**Retooling the Concept of Information Service Provision: Imperative for Libraries in Developing Countries in Times of Pandemic**

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**Abstract**

The quest to adapt information services from the traditional library context to one that is digital for the purpose of efficiency, relevance and sustainability of the library profession in developing countries prompted the paper. From a comparative viewpoint, the competitiveness of two information provision models (traditional and social media) was discussed alongside their challenges, considering the mediating role of technology. The prospect and viability of the latter over and above the former as an efficient model of information service provision during and after pandemic were highlighted with the aid of statistics. The paper proposed that the identification of core library patrons, acceptance of the broken monopoly of the library as an information provider, the development of a variety of services, making services audience and device-specific, the building of social media community, the designation of social media savvy personnel and the library ability to demonstrate capacity to provide relevant information are key strategies for transforming the surviving libraries into thriving libraries. The paper concluded with some benefits accruing to the concerned libraries if the proposed strategies are proactively implemented.

**Keywords**: Social media, Traditional library, Covid-19, Pandemic, Information service provision

**Introduction**

There is a strong consensus among LIS professionals that service is the hallmark of the library profession; however, divergent views abound on ways of communicating them. Among other factors, the emergence of ICT and its attendant proliferation and rate of diffusion across all fields is remarkable. This phenomenon has prompted various service provision models that have continued to assume a more complex dimension. Presently, communication (i.e., verbal, non-verbal, written, or visual) is greatly redundant if the essence is not to disseminate information. A more efficient way of achieving this is through the use of technology. Thus, information service provision is now a blend of technology, man, and data (Zazi, 2010). Whereas the term could mean the dissemination of processed or unprocessed information, a more comprehensive description would capture the channel of dissemination. Consequently, information service provision is operationalized as the transmission and management of man’s documented intellectual output by those trained to do so with the aid of relevant technology.

Despite the existing and potential benefits modern technology offers the LIS profession, critics are of the view that if the primary function of the library is information dissemination, the Internet has extinguished its usefulness. One of the technological platforms giving impetus to this argument in recent times is social media. Its acceptance has continued to gain prominence among individuals and organizations seeking a place in the digital realm (Steinfield et al., 2012). With the prevalence of Covid-19 pandemic and its attendant restrictions, the popularity of social media as a veritable means of communication is receiving greater attention. For example, Pérez-Escoda, et al (2020) asserted, “As a consequence of the pandemic, social media is becoming the platform of choice for public opinions, perceptions, and attitudes towards various events or public health policies regarding Covid-19”. Furthermore, social media analytics has been reported as an efficient technique for capturing attitudes and perceptions of the public during the pandemic (Yigitcanlar et al., 2020) and has become a catalyst for quality decision-making and risk behavior (Al-Dmour, et al., 2020).

Whereas evidence abounds that libraries in the developed economies leverage social media to widen their patron-base and remain relevant in the information provision business (Xie & Stevenson, 2014), the narrative contrast significantly in the less developed countries (Ziaie, 2013), where the argument about library usefulness appears valid. More than a decade ago, it was reported that the majority of African libraries are in real crisis with an unclear future (Ogunsola, 2011). This assertion was premised on the low rate of technology deployment by libraries in the region. According to the author, if nothing changes, technology will foster the death of traditional librarianship in the region. Whether or not the emergence of Covid-19 and its restriction protocols will initiate or expedite the actual demise of such libraries due to their unresponsiveness in times of restrictions on physical movement is not certain. However, this paper proposes that efficient deployment of relevant social media tools will remedy the image crisis such libraries are currently contending with due to Covid-19 guidelines.

**Justification**

The unresponsive nature and over-reliance on routine manual operations, the need to eliminate/minimize physical trips to the library facility and embrace a paradigm that promises ‘anytime’ and ‘anywhere’ access to a wider range of information resources and services (Bamgbade et al., 2015) are among the flaws inherent in the traditional library system. Thus, a more inclusive and adaptive information provision model that is responsive during and after emergencies/pandemics becomes expedient. The emergence and proliferation of ICT brought with them a decline in preference for libraries and librarians both as sources of information and advocates of information for researchers (Dickson & Holley, 2010). Earlier, it was reported that information users begin their search for information with search engines, with no reference to the library as a starting point (OCLC, 2006). An overwhelming preference for information disseminated through social media over other conventional platforms has also been observed (Howard et al., 2018). If these empirical claims emanated from the U.S., what does the future hold for libraries in the less developed regions? What can be done to ensure the latter brace up for relevance with a view to reclaiming its lost ‘territories’ and confidence reposed in it as information provide? This is the crux of this paper.

**The Traditional Library Concept of Information Service Provision**

The traditional library system is one that is characterized by manual methods of processing physical records and services from the point of acquisition to transmission of same to the end-users. It emphasizes a centralized, physically assembled information stock where usage requires a physical visit to the library (Kaur, 2015). With respect to relevance, Librarians in this environment are often quick to point out, in defense, the benefits that the non-digital library setting offers. It has been debated that there is a greater control mechanism in the traditional library system over what comes into the library than it is in the digital environment (O’Brien, 2018), where publishers reserved the right to add or withdraw titles from digital resource packages without external input. It has been reported that only about 57.5% of essential academic titles are available digitally (Rao et al., 2016). Earlier, it was submitted that despite the ongoing digitization efforts, the relevance of the traditional library could not be outlived because only an insignificant amount of what has been published since writing began is available on the Internet (Remelts, 2005). Furthermore, no technological competence or IP address management and authentication/user ID setups are required for gaining access to resources and services in the traditional setting. Other bottlenecks associated with the digital environment like incompatibility of software/hardware, licensing/legal issues and publishers’ business models (Walter, 2013) lent further credence to traditional librarianship. The argument notwithstanding, the traditional library system is often criticized for several reasons.

The rigidity and unresponsive nature of the system during emergencies and unfavorable weather conditions confine patrons to physically accessible resources and services. Thus, this system became moribund and inaccessible to patrons during the Covid-19 lockdown. Lending policies have been reported to pose further restrictions to access to information resources and services (Abbas & Faiz, 2013). Once collections are built and services developed, it becomes the responsibility of patrons to take advantage of them—no deliberate efforts to induce use or increase patronage due to its lack of competitiveness. The attention required in the preservation of highly combustible physical records and their vulnerability to deterioration and other forms of catastrophes is another concern of this system. Shelving arrangement under this system is time-consuming and labor-intensive. In this system, manual processes like charging system, organization of knowledge, search and retrieval of information, as well as record-keeping are unnecessarily tasking and expensive (Ashikuzzaman, 2016).

**The Social Media Concept of Information Service Provision**

With the advent of technology, users of information have not only increased astronomically, but their information needs and modes of meeting them have also become elastic, dynamic, complex. Whereas the emergence of technological innovations like social media created this *phenomenon*, conscious deployment of same offers a reasonable solution. Whereas this assertion reinforces why libraries in the developed economies continue to *thrive* and remain relevant (despite the encroachments into the library’s statutory functions by allied disciplines), it also validates the continued *survival* of libraries in the less developed regions in terms of decline in patronage, relevance and impact.

The emergence of social media has transformed the library from being a ‘repository of knowledge to a ‘facilitator of communication and collaboration’ (Bell et al., 2015), where libraries have become more of ‘connections’ of people, information, and technology than ‘collection’ of resources (Hielmcrone et al, 2012). With the use of blogs, libraries facilitate speedy interaction with patrons and timely dissemination of library news and providing web links to resources and services. Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social networking sites have been identified as veritable platforms for academic activities like class projects/assignments/presentations, group discussion (Muruli & Gireesh, 2013) and marketing/publicizing library services. RSS aggregators are suitable for current awareness services and selective dissemination of information (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). As an information-laden environment (Kronqvist-Berg, 2014) that helps to build enduring communities of patron, social media helps to minimize patrons’ physical visits to the library facility due to its flexibility of engagement. The advantages/benefits notwithstanding, social media experience is evolving and challenges such as the authenticity of information, users’ privacy, false identity, and lack of control mechanism (Izuagbe, et al., 2019a) have been associated with the platform.



***Fig. (DataReportal, January, 2021)***

**Distribution of social media applications and their monthly active users**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **S/N** | **Social Media Application** | **Monthly Active Users** |
| 1 | Facebook | 2.740 billion |
| 2 | Twitter | 353 million |
| 3 | Instagram | 1.221 billion |
| 4 | Pinterest | 442 million |
| 5 | Snapchat | 498 million |
| 6 | YouTube | 2.291 billion |
| 7 | Reddit | 430 million |
| 8 | WhatsApp | 2 billion |
| 9 | Quora | [300 million](https://www.chinainternetwatch.com/27603/weibo-q3-2019/) |
| 10 | WeChat | 1.213 billion |
| 11 | Weibo | [511 million](https://www.chinainternetwatch.com/27603/weibo-q3-2019/) |
| 12 | Telegram | 500 million |
| 13 | Massager | 1.3 billion |
| 14 | TikTok | 689 million |

***Source: DataReportal (January, 2021)***

The figure presents data that lent credence to the growing popularity of social media use. Globally, 4.20 billion (53.6%), more than half of the world population, are active social media users. Of these figures, 4.15 billion (98.8%) access the platform using mobile devices. Similarly, an annual increment in social media usage is estimated to be over 490 million (+13.2%). The breakdown in the Table reveals that Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp are the most utilized platforms, with Facebook topping the distribution. Furthermore, statistics indicate that 9 out of 10 Internet users use social media and a typical social media user has an account on more than 8 different social media platforms and spends an average of 2.5 hours on social media per day (DataReportal, 2021). From these data, are there opportunities that libraries could leverage? What percentage of these figures can the library harness for its advantage?

**Strategies for retooling library services**

1. **Identify your audience**

Information is a slippery term that means different things to different people as well as the sources. This obviously suggests that the library cannot satisfy the information yearnings of all and sundry. The collection development policies of libraries (where they are available) usually spell out whom the library and its services are designed. Libraries should therefore be guided by this framework to identify its core patrons in order to streamline services for maximum output and impact.

1. **Accept the norm**

Having identified your audience, librarians must realize that the monopoly of being the sole provider of information that characterized the traditional library environment is broken. Patrons are well aware and more exposed to sources of information and ways of accessing them now than before. Librarians must objectively embrace this reality that users have outgrown what is physically available in the library; they now know what they want, the way they want it, and where they want it (Izuagbe et al., 2019b).

1. **Develop a variety of services**

The 21st century information consumer is interested in a wide range of information services. Social media is a hypermedia domain where a variety of information on academic, political, social, religious, entertainment, games, audio, video, etc., can be shared in different formats. Making such information available in the form of services avails patrons a wide range of services to choose from. According to Igwe (2017), the use of library social media platforms is not all about information; other interesting digital contents also elicit use. So, the more the services vary, the more they use them. To achieve this, librarians must research into patrons’ information service preferences, identify and make provision for them. This will create the impression that their needs are appreciated.

1. **Make services audience and device-specific**

Besides the instantaneous feedback capability of social media, its ability to reach a larger audience than would otherwise be possible using the traditional platforms is unmatched. Having identified for whom the library and its services are meant, librarians need to ascertain the most utilized channels for accessing social media services and adapt. Statistically, it was reported in early 2020 that 3.2 billion (94.1%) out of the 3.4 billion active users of social media accessed the medium using smartphones (Statusbrew, 2020) and increased to 4.15 billion (98.8%) in January 2021(DataReportal, 2021). This is an indication that mobile phone is the most utilized device for accessing the information on social media. Making information services accessible on smartphones put the library where their users are, vice versa.

1. **Build a social media community**

Building an engaging/enduring social media community is a good way to demonstrate relevance as it makes patrons feel part of the library community. However, librarians need to determine the type of social media communication is most effective and useful to the community. The library may also design user-friendly applications that expedite access to resources and services, thereby creating a point of convergence for communication. The inclusion of URLs to resources and services should consciously feature on the library's social media websites.

1. **Designate social media savvy librarians**

Building an engaged social media community is not as important as growing and keeping it strong. In order to expedite all activities on the library’s social media platforms, one or two individuals trained in the act of information management who are technology or social media proficient should be designated to man the platforms on a real-time basis to enhance communication efficiency.

1. **Follow them**

Followership on social media is reciprocal. Sharing of posts and providing updates on trending or topical issues (depending on the demographic disposition of the users) across industries will ensure high user-engagement on a real-time basis. The assurance that you have what patrons want automatically endears them to you. Howard et al. (2018) found that the majority of students sampled in their study would prefer to see their libraries on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This implies that the respondents would be interested in being followed-up. Until this is ascertained, the gesture may not be reciprocated.

**Benefits for Libraries in the Developing Countries**

The proposed strategies, if implemented, have implications for libraries operating the traditional model in the following areas:

1. Making information services social media-compliant automatically removes the appellation “traditional” from libraries operating the traditional model of information provision and gives them a digital and universal relevance.
2. It has been predicted that about 90% of library patrons would be meeting their information needs from non-library-related sources and physical space used for non-library-related functions (University Leadership Council, 2011). Conscious and proactive deployment of relevant social media tools will address and nullify this prediction.
3. From the academic standpoint, the use of social media will improve the professional image of academic libraries in terms of interaction and foster liaison operations with the various departmental Heads in their institutions.
4. The debate about relevance, social rejection and the eventual demise of the library profession would become null and void because the libraries would have become more competitive and responsive to the information needs of their patrons during and after emergencies/pandemics that limit physical movement.
5. The concerned libraries will be able to take information services to the doorstep of a wider audience through proactive marketing of information products and services, thereby bringing to an end the age-long practice of wait-for-patrons’ physical visit to the library.
6. It is pretty challenging nowadays for researchers to keep track of scientific development/discourse due to the enormity of the avalanche of literature and information in circulation. Thus, several scholarly communication platforms (i.e., conferences, workshops, seminars) are currently being complemented by relevant social media tools like LinkedIn, ResearchGate, Academia.edu (Persson & Svenningsson, 2017), Almetric, Mendeley, Orcid, Google Scholar, etc. These platforms help researchers increase visibility and citation by reaching a wider audience with their research findings (Van Noorden, 2014; Bik & Goldstein, 2013). Since citation is a key measure of research impact, libraries could therefore create or subscribe to relevant academic, social media platforms to further publicize the academic and scholarly publications emanating from the institutions they belong for the benefit of authors and institutions’ rankings.

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