

# **Information Sources for Clergy in Nigeria: Examining the Problem of Access, Availability and Preservation of Information**

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## **Abstract**

This paper describes how Catholic clergy seek information and the problems they encounter with access and availability of information in their particular environment and culture. It examines the archiving system of the clergy in parishes and dioceses in Nigeria. The recommendations presented may help seminaries and theological institutions in Nigeria in planning library and information systems that meet the needs of future African clergy and increase access to the type of information needed to function effectively in their future ministry. The paper provides a roadmap for effective information preservation and archiving policies that may increase the availability of information for the clergy in Nigeria in a digital information age.

## **1. Introduction**

There is no shortage of information today, especially with the advent of the Internet and the availability of new technologies. In a time of information overload, the problem has not been unavailability of information, but the awareness of and the access to the type of information needed to solve particular problems for particular people. Every field or profession has a type of information that is unique to itself. The information relevant to electrical engineers, for instance, may not be of much relevance to medical professionals or to the clergy. Information systems such as libraries and electronic databases are designed to serve the needs of particular users; they are not randomly designed. Understanding the information needs and the information seeking behaviour of the user is essential in determining the type of information system to be developed to serve the needs of a particular group of people. For instance, if a library is to be designed for the clergy, library system designers and information professionals need to understand the

characteristics of the clergy who are to use the library, and the type of information they need. Information systems such as libraries and electronic databases that store information resources are not set up like a fishing expedition where one throws a net to catch whatever type of fish is available; specificity is needed. Much work is put into learning about the characteristics of the expected users of the library or electronic database system, and the type of information they seek. Therefore, there is a need to understand different types of users in their particular disciplines in order to design information systems that meet their needs.

This paper presents a summary of a study that investigated Catholic clergy as information users to understand their sources of information, how they seek information and the problems they encounter with access and availability of information in their particular environment and culture. The paper examines the archiving system of the clergy in parishes and dioceses. It answers questions such as: How do parishes and dioceses preserve or maintain records such as sacramental and administrative records in their organizations? If a priest, for instance, needs information about an event that happened twenty years ago in his new parish, is it readily available? This paper attempts to provide a roadmap for effective information preservation and archiving policies that may increase the availability of information for the clergy in Nigeria in a digital information age. The findings and recommendations presented here may also help seminaries and theological institutions in Nigeria in planning library and information systems that meet the needs of future African clergy and increase access to the type of information needed to function effectively in their future ministry.

## **2. Terminologies and Concepts**

Some of the terms used in this paper are technical terms drawn from the field of information science. For the benefit of readers who may not be familiar with the meaning of the terms in the context of their use here, this section provides some working definitions of these frequently used terms.

A very important concept that has been a subject of research in the field of information science is *information seeking*. There is no one-way definition of information seeking. The context of its application determines its definition. Marchionini (1989) defines information seeking as a special

way of solving problems that involves identifying a problem or a need, taking steps to create a search process, carrying out the actual search and assessing the results of the search. Case (2012) describes information seeking as “a conscious effort to acquire information in response to a need or gap in your knowledge” (p. 5). In other words, the process of information seeking is carried out consciously when one identifies the need for information to fill a gap in one's knowledge, and then makes an attempt to find information to fill that gap. An important term related to information seeking is *Information system*. An Information system is the location where information is stored for the use of particular set of people in a particular environment who need information to solve and clarify information problems (McMullin & Taylor, 1984). The purpose of an information system is to maintain a collection of resources for the use of a community of users. Examples of information systems include, but are not limited to, libraries and electronic databases. A closely related term is *Information user*, which refers to anyone who interacts with an information system to look or search for resources, and then uses the information found to solve a need. A user here can also be called a reader, a searcher or a consumer of information. An information user is not one who uses only the library, electronic database or information centre. A user can be one who looks for information from another person, such as a priest asking a fellow priest a question; or a lay person inquiring about the teaching of the church from a priest in order to explain it to others. In other words, an information user is one who seeks to acquire information from *any* credible source—printed materials, electronic sources, or human beings. *Information need*, on the other hand, is anything that motivates a user to seek information. This may include a task, a question, a situation or a problem—anything that prompts a user to go in search of information.

Another important term is *information environment*. This term denotes the setting where the information seeking and use take place. Information environment includes the physical, social, organizational, intellectual or cultural context in which the process of information seeking and use takes place. Users have different ways of seeking or using information, depending on their information environment, which influences their interaction with information. Therefore, there is a need to understand information users in the context of their information environment. For

instance, the type of information the clergy in Nigeria need, and how they go about seeking this information, may be influenced by their culture, status as celibate clergy, type of knowledge sought or geographical location. Hence, in developing an information system to make information available and easily accessible to these clergy, these factors have to be considered in the design process. The benefit of understanding the information environment of a specialized population is that it helps information service providers customize their services based on explained social norms and the contextual life-worlds of the user (Agada, 1999). This means that different information systems need to be designed for different types of users.

Information scientists have conducted several studies to determine the information seeking behaviour of various types of users in order to make the right information available and accessible to the right people. Chatman (1991) suggests that information professionals (those responsible for collecting, storing, recording, preserving, organizing and/or disseminating information in both digital and print format) need to create more access to information that meets the everyday needs of specialized populations. Recently, research on the information seeking behaviour of the clergy is growing in the field of library and information science. However, most of these studies have concentrated on clergy from the Western world. Studies on the way African clergy seek information are just beginning to develop. Most of the few studies on African clergy have concentrated on Islamic clergy (Dankasa, 2015). The study which this summary paper is drawn from examines the information practices of Catholic clergy in Nigeria in an attempt to bridge the gap.

### **3. Report of Selected Findings**

This paper specifically presents findings from a mixed-methods study conducted with a sample of Catholic clergy from Northern Nigeria. It utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. Fifteen Catholic clergymen participated in the interviews and 109 completed the survey. Part of the study was designed to find out the sources of information used and the problems these particular clergy encounter in accessing relevant information. A summary of the results and their implications are presented below.

### 3.1 *Catholic Clergy and their Sources of Information*

The findings of the study show that the clergy use various types of sources to resolve problems resulting from their information needs. When the clergy need particular information, they use certain sources to acquire the needed information. The resolution of information problems through the use of information sources is one of the everyday life activities of the Catholic clergy in Nigeria. The information sources they use vary depending on the particular need. The study found that when the clergy seek essential information, such as information for sermons and the teachings of the church, their preferred sources are *printed books*, which are mostly documents of the church and commentaries on homilies, followed by *Internet websites*. Most of the documents and commentary books they use are from their *personal libraries*. They also utilize *fellow Catholic clergy* to share points on sermons, but especially when they need information to solve pastoral issues or problems. The desire for these types of information is prompted by the need to fulfil their duties as ministers.

On the other hand, when the clergy seek information on topics such as health, politics, public/current affairs, and sports/leisure/entertainment, their preferred sources are *Internet websites* and the *mass media*, such as TV and newspapers. Other prominent sources they use for these categories are *fellow Catholic priests* and *social media* (Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, etc.). Although there was no question on the sources of information on security in the survey, analyses of interview data showed that these clergymen relied mostly on the mass media, social media and fellow Catholic priests for information on security. There were positive correlations between the needs for particular types of information and the sources used to resolve the needs. In other words, as the need for a particular kind of information increases, the use of different sources to resolve the needs also increases.

In general, *Internet websites* were the most dominant sources of information, cutting across all the different information needs, and *Google* was the most utilized search engine for these clergy. The use of Google among these clergy was likely to be the same, regardless of their years of experience in the ministry or level of education.

The findings also show that when the clergy need information for sermons/homily and the teachings of the Church, they prefer to use books as major sources. These are mostly printed books from the priests' personal libraries. Their reliance on personal libraries agrees with the findings of Bakar and Saleh (2011), who found that Islamic clerics in Nigeria widely use their personal libraries as channels for information gathering. From the results of both the survey and the interviews of my study, there are clear indications that these Catholic clergymen preferred to use books when seeking information for their ministerial needs.

After examining both quantitative and qualitative findings, it was also evident that these clergy prefer to use *fellow Catholic clergy* as human sources for almost all their different types of information needs. This was seen even in their use of other sources such as social media, where they tend to prefer information from their colleagues. They rarely use family members or friends that are not Catholic clergy as human sources. This could be attributed to the findings that showed that they tend to have more *trust* in information from their fellow Catholic clergy, rather than others who do not share their worldview (Dankasa, 2016). Social media use was also evident from the findings. *Social media* such as Facebook, Telegram, and WhatsApp are major channels where these clergy seek certain information, especially on sermons/homily and the teachings of the Church. These social media tools are important sources of information for these clergy. They access the social media mostly through their smartphone devices.

As found in previous studies (Curran & Burns, 2011; Saleh and Bakar, 2013) that mentioned the use of public libraries among the clergy, this group of clergymen do not frequently use public/school libraries. This behaviour was found to be the same among the clergy regardless of years of experience in the ministry or level of education attained. This finding was not surprising, considering the reliance of these clergy on the Internet and their personal libraries.

### ***3.2 Problem of Access and Availability of Information***

The Catholic clergy in Northern Nigeria attempt to use different sources to meet their information needs, but sometimes problems persist and the needs remain unfulfilled. This failure to resolve their needs may be attributed to problems with access to, and availability of, information.

The contributing factors to these problems as found in the study are discussed below.

#### *Lack of Archive and Documentation*

This group of clergy encounter difficulties in acquiring some important information they look for due to lack of records and proper documentation of past events. Information about histories of churches and administration of sacraments is hard to find because parishes and, by extension, dioceses rarely maintain an archive for storing such information. Sacramental records are kept in many parishes, but most of these are in paper form without adequate protective storage. Consequently, in parishes that are damaged by fire these records are lost, and vital information is destroyed. (Religious riots are common in Northern Nigeria and, unfortunately, places of worship are common targets of vandalism when such incidents occur).

#### *Lack of Familiarity or Absence of Electronic/Online Library Databases*

These clergy showed a lack of familiarity with the use of electronic/online library databases. In the survey, participants were asked to state how often they use electronic/online library databases such as online journals to search for documents or resources. The largest number (37.7%) responded that they either often or all of the time use electronic/online library databases, 16.5% said they sometimes do, and 33.9% reported they either rarely or never use them.

However, it was suspected during the questionnaire design that social desirability bias might influence the answers to this question (Sjöström & Holst, 2002), that some may report using the electronic/online databases often while, in fact, they are not. Social desirability bias is a type of bias in which participants give favourable answers in order to present a better image of themselves, one which may be different from reality. Hence, to control for social desirability effect, a question was inserted in the survey requiring the participant to mention the name of one electronic/online library database he has used in the past. From the results of the frequency analyses, 40.4% (44) reported that they are either not familiar with or have never used electronic/online library databases, while 45.9% (50) mentioned the name of an electronic/online database. However, an examination of the list of electronic/online library database names mentioned by the 50 participants showed that only 13 named one

correctly. This indicates the likelihood that the answers provided by the majority of those who reported that they have used electronic/online library databases are questionable, and probably influenced by social desirability effect. This implies that the majority of the survey participants were not familiar with electronic/online library databases.

The problem may not only be one of familiarity, but may also be the result of the absence of electronic/online library databases. Most seminaries and other higher institutions of learning for the clergy in Northern Nigeria did not have online library databases, or the materials in the library were mostly out of date, as reported by some participants in the interviews. This lack of familiarity with and availability of electronic/online library databases could be the reason why these clergy use Google as their major search engine. In both the interviews and the survey, no participant mentioned Google Scholar, an electronic database that contains and gives access to many scholarly resources. This means that although they use Google frequently, their use does not seem to go beyond the simple Google search. This has the potential of affecting the quality of information these clergy acquire, since a simple Google search may not provide them with the kind of reliable resources they need, especially when preparing to write papers and present talks on theological issues.

One participant mentioned that he was unfamiliar with how to reference materials from the Internet. Hence, he prefers to use printed books when preparing for a talk or writing an article because he is able to reference the printed book. This gives insight into why these clergy prefer using printed books as sources of information when seeking essential information such as the teachings of the Church. Problems like these may limit their ability to get access to current electronic/online research materials in their field of interest that could provide them with credible diverse ideas and viewpoints.

#### *Lack of Basic Amenities*

Another problem that affects access and availability of information for these clergy is the lack of basic amenities. The inefficient electricity, unstable cellular networks and poor Internet connectivity that are common in Northern Nigeria negatively impact how these clergy seek and use information. The lack of amenities compels them to give up

seeking certain information, diminishes their interest or makes them practice selective information behaviour, which may result in missing vital information.

### *Media Imbalance*

Because of an imbalance in government and due to ethnic and religious influence in the polity – especially in the northern region where these clergy come from – the ownership and use of media are manipulated. The religious division in the northern part of the country – a Muslim majority and a Christian minority – affects how the media operate and the type of information transmitted. The governments (mostly dominated by Muslims) control the media and, according to these participants, promote programs in favour of Islam and give less attention to Christian programs in the media. This media imbalance affects how these clergy access certain information and influences the availability of such information. This may explain why these clergy are moving towards the Internet as a major source of information, replacing other media such as television, radio and newspapers.

### *Quality of Information from People as Sources*

Although one of the findings showed that these clergy, especially younger clergy, are more likely to trust information from their fellow clergy than from lay people, it also showed that, in most cases, people who are not clergy are very willing to volunteer information to the clergy. Sometimes this information is unsolicited information, and at other times it is privileged information. This phenomenon is believed to result from the trust the people have in the clergy as confidants. However, these clergy have to be alert to, and deal with, the problem of the quality of information from these human sources. The quality of information may be affected by factors such as *sentiments* and *unreliable sources*.

*Sentiments* could affect the access or availability of information in various ways. Religious, ethnic, and political sentiments could be so strong as to prevent some people from presenting a true version of an issue. The second factor that could affect access or availability to quality information is *unreliable sources*. Rumours and gossip could be passed around as legitimate information if not properly verified. These are problems mentioned by participants that could affect the availability and

access to quality information in the information environment of these clergy.

#### **4. Practical Implications and Recommendations**

This paper suggests several practical implications to information professionals, the Catholic Church and educators of clergy. The information environment of Catholic clergy in Nigeria poses unique problems, and demands unique solutions for solving them. Owing to the clergy's lack of familiarity with information retrieval systems such as electronic/online library databases, there is a need for the development of systems that will serve the needs of the Nigerian clergy. The study may be beneficial to system designers in their design decisions. System developers may design efficient systems for the clergy, according to their contexts and needs that will meet the unique experience of the African clergy and enhance and encourage effective information retrieval.

Based on the findings of the study, this paper outlines the following recommendations to the Catholic Church in Nigeria, its institutions and personnel.

Findings showed a lack of familiarity with electronic/online library databases among these clergy. This could be attributed to the absence of electronic databases in the institutions of training for the clergy. This lack tends to affect the credibility or reliability of the sources of information used by clergy. Seminaries and other higher institutions of learning for the clergy need to upgrade and update their library systems. They should invest greatly in making electronic/online library databases available for their students. These institutions should encourage and offer training to students on how to search for credible, reliable and up-to-date information for their academic works. Catholic dioceses should also be involved in this process by providing workshops and seminars for their clergy on the effective use of the Internet and its tools. They should be shown how to distinguish reliable from misleading information, and to be aware of the credible resources available online for their ministry and how to find them.

There were problems of archives and documentation which made it difficult for some clergy to retrieve important records or information at a point of need. Catholic dioceses and institutions in Nigeria should have

long-term plans for developing an efficient process of documentation and archiving. When records are missing, history may be lost. I recommend an electronic process of documentation (i.e., digitizing documents), where records are kept in a database and stored in the cloud for easy retrieval and to ensure the safety of the documents, especially in Nigeria, where religious crises almost always result in destruction and burning of public places, particularly places of worship. It will require human and material investment to achieve these goals, but all dioceses should consider developing an archiving and documentation plan that digitizes paper documents for electronic management; that plan should include policies on data curation.

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