The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Library Users

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ABSTRACT

Library services had always been rendered to users with ease and satisfaction before the emergence of corona virus in the year 2019. At the dawn of the year 2019, the world witnessed a paradigm shift in her history, one of its kinds in more than a century. That is what many scholars within the main stream termed the COVID-19 Era. This pandemic incepted some peculiar challenges to the academia, leaving the stakeholders of education system at a cross road, hence the question of to be or not to be? In a dramatic turn, the abrupt and unexpected outbreak of the pandemic forced the library professionals, to ascertain ways of working in a rapid time frame to still maintain their value. Hence, in other to solve this bedeviling challenge to the advantage of the Library users, there was a shift to digital platform. Given the nature of the challenges faced by librarians in providing library services during this pandemic era, the purpose of this paper is to decipher the effects this era has caused in the academic activities of the Users of the Library and to profer solutions. However, one must not fail to acknowledge the positive impact of technology during this era and how technology became the academic saviour during the period of lockdown. Conferences and lectures were attended through webinars via zoom, Google meet, etc. In the midst of the challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, one could also witness a blessing in disguise, following the enthronement of technology in academic activities and other spheres of life. Hence, as much as the era is quite challenging, it has brought a revolution in the academia and moreso in the use of Library. Most librarians are now computer literates in order to meet with the taste of time and still be relevant in the profession.

Keywords: *Covid-19, Pandemic, Library, Library Users.*

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 Pandemic has changed the face of the earth especially in the area of library services to the users. It really changed the way people thought and acted over time. More so it affected scholars and the academia, teachers, students and schools are not left out in this struggle for healing as the entire academic sector was being left moribund for several months. The closing of schools and the emergence of online studies have left students and academic staff from developing countries like Nigeria reflecting on the effects of the COVID-19 on them (Davies, et al, 2019). When the pandemic is over, another over thought would be how to survive during this period of post-pandemic lockdown without allowing the academic activities to dwindle, since it is becoming so glaring that the world is learning to live with the pandemic. The regrettable effects of this turbulent period to library Users and library activities is widely discussed today. According to Devi and Verma (2019), it is quite obvious that libraries around the world especially those of them in Africa, Gulf of Guinea are facing hard

choices around which services to offer and how, ranging from minimal restrictions to full closure. One is not oblivious of the fact that governments themselves are taking different approaches, sometimes ordering the closure of all institutions, others indicating that life should continue as usual, and others simply leaving decisions up to library directors. But the fact remains that library activities must go on with or without covid-19 pandemic. Whether virtual or physical services, one has to be covid-19 compliant to avoid further spread of the virus and still discharge his or her library duties diligently.

In any pandemic there are three dimensions to a librarian's role:

- To enhance the promotion of public health awareness through the creation and dissemination of information relating to preventive measures;

- To make sure that research team is supported through the provision of information regarding the latest developments, research and literature;

- To meet the core needs of regular library user

LIBRARY AND COVID-19 SENSITIZATION

It is certain that the COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly spreading to countries around the globe. In this regard hence, Libraries are responsible agents for ensuring public health awareness and the provision of up to date information to clinicians and managers. However, in the age of multiple information as ours, sources and diverse communication channels users do not always access the most valid information. It is estimated that there are about 11 different types of information sources ranging from valid information to untrusted or doubtful information (Ashrafi-Rizi and Kazempour, 2019). However, Hollander and Carr, (2020) opined that experts in the field of infectious diseases suggest that during a pandemic, virtual communication provides a good way to inform patients who are in isolation wards. Google Trends have become a useful tool for monitoring awareness about public health at both national and international levels. It shows a relationship between topics related to COVID-19 and search volumes (Liu et al, 2017). This is to highlight the role of the Library users not only within the academic sector but in the Health Sector. Hence, Librarians are saddled with the responsibility of being at home with up to date data about novel researches around the Globe, to help Health agents confront the critical challenges of the moment.

The Effects of Lockdowns and Closing of Libraries

Different guidelines were set during the pandemic outbreak and to help curtail the further spread of COVID-19 in so many communities, many libraries canceled programs and other events and closed entirely for a period of time. The recent and in many cases abrupt changes to programs and hours may not be immediately detected and reflected in search engines. This gap in information led to confusion and inconvenience for those who make use of online libraries. This leads one to talk about the societal role of the frontline librarians during this period.

Frontline Librarians' Roles in the Pandemic era

This interesting theme emerges when talking about the societal role of librarians during crisis times. Here one asks how information professionals can play their roles as a citizen within their extended role as librarians during hard times. One of the ways would be promoting reading habits and good reading materials to help users in isolation. Another way may be to conduct information literacy sessions to prepare the nation against "infodemic" (spread of fake or misinformation). Another important role of information professionals these days is to provide and promote soul satisfying books for individual's well being. People are depressed and disappointed and this is a high time to heal their hearts and souls. Some users had a consensus that the role of librarians becomes more crucial and demanding during emergency crisis. Across the world people are taking extraordinary precautions to combat the dreadful situations created by COVID-19 (Heymann and Shindo, 2020). Now the countries are reopening lockdown gradually by implementing standard operating procedures issued by the governments because people need to learn how to live in this condition.

BARRIERS IN PHYSICAL TO DIGITAL SHIFT OF LIBRARY SERVICES

Before the pandemic, libraries were starting to move from physical to digital collections and services if not entirely then. Other organizations quickly responded to the digital shift. We can see that the present pandemic emergency not only changed our lifestyles but also learning patterns and practices. Like other sectors, libraries are also undergoing a paradigm shift from physical to digital. However, this shift is complex for developing countries. According to Alavi-Moghaddam, (2020), underdeveloped countries are facing numerous problems including finance, infrastructure, technology and restricted electronic collections. However there remains a strong barrier that emerged in the bid to draw a line between physical services in the use of Library to Digital emancipation, this leads to a development in the Digital Collects (Atayero, 2020).

Development of Digital Collections

In response to a question about how professionals responded to the digital shift, many libraries were in the process of developing digital collections and repositories when COVID-19 crisis emerged. However, some libraries were not completely prepared to take a digital shift. They were planning, in process or started thinking of virtual access. In addition, some library users also lack digital literacy skills and are mostly living in less developed areas with poor internet connections.

Presence of Online Services in Schools

The online classes were started in majority of universities and tertiary institutions in line with

government policy to engage youth in learning at this difficult time. The university libraries were compelled to present their library resources online to meet the information needs of the students and faculties who were engaged in online classes as well as the researchers (Ashrafi-Rizi and Kazempour, 2019). Also, this was the time to positively position the library by providing resources instead of closures.

Available Resources and Pandemic

Online provision of reference services is not a new concept, however, before the pandemic this was a less used service as people can visit physically. COVID-19 closure of schools and libraries created more awareness about library online collections and services.

Available Resources and Services

In order to support online classes due to COVID-19 pandemic, academic libraries strove to fulfill the needs of its users through digital collections. In academic scenarios, a number of vendors and publishers also play their societal role by making their e-resources open access in the pandemic (Bishop and Veil, 2013).

Library Accessibility

The role of academic libraries becomes more challenging due to the closure of the education sector in this pandemic. That is why Dabengwa, Raju and Matingwina (2019) wrote that around the world, libraries are facing hard choices in the provision of services or restrictions to partial or full closures.

THE EMANCIPATION OF DIGITAL LIBRARIES

Digital libraries are services that have been developed and enhanced for years, but the recent Covid-19 pandemic has made many users aware of the service for the first time, especially because of the closure of libraries. During the pandemic, additional efforts have been made to promote digital libraries and their services, as clearly visible and active libraries. Moreover, traditional libraries or those without many digital services are having the challenge of keeping their services active for their users virtually during this era and librarians have been engaging in new work practices in order to achieve such objectives from their homes and offices.

Evaluation of Effects of Covid-19 on Library Users

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated sudden and radical changes in delivery of library services, as strict social distancing and lockdown measures were imposed in the early phases of the pandemic. The Internet and web technologies have created a new and unparallel environment and enabling the libraries to enhance and strengthen the research, teaching and learning even in this difficult and uncertain time. The concept and practice of providing remote access of e-resources by libraries is not new, but the user friendly way adopted by many libraries and the number of resources made available by them during the pandemic is exemplary. Considerable planning by the library professionals will be required even after the opening of educational campuses. It will be imperative to re-assess every existing service and re-design it in view of the government policies and protocols to deal with the situation. Following strict social distancing measures, visit to library could be restricted when institutions re-open.

REVITALIZING THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN THE PANDEMIC ERA/RECOMMENDATION

Developing measures to revitalize the libraries in this era is of paramount importance to scholars. Hence, all hands must be on deck to re-institute the relevance of libraries. It is a huge development that digital libraries have grown to great height at this period. However, Davies, et al (2019) noted that the role of the manual library services has been relegated.

Hence the following are recommendations that may enhance the revitalization of libraries digitally and manually that have been relegated over time, since the COVID era.

Transformation of Digital Societies

The federal governments in the developing countries like Nigeria need to increase the investment and prioritize the digital transformation in their societies. Hastings (2017) advised that the governments should take initiatives to improve the internet facilities particularly mobile internet facilities and bridge the digital divide among the villages, towns, and cities.

Rewriting of Library Policies

Libraries need to rewrite library policies and realign their practices to the new circumstances to serve the clients and abide by social-distancing standards because COVID-19 has left us all in a state of shock. Libraries must develop operating procedures for staff and library users to abide by social distancing standards during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prioritizing of Library Budget

It also seems important to increase or re-prioritize library budgets to increase the e-resources and e-services. Libraries need to invest in new technologies, infrastructure, systems, and staff development to be able to serve their users in emerging online environments.

Rethinking the Role of University Libraries

University libraries also need to rethink their role particularly in context of online classes being offered by their universities. Libraries need to prepare their resources, services, systems, and staff to effectively help the online students. They need to offer off-campus access to all their e-resources as majority of university students in Nigeria live off-campus.

Renegotiate their Subscription License

As regards the above, there is an urgent need to renegotiate their subscription licenses with the suppliers of online contents as well as increase the subscription particularly textbook material.

The need for Digitization Initiatives

University libraries also need to initiate digitization initiatives and provide online access to contents in digital formats. It is particularly important for the information users of social sciences and humanities disciplines. Institutional research repositories may be a good start. Johnson (2012) also opined that collaborative approach by cultivating the partnerships may ensure the long-term sustainability of such initiatives. It is also necessary that such initiatives should be formalized by the approval of competent authorities of the institution(s) in the universities. TETFUND could be approached for funding of the digitization initiative if it is difficult for schools to handle solely.

Review of web Presence

Libraries also need to review their web presence. It seems important to gauge the use of library portals and redesign or revamp the libraries web pages. Libraries also need to work to provide 'one-spot' access to all library resources and should try to buy computers or build new systems for such purposes.

Improving the information and digital literacy skills

Library leaders recognize their individual and collective roles in the society and communities. Libraries may play a role in improving the information and digital literacy skills of the users as well as countering fake news dilemma. Libraries may coordinate with faculty, academic units, or societal organizations to design and provide access to web pages, videos, tutorials, etc. in this regard. It is particularly important in the context of developing countries like Nigeria where information scarcity is a problem on one hand and dissemination of fake and unauthentic information on the other.

CONCLUSION

Libraries are passing through difficult times as the COVID-19 pandemic is forcing it to change its lifestyle and reshape its daily routine services, which is a new normal in librarianship. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of electronic resources and internet access as a key to education (Tu-Keefner,et al, 2017). However, the students who belong to low-income and geographically remote areas in Nigeria may lack or have limited access to the internet. Thus, online services will not benefit the students uniformly and shall widen the disparity. That is why Keshavarz (2015), wrote that it is high time for the government to understand how to effectively harness the power of the internet and provide uninterrupted internet facility and power to the entire country.

The majority of the university libraries were physically closed in this pandemic but very much engaged with some of the users online by making their e-resources available to users through the university database. However, few university libraries were offering print material lending, mainly to the faculty living on the university campus. Perappadan (2020) noted that libraries revamped their web pages, reassigned resources, and adopted some ad-hoc strategies and robust online offerings to their patrons. Furthermore, they were communicating with users through phone, WhatsApp, and email. The university portal and other social media tools were the least used learning tools during pandemic lockdown and Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strike. Library staff were working from home and there was a sense of over burden because of 24/7 connectivity and without any formal work policy addressing the new expectations and responsibilities. Members of staff of university libraries were using Google Meet, WhatsApp, Zoom etc to communicate with each other and to hold meetings and workshops.

Libraries face certain challenges and barriers in their transformation from physical to digital. The pandemic established the importance of e-

resources and services, hence making a good case for libraries to get support from the university administration and to acquire more digital contents particularly related to text books.

Libraries also need to build infrastructure and systems to meet the needs of online classes and scale up the remote delivery of library resources and services. However, the high speed internet connectivity on user end will also be required to enhance the maximization of the benefits of online contents and services.

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