

Information dissemination in an era of a pandemic (COVID-19): librarians' role

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Introduction

Scientists and health professionals are working day and night, tirelessly to limit COVID-19 from further infections. 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 mostly difficulty breathing. According to the World Health organization (WHO), as of 24 April 2020, there were close to 3 million confirmed cases globally and since then has risen substantially. As scientists and health professionals search for solutions to COVID-19, 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.

Information needs

Librarians and information professionals disseminate information as often as they have access to authoritative information and resources. Information dissemination, according to [Wu et al. \(2016\)](#), is the transportation of information to the intended recipients while satisfying certain requirements such as delays, reliability and so forth. Stating that these requirements vary, depending upon the information being disseminated, [Dhawan \(2018\)](#) notes that:

[...] information dissemination is a proactive information service designed to educate and inform various groups of users on social, economic and educational issues, problems, and opportunities of interest to them. It requires systematic planning, collection,

organization, and storage of information for its delivery to the target.

[Bello and Aghadiuno \(2019\)](#) summarized information dissemination as the channel through which facts are linked to the rightful individual seekers and organizations. All these may not be achieved without the necessary technology in place.

Technology has impacted the way we access and handle information resources, thereby improving quality of information we have at our disposal. It is worthy to note, based on a study by [Shonhe and Jain \(2017\)](#), that potential library users have positive attitudes towards technology; they have competent skills to use mobile technology and they access information daily using mobile technology. It is observed that changes in user information needs have put more pressure on the delivery of library services. According to [Verma and Verma, \(2014\)](#), today's libraries are operating in a more advanced technological era, and hence the need to remodel library resources and services to fit into the 21st century era. [Nkiko and Iroaganachi \(2015\)](#) noted that information accessibility and utilization presuppose removal of all barriers in format, content, cost, distance, time and language for effective dissemination to the targeted audience. This means that information resources should get to the user in the easiest format in a timely matter.

[Bello and Aghadiuno \(2019\)](#) suggest that the librarian must be adapt and be knowledgeable in all fields of human endeavour and proficiency in using print and digital options for information dissemination. Those individuals who could not afford or attain formal education underserved populations are unaware or unable to access information from libraries. Librarians must assess the needs of various

populations via relevant surveys and other ways of gathering data. As a result, librarians become adequately equipped to disseminate necessary information based on needs assessment to diverse populations ([Akparobore, 2011](#); [Nkiko and Iroaganachi, 2015](#)).

Strategies

Librarians have to reach user populations and their need for up-to-date relevant information. When this is done, there can be limitless access to the library and information resources by millions of users and information seekers and their optimal use. [Echezona \(2007\)](#) writes that by delivering high-quality services, libraries and information centres have contributed immensely to ensure greater access to information resources. [Shonhe and Jain \(2017\)](#) observed that publishers presently provide a wide range of e-resources that are accessible through mobile technology. Going with the study by [Okiy \(2010\)](#), is an example of one study that revealed that students and lecturers in learning institutions increasingly demand and prefer access to electronic sources and networked information from their respective libraries. In the quest to meet up with the needs of library users, [Shonhe \(2017\)](#) suggests that libraries can use various information dissemination techniques such as personalized collections, SMS/text notifications, QR codes, online reference services, social networks, websites, mailing lists and OPACs. Below are just a sample of existing digital strategies but many new opportunities continue to be developed.

Personal space/My Library is a self-service platform where library users manage their personalized accounts with custom-made collections. Here users can set up and manage their profile, preferences for searching library

collections, receive alerts on reserved items, check their records, track interlibrary loan requests and renew borrowed items and document delivery requests (Saxena and Yadav, 2013; Verma and Verma, 2014). In this regards, librarians are able to send customized scanned documents, images, audio books and ebooks to library users' personalized accounts.

Text notifications via the use of mobile devices can disseminate information and multimedia content such as videos, images and audio files. Librarians can use this service to alert patrons regarding the latest information on happenings around COVID 19 on how to stay safe or other related information. In a study conducted by Shonhe and Jain (2017), most respondents prefer to access library collections or resources through mobile devices.

Social media are more appropriate for use on marketing information and delivering personalized information resources to groups of people or individuals.

Quick response (QR) codes, two-dimensional barcodes that direct users to desired websites, can be used by libraries on a certain topic or subject area. Verma and Verma (2014) noted that QR codes are akin to mobile tagging.

Online reference services can use for research outreach. According to Barnhart and Pierce (2011), online platforms allow librarians to create a bond with patrons and improve their efficiency through provision of a 24/7 reference and information service.

Library websites can be used effectively to share information, links, share updates and announce news.

Mailing lists to targeted users can be used by libraries to receive personalized information at the same time.

Librarians and information dissemination redefined

Today, librarians are expected to manage digital libraries, organize digital knowledge and information and disseminate digital information owing to the fact that we are all have become a global village as a result of the internet. Pal (2013) notes that today's librarians

must also acquire new psychological, praxeological, social and professional capabilities. Additionally, Sreenivasulu (2000) notes that the ultimate goal of a digital librarian is to facilitate access to information just in time to the critical wants of end users and additionally to facilitate electronic publishing. Many libraries are renovating their library's physical spaces and environments around the concept of "learning commons" (Litzenberger, 2016).

In this era of information explosion where thousands of bits of information are chunked out on daily basis, librarians are expected to collect, organize, store and disseminate the information for consumption of the users. 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. It is expected that librarians work independently to deliver service-oriented, researcher-centered applications, instructional programmes, projects and services. Tait *et al.* (2016) note that the tools and resources used to supply required information and transform it into knowledge have changed, but the librarian's role has remained unchanged. Especially now, it seems necessary to reflect and redefine the characteristics of a modern librarian that would best serve all users.

Librarians may be indispensable in the era of the information dissemination because they play a distinctive and dynamic role in providing easy access to authoritative information at the right time and disseminating to the user in appropriate formats based on local user needs. Librarians must also possess high level of security to prevent hackers from users' personal details and the type of information they accessed. Okike and Adetoro (2019) confirmed in their study that it is pertinent that librarians re-tool and up-skill themselves in information and communication technology to ensure secure information systems.

Concluding remarks

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 reimagined librarians.

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