Contextualisation of Library Usage during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

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ABSTRACT This literature review paper reviews the appropriate usage of libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic to discuss various viewpoints of the library for the improvement of its service rendered to its users while on the other hand considering the safety of librarians and users. The objective of this paper is to provide a basic understanding of library usage during the lockdown as a result of COVID-19. This paper aims to introduce some early considerations, discussions and to put forward the author's personal critical positioning on the issues, challenges and potential benefits emerging during the COVID-19 pandemic era for libraries and to underline areas of importance for the usage and direction of the library. The purpose of this review is to provide inspiration for the new ways of library usage for the development of library service provision. The research method utilised to collect data concerning the library usage during and after the COVID-19 pandemic was a literature review. Data was collected from survey reports, journal articles about the topic and books. Main findings and recommendations of this conceptual paper are also based on a literature review.

INTRODUCTION

Libraries are regarded as hubs that provide people in the community as a whole with their information needs as well as reading and learning materials for learners and students in different formats to support both their reading and information needs. There cannot be successful reading without school libraries. The mass production of information has resulted in an information explosion. Learners will be able to read and learn if the information is readily available to them. This is where the library comes into play because the library plays an important role in separating important information from less important information. It is the duty of the library to select relevant materials that are suitable for the level of learners. Information, and not just information, but current, relevant and timely information play an important role in learners' ability to read. The library plays an important role in providing the information needed by both the teachers to succeed in their teaching while learners to succeed in their learning.

Libraries are the backbone of the teaching and learning activities for both learners and students. It is of paramount importance that professional librarians continue to offer services to all library users, that is students, teachers, and families through distant and combined learning practices. Also offering access to both print and non-print resources, and the teaching in the utilisation of resources (Library Media Services 2020).

"However, the present crisis has already created radical shifts for Higher Education institutions, some of which, under normal circumstances, would have taken years to materialise due, for example, to logistic, operational or bureaucratic hurdles, or simply because of a managerial or higher-level strategic resistance to 'new ways of thinking', which could have challenged established teaching and learning practices and tested-out formulas, creating, in that way, prolonged change management timelines" (Martzoukou 2021: 268). However, although offering online access to resources is common in many universities, the full-time online provision of courses has been less prominent, with only a small proportion of universities having embraced online learning pre COVID-19. For example, in England although there are a high number of private training providers, prior to COVID-19, few Higher Education Institutions had been delivering online courses (although many were working in partnership with MOOC platforms) (Zaidi et al. 2018: 7).

Due to the new normal encountered by all different types of libraries as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of challenges were created which included economic, managerial and

academic challenges. On the other hand, the present deteriorating economic situation and the important stress caused by the pandemic decreased library users' access to the physical site. "The migration to a seamless provision of online resources and services to meet students' needs, in their transition to online learning environments, has not only put extra pressure on libraries but also placed a lot of uncertainty about the future" (Martzoukou 2021: 272).

Objectives of the Study

This study explores the school libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Aspects of challenges and benefits of the effects of COVID-19 in library usage were highlighted. This study will have the following specific objectives:
- To provide a basic understanding of library usage during the lockdown as a result of COVID-19.
- To equip with sufficient information to appreciate library usage during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To highlight different challenges that are faced by library users and workers.
- To describe in brief the advantages brought about as a result of the COVID-19.

METHODOLOGY

The research method used to gather information regarding libraries usage during the pandemic and beyond, school libraries during COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges of libraries shifting to being virtual libraries, the benefits of libraries shifting to being virtual libraries, and precaution during lockdown was a literature review. Key findings and recommendations of this conceptual article are also based on literature review. Bryman (2012) indicates that a review of the existing and relevant literature is a crucial element of academic research. The literature review for this article included the collection of secondary data, as the researchers have used published sources from different publications of both foreign governments and local documents such as books, articles, and e-resources. Documents were reviewed and analysed to highlight library usage during COVID-19 pandemic as well as the challenges encountered in the libraries as a result of COVID-19.

RESULTS

School Libraries during COVID-19

"School librarians fulfil five important roles as an instructional partner, teacher, leader, information specialist, and program administrator, relationships and creating an inclusive school culture. During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools need this librarian skill set more than ever as they adapt to meet the current needs of learners in a constantly changing learning environment" (American Association of School Librarians 2020: 1).

Moreover, libraries stand together with their communities. The libraries are dedicated to serving the communities with resources and services required to assist with virtual learning, economic as well as job-related activities, and engaging and connecting throughout this complicated period. The COVID-19 period helped to reveal that libraries are indispensable informational and educational connections for the public as well as organisations. Libraries are transformed to serve the users virtually to effectively meet the users' information needs successfully though they cannot visit the libraries physically (Texas State Library and Archives Commission 2020).

School libraries are critical to teaching and learning for all students. It is important that school librarians continue to provide services to the students, teachers and families via remote and blended learning practices. This includes providing access to print and non-print resources, as well as instruction in the use of resources. "School library furniture, fixtures, books, technology equipment, tools and supplies all have the potential for transmitting viruses. Following the research and recommendations of the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention and the Institute of Museum and Library Services Reopening Archives, Libraries, and Museums (REALM) Project, Fort Worth ISD Library Media Services developed a reopening checklist to mitigate the potential transmission of the novel coronavirus through school libraries" (Library Media Services 2020: 1).

According to the Centre for Disease Control (CDC), it is not recommended to sanitise books since sanitising wipes destroy papers and cardboards print materials. Hence, epidemiologists and librarians do not need to disinfect paper-based items such as books. Moreover, Library Media Services (2020: 2) indicated, "The CDC recommended

that returned books should be avoided for at least 24 hours since the library clients or users sneeze and cough openly into the library resources being used. REALM Project testing for the detection of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) reveals that the virus is undetectable after 3 days on un-stacked books. Stacking books keeps the virus alive longer. Results of the latest round of testing reveal that after 6 days of quarantine, the virus was still detectable on books that were stacked together. Library Media Services recommends that school librarians develop a system for collecting and quarantining returned library books for a minimum of 72 hours". Book trucks, bins, boxes, or library tables should be utilised to contain returned books each day. Librarians should label each day's collection with the date that the books can be made available to students again (Library Media Services 2020). Alternatively, the circulation librarians prepare the books and send the email to notify the client who requested the book to come and collect the book and also indicate the due date for returning the book to the library.

Library users, that is both students, learners and their teachers and lecturers who needed library resources to do their academic work from home have the opportunity to search their institution's school's library catalogue and request to borrow specific books. "Library Media Services encourages all campuses to consider implementing curb side delivery of library books to students learning from home. Additional online resources can be accessed through the Library Media Online Database Resources application on Class Link" (Library Media Services 2020: 2).

"Touchless, self-checkout utilises a stationary barcode scanner to input the student ID number and the barcode number of each library book being checked out. Students do not touch a keyboard or keypad to enter their names or ID numbers. If barcode labels are not used for individual students, an alternative is for a library staff member to type the name or ID number for each student and then allow the student to scan their library books" (Library Media Services 2020: 2).

Librarians became more creative every day, and virtual events were organised such as virtual art workshops, virtual book launch, virtual library week, which is celebrated yearly, and virtual Open Access books for children, students, academics and the community as a whole. "Online art workshops

for adults held by librarians, online meetings of library reading clubs, live streams of meetings with writers, artists and various experts organised by libraries, online e-book recommendations done by librarians, online quizzes, online exhibitions" and many others, all these being carried out by librarians (Solis and Kear 2020: 318). Librarians were exploring methods and strategies that they can use in providing teachers, lecturers, researchers and students with online resources that can enable them to do their work given that academic institutions and other organisations were locked-down, and all the library activities like for example training library users on how to search information on the library databases that the organisation has subscribed to, making library users aware of the availability of e-books in the libraries, were done online. In many public libraries, librarians were collecting and publishing lists of verified reference sources for research and learning assistance since the schools and universities were closed and teaching was done online. Numerous libraries created (size of the library and number of employed librarians was not a key factor in all this) and posted this new content and libraries that did not make them, shared content from libraries that did. Also, even libraries that were active content producers, shared content from other libraries, for diversity (Solis and Kear 2020).

"There is a need for more inclusivity, more focus on providing Internet access, and more awareness-raising initiatives with local organisations and schools. The stories in this report-of libraries developing mobile Wi-Fi options, creating digital navigator programs to support digital literacy, launching more online programs, and making use of outdoor spaces-show the possibilities of transformation and partnership" (Guernsey et al. 2021: 5). The period during the COVID-19 helped to expose the characteristics of the librarians as a whole.

Challenges of Libraries Shifting to Being Virtual Libraries

"Throughout the world, the library as a cultural hub or academic space suffered most from the closure, the pandemic caused the disruption of events, reduction and suspension of access to the space, thus paralysing the borrowing activities and all related services offered inside the library" (Medawar and Tabet 2020: 179).

As a result of the new normal encountered by the academic libraries numerous monetary, administrative and academic challenges generated by the recent deteriorating economic environment and the important burden placed by the coronavirus to decrease students' presence to the physical campus. The change from physically providing and accessing information from the library to a flawless provision of virtual resources and services to meet students' information needs, in their transition to online learning environments, has not only put extra pressure on libraries but also placed a lot of uncertainty about the future (Martzoukou 2021).

The first change was to adopt a comprehensive platform for conducting events and sessions that were undertaken virtually and in some countries no visit to the libraries was allowed and no borrowing of print books was permitted. As a result of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic the South African government announced the shutdown of academic institutions that is the universities, colleges, schools, preschools, crèches, libraries and also businesses were closed down. This meant that workers who work in these types of organisations were also affected and as such had to work from home. Working from home has its hustle too in as far as the equipment required to effectively work from home is concerned. Since the lockdown was announced with people being unaware, some of the most important required equipment was locked in the offices inside the institution premises. People were just able to grab laptops as usual thinking that it is going to be a matter of a month or two (Hornung 2020).

Lack of human interaction was the most dreadful experience brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Face to face meetings cannot be replaced by video calls. People missed curdling with books in the library (Hornung 2020). Teachers and lecturers had to come up with the new teaching and assessment and feedback methods via online. Moreover, the librarian had to device an effective means of providing clients with the various services online. Online teaching and learning as well as any type of virtual working, is expensive and frustrating especially in the rural areas since it depends on a number of things such as internet, gadgets, data, just a few to mention. Furthermore, in order to maintain social distancing in the library, some furniture like the chairs had to be reduced from the study area.

Benefits of Libraries Shifting to Being Virtual Libraries

As a result of COVID-19 that instigated lock down globally, "…the digital transformations brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has proved to be useful in expanding the communication platforms where information is communicated to reach the global masses" (Mahlaba 2020: 123). Furthermore, the libraries, especially academic libraries increased the library usage during the lockdown offering meetings, teaching classes, events, trainings, consultations and much more through the Microsoft Teams digital platform. Most library activities were marked and advertised through social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram as well as the web pages and emails (Medawar and Tabet 2020). Library orientation where learners and students are taken on physical tours to make them aware of the available facilities and services under normal circumstances was now conducted virtually online because of lockdown. It did prove successful, and more students attended the virtual orientation than what was expected.

Online book clubs and other recreational reading programs meet the needs of learners with more free time, building relationships with educators using the library space for regular classes, and innovative book delivery programs to learners (American Association of School Librarians 2020). Libraries throughout various states have launched efforts to improve availability to indispensable services, like for example Internet and personal hygiene. Libraries have extended their services to incorporate COVID-19-related support by "repurposing book drops and drive-through windows" (The Atlantic, Public Libraries' Novel Response to a Novel Virus 2020).

"Librarians became creative and developed substitute services for the loaning of physical library materials include among others 'drive-through' library services (return and pick up books without leaving the car), 'takeaway' services (collect pre-ordered books in a bag at the library door at a specific time), 'book bags' (bags with books selected by a librarian according to a subject topic), delivery of books to the doors for users aged 70+ years or in high risk groups, and extended opening hours for those aged 70+ years or others in high-risk groups" (Public Libraries in Europe and COVID-19:

Findings from NAPLE Members, April 2020 nd: 5).

Major publishers and e-resource providers were quick in responding to the pandemic and supported the librarians in their mission to deliver undisrupted and reliable information services to patrons.

Here are some examples from prominent publishers:

- *Sage created a COVID hub that included podcasts, presentations, legislations, wellness essentials and more (https://www. sage.com/en-us/coronavirus/)*
- *Elsevier ScienceDirect compiled a resource packet that included toolkits, resources for libraries' reopening and more (https:// www.elsevier.com/connect/library-connect/ covid-19-resources-for-librarians-and-their-library-users)*
- *Springer Nature launched a page 'Library resources to assist with the pandemic' (https: //www.springernature.com/gp/librarians /landing/covid19-library-resources*) (Medawar and Tabet 2020:179).

As a result of lockdown due to COVID-19, students learned to be independent library resources users for the purpose of their studies. Throughout this COVID-19 pandemic, library users have new responsibilities and learnt new ways of accessing information from the library.

Lockdown due to COVID-19 has brought more harm than good to mankind, but on the other hand it was a blessing in disguise in that most of the "domestic and international institutions, associations, groups, and individuals" are making their contents freely available to all. For the first time museum, theatres, musicians and many, many others were "open to all" with their collections, performances, concerts and plays. Film festivals were held online, or they gave free access to movies from previous years (Solis and Kear 2020).

Precaution During Lockdown

Protection is the mandate to all mankind because COVID-19 is a contagious disease and therefore each and everybody should strictly wear masks covering the nose and mouth in all the public areas. Consistent hand washing thoroughly was also emphasised and pictures showing hand wash

were posted all over, hand sanitisers were installed on every entrance of the library and at each table and near the self-borrowing stations and so on. It is mandatory that library staff and users have their temperature tested whilst entering the library as well as a health status application, which is also enforced to be on each and every individual's cell phone of which failure to have it, any entrance to any public place would be prohibited. Processes used in reporting a COVID-19 case or in case any symptoms arise strongly applied.

The use of facemasks was enforced on each human being from infants to old people across the country. Although at first people were not used to face masks and felt it was awkward to use it, as time went on, they became used to it. Sitting space for library staff and users is strategically arranged so as to sustain social distancing. Use of group workrooms where users sit as a group for discussion gatherings around the tables is prohibited, and as a result, they are temporary closed. Programmed consistent thorough cleaning is the order of every day. Returned books are quarantined for a stipulated number of days and then sterilisers are being used to sanitise them (Ma 2020).

"The growth and development of academic libraries, cognition of its value and responsiveness of the South African academic library during a time of crisis. Given that the contemporary academic library functions in a highly connected environment, this further demonstrated its ability to continue functioning virtually and its staff work remotely" (Committee of Higher Education Libraries of South Africa (CHELSA) 2020: 4).

To overcome restrictions libraries modified library services and used online services and platforms to continue providing references, library instructions and first-entering students orientations remotely. The librarians had to quickly master the use of various communication platforms and digital media to facilitate the effective provision of services to the library clients (Lainers and Ho 2021).

COVID-19 Considerations for Reopening Schools, August 10 (2020) emphasised that carpet-safe adhesives should be used to mark spaces so as to make library users aware of where to stand while queuing to request for library assistance. If study areas are to be used, seating areas were marked to promote social distancing. Health and well being were a priority, which resulted in the implementation of some serious safety health measures to combat

the COVID-19 from spreading wildly causing more harm to mankind. As a result, all types of libraries were physical closed, and they were locked down. On the contrary the virtual/online doors of the libraries opened, which was a blessing in disguise. The different library services were strategised swiftly so as to assist the library clients to continue to receive their information needs in time.

DISCUSSION

Although COVID-19 has brought more harm than good to mankind, it also brought good things to cherish for human beings. COVID-19 was a blessing in disguise, as most of the people were frightened by the fourth industrial revolution era that most of the work would be lost since most of the things will be done technologically. COVID-19 was a blessing in disguise because it accelerated the fourth industrial revolution in which technology played an important role. Who thought that even in the remote rural areas where it was going to take forever to use technology, due to COVID-19 people in those areas are compelled to use technology effectively? It was like a fantasy to believe that one could access library materials remotely. One used to hear the name "virtual library" and thought it was something of the far future. One is now living in the fourth industrial revolution age where one talks about paperless libraries and libraries without walls. These are libraries where clients are able to access library resources without the assistance of the librarian.

The other challenge was that of data protection and copyright, which was emphasised so as to promote a healthy use of information, which the users have to learn and understand how it works. At first social distancing was a problem to the extent that security officers had to keep on enforcing it. Some students and lecturers residing in social conditions were faced with realities that made it difficult for home schooling, remote teaching, and learning. The strategy adopted by most universities to teach and learn from home, brought with it radical challenges like for example, knowledge and the correct skills to use technology equipment. Another challenge was that to learn and teach online needed data and proper gadgets so that they can be able to access needed material for remote learning and teaching. Remote teaching and learning depends on tech-

nology and as a result connectivity in some areas especially in rural areas where the network is not stable was a challenge (Mahlaba 2020).

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy's educational institutions, businesses, health organisations, companies, factories, all social gatherings were compelled to close down. The activities throughout the world came to a total shut down in an attempt to survive this terrible disease. As a result of the situation, people were compelled to combat the spread of this disease by working remotely or from home and university, and college and school students attended classes remotely. Apart from the University of South Africa (UNISA), which has been known for being a distance learning university for such a long time, it is now confirmed that education especially in universities does not require students to be on campus to attend their classes. University students, who were completing their academic progress in the previous years in 2020 and 2021, were able to complete their academic work successfully and were able to graduate. It also confirmed that many functions could be effectively done when a person is working remotely. Therefore, most libraries that were still traditional libraries had to shift to being hybrid libraries where print and electronic and digital sources were made available. It is not surprising that the libraries that were already hybrid libraries shifted to being totally electronic and digital libraries, which resulted into virtual libraries. The advent of virtual libraries had its benefits/advantages as well as the disadvantages (Ewe 2020).

According to the Atlantic writer Fallows (2020), from 1990s the majority of public libraries were "ramping up the virtual". Most public libraries augmented their library collection/holdings so as their clients will be able to access the library collection electronically as e-books and other digital means. Wi-Fi and the computer station were made available for the library users so as to access the various services such as "ask a librarian, services offered via phone, chat, or email". Moreover, the libraries had become "vital hubs", which offer the clients library services through technology and digital methods (Fallows 2020). It is logical that according to Guernsey et al. (2021), public libraries are crucial entities that play the indispensable role of providing resources and information to learners, students, workers, parents, and the community as a whole without any payments.

Access to licensed electronic resources is subject to the terms and conditions under which they are procured. Print materials were prepared for library clients and then an email was sent to notify the user to come to the library to pick-up the book from the pick-up point and the due date to return the book to the library is also indicated in the same email. A countless number of books, which were borrowed before lockdown were renewed several times because of prohibited physical visits to the library due to the lock down.

Many institutions trained their workers/employee on how to use Webinars, Zooms and Microsoft Teams. It is understandable that students and staff were trained on how to access library resources through these platforms (Webinars, Zooms and Teams Microsoft). With the use of these platforms, a large number of students and staff were trained online/virtually at the same time as compared to when training them face-to-face (Dadhe and Dubey 2020). Those who are referred to as the so-called born before technology who are "technophobic" were compelled to undergo online trainings and mastered the skills of using technology to access library resources.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated sudden and radical changes in delivering of library services, as strict social distancing and lockdown measures were imposed in the early phases of the pandemic. Therefore, the Internet and web technologies, have created a new and unparalleled environment and enabled the libraries to enhance and strengthen the research, teaching and learning even in this difficult and uncertain time (Dadhe and Dubey 2020).

CONCLUSION

Libraries are regarded as hubs that provide people in the community as a whole with their information needs as well as reading and learning materials for learners and students in different formats to support both their reading and information needs. In this study the author's personal critical positioning on the library usage during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, as well as challenges and potential benefits the benefits of libraries shifting to being virtual libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic were highlighted. Apart from the setbacks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was a blessing in disguise in other areas of life. People who were referred to being "technophobic" are now able to interact with services that should be carried out technologically. It also accelerated the advent of the fourth revolution in which technology is the buzzword, which assisted in chasing away the fear of losing jobs as a result of technology.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the use of technology in schools, academic institutions, different types of libraries just a few to mention, should continue to provide their services technologically so that the technophobic be eradicated in the societies, especially in the rural areas. Even beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, technology should form a part of the school curriculum and be a compulsory learning subject, and tertiary technology should also be a compulsory module done by all students.

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