

NATIONAL POLICY ON INFORMATION FREEDOM IMPLEMENTATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The implementation of information freedom has been a major challenge to most countries, especially the less developed or developing nations. Countries have enacted decrees and legislations in order to check the abuse of information freedom. Some have succeeded, while others are still struggling with information control. This paper is about information freedom in Nigeria, and all the efforts made by various governments to allow people have access to information without affecting the operations of government as well as other users of information as an important factor of production.

Keywords: National Policy, Information Freedom Implementation, Library, Dissemination

Introduction

Information resources are invaluable at all times and in all circumstances, especially to national development. Information is required in all modern organizations. It is routinely needed to control the daily activities of any organization, Opers (2011). Information is important to all living organizations. Access to information and use determine how we live and function. The society either evolves in positive or negative perspectives because of how we access and use information. Information is therefore important to the operation and survival of any nation. Nations that place value on the importance of information have made policies to guide the access and use of information material. These policies have come in various forms such as laws, regulations, customs, and belief systems. These information policies differ from country to country as a public policy emanating from government to guide the activities of government, and other organizations.

Victor in Abu (2007) posits that "information services have social value", that is responsible for the organization, storage and dissemination of ideas. Library is a distinct institution that plays prominent roles in shaping the knowledge of very society, closely driven and guided by information policy. Kargbo (2007) argues that "matters relating to information policies should be the responsibility of the library". The library as a policy selects, organize and disseminate information in addition to handling issues related to it. Libraries play instrumental roles in the making of information policy, especially for national development. Without the transmission of thought from the collections of human civilization, in terms of culture, language, speech, science and technology and social organizations, the function of policies become difficult.

Kinetics and signs were earlier forms of information dissemination. The use of language logically predated the written world. Graphics were also some forms of mechanical facets of communication. Today, we are familiar with "recordings" and the impact of information activities. Thus the development of civilization which comes with man's ability to exchange information and ideas has imparted positively to the provision and access to information policies across the globe.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide more knowledge to the librarianship profession to the general public on issues concerning information policy. Sometimes people may think that it is solely the business of government without looking at the perspectives of information managers, the librarianship. Without the input of librarianship in any information policy, there may be lapses on the whole packaging and implementation, hence a stitch in time. It is a good thing to have information freedom and another thing to ensure that this freedom is used with caution as other interests are also involved.

The acknowledgment of any information policy is good to be known to both the government and users of information. When this is a common knowledge, it creates harmony and saves the people from unnecessary litigations. Therefore, this paper is significant because it will create awareness among the people that though, we have information freedom access and use, but that there are also limitations required of every user to be conscious of our rights to information freedom.

Conceptual Classification of Information Freedom

Information Policy

Uhegbo (2008) viewed policy as a plan of action, a statement of aims and objectives, especially when made by government. It can be an individual matter or an official enactment. Longman Dictionary (2009) defines policy as a way of doing something that has been officially agreed upon. It can also be viewed as a particular principle that you believe in, that influences the way you behave.

Policy can also be in form of a law made by the governing bodies of any organization to direct, control and regulate members and the activities of the organization. A National Information Policy is a set of decisions taken by a government, through appropriate laws and regulations, to provide a harmonious development of information transfer activities, in order to satisfy the information needs and use of the country. An information policy also provides the necessary means and instruments needed for the implementation, such as finance, personnel, institutions, etc. McClure and Jacquer (2008) opine that a National Information Policy is a service of decision taken by a national government, which are designed to encourage a better information infrastructure, in order to deliver both economic and social benefits for individuals and for the society.

According to Maxwell (2003), information policy is a social, political, economic and technological decisions relating to the roles of information in a society. Information policy is also a guidance of planned actions to ascertain access to universal information for the benefits of social, economic and political activities. They also help to achieve a national developmental goal. Most often, information policy is discussed in terms of government legislation. The goals of any policy vary from country to country and from organization to context. Infact, the concept of information policy is defined differently by different people.

However, a typical policy has the following attributes; a scope and an action. Each rule defines a scope initiating the policies; a framework or structure which embodies the mechanism of the policy implementation and the action which is the effect of the policy on national programmes and events.

There is no doubt that we are in the information age, or information society according to Ochia in Ifidon (2012), described an information society as:

A society in which the quality of life, as well as the prospects for social change and economic development, depends increasingly upon information. In such a society, living leisure, the education system and the market place are influenced markedly by advances in formation and knowledge. This is evidenced by an increasing array of information through a wide large of media, many of them electronic in nature.

According to Inf. Tech (2008) posit that "lack of appropriate skills make IT staff not to be able to support implementation and use of the emerging technologies". Enfield et al (2011) also stated that "people will support adoption and implementation of emerging technologies for as long as they are well understood. This can significantly hinder implementation of programmes. Lack of skills also among top management staff affects the ability of the country or organization to make decisions on good technologies and implementations.

Method

This paper does not use any empirical method to draw the inference, but a position paper that collates information from secondary sources to draw our inference. It is also a reliable historical research method which deals with the documentation of records.

Data Presentation

The information environment has a great impact on issues that border on information policies. One way to capture the information environment is to consider how information activities take place amongst individuals and institutions who are involved in the day to day processes of information creating, disseminating and use in the society. The information components are as follows:

- i) Information creating activities
- ii) Information products
- iii) Information distributors
- iv) Information dissemination, and
- v) Information users

All these can be considered as stakeholders in information policy. There are varieties of stakeholders in the information policy process. Stakeholders who are deeply concerned about information from the legal point of view and those from the political point of view. Those on the legal perspective include the business community who are more active in influencing the policy, while the government and parastatals also influence the information activities.

The implementation of national policy on information freedom

The barriers to national information policy are as follows:

- i) The lack of technical skilled or trained manpower on ICT
- ii) The implementation problem of cost and benefit
- iii) The lack of knowledge updates among users of information technologies
- iv) Rapid changes in information technologies
- v) The lack of legislation to support ICT implementation
- vi) Information technologies are expensive. Lack of fund for implementation
- vii) Corruption in the system that makes implementation difficult.

The above gives a picture of some major problems of information policies and implementation. There are still some other issues that should be noted. These include the problem of technical skills among providers and users of information technologies. This follows the lack of training or limited opportunities for training of providers and users which most times underscore the benefits of these provisions. Other studies have also established that education is important for any country to incorporate change, modification, innovation or process improvement. Training and education are therefore very important for country or organization to break even on the implementation of new policies. Finally, lack of appropriate abilities and skills can limit workers' productivity which would in turn affect the application and implementation of any new policy in a country.

Cost of Implementation

The cost of a new project could also be a barrier to national information policy. When the cost and benefit of implementing a new innovation is high, the government may either want to delay or even stop the whole process. The government may even want to change to the traditional approach of doing it.

Lack of Knowledge Update

The Nigerian society remains information poor and deficient due to lack of workshops and seminars that regularly expose staff to acquire new skills within their chosen fields of specialization. This cuts across all the sectors. This is a setback in creating awareness and improving the employees' productivity level in implementing a national information policy.

Rapid Technological Changes

In today's world of globalization, a technology change in one country rapidly affects the activities of other countries. This is because technology requires every user to be on the same page in order to function effectively. Therefore, every government has the responsibility to respond fast to changes in technology in order to remain relevant. It becomes a barrier if any government does not play her part in bringing technological changes to the citizenry. When the planning stage and implementation takes too long, the same new technology becomes obsolete. Apart from the hardware problems, issues may also arise from the software which may affect the information content, etc. This is because, if the knowledge of the expertise are not regularly upgraded with the new technology, a country may be losing wealth from her various activities of wealth creation. It may also affect a nation's global visibility.

Lack of Legislation

Legislation plays an important role in information policy. National security and law enforcement agents are empowered by legislation to check and control the information society. Legislation also provides disciplines among the citizenry to act within the laws that will make access and use of information resources meaningful. Legislation also helps the global environment to deal with a nation according to her laws and practice, thereby reducing informational conflicts and also promoting friendly nations.

Lack of Capital / Funds

The implementation of national information policy requires adequate funding to acquire material resources, ICTs, build accommodation, deploy modern technology, train and retrain staff, and also educate the public. Unfortunately, most developing countries like Nigeria lack these financial

resources for the full implantation of information policy. There is therefore need for stakeholders to pursue aggressive strategies such as copyright laws etc that will partner with the government for the full implementation of any information policy. This is imperative because of the benefits the society stand to benefit in an information environment, friendly in access and usage.

Corruption in Any System

Corruption plays another major barrier to any National information policy. Corruption is an enemy of progress which usually draws any programme back from meeting her set objectives. Therefore, every policy on information must be closely guided to ensure integrity in the implementation in order to arrive the set objectives.

Conclusion

The implementation of any information policy cannot be the responsibility of the public sector alone, but every stakeholder that needs access to information materials. Information today is a very serious factor in any sector of the society. Therefore, every sector must contribute positively to the protection of any information laws or decrees such as Commercial and Corporate Law, Information Technology Law, Intellectual Property Law, International Law etc. that will help to provide access to information materials. The governments on their own may have tried to provide the framework, but these efforts alone will not be enough if we do not complement their effort.

The freedom of information Act (FOIA) came into law in Nigeria on May 28, 2011 when it was enacted. This Act was received with joy because of what we envisage as a check on corruption and lack of transparency in governance.

FOIA is expected to guarantee the right to information within the control public institutions to all Nigerians regardless of Age, Class or Occupation. This right is enforceable in court of the requested information is not provided within 7 days of making the request. The Act also makes it compulsory for public institutions to keep records of their activities. This is meant to enable public access to these records, thus encouraging transparency. However, this Act does not apply to state owned public institutions by the principle of federalism, unless adopted by each state legislature. Presently, only Ekiti and Lagos states have done this.

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is a viable weapon in the hands of the media and civil society groups. However, 4 years down the line, FOIA has been grossly under-utilized. The Nigerian Press and the civil society groups seem to care less about the Act in investigative journalism. Instead, most Nigerian Journalists embraced the practice of feeding-bottle-journalism. The civil society organizations are no better either. They rather respond to issues, instead of setting the Agenda for proper oversight of its activities. The FOIA can be the difference between Accountability and profligacy in our public institutions. Nigerians are aware of this important piece of legislation, but fewer Nigerians have taken steps to exploit its provisions for the public good.

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