Newspaper indexing in Nigerian libraries

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Few Nigerian libraries index daily and weekly newspapers. The qualified and unqualified staff who do the indexing use various entry formats and structures, provide several access points and also maintain several catalogues. The number of subject headings to be assigned per item is determined by policy in most of the libraries. Subject headings are determined with or without subject heading lists. To achieve a uniform indexing system, the National Library of Nigeria should formulate indexing standards, compile and publish indexing terms, index newspapers and publish subject indexes.

Newspapers form the chief instrument of communication through which people debate their problems and speak their minds on public issues. Okorafor has outlined their importance to various sectors of society. He states, "newspapers are useful in teaching reading skills to students and to help them learn to distinguish between fact, opinions and propaganda. Newspaper reading is an important means of maintaining literacy, particularly among young people who leave school early."

Adeyemi stresses the importance of newspapers with particular reference to the developing countries where newspapers publish analysis of current trends in politics, government, arts and sciences; a role played in the developed countries by primary journals. He says that information in newspapers is of value and benefit to industry, government, publishers, the media, banks, labour unions, political organizations, legislators, insurance companies, legal practitioners, researchers and the general citizenry.

To satisfy these vital societal needs about fifty-five newspapers are published in Nigeria: thirty dailies and twenty-five weeklies. The thirty daily and sixteen of the weekly newspapers are published in English; nine weekly newspapers are published in the major Nigerian languages—four in Hausa, three in Yoruba and two in Igbo. One weekly and twenty-five daily newspapers have two editions each. The differences between the editions are chiefly of timing; minor differences appear on the front and back pages when necessary. One weekly newspaper, the Community Concord, has sixteen different editions.

Twenty-five daily and fifteen of the English-language weekly newspapers are known as national newspapers because they are meant to circulate throughout the country. Most of them achieve this objective, but some circulate in their individual states and a few other state capitals, including Lagos and Abuja. The remaining five daily newspapers are city newspapers circulating in one or more of the following towns—Lagos, Ibadan, Abeokuta, Abuja, Kaduna and Kano. Each of the sixteen different editions of the Community Concord circulates in a different state. The nine weekly newspapers published in Nigerian languages circulate in the states where the languages are spoken.

B. U. Nwafor says that the importance of newspapers to Nigerian society is measured by the large backfiles of newspapers maintained by libraries, business and commercial organizations, and even individuals. Paradoxically, Nigerian newspapers have been generally under-utilized, or not used at all because the absence of indexes to newspapers deters potential patrons from using them. Indexes to the newspapers in English and in the Nigerian languages will facilitate retrieval of information in the newspapers and promote research with them.

Three of the eleven libraries in Imo State index newspapers, and three of the seven Nigerian newspaper libraries studied, index newspapers. Most libraries rely on newspaper cuttings and neglect indexing, and the lack of training and/or experience in indexing results in the production of ineffective indexes. Thus, few libraries have independently proceeded to provide any index, to all or some of the newspapers they stock. Where this has taken place, the end result has been both duplication of efforts and, in many cases, poorly compiled indexes, while the sheer task of generating the index remains both tedious and time and energy consuming.

This paper aims to examine newspaper indexing methods in Nigerian libraries and to make recommendations for evolving a uniform newspaper indexing system for the country. A questionnaire comprising various aspects of newspaper management was mailed to 80 libraries. Of the 47 (59%) responses received, 26 (55%) completed the section on indexing. Obviously, the low response to indexing is due to the fact that most Nigerian libraries do not index newspapers. However, the 26 libraries, which are made up of eight university, eight polytechnic, four college of education, one special and five public libraries, are located in 17 (84%) of the 21 states.

Selection of newspapers

The fifty-five newspapers were listed in the questionnaire by language and frequency of publication for the libraries to indicate those they index. 60% of the daily...

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newspapers and 40% of the weekly newspapers are indexed. Although all these newspapers are published in English, the city newspapers also published in English are not indexed; and none of the newspapers in Nigerian languages are indexed.

Selection of subjects

Thirty subjects featuring in Nigerian newspapers at various frequencies were listed in the questionnaire for the libraries to indicate the ones they index. Every library does not index every subject; each library indexes the subjects which satisfy the needs of its immediate clientele.

Entry formats and structures

The libraries were requested to write an entry in the questionnaire to enable comparison of their entry formats and structures. The responses revealed various entry formats and structures.

Eleven relevant and usable entries were used for the comparison. There are differences in the styles of entry formats. Entries are variously indented. The author's name comes before the title in seven entries, and there are disparities in the order of the author's name when it comes after the title. Three libraries use the ordinary order of the name, while one begins with the surname. Titles of newspapers are underlined in seven libraries. Titles of newspapers, names of days, months and year are either written in full or abbreviated. The month precedes the day in ten entries. 'Page' is abbreviated as 'p' or 'pg'. In writing the page reference, the number precedes the letter 'p' in one entry. Capital letters are indiscriminately used in the subject, author's name and the title. Entries are variously punctuated.

There are further differences in the structure of the entries. Items common to all are author, title, day, month, year and page reference. Peculiar to various entries are 'nd' and 'th' used with the day in two entries; the name of the day in three entries; place of publication, volume and serial numbers of the newspaper in one entry. The entries are either badly edited or not edited at all.

Sources of subject headings

Three of the 26 libraries assign no subject headings to their entries. Of the 23 that determine the subjects of an item from ideas, words and concepts in the title or text of the item, 11 adopt the ideas, words and concepts as subject headings, but 12 translate them into index languages, using one or more of the following lists of subject headings: Library of Congress Subject Headings (8 libraries); Sears List of Subject Headings (6); Subject Headings for Indexing Nigerian Newspapers: a preliminary list (1); Geosaurus (1); Legal Subject Headings (1); Spines Thesaurus (1); and Unesco Thesaurus (1). The lists provide adequately for all subjects indexed in eight of the libraries. Although the lists provide adequately for many subjects in four libraries, they are inadequate for typical Nigerian subjects. These libraries adopt such Nigerian subjects as subject headings.

The various indexing methods scatter related material. The three libraries that do not assign subject headings manage through filing by author-title. The practice of free indexing in the eleven (where ideas, words and concepts are adopted as subject headings without reference to a list of subject headings) also scatters related material because an indexer can consider ideas, words and concepts as subjects and assign different headings to the same subject published under different titles in various newspapers. Borko and Bernier warn against this method of indexing because not all the ideas, words and concepts expressed in a work can be considered as subjects—some may be concepts that are simply mentioned, others may be used as examples.

In the eight libraries where the lists provide adequately for all subjects, typical Nigerian subjects are either assigned inadequate headings from the lists or are assigned headings ad hoc as suggested by ideas, words and concepts in the text. Either method scatters related material. The lack of current authority lists of Nigerian subject headings through which typical Nigerian subjects are controlled creates loopholes for inconsistent representation in the four libraries that find the lists inadequate for typical Nigerian subjects. Adeyemi and Adeniji's Subject Headings for indexing Nigerian newspapers, published in 1977 and used in one library, cannot provide adequately for all subjects that have evolved since the list went to press. Adeyemi admits the deficiency by assuring that additional work is being done on the list to reflect developments which have taken place since then and by hoping that, with new headings added to it as new themes evolve, the list can form the foundation for an authority list for indexing newspapers and allied materials.

Number of subject headings assigned per item

The 23 libraries that assign subject headings to their entries differ in their policies on the number of subject headings to be assigned per item. Six libraries assign as many subject headings as are appropriate; seven assign a maximum of one subject heading; three assign two; and another seven assign a maximum of three subject headings irrespective of the contents.

Limiting the number of subject headings by policy affects exhaustivity and specificity of indexing, which in turn affect precision and recall, respectively. It seems that an optimum level of indexing exhaustivity and specificity can be determined by the indexer assigning as many specific subject headings as are appropriate.

Number and position of staff assigning subject headings

Various numbers of librarians, library officers and library assistants with varied experience in indexing

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assign subject headings to the entries of the various libraries.

Table 1  Number and cadres of staff assigning subject headings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number and cadres of staff</th>
<th>Number and percentage of libraries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One librarian</td>
<td>8 (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several librarians</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several librarians and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>library officers</td>
<td>6 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One library officer</td>
<td>4 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several library officers</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several library assistants</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>3 (11%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indexing is a complex decision-process involving perceptual discrimination, concept formation and problem solving. There are obviously difficulties involved, to do with the subject knowledge of the indexer and the social and educational constraints within which the indexer is working. To be able to make the correct decisions, Borko and Bernier recommend that indexers should have a good command of English, and preferably, know the subject field, either by education or by experience.10 The School Certificate is the required qualification for Nigerian library assistants, who have neither sufficient general education nor command of English to enable them to gain effective experience in indexing; they index by trial and error and produce ineffective indexes.

Newspapers may be many but items worth indexing do not usually present so many subjects together as to necessitate subject specialization by several persons. People may have different understanding of the concepts in the same subject published under different titles in various newspapers. They may also index different parts of serialized articles separately with different subject headings for the various parts, which are most often differently titled. Ingwersen and Wormell maintain that any two indexers indexing the same document separately are most unlikely to select identical indexing terms.11 The differences in their indexing processes and techniques result in inconsistent representation of subjects, scattering related material. The degree of scattering is usually highest in systems controlled by library assistants. To build an effective index, Miller advises that one person should be in charge of assigning subject headings but the advice of other staff members should not be ignored: 'They can often suggest pertinent cross-references for which a need was demonstrated as they actually worked with the collection'.12 Newspapers have such continuity of content that they cannot be indexed effectively by more than one person. If several indexers work in the same system, additional provisions for control and supervision must be made to correct the inevitable inconsistencies.13

Access points and catalogues

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The libraries were asked to indicate the access points they provide and the catalogues they maintain. Multiple choice of answers was required in both questions. The responses revealed the following access points: subject—23, author—16, title—12, joint author—8, editor—4, interviewee—3, reporter—2, interviewer—1, author of a reviewed book—1, and author of a book review—1. They are arranged in subject, author-title or dictionary catalogues.

Indexing is concerned with subject approach and analysis. For easy location and retrieval of newspaper items, the subject is the most important and the only access point that should be provided. The provision of many access points and hence several catalogues enormously increases the number of entries.

Frequency of indexing

Newspapers are indexed daily, weekly, fortnightly, monthly or occasionally.

Information delayed is information denied. Newspapers should be indexed daily for the index to be effective. G. O. Ibekwe cautions that backlogs of un-indexed documents are detrimental to the image of the libraries concerned.14

Frequency of filing cards

Cards are filed at various frequencies: daily, thrice weekly, twice weekly, weekly, fortnightly, monthly or occasionally.

Delay in filing cards is as bad as delay in indexing. For effective use of the index, cards should be filed daily as soon as indexing is completed in order to avoid massive accumulation of unfiled cards which bring delays and filing errors, again reducing the effectiveness of the index.15

User problems

These differences in indexing policies and methods and irregularities in indexing systems clearly reveal that indexing varies among the libraries. There are therefore about as many indexing systems as there are libraries where newspapers are indexed, with obvious problems for library users.

Because libraries index the subjects which satisfy the needs of their immediate clientele, subjects contained in the same newspapers indexed by some libraries are not indexed by others. Users are restricted to the subjects indexed by each library, and the absence of relevant subjects in the index erroneously leads users to conclude that they are not in the library's newspaper collection.

The lack of indexing services for the newspapers in Nigerian languages militates against research there. Similarly, the lack of indexing services for the city newspapers hampers research in the local histories of the
cities. Meagre indexing services for weekly business newspapers make business research difficult.

Reference to items on the front and back pages of either edition of some newspapers cannot be effectively used in areas where the other edition circulates. The indexes, which are cards in cabinet drawers, cannot be sent to other libraries on co-operative or exchange basis since they are not mimeographed. The paucity of newspaper indexing has made users, particularly students, travel long distances to use other libraries’ indexes. These problems call for a national action to evolve a uniform indexing system for the country.

**Evolving a national uniform indexing system**

Nigerian librarians, documentalists and information scientists have for over a decade realized the importance of a uniform indexing system for the country. Lawani in 1976 called on the Nigerian Library Association (NLA) to organize a national workshop to work out modalities for a uniform newspaper indexing system.

Banjo’s suggestion that the Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN) provide funds while libraries provide expertise cannot work because of the uncertainty surrounding such a venture. The New York Times sustained so much loss providing its indexes to the public that it left the service for organizations that could make profits or absorb the cost. The writer shares Adeyemi’s view that the National Library, which has the national bibliographic function and is directly funded by the federal government, should take full responsibility for newspaper indexing services.

**The role of the National Library**

The National Library should create a Department of Newspaper Indexing Services staffed with qualified and experienced newspaper indexers.

It should organize a workshop with the active participation of the Nigerian Library Association, the Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria, the National Archives, the Nigerian Historical Society and other interested bodies and persons. The workshop, which should be held at national and state levels, should consider the importance of indexing and indexes; indexer characteristics; indexing processes and techniques; the importance of subject headings; the importance of lists of subject headings and the disadvantages of free indexing; the importance of current authority lists of Nigerian subjects and how to compile and maintain them; Nigerian subjects and their availability in foreign lists of subject headings; entry structure and format; and the importance of daily indexing and filing of cards.

The workshop should create an association to be known as the Nigerian Indexers Association with a Committee of Newspaper Indexers which should meet quarterly to consider new terms for adoption as subject headings.

The National Library should index all archival editions of all Nigerian newspapers and publish the index. It should compile and publish a list of Subject Headings for Indexing Nigerian Newspapers with the indexing terms adopted by the Committee of Newspaper Indexers.

**References**

8. Adeyemi, N. M. op. cit.
15. Ibid.
18. Adeyemi, N. M. op. cit.
20. Adeyemi, N. M. op. cit.