
**THE ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS IN COMBATING
COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA****By****LINUS, Nihungu Ahaz****And****OLULEYE, Helen Remilekun****Abstract**

This work is centred on the role of libraries and librarians in combating Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The research method adopted for this work is contextual analysis which involved content review of literature in related area of study. The work explained in simple way the meaning of Covid-19 (Corona virus); it discussed the concept of public library and its functions, pointing out the roles of public libraries and librarians can play in combating the covid-19 pandemic, stating various ways librarians can be involved to support health workers and researchers in the fight against Covid-19. The study also discussed the preventive roles of public libraries and librarians in combating the pandemic. The study identifies the best practices libraries and librarians can engage in the fight against the pandemic. Conclusions were drawn based on findings of the review of related literature and inferences drawn.

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

Introduction

Covid-19 is a respiratory illness which is also referred to as Corona virus and was first discovered in a China city of Wuhan in 2019 which later become a global health problem that claim unprecedented number of lives globally. According to Adigun et-al (2020), corona viruses are a large family of viruses that may cause illness in animals or humans. In humans, for example, several corona viruses 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). He went ahead to say that, the complete clinical picture of COVID-19 is not known, the reported illnesses range from mild (no reported symptoms) to severe illnesses and sometimes, including death. In line with the above, Linus, Mamza and Aliyu (2021) maintained that corona virus 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. COVID-19 is a pandemic.

A pandemic is an outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area and affects an exceptionally high proportion of the population (American Library Association (ALA) 2021). The outbreak of Covid-19 globally gives the pandemic status as such it needs to be handled holistically to curtail its spread. They further explained that, the most common symptoms of the disease include flu-like symptoms such as fever, dry cough, and shortness of breath or difficulty in breathing. Symptoms can also include chills and repeated shaking, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, and loss of sense of taste or smell. Symptoms typically appear within two to fourteen days after exposure. According to an official information issued by World Health Organization (WHO), the disease is easily spread and it is vital that every effort is made to control and ensure that health systems are able to provide services to all that need them (Ameh, Ukwuoma and Oye, 2021).

Although, vaccines for the corona virus have been discovered in different pharmaceutical companies in the developed countries, the developing countries including Nigeria are still lagging behind. According to World Health Organization (WHO) (2021) in their update titled “Coronavirus Disease: Vaccines” where they opined that, there are now several vaccines that are in use, they said, at least 13 different vaccines (across 4 platforms) have been administered. While most countries globally have received the covid-19 vaccine many countries including Nigerians are still facing the threat of the virus.

In other to curtail the spread of the virus, libraries can employ their services and expertise to disseminate information on the ills and how to avoid the virus and its spread. To buttress the above assertion Linus, Mamza and Aliyu (2021) explained that, 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 librarians. This implies that, libraries and librarians can play a great role in carrying out public awareness program on the virus, they can also support researchers in providing current information that may lead to discovering its cure. Librarians can be relied upon in terms of authentic information because they are trained to identify fake information from the original.

In line with the above, Linus, Mamza and Aliyu were of the view that, there is a serious proliferation of fake news all over the world especially on social media and sometimes in broadcasting houses; libraries provide more reliable information because they subscribe from the original publishers. On this note, all types of libraries such as public, academic, school and national libraries have the potential to fight against the pandemic by supporting research fellows. It is against this background that the researcher deems it necessary to investigate the role of libraries and librarians in combating covid-19 pandemic. However, for the purpose of this study, the discussion will focus on public libraries in Nigeria.

Concept of Public Library

Public library has been defined differently by different experts depending upon the importance they gave to its objectives. It was a People's University for those who laid stress on educative aspect; it was a common man's cultural centre for those who had in mind its recreational role; for some it was a centre to provide authentic information for various aspects of life (Mishra, 2009). The public library is established to cater for all categories of people regardless of their status and that is why it is sometimes referred to as the peoples' university as stated by Mishra. It is the peoples university because it accommodates all manner of individuals and this is in line with Okafor (2020) who defined public library as a library that provides information resources, services and recreational outlets for the generality of the citizenry, namely, the young, old, literate and non-literate.

Unlike other types of library, the public library is not restricted to any group of users and the collections are developed to reflect the diversity of their clientele. According to Munchen, (2001), public library is an organization established, supported and funded by the community, either through local, regional or national government or through some other form of community organization. It provides access to knowledge, information and works of the imagination through a range of resources and services and is equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, disability, economic and employment status and educational attainment. Public libraries are most often established and funded by government. It is usually situated within the community, as such it is most appropriate to interact with community members regarding covid-19 pandemic through public awareness services. Below are some functions of public libraries as outlined by Okafor (2020).

1. Preservation and development of cultural heritage
2. Provision of services, resources and facilities to users
3. Meeting the needs of children and young people.
4. Making fundamental contribution to daily survival and social development to people in rural communities
5. Provision of facilities for leisure to the communities

Materials and Methods

The research was carried out with secondary sources of data from the internet (e-resource), newspapers, and journals to find out how public libraries engage in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, keeping in mind strategies adopted by public libraries and what new ways, resources, and services they have developed to help combat the new CIVID-19 pandemic. As a contextual analysis, the study involves critical study of related information and making inferences that may lead to drawing a logical conclusion about the phenomena.

Public Library Services and Resources

The basic aim of public libraries is to provide information and services to their client and the community in general. According to Iwhiwhu and Okorodudu (2012) public library provides access to knowledge, information and works of imagination through a range of resources and services. It is equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, disability, employment status and educational attainment. Although, there are quite a number of services public libraries can undertake with regard to combating the virus, libraries in some countries around the globe are shut. Ameh, Ukwuoma and Oye (2021) citing the New York Times, averred that, amid the pandemic, libraries in the USA were shut, although some of the employers requested the employees to report to work daily, most especially those on essential services. In the case of Nigeria, as observed by the researchers, public libraries were shut down and none of the librarians were mobilized for essential service during the lock down. Ameh, Ukwuoma and Oye, opined that, Chinese created a memory bank to document the corona virus outbreak stories which includes articles, audio, pictures, manuscript, multimedia resources, video calligraphy and paintings. This resources created are meant to be referred to in case of similar outbreak or when carrying out a study or clinical research on the pandemic.

In Nigeria public libraries were shut during the pandemic; it is however, pertinent to note that, Nigerian Library Association (NLA) via its twitter handle provides update on the covid-19 pandemic (Adigun et-al 2020). They further maintained that, the Akwa Ibom State chapter of the Nigerian Library Association (NLA) held outreach and sensitization campaigns for members of the populace to educate them on the ways to stay safe from the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, in China, the National Library of China (NLC) assisted in the provision of information in the prevention and control of the pandemic that supported national policy making organs. They collated all information about the pandemic on daily basis, and stored same. Also, they ensured the provision of library services through the use of ICTs and made

information available online for the citizens of China. Ameh, Ukwuoma and Oye on the other hand maintained that, libraries, as social institutions, are essential for public health awareness and promotion. This service is in tandem with library 's principles of selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) and Current Awareness Service (CAS).

In view of the above, public libraries in Nigeria can serve as information hub regarding covid-19 to the community in which they are situated, librarians can sensitize the community through current awareness services by taking advantage of Information and Communication Technologies ((ICT) and especially social media services in the fight against pandemic. They are expected to use the practices of Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) and Current Awareness Service (CAS). According to LISBDNetwork (2014), SDI is a type of current awareness service meant to keep the user abreast with the latest developments in the field of his interest. It is a personalized service meant for the individual or a group of users having identical information needs. It involves the screening of the document and selecting the information according to the specific information needs of each user or group. Ali and Bhatti (2020) outlined the following resources through which librarians can also engage the communities about covid-19 and how to avoid contacting it.

- a. **Mobile Apps:** COVID-19 is a contagious disease. Mobile apps are used to educate the people to know about the early-stage diagnosis symptoms of COVID-19 and to inform the general public about the disease
- b. **Social Media Trolling:** Social media platforms are also one the fastest mode/medium of public health awareness. Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram and twitter are renowned forums of message sharing to the public about the latest updates of the pandemic.
- c. **Video-Based Lecture:** Video-based lectures on YouTube, zoom, and webinar are sources where infectious disease experts share video clips about coronavirus symptoms, cure, and possible measure to avoid this pandemic.

d. **Electronic Resources:** Medical staff, faculty members, researchers, health support organizations, and paramedical staff support disseminating the latest developments regarding the vaccination, diagnosis kits, and latest literature published on the topic. All the renowned databases provide free access to COVID-19 coronavirus literature. Renowned and leading publishers, that is, Elsevier, Oxford, Wiley, BMJ, Nature, Sage, Emerald, Cambridge, and others, provide free access to the latest literature on coronavirus in the fight against coronavirus

Due to the nature of covid-19, the above resources outlined by Ali and Bhatti is a perfect medium for which librarians can interact with communities regarding coronavirus because of the need for social distancing, they can use ICT's to inform the public about the symptoms and how the virus behaves when contacted. It is also the fastest way of conveying message to the public, because conveying of messages through mobile app is synchronous in nature where interaction is instant, librarians can discuss with people in group on social media platform such as Face Book, WhatsApp etc. They can also engage in video conferencing on YouTube, Messenger, Zoom and WhatsApp etc. to discuss preventive measure and how not to spread the virus.

Roles of Public Libraries and Librarians in Combating Covid-19 Pandemic

Public libraries which are usually closer to the public should take responsibility of informing the communities in which they are situated about the dreaded virus and the implication of contracting it, support researchers who are working towards finding its cure and providing user services using Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Chuks-ibe et-al (2020) cited Ali and Gatiti who explained the three dimensions to the roles that library and information professionals can play during pandemics bellow...

1. Promoting public health awareness by creating and disseminating timely information relating to preventive measures. Also, providing other useful information on histories of those recovering from the corona virus, nutrition and lifestyle choices that could aid the prevention and management of the virus when infected.
2. Support research teams, researchers and faculty working on solutions by providing latest developments, research and literature. As experts, librarians could support medical staff, academics battling to find solutions and research teams by providing access to relevant studies and well-known databases relating to the COVID-19.
3. Meeting the core needs of regular library users seeking all kind of information by Providing virtual support, document delivery, literature search, systematic reviews and webinars on a number of key topics via Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, WebEx, and so on

Librarians are trained in information handling and dissemination, as such they are experts in information sharing. Therefore, they are capable to promote public health awareness to the public as well as support researchers by providing first hand literature that can assist them in finding solution to the surge. Also, with their knowledge of Information and Communication Technology they can continue to carry out normal library services via virtual means while the library is locked. In line with the above, Ladan, et.al. (2020) opined that, libraries in Pakistan had managed to provide virtual support to their users which include providing them with reference services, document delivery, literature searches and systematic reviews, and that some of the libraries have also initiated online webinar sessions to keep in touch with their users using some web platforms like the google classroom, google hangouts, skype or zoom during the recent lockdown.

Librarians are usually relied upon when it comes to accessing reliable information especially when carrying out research. Nagarkar, (2020) in her work, COVID-19: The role of a library during a pandemic, asserts that,

In the case of research, authentic information from multidisciplinary information sources is crucial for the development of vaccines, handling social issues, and to make rules and regulations. Researchers are highly dependent on libraries for reliable information. Latest data about the ongoing research is made available to researchers through peer-reviewed academic journals, books and reports subscribed by the libraries. These resources should be shared for disseminating research results which help researchers to make more knowledgeable decisions about the outbreak. P.1

Librarians can assist by instructing communities on the need to use masks and how to use it, handwashing, use of sanitisers, avoidance of handshakes and other ways necessary to control the spread of the virus. In view of the above, Deol and Brar (2021) maintained that, libraries have an important role of disseminating information during the times of emergency. They further said that:

The library employees, particularly those who are trained in this field, can establish a coordination with the scientists. The needs of the scientists with regard to books, articles and other forms of published research can be fulfilled by the library employees. The scientists can be allowed to access through the web sources, all material provided by the libraries through the online mode. The access to various paid research journals purchased by the libraries should be shared with the scientists who have been pursuing research in the field of COVID. P.8

The researchers concur with the above assertion because as information experts, librarians can support researchers and medical experts in their quest to find cure or vaccine for the virus by providing genuine information and literatures amidst the proliferation of fake information on the Internet. Chuks-ibe et-al (2020) noted that libraries as major information resource centres are expected to be at the centre of the dissemination of reliable and timely information to citizens which the WHO termed critical. They further said that, Public libraries and other relevant agencies at this time should take up the responsibility of ensuring

that the citizens are well informed about the state of the nation using every medium at their disposal. According to Ebijuwa et-al (2021) who cited the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) that, Librarians can inform their patrons on what steps may need to be taken on COVID-19 prevention and control, sanitize their collections, and post hand-washing reminders in the library.

Roles of Public Libraries and Librarians in Preventing Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

Preventive measures are any action taken that will ensure any type of pandemic is avoided. Public libraries welcome quite a number of people who need their services. Therefore, there is need for precautionary measures to be taken in libraries during covid-19 pandemic. According to World Health Organization [WHO] (2021), in their work titled “Coronavirus Disease: Advice for the Public” stated that, If Covid-19 is spreading in your community, stay safe by taking some simple precautions, such as physical distancing, wearing a mask, keeping rooms well ventilated, avoiding crowds, cleaning your hands, and coughing into a bent elbow or tissue. Public libraries in Nigeria during the post lock down have laid down rules guiding the use of their libraries, for example, public libraries in Nigeria took series of measures to curtail the spread of the virus by instructing users to queue and maintain physical distancing, use of mask, constant washing of hands etc. and engaging in sensitization program to create awareness about the virus. Similarly, the findings of Adigun et-al in their work ‘Interrogating the Role of Libraries in the Fight against COVID-19 Pandemic’, revealed that: some of the activities organized by Nigerian libraries to curtail the spread of COVID-19 include maintaining careful watch of PubMed, Government agency report, and news report to update both the emergency management team and the public; producing and sharing E-fliers containing information on how to stay safe from COVID-19; organizing outreach to sensitize the populace as well as disseminating information on COVID-19 to the public via the library website. (p58)

The study further revealed that, other measures taken by Nigerian libraries includes the provision of washing materials and hand sanitizers to both library staff and patrons; regular communication to staff and patrons with updates and guidelines on safety measures and constant cleaning of chairs among others. New York University (NYU) Library (2021) recommends the following procedures for safe handling of library materials during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

- i. Hand Washing: library users and staff should wash their hands with soap and water frequently or use hand sanitizer
- ii. Disinfectant: use disinfectant to disinfect surface of material used and wash hands after disinfecting
- iii. Shared computers and other devices should be cleaned and disinfected daily using sanitizing wipes containing 70% ethyl or isopropyl alcohol. Do not use spray disinfectant on electronics.

The recommendations above should be adopted in all types of libraries and especially the public library which accommodates all categories of user from the community as it will curtail the spread of the disease because

Best Practices by libraries and librarians during Covid-19 pandemic in Nigerian.

Librarians are professional who are trained in the area of information gathering, organizing and disseminating same to people, they aid users who are in need of information, thus, they are capable to assist researchers in combating the pandemic. According to Ekwelem and Madumere (2021) who maintained that...

Libraries irrespective of the type are information centres. Traditionally, libraries acquire information resources, organize and disseminate for people to read, therefore, Libraries can educate the populace on coronavirus epidemic disease through outreach programs to the rural areas, information repackaging, acquisition of

materials on coronavirus control measures, dissemination of such information through social media and display at libraries, organizing forums for sensitization of the populace about coronavirus, operating mobile library services in rural areas on the subject, organizing seminars and workshops on coronavirus etc. p.45

Ekwelem and Madumere explained the following as some of the best practices libraries can engage in combating the pandemic.

Acquisition of Materials on Coronavirus Control Measures: Libraries irrespective of types acquire information materials to meet the varying information needs of users. Information materials that deal with issues such as how to protect the body from contagious diseases like coronavirus can be acquired by libraries and displayed at strategic places in the library for users to read up.

Organization of library resources: Broadly speaking, refers to the process of getting library materials including books and non-book into an arranged form so as to aid easy retrieval of such materials and for posterity. Specifically, organization of library materials refers to the cataloguing and classification of library materials. According to Olise (2021) The need for organization is driven by the general explosion of knowledge and exponential growth in publication, effective organization provides for effective use of the resources. Librarians therefore are poised to collect and organize covid-19 related materials that can support researchers in their quest for medical solution to the pandemic.

Information Dissemination through Social Media: Social media has been useful for information dissemination while library services have also gone beyond traditional to electronic method of disseminating information. Social Media is also a wide interactive platform that employs mobile and web based technology in order to enable people or users to create, share, and co-create contents as well as discussing and modifying generated contents. Public libraries can take advantage of these media in providing public awareness to the public about covid-19 pandemic.

Outreach Programs: Outreach programs are targeted at taking information to the target audience in places and not necessarily waiting for people to visit the library in order to obtain information. Through outreach programs issues on coronavirus would be communicated to people at market places, worship centres and schools especially at rural areas by librarians

Organizing Forums, Seminars and Workshops: Librarians can organize professional and interactive forums, seminars and workshops in order to share knowledge on how libraries can effectively help to educate the populace about epidemic, contagious illness such coronavirus. There are two recognized professional forums for librarians in Nigeria: The Nigerian Library Association and the Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria.

Provision of Trusted Information Sites about COVID-19 to the Populace: There are lots of websites for all sort of information on the care and prevention of coronavirus in the world. Libraries can publish resources and information through this websites, the recommended websites that are linked to the centres for diseases control, world Health organization, and in Nigeria to Nigeria Centre for Disease Control.

Organizing Forums, Seminars and Workshops: Librarians can organize professional and interactive forums, seminars and workshops in order to share knowledge on how libraries can effective help to educate the populace about epidemic, contagious illness such coronavirus. There are two recognized professional forums for librarians in Nigeria: which are Nigerian Library Association (NLA) and the Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria.

Conclusion

Covid-19 is a condition that makes patients seriously ill and it has claimed a lot of lives. The study revealed that vaccines for the virus has been discovered but the developing countries did not have enough of it and that there is still traces of the disease in many countries of the world including Nigeria. Therefore, libraries and librarians in Nigeria have a

role to play in curbing the surge by carrying out public awareness program and supporting researchers with reliable literatures that may lead to discovering a cure for the virus.

The study revealed that libraries in some developed countries joined in the fight against the pandemic in Nigeria however, libraries were closed throughout the lockdown period, this statement was supported by Chuks et-al (2020) who confirmed that, during the lockdown libraries in Nigeria have remained shut. It is however necessary to note that Nigerian Library Association where involve in providing updates on the pandemic via their twitter handle as stated by Adigun et-al (2020). The study showed librarians can sensitize the community through current awareness and Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) service, they can also engage the community using Mobile App, video based lecture. Librarians can also promote public health awareness to the public. The best practice carried by libraries during the pandemic includes acquisition of materials on covid-19 control measure, organization of the resources and disseminating the resources to the public, carrying outreach programmes and provision of trusted information site about Covid-19 to the population.

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