Indexing Services in Nigeria

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Introduction

It will probably seem precocious to write realistically under this heading for readers of this journal, many of whom may be unfamiliar with recent developments in the vast, growing country that is Nigeria. It is true that the average literate population is still very low, yet there is abundant evidence of rapid growth in the economy and a marked increase in education, and in modern and progressive measures being taken in decision-making sectors of the Nigerian community.

Of more relevance to this topic is the attention currently being given to the development of library and information services in the country. There is a National Library Service, and there is a National Library charged with repository and preservation responsibilities for all publications originating in the country. Public, special and university libraries are also being established to meet national needs. There is therefore a justified basis for postulating an appreciable number of information-seeking academic and research-conscious members of the community that must be users of such versatile tools as indexes.

Role of an index

In a developing country such as Nigeria the role of an index can be more understandable if information awareness is briefly reviewed within a growing economy, or the question can be asked: Of what use is information to an underdeveloped country? or, alternatively, can there be growth and development without adequate or relevant information?

The underdeveloped countries use background information on the economic and social environment in which their programmes are to be carried out; information is needed on trends in conditions and forecasts for years ahead; they need information on the successes and failures of other programmes related to those they are planning. Information is also required for evaluation of past experiences and studies of the impact that such programmes are likely to have in the future. The index as the searchlight to an information seeker has a vital role to play in a developing economy.

Holmstrom has likened indexing to insurance, saying that ‘the only rational statement one can make about its economics is that if, over a long period of years, the value that has been gained from its existence as a whole exceeds the value of the work originally invested in it, the premium paid in advance will not have been excessive’. This economic consideration has meanings with wider dimensions as one considers that the libraries that should provide the indexes are often being given low priorities in the provision of essential services. The provision of needed information is thus made to face an uphill, if not insurmountable, task because of lack of funds.

Problems

We can fully appreciate these problems with the understanding of the fact that no country, not even Nigeria nor any other developing country, can be an island on its own when viewed in relation to an overall international order in bibliographical control and access to information. It is believed that the developing countries’ contributions to information sources are cumulative to what is the total world’s knowledge.

For example, books and journals are now being published in sufficient quantity and quality to be expected to meet international specifications, including indexing. Authors and publishers are presenting materials which receive international recognition.

But on the other hand, in educational institutions in particular, the level of awareness of information is quite below the required standard. As Sawyer (1978) noted:

This problem is perhaps partly attributable to the fact that emphasis in basic training is on the methodological rather than the intellectual (or research-oriented), and that university-level education was not required for elementary school teachers until recently.

The majority of publications are often not
provided with indexes. Some institutions, particularly the teacher training colleges, do not include instruction in the use of information or of libraries in their curricula. The students, some of whom have had some G.C.E. "A" level subjects, find it difficult to differentiate, for example, the parts of a book—Title, Table of Contents, Preface, Footnotes, the Index, to name a few. It is therefore not unusual to find some of these students unable to look for specific information quickly and intelligently without the help of a professional librarian.

Librarians are now being trained in some of these less developed countries. Nigeria has two fully fledged library schools properly integrated with the University of Ibadan and Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, respectively. But the demand for services is greater than the total annual output of the two institutions.

Another problem is the recent growth and formation of learned and professional societies and associations. These learned bodies, like their counterparts in the developed countries, publish journals and magazines as vehicles of communication, thus providing a stimulus to research in various fields. The writer looked into the possibility of finding a solution to the problem of keeping track of the increasing number of publications and learned professional bodies in the medical and health-related sciences and noted in the introduction to a selective bibliography:

Apart from their central and incomparable role of providing continuing education for the professionals, who are the main targets, the journals generally provide a forum for discussion, elucidation, exposition and for keeping all health staffs in the country in close communication and contact, not only with one another, but also with the most recent development within their respective professions—dentistry, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, etc.1

This has raised the other essential problem of preaching or publicizing the awareness of provision of indexes to the completed volume of a journal or the proceedings of the learned bodies in the country.

It is of course a different problem for the local publishers. The economic justification often over-rides the desirability of adding an index to the bound volumes of periodicals.

The use of a thesaurus or of authoritative subject headings in some internationally known indexing services, e.g. Index Medicus or the Educational Research Information Centre (ERIC), is a well-known and accepted practice. In the less developed countries, some allowances have to be made by the reference librarians in using synonyms or related terms. For example, MALNUTRITION, WORMS, WEST AFRICA are acceptable indexing terms in any medical library in Nigeria or West Africa. But in the retrieval of information on these headings from the Index Medicus users need to be aware that:

NUTRITION DISORDERS is used for MALNUTRITION
HELMINTHS for WORMS
AFRICA, WEST for WEST AFRICA

Sometimes too, it is even necessary to build up some subject headings which may not be found necessary in some international indexes, e.g. LATRINE, DIARRHOEA, DISPENSARY, DISPENSER, HEALTH CENTRE, SANITARY INSPECTOR. Such words are used and accepted within the rural health practice concept and many articles are simply written for the village health worker to understand in order to make him more effective in discharging his duties to the rural community.

Developments and prospects as future possibilities

The professional body within Nigeria responsible for encouraging the provision of indexes in correct and acceptable forms, is the Nigerian Library Association. Members, particularly those charged with the retrieval of information for research workers, can be encouraged to form an Association of Indexers.

The Society of Indexers, through international affiliations, could arrange workshops, seminars sponsored by international bodies such as IFLA, Unesco, UNISIST, for developing countries.

The advantages that can accrue from such an arrangement cannot be immediately appreciated unless viewed in the total output of world's knowledge or, as in the quotation from Holmstrom, in the analogy of insurance and indexing.

Publicity should also be directed by librarians towards publishers and authors. An unknown piece of information is a lost piece of information. The index is a quick guide to the text in books or journals. It enhances the usefulness of a publication and becomes a versatile tool in the retrieval of information. Technological advances will help the future exploitation of these reference tools.
It is essential to call the attention of suppliers of commercially funded services to the needs of users in the developing countries—the smaller users, who find themselves at a disadvantage in using large data bases and sophisticated services. For example, if an index is difficult and cumbersome to use, or gives poor recall, it becomes only a 'white-elephant' or useless tool. The low level of 'information-awareness' should be constantly borne in mind by the suppliers of these on-line data bases. The index must anticipate various ways of approach to achieve the fullest exploitation.

In a forthright summary appraisal of this related issue, Pickup (1978) wrote:

To summarise this requirement for flexibility; to cater for the smaller user, suppliers must cease to think of their services as huge, monolithic lumps. They must look rather at the data they contain and at the use that can be made of it. Then they must find some way of allowing and encouraging this use to be made of it. . . .

**Conclusion**

The less developed country will continue to look forward to the advances being made to retrieve information quickly and effectively for the users of library and information services. Librarians and authors should cooperate more to see that books and other publications are provided with indexes up to international standards. Help should be sought to improve local standards and performance.

**References**

3. Oyesola, S. O. Compiler, Nigerian Health Sciences Periodicals (and a list of Health Sciences Associations): a select list. Lagos, College of Medicine of the University of Lagos [1977]. 16p. Introduction.

**Rate of payment for indexing**

A member of The Society, on becoming a Registered Indexer, and on The Society's raising its recommended minimum rate of pay to £3 per hour, advised two publishers for whom she worked regularly that she was thus raising her charges. These are extracts from the letters she received in reply:

. . . informs me that you have done excellent work in the past. . . . However, all our other indexers charge £2.50 per hour and I would be most grateful if you could keep it to that figure for a little while longer.'

from Messrs George Allen and Unwin (28th November 1978)

'I note that you are now a registered member of the Society of Indexers, charging £3 per hour. The Society always seems to be putting its rates up! They should be warned that that policy is making more authors turn to doing their own indexes, which means less work for Society members. There is such a thing as pricing yourself out of the market.'

from Messrs Jonathan Cape Ltd (23rd February 1979)

**First write your index . . .**

As not many people will read your memoirs if you are a politician and a high percentage of those who do will be politicians themselves, why not begin at the end? That is where your dear colleagues will start. By drawing up the index first you will get straight to the point. You will also ensure that the book has Shape.

Who should appear in the index? First, anyone who is likely to be asked to review it. I am told that some papers will allow the author to choose the reviewer. If so, this simplifies the whole procedure. But for my part I fear that if I suggested a reviewer the editor might go out of his way to find someone of exactly contrary opinion. Secondly, if you are likely to be alive and continuing in politics you must mention your colleagues: which colleagues and in what terms depend upon whether you hope for appointment to office, the Lords or a Quango or not. But you must provide for at least one or two words of congratulation as you wander through the lobbies. Thirdly, a sprinkling of The Great, starting with Churchill. All you need is an anecdote or two in the text but Names must appear in the index. Fourthly, it is worth trying to provoke. 'Scandals' seems to me a useful entry with a short list beneath it.


**Going for a gong? See page 201.**

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