

*Full Length Research*

# Public libraries services and workplace realities during post covid-19 period in Nigeria: looking ahead

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This paper takes into perspective the need for librarians and information workers to brace up for the challenges of meeting information needs of library users irrespective of times and circumstances. Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of the public libraries and their ability to provide services. It happened at a time that public libraries in Nigeria could not boast of adequate infrastructure for information processing and services. A glance at the historical development of libraries in Nigeria was highlighted. Closer look at the implications of the coronavirus pandemic on library services shows that there was total or partial withdrawal of services in libraries, most services were channeled online for remote access, the workload of the ICT librarians was a factor, also the observance of social distance was a high priority, and so on. Recommendations regarding 'new normal' being a new concept has to be adhered to in order to guarantee the protection of users from any forms of attacks. Post Covid-19, funding of libraries should be at the front burner of library administrators. It is also recommended that government should rise to ensure that libraries are attractive for all users, while library administrators push and lobby for funding, training, and infrastructural boost of all library institutions in the country.

**Keywords:** Public libraries, services, covid-19, workplace, Nigeria

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## INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the year 2020, little did anyone know that the world was going to be hit by the dreaded virus called coronavirus. A pandemic struck! Libraries were directly affected by the Covid-19 virus not only in terms of physical space but also in the collections and services they provide to their community (Medawar & Tablet, 2021). Provision of information services was redirect through electronic and online channels. Nigeria got its index case from an Italian who traveled from Milan to Nigeria on the 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 through Lagos; he was confirmed by the Virology Laboratory of Lagos University Teaching Hospital, part of the Laboratory Network of Nigeria Centre for Disease Control on the 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2020 (Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC),

2020). The spread of the virus was wild across the globe, therefore, it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of March, 2020 (Hickok, 2020, Cited by Chuks-Ibe, Salau, Salami & Irenea, 2020).

Public library is often referred to as the people's university because of the central role it plays in keeping the citizens educated, informed and enlightened, irrespective of age, colour, academic qualification, or religion. A public library according to American Library Association (2010) is established under state enabling laws or regulations to serve a community, district, or region, and provide at least the following: 1) an organised collection of printed [and electronic] or other library materials, or a combination thereof; 2) paid staff, 3) an establish schedule in which services of the staff are

available to the public; 4) the facility necessary to support such a collection, staff, and schedule, and; 5) is supported in whole or in part with public funds.

Information dissemination entails processes, procedures, policies, and medium through which credible, accurate and reliable information contained in various media are transported or distributed to individuals, groups or organisation for the purpose of dispelling ignorance or improving knowledge. Central to the mandate of the public library is making information resources (print and electronic) available to its diverse users.

The work place means an established job site, or project, at one geographical location containing one or more work areas. It is a place created for an employee to carry out the employer's job. Types of workplace vary across industries and can be inside building or outdoors and can be mobile to enable an individual to work in any locations of choice (Indeed, 2022). The workplace plays a vital role in ensuring the general wellbeing and effective job performance of the library staff and the academic excellence of users.

The reality about the workplace during Covid-19 pandemic was that of a shutdown and staying off physical offices and a migration of the workforce to virtual work environment. The efficacy of this is that many employees were asked to work from home by their employers, especially those with the already established virtual presence in terms of functional computers and Internet networks. On the other hand, many had to stay idle at home, while others lost their jobs because of the absence of virtual work environment. It was a period of economic, social and educational losses which also resulted in large scale social misfortunes, hunger and lack (Ingram, 2021).

Public libraries provide free spaces where vulnerable populations can seek out computer and Internet access, day time shelter from the street, and de facto child-care centers among host of other services libraries provide (Mathews, 2020). We living in an e-world which in the words of Ingram (2021) our lives are affected by e-commerce, e-finance, e-government, e-social communications, e-media, e-education, e-learning and even e-gaming. This paper therefore, aims at investigating ways public libraries in Nigeria were able provide information services to the public, their challenges, progress and the way forward.

### **Taking a glance at public libraries in Nigeria**

Public libraries formed the structure and foundation of education, learning, entertainment, as well as public enlightenment at the early stage of Nigeria's development. Historically, libraries were first subscription based in Nigeria, and as at then, only the privileged few could have access to the resources. Public libraries are uniquely positioned and well thought of, to remove barriers that stand against access to information by the

common people as compared to the rich or well-to-do of the society. One can only imagine the level of backwardness Nigeria would be by now without free services provided by public libraries.

Libraries have historically been engaged in changing configurations and ways of communicating information, becoming associated with the idea of a 'hybrid' or 'bricks and clicks' space that incorporates both virtual and physical library spaces (Black & Pepper, 2012, cited in Smith, 2020). The introduction of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) in information work in libraries is the greatest innovation that has liberated mankind from being a static or unidirectional information seeker or provider, to a dynamic and ubiquitous information beneficiary.

In the developed societies, there is a strong information technology base as asserted by Smith (2020) that virtually every public library in the United States provides public access to Internet computers as a role central to its mission. This is possible because they can boast of uninterrupted power supply, conducive learning environment, and adequate skilled man power as a result of adequate funding of research and development.

### **Covid-19 pandemic and its implication to public library services**

Coronavirus pandemic caused a large scale disruption of and complete or partial shutdown of means of livelihood around the world. This lockdown is the period in which individual's ability to leave their homes was restricted; cafes, restaurants, and non-essential shops were closed; travel was banned; workers were placed on furlough or required to work from home; and people were instructed to socially distance themselves from those living outside their immediate household (Peachey, 2020).

The entire public library system was affected, ranging from acquisition of information resources, supply of the resources, access and usage of the resource, and well as management of the resources. People in public library share everything from books, magazines, computers, furniture, and rest rooms in an enclosed space, which may make maintaining social distancing difficult when libraries re-open (Matthews, 2020).

Some of the implications and adverse effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on public libraries services in Nigeria could be seen in the following areas:

- **Breakdown or total stoppage of services:** Since there was a lockdown in many countries of the world, and librarians/library personnel could not go out of their homes to work, and users could not visit the libraries, the usual inflow and outflow of information resources were interrupted. Vendors could not transport truckloads of books and electronic hardware to the libraries because

for fear of the virus transmission. That created a vacuum of information flow to the users and a step backward for those who could have been better informed.

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- **Adoption and utilisation of different media of providing services:** Public libraries that were providing hybrid (electronic and physical) services prior to the Covid-19 pandemic found it easier to reach out to their clients through the electronic databases. Those libraries that were operating purely analogue (without online presence) found it impossible to reach their audience, because of the lockdown. However, for as many that chose to adopt the virtual information transmission, resources had to be provided as emergency to meet up the need of the moment.
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- **Increased workload for the ICT librarians and others:** Since most people were instructed to work from home, the ICT librarians that are in charge of uploading content on the Internet through the websites and social media such as whatsapp, twitter, instagram, facebook, etc had to work harder to meet up the demands of the users. There should have been constant monitoring of the sites by the reference librarian to respond to clients' queries and requests on a regular basis. Ask the librarian link, and active social media numbers were expected to be made available to enable interactions during that period.
- **Additional expenses for the library:** The pandemic attacked at the beginning of the year 2020, budgets should have been given approval with specific items to spend on. In Nigeria, it is a known fact that libraries receive less attention when it comes to funding. This rule out the possibility of having supplementary budget. Therefore, with the paradigm shift to area of online services, acquisition should be more of electronic hardware and software so as to meet demands.
- **Orientation and training of staff on the new normal:** Coronavirus was a novel virus that had not been discovered before now. Therefore, library personnel needed to understand how to handle and disseminate information to users. When the lockdown was eased and certain cadre of the staff, especially those at level 12 and above were asked to resume work by the Nigerian government, while those from level 12 and below were asked to work from home. Hence, they needed to know how to handle their routine.
- **Observance of social distancing in the libraries:** A new concept emerged immediately the Covid-19 pandemic was pronounced. It entails keeping certain distances between one individual from another. Large gatherings were prohibited, wearing of facemasks, use of hand sanitizers, washing of hands with soap in running water, became the practice. Therefore, the number of

users in the library has to be slashed, spacious arrangement of seats, provision of hand washing points and sanitizers, posters passing information to users about the virus, and so on.

- **Provision of ambulances and health workers to the libraries:** During the pandemic, every user in the library could be a potential carrier of the virus. Therefore, it would be necessary to station ambulances and health workers around the libraries in case of any symptomatic individual. The aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic saw the vast majority of public library building around the globe closing down, but giving way for alternative method of service delivery. These help in keeping people informed, entertained and relaxed in their homes.

### **Rethinking information service delivery in libraries (The new normal)**

The concept of new normal evolved during the lockdown as a result of the pandemic and the guidelines provided by the government of Nigeria and the world at large. The phrase "new normal" implies that people have adapted different ways of behavior than usual i.e .the ways of providing services in all sectors of the economy changed from too much of physical contacts to less physical interactions, and/ or virtual services.

In libraries, the new normal during and after the pandemic could be seen in the following areas of operation:

**Wide scale use of online information services:** According to International Federation of Library Association (2020) cited by Smith (2020) revealed that, around the world, public libraries provide remote access to collections and promoting digital services, from virtual exhibitions in France; online book clubs in Egypt; reading-related hash tags across Malaysia; provision of health information in Ghana; bibliotherapy in India to engage with patrons while in lockdown. Also, social media websites such as facebook, Instagram, Zoom meetings and Youtube have been used widely by public libraries during the shutdown period (Frudenberger, 2020, Para. 2).

Other mainstream media such as radio and Television were used for effective teaching and learning as the world battles the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic. In Lagos state, Nigeria for instance, the Lagos State Universal Basic Education Board (LASUBEB) put up programme tagged "Classroom in your home" where pupils were taught lessons on television five (5) days a week for a period of about an hour. It was very helpful to pupils and has improved their learning experience and outcome. As many families were lockdown together, disrupting regular schooling and inhibiting children's programming in branch libraries, children's programmes and learning that supplement regular school work have moved online for public libraries (Frudenberger, 2020,

Para. 13).

According to Ifije and Yusuf (2020) citing University of Sussex Library (2020) stressed further that America continued to render online services to their users during the lockdown. Ifije and Yusuf (2020) in their research revealed that Nigerian university libraries were not actively involved in providing online information resources to support the online educational activities of their institutions during the period of the lockdown. In the United Kingdom for example, Peachey (2020) reports that physical services included welfare and keeping in touch calls, home delivery services, information provision and a handful of building-based services.

While in some countries because of the reduction or suspension of access to the space, visiting the library required booking a pre-confirmed appointment, in alignment with the Government decision and policies (Medawar & Tabet, 2020).

The new normal requires a complete overhauling of public library operations especially in this part of the world where libraries have been yearning for adequate attention and funding to meet the basic and general needs of the users.

### **Aftermath of Covid-19 and public libraries funding**

Covid-19 has done a lot of damages virtually in every sphere of human endeavor, and the aftermath has been excruciating because of lost of human lives, properties, businesses, and means of livelihood of millions of individuals around the world. Many government agencies, businesses, private sectors, and the likes who have cut down on their staff members take home pay, and, or downsized their workforce due to paucity of funds.

Matthews (2020) rightly observed that a majority of public libraries are funded through local government funds (often using "general funds") or some cases dedicated property, sales or use taxes. It is in the public domain that local governments in Nigeria go cap-in-hand begging for funds to acquire resources, pay staff salaries and obviously lack funds to finance capital projects.

If public libraries are granted financial autonomy, one may be confident that public libraries will enjoy some consideration for better funding. Matthews buttressed that for many local governments, eliminating or significantly reducing the public library's budget will be an obvious first choice as a result of the harsh economic realities. This has been the practice in most developing and developed economies. Since libraries are not part of revenue generating agencies, their impacts are not palpable by the government whose focus is on how to generate money rather than developing the capacity of the revenue generators.

Furthermore, the political will of government officials to prioritise public libraries financing plays an important role

for libraries' development in any society. There is a complete disregard to the impact of library services in most countries which also has proportionate negative impact on the librarians who provide these professional services. Smith (2020) laments that the lack of regard for the library and what it offers to a community can be seen in the ongoing low levels of funding for public library services. Consequently, in Nigeria, hardly were there public libraries that provided services during the pandemic, unlike in other climes where libraries provided Covid-19 information and update, shelter for the less privileged, and other humanitarian support.

### **Coronavirus pandemic: An opportunity for bridging the digital gap**

Digital gap describes the divide that exists among countries, organisations or individuals in terms of information access, retrieval, and use via computer terminals and Internet connectivity. Equal access to digital information is more demanding during and after this pandemic than any other time past. Communities that have suffered neglect of accessing Internet network and other digital resources stand a chance of having them provided as a result of the pandemic. Although, the dynamic nature of technology (innovations of new products) keeps opening gaps that require upgrades and total change of systems.

As life increasingly revolves around digital technologies and innovation, countries are in a race to digitise at a speed that threatens to leave behind the less advantaged countries and underserved countries (Ingram, 2021). Kinny (2010) opines that virtually every public library in the United States provides public access to Internet computers, and the public increasingly see Internet provision as a role central to the mission of the public libraries, both in terms of impacts on the general public especially the digitally disadvantaged or information have-nots and on the libraries themselves.

China is among the countries that implemented distant learning programmes due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Finding by (Liu, 2021) indicates that while there was sign that large digital divide exists among school-age youths in pre-pandemic China, result from an original large-scale rapid roll-out survey and systematic tracking of policy documents showed that such gulf of unequal access to distant learning opportunities could be bridge. The advantages of building this gap cannot be overstressed at this point in time.

In a study by Adeyemi (2021) on "Influence of Covid-19 lockdown on reading habits of Nigerians: A case study of Lagos state inhabitants" reveals that most Nigerians used phones to read during the lockdown. Although phones could provide access to digital resources, but access to the appropriate platforms where resources for research could be easily tapped is the crux. The challenge here is

that most public libraries lack functional library websites and digital resources available for use.

Fundamentally, bridging digital divide does not stop at just providing computers and Internet services in libraries. Central to this is the information literacy level of the users, and the skills to navigate these resources for effective use. Availability and effective utilisation of technology bridge the gap that has been created.

### **Challenges of public libraries during and post Covid-19 pandemic**

The devastating effect of Covid-19 pandemic was not without challenges on public library services. Some of these challenges may persist for a longer time into the post pandemic because of the serious economic setbacks it has caused.

Some of the challenges public libraries may or have encountered include the following:

**a)** Challenges of library staff members handling information resources. Libraries take delivery of information resources from vendors coming shipped from different locations with the possibility of those materials getting infected. The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) notes that library collections, most notably library books, may carry risks associated with coming into contact with the Covid-19 virus, with studies showing that surfaces can remain infectious from between one and nine days (Smith, 2020). Public libraries are faced with the challenge of providing protective gears, sanitary equipments and materials for the staff and users. The library surfaces have to be cleaned, and the information resources sanitised constantly to avoid transmission of the virus.

**b)** Obeying government's directives and policies on Covid-19. In Nigeria for example, the government approves 50% of the total capacity of all public gatherings. That is to say, not every library users were allowed into the library building. Social distancing had to be observed to avoid transmission. Hence, the need to provide alternative access to these resources physically or online. These also pose difficult challenge for the libraries.

**c)** Digital divide and inequalities. While not every user would be allowed into the library building, many do not have access to computers and internet connections to access the libraries remotely. This causes huge gap or divide and disenfranchisement of users from using the library. There is a wide information inequality in developing countries whereby the haves are at the advantaged position, while the have-nots are disadvantaged. Kinney (2010) notes that library provision of free public Internet access does appear to reach those who are digitally disadvantaged, while members of the

disadvantaged groups tend to use library computers more frequently and more likely to rely on the library as their only source of Internet access.

**d)** Book reading meetings, storytelling, literary meetings, and training workshops, etc, have to be done through Skype, Zoom, live Instagram, Whatsapp, Youtube broadcast, Facebook ,etc to reach the audience. This is to curtail the spread of Covid-19 as a result of mass gathering. These services may be difficult to access by users from the remote locations of the society where Internet services are not provided. Nigeria is not yet covered by the network providers and until that is done; many users will be left out.

### **CONCLUSION**

The negative impact of coronavirus pandemic in public libraries and other sectors cannot be overemphasized. It happened at a time that most libraries in developing countries were crawling due to poor funding. The devastating effect could be felt when most library services navigated towards online digital services, in compliance with government directives on lockdowns and social distancing policies. It became difficult for most libraries in Africa and in Nigeria in particular to render reasonable services to their clients due to poor ICT infrastructure. Students, especially those in primary and secondary schools in Nigeria depended on the main stream media i.e. television and radio for their lessons. While some of the universities that have the infrastructure prior to the Covid-19 engaged their students on the digital platforms.

Way forward:

- 1) Government should declare a state of emergency on public libraries in Nigeria. States and local governments should consider public libraries as core enablers and fulcrum of education in the country and should be given priority in terms of funding.
- 2) Librarians, administrators, and libraries' associations must mount pressure on the government, lobby and push for legislation for funding, and should constantly interact with government on the need to equip all public libraries with the necessary infrastructure.
- 3) Training and retraining of librarians and library personnel through seminars, symposia, conferences, workshops, and academic qualification upscale must be taken seriously. Government must fund research and development in the country if necessary development must take place.
- 4) Health information emergency desk should be put in place in every public library. Adequate training should be given to the health information librarians on how to source for information and report health emergencies reliably.

- 5) As a matter of policy, Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria should ensure that public libraries are built and furnished for the community in all the local government areas in Nigeria.
- 6) Government alone cannot successfully finance public library project. Public Private Partnership should be encouraged to be able to meet the desired spread of the libraries across Nigeria.

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