

Social media and library and information services in COVID-19 era

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Abstract

This paper examined social media and library services in COVID-19 era. The emergence of social media in the delivery of library services is a recent development. It has become a major instrument of communication and information dissemination especially during a pandemic witnessed in human history. Given the context of wider reach and acceptability of social media platforms, libraries are now exploring the opportunities provided in the delivery of library and information services to their patrons in such areas like; education and training, marketing and advertising, collaboration and linkages, delivery of information on library resources, amongst others to wildly control the menace. Challenges encountered in the application of this platform to library and information services delivery in COVID-19 era were identified in this paper such as; inadequate funding, poor network and connectivity, epileptic electricity supply, inadequate trained personnel to handle digital programmes, amongst others. The paper recommended appropriate measures that could be taken to overcome the challenges such as increase in library budget, improved network and connectivity, alternative source of electricity, training and retraining of library personnel, all geared towards improving library and information services through social media platforms in the COVID-19 era. Secondary sources of information and other documented sources were consulted.

Keywords: COVID-19, Era, Information Services, Library, Social Media

Introduction

One of the most commonly and widely used platform in the world today is social media. This is largely due to its ease of use and inexpensive access to the internet whereby a large number of registered users on these platforms can disseminate information and communicate freely. Developments in information and communication technology with the emergence of digital technologies which permeated and changed the trend of transaction across many endeavours have necessitated that. The appropriation of these digital technologies chief among which is social media has brought about conspicuous and positive changes in governance, business, communication, entertainment, and library services, among others.

The outbreak of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (otherwise known as COVID-19) undoubtedly, has changed the mode of operation among libraries globally. Today, associated terms like social distancing, lockdowns and quarantining are now part of the new normal, whereby libraries are now operating on a largely digital and therefore remote basis. In view of this paradigm shift in the library landscape, libraries of all types are increasingly incorporating the adoption and use of social media for enhanced service delivery to their clientele.

Social media platforms have been found to be very helpful during pandemic for the general public to maintain communication with friends and family so as to reduce isolation and boredom which is commonly associated with anxiety and long-term distress. As observed by Bradley (2015), social media has increasingly become a strategic resource for university education, where its adoption and use is no longer seen as a luxury, but a necessity for academic libraries.

Therefore, in this changing library landscape particularly occasioned by the COVID-19 era, the use of social media in the library effectively will enable librarians to connect with

users in a space that they already occupy, while bringing added value to existing activities. This paper attempts to highlight the areas of application of social media to library services in COVID-19 era, the challenges encountered in the application as well as recommendations for improvement.

Concept of social media

Various attempts have been made by scholars to define the concept of social media. By definition, it refers to a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Social media generally include a variety of applications which range from content communities, collaborative projects, micro-blogs/blogs, Twitter, social networking sites to virtual worlds.

Dewing cited in Aghadiuno (2020) sees social media as a wide range of internet-based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute to user-created content, or join online communities. These online communities often lead to the development of different social media platforms such as applications, tools and internet-enabled environments where individuals or groups interact through sharing of information, comments or chats with the aid of computers or mobile devices.

Adigun, Adegboire and Amuda (2015) viewed social media as a term that encompasses all Web 2.0 and social networking tools that enable content creation, sharing, discovering and exchange of user-generated content, with the main focus on their participatory nature. Some of the most relevant characteristics of social media platforms in this pandemic era have been the rapid dissemination of protocols at regional, national, and international levels. Sharing protocols about treatment, personal protection equipment, or even proposals for fair allocation in scarce medical resource settings have now become the new normal.

Studies have shown that social media are highly beneficial to the public through the promotion of rapid dissemination of educational content in the COVID-19 era, faster dissemination of information regarding preventive measures, dissemination of scientific literature on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. which increases the number of downloads, queries, and citations of these articles (Daniel & Leonardo, 2020)

Examples of social media platforms and the timeline of the year in which they began can be seen below as observed by Aghadiuno (2020): Bulletin Board System- BBS, Geocities (1994), AOL Instant Messenger and sixDegrees.com (1997), Asian Avenue (1997), Black Planet (1999), MiGente.com (2000), Friendster, MySpace (2003), LinkedIn (2003), Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter, (2006), among others.

Concept of library service

Library services are services aimed at providing users with the right information needed to accomplish a task or for decision making or reduction of uncertainty level. It is seen as the organized collection, exploitation and dissemination of information for the benefit of a firm, or corporate body (Fowowe, cited by Mbashir and Alabi, 2013). Library and information services today play a multifarious role in the society as it present a remarkable variety of pictures and play an important role in the educational, economic, cultural and recreational life of the entire population due to the enormous resources that abound in modern day libraries and the services rendered overtime.

Aina, (2004) opines that the provision of library and information services should be one of the fundamental human rights of every citizen, but largely dependent on the objectives of the parent organization. He stated further that the services provided in a library will differ from one library to another but there are certain services that are common to all libraries

which are categorized as follows: Lending services, inter-library loan service and document delivery, reservation service, provision of seating and studying facilities, reference service, current awareness service, exhibition and displays, library publication, user education, information literacy programme.

In the views of Igwe and Onah, (2013) some of the common library and information services in our libraries today are as follows: Catalogue Based Services- access to information resources are facilitated among library and information centres through the catalogues; reference service- personal assistance provided by library professional to the library users; current awareness service- an important means for keeping the users up to date in their areas of interest; document delivery service- This has helped from searching the holdings of libraries to ordering and delivery; bibliographic service- this include compilation of bibliographies, reading lists and state of –the- art report; audio visual service- They can be played on standard PCs, stand –alone or networked, etc.

COVID–19 Era

COVID-19 is a game changer across the world today and would remain so in the years to come. The viral infection that broke out in December 2019 in Wuhan, China has threatened and weakened the health and socio-economic systems of most of the countries of the world. The negative impact of this pandemic has brought a paradigm shift in the way and manner in which services are provided and business transactions executed around the world, including the library environment. COVID-19 era has further deepened the gaps in accessing routine health services thereby exposing vulnerabilities in the global and national health system as well as our social, political and economic system which in turn affects social interactions among individuals and organizations that are service-oriented.

According to Alegbeleye (2020) COVID-19 has marked a paradigm shift in thinking and practice which dictates how you deal with people who are not in your environment. This era is a period in which teaching is done online because schools are closed or in skeletal operation, and therefore necessitate the use of platforms like Google classroom, Zoom meeting etc. This new normal has opened our eyes to the need for cooperation, partnership, networking and many other things which were taken for granted hitherto. The discussion below will therefore focus on areas in which social media could be applied to provide library services to users during this era.

Areas of application of social media in library and information services in COVID-19 era

Social media are veritable platforms that have the potentials of being exploited to render library and information services to users in the following areas:

- i. *Library orientation/education programme:* Library users of all types can be taught on how to use the library for academic purpose or search for information to meet their information need on social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp, among others. They are seen as convenient platforms that save time, cost and energy of library personnel as well as their users. They also provide access to a variety of information sources that users can explore with or without guide from library professionals.
- ii. *Education and training programme:* COVID-19 era has called for the retooling of educators and lecturers to upgrade themselves to be able to provide online classes to their students regardless of time and space. Training could be conducted on digital platforms like Google classroom, Zoom meeting or other webinar platforms and feedback received instantly. This is the reality of our time where there is no hiding

place for information providers, educators and lecturers in the impartation of knowledge.

- iii. *Establishment of linkages:* one of the ways of linking up with partners, individuals, groups as well as institutions that share similar interests is through collaboration using social media platforms. Today, we live in a global village by reason of online accessibility. Hence, Fagbohun and Esse, cited in Aghadiuno (2020) opined that librarians usually visit social networking sites particularly for the purpose of connecting and collaborating with friends and colleagues in order to render current awareness and reference services to their teeming patrons on one hand, and foster collaboration with peers and colleagues
- iv. *Document/information delivery:* The application of the various social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Whastapp enable libraries to provide library and information services to the public in an easy manner. Library professionals are concerned with the delivery of information service as a vital element in an information driven society. Therefore, for a society to attain its status as a modern society, it must give priority to the way information is generated and disseminated to the users.
- v. *Marketing of library products and services:* The use of digital technologies undoubtedly enhances the reach of information to those that need them. Social media provides a wider coverage and reach than the mass media because within a click, several thousands or millions of people could be reached. This in turn attract a long line of traffic to library sites where records of varying degree are promoted by library professionals to those that need them.
- vi. *Expansion of remote services:* Despite the near total lockdown that characterize the COVID-19 era, libraries across the globe could render services which include the expansion of remote services such as virtual reference, promotion of e-books, databases, providing access to library's e-resources 24/7, reference services through e-mail, phone and chat, use of social graphics for online library services, expanding reader's advisory service online, sharing of favourite books or movies with patrons on social media, among others.
- vii. *Awareness and sensitization creation:* In a study conducted by Ojo cited in Eberechi (2020) it was revealed that library professionals can use social media platforms to create awareness and sensitization on COVID-19 related matters, provide digital contents to patrons, organize online streaming programmes and connect patrons to accurate and reliable data on COVID-19 issues around the world. Through the aforementioned, libraries can contribute significantly to the fight against the pandemic and still promote positive change through their services. Libraries are known as gateways of relevant information and knowledge for conducting research and development in any related subject areas. During this pandemic, libraries and information centres through the social media provide opportunities to researchers to explore medical and scientific research discoveries while preventing the disease.

Challenges in the application of social media in library and information services in the COVID-19 era

A number of challenges are associated with the use of social media platform in providing library and information services in the COVID-19 era. These includes but not limited to the following:

- i. *Cost implication:* One of the foremost challenges encountered by libraries and other information agencies in the application of social media in the provision of library and information services is funding. As observed by Nwalo (2000), certain problems

inhibit the application of Information Technology by African libraries which include apathy and inadequate government funding. Areas covered by this cost implication include the acquisition of web hosting rights, publishing web content, consultancy fees, among others.

- ii. *Issue of digital literacy*: Digital literacy without any doubt is crucial for the success of the application of social media platforms across disciplines. But, unfortunately, many library and information services provider are not digitally literate. While this is noticed among the service providers, it is even more prevalent among the users who lack the required skills, knowledge and ability to run complex programmes requiring digital devices.
- iii. *Epileptic power supply*: For proper application of social media platforms in the provision of library and information services in the COVID-19 era, there is need for improved and regular power supply. Erratic power supply affects efficient delivery of library services which has left much to be desired. Attempts to fix this challenge and provide alternative has heightened the expenditure profile of many organizations
- iv. *Poor internet access and connectivity*: One of the major challenges in the application of social media in library and information services is that of poor internet access. This is a peculiar problem to third world countries like Nigeria and it is often blamed on the initial capital outlay to install internet facilities, low bandwidth or low speed internet infrastructures, among others. Libraries and information centres require strong internet connectivity in order to remain viable in the present ICT environment and COVID-19 era.
- v. *Inadequate trained personnel*: Many library and information centres do not have sufficient manpower that are trained to handle digitally oriented programmes particularly during pandemic like COVID-19 in spite of the number of graduates churned out every year from our library schools. Only a few libraries are concerned with providing requisite training on ICT literacy or retooling to acquire necessary ICT skills in order to cope with emerging circumstances in the provision of library and information services.

Conclusion

The use of social media platforms has no doubt increased among the people particularly for service delivery. The discussion above showed that social media has been used to share view points, health care related matter and distance learning during the COVID-19 era. The use of social media has been seen as a valuable means for the government and experts to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other epidemics. Individual activities have greatly increased on social media with the outbreak of Covid-19, therefore information sharing on this platform will reduce cost and time taken in the delivery of information as well as enhance participants' skills and abilities to be more productive. It is therefore expected of the government and relevant stakeholders to provide a conducive environment for the application of social media platforms in library and information services.

In order to ameliorate the above situations, the following recommendations are put forward:

- 1 Budgetary allocation to libraries and information centres should be strengthen to enable them fund their services easily. Also, there should be proper management of funds allocated by library management.
- 2 Government should pay attention to ICT infrastructure facilities provision in their policy and budget to bridge the digital divide and encourage globalization
- 3 There should be more liberalization of telecommunication market in order to reduce the high cost of internet connectivity bandwidth

- 4 Alternative power source should be heavily canvassed and explored in libraries and information centres in order to sustain existing and emerging library services
- 5 Training and retraining of library personnel should be an ongoing practice in our libraries particularly in a technology driven society where change is inevitable. This will help to keep the service providers abreast with recent trends in their profession.

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