



PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF COOPERATION AMONG LAW LIBRARIES IN A DIGITAL ERA: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Current trends in information production and dissemination have made it practically impossible for any library, no matter how large, to acquire all the information resources it requires so satisfy the information needs of its patrons. While that vision may not yet be realisable, law libraries do have within their grasp the possibility of access to much more extensive collections than any one of them currently holds by forming cooperative alliance. The digital environment provides many new opportunities for library cooperation. This paper defines the concepts of ICT, library cooperation and law libraries. It also provides a brief historical background of library cooperative alliances around the globe. The importance of cooperation among law libraries in the digital era of change has also been discussed. Some basic areas of cooperation as regards law library routine services were itemized and explained. Challenges such as inadequate funding, information explosion, copyright barrier, etc. affecting successful library cooperation were enumerated and discussed. The paper recommends, among others, adequate funding of law libraries, adaptation to change by law librarians, and formulation of functional written collection development policies guide sustainable library cooperation.

Keywords: *Prospects, Challenges, Cooperation, Law Libraries, Digital Era, Nigeria.*

Introduction

From time immemorial, libraries have been known to organise themselves into cooperative units for the purpose of enhancing the provision of information services to their teeming population of users. According to Udo-Anyanwu (2020), cooperation is necessary as a means of broadening the services libraries provide which would otherwise be unaffordable for any individual library to offer. The provision of library resources and services cannot be achieved independently; hence library must engage in cooperation to increase the opportunity to serve their users effectively (Jane & Charity, 2024). It is widely acknowledged, according to Ogonu (2024), that no library, no matter how large and well-funded it is, can be self-sufficient in meeting its users' demands especially in this present hard economic situation in Nigeria. Nations progress based on available information infrastructures at their disposal. Cortada (2023) is of the view that global information society is built on information infrastructures that

facilitate cooperation. The world is characterized by massive creation, distribution, utilization, and integration of information. Hence, the importance of cooperation among libraries to benefit from this information explosion cannot be over emphasized.

Cooperation is essentially described as the pillar of unity. According to Ezekiel (2022), cooperation is the “process in which two or more entities work together to bring resources, share responsibilities; jointly plan, evaluate and implement programmes of activities to achieve a common goal”. Cooperation in library situation implies that two or more libraries come together; recognizing that each of them cannot provide the necessary information resources to satisfy needs of its clientele, agree to cooperate in order to share resources (which may include human resources) for the benefit of all. Library cooperation is “a basic concept in library and information science (Ahmad, et al 2024). It ensures that network members make up for their own shortfalls with the strengths of others. By implication, collections that are not locally available can be accessed from other libraries having such collections within the framework of network or library co-operation. The beauty of it is that library patrons in any given library can have access to resources or information from other libraries, both within and outside the country (where there is interaction) through the use of relevant ICTs. The study conducted by Mensah and Dadzie (2022) revealed that resource sharing among libraries, if freely promoted, can facilitate adequate information provision to library patrons. The use of information and communication technology is the best thing to do to freely promote and facilitate steady information dissemination.

The digital era is the era of information and communications technology. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has been defined differently by various scholars. The Encyclopedia of Library & Information Science defines ICT as “electronic technologies for collecting, storing and processing of information. For this discussion, ICT encompasses all electronic systems, gadgets and processes that aid the selection, acquisition, processing, storage and dissemination of library resources for the benefit of cooperative engagement.

Law libraries are libraries found in courts and tribunals, law firms, universities and law societies. There are also criminology and police libraries, and some government departments and companies have legal collections for their in-house counsel. Ogba and Ikeazota (2012) identify some of the substantial law libraries in Nigeria thus: Courts of Appeal Libraries; High Courts Libraries; Human Rights' Commission Law Library; Law Reform Commission Library; Legal Aid Council Law Library; Libraries attached to Law Firms/Chambers; Ministries of Justice Libraries; National Industrial Court Library; National Judicial Institute Library; Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies Library; Supreme Court of Nigeria Library; Taslim Elias Library, Nigerian Law School; and Universities' Faculties of Law Libraries.

Prospects for Library Cooperation in the Era of Global Information Change

There is no better time for libraries to cooperate than in the present era of information and communications technology. According to Ukaegbu & Okwu (2023), cooperation among libraries will significantly reduce operational costs, increase the ability to provide cheaper and more efficient services, expose librarians to global library practices, significantly reduce negative competition, increase the ability of libraries to attract support from foreign donor agencies, and avoid duplication of efforts. The Library and Information Science Network, (2023) recognizes library cooperation as a vital and evolving facet of modern information management and dissemination. Libraries cooperate to be more interconnected in promoting knowledge-rich society (Jane & Charity, 2024). Other rationales for cooperation, according to



Wu (2011) include: promotion of free flow of information resources, ensuring better and efficient access to information resources, ensuring maximization of information resources, facilitating reciprocal exchange of local publications, increasing national technology development, and ensuring standardization of library services.

Jane & Charity (2024) reported Atkinson (2018) enumerating the expected attributes of librarians participating in cooperation activities to include:

- i) Participants are expected to have the right attitude with an open approach and a willingness to share knowledge, information and skills freely.
- ii) Willingness to challenge conventional thinking and an ability to bring to bear fresh perspective and to rethink traditional library services.
- iii) There should be existence of common sense of purpose. All the participants in the team need a common sense of purpose, a commitment to a shared goal trust. Team members need to be able to articulate the reason for understanding of the initiative.
- iv) Team needs to ensure that there is a mutual sharing of success.

Law Library Cooperation: A Brief Historical Background

The Law Library of Congress and Harvard Law School collaborated on a project to increase access to and discovery of national local gazettes, manuscripts, and other legal materials. The aim was to facilitate analysis and knowledge-sharing by the Law Library of Congress and the Program in Islamic Law (PIL) at Harvard Law School regarding the copyright status of collection materials, particularly national gazettes (Brammer, 2021).

The two most comprehensive international law libraries-the Law Library of Congress and the Peace Palace Library based in The Hague, Netherlands, entered into an agreement to form an information-sharing relationship to exchange information and better serve library users. The agreement provides valuable insight into services, collections and cataloging at the two leading law libraries. The Peace Palace Library serves the International Court of Justice, the Permanent Court of Arbitration, The Hague Academy of International Law and other tribunals in The Hague. Its collection includes more than 1 million volumes on public and private international law, foreign law, international relations and diplomacy. The Law Library of Congress was to benefit from this cooperation in fulfilling its primary mission, which is providing foreign, comparative, international and U.S. law research and reference services to Congress, the federal courts, federal agencies and legal researchers. Under the MOU, the Law Library of Congress and the Peace Palace Library share information on research and reference services, which include research methods and techniques and how they are applied in responses for the various types of users each institution serves. Both libraries also share information on the preparation of written reports and other research products and how they deliver research and reference services to their respective patrons. The parties may also share information about collection development. This can include information on collection development policies and about cataloguing, system of classification and the subject headings developed by each of the library. (Collaboration between Peace Palace Library and Law Library of Congress, 2018).

The New England Law Library Consortium (NELLCO) was a cooperation of law libraries collaborating to maximize access to services and resources and to develop, evaluate, and implement initiative programs for the benefit of the members. In 1983, fifteen New England law libraries established a cooperative network to enhance research and educational opportunities at law libraries in New England through programs of cooperative collection

development and resource sharing. That core group, convened at the suggestion of the Deans of the law schools represented, wasted no time in establishing the New England Law Library Consortium, Inc. (NELLCO). NELLCO provides a mechanism for resource sharing and mutual benefit between law libraries. In the early days, this consisted primarily in reciprocal interlibrary loan and access agreements between the participating institutions. NELLCO Law Library Consortium, Inc., renamed in 2014, has grown to include more than 120 law libraries, including Full and Affiliate Members from 33 states across the United States, and International Affiliate Members in Australia, Canada, and the U.K. (History of NELLCO and Bylaws, (n.d)).

On the African Continent, the Coalition of South African Library Consortia (COSALC) was established in 1999 to promote and support national cooperation initiatives. Its main focus was access to electronic information through the establishment of the national site licensing initiative referred to as SASLI. SASLI is the South African Site Licensing Initiative. Others include African Digital Library Support Network (ADLSN), the Database of African Theses and Dissertations (DATD), the Consortium of Ugandan University Libraries (CUUL), the Kenyan Library and Information Science Consortium (KLISC), South African Bibliographic and Information Network (SABINET) and the South-Eastern Library Network (SOLINET), to mention but a few (Che, 2021).

In Nigeria, library cooperation activity started as a follow up from the Conference of the International Library Association and Institutions (IFLA) held in France in 1973. The National Library of Nigeria was mandated to take the role of a clearing house for all the existing libraries in the country. This role resulted in the establishment of an inter-library loan section at the National Library of Nigeria in 1973 (Nwosu, 2004). Onwuchekwa (2014) posits that the emergence of library cooperation in Nigeria was linked to the creation of "National Union Catalogue" for all the resources held in Nigerian libraries. That the deposition of catalogue cards was the main form of resource sharing until 1977 when inter-library loan of books or resources were initiated in pursuant to the recommendation by the "Interlibrary Lending Committee" (held at Ife) that a "Bibliographic Centre" be formed. In 2004, the Committee of Librarians of Nigerian Universities (CULNU) formed the Nigerian University Libraries Consortium (NULIC) to embrace all universities with the view to expanding it to include all academic and research libraries (Okeagu and Okeagu, 2008).

Law Library Cooperation in the Era of Global Information Change

In the twenty-first century global information change, libraries no longer boast owning the resources they provide to their users. As online resources, internet sites and databases become increasingly common, modern libraries serve as gateways to information resources located outside their walls. This is because the volume of information available on the internet is so large that no library can acquire every item of information for the benefit of its users. Libraries have increasingly joined forces together to address the concerns of access to broad and reliable information. Muhammed (2022) reported the rapid change in technologies with reference to library cooperation. He mentioned technological devices such as mobile technologies and social media as having greater impact on library cooperative initiatives. Similarly, (Jane & Charity, 2024) stated that libraries have witnessed significant evolution due to advancement in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Globally, ICT has impacted on the modes of cooperation and provision of library and information services. ICT has become an integral part of library cooperation and has revolutionized sharing of information and knowledge resources. With the adoption of ICT tools, a library can harness



the knowledge and experience of other libraries and come up with better services. Libraries are compelled to embrace ICT to stay abreast of new realities in their profession.

Owushi (2021) gives possible aspects of cooperation that can be improved by ICT to include:

- i. **Centralized Cataloguing and Classification:** Libraries serving the same category of patrons such as law libraries may decide to centralize the production of catalogue cards by one of the member libraries or a different agency. This is possible if all the cooperating libraries are using the same classification scheme. In as much as this engagement will save time and cut expenses, application of ICT will be more rewarding. Instead of the managing centre having physical catalogues, it can explore the possibility of having cataloguing in-print, which can be accessed remotely.
- ii. **Cooperative Acquisition:** Cooperative acquisition entails procurement of library resources by member libraries on a regional or national level. Each participating library is made to concentrate on the procurement of resources on certain subjects which are needed by users of all member libraries. The advantage of this cooperation is that wasteful expenditure, duplication of the same resources and storage issues are avoided. Cooperative acquisition is made much easier using information technology. In the 21st century, electronic resources are given prominence. Hence acquisition of digital resources by cooperating libraries will enhance access to the resources of the libraries' users as users do not have to visit their libraries to be able to access information from other libraries. Resources acquired by member libraries are uploaded to all the users of the participating libraries to access.
- iii. **Interlibrary Loan (ILL):** This is the foremost method in library cooperation by which the libraries in partnership can share their resources. Traditionally this process was made possible by sending print materials from one library to another by shipping or postal services. Where the participating libraries are within the same locality, staff can be used to collect the resources from the loaning library. This practice is made easy using information technology. Library resources in digital form in one library can easily be sent to the receiving library electronically by email or other means. This method takes care of cost of postage or transportation.
- iv. **Digitization:** Copyright issues have been and will continue to be the greatest hurdles to transforming library collections. It is a common fact that libraries in this part of the globe subscribe to a wide range of databases, but much of their retrospective collection and current monographic acquisitions exist only in print. To move to a more efficient and cost-effective way of transporting information to our users, regardless of location, libraries must be able to take issues of copyright seriously. This is more important because we are at a point where we must move forward and address these issues or find ourselves lagging so far behind other industries that we will be unable to catch up.
- v. **Union Catalogues:** Union catalogues are avenues for promotion of readership by making it possible for users to locate information of their choice. It keeps cataloguing and classification data of library resources produced in a particular region, nation or

even the world, such as OCLC union catalogue. An example of national catalogue is the one produced by the National Library of Nigeria. Again, ICT has greatly influenced the production and use of union catalogues. Now we can boast of having the online computer library centre (OCLC) union catalogue. The OCLC union catalogue is the world's largest and most comprehensive bibliographic database. It was established in 1967 and made available in 1971. It was the first, most participant, computerized, online union catalogue system.

Areas of Cooperation by Law Libraries

The following areas are identified as beneficial for cooperation by law libraries:

i. Cooperative Acquisition: Cooperative Acquisitions is open to libraries or research institutions wishing to acquire publications. Participants receive sets of publications according to a profile which they define based on predetermined subjects, languages, and degrees of selectivity and other categories available for selection. They can deposit an estimated amount to cover the costs of their selected profile for one year. Profile costs are based on history of purchases for the program. If the amount billed proves insufficient to cover the cost of materials, there are two options. The libraries because of bulk purchase and collaborative advantage can submit an additional bill to the participant to cover the shortfall or can purchase the material at a discount rate than when acquiring individually.

ii. Resource Sharing: The goal of resource sharing is to improve access and maximize the availability of materials and services at minimum expense. The libraries can purchase resources individually according to the agreement and allow their users to access all the holdings of the participating libraries regardless of their location.

iii. Cooperative cataloguing: Computers are used to aid in the production, maintenance and updating of catalogues. The quality of the catalogue depends ultimately on the cataloguer. In other words, initial input data is still the cataloguer's work. Bibliographic details are gathered from relevant sources or from the acquisitions system. Usually there is one main or master file for the holdings of the library, and a temporary file for cumulating additional records, because printing the master file is done only occasionally. After initial input of the records, the computer can perform simple tests on the record structure, and errors can be located and checked. The computer can be asked to generate added entries, if required, which can later be sorted into the main file. Separate listings for authors, subject and key points of access can be created. A postings file and an inverted index help the computer search and display record relevant to a specific query. Some of the library schools and other institutions have important collections of library literature.

iv. Staff Development: This collaboration involves pooling resources together by collaborating libraries to train their staff at lower costs. Libraries in a cooperative can significantly negotiate lower tuition fees for professional development trainings, courses and workshops for their staff. The operational procedure that guides this arrangement is usually designed and implemented by a staff development committee made up of at least one representative from each of the collaborating libraries.



Factors Inhibiting Successful Cooperation among Law Libraries in Nigeria

Many scholars have written on the challenges involved in forming cooperative initiatives in the era of information and communications technology. Some of these challenges include:

Inadequate Funding:

The study conducted by Antwi et al (2020) to examine electronic resources sharing among academic libraries in Ghana revealed that libraries suffered massive low budget allocation all the time. Similarly, the research conducted by Irenoa, Emilian and Eru, (2019) showed that challenges of cooperation funding availability by their parent organisations. Nworie, et al (2023) also lamented that inadequate funding hinders cooperative efforts. This happens although the budget of libraries has risen significantly in the 21st century (Idogba, 2020). In the same vein, Osagie and Ola (2022) gave availability of funds as one of the major keys to the delivery of satisfactory library services. This is also the view of Okwu and Oporum (2021) that without adequate funding, libraries will continue to remain poorly digitized or automated for efficient service delivery.

Resistance to Change: Some librarians are obviously not willing to adapt to change. But change is inevitable. Librarians in the Third World countries are still battling to cope with modern systems of doing things. Such attitude has negative effect on library cooperation.

Lack of Collection Development Policies: Collection development policies serve as guide to the overall operations of libraries-from selection of information materials to evaluation. Unfortunately, many libraries do not have functional collection development policies-not even unwritten policies. Aslam (2019) stated that lack of structured collection development policy is a barrier for effective library cooperation. Tufail, et al (2024) also highlighted the importance of collection development policy in guiding librarians about resource sharing.

Information Explosion: Libraries are continually facing the problem of information explosion as they strive to form consortia. According to Kapoor (2019), the problems of information explosion inhibit successful cooperation among libraries.

However, Wawu (2019) summarizes the challenges affecting library cooperation thus: General inadequacy in the level of relevant infrastructures, particularly telecommunication facilities; users' inability to access online information; recurrent transformation in technologies. Any format that exists now may not exist ten years from now; lack policy on ICT education/training programmes and implementation; insufficient power supply; lack of ICT skills on the part of library personnel; and lack of automation in some libraries.

Copyright Issues: Libraries wanting to cooperate must digitize their resources and establish institutional repositories. Digitized resources are preserved for long-term accessibility. To be able to do this successfully, copyright guidelines and regulations must be obeyed. The observance of these regulations has been bottlenecks for libraries and librarians, especially in the Third World countries. As a result, libraries feel reluctant to do cooperative activities to avoid copyright infringements.

Recommendations

Based on the challenges affecting successful implementation of cooperation among law libraries in Nigeria, the following recommendations are made:

- **Provision of Adequate Funding:** Without adequate funding, no cooperation initiative will work. With adequate provision of funds, law libraries will be able to acquire up-to-date digital equipment, provide appropriate internet connectivity, subscribe to electronic databases, train and motivate personnel, and provide stable power supply.
- **Acceptability and Readiness to Embrace Change:** It is a fact that there is nothing any profession or discipline can do in this 21st century to survive rather than embrace and move with the trends of technology. Law libraries cannot cooperate in this era with little or no skills in information technology. It is therefore mandatory to accept and move with the time.
- **Availability of Collection Development Policies:** Collection development policies are fundamental to resource sharing. It is in the policies that such ideas are muted for execution. Terms and conditions for cooperation is being spelt out in the policy of each participating library. It is advisable that cooperating libraries write policies to guide their union.
- **Keeping Trends in Technology:** One of the challenges libraries face in this era is the rate at which technologies transform. There is information explosion. Rapid transformation in technology leads to obsolescence of ICT gadgets. Law libraries are advised to embrace the changes that occur in ICT to keep with the time.
- **Copyright issues:** This is another critical area that must be investigated by cooperating libraries. In as much as these issues are complex, librarians, law librarians in particular, must take it as a professional duty to study copyright regulations regarding preservation of information materials. Until this is done, there will be no meaningful and sustainable cooperation that can be formed amongst libraries.

Conclusion

The purpose of establishing a library is to meet the information needs of its users. Efficient service delivery can only be provided with relevant library resources and skilled personnel. Cooperation has since been identified as catalyst for enhancing service delivery and growth of libraries. Libraries need to rely on one another for them to achieve individual goals as no library, no matter how big, is self-sufficient. The digital era has provided avenue for law libraries to leverage upon to effective and limitless service provide cost effective a dlmitless service. Information is produced in different formats which has increased the need for law libraries to develop cooperation among them. This paper discussed the importance of cooperation among law libraries in Nigeria. It provided some useful areas of cooperation for better service delivery. It highlighted some challenges that are affecting library cooperation and suggested measures to deal with them.



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