

ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN INFORMATION SERVICE PROVISION IN A PANDEMIC PERIOD

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Abstract

This paper focuses on role of libraries in information services provision during pandemic period. The paper explores library and information services to be provided to library users during pandemic, the skills required by librarians in providing these services, digital platforms available for the provision of these services during pandemic and safety measures taken to control the spread of in libraries and information centres. The paper recommended among others that, libraries should re-assess every existing service and re-design it to facilitate its use by library users, and in view of the government pandemic protocols to deal with situation, the library management should endeavour to provide the needed ICT resources which the staff is to work with and make use of their newly acquired knowledge and skills, and libraries should provide new equipment and materials to enable it play better role in pandemic situations.

Keywords: Pandemic, Library and Information Services, Provision, Digital Platforms.

Introduction

COVID-19 is a novel virus identified on December 31, 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei city of China (WHO, 2020). According to WHO (2020), the virus is highly contagious and has a high death rate. COVID-19 is associated with illness such as fever, dry cough, shortness of the breath and extreme tiredness. People of higher age group and those with underlying ailments such as dialysis, diabetes, respiratory diseases, and cancer to mention but a few, are more likely to develop serious problems if infected with COVID-19 (WHO, 2020).

On February 27, 2020 Nigeria reported its first positive case of novel COVID-19 in Lagos. The case was that of an Italian citizen who works in Nigeria and returned from Milan, Italy to

Lagos on the 25th of February, 2020. On 30th march, 2020 the president of Nigeria ordered a ban on social and economic activities in Abuja, Lagos, Ogun States and surrounding cities to stem the spread of the virus. This was declared for 14 days. As the virus continue spreading across the states of the federation a total lockdown was imposed as precautionary measure to contain the spread of the virus. However, these lockdowns came with severe economic and social consequences, which has also presented unique challenges in the society and has forced not only information seekers but also government and service providers including libraries and librarians to adapt and adopt technology as a viable and valuable option to provide library and information services so as to satisfy the information needs of users in this pandemic era (Dadhe & Dubey, 2020).

Library and information services are resources, programmes and services provided by libraries to address the information needs of users. They include provision of various resources and programmes to members of the user community. The pandemic necessitated radical changes in the provision of library and information services as strict lockdown and social distancing measures were imposed in the early phases of the pandemic (Dadhe and Dubey, 2020). The internet and web technologies have created a new enabling environment for libraries to enhance and strengthen its service provision in this period of COVID-19. Ishtiaq, Sehar and Shahid (2020) reported that, with the aid of internet and web technology libraries use different digital platforms to provide services to users in this pandemic era. The authors stated that the digital platforms are used to interact with library users, provide the information they required as well as answer their queries. Leo (2020) identified the digital platforms to include zoom, Google classroom, Google hangouts meet, WebEx, blog,

Facebook, WhatsApp, twitter, LinkedIn to mention but a few. With these digital platforms the library can provide remote access to e-resources.

The practice of providing remote access to e-resources through digital platforms by libraries is not new, but the user friendly way adopted by many libraries and the number of resources made available as well as the skills required by librarians in providing library services during the pandemic era paramount. The use of digital platforms in providing library services in this pandemic era has prompted a comprehensive review of the competencies and skills required by librarians. Ashcroft (2004) noted that the rapid introduction of new technologies implies that information professionals in Nigeria and other developing countries need to be more flexible in adapting and adopting new skills and strategies for handling library operations. The skills required by librarians in the 21st century include information technology skills, digitalization skills, skills in provision of intellectual access to information, professional skills, personal skills, skills in development of metadata and information literacy skills (Iorfa, Tondo and Kabir, 2019). All these skills are required by librarians in the provision of library services in this pandemic era. The questions that face every library and librarian in Nigeria which this paper seeks to address are:

1. What are the types of library and information services provided during pandemic period?
2. What are the skills required by librarians in the provision of library and information services provided during pandemic period?
3. What are the digital platforms available for the provision of information services provided during pandemic period?

4. What are the safety measures taken to control the spread of pandemic in libraries and information centres?

Type of Information Services Provided During pandemic

Some of the significant services and provided by libraries are discussed below.

Provision of Remote Access to E-resources: All libraries of higher education system have been working hard to provide services and access to collections to the users who have been displaced due to pandemic (COVID-19). Many libraries have provision for remote access to subscribed E- resources; many have taken a lot of effort in leveraging and expanding existing online services. Libraries can provide various online digital platforms where users can easily access their information. These online digital platforms links to Bhati and Kumar (2020) can be shared on organization websites as well as through social media platforms.

Provision of Free and Expanded Access Resources: In response to the uncertain and difficult time, some publishers are providing expanded access to e-resources (access to additional materials than subscribed by the library) including e-books, e-journals, e-databases etc. for a limited period during this pandemic. Libraries highlight the links of these free and expanded resources on their portal to facilitate visibility of these options available for users. This has enhanced the possibility of users availing the virtual services and hence, visiting library portal frequently. Libraries facilitated access point to provide digital version of the newspaper and magazines that can be read using any convenient handy digital devices (Bhati & Kumar 2020).

Provision of Open Access Resources: Beyond this, there are many scholarly freely available resources available notably repository of Electronic Thesis and Dissertation, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), AMS Free Online Books, Book Boon, Directory of Open Access Books (DOAB) and many more. Libraries have brought together all such resources onto a single page and made these available for their users in anticipation to the information need. Libraries has provided link of resources sharing initiative by International Federation of Library Association (IFLA).

Provision of Resources Related to Pandemic (COVID-19): As the scientific community across the globe is racing against time to develop a definitive treatment for the disease, access to as much as and as quickly as possible published literature to accelerate the ongoing research is the need of the hour. According to Dadhe and Dubey (2020) National Digital Library of India(NDLI) has open its services to all, by providing special COVID-19 related literature and information ranging from research writings, projects, funding, start-ups, datasets, multimedia contents under these single section ‘COVID-19 Research Repository’. The library can equally create a new app with freely available e-contents to access different resources on a single platform and organize information literacy skills classes for those who are not familiar with digital tools. These could be done through open course wares, open learning resources, webinar and virtual classrooms to mention but a few.

Assistance in Information searching and scholarly writing: In order to easing the stress level of users to get the required information, libraries themselves are doing great work to inform their members and support them in this difficult time.

Organisation of Virtual Events: Many libraries have taken effort in arranging webinars relating to topics starting from information literacy to research ethics to educate their users on the use of digital information in their learning and research activities (Dadhe and Dubey 2020).

Other services provided by libraries during the pandemic era include provision of mobile application services, live chat, e-mail management and document delivery services to mention but a few.

Skills Required by Librarians in the Provision of Library and Information Services During Pandemic Era

Umerah (2017) cited by Iorfa, Tondo and Kabir (2019) identified skills required by Library and Information Science professionals to include; professional skills, managerial skills, personal skills and technical skills.

Professional skills include:

- a. Information technology skills: these include networking, library automation and digitalization, web based services, database creation and management systems including CDs, LIBSYS, content development, desktop publishing, intranet, presentation, reprography, micrographs, facsimile, video text, Teletext, hardware/software skills and relational databases including the ability to create data structures which facilitate the indexing and retrieval of information. Others include efficient use of search engines, use of social media tools (Facebook, blogs, twitter etc.) to provide library services, web cast and search skills.

- b. Information literacy skills: this has to do with the ability to locate information efficiently and effectively, evaluate information critically and competently and using information accurately and creatively. Also included here is the economics and marketing of information products and services, information resource management, information processing and organising, e-mail operation skills, multimedia perspectives and video conferencing. Information literacy form the basis for lifelong learning and enables learners to master content and extend their investigations to become more self-directed thus, assuming greater control over their own learning.
- c. Knowledge management skills: this is required for managing organizational knowledge to solve the organizational problems.

Managerial skills: this is the business management skills such as marketing, financing, accounting, control, planning and goal setting, decision making, human relations and managing growth, they are essential in launching and growing a new venture, (Umerah, 2017).

Personal entrepreneurial skills: this skill includes inner control/discipline, risk taking, innovative, change oriented and ability to manage change, persisted, visionary leadership.

Technical skills: writing oral communication, interpersonal, monitoring environment, ability to organise and network building. These skills form the basis of the modular approach to an educational curriculum, (Umerah, 2017). Now that ICT convergence changes the nature of information creation, storage and communication, information provision appears in a variety of contexts. Library and Information Science graduates need to understand the effect of new

technology on labour market and demand for information services and how any changes in the way library provide services will affect all stakeholders.

Digital Platforms Available for the Provision of Library and Information Services During COVID-19 Pandemic

Digital platforms in this context is the software and technology used provide library services with the use of information technology. Digital platforms that can be used to provide library services during COVID-19 pandemic are:

Google Classroom (<https://classroom.google.com>): Teaching and Learning Platform: An online teaching and learning platform Teacher can make online classrooms, upload teaching material, and conduct online quizzes.

Google Hangouts Meet (<https://meet.google.com>): Video Conferencing: Stay connected with teachers and students for teaching and learning and official academic work.

Zoom (<https://www.zoom.com>): It is a platform for organizing meetings, interactive classrooms for teaching virtual and hybrid techniques, micro learning and Video Conferencing.

WebEx (<https://www.webex.com>): Video Conferencing, collaborations, virtual classrooms: It is the leading and widely using platform for webinars, official meetings, video conferencing, and webinars. Recently many webinars are organized by INFLIBNET in this platform with support of web of science teams and others.

Go to Meeting (<https://www.gotomeeting.com>): Meeting tools and web-hosted service: It is an online meeting platform for various institutions. There are various features available in

this tool like desktop sharing, and video conferencing that enables the users like customers, clients or colleagues through digital media.

Easy class (<https://www.easyclass.com>): Learning Management System: It provides a platform for educators to create online classes where they can store the study/course materials online, assessment tests, class assignments, various quizzes, and exams related documents. A feedback system and due dates facility is also available.

Blackboard (<https://www.blackboard.com>): Learning Management System: It provides a platform for educators to create online classes & Share class announcements, learning materials, and make learning accessible anywhere.

Google Form (<https://www.googleforms.com>): for online Quiz/Test: Use google form for assessment purposes and take online quizzes. It also has features like randomization, result declaration, grading, and item analysis.

Microsoft Teams (<https://teams.microsoft.com>): It is developed by Microsoft for teamwork. To update all your teams with instant chats, meetings, files, and apps together on a single platform.

Social media platforms can also be used as digital platforms to render library services during pandemic. These social media platforms include:

Blog: A blog also known as Weblog is an online journal style or informational website which displays information in the reverse sequential order, with latest posts or subject appearing first or at the topmost. Blog pages are social media web platforms where a writer or group of writers and readers or viewers shares their views on a subject or topic even news

as it may apply, (Ogi Djuraskovic and FirstSiteGuide 2018 cited by Bakare, Yacob and Umar 2018). Blogging can be used to promote library services like library outreaching, dissemination of information, building library image, communicate both to internal and external users, and highlight new material arrival and promoting available materials in the library collection. Also Libraries can promote their library services like opening hours, special library events, online discussion and community services like festivities in their local communities, ceremonies, sports. Trending news about issues of general interest can be posted and allows users to comment instantly and add their contribution and opinions.

Facebook: is a social media platform that facilitates social interactions between users. Facebook allows users to create group with unique identity where members can interact and share messages, pictures and even materials when they signed in. Librarians can use Facebook to promote Library service like hosting library homepage, advertise opening and closing hours, locations, website information, newly acquired materials and classmate interaction and discussion on special subjects. Research has revealed that millions of users visit the Facebook platform every hour and most of them are young people. Facebook page can serve as a connect centre to Library users and libraries can also remind user through posting of up-to-date messages and pictures of the resources available in the library, (Bakare, Yacob and Umar 2018).

WhatsApp is a social media platform with instant free messaging and voice over telephoning services. Instant text messaging, voice calls, video calls, documents and media sending serves are all available on this platform. Libraries can send instant messages to users

and get instant responses. Urgent information that requires Library user's attentions can be communicated to users, even documents and materials can be send to users at any time and even outside the Library working hours, (Bakare, Yacob and Umar 2018).

Twitter: is an online real time news and social networking platform where users post and interact with messages. The ease of posting, interacting and sharing of information on this platform have made it a very vital platform for librarians to reach and interact with library users Information on the go with user's responses can be tweeted at everybody convenience. Other social media platforms that can be used to provide services to library users in this pandemic era include skype, LinkedIn, Instagram to mention but a few.

Safety Measures Taken to Control the Spread of pandemic Period in Libraries and Information Centres

Being a central facility of educational institutions, visit to libraries is quite high compared to other sections of the institute. Further, the workspace of libraries is relatively close setting with shared spaces like stack room, reading room, multimedia lab, circulation counter etc. Hence the vulnerability for the spread of coronavirus is comparatively fast among library staff and visitors. Many libraries are doing so only for limited hours every day, and are allowing staff to work with minimum number in accordance with the government guidelines.

Another step being taken by some is to limit the number of sections of the library open to users as the use of certain facilities may make the workplace contaminated and increase the risk of spread of the virus to staff. Other libraries barred the use of computers for searching of Online Public Access Catalogue and urged to use personal devices to check the

online catalogue either by visiting the library website or by using the Single Window Search or Library App or Remote/Off-Campus Services. More so, some libraries have to disinfect all the returned books before they are shelved back.

It is imperative to make the library virus free by taking some preventive measures. Some libraries have issued Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to be followed by users wishing to visit the physical facility of the library to ensure the safety of the staff as well as the visitors. Dadhe and Dubey (2020) stated that the guidelines are placed on the website and at the entrance of the library in an attractive fashion to catch the attention of patrons and also to ensure that visitors know about these SOPs in advance thus facilitating adherence to preventive measures while providing library services. Some of the guidelines are as follow

- i. Users are required to wear a face mask before entering the Library.
- ii. Washing of hands with running water and soap before entering the Library
- iii. Use of alcoholic based hand sanitizer
- iv. Maintaining social and physical distancing while in the Library

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made

1. Improvement in financial resources is the essential elements to develop the library system according to new environment. There should be proper allocation of funds for libraries by authoritative bodies.

2. The library should be provided new equipments and materials so that it can play better role in this new pandemic situation.

3. There is need to encourage awareness of new emerging technology and changing concepts in the field of library and information science.

4. There is need to provide training on new advance technologies to all library professionals to enhance their activities.

5. Centralized training program should be conducted to overcome the financial barriers.

6. There should also be an evaluating system which checks the performance of library staff after training.

7. The library management should endeavor to provide the needed ICT resources which the staff is to work with and make use of their newly acquired knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

It may not be easy to determine when pandemic (COVID-19) will be finally eradicated. We therefore have to get used to continue library business under the “new normal” by exploring all possibilities and flexibilities in order to better serve our users. No doubt academic libraries in different countries and regions have different strategies to support their users in the best way they can. To end on a positive note, however, COVID-19 provides a unique opportunity for librarians to rethink their key roles and core values in providing the needed information to library users during this very challenging time.`

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