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COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS IN TIME OF EMERGENCY

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Abstract

Purpose: This work is a general review of the role of libraries and librarians in times of emergency especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic as, libraries and librarians can assist in managing or curbing the pandemic.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The research method adopted for this work is the analysis of the text (i.e. contextual analysis) which involved reviewing of literature in different medium including multimedia.

Implication: Human survival has often been threatened by diverse plagues since existence. One of such recent threat is an infectious disease, the pandemic of SARS-CoV-2 also known as the Coronavirus disease 2019 (i.e. COVID-19). The pandemic is claiming lives due to inadequate equipment and overstretched medical facilities which are subjecting people to an emergency situation without immediate hope for a possible cure or vaccine. This study, therefore, investigates the role libraries and librarians can play to support the fight against the coronavirus surge.

Originality/Value: The conclusion for this work depends on the contextual analysis of the related literature and inferences drawn in the course of the research

Keywords: Libraries, Librarians, Coronavirus (Covid-19), Emergency and Pandemic.

Paper type: Contextual research

Introduction

There have been quite a number of the pandemic that has ravaged the world ranging from HIV/Aids, Ebola, and so on, and now comes Coronavirus otherwise known as Covid-19, each of these pandemics came with its own scare and medical challenges. COVID-19 is a new strain of coronavirus that has not previously been seen in humans with symptoms such as fever, cough, loss of smell, tiredness, muscle pain, and most difficulty breathing (Okike, 2020). This is a condition that makes patients seriously ill and usually but not always leads to death. Medical scientists all over the globe have been studying to understand how the virus behaves and possibly discover a vaccine/cure. The way it is now, the pandemic is not likely to pass away soon and so people have to adjust to the new normal (i.e. a new way of doing a thing). The question now is, what role can libraries and librarians play in combating the surge? According to Ladan (2020), the potentials of the libraries and their associates to acquire, evaluate, package, store, and disseminate information,

especially to the information poor society has placed a huge demand on it to intervene in a critical situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic era.

Libraries whether public or academic are service-oriented, they are designed to provide information resources for the purpose of solving problems with the help of a professional librarian, the emphasis in this paper is the public library which is established by the public fund and situated within communities. During the pandemic, libraries are crucial to researchers as a source of information and are the most conducive environment for study. According to Nagarkar (2020) in the case of research, authentic information from a multidisciplinary information source is crucial for the development of the vaccine, handling social issues, and to make rules and regulations. Researchers are highly dependable on libraries for reliable information. The above admonition is true because there is a serious proliferation of fake news all over the world especially on social media and sometimes in broadcasting houses,

libraries provides more reliable information because they subscribe from the original publishers. It is against this background that the paper seeks to investigate the role of libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Concept of Coronavirus/COVID-19

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that may cause illness in animals or humans. In humans, several coronaviruses are known to cause respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The most recently discovered coronavirus causes coronavirus disease COVID-19 (WHO, 2020). The body further explained that COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus. This new virus and disease were unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. COVID-19 is now a pandemic affecting many countries globally. The disease has led to the death of many people in many countries and it is still a threat and yet, no accepted vaccine or cure Agusi et-al (2020) on the other hand posited that COVID-19 is an infectious disease that causes a respiratory illness with symptoms of cough, fever, and in more severe cases, difficulty in breathing. This disease spreads primarily through contacts especially when an infected person either coughs or sneezes openly, when a person touches a surface or object and then touches the eyes, nose, or mouth. Similarly, COVID-19 seems to spread from person to person by the same mechanism as other common cold or influenza viruses that is, by face-to-face contact with a sneeze or cough, or from contact with secretions of people who are infected. The role of fecal-oral transmission has yet to be determined in COVID-19 but was found to occur during the earlier Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak (Heymann and Shindo, 2020 in Muhammed and Gatiti 2020)

In view of the above, libraries and librarians should be at the forefront in providing awareness to the public regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuring that up-to-date information is generated and made accessible to

both clinical personnel and other people involved in the fight against the coronavirus.

The Role of Libraries and Librarians during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 (Coronavirus) outbreak has a global impact, and affects local communities. Libraries Staff of all types, geographic locations, and sizes are learning the facts about this public health crisis, informing the public, and adapting services and programming to meet changing community needs (WebJunction, 2020). According to Okike, (2020) Librarians have the important role of disseminating COVID-19_related information and resources to the public through various virtual media channels available to them, especially as most people may not come to the library or because the library may be closed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Libraries are designed to collect information in various formats, organize and disseminate them to patrons; these information resources include print and non-electronic resources. The introduction of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) especially computer and the Internet in library functions has made it possible for libraries to carry out reader services remotely regardless of place, time and distance and that is why the library is in a better position to play a role in the current pandemic. Therefore, in this current pandemic, librarians need to devise a different way of collecting organizing, and disseminating factual information regarding COVID-19, bearing in mind social distancing so as to avoid physical contact. In view of the above, Okike, (2020) has this to say, in the current global pandemic, there are new ways to deliver information both real and fake; it is left for librarians to sort out the real information for their users to avoid misinformation.

Libraries like any other institution, public and private sector have been affected by the coronavirus, all activities are shot down because of the pandemic except for the essential services, and libraries by their nature can be of use during the pandemic in terms of disseminating information that will create awareness to the public about the virus. Ladan and Madu (2020) opined that, the president of IFLA had announced that, Libraries around the world are

being affected by the emergence and spread of the coronavirus. After this situation, the libraries around the globe have to mobilize and provide a collection of valuable and reliable information on coronavirus in order to give people a source they can trust. This is true because this day's, fake news is the vogue on the Internet, and librarians are trained on how to identify factual information from the fake ones as such, they are expected to collect reliable information on coronavirus for their users. To buttress this statement Ladan, Haruna and Madu (2020) further said that...

It is apparent that fake news and misinformation have created confusion and subsequently, posed a greater challenge to every effort to curtail the spread of the virus. In this regard, academic, special, and public libraries in Nigeria can provide and share information quickly, efficiently and in real-time as strategies in response to COVID- 19 pandemic. Pg. 129

Aside from the above-mentioned roles libraries can play in the fight against the pandemic, Muhammed and Gatiti (2020) outlined the following roles that librarians can play in times of the coronavirus pandemic

To promote public health awareness by creating and disseminating information relating to preventive measures: They explained that there are various topics which need to be embedded in awareness campaigns about COVID-19 for example the steps individuals can take to prevent transmission, general instructions on using masks, handwashing, and the use of sanitizers, the avoidance of handshakes, and various other ways to control the spread of the virus. All librarians (public, specialist, academic, and medical) have a responsibility to share evidence-based information about this epidemic. In respect of the above, libraries especially public libraries which are situated within communities can play a vital role in creating awareness about the pandemic by engaging the users and members of the community on the need of using face masks, handwashing/use of hand sanitizers, and social distancing in the pandemic.

The findings of Ali and Bhatti (2020) agrees with the above assertion, according to them in this COVID-19 pandemic, social distance is one of the keys to protecting ourselves. In this information age, public health awareness is key to minimize causalities, and librarians and information professionals can play a vital role to disseminate information with health care workers, society, and communities. Maintaining social distancing is important during the lockdown phase. These information channels play a vital role in informing and updating public health information to the general public and health care professionals.

To support the research team, researchers, and faculty by providing information regarding the latest developments, research, and literature:

They further explained that librarians can support medical staff, academics, research teams, and paramedical staff by drawing attention to the latest developments regarding vaccination, diagnosis kits, and relevant studies published in medical journals. The researchers agreed with the above statement because librarians by virtue of their training are experts in the area of information diagnosis selecting, organizing, and disseminating them. These skills can be applied during the COVID-19 pandemic to support researchers who are researching for the vaccine or possible cure for the disease. The librarians assist by searching, identifying, and collating kinds of literature/documents that can be useful in the research on the coronavirus.

To meet the core needs of regular library users:

The incorporation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) in library operation makes it possible for libraries to meet their user's needs in time of the pandemic, librarians can attend to clients online using computers/mobile phones connected with the Internet. There are various platforms librarians can take advantage of_ WhatsApp, e-mail, Facebook, etc. To buttress this assertion, Muhammed and Gatiti, (2020) maintained that, during a pandemic, the library must also continue to support its regular users. During the recent lockdown, many libraries in Pakistan have managed to provide virtual support to their users, such as the provision of references, document delivery, literature searches, and

systematic reviews. Some libraries have initiated online webinars and sessions to keep in touch with their users via Google Classroom, Google Hangouts, Skype, or Zoom. To buttress the above assertion, Okike (2020) in her work, information dissemination in an era of a pandemic (COVID-19): librarians' role made the following remark...

Librarians should serve as catalysts for the effective dissemination of information to promote true knowledge. Librarians should disseminate information via existing and digital media platforms to educate users. For better dissemination of information, especially in a time of great need for accurate health-related information resources in an ever-increasing digital environment, libraries should establish working relationships with health agencies and communication organizations with the objective of cooperative developments of collections, referrals and information shared and learning for users and a new breed of remained librarians. Pg. 2

In line with the above, libraries in Nigeria whether public, school, academic, etc. should endeavor to embrace information technology due to its numerous importance especially in terms of information identification, retrieval, and dissemination in real-time because they play a key role in library operation especially during emergence like in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Challenges Faced by Libraries During COVID-19 Pandemic

The emergence of affordable mobile technology with its numerous social platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc. have necessitated the peddling of fake news among individuals and that is why people do not rely on information emanating from such platforms. During a pandemic, therefore, libraries and librarians are relied upon for genuine information that will help in tackling situations at hand. Misinformation however is one of the major challenges of battling the pandemic. Ladan and Madu (2020) maintained that fake News and conspiracy theories is one of the challenges faced by libraries in combating the pandemic,

they maintained that, our community now depend on various sources of information that are not verifiable. Therefore, librarians should endeavor to evaluate information critically to ensure that information collated is from reliable sources and genuine whether on social media or otherwise that is related to the COVID-19 pandemic without which it will spell doom on the people in the community.

In line with the above Hursh, (2020) asserts that Libraries are also a vital source of truthful information about COVID-19. It's no surprise that there are lots of rumors and false safety tips circulating on the Internet. Libraries are stepping up to provide the public with accurate information about how to protect them. Ladan, Haruna, and Madu on the other hand said, librarians as information specialists should critically evaluate the authenticity of the information from a reliable source and disseminate to the right users at a right time through (Online) available means of communication.

Also, for libraries to be useful in the fight against the pandemic, there is a need for the application of Information Communication Technology ICT which is vital in creating awareness about the pandemic to the public, in Nigeria therefore, libraries and especially public libraries are grossly underfunded as such lack ICT facilities i.e. computers, the Internet that will enable librarians to reach out to a wide range of the public. Supporting the above assertions, Daniel (2013) observed that lack of funds is the major reason for the underdevelopment of libraries in Nigeria. This is true because due to inadequate funds libraries in Nigeria are backward in terms of ICT's infrastructure and technical know-how necessary to meet the information needs of a wide range of people within the community.

Conclusion

Coronavirus also referred to as COVID-19 is a condition in the human body with symptoms such as fever, cough, loss of smell, and difficulty in breathing which has now become a pandemic globally. Health workers and experts on various fields are joining hands to fight the pandemic, librarians are not left behind in these fight too. In the course of this study, it is realized that libraries and librarians have been working

tirelessly in supporting researchers and medical personnel with the information required to combat the surge and that librarians are relied on for genuine information regarding COVID-19 especially now that fake news peddling is the order of the day. In view of the above, Wang. (2020) maintained that, librarians should not overlook their unique skills and the important role they play in curbing the spread/impact of diseases like COVID-19 by combatting fake news/misinformation and providing reliable information to patrons. Libraries and librarians are involved in promoting public health awareness regarding the pandemic, sensitizing people on its preventive measures like the use of face masks, washing of hand, and the need for social distancing. The study further revealed that the challenges faced by librarians during the pandemic are the presence of fake news among people as such librarians are required to apply their professional skills to ensure that information conveyed is reliable and genuine. This is also in-line with, Wang (2020) who maintained that, libraries may play an important role in providing reliable information about pandemics like COVID-19, using their strengths in gathering, evaluating, and curating information for the public. There is also the issue of poor funding, without adequate funds libraries cannot acquire necessary ICT's needed to provide services in real-time in pandemics. The bottom line, however, is that libraries/librarians are essential in the time of emergency as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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