LIBRARIES AND INFORMATION DELIVERY DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Purpose: *The aim of this paper is to identify and critically examine the strategies of information delivery in libraries in the midst of the pandemic; the prospects and the challenges.*

Design/Methodology/Approach: *An exploratory approach was adopted in this study. Major concepts in the title were defined for proper understanding of the study and information delivery strategies such as library websites, electronic mails and social media were discussed.*

Findings: *The findings from the paper identified the various information delivery strategies adopted in libraries; the prospects for the libraries and the challenges in libraries such as financial constraints, poor internet subscriptions and inadequate skills by librarians.*

Practical Implications: *COVID 19 has changed a lot of things globally. Educational institutions are closed alongside libraries. Movement is restricted in all areas especially the aged are advised to remain indoors. Information is life. The society needs to be informed of updates on the pandemic. The library needs to deliver timely information from the Presidential Task Force on Disease Control in Nigeria: the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC); World Health Organization (WHO) and State Monitoring Teams. The prospects and challenges encountered by librarians were discussed.*

Originality/value: *The value of this paper lies in the prospects and challenges of delivering timely information to library users during pandemic.*

Keywords: *COVID 19, information delivery, pandemic, social media, libraries*

Paper type: *Conceptual.*

Introduction

Libraries are the gateways to all life spheres and all formats of knowledge. The year 2020 has given libraries a new generation in terms of how resources are made available to library users and librarians during the COVID-19 pandemic. This cannot be done without the use of the technical tools available in libraries in Nigeria. COVID-19 is an infectious disease that has ravaged the most parts of the continents and was discovered in China in 2019. This has contributed to the closing of educational institutions and the global economy, leading to the worldwide shutdown of libraries advertently. Many countries were shut down and workers were directed from home to work, and the online environment of educational institutions, particularly in developing nations was restricted to learning practices. All the information was provided for any type of media to run daily operations.

Owing to the value of pandemic prevention, members of society are most interested in collecting information on the care, treatment, prevention and containment of the virus. Health experts and pharmaceutical organizations supported the pandemic masses by providing sufficient and specific information to curb the situation. In laboratories, researchers spent days and nights focusing on how to avoid the spread of the virus while the library took the opportunity to do what it does best, and took steps to give members of the public the necessary and accessible information.

Libraries are far from being completely automated in Nigeria so people continue to have physical contact with libraries on a regular basis. With the Pandemic, due to government policy and fear of being infected by the virus, the physical contact with libraries was put on hold. Owing to the closure of libraries, access to

print resources was not possible. However, the need for information increased as users became itchy to get alerts and authenticated data from recognized bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the Nigerian Centre for Disease and Control (NCDC), and the Nigerian Presidential Task Force (PTF). The sudden closure and shift in ways in which information can be supplied hits library managers very hard as it becomes a problem for who and who librarians are to provide with such information. Library administrators were not prepared for this pandemic and their parent organizations were not prepared. Of course, in order to get to every home, the information could not be transmitted manually, libraries had to follow the electronic information distribution platform to be able to fulfill the user needs. Most of the information needed during the time was updates on the pandemic, how to prevent the spread and how to contain the virus. Moreover, some researchers particularly needed information on their research topics during the lock-down.

COVID-19 Pandemic Defined and History

In 2019, a new form of infectious disease named Coronavirus was discovered in Wuhan, China. The virus was not previously found in humans. Coronaviruses are a wide family of viruses known to cause diseases ranging from the common cold to more serious diseases, such as Extreme Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).

The overall signs are fever, exhaustion and a dry cough. Other signs include breathlessness, discomfort and aches, sore throat, diarrhoea, nausea or a runny nose and loss of taste/smell. In all other situations, available evidence suggests that COVID-19 is transmitted by respiratory droplets (such as coughing) and 2-8 fomites during close contact. Reports indicate that more than 27.5 million cases were registered in 188 countries and territories on 9 September 2020, with more than 898,000 deaths; more than 18.5 million people were rescued (Johns Hopkins University, 2020). When the first case of COVID-19 was released on February 27th, 2020 with an Italian visit to the country from Milan on a business trip to Lagos,

Nigeria had its fair share of the pandemic. Similarly, a second case of the virus was identified in Ogun State, South-West Nigeria on March 9, 2020 (Ladan, Madu, &Bala, 2020). So far, Nigeria reported 56,388 confirmed cases as of September 15, 2020, with 10, 968 active cases, 1,083 deaths, and 44,337 discharged cases (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020).

Covid-19 and Information Delivery in Libraries

Globally, libraries play an excellent role in keeping the nation informed, trained and strengthened at all times, including the outbreak of a pandemic like COVID-19. The development of information technology in the 21st century is aimed at bringing libraries and their offerings on a new pedestal (Eje and Dushu, 2018). This trend has shifted the provision and distribution of information in libraries worldwide, from conventional global models to distribution of electronic and web-based formats. Dissemination of information is the method of distributing knowledge to various user groups in different formats. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the common types of information provided in Nigeria include:
  i.   Guidance on COVID-19 virus regulation
  ii. Information about different phases of federal and state government lock downs
  iii. Data pertinent to health care
  iv. The number of infected individuals in every State of the Federation on a regular basis
  v.   Number of patients discharged
  vi. Complete deaths
  vii. How to get the virus back
 viii. Signs from a virus.
  ix. Personal Safety Equipment (PPEs) that emergency responders have access to
  x.   Antibiotics available for viral cure

In order to support medical personnel in the performance of their daily duties, COVID-19 research teams and the presidential and federal task force teams, librarians provide details on the latest developments in virus management in various countries around the world (IFLA, 2020). The following resources are used to deliver this content: Library website, social networking, electronic services and the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC).

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Information Delivery through Library Websites

The library website is a powerful electronic medium which promotes the effective dissemination of information to a variety of users in libraries during the information age. The website of each library is a room for users to activate library properties in the online world. Broering (2017) stated that the library and user solution lies in the development and enhancement of library networks to improve the delivery of information. In libraries, websites are gateways for the use of tools for electronic materials. In the COVID-19 era, the only gate opened to users was the library website which administrators controlled remotely with the closure of physical library spaces. As such, academic and special libraries referred the users to the National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) website.

Social Networking

As defined byPowell (as cited by Chiatto, 2018), social networking as communities in which individuals are somehow related by the values of friendship, working relationships, meaning, etc. Social media networking sites are online outlets where people, groups and organisations, in images, music videos and charts, create and exchange content. A number of social media platforms are currently available to deliver COVID-19 contents, with the common ones being WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, You Tube, Blogs, Wikis, LinkedIn, Flickr and more. These are renowned sites for exchange of information. Libraries use the platforms to provide authenticated data to library users because of their popularity. Library users rely on the information given on these pages by libraries as they are managed by trained system librarians. Chukwuyere, Nwanneka, Chukwudebelu and Emenari(2020) noted that "WHO's WhatsApp" is one of the most credible information sources in the current crisis. Librarians share the WhatsApp link (https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/who-health-alert-brings-covid-19-facts-to-billions-via-whatsapp)withlibrary users in an attempt to counter misinformation and fake news. To do so, librarians build community maps for members, where COVID-19 data are shared, updated and validated. These updates are either posted on community maps or exchanged privately with users, or in other technical chart rooms (Chukwuyere, Nwanneka, Chukwudebelu and Emenari,2020). Ali and Bhatti (2020) also noted that libraries channel information to its users' communities through mobile apps,artificial intelligence–based Chatbots and social media tools and video-based lecture using YouTube.

Information Delivery through Electronic Resources

The information source provided in an electronic format is an electronic resource. E-Resources include: full-text articles, magazines, industry details, e-books, dictionaries, encyclopedias, etc. Electronic tools make it easier to offer the required and credible information to users. Major editors of electronic resources: ProQuest, Cambridge, Elsevier, Emerald and many more gave free access to their publications, mainly on Coronavirus related issues and other open literature, during the period of lock down in most countries of the world. The libraries cooperated with these publishers in order to provide updates on the subject to various user groups online, either through electronic service delivery or by electronic mail.

OPACand Availability of Information

In most libraries in Nigeria, there are library management systems available. Using this technique results in the provision of an Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) that replaces the conventional catalog of the library. In order to access the library catalogue, most library users use the OPAC window that offers access to bibliographic information resources. Asaikpe (2020) observes that OPAC's search capabilities have revolutionized access to bibliographic knowledge, such as keyword search, boolean search, truncation, proximity search, and search for item identification numbers. In the conventional catalogue, this was not possible.This makes information delivery easier for users after the complete lock down of the nation and libraries.

Challenges of Information Delivery during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Librarians faced difficulties in the distribution of information during the COVID-19 pandemic. These problems include:

i. Inadequate Internet capacity in libraries.

ii. Financial constraints

iii. With the nation's complete lockout, most library system administrators were locked outside of their offices and there were no experts available for internet service delivery.

iv. In the case of academic and research libraries, most networks are limited to the campuses and the libraries. With movement limits, users have not been able to access these services.

v. Many library users are not literate and could not even access the services that were accessible on the website of the library.

Prospects

The COVID-19 pandemic is now a new reality and people are to learn who to live with it. Libraries are expected to train and retrain their staff in order to cope with users' demands and information service delivery requirements globally. Service delivery in Nigerian libraries should shift from semi-automated services and a great deal of emphasis should be placed on providing e-services for better user patronage.

Conclusion

COVID-19 amends the protocols to fulfill user awareness criteria and other library social interactions. The closure of physical library spaces has opened the minds of librarians in Nigeria to change their mindset and embrace electronic library services which are the only avenues for effective information delivery in libraries of the 21st century.

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