Information: a Categorical Imperative for Democratic Sustenance in Nigeria

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Abstract

Information is recognised as an important tool to societal growth and development. It has even perversed the different ways people choose to govern themselves. Democracy being one and the most popular form of government accepted by many countries is not excluded from the use of this important tool. The tool has, however, not been adequately explored for the entrenchment and promotion of democracy in Nigeria. To achieve sustainability in democracy in this country, this paper advocates that the National Assembly Library should be proactive in its drive to gather and disseminate information; a more assertive and outward looking information delivery system should be established; information workers should anticipate demand for information and there should be a purposeful drive to acquire the information required by political actors. Also, necessary infrastructures for the computerisation and networking of relevant libraries should be put in place, while a database for books, periodicals, parliamentary bills and other papers that can serve the needs of the executive, legislators, judiciary and even the electorate should be created.

Introduction

Experience has shown that 'information' has been added to the four factors of production - land, capital, labour and entrepreneurship. Information has also been identified as paramount to societal growth and development. In other words, the absence of information is a retarding factor to development. The importance of information as a resource has been taken for levity for a long time until man and society were inundated with more information than they could possibly handle or manage. The need to organize information in a way that it is classified and packaged for easy accessibility becomes compulsive. The classification and packaging of information are predicated on its usability. The usability of information is indicative of the extent of its importance.

For divergent purposes and to different societies and organisations, information has varied levels of importance. This paper posits the

imperativeness of information for the sustenance of democracy. This is granting that the pervasive essence of democracy is generally accepted regardless of culture, race, gender or other differences. Democratic sustenance is premised on a number of imperatives among which are the willingness of all political actors to play by the rules; the recognition of the freedom and rights of the individuals; the respect for the freedom and rights of the press; and the acceptance of uninhibited judicial system. Democracy encompasses decision making and policy formulation at all levels of political structures, and information is a necessary sauce to both functions. Information will be placed in the context of its ability to sustain democracy after looking at a wholistic framework for the use of information. Then, information will be viewed as an instrument for decision making and the role of the library in the promotion of democratic culture will be discussed. There is an instrinsic linkage between 'Democracy' and 'Information'. This relationship will be explored.

A Framework for Information Use

Information needs and information-seeking behaviour of individuals and classes of persons are precedents to information use. The 'need' for information must be identified; then the manners through which the information could be sought are laid out before the information is put to use. Several disciplines are concerned, to some extent, with understanding of how people seek and make use of information; the channels they employ to gain access to information; and the factors that inhibit or encourage information use. These include: the study of personality in psychology; the study of consumer behaviour; innovation research; organizational decision-making; mass media research; and information requirements in information systems design.

Needs may have a cognitive component, which means the need to find order and meaning in the environment - also expressed as the need to know, curiosity, or the desire to be informed. The idea of a fundamental need which drives the search for information is seductive.

Various categorizations of information needs have been produced. Wrights et al (1993) suggest the following categories:
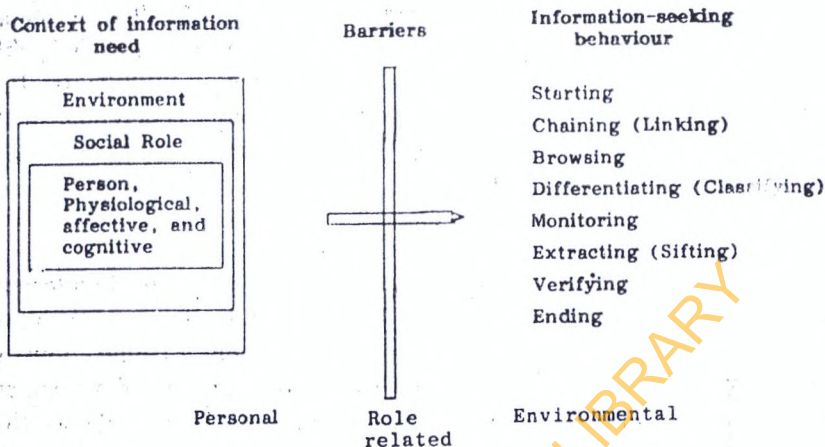
Fig. 1: A general model of information-seeking behaviour (Wilson, 1981, revised)

1. Need for new information;
2. Need to elucidate the information held;
3. Need to confirm information held;
4. Need to elucidate beliefs and values held; and
5. Need to confirm beliefs and values held.

The mode of questioning in carrying out searches also identifies underlying information needs. For example, Carter (reported in Chew (1994) suggests that when an individual is driven to seek information as a result of "needing to know" three modes of questioning behaviour are exhibited

a) Questions to discover what is happening (orientation);
b) Questions to check that the person is "on the right track" (reorientation); and
c) Questions to form an opinion or solve a problem (construction)
One can add:
d) Questions to build one's knowledge of a subject, which we shall label 'extension'.

A fundamental requirement for information-seeking is that some sources of information should be accessible. The lack of an easily accessible **source**

may inhibit information-seeking altogether, or may impose higher costs than the enquirer is prepared to pay. In a study of Consumer Health Information Needs conducted by Phillips and Zion (1994), for instance, identified public libraries as the second most frequently sought sources of information. If an information-seeker discovers that an information source is unreliable in the quality and accuracy of the information delivered, he/she is likely to regard the source as lacking in credibility.

A Conceptualization of Democratic Culture

Democracy has become the most popular form of political philosophy and political practice. It is an irresistible political tide. It grows stronger as long as it endures. To be on the side of civilization, a country must go democratic. Democracy has become the secret for peace and development. All peaceful and progressive countries are democratic because the worth of the human person is appreciated and accorded full respect. It is only when a government is in pursuit of the wishes of the people that it can be called democratic. It is the people's instrument voluntarily constructed by the people through their votes for their own governance. A democratic election must be free, fair and devoid of fear.

What then is democracy? According to Okunade (1988a), "Democracy is a fundamental right an engine of liberation and a catalyst agent of human development. Democratisation must involve not only the free and unfettered exercise of fundamental freedoms of expression, association and political choice, but also the ability of all citizens to participate in the process of national governance". Democracy is the form of government in which every citizen in a state has political investments of political participation and trust. It is a form of government owned by the people it governs. A democratic government is marked by the continuous dialogue and interaction between those who govern and those who are governed.

Another form that the interaction between the people and the government can take is the mutual exchange of views and opinions through the medium of free speech. The activities of government and laws passed by government are powerful forms of communication with the people. That kind of communication determines the nature and character of the government. If a government does not listen to the opinions of its 'customers', it will continue to make 'products' which the people do not need. Therefore, a democratic government is responsive. It listens to the people. A responsible and responsive government creates an efficient state leading to better, faster and more sustained development.

Democracy requires the participation and involvement of the people in political decision making because it is based on the assumption that all people must be involved in determining how they are governed. Democracy, participatory or representative, entails the relatively equal capability of all citizens and influence the allocation of values. Participatory democracy is a government of and by the people - there is active, direct participation by all citizens in the authoritative allocation of values. Representative democracy occurs when the citizens elect people to represent them in the political process and allocate values on their behalf. Generally speaking, the philosophy of allocation of values is dependent on the available information as a guiding principle for equity and justice. It is a major variable in the distribution of values to the different segments and levels of society.

In democracy, all citizens, no matter the social or political status, are accountable before the law. Nobody is entitled to a special legal privilege because, under such dispensation, the law is no respecter of persons. The natural rights of the individuals must be respected by the people and government. The most basic function of government is to protect the rights of its citizens. Democracy not only must allow voting rights but also must allow the citizens and the mdeia some freedom of speech, of assembly, and of political opposition. According to Ranney (1990), democracy is a form of government in which the power to make decisions or select public officials is granted to all adult citizens, based on majority rule, and on which "having ascertained the people's preferences, public officials must then put them to effect, whether they approve or not".

Civil rights and individual liberties are important properties of a democracy. Among these rights, most critical is the right to the freedom of expression and the press. The freedom of the press protects other freedoms through the dissemination of information. This is very important in a developing country like Nigeria where publicity and documentation of human right practices are a deterrent against human rights abuse. This is why repressive regimes always seek to control or gullotine the press. The press must remain the watchdog of the rights of the people, as it is one of the most important institutions in error detection and error correction in a democracy.

A competitive (multi-) party system subjects itself to the opinions of the electorate such that the socio-political product is the joint effort of the party and the people. In a democracy, the results of elections reflect the political opinions of the electorate. Winners must either have an absolute majority or a plurality of votes. If election results are subject to plurality rule, it means that the party with the highest number of votes wins the election even when

it is less than an absolute majority.

In summarizing the elements of democracy, Okunade (1998b) itemized the following:

a) freedom of choice;
b) freedom from ignorance or want;
c) empowerment and capability;
d) respect for the rule of law;
e) equality before the law;
f) promotion and defence of human rights;
g) creation of appropriate political machinery;
h) sustained political communication to create truth and confidence amongst leaders and the populate;
i) accountability of the leadership to the followership;
j) decentralization of the political power and authority; and
k) periodic and orderly succession through secret ballot.

Democratic culture is subsumed under political culture which evolves through a process of comparing different political orientations and merging similar political behaviours to get generalized or universalized democratic standards which encompass the above-itemized elements. According to Danziger (1998), political orientations - that is as the generalized belief system of many individuals. Hence, when a political culture is premised on democratic tenets and the tenets are respected and adhered to continuously, a democratic culture can be said to have been established. In defining politics, Finer (1970) presented a vision of ubiquity of political behaviour and the paradoxical omnipotence and frailty of the effort to channel and domesticate it. This, we assume, sums up the culture of democracy. Democratic culture is not limited to having elections or putting on ground elected governments, but it has to do with sustaining such practices. In doing this, the character of the permissive nature of democracy and the tolerance of opposition must be allowed to subsist.

The Role of Information in the Decision Making Process

Information has been identified as one of the resources required for the improvement of any setting; it is also a data necessary for decision making. According to Derwin (1976), every individual, whether literate or non-literate, needs information to take decisions; thus, every sector of the society needs information. Policy makers, the ordinary man in any type of occupation, etc. are primarily responsible for generating information (Aina, 1995). To be able to generate information, one also needs information

A lot of users' studies in various fields have been carried out in order to precisely know what those users need and thus help to improve their information intake, or means and methods of acquiring information. Information being a valuable tool has to be sought and acquired. It is necessary to know how, where, and when to seek for and use information in order to meet the need one is aspiring to achieve.

It is undoubtedly true that a society stagnates unless it makes constant provision for the injection and absorption of new knowledge. A society is a duality of action and thought, bound together by a communication system that itself is a duality of mechanism and message; i.e., that which is transmitted, as well as the manner of its transmission. In a given society or culture in which language is the medium of communication and the graphic record, one of the instrumentalities, libraries of every kind, constitute a network within the total communication system; a subsystem whose effectiveness depends upon the librarian's understanding of the nature of knowledge and its importance to both the individual and society.

The library can be socially effective only if its operations derive from and are harmonized with an understanding of the ways in which knowledge is generated and flows through the communication channels of a constantly evolving social and intellectual organization. It is this social structure that in large measure determines how knowledge is transmitted into action.

The librarians' professional resources must include an understanding of the processes of intellectual differentiation and inter-relationships of knowledge within a complex social organization. He must recognize not only that intellectual forces shape social structures but also that cultures and their symbol systems shape thought. For example, such concepts as freedom and democracy are both culturally and linguistically delimited. Since libraries are agencies for the diffusion of cultural products, the theory and practice of librarianship must be founded upon social epistemology, which is the study of social knowledge, the means whereby society as a whole achieves a perceptive relation to its total environment, society, nation, or culture with specific reference to the production, flow integration, and consumption of all forms of communicated thoughts through the entire social fabric.

Information is a valuable tool both to policy makers and the electorate as a whole. All political interest groups share the common objective of attempting to influence the allocation of public values using a variety of strategies. Provision of information and necessary data is one of the strategies/political actions used by some groups. Such a strategy assumes that the provision of information will influence decision makers to be more

favourably disposed towards the interests of a group. The interest group may have specialized information that the political system would find difficult or impossible to obtain from other sources. These private groups usually have vested interests in the public policies that emerge and so most actively provide data that support their own interests.

Also, in many countries, as the scale of government and the reach of public policy have expanded, many organizations in society need detailed, insider information about what the government is doing or intends to do that might affect their organizations. Thus, Salisbury (1990) concluded that American interest groups in Washington D.C. now spend more time gathering information from government that is relevant to their organizations' interests (e.g. changes in rules or laws) than they do providing information that might influence government policy.

Aiyepeku's study on 'Information Utilisation by Policy Makers in Nigeria' showed that public policy-makers in Nigeria did not have a high level of information consciousness, although most of them had an appropriate perception of the role of information in an operational context (Aiyepeku, 1982a). In a second report of the same study, Aiyepeku (1982b) laments that while Nigerian policy-makers read journals and current development plans, they were not very great readers of books. He purports that in Nigeria, policy-makers required information in support of planning, implementation, monitoring and formulation or rejection of ideas. For instance, sometimes in 1995, during the Constitutional Conference of General Sani Abacha, some members of the Education Committee visited Kenneth Dike Library from Abuja in pursuit of document that would enlighten them on the causes of incessant strikes and students' unrest in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Their effort was geared towards finding lasting solutions to these problems. Incidentally, the library, in anticipation of people carrying out researches or exploits into these areas, had stocked some materials which were of immense benefit to the members of the constitutional conference.

Parr *et al*. (1991) who have undertaken a study on information, policy analysis and advisory needs of senators and members of Parliament in Australia, acknowledge the fact that parliamentarians have extensive needs for information and policy analysis assistance, and that by and large, the Parliamentary Library is most useful in meeting a substantial proportion of these needs. Baker and Rush (1970) noted that members of parliament want to absorb only that information that is needed for their current purpose; Land (1988) then takes the opportunity to advice librarians that they should keep the short- and long-term needs of information users foremost in their minds,

so they can anticipate and respond to the users' changing moods and needs.

At the third seminar for Clerks-at-the-Table and other parliamentary officials held in Blantyre, Malawi in 1986, it was argued that legislators need to be adequately informed in order for them to perform parliamentary/legislative duties well. It is difficult to obtain information from the executive departments at short notice, so parliament (House + Senate) must have its own information reservoir.

Members of Senate and House (policy-makers) need information services which would enable them to reach both the electorate and government to strengthen their go-between role.

It is of utmost importance that legislative libraries become computerized or enter on-line. The driving force behind the introduction of computerized information in some parliamentary libraries in Europe and America appears to have been the realization that as nations and international communities become more and more interdependent and as the problems associated with central government become complex, it was important that Members of Parliament (MPs) were enabled quickly, and without political favour, the facts that they required. There has clearly been a move away from the traditional method of information management towards a more modern and electronic-oriented approach. For example, POLIS is a Parliamentary On-Line Information System designed exclusively to address the urgent information needs of Members of the British House of Commons. The new technology offers an assortment of advantages, including speed, efficiency and flexibility. It allows searching to be effected by parameters of the alphabetical catalogue, subject catalogue as well as by various combinations of access points (information retrieval) (Thapsia, 1996).

It also offers electronic catalogues with on-line access for readers (OPAC).

Information and Democracy

The efforts to provide effective and efficient information systems and services were ostensibly geared towards fostering and supporting democratic decision-making in Parliament. The belief appears to have been that since the key to democracy is representation, an effective Legislature should rely upon information and policy analyses that permit it to make informed decisions. To this end, therefore, there is a link among information needs, information availability and democracy.

According to the study carried out by Thapsia (1996) on the Legislators' Information Needs in Botswana, their responses show that they perceived

information as all oral, written published or unpublished knowledge. Also, the following became obvious:

1. They demonstrated an awareness of the value and importance of information in legislative debates.
2. The Botswana Daily News and Muegi (The Reporter) are the most popular sources of information followed by members' own constituents. The information available in these sources, however, is not always necessarily tailor-made or directed towards specific needs.
3. Respondents appear to seek information mostly from government departments, personal contacts and fellow parliamentarians. The library would appear not to be their most favoured source of information. Members expressed a need for development oriented information on commerce, industry, rural development and agriculture. Most of this information is not available in the library.
4. A small number of respondents have made important legislative decisions without adequate information because they do not seem to get information when they needed it.
5. Respondents appear to prefer reading newspapers and journals to books. They argued that information in books is often out of data and does not always relate to the immediate situation or problem.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, it is thus recommended that:

1. The National Assembly Library should move away from a traditional approach to a more proactive information gathering and dissemination programme.
2. More assertive and outward looking information delivery system should be put in place.
3. Information workers should have a drive for the anticipation of demand and they must deliver same as appropriate.
4. In the light of the above, a demand monitoring system is required to determine what MPs are currently doing or debating to enable them provide needed information.
5. More research papers/reports and policy documents should be made available to the legislators by the library, especially those that have a development orientation, including reports of commissions of enquiry, project evaluations, consultancy reports and case studies.
6. An infrastructure should be put in place for the computerization and networking of the National Assembly Library. An expert should network

the University Libraries, the Ministerial Libraries and the Attorney General Chamber's Library.

7. A database should be established to house the library's catalogue; information index; newspapers, journals and periodical index; newspapers-parliamentary bills index; older papers and speeches index; index to press articles; external press data; local newspapers cutting data and other resources. These services should help meet the needs of parliamentarians.

Conclusion

In summary, information as it pertains to democracy can be represented in form of a cycle or could be said to be cyclic. Thus:
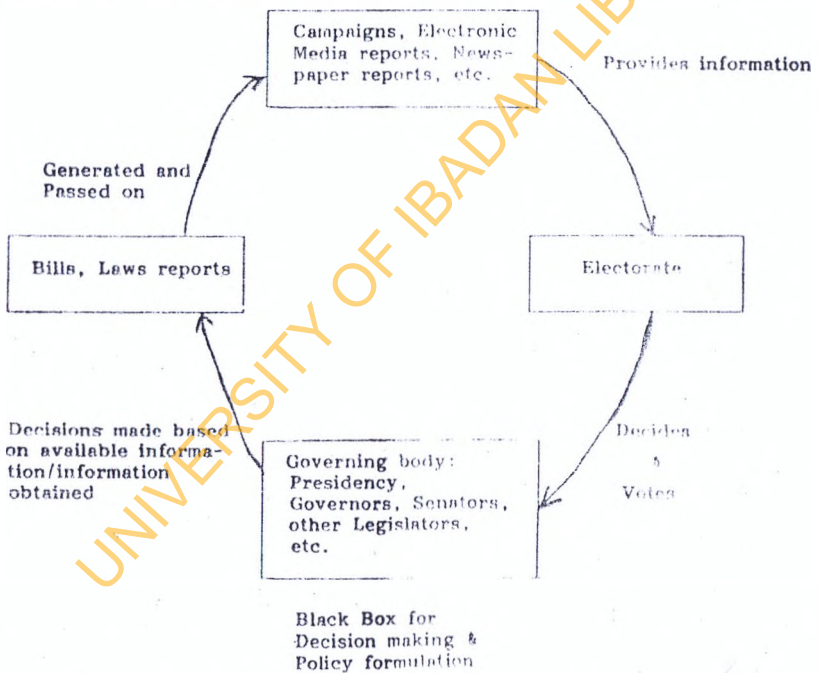
Since information is a necessary tool for decision-making, it is therefore necessary that this tool be supplied to the individuals responsible for making the decisions. In the case of democracy, adequate information is very necessary if the right democratic culture should be obtained and hence sustained. As represented graphically above, it is obvious that at every stage of the cycle, information is needed. The amount and type of information

supplied or obtained influences the output which translates into the next stage in the cycle.

Information, as already noted, can be obtained orally and in written form but it is necessary that once this tool is sought, it will be readily made available hence the necessity for appropriate reservoir or library. The library should make itself current and modern in tune with the trend of society. With recent development in Information Technology, libraries should make sure that they stock the appropriate tools to aid them in retrieving information, especially current information for their users. Libraries should acquire ready and current information and make same available to identified group of users. For decision makers to make the right decisions at the right time, necessary infrastructures, internet connectivity, appropriate database, on-line public access catalogue, etc. should be provided.

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