment of a role that is normal (depending on age, sex and social and cultural factors) for that individual". The term "handicap" refers to how impaired or disabled people are viewed in social and economic contexts that put them at a disadvantage in comparison to others. A few examples of disabilities are being restricted to one's home or bed, not being allowed to use public transportation, being socially isolated, or being required to maintain their illiteracy.

Types of people with Disabilities

Disabilities can be categorized into several broad types, each with unique characteristics and needs:

- *Physical Disabilities:* Affecting mobility and physical functioning (e.g., paralysis, amputation).

- *Sensory Disabilities:* Affecting sight or hearing (e.g., blindness, deafness).
- *Cognitive Disabilities:* Affecting learning, memory, and problem-solving (e.g., Down syndrome, dyslexia).
- *Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities:* Affecting emotional regulation and behavior (e.g., autism spectrum disorder, mental health conditions).
- Prisoners

Ways of Enhancing Information Accessibility for People with Disabilities

The statement "If the users will not come to the library, the library must go to the users" was made correctly by William A. Katz in 1969. In this era, this can unquestionably be seen as the guiding concept for library services to those with disabilities. Since they are unable to completely access libraries or information centers owing to their handicap, people with disabilities have information needs that are quite comparable to those of regular people or library users. Therefore, it is necessary to create an inclusive information and knowledge society, which can be achieved by libraries and information centers for people with disabilities through:

- i. *Supplying them with their resources:* Clients of the libraries also include those with disabilities, such as the blind, deaf, dumb, mentally retarded, etc. In regard to this, they require specialized resources such as talking books (audio books and books with text read aloud), Braille books, daisy books, large print, audio books, sign language interpretation for easy access to information (Udo-Anyanwu, and Esharenana 2022). Ramps should be available for those who are paralyzed or have other disabilities in order to facilitate their use of the staircase; this includes people who are restricted to wheelchairs (Igwele, and Opara 2020). Making these resources accessible will help individuals with disabilities to participate in societal issues, giving them sense of belongings in the society and create equal access to opportunities and information.
- ii. *Bookmobile services:* A different term for bookmobile services is mobile library services. Eastwood as cited in Akanwa (2013) defined the mobile library as "a road vehicle specially equipped and furnished to provide a professional library service direct to the people". A mobile library service for people with disabilities mostly the prisoners, people with physically challenged, mental retard etc can provide equal access to reading materials, information and knowledge which in return promote inclusivity and independency. This service can help bridge the gap in access to information and promote inclusive environment.

iii. *Reading to them:* One of the most important ways to ensure that persons with disabilities can access information is by reading to them, especially for those with hearing or vision impairments. Libraries and information centers may provide equitable access to information for individuals with disabilities by offering these options, to fostering independence and inclusivity.

iv. *Provision of special equipment and facilities for libraries:* The main library entrance should have ramps for those with physical disabilities and the ground floor of the library or information centers should have a specific wheelchair-accessible entrance that can be accessed via a tunnel. If there is an automated door, personnel at the circulation desk should be notified by a key-operated bell system at the entrance so that it will be opened on time. The library should provide wheelchair-accessible restrooms on every floor (Udo-Anyanwu, and Esharenana 2022). The library should have wheelchair-accessible water fountains on every floor. Accessible parking spots ought to be accessible in the vicinity of the library. Wheelchair users should have access to designated computer stations on the main floor, as well as in the library's computer labs. There ought to be a wheelchair-accessible phone on the floor next to the library's elevator. All of these can make it easier for those with impairments to visit the information centers and have easy access to information materials.

v. *Information and referral services:* The idea behind referral is that no library is self-sufficient. Users are directed to other libraries or information centers where they can obtain information they require. Referral services can be used to make information accessible for people with disabilities by directing them to information centers and information sources that can address their issues or inquiries.

vi. All types of library clients must have equitable access to the collections and services offered by the library. In order to meet the information needs of those with disabilities, libraries should also provide support in maximizing the use of their collections, services, and other resources.

vi. To make information more accessible to individuals with disabilities, circulation services should include the following.

- When assistance is needed by person with disabilities, library workers should retrieve materials from the shelf. Retrieval ought to happen right away, depending on personnel availability and schedule.

- Those with disabilities should be able to arrange for someone else to check out information resources on their behalf at libraries and information centers.
 - Renewals for library materials on loan should be handled by phone, online, and other means of communication.
 - If there are exceptional circumstances, the loan duration for reserved materials should be extended.
 - Circulation desk staff will provide assistance in the use of photocopiers when time and staffing permits.
- vii. *Making reference and information Services available to people with disabilities.* Libraries need to identify the scale and diversity of information needs of the individuals in each strata of the society in order to serve them better. The ability of the librarians to answer reference queries posed by the users goes a long way in sustaining this service in libraries Nwalo (2018). This service is carried out using reference sources such as encyclopedia, dictionaries, biographies etc. The following should be provided in order to make information accessibility easier for people with disabilities
- Library and information center's staff should provide a basic level of research assistance at the research help desk to facilitate quick and easy access of information for research, education and so on.
 - Reference assistance can be provided to them in person, through electronic Medias such as telephone, computers, social media apps, and e-mail via internet.
- vii. *Assistive technologies:* These facilitate various tasks, communication, and environment interaction for those with disabilities. Hearing aids, visual aids (glasses, magnifiers, Braille displays), assistive software (screen readers, speech recognition), home automation systems, communication devices (text-to-speech, speech-generating devices), computer access tools (special keyboards, mouse substitutes), orthotics and adaptive equipment, and accessible gaming devices are a few examples of assistive technology. People with disabilities can use assistive technology to improve their overall quality of life, increase their independence, improve communication, increase productivity, and fully engage in school and employment.

Constraints facing library and information accessibility by people with disabilities

The numerous problems which Nigerian libraries are dealing with have effects on how they provide services to their immediate clients and the community at large. These issues make it

more difficult for libraries to provide efficient services to their patrons and have impacted their ability to meet user satisfaction. Several factors make it more difficult to provide library and information services to people with special need. The availability and accessibility of the services may be impacted by certain factors. Among these factors are:

i. *Weak or poor communication network:* Libraries find it more challenging to receive feedback from and support individuals with impairments because of their systems of communication aren't up to standard. Library websites and digital resources may not be designed with accessibility in mind, making it difficult for people with disabilities to navigate, access information and send feedback to the library and information centers (McKinney, 2017). It is challenging for libraries to properly inform its physical and virtual clients with impairments about services, events, and programs. Inadequate communication networks may make it more difficult for libraries to collaborate with other libraries that provide services and support to individuals with disabilities.

ii. *Social Factors:* Unfavorable social attitudes and a lack of information about the needs of people with disabilities could impede efforts to make libraries more accessible and inclusive. People with disabilities may face stigma and stereotypes, making it difficult for them to access library services (Chakraborty, 2016). The prominence of these services at public institutions like libraries may vary depending on the emphasis that is placed in a given location on inclusion and accessibility for people with disabilities.

iii. *Political factors:* Long-term planning, unstable politics, frequent governmental changes, and other issues can interfere with the provision of library services to individuals with disabilities. (McKinney, 2017). Inconsistent and inadequate support may result from weak or nonexistent legislation requiring equality and inclusion in library services.

iv. *Government factors:* Inconsistent information services to people with special need may arise from the lack of comprehensive planning and rules promoting accessibility and inclusion in libraries. Accessibility laws may not be adequately enforced, making it difficult to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities (Chakraborty, 2016). Inconsistent execution across several locations or libraries might result in conflicting access to services, even in the presence of plans and rules. There is possibility that legislators and government representatives are unaware

of or do not comprehend the value of the services rendered by libraries and information centers for people with disabilities.

v. *Economic Factor*: It is difficult for most Libraries and information centers in Nigeria to purchase specialist materials such as Braille printers, audio books, screen readers, and adapted technologies due to a lack of financing (Liu, 2018). Libraries with little funding may find it difficult to purchase these specialist resources which restrict their ability in rendering services to individuals with disabilities. Staff training also required finance to teach library employees on how to use assistive devices, recognize individual needs, and develop inclusive service techniques for people with disabilities.

vi. *Lack of awareness*: Lack of knowledge is a major issue when it comes to accessibility of information for people with disabilities. Library staff may not be aware of the needs of people with disabilities, leading to inadequate support (Kwansa, 2015). As a result, professionals such as educators, employers, and service providers are not frequently trained on issue related to information need of people with disability; this makes it more difficult for them to render quality services. Some organizations fail to comply with the law because they are ignorant of their duty to provide information for all. Inaccessible information material results from a lack of awareness among content developers and authors about accessibility standards and rules.

Conclusion

Promoting inclusivity, equality, and empowerment among persons with disabilities requires making information accessible to them. The lack of basic amenities in library buildings prevents people with impairments from completely accessing the premises. Reading materials in libraries are not readily accessible by the people with disabilities since they are not available in formats which they can access. Professionals in libraries and information have come to agree upon the phrase "inclusive library" in recent years.

Accessible information can help individuals with disabilities to overcome obstacles to learning, work, and social interaction; it can also guarantee equitable access to opportunities and information; improve self-sufficiency, independence, promote social inclusion and community involvement; and adhere to legal and ethical requirements. We can build a more equitable and inclusive societies where individuals with disabilities have equal opportunity to participate, contribute, and thrive by making information accessibility a top priority.

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