

# Enhancing, Repositioning and Readjusting Library and Information Services Towards Maximal Productivity: Perspectives from the Post COVID-19 Era

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**Abstract:** The colossal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic which has continued to ravage the global community has raised many questions especially with the new realities the post COVID-19 era has to offer. This is of utmost importance especially in the current era where there is a shift and readjustment from the former methods of doing things to the new methods which has been christened the new normal. These realities are of utmost importance to libraries as one of the many social institutions and also to librarians who have the duty of meeting the ever dynamic information needs of their patrons. The modalities, strategies and challenges to achieve this has not ceased to be a source of worry to many librarians and other information professionals who deal with the handling, management and dissemination of information. By using data obtained from secondary sources, this paper seeks to highlight the many challenges faced by many libraries in their quest to serve their clients in the new era. It also highlights the importance of acquiring additional skills to librarians. This is toward reducing redundancy and to promote effective and efficient service delivery which are necessary ingredients for maximal productivity in the new era.

**Keywords:** Post COVID-19, Libraries, Librarians, Information, Productivity

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## 1. Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic which shook the world to its feet has continued to be the centrepiece of many discussions especially among intellectuals. This is largely due to its widespread effects which to many is grossly incalculable especially in the current world which is multifaceted and diverse.

In Nigeria and many West African Countries, the pandemic which began on a mild note saw to the announcement of a lockdown which was a measure put in place by many countries to contain its spread. This notwithstanding the fact that even after several months, information relating to the novel virus and pandemic is sketchy and emerging on a daily basis Ameh, Ukwuoma, & Oye [3]. This may ultimately be the reason countries like Uganda are just lifting the ban on the lockdown Voice of America [24].

Chatham House [7] in profiling the chronicles of the

pandemic especially in the Nigerian context noted that it was seen as a hoax, a rich man's disease and an attempt by some politicians to loot the national coffers. This was after infusing into the mental consciousness of their citizens' different conspiracy theories such as the aftermath of the plan to deploy the 5G technology Wasim, Downing, Tuters & Knight [25].

The global market was shaken to its root. This subsequently led to the crash of oil price which was a great disadvantage to countries where oil produce was the sole means of generating revenue, Wang, Yang & Li [26], World Bank [28]. These and other factors culminated into job losses, mergers, downsizing and extreme poverty especially in developing countries Momoh & Folorunsho [17]. Commenting on this, Ozili [22] noted that Nigeria's case was unique considering the fact that it was a mono-economy. This triggered an economic downturn arising from the crash of oil price at the world market.

The above led to the conceptualisation of the term the new era or the new normal which Buheji [5] defined as the period after the COVID-19 pandemic which is "full of challenges and instability". Buheji and Buheji [6] further agreed that the period is characterised by agility, curiosity, risk mitigation, learning by exploring as well as learning by doing". Little wonder practices such as social distancing, utilisation of hand sanitisers and nose masks, isolation of affected individuals, remote working or working from home among others are the daily realities we have been accustomed to.

This study is significant in that it aims to achieve the following:

1. Do a profile analysis of the various challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has brought on library and information services and the profession of librarianship.
2. Proffer solutions to the challenges highlighted by the study.
3. Highlight necessary skills for librarians in the new normal era. This is towards enhancing workplace productivity and avoid redundancy.

### **1.1. Background to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Not minding the fact that information about the COVID-19 pandemic is still sketchy, international organisations and establishments have conducted investigative studies towards unravelling the mysteries surrounding the pandemic.

The International Association for Medical Assistance [13] and the World Health Organization (WHO), [27] both affirm that the corona virus disease (COVID-19) is an offshoot of respiratory viruses which end up affecting the respiratory organs and systems of people and animals. This causing illnesses and making respiratory actions such as breathing a difficulty. They further argued that the spread of the disease is caused by droplets of saliva and other liquids when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Symptoms of the disease include fever, sore throat, pains around the joints, mild to severe headache among others International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers (IAMAT), [13].

The emergence of the disease could be traced to its initial discovery in Wuhan, a city in the People's Republic of China in December 2019 Kandola [15]. Asselah, Durantel, Pasmant, Lau & Schinazi [4] submitted that research groups from China conducted studies and found out that severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2) was responsible for the corona virus which had a zoonotic origin. Following this discovery, it was considered as a public health threat of grave concern in the early days of 2020. Thereafter, a pandemic in March, 2020.

Nigeria's first case was reported in February 2020 Ameh, Ukwuoma & Oye [3] Thus in the words of Ameh, Ukwuoma & Oye [3] made Nigeria shift her focus on providing support in the form of repatriation for her citizens who were mostly students that were stranded in Wuhan. Following this, the Federal Government established the Presidential Task Force which was made up of the Federal Ministry of Health and its adjunct agencies, the Federal Ministry of Information and other critical stakeholders in the public health environment.

Following series of consultations, a partial lockdown was enforced in some important states which have a large chunk of human population. This nosedived into a full lockdown which lasted more than five months, Federal Ministry of Health [10]. This further brought a sudden suspension on academic activities in all educational institutions across all levels in the country Ifijeh and Yusuf [11].

World Health Organization (WHO), [27] reports that there has not been there has not been an appreciable development in the efforts to discover medications and vaccines that could cure the disease. This not minding the fact that some countries have conducted studies on Hydroxyl Chloroquine, Remdisivire, among others. However, this hasn't been clinically proven to be effective in mitigating the effects of the disease. They however, suggested public enlightenment and regular observance of hand washing and isolation of infected patients as sure ways to prevent the disease since this was relatively cheaper to curing it.

### **1.2. Appraising Library and Information Services in Selected Countries Amid the Pandemic**

Not minding the impacts and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, some countries were able to provide information services to their clients and patrons. In the United States of America (USA) for instance, Ameh, Ukwuoma & Oye [3] noted that many libraries were under lock and key. Nonetheless, some employees ordered their staff members especially those who had important functions to report to work on a daily basis. It was observed that employees that reported to work observed the necessary precautions of utilisation of nose masks, social distancing and frequent hand washing with the use of sanitisers, The New York Times [23]. In situations where the above scenario wasn't applicable, staff members were requested to work from home. This was done in states like Texas, Massachusetts and Colorado Ameh, Ukwuoma & Oye [3]. In addition to the above, some institutions like the Duke University Libraries provided half services to their clients as majority of their operations and services were conducted virtually, Duke University [9].

In the Asian Continent, some countries like China that had recorded massive record of the breakout of the disease put in place a repository to collect and store news items, documents and other materials - pictures videos and paintings relating to the pandemic CGTN [8]. African Library and Information Association and Institutions (AFLIA), [1] also reported that the National Library of China (NLC) put in place a mechanism which was tailored towards providing librarians and the general public unrestricted access to literature on the pandemic.

NAPLE [19] in a detailed report published in 2020 hinged on the fact that libraries in the continent began to cease operations in the early days of March 2020. This necessitated their staff members to work from home. Consequently, there was a shift in the mode of operations as they were done virtually. However, members of staff on essential duties who had to report to work did so under strict observance of the recommended guidelines. Books which were meant to be

discharged especially those that had been loaned out before the pandemic were thoroughly fumigated to rid them of diseases carrying organisms NAPLE [19].

Moving to Nigeria which is the hub of the African Continent, libraries of all types were locked. This was largely due to the influx of the pandemic which necessitated the passing into effect of a national lockdown by the central government. Momoh and Folorunsho [17] gave more insight to this when they submitted that since many libraries were offshoots of government establishments and operated based on government laws and licences, it would be a breach of agreement if these libraries opened for operations during the pandemic. They further outlined the fact that the meagre budgetary allocation, poor reading culture and lack of understanding the fundamental role of libraries in the society defeated the calls for remote or virtual operations. Consequently, there was a rise in misinformation, disinformation and the spread of rumour. This according to African Library and Information Association and Institutions (AFLIA), [1] is generating heated anxiety and promoting false hopes. This is unarguably especially with the high rate of illiteracy in Nigeria overtime.

### ***1.3. Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on Library and Information Services***

Many authors believe that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on library and information services are multi-directional. Hence, it has a mixture of both the good and the bad. This not minding the causalities and job losses which were the aftermath of the pandemic,

The negative impacts of the pandemic can be seen in areas bordering around job losses and the rise in misinformation and other unwholesome practises. In the result of their studies, Ameh, Ukwuoma & Oye [3] highlighted that the pandemic has necessitated the closure of many libraries around the world. And the few that have been opened are providing skeletal services which have affected the majority of their clients. The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), [12] after an in-depth study conducted in 2020 revealed that libraries in about 177 countries have been shut. This include universities, national and research libraries.

Furthermore, the world body revealed that the closure of these libraries consequently put librarians at disadvantage as they were unable to copies of their collections both in hard and soft formats. And for the world countries like Nigeria who were still at the cradle of technological advancements, it is almost difficult if not impossible to document and disseminate valuable information about the pandemic.

On the other hand, the positivity of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic include the necessity of technological advancements for libraries and librarians. This is considering the fact that concepts such as remote work or working from home have become the new way of life for organizations. This according to Buheji [5] is becoming far competitive especially with the rising cases of unemployment which have become widespread.

In addition, the positive impact of the pandemic to libraries and librarians could be measured in the way many libraries and librarians are gradually shifting towards the utilisation of technology for all operations. For instance, the restrictions on large gatherings and movement for people forced many libraries to utilise web applications such as zoom, Microsoft team and Google meet for conferences and seminars. The Nigerian Library Association specifically conducted a seminar themed the "Emerging Roles of Librarians During and Post COVID-19 Era" using this approach. Thus, Video conferencing applications gained credence during his period. This made many librarians hone their information technology skills. Thus, there is the urgency of libraries and librarians adopting and adjusting to new paradigm shifts in the mode of operation and information delivery. This is of paramount importance as libraries strive for sustenance, survival and relevance in the new era Iwu-James, Haliso & Ifijeh [14]. Thus, there is a shift from the traditional method to the use of the conventional method. This in its own has increased the workplace productivity of librarians.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic also pushed further the importance of increasing budgetary allocations for libraries which aforetime had always being neglected by policy makers Momoh and Folorunsho [17]. Consequently, policy makers have begun to effect this change and have made it a matter of grave concern to provide funds for library and information activities and services as and when due.

## **2. Underscoring the Role of Libraries and Librarians During Emergencies: The COVID-19 Pandemic in Focus**

It is evident and undisputable that emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic are unplanned events and occurrences Kennedy [16], which change the phase of things. Not considering this, the roles of librarians in such critical periods cannot be overemphasized. This is more so, as the realities of the 21st century continue to evolve day by day. On this note, Owolabi, Adeyemi and Hammed-Wole [21] listed the functions of librarians during emergencies to include:

1. Promoting Public Health Awareness Regarding COVID-19;
2. Supporting Research Teams, Researchers and Academic Faculty;
3. Maintaining core library services for users;

Other functions which may be performed by librarians include:

1. Providing advisory services;
2. Keeping records and statistics of recovery and death rates which can form the basis for decision making;
3. Providing support and other related services to the public. This borders around serving as ad-hoc staff in areas such as quarantine services among others.

Ameh, Ukwuoma & Oye [3] were of the opinion that the roles of the library during a pandemic were diverse and included creating awareness, providing relevant and latest

information and most importantly the documentation of all facts relating to the pandemic.

### **2.1. Survival Skills for Librarians in the Post COVID-19 Era**

With the emerging and evolving realities of the post COVID-19 era, many scholars have highlighted the different skills librarians and other information professionals must strive to acquire. This is in a bid to ensure effective service delivery and workplace productivity. Alayande, Abatan, Salau and Ayoola [2] were of the opinion that the skills which include cloud computing, advocacy, social media management and partnership would be in high demand. Other skills they highlighted include information packaging as well as use of mobile phones to request information. Momoh and Folorunsho [18] also listed information marketing as an essential skill which must be acquired in the new normal era.

### **2.2. Effective Service Delivery by Librarians in the Post COVID-19 Era: Challenges and Survival Strategies**

It is important to mention that the "new normal" which has aforetime been regarded as the period after the pandemic has been regarded as a critical period for libraries. Thus many are still finding it difficult to readjust and come to terms with its realities. This is due to the challenges of meagre budgetary allocations, lack of technological literacy, poor internet connectivity which hinder effective service delivery and reduce the rate of productivity among librarians Alayande, Abatan Salau and Ayoola [2]. Ochogwu [20] also identified the challenge of infodemic and misinformation which has become a readymade tool to hamper effective and efficient service delivery by the people. This in the end thwart the core aim of the library in making quality information available to the public.

In solving the above challenges, Alayande, Abatan Salau and Ayoola [2] suggested that there should be a move from the physical to the virtual and that libraries should shift their focus from being repositories of collections to places of content creation which will be a hub for all and sundry.

The following should also be put into place:

1. Human capital development and training for librarians so they can acquire relevant skills to avoid redundancy and improve workplace productivity.
2. Partnerships, alliances and groups that will aid knowledge diversification and transfer should be formed.

## **3. Conclusion**

With the realities of the post COVID-19 era, it is now a known fact that libraries and librarians are crucial institutions and stakeholders in the national economy. Based on this, it is important that new skill sets are developed by librarians. This will justify the existence of both the profession of librarianship and the library as a social institution. In the end,

this will nip in the bud the problem of misinformation, disinformation and illiteracy.

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