



LIBRARY AND INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS AS CATALYST IN COMBATING INFODEMIC IN THE FACE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Purpose: *the study is on roles of library and information professionals in combating infodemic in the face of Covid-19 pandemic.*

Design/ methodology: *the theoretical desk review method was adopted. Resources were accessed online, upon which inferences were drawn.*

Findings: *The paper highlighted on the relationship between social media and infodemic. Examples of misinformation spreading on social media were identified such as conspiracy theories, inaccurate reports of the virus spread, use of anti-malaria drugs and eating of garlic among others. The strategies that library and information professionals should adopt to curb the menace of infodemic were articulated as partnering with health workers, world health organization (WHO) agencies, and media houses etc., in the dissemination of the right information to the public. Practical examples of distinguished librarians and libraries using social media to propagate accurate information on Covid-19 were screenshot.*

Implication: *Library and information professionals has strong role to play in combating the plague of infodemic. Library and information professionals should engage meaningfully in the fight against misinformation with provision of timely and accurate information. Librarians therefore, can help prevent panic, provide timely and accurate information, thereby assisting in quelling rumours and misinformation about the virus. Various media such as the print and social media should be massively deployed as means of carrying out the campaign.*

Originality/Value: *It has exposed the need for Library and Information Professionals to adopt a variety of measures to ensure that timely and relevant information aimed at curbing the menace of infodemic are provided. Library and information science professionals should be seriously engaged in the campaign against spread of fake information.*

Keywords: *infodemic, information professionals, librarians, coronavirus*

Introduction

The global world is at unprecedented moment of uncertainty. Nations are shutting down their borders, economy of nation are gradually going down at an unprecedented rate. Most nations of the world are totally locked-down as a result of the pandemic of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

The epidemics of corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) started from Wuhan, China, last December and have become a major challenging public health problem for not China but the world at large. Viral epidemics and pandemics are by their nature diffuse events, impacting populations on a regional, national or

global scale (Policy Brief, 2020). The new virus has seized the attention of the world. It has infected thousands of people, disrupted the lives of hundreds of millions, and become a major market driver. The outbreak appears to be accelerating (Falkenrath *et al*, 2020). COVID-19 has interrupted global trade and supply chains, depressing asset prices, and forced multinational businesses to make hard decisions with limited information (Ayitety *et al*, 2020).

In February, the World Health Organization (WHO) raised concerns about an "infodemic" caused by a flood of false and misleading information about COVID – 19. During a public

health crisis such as the COVID-19 outbreak, the free flow of information is critical. The WHO is making public health information and advice on the 2019-n CoV, including myth busters, available on its social media channels (including Weibo, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest) and Website (WHO, 2020; Policy Brief, 2020).

The countries of the world are under lockdown to tackle the spread of the pandemic. Schools have closed, offices are shut, markets have restricted operations and people have been asked to remain at home. These social distancing efforts could help tackle the virus, but there's little it can do to control misinformation and online scams. As many people are currently confined to their homes because of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are myths being spread all over the place. The spread of the novel coronavirus is a major public health threat for all affected countries. As the virus spreads, it is creating a fertile environment for fake news to emerge.

Fake news is affecting virtually every sector of the world economy. The challenge of managing fake news on covid-19 is even more dangerous than the virus itself. Fake news is affecting social fabric and dynamics, including politics, policies and global politics, with more than 20 billion devices connected to the internet by 2020, the challenge posed by social media fake news will continue to grow (Nagi, n.d). Infodemic which is a parallel outbreak of misinformation and fear is expanding even faster than the virus in question. (Kihal *et al*, 2019).

The spread of COVID-19 has been matched by the proliferation of misinformation and hate speech directed at individuals of Chinese or Asian descent (Policy Brief, 2020). Misinformation represents a serious challenge in addressing a viral epidemic or other public health crisis. The global world is under the siege of infodemic whereby the various social media, such as facebook, Twitter, You-Tube, Instagram and several popular communication apps like WhatsApp etc is being deployed to spread fake and inaccurate news. The current wave of

misinformation is a challenge for health workers and all the stakeholders engaged in fighting the coronavirus. Mismanagement of information in the period of pandemic could be as dangerous as the cause of the pandemic. How people seek, disseminate or avoid information in the period of pandemic is worth studying. At times untruths creep into the reporting of traditional media outlets in many instances, misinformation has diverted the attention of policy makers, fostered distrust in governments and sowed confusing among the public. Misinformation not only disrupts public health efforts; it can lead to the violation of other human rights (Policy Brief, 2020).

The best way to prevent and slow down transmission is to be well informed about the COVID-19 virus, the disease it causes and how it spreads. The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Finding reliable information in the digital age is already challenging enough, even more so during a global pandemic when fake news, misinformation and hyperbole are rife. No doubt, the library and its many services are invaluable resource and asset to its teeming patrons and the society at large. However, it must be acknowledged that the need to safeguard the health of patrons, employees of the library as well as the host community is paramount. In order words, to contain the widespread of the virus, it is imperative that the traditional libraries and librarians should work hard to ensure that the spread of wrong information on corona virus can be controlled. Library and information professional must lend their voices to the control of COVID-19. They are expected to contribute to the fight against misinformation related to the COVID-19 crisis. Librarians can help the public navigate the potentially confusing world of health information. It is on this understanding that the researchers explore the role of library and information professionals in combating infodemic.

Objectives of the Study

The study generally examined the expected roles of library and information professionals in

combating infodemic in the face of coronavirus. The specific objectives are, to:

1. Give a brief background information on corona virus (CoVs);
2. Highlight on the relationship between social media and infodemic;
3. Discuss some examples of misinformation on covid -19 spreading fast on social media;
4. Determine strategies that can be adopted by LIPs in curbing the menace of infodemic;
5. Discuss with examples, some of the distinguished library and information practitioners spreading timely and accurate information on corona virus.

Brief Background Information on Corona Viruses (CoVs)

The name "coronavirus" coined in 1968, is derived from the "corona" like or crown - like morphology observed for these viruses in the electron microscope (Tyrrel *et al* 1968 in Weiss & Navas-Martin, 2005). Coronaviruses (CoVs) have caused a major outbreak of human fatal pneumonia since the beginning of the 21st century. Over the years, different kinds of Viruses have caused global pandemic. Historically severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus (SARS-CoV) broke out and spread to five continents in 2003 with a lethal rate of 10% in 2012, the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Corona Viruses (MERS-CoV) broke out in the Arabian Peninsula with a fatality rate of 35%. Documentary evidence shows that no specific therapeutic drug or vaccine has been approved for the treatment of human corona virus. Hence, CoVs are considered to be a kind of viruses, of which the outbreak poses a huge threat to humans. Corona viruses are spherical or pleomorphic, with a diameter of 80-120nm. Under the electron microscope, the union surface is decorated with club like projections constituted by the trimeric spike(s), gly coprotein (79) (Fung & Liu, 2019)

The Wuhan Viral Pneumonia cases were discovered at the end of 2019, the corona virus was named as 2019 novel corona virus or "2019-nCoV" by the World Health Organization

(WHO) on January 12, 2020. The International Virus Classification Commission (ICTV) classified 2019-nCoV as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS – CoV – 2) on February 11, 2020. The same time, WHO named the disease caused by 2019-nCoV as COVID-19. (Wu *et al*, 2020). The new COVID-19 is caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2. The most likely ecological reservoirs for SARS-COV-2 are bats, but it is believed that the virus jumped the species barrier to humans from another intermediate animals host. This intermediate animals host could be a domestic food animal, a wild animal, or a domesticated wild animal which has not yet been identified (WHO, 2020). The Novel Coronavirus (COVID-2019) epidemic that originated in China has now spread across countries and territories. Coronaviruses (CoVs) are positive-sense, single-stranded RNA viruses of the family Coronaviridae (subfamily Coronavirinae) that infect a wide host range to produce diseases ranging from common cold to severe/ fatal illness (Dhama *et al*, 2020). The ongoing coronavirus threat that emerged in China has rapidly spread to other countries and has been declared as a global health emergency by the World Health Organization (WHO). The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has already brought considerable human suffering and major economic disruption. This is the second time in the past 20 years that China is facing contagion coming from the corona virus family. In 2002, SARS epidemic took 800 lives and infected 8,000 people (Stanisljevic, 2020).

The world is under the sieges of the coronavirus epidemic which has continued to rise and wreak havoc. Authoritative sources confirm that though fresh infections have come to near zero in China the epicentre, global figures of fresh infections and death are rising. Africa, so far the least hit continent, is gradually amassing figures of infections and fatality.

The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person. The virus spreads by droplets made when people with the corona virus cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people nearby or be inhaled into their lungs. It may be possible that a person can get the corona virus by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose or possibly

their eyes, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads. (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/transmission.html>).

The common symptoms of a person infected with corona virus include respiratory symptoms, fever, cough, shortness of breath, and dyspnoea. In more severe cases, infection cause pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure, and even death

Social Media and Infodemic

The Coronavirus is indeed a global threat. Beyond the corona virus, is another siege known as information epidemic, or what has been called infodemic. It is a situation of overwhelming production and distribution of large amounts of information ranging from outright falsehood to near-truths. According to Ojebode (2020), the virus infestation, this too has been rising. An infodemic, or an excessive amount of both correct and incorrect information, is spreading around the world. The worst-case scenario is that inaccurate information is potentially spreading faster than the virus itself; causing people to make poorly informed decisions. Researchers have found that false information about COVID-19 has circulated much more widely than information from authoritative sources such as the WHO and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The term *infodemic* has been coined to outline the perils of misinformation phenomena during the management of virus outbreak, since it could even speed up the epidemic process by influencing and fragmenting social response (Matteo *et al*, 2020). The World Health Organization is warning that an “infodemic” has developed alongside the coronavirus pandemic. WHO calls it “an over-abundance of information—some accurate and some not—that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020). Infodemic, as it is termed by WHO, is a key word, where different stakeholder’s participation, along with stricter regulation, is required to reduced the impact of fake news in this information age and social media. A lot of information that are incorrect is spreading

through social media. Hua and Shaw (2020:12) writing on the philosophy of infodemic asserts:

“We know that every outbreak will be accompanied by a kind of tsunami, but also within this information you always have misinformation, rumours. We know that even in the middle ages, there was this phenomenon” but the difference now with social media is that this phenomenon is amplified, it goes faster and further, like the viruses that travel with people and go faster and further.

As noted by WHO director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus “we are not just fighting an epidemic, we’re fighting an infodemic. The growing alarm for the novel corona virus (2019-nCoV) spreading from China brings back the spectre of the rapidly diffusing pandemics of the past.

There has been so much overload of information on social media and the traditional media that the World Health Organization, on February termed it an “infodemic” the spread of misinformation and false information about the virus itself is spreading faster than the virus. The covid-19 pandemic has started an infodemic of unprecedented scale, fake news and bullshit flourish alongside credible information from sources such as the World Health Organization (Jandric, 2020). The prevalence of fake news has come under the spotlight more than ever before as noted by Crymble (2020), we are living in a time where anyone and everyone with a laptop or smartphone can offer their opinion instantly, often with either inadvertent misinformation or malicious intent.

While disinformation is a global phenomenon, the way it spreads can vary from country to country. In Africa, news is often spread via WhatsApp groups or local radio, sometimes more than on Facebook or Twitter (<https://www.preventionweb.net/new/view/70744>). Lack of proper messaging at an outbreak of a novel disease causes a panic with more serious damaging impacts on livelihoods, social-fabric of communities, economic landscapes and political stability (Costa, 2020). Misinformation and lack of trust relation to

information and its sources is a re-occurring feature of this pandemic.

The negative impact of misinformation has made some countries to enact, for instance, the UAE Ministry of Interior (MOI) waned that anyone spreading fake information and rumours on social media about coronavirus in the country will be punished according to the online law.

Over the past half century, information has spread to such an extent that it has overpowered the human ability to distinguish between true and false (Mansoori, 2020). He noted further, that in the information age, finding the truth is like trying to find a needle in a haystack for instance, using covid-19 as an example, everyone is talking about the risks, symptoms, results, prospects and possibilities based on their sources, without realising the need for determining the validity and reliability of the said sources; particularly, when the subject is crucial and the information exchanged is probably perceptive and could be interpreted differently by different people.

Brennen, Simon, Howard & Nielsen (2020) contends that members of the public appear to have many reasons for sharing pieces of misinformation, including a desire to “troll” the legitimate belief information is true and political partisanship. Brennen *et al* (2020), in their analysis suggests that misinformation about COVID -19 comes in many different forms, from many different sources, and makes many different claims.

Unlike the pandemic itself, there is no single root cause behind the spread of misinformation about the coronavirus. Instead, COVID -19 appears to be supplying the opportunity for very different actors with adage of different motivations and goals to produce a variety of types of misinformation about may different topics (Brennen *et al* 2020). Today, in the time of Covid-19, false information is almost overriding evident facts, which led some, expects to warn of another epidemic called the “infodemic (Mansoori, 2020). As noted by Krishna (2020) “why is there such an overabundance of information? It is simply because there is an appetite for it. In times of coronavirus, people are driven by fear, which is

the fear of the unknown, fear of an unseen pathogen. Furthermore, this fear travels faster than infection. It must be state categorically, that the intent of spreading fake news is simply an act of irresponsibility. It is disheartening to see an array of social media users sharing statements and pictures that are actually far from reality, this misleading the populace without taking cognizance of the implication of such actions.

The media, especially social media, has been instrumental in sowing fear, a link between social contagions and real biological contagions are a feature of modern outbreaks because of misinformation and fake news (Samuel Scarpino as cited in Krishma, 2020). Social media represents a very dynamic and, still rather new field or technique of communication. Social media platforms such as Youtube, WhatsApp, Twiter and facecebook are being utilize in disseminating information in contemporary society, these social media platforms provide access to unprecedented amount of content with the capacity to amplify dissemination of rumours and questionable information. Social media platforms occupies central place in the dissemination of information relating to COVID-19. Various platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc are used in propagating false information about COVID-19.

With the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic massive, infodemic has undermined and disrupted global effort to fight epidemic (Dhama *et al*, 2020). According to Greene (2020), mimicking the rapid spread of the virus, the hourly expansion of misinformation on television, news reports and social media have obscured the actual communication by international health authorities to medical professional and the wider public. Social media is therefore is a strong instrument through which information on covid 19 can be spread.

Examples of misinformation spreading in social media

Ever since the emergence of the novel Covid 19, several misinformation have been spreading on the social media. Most of these information can be misleading. Some of the misinformation on social media bogus cures, conspiracy theories and inaccurate reports of the virus’s spread are

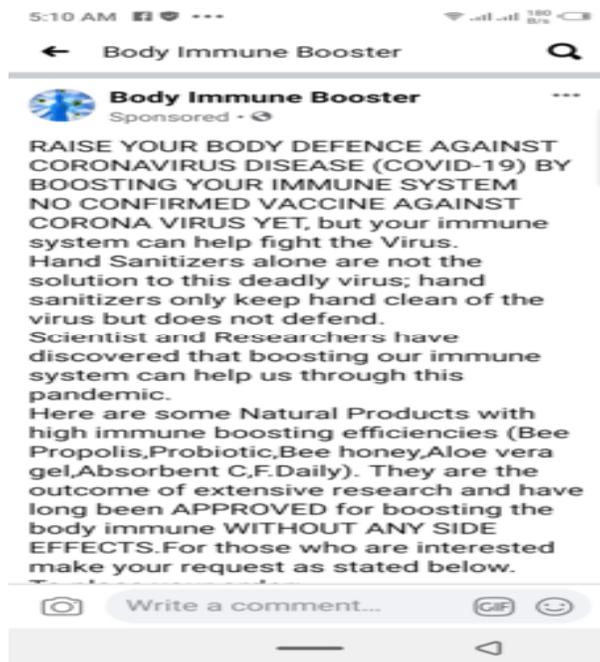
viewed more often than information from authoritative sources (Policy Brief, 2020). Another example of myths circulating online are claims that using hand dryers, eating garlic and drinking bleach can cure infectious, that the origins of the outbreak lie in America or Chinese biological weapons or a sinister plot by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. As pointed out in Policy Brief (2020), more mundane falsehoods include exaggerated infection figure and inaccurate descriptions of government policies.

Again, social media had it had it that the virus could not survive in temperatures above 270 Celsius. With the temperature in some cities hovering close to 40oC, we were right to feel immune until that too proved to be a lie. Also, UNICEF, which was quoted as the source of that information, has since distanced itself. Then appear the video of an oriental person who collapsed on the street in Isolo, Lagos, allegedly under the weight of the virus. That too proved to be a lie as we soon learnt that he was floored in fisticuffs with a driver (Ojebode, 2020)..

Social media posts have been spreading the erroneous message that the anti-malarial drug chloroquine is a protective measure or treatment. While the potential benefits of chloroquine are still being studied, there is as yet no scientific proof to support this claim. According to Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2020), doctors in Lagos have denounced a WhatsApp message currently being circulated in Nigeria that recommends a significantly higher dose than is typically prescribed for malaria treatment

Furthermore, it was allegedly stated that Britain's Queen Elizabeth has been infected with COVID-19, at least that's the fake news that on Saturday, March 28. It went viral on Twitter. Users with thousands of followers retweeted the news. Many didn't care to check if the story was verified, neither did they care that not a single UK publication wrote about it. But that's one example of how vulnerable Nigerians are to online gimmicks (Idris, 2020).

Screenshots of misinformation from social media platforms



Place of information in the period of Covid-19 pandemic

Access to information is non-negotiable factor in dealing with the scourge of COVID-19, individuals, communities, health workers

among others, must be adequately informed on issues relating to this global pandemic. Information is essential to ensuring effective responses to COVID-19, including the implementation of protective measure by the public.

The spreading of information can strongly influence people behaviour and alter the effectiveness of the counter measure deployed by the governments (Matteo, *et al*, 2020). According to Falkenrath *et al* (2020), for students of the history of epidemics, the effects of a pandemic are unsurprising in general even as they may be startling in their speed, proximity, and intensity. As noted by Falkenrath (2020), thousands or millions of people imaging the same thing can become self-reinforcing, amplifying the currents of fear running through the society with each snippet of information or new anecdote.

No doubt, dissemination of timely and accurate information from reliable source is the key to describing the menace of infodemic.

Strategies through which library and information professionals can curb the menace of infodemic

Library and information professionals can adopt any of the following procedures to ensure that information on how to curb the menace of infodemic are provided appropriately.

Partnership with health workers: librarians should partner with health workers in order to generate timely and accurate health information relating to COVID-19. This could be in respect to the various preventive measures, such as social distancing, washing of hands, right use of hand sanitizers both at home and in public places.

Partnering with World Health Organization (WHO) agencies/ representatives: Partnering with WHO agencies and other stakeholders such as National Disease Control Department (NCDC) could go a long way in ensuring the threat associated with the covid 19 is reduced to the barest minimum. In most cases, there are over exaggerated number of deaths associated with the dreaded virus. Library and information practitioners should take practical steps towards partnering with WHO agencies or allied institution to promote dissemination of accurate authoritative information about COVID -19.

Partnering with media houses: Library and information professionals could partner with media houses, through this channel, they could

be able to access and generate timely and accurate information as it relates to covid 19 and disseminate same to the public through social media platforms.

Strong campaign and trainings on how publics can detect fake information: Library and information science professionals should be seriously engaged in the campaign against spread of fake information. Various media such as the print and social media should be massively deployed as means of carrying out the campaign. More so, it is imperative that that trainings are organize for the public's on how to detect fake information.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is without doubt that the WHO has declared misinformation and fear as some of the biggest challenges they face with the new coronavirus. Right now, most people are at a state of dilemma in deciding what is and what is not true about the pandemic and its extent in Nigeria. However, since Library and information professionals serve as information gatekeepers, it is imperative that they should engage meaningfully in the fight against misinformation with provision of timely and accurate information. Librarians therefore, can help prevent panic, provide timely and accurate information, thereby assisting in quelling rumours and misinformation about the virus.

Library and information professionals can no longer afford to be passive but have to be active partners in combating infodemic due to their capability to provide access to timely and highly reliable information. They also have to shift their focus from the conventional library service as means of combating infodemic to a more digitalized format

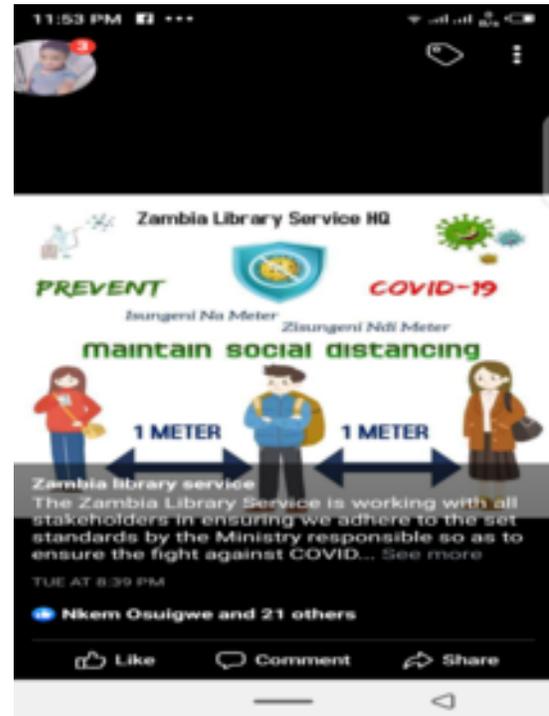
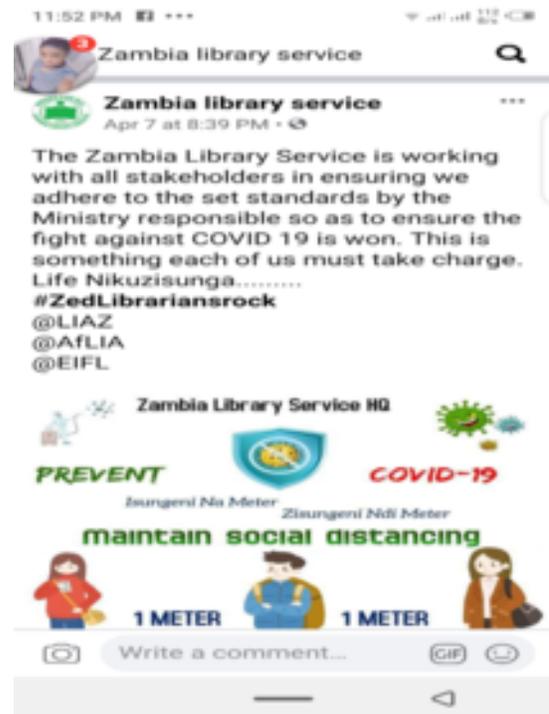
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Screenshots of how Libraries, information professionals and library associations has contributed in curbing the menace of infodemic







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