

Commentary

Creating electronic access to newspaper information in Nigeria: The information aid network (IFAnet) experience

*Christopher O. Ola and **Reuben.A. Ojo

Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

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This paper highlights the value of newspaper information and the methods adopted in organizing, preserving and disseminating it. The paper dwells on the traditional ways of managing newspaper resources and the need to devise a new medium of accessing the information contents of the resource. It enumerates the steps taken in conserving newspaper information and building access descriptors for retrieval from the massive information contained in numerous newspapers churned out daily, weekly or periodically. An NGO, (IFAnet), concerned with managing information and using newspapers as one of its major resources has been used as the case study.

Key Words: Electronic access, indexing, Information Aid Network, information communications technology, newspaper information, Nigeria.

Introduction

Information Aid Network (IFAnet) is a non-governmental organization (NGO), established in 2000 at Ibadan, Nigeria to give assistance to seekers of information. It has the goal of gathering, organizing, packaging and disseminating information that have bearing, primarily on Nigeria (Nigeriana information), and more widely, Africa (Africana information). The organization was established with the mandate of creating access to information resources in the areas of Media, Arts and Culture, Information Communications Technology (ICT), Development and Human Rights, among others. It was conceived as a direct response to the incessant and increased malevolence of the military dictatorship against civil societies and media, print and electronic, in the '90s.

The network is meant to provide information resources, ready reference sources and other primary source materials for journalists whose organizations/media houses are banned or closed down. Succinctly explained, IFAnet was established as a resource network and an electronic library to attend to the needs of information

users on media and culture-related issues in Nigeria. It also provides materials on all relevant social, scientific, economic and political aspects of life in the West African sub-continent. Newspapers constitute a major component of the resources housed at IFAnet. It is instructive to note that one of the reasons for locating the network at Ibadan is because of the high level of academic and research activities in the city. The premier university in Nigeria, University of Ibadan, is located in the city. Other higher and research institutions located at Ibadan include: The Polytechnic, International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, Institute of Agricultural Research and Training, Cocoa Research Institute of Nigeria, Forest Research Institute of Nigeria, Nigerian Institute of Horticulture, among others. Students and staff of these institutions also patronize the network for relevant academic and research information. By implication, apart from attending to the information needs of media workers -especially the print journalists- IFAnet serves as a research hub for scholars. In fact, the center has provisions for housing a few researchers (foreign or local) who may want to escape from the hurly-burly of the city, for a short time, to a quiet and serene environment to get some work done or take full advantage of the information and communications technology (ICT) facilities available at the center.

*Corresponding author. E-mail: co.ola@mail.ui.edu.ng

This paper explains how IFAnet manages its newspapers collection. It also enumerates the benefits to be derived if more libraries in Nigeria pay more attention to this vital information resource. Apart from being important tools for information practitioners (journalists) in reportage, newspapers contain primary information. According to Garrison (1933), "When newspaper libraries are computerized, reporters are able to use reference material more effectively." Newspapers are primary sources for written information that, in most cases, does not appear in any other preserved or accessible media. They provide immediate and contemporary news coverage, editorial and public opinion and literary works. Due to the paucity of books in developing countries like Nigeria, newspapers are sometimes the only source of information. "They [newspapers] sometime remain as the only source of information, especially in Nigeria where books are not readily available" (Aina, 1987). However, accurate and unbiased coverage may not be guaranteed in news-reporting in this medium.

Importance of newspapers as information resource

Newspapers are important because they carry current information and they keep the readers informed of events and happenings within and outside their immediate environments. They are useful for education, recreation, entertainment and relaxation. They are a rich source of information due to the sheer enormity of information they contain and the frequency of their production. According to Okojie (1993), "Despite keen competitions from other mass media, newspapers have exerted the greatest influence because of the inherent advantages of being relatively cheap, portable, more widely available and more frequently published thus ensuring the most up-to-date information and readability by individuals with varying reading abilities as and when they like." Lattood (1967) recognized the value of newspapers when he proclaimed that they "serve as primary sources of information, containing current news such as official statements and speeches, new laws and decrees, defense statements, discussion, politics, education and government." Then; Aina (1987) was able to establish the efficacy of newspapers for educational research in Nigeria. The study revealed that, "there is sufficient evidence to infer that newspapers constitute one of the tools used by researchers in education in Nigeria. It is therefore necessary that libraries should emphasize on the collection and organization of newspaper information. They should also provide avenue for the dissemination of research materials contained in newspapers for researchers in education. This could be achieved either by newspapers cuttings."

From the on-going, newspapers are shown to be a veritable resource in any library. Although they are ephemeral and easily destroyable, they constitute a vital

information resource. The perishable nature of newspapers makes them fragile and delicate. They pose a lot of challenges to libraries. Librarians and archivists have taken keen interest in managing this very important medium of information. The need to preserve and/or conserve them so as to make the contents accessible to users has preoccupied researchers. This led information stakeholders to organize an international symposium on: "Access to and preservation of global newspapers" held between 27th and 28th May, 1997 at Washington DC (Naru, 1997). The symposium was sponsored by a combination of Association of Research Libraries (ARL), Centre of Research Libraries (CRL) and Library of Congress (LC). Over 60 researchers, librarians, micropublishers and representatives from foundations attended the meeting to define the problems of collecting, storing, preserving and providing access to international newspapers and, most importantly, to design a course of action that will guarantee acquisition of and access to international newspapers. Apart from this, the James M. Cox Institute Newspaper Management Studies at the University of Georgia funded a study on 'Electronic newspapers: toward a research agenda'.

The level of on-going discourse on the death of newspapers ironically re-entrenches the importance of the medium for communicating information. "Every new communications tool that comes along is proclaimed as the death of newspapers, when in fact they are not more than media hula-hoops in terms of consistency and penetration. The new technologies, the new ideas, the new challenges to readership are threats only if newspapers and newspaper companies refuse to change" (McGuire, 2005). The significance of newspaper information is further encapsulated when he then admonished "The vehicle with which newspapers deliver information and advertising should not be limiting. That doesn't mean we have to toss newsprint. It does mean we have to look for the best ways to engage readers... To save newspapers, we may be talking about saving something that doesn't look like it has for the past 100 years. And, we may be talking about a hybrid of delivery vehicles that includes print and electronic." These efforts and proclamations are indicative of how seriously the issue of managing newspaper information is of great concern to information managers and providers.

Managing newspapers in Nigerian Libraries

Libraries encounter lots of problems in managing newspapers. The precarious nature of this medium paradoxically contrasts their level of usefulness and the enormity of information they contain. Librarians are confronted with the triad problems of handling the papers because of their fragility; preserving them because of their information contents; and housing them because of lack of space and the rapid rate at which they are

churned out. Various methods are therefore employed by different libraries for managing newspaper collection. Some libraries acquire newspapers and organize them by tying issues procured together with a twain on monthly basis and keeping them in closed access. A library assistant is then assigned to retrieve any of the newspapers whenever a user requires them. This system of storage and retrieval increases the incidence of destroying and/or tearing the newspapers especially when tying and untying the papers on several occasions. In no time, the newspapers are in shreds. Other libraries keep the newspapers in boxes arranged chronologically on monthly basis. This method is not only expensive but also space-consuming.

Some libraries have newspaper cuttings. Topical issues of value and headlines are cut and kept in files according to subjects. The files are then classified while those that are needed are retrieved for users by library assistants. This method of preserving newspapers is also wrought with problems because it is cumbersome, tasking and expensive. The risk of loosing some of the files should not be discountenanced. Other libraries also bind the newspapers after acquiring complete sets every month. Apart from being expensive, this method also takes a lot of space.

According to Afolabi (1991), "Although newspapers and magazines are required by most libraries in Nigeria, their contents are indexed by a few libraries." Starting from the first ever published index of 'New York Times' newspapers in 1851 in the US, he chronicled the emergence of newspaper indexes as tools for exploring newspaper information resource in the West and the feeble attempts made in Nigeria at indexing local newspapers without much success. His paper then dwelt on the essential factors to be considered when embarking on manual newspaper or magazine indexing project.

The contemporary information seeker

The relevance of newspapers as a tool for research and a medium for getting current and primary information has been shown in the preceding sections of this paper. It is pertinent to also show the nature and expectations of the contemporary researcher and/or user of information. This is to elicit the need to create new modes of packaging newspapers and magazines for easy accessibility, retrieval, dissemination and referencing. In advanced technology environment, newspapers are given a pride of place as a research tool and recreational material. For instance, the O'Neill Library, Boston College, U. S., subscribes to approximately 80 daily and weekly newspapers. Newspaper directories, indexes and sources of information about newspapers are included in the College's web (Boston College, 2005). This is done in

acknowledgement and anticipation of the information needs/requirements of their patrons.

Information requirements are expected to be handled in the present dispensation with speed and accuracy. The efficiency of any information retrieval system is mainly determined by its ability to deliver needed information fast. Users of information services today differ vastly from those of decades ago. Library patrons are now consumers of the web environment and expect to obtain the information they need in their field of research as easily as they find the flight schedules of their favorite airline and the weather forecast at their destination. They virtually have no time to lose; they are not willing to invest any efforts in learning new tools; they insist on getting accurate information in the shortest time possible. Our users are not interested in the tools but in the benefits that can be reaped from them with minimal efforts.

It is not surprising therefore that more and more information seekers are dependent on information professionals for their information requirements. They need to be informed and they have no time to spare on 'frivolities' i.e. spending precious hours going through extensive volumes of books, magazines, newspapers, etc. Time is just too short! They require the expertise of professionals to device methods of repackaging their information needs in a way that only what they require are provided. This is very necessary now because of the proliferation of print media, especially, newspapers. It becomes expedient for librarians and other information professionals to rise up to the challenges of providing newspaper indexes for easy retrieval.

Managing the newspaper resource at Ifanet

As mentioned earlier, one of the major resources at IFAnet is newspaper. The Center, when it started subscribed to six main newspapers and two national magazines. All the periodicals have very vast coverage focusing basically on Nigeriana and Africana news items with a blend of foreign news.

The first step taken was to design a worksheet to serve as data input instrument for creating electronic database (see appendix I: IFAnet Data Entry Worksheet). Initially, the process of gathering and writing out information was manual, tedious and time-consuming. The library assistants would have to go through each of the dailies to identify topical issues that are suitable for inclusion in the database. Now, using the 'Data Entry Worksheet', relevant information is extracted from the newspapers and recorded on the worksheets. The worksheets and the newspapers are then taken to the editors and documentalists to edit and vet. After this, the information is keyed into the computer by data entry clerks and later verified for correctness and accuracy by the editors and documentalists. In spite of these efforts, the slow pace of

APPENDIX I

IFANET DATA ENTRY WORKSHEET

NEWSPAPERS

NEWSPAPER: _____

DATE: _____

TITLE: _____

AUTHOR (S): _____

SUBJECT (S): _____

KEYWORD (S): _____

ABSTRACT: _____

CLASS NOTATION: _____

LOCATION: _____

ACTIVITY BY: _____

DATE: _____

COMMENT: _____

APPENDIX II

IFANET DATA ENTRY WORKSHEET

NEWSPAPERS

NEWSPAPER: THIS DAY

DATE: Tuesday, October 17, 200; P. 1, 4 & 6.

TITLE: Mayhem in Lagos as 24 killed in Ethnic clashes: Tinubu imposes curfew on Ajegunle.

AUTHOR (S): Amanzé - Nwachukwu, Chika

SUBJECT (S): Ethnicity - Nigeria; Ethnic conflicts - Nigeria.

KEYWORD (S): Mayhem; Lagos; Ethnic clashes; Curfew.

ABSTRACT: Ethnic clashes in Ajegunle area of Lagos State between the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) and the Hausa Community living in the area. About twenty-four people died while several others were injured. Houses, shops and other valuables were destroyed. It was alleged that the fracas started as a reaction to a similar ethnic clash at Ilorin in Kwara State where the OPC wanted to install an Oba in defiance of the Emir of Ilorin. Others also alleged that the clashes started because the OPC killed six Hausas at Ajegunle who they claimed were robbers. The clashes disrupted social and economic activities in Lagos. The Governor, Bola Tinubu imposed a dusk to dawn curfew in the troubled area to forestall further destructions.

CLASS NOTATION: _____

LOCATION: Ifanet

ACTIVITY BY: 000

DATE: 29/02/2001

COMMENT: For official use, Edited by S.O on the 05/03/2001; Data entry by OPE on 07/03/2001, Verification on 20/03/2001 by SO

work and the resources expended; the exercise was worthwhile.

This process was improved upon when the Centre acquired some scanners. The scanners helped greatly as identified portions (topical headlines) of the newspapers were scanned and edited electronically. This eliminated

the burden of having to key-in every item identified for inclusion in the database. However, the process of editing became more rigorous as the scanners would, at times be unable to recognize some words or sentences in the newspapers. Recently, some of the newspapers started having websites and can therefore be accessed

online. This development assisted IFAnet as the necessary abstracting and indexing were done online.

Relevant news or headlines are downloaded, indexed/or abstracted and imported into the IFAnet newspaper database. This method is faster, more accurate and time saving. (See appendix II for a sample of a completed IFAnet newspaper data worksheet).

In creating the database, Microsoft Access was used. The versatility of the software for hosting the IFAnet data was tested and when it was discovered that satisfactory results were obtained through searches made using different parameters and search engines, the database was deemed functional/operational.

Conclusion

Libraries and librarians in Nigeria tend to treat newspapers with levity and neglect. It is instructive that as far back as 1969, Lattood asserted that 3,000 readers of Library of Congress use 8,000 unbound issues, 15,000 bound volumes and 6,000 reels of microfilms per month. There is no gainsaying that newspapers are essential library resources, the need to handle them with the same caution and importance accorded other library materials should not be over emphasized. Newspapers should therefore be organized carefully for easy and quick retrieval.

IFAnet has demonstrated that electronic newspaper database can be created with ease. It is therefore expedient for libraries to start taking the computerization of newspapers seriously. The use of microforms for preserving newspapers should be explored.

According to Naru (1997), "speakers ... and participants expressed strong support for microfilms as the preferred preservation medium, with electronic media as preferred access tools."

Finally, in the spirit of resource sharing, a consortium of libraries could be formed to foster inter-library dependency and library resource sharing. This, to a large extent, will reduce duplication of efforts, materials and costs in handling newspaper records.

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