

Preparedness of librarians in Zimbabwe in dealing with COVID-19 library closure

Josiline Phiri Chigwada

Sub Librarian, Bindura University of Science Education

Abstract: A study on the preparedness of librarians to offer library services in the face of closure due to the coronavirus outbreak was conducted. The data was collected using observation and interviews, whereby fifty librarians from thirty libraries (30 academic librarians, 5 from public libraries, 10 school librarians, and 5 from special libraries) were interviewed to explore the services that they would be able to provide during COVID-19 library closure. Five libraries were visited before the lockdown to see how they were dealing with the protection of both the patrons and staff against COVID 19. The findings revealed that librarians were prepared to offer services by working from home. However, the major challenge was that of internet connectivity and the fact that the patrons were not using online services. Most librarians were not connected except one institution which was assisting library staff with internet charges. All the other libraries were closed and library staff was assisting patrons through WhatsApp and email using their own resources. The author recommends the need for institutions to assist key library staff members with an internet connection so that they would be able to offer research assistance and answer other library queries in times of closure.

Keywords: Disaster preparedness, Pandemic preparedness, COVID-19, Corona Virus, Lockdown, Library services disruption, Online services, Virtual services, E-learning

1. Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO) classified the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic i.e. a global disease outbreak (World Health Organisation, 2020). The disease is transmitted through coughing and coming into close contact with an infected person, surfaces or subjects (Centres for disease control and prevention, 2020). As a result, people are advised to wash their hands more often and avoid close contact with other people since the only means to control the spread of the disease is to block the transmission route (Wilder-Smith and Freedman, 2020). The Association of African Universities (AAU) indicated that educational institutions have been ordered to close as a way of containing the spread of COVID-19 (AAU, 2020) leading to the obstruction of 776.7 million children and youth worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). Due to the closure of schools and higher education institutions, there has been a shift from face to face instruction

to online lecture delivery and preventive measures were put in place to curb the spread of the disease (ALA, 2020; Hill, 2020; Hinchliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020).

The outbreak of COVID-19 which is also known as the coronavirus greatly affected the operation of libraries worldwide. The closure of libraries due to lockdown in most countries to avoid the spread of the diseases altered the way libraries operate since there are no physical visits to libraries and patrons are forced to access virtual services. In Zimbabwe, the lockdown started on 30 March 2020 and it was supposed to end on 19 April for 21 days to curb the spread of the disease (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020), but it was extended for two more weeks up to 03 May 2020. Before the lockdown, people were encouraged to observe social distancing and sanitise their hands thoroughly to kill the virus and a national preparedness and response plan was put in place (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020a). Some library associations created information briefs with links to resources that would be accessible during the lockdown (Ontario Library Association, 2020). The information brief provided the general information about the virus, resources for patrons, mental health and COVID-19, resources for libraries, and pandemic planning guide. It is against such a background that this study was done to assess the preparedness of librarians in Zimbabwe to continue offering services in the COVID-19 pandemic era to avoid the risks of failing to prepare and respond adequately to the closure of libraries due to lockdown.

2. Objectives

The following objectives guided the study:

- i. Explore services that can be offered in times of closure.
- ii. Assess the preparedness of librarians to offer services during the COVID-19 lockdown.
- iii. Analyse the challenges experienced by librarians by working from home.

3. Problem statement

The closure of institutions due to the pandemic has a negative impact on the continuation of teaching, learning and research in schools and higher education institutions (AAU, 2020). Despite this, libraries are obliged to continue offering services even if the physical buildings are closed through virtual services (Cooper, 2020; Hill, 2020; Sweeney, 2020). This is a challenge in most of the developing countries like Zimbabwe where the resources are not enough for people to work from home and offer remote and virtual services effectively. The study would help to unpack some of the services that can be utilised by librarians to continue

offering services and to remain relevant in times of closure due to the pandemic.

4. Literature review

Libraries are regarded as information disseminators that should provide current and trustworthy information to its clientele (Wang and Lund, 2020). The COVID-19 is a global crisis which most countries preconize it as a national disaster leading to the temporary closure of some libraries. Emerging roles of librarians were identified as institutional supporters, collection managers, information disseminators, internal planners, government partners, educators and trainers, and information community builders (Featherstone, Lyon and Ruffin, 2008; Featherstone, Boldt, Torabi and Konrad, 2012; Malizia, Hamilton, Littrell, Vargas and Olney, 2012). These roles are important to ensure that services are restored and the library would function normally after the disaster. Wang and Lund (2020) pointed out that in times of closure, library staff can continue to offer virtual support through library websites and social media by providing reliable information to combat misinformation and fake news.

As a way of dealing with the pandemic, there is a need to ensure that there is business continuity and have disaster recovery plans in line with the prevailing circumstances and there is need to review those plans when situations change (AAU, 2020). The Poudre River Public Library District created a response plan which shows how it would be dealing with the pandemic. It is stated that the district would provide hand sanitizers, hand washing facilities, disinfecting wipes, and facial tissues in all its facilities (Poudre River Public Library, 2020). There would be signs encouraging hand washing in all the restrooms to minimise the spread of the disease. The response plan also states that there might be temporary reduction or suspension of services such as storytimes, use of library meeting rooms by the public, access to computers by the public to reduce the risk of transmission. In times of temporary closure, all due dates would be suspended and the information would be communicated through the library website, social media, e-mail distribution lists, and the local media (Poudre River Public Library, 2020).

There are various ways that can be used to put in place social distance measures. These include but are not limited to cancelling in person staff meetings and resorting to online meetings such as Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, putting in place protocols for physical distance in one-on-one meetings with patrons, cancelling public lectures, converting public events to online, and suspending domestic and international travels. Much information is available on library and national associations' websites and libraries can check and adapt some activities to ensure that they are providing the essential services during closure (IFLA, 2020). AAU (AAU, 2020) pointed out that closure of institutions can be taken as an opportunity to introduce technology-based platforms through full

utilisation of e-learning management systems. Schools and institutions of higher learning are encouraged to work with internet service providers to offer affordable or free access to the internet to access education-related websites and information. For example, Wits University in South Africa is working with Vodacom, MTN and Telkom to offer free access to educational websites while Ashesi University in Ghana is giving 10GB monthly data bundles to students to access online classes (AAU, 2020).

The major challenge that is experienced by most libraries is that patrons do not have home computers and internet connectivity and therefore depend on the library to get internet access. Due to this, there would be no equal access to information since some patrons are not able to participate in online learning (Guthrie, Hill, Kurzweil and Le, 2020). It is a major drawback concerning the use of e-resources off-campus. The other challenge is of working from home since most librarians are used to face to face interactions with the clients and at home they can face some disturbances with house chores (Radcliffe, 2010). It is because some institutions do not have remote work policies to specify how employees should work from home. Some employees are also not confident to work alone and may view some tasks as daunting if they do not have supporting resources such as knowledgeable co-workers or managers who provide feedback and advice (Hamilton, 2014; ILO, 2016; Farrell, 2017). Therefore, there is a need to train employees so that they are empowered to make decisions when they are working from home. It is stated that planning in advance would ensure that the tools and resources that are needed to work effectively and safely at home are available (IFLA, 2020). Lack of skills on how to use e-learning systems can be another challenge that can be experienced by librarians and there is need to ensure that there is a system for submitting requests to ask for help to the technical team (Guthrie, Hill, Kurzweil and Le, 2020).

5. Methodology

The present study was a qualitative study which employed telephone interviews and observation to collect data from the participants. Fifty (50) librarians from thirty libraries, i.e. 30 academic librarians from 10 academic libraries; 10 school librarians from 10 school libraries, 5 librarians from 5 public libraries, and 5 librarians from 5 special libraries, were interviewed to assess their level of preparedness in offering services in the face of lockdown. It would help to avoid disadvantaging their patrons especially those who would be writing their theses and dissertations and also researchers and lecturers who would be preparing their lectures and tutorials to upload on the e-learning platforms. Five libraries were visited before the lockdown to observe how they were dealing with the protection of both patrons and staff. The circulation services and other rules concerning social distancing and wearing of protective clothing were looked at. The data was coded and those with the same information were grouped together and one prominent answer was presented to represent the same points. Content analysis was used to analyse the data which was presented thematically.

6. Findings

The findings revealed that librarians are assisting patrons from home though they are not “officially” working since there are no policies in Zimbabwe regarding teleworking. However, the rate of assistance for those who are not receiving support in terms of data charges and airtime is low since they are improvising by using their own resources to cater to the needs of patrons. The following were some of the responses that were provided:

Few patrons are calling for personalised research assistance through WhatsApp.

I am assisting patrons online through live chat, email and WhatsApp.

I am offering lectures online through Google classroom.

I have uploaded information literacy course content on eLearning platforms such as Edmodo and Moodle.

I posted library lessons, e-books and links on the e-learning platform.

I am using online resources provided on the Aflia website especially reading materials for children.

I am taking advantage of open access resources that are provided by publishers during the COVID-19 lockdown. I have been creating awareness to the patrons using WhatsApp groups and library website.

I am creating awareness about the free resources that are provided by publishers.

The findings showed that the librarians are prepared to offer services during the lockdown. However, there are some circumstances that affect them that are beyond their control. As a result, only one library was offering full support to the patrons as usual although the institution was closed. The librarians pointed out that:

The physical library is closed but we are working full time from home. The institution is very supportive as we are given internet connection charges and fuel allowances just in case there is need to visit the campus for some services. Queries from students are directed to the college and departmental librarians. Internet connection is provided, and airtime is given to staff members to offer services.

We are not working from home but I am just assisting my faculty members using my own Wi-Fi so that they are not stranded.

The results showed there are a lot of challenges that are faced by librarians who try to work from home. This can be attributed to lack of a culture of teleworking where the institution is very supportive to ensure that all the resources are available. The respondents pointed out that:

A few library staff members have internet access at home. So, lots of cell phone and WhatsApp assistance is in progress whilst we are exploring how library staff without internet access at home can be assisted.

The library depends on the expertise of people from the information technology department to ensure that the servers are up and running and the e-resources are accessible. As a result, it is important for IT librarians to ensure that the servers are up and the e-resources are accessible during the lockdown.

We want to assist the patrons in any way, but the resources are not there for us to work from home.

Our patrons are struggling with accessing information due to lack of resources. Researchers do not have the data to do research from home. At the moment we struggle with having our users online because 100% of them visit the library for internet services. Students who were in the halls of residence were made to vacate the residential facilities as a way of avoiding overcrowding and they do not have access to the internet at home.

Minimum data was given but it's terrible because the data is not enough.

It's not always easy to get the resources from the institution; it's just a sacrifice to ensure that work is done. Some institutions provided money to workers to put solar and internet connection at home, but we are still far from it.

Zimbabwe is not ready for any major assistance from home besides taking reference queries via WhatsApp.

Results from the five libraries that were visited before closure of institutions showed that there were hand sanitizers at the entrance of libraries before the lockdown and everyone getting in and out of the library was supposed to wash his or her hands thoroughly. Protective clothing was also provided for all library staff in the form of gloves and masks and it was the policy that staff at the circulation desk and those who were responsible for shelving books should always wear these to avoid the transmission of the virus. Returned books were not immediately shelved but were quarantined for 48 hours to ensure that the virus would die if there were contamination. There were notices encouraging patrons to observe social distancing in the library and everywhere else and patrons were also encouraged to avoid handshaking and hugging. The library staff was not allowed to let visitors into their offices during working hours to avoid the transmission of the disease.

7. Discussion

The findings from the study showed that most institutions are making use of e-learning management system as stated by AAU (2020) and automatically libraries are also forced to offer their services remotely to ensure that patrons are not disadvantaged. Librarians are using e-learning systems to offer information literacy training and Google classroom to deliver lectures. Some librarians are assisting patrons using live chat, WhatsApp, email and social media to offer reference services. It shows that librarians were prepared to continue offering services despite the lockdown. However, the major challenge that is experienced is lack of support from the institutions in terms of data charges and airtime to assist the patrons effectively. Most librarians do not have internet connectivity at home and cannot afford to continue offering services to patrons if management does not come to their rescue. This is in line with the issue of organisations in Zimbabwe not prepared for their employees to work

from home due to lack of teleworking policies. There is great need of institutional support for the librarians to be able to offer meaningful assistance to patrons during library closure. Libraries should also plan to provide the needed resources to work from home and this can be documented in the disaster preparedness plans as indicated by IFLA (2020).

8. Conclusion and recommendations

It can be concluded that libraries should continue to offer services to patrons in times of emergency closures caused by pandemics such as COVID-19 since the library is regarded as the hub of any learning institution. Institutions should therefore have disaster preparedness plans to deal with such cases especially if there is imminent closure as stated by Featherstone et al. 2012. All types of libraries should have a plan with clear procedures which should be followed in providing library safely and most effectively during closure. This should incorporate the issues of social distancing, reduced staff, and availability of protective clothing and hand sanitizers. The libraries should also ensure that patrons have access to accurate, correct and up-to-date information regarding the disease and avoid misinformation and fake news that might be circulated on social media and other platforms as stated by Wang and Lund (2020). It can be accomplished by working with the ministry of health and child care to combat fake news.

The libraries cannot tackle the issue of informing the patrons about the pandemic alone. There is need for coordination among public health authorities, local government and educational entities in order to successfully deliver the services required by patrons. As a result, the libraries would be able to effectively communicate in a timely and accurate manner with the patrons basing on the latest information obtained from the health authorities. The information should be cascaded to the patrons by posting current information on the website and responding to questions promptly.

There should be strategies to improve student participation online since most of the patrons are used to face-to-face instruction and communication. The way that the libraries would respond to COVID-19 can be successful depending on the nature and status of classes at the institution. Some classes continued as usual during the lockdown while some were cancelled and some in person classes were moved to online or remote instruction. If the classes were cancelled, then some students tend to relax and not concentrate on reading and researching leading to non-use of the virtual library. If the classes were moved to online instruction, there would be a notable increase in the use of e-resources and how to guide should be available on library websites to guide the patrons who might face challenges in using e-resources. Library staff should also be available to offer remote assistance to patrons who might be facing challenges. Librarians should build capacity on designing, developing, and providing orientation programs and information literacy training on eLearning platforms.

It can be done by offering training sessions to librarians on how to use these platforms. Some of the librarians who were interviewed are already using these services. The libraries should also ensure that the online reference services are functional and are manned all the times during the lockdown period to ensure that reference queries are answered on time. These include WhatsApp services, live chat, Facebook chat, and Skype among others. This calls for Institutional support to provide the needed resources especially internet connectivity at home for library staff.

Libraries should provide access to e-resources off-campus, both subscription based and open access and ensure that these e-resources are always accessible remotely. However, the library cannot accomplish this alone. The IT personnel should ensure that the servers are up and running so as to ensure the accessibility of e-resources off campus. This calls for a joint effort between the library, the institution, service providers, and ministry. Institutions should work with service providers to get subsidised data charges when accessing educational materials like what was done by Wits University. Ministers, Vice-Chancellors, data providers, and those responsible for working with the information technology infrastructure should ensure that all the patrons would be able to access the e-resources. If the data charges are affordable, the patrons would be able to use internet services when they are home since the findings indicated that most of the patrons visit the library to access the internet and do not have internet connection at home.

The library can apply temporary procedures to ensure the safety of both the library materials and library staff. Quarantine of recently returned items can be practiced if there is storage space to keep the returned books. The libraries can also consider disinfecting and cleaning all returned library items at the time of check-in. There is need to consider the effects of disinfecting methods such as the use of gels, liquids and heat on library materials. This would help in minimising the spread of the disease. Patrons should be educated on best practices of dealing with the disease and the information should be readily accessible.

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