Evolution of Library Services in the Post-COVID Era

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 global pandemic resulted in significant disruption in educational, cultural, and information domains. Libraries, as a traditionally physical space, faced unique challenges in how to stay accessible to resources and services while keeping users safe. The article focuses on discussing the development of library services during the post-COVID period and reviews the available literature. It covers the shift to digital collections, virtual reference, contactless services, and remote learning support, as well as equity, infrastructure, and digital literacy issues. The paper presents the response of libraries in academic, civic, and special sectors to crisis conditions and, through a narrative literature review, determines the sustainable practices that transformed the profession. The evidence indicates that the pandemic further catalyzed the change towards hybrid models, re-established the role of the library in fighting misinformation, and emphasized the need to move towards digital inclusion. This paper finds that the libraries of the post-COVID era need to integrate these technologies into long-term plans that offset physical and digital activity and enhance the relevance of libraries to society.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, library services, hybrid model, digital inclusion, information literacy, post-pandemic libraries**.**

1. INTRODUCTION

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020 compelled institutions around the globe to halt normal business activities. Of them, libraries, regardless of being academic, public, school, or special, were particularly hit due to their dependency on both physical space and human interaction. Traditionally, libraries have been a source of access to knowledge, a secure place in the community and a place of lifelong learning. These functions have been broken as the extensive lockdowns, shutdowns, and prohibition of people from gatherings has been introduced.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2020) reported the closing of library doors in almost every country throughout the initial months of the pandemic. This was a big loss to the users who were used to physical borrowing, reference desks, and communal areas. However, instead of letting the upheaval take its toll, libraries reacted creatively, strongly and speedily. Countless hastened existing digital efforts, increased

remote services, and identified new opportunities to stay relevant in an environment where normal operations could no longer be done.

With the restrictions alleviating in late 2021, a new question came to mind: What will library services be like in the post-COVID era? The post-COVID is not a term that means eliminating the virus, but perhaps a time when institutions started to accommodate a world with the long-term consequences of the pandemic. In the context of libraries, this implied a reassessment of priorities in service provision and balancing digital and physical services and responding to disparities in access.

This article summarizes the significant changes in library services in the pandemic and explains their implication on operations in the post-COVID period. Based on the literature published prior to December 2021, it draws attention to both achievements and obstacles, and outlines ways of operating sustainable innovation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Global impact of COVID-19 on libraries

Libraries all over the world were hit by the pandemic. Reportedly, during the first quarter of 2020, closures were almost universal (UNESCO, 2020 and IFLA, 2020). The academic libraries suffered most because the universities went online and the public libraries lost their purpose of having people gather. Special libraries such as those found in hospitals, corporations and government agencies were also restricted but in many cases, played vital information provision roles in the decision making process.

Ali and Gatiti (2020) noted that librarians have been requested to reconsider the scope of their professional duties to shift not only to the conventional functions of librarians but also to the technology-based functions. Ameen (2021) suggested that the pandemic brought to light the realities of libraries as a vulnerable institution and essential service providers.

2.2 Switch to electronic materials.

Libraries had started to invest in digital collections long before the pandemic. But COVID-19 speeded this change up tremendously. The publishers also reacted by providing temporary free access to e-books, journals, and databases (De, Pandey, & Pal, 2020). In response to remote teaching and research, especially academic libraries increased their online collections.

2.3 Fighting misinformation and being information literate.

The so-called infodemic, or the excess of information, most of which is false as well, spread online, was one of the hallmark features of the pandemic. Librarians took a crucial position in the process of collecting and sharing reliable information (Ameen, 2021). Fact-checking guides, webinars and digital literacy workshops became common. Ali and Gatiti (2020) noted that the information evaluating and training of library professionals uniquely allowed them to step in and combat misinformation.

2.4 Fairness and digital gap.

Digital transformation increased the access of some people, but it intensified the inequalities of others. Users who lacked good internet, the right equipment and digital skills were left out in most cases. Oyelude (2020) also brought attention to the digital divide in African scenarios, where various libraries had no infrastructure to offer effective digital services. Such problems were observed in rural areas of Asia and Latin America. The pandemic was therefore an eye opener regarding the importance of libraries to consider digital equity, not just through the provision of resources but also through the promotion of equitable policies.

2.5 Emerging hybrid models.

By the end of 2021, with the reopening of institutions, a consensus was starting to emerge around the hybrid model of library service. This model combines both physical and online access and enables the user to be flexible about the way they utilize library resources. IFLA (2021) recommended that libraries need not reach the post-pandemic state of normalcy, but rather integrate the lessons of the pandemic into models of sustainable services. One way to address the future of the profession is to have hybrid libraries that integrate community and collaboration spaces with powerful remote-access digital platforms.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research is based on a narrative literature review approach. Contrary to systematic reviews, a narrative review integrates the results of divergent sources into an explanatory narrative of an area of development. The aim is not to be exhaustive but rather to find some main themes, patterns and knowledge concerning the research question.

3.1 Data sources

1. The review is based on the literature published in the period between January 2020 and December 2021. Sources include:

2. Library and information science journals articles that are peer-reviewed.

3. Professions Report and guidelines by professional organizations like IFLA, ALA, and UNESCO.

4. Case studies and experiences which are reported in professional newsletters and in conference proceedings.

3.2 Selection criteria

Publications were chosen according to their topicality in the following themes:

- The effect of COVID-19 on libraries.
- Going online and remote.
- During the pandemic.
- Problems of equity, access and digital divide.
- New hybrid models and new post-COVID visions.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The reviewed literature proves that the pandemic not only derailed the normal operations, but also enhanced innovation in the library sector. There are a few dominant themes in the post-COVID environment.

4.1. 21st-century Library as the Digital Core.

4.1.2. Collection digitization.

One of the most notable developments during the pandemic was a massive rise in the number of orders of e-resources. Academic libraries have struck a deal with publishers to temporarily or have extended access to digital collections. As an example of this, De, Pandey, and Pal (2020) stated that several universities gained access to electronic journals and databases on trial to facilitate distance learning.

Healthcare institutions and other special libraries created COVID-19 research databases and distributed open-access material to communities worldwide.

4.1.3. Remote Access Technologies

Libraries spent money on authentication, virtual private networks (VPN), and proxy servers to help them access digital materials digitally. Institutional repositories were also created by libraries and other institutions to make visible more archival materials (IFLA, 2021). These were emergency responses at first, but now it is a long term strategy, because users can access resources wherever they are.

4.1.4. Remote Reference/User Service.

Closing the physical reference desks created a new level of dependence on virtual reference. The researchers also received one-on-one consultations using Zoom or Microsoft Teams and helped with the research questions and search databases (Ali and Gatiti, 2020). This is despite the fact that these services had been piloted in some libraries previously, but the pandemic made them standard practice.

4.1.5. Personalized Services

More personalized user support was also made possible through virtual reference. Pickup and Delivery Curbside. These technologies also emphasized the flexibility of the reference role, and most institutions intend to keep them after the pandemic.

4.1.6. Hybrid and Contactless Circulation Services.

Online booking of materials, and their pick up during specific moments of the day helped to reduce physical contact to a minimum (Murphy & Newport, 2021).

Libraries (public and academic) launched curbside pickup and contactless circulation. There were also cases where home delivery was being tested especially in vulnerable populations who had to travel.

4.1.7. Self-service Technologies

Self-checks and book-drop kiosk RFID-enabled systems were created to be available in libraries that had reopened. According to IFLA (2021), these types of technologies will continue to be included in the service ecosystem.

4.1.8. Expanding User Training

The move to the online learning environment caused libraries to realize that there was an immediate need to be trained in digital literacy. Recorded online tutorials and sessions made it possible to learn asynchronously which

increased the boundaries of information literacy programs. The so-called infodemic of COVID-19 revealed the importance of information assessment.

4.1.9. Addressing Misinformation

Libraries selected health information guides, liaised with the government agencies and sent fact-checking material. In the article by Ali and Gatiti (2020), the authors state that librarians can significantly help counter misinformation and health literacy during the crisis.

4.2. Barriers to Access

Not every rural or low-income user would be enthusiastic about a permanent Internet connection or the appropriate device (Oyelude, 2020). To some degree, these solutions softened situations, but the overall problem of digital inequity has to be addressed in long-term policy-level actions. In these settings, libraries were not able to sustain inclusive services.

4.3. Bridging the Gap

Some libraries in turn lent out laptops, Wi-Fi hotspots and tablets. North American and European public libraries extended their Wi-Fi networks past the walls of buildings and enabled users to connect to this network on the ground (Murphy & Newport, 2021). The online libraries provided online users with online story hours, online cultural events, and online fitness to help people stay socially active despite isolation (Ameen, 2021).

4.4. Reinventing the Social Role of Libraries.

4.4.1. Community Engagement

Libraries also strengthened their position as community anchors, in addition to providing information. Peer-support programs and virtual discussion groups were a way the academic libraries addressed the mental health needs of students.

4.4.2. Policy Advocacy

Libraries have also become frontline advocates for open access and equitable digital policies. The pandemic highlighted the flaws of restrictive models of copyright and professional associations called for reforms (IFLA 2021). These advocacy initiatives may help shape the long-term view of scholarly communication.

The pandemic exposed the inadequacy of restrictive copyright regimes and within the framework of which professional associations called for changes. This type of campaign may have an impact on the future of scholarly communication. Libraries have also become frontline advocates for open access and equitable digital policies (IFLA, 2021).

4.5. Toward a Sustainable Post-COVID Solution

The evidence appears that libraries probably won't revert to the pre-pandemic models. Rather, the future is hybrid services that blend digital and physical interaction. Hybrid models include:

- Strengthening the digital platforms while reopening of the physical places.
- Combining contactless technologies with traditional services and self-service

- Providing variable programming in online and offline mode.

As noted by De, Pandey, and Pal (2020), the pandemic was a "stress test" for libraries which revealed vulnerabilities, but also resilience and innovation. Libraries need to synthesize these lessons into broad strategic planning.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic made libraries re-assert their purpose, switch to being digital-first, and make themselves better at fighting misinformation. It has also raised fundamental disparities in access and made digital inclusion one of its key priority missions. There are still some challenges, particularly in the infrastructure, funding and staff training, but the crisis has shown that libraries are powerful and adaptable institutions.

The libraries that will achieve success in the aftermath of the pandemic are those that accommodate a hybrid approach to the service provision, become more digital, and reassert their social mission. Finally, libraries are not returning to the past, but proceeding in a medium course that will keep them significant actors in an uncertain society. Lastly, libraries will not be moving backwards but will move forward in a middle ground that will see them remain an essential institution in a highly dynamic society.

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