

Retooling the Concept of Information Service Provision: Imperatives 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 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 digital—social media) was discussed, considering the mediating role of technology. The prospect and viability of the latter over and above the former as an efficient and responsive 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 information services, implementing social media and making services audience and device-specific, the building of social media community, etc. as key strategies for transforming the surviving libraries into thriving ones. The paper concluded with some benefits accruing to libraries in less developed countries that are operating the traditional model if the proposed strategies are proactively implemented.

Keywords: Social Media; Social Media Tools; Traditional Library; Covid-19; Pandemic; Information; Service Provision

Introduction

There is a consensus among LIS professionals that service provision is the hallmark of the library profession; however, there are divergent methods of packaging and communicating the service due to the emergence of ICT, its attendant proliferation, rate of diffusion across sectors, and the extent of digital citizenship among others. These factors have resulted in the development of various service provision models that have continued to assume more complex dimensions. Presently, communication (i.e., verbal, non-verbal, written, or visual) is greatly redundant if the essence is not to communicate or disseminate information. A more efficient way of achieving this is through the use of

technology because 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 also. Consequently, information service provision is operationalized in this paper 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 tools strengthening this

argument in recent times is the Internet and social media. Their acceptance has continued to gain prominence among individuals and organizations seeking a place in the digital realm (Steinfeld, Ellison, Lampe & Vitak, 2012). With the outbreak of Covid-19 and its variants, the popularity of social media as a veritable means of communication received greater attention. For example, Pérez-Escoda, Jiménez-Narros, Perlado-Lamode-Espinosa and Pedrero-Esteban (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 the attitudes and perceptions of the public during the pandemic (Yigitcanlar, Kankanamge & Preston, 2020) and a catalyst for quality decision-making and risk behavior (Al-Dmour, Masa’deh, Salman, Abuhashesh, Al-Dmour, 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 initiated the fulfilment of this prediction due to the unresponsive nature of the libraries in times of restrictions on physical movement is not certain. However, this paper proposes that, among other factors, efficient deployment of relevant social media tools will remedy the image crisis confronting libraries in developing countries especially in times of a pandemic or emergencies that restrict physical movement.

Justification

The unresponsive nature and over-reliance on routine manual operations, the need to eliminate/minimize physical visits to the library facility, and embrace a paradigm that promises ‘anytime’ and ‘anywhere’ access to a wider range of information resources and services (Bamgbade, Akintola, Agbenu, Ayeni., Fagbami & Abubakar, 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, respectively (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, Huber, Carter & Moore, 2018). These empirical claims emanated from the U.S. (a more developed economies). This being the case, what then does the future hold for libraries in the less developed regions? What can be done to ensure libraries in the developing region brace up for relevance towards reclaiming their 'lost territories' and the confidence reposed in them as information providers? This is the crux of this paper.

The Traditional Library Concept of Information Service Provision

The traditional library system is characterized by manual methods of processing physical records and services from the point of acquisition to dissemination and use. It emphasizes a centralized, physically assembled information stock where usage requires a physical visit to the library (Kaur, 2015). From the context of relevance, librarians in such environment are often quick to point out, in defense, the benefits that the traditional library system offers. It has been argued 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 electronic resource packages without external input or consultation. It has been reported that about 57.5% of essential academic titles are available electronically (Rao, Tripathi & Kuma, 2016).

Earlier, it was submitted that despite the ongoing digitization efforts, the relevance of the traditional library system cannot 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. Additionally, once resources are acquired, they are owned forever in the traditional system. Other bottlenecks associated with the electronic environment like incompatibility of software/hardware, licensing/legal issues, and publishers' business models (Walter, 2013) appear to favor traditional librarianship. The argument notwithstanding, the traditional library system is often criticized for several reasons.

The rigidity and unresponsive nature of the traditional library system during emergencies and unfavourable weather conditions confine patrons to physically accessible resources and services. During the first and second-waves of the Covid-19, where many academic and public institutions experienced partial or total lockdown, the traditional system became moribund and inaccessible to patrons. If prior to the pandemic lending policies have been observed to pose restrictions to access to information resources and services (Abbas & Faiz, 2013) in the library, they become more of a concern during emergencies. Once collections are built and services developed in this system, it becomes the sole responsibility of patrons to take advantage of them — no

deliberate efforts to induce use or increase patronage due to its lack of competitiveness is made by the system. 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 the system. Shelving arrangements, record-keeping, charging processes, organization of knowledge under this system are time-consuming and labour-intensive (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 satisfying them have also become elastic, dynamic, and complex. Although the emergence of technological innovations like social media created this *phenomenon*, conscious deployment of the same technology offers significant solutions. Whereas this assertion reinforces why libraries in the developed economies continue to *thrive* and remain relevant (despite the obvious encroachments into the library's statutory functions by allied disciplines), it also validates the continued *survival* of libraries in the developing regions in terms of decline in patronage, relevance and impact.

The emergence of social media, in addition to other factors, has transformed the library from being a 'repository of knowledge to a 'facilitator of communication and collaboration' (Bell, Dempsey & Fister, 2015), with

libraries becoming more of 'connections' of people, information, and technology than 'collection' of resources (Hielmcrone, Maiello, Bainton & Bonnet, 2012). It has been reported that digital technology transforms clients' habits (Lund, 2021). The author further found that organizations that transform their services digitally have clients who are six times more likely to patronize new products and services from their desired brand. 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, Ifijeh, Izuagbe-Roland, Olawoyin & Ogiamen, 2019a) have been leveled against the platform.

Distribution of social media applications and their monthly active users

S/N	Social Media Application	Monthly Active Users
1	Facebook	2,958 billion
2	YouTube	2514 billion
2	WhatsApp	2,000 billion
3	Instagram	2,000 billion
4	WeChat	1,309 billion
5	TikTok	1,051 billion
6	FB Messenger	931 million
7	Telegram	700 million
8	SnapChat	635 million
9	Twitter	556 million
10	Pinterest	445 million

Data Reportal (January 2023)

The figure presents data that lent credence to the growing popularity of social media use. According to DataReportal (2023), there are 4.76 billion (i.e. about 60 percent of the world population), active social media users. Of these figures, about 99 percent access social media using mobile devices, such as tablets or phones. Out of this group, about 78% exclusively access social media platforms from their mobile phones, while only an insignificant 1.32% visit their social networks using desktops (Dean, 2023). The distribution of social media applications and their monthly active users reveal that Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and, Instagram are the most utilized platforms, with Facebook topping the distribution (Table). 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 can leverage? What percentage of these figures can the library harness for its advantage? Given these insights, the paper aims to explore potential opportunities for libraries by delving into questions such as the percentage of these figures that libraries can leverage for their advantage, and how library services can be adapted and made more accessible to a broader audience.

Strategies for retooling library services

Retooling and adapting library services involves the implementation of strategies to meet the evolving needs of users in the ever-evolving information landscape. Some of the strategies for retooling library services include:

Recognizing the shift in information access

Librarians must realize that the monopoly of being the sole provider of information that the traditional library era enjoyed some decades ago has been disrupted. As at 2006, it was reported that the library was not mentioned as a starting point for students who seek information among the options listed (OCLC, 2006). Considering this report in 2006, when information and communication technology (ICT) was less advanced than today, librarians should expect that present-day patrons are even more adept at accessing

information independently (without the assistant of a *middleman*) now than ever before. In the digital economy, clients are the ones in the driver's seat (Lund, 2021).

Identification and understanding audience

Each library is established for a specific user community, as outlined in the collection development policies of libraries. Librarians should be guided by this framework to identify their core patrons, and understand their digital inclinations. Furthermore, they need to recognize that today's patrons have outgrown accessing physical collections and services, librarians therefore need to acknowledge their preferences in terms of what they want, how they want it, where, and how to use it (Izuagbe, Ibrahim, Ogiamien, Olawoyin, Nwokeomaa, Ilo & Osayande, 2019b). Understanding the audience is pivotal for implementing user-centric design principles, that ensure a seamless and intuitive experience for patrons navigating digital platforms and services.

Diversifying information services on social media

The contemporary information consumer of the twenty-first century seeks diverse information services. Library social media platforms, as highlighted by Igwe (2017), go beyond mere information provision, it cut across incorporating various engaging digital content across academic, socio-economic, political, religious, and entertainment domains. To cater to diverse preferences, librarians must research patrons' information service preferences and make provisions accordingly. Creating awareness among

patrons that their information needs are met fosters a sense of understanding and appreciation.

Adapting services to audience and device-specific

Librarians should identify relevant information services and corresponding social media tools for effective communication with patrons. Determining the most utilized social media channels for specific information and adapting services accordingly is crucial. Statistics indicate that in early 2020, 3.2 billion (94.1%) out of the 3.4 billion active users of social media accessed the medium using smartphones (Statusbrew, 2020). These figures have increased to 4.20 billion and 4.15 billion (98.8%) in January of 2021 (DataReportal, 2021), respectively. This is an indication that mobile phone is the most utilized device for accessing information on social media (Dean, 2023). Libraries should therefore prioritize designing information services that are both audience and device-specific. Developing library mobile apps, tailored to each user group, ensures on-the-go access to resources, catalogs, and services, placing the library and its services where the users are.

Building and sustaining social media communities

Establishing a robust and enduring social media community showcases the library's relevance and fosters a sense of belonging among patrons. Librarians need to identify the most effective social media channels for community engagement and may design user-friendly apps to expedite access to resources and services. Actively promoting the inclusion of URLs to

resources on social media websites enhances coordination and communication, expanding the library's patron base and ensuring member loyalty. Additionally, the establishment of virtual reference services within the community enables users to seek assistance and information through online chat, email, or video calls.

Real-time management of social media platforms by technology savvy librarians

Fostering a social media community is not just about its creation but also about its continuous growth and resilience. To optimize all engagements on the library's social media platforms, individuals skilled in information management, technology, and social media should be assigned to oversee these platforms in real-time. Their responsibilities should encompass creating social media accounts for registered patrons, categorizing users into relevant groups for the purpose of disseminating group-specific information, establishing feedback mechanisms for consistent user satisfaction assessments, and employing data analytics to comprehend user behavior, preferences, and needs. Furthermore, they should be saddled with the responsibility of conducting regular training sessions for library staff to enhance their technological skills, ensuring they can effectively assist patrons with digital resources and tools. This responsibility forms the foundation for informed decision-making regarding resource allocation and overall service satisfaction within the patron community.

Initiate a reciprocal engagement

Reciprocal followership on social media hinges on the value-based services provided. Active sharing of posts and updates on trending or pertinent issues, tailored to the demographic characteristics of users, ensures high real-time user engagement. The assurance that libraries consistently deliver what patrons seek creates a connection with and loyalty to the library. A study by Howard et al. (2018) revealed that majority of students preferred seeing their libraries on popular platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. A similar position was shared from the Zambian context, where over 80 percent of respondents strongly endorsed the use of social media tools in the library (Chitumbo, 2015). This suggests an interest among respondents in being actively followed on these channels. Until this interest is confirmed, the act of initiating a follow may not be reciprocated.

Benefits for libraries in the developing countries

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

1. Consciously implementing these strategies has several implications and advantages, such as removing the "traditional" label from libraries, addressing predictions about changing patron behaviours, improving the professional image of libraries, and positioning libraries strategically for broader outreach.

2. It has been predicted that about 90 percent of library patrons will source their information needs from non-library-related channels, and physical spaces will be re-designated for non-library functions (University Leadership Council, 2011). However, a deliberate and proactive deployment of relevant social media tools has the potential to counteract and negate this projection.
3. From an academic perspective, the integration of social media is poised to enhance the professional image of academic libraries by facilitating interaction and strengthening liaison operations with departmental heads across institutions.
4. The ongoing discourse surrounding the relevance, potential social rejection, and the speculated decline of the library profession would lose significance. This transformation occurs as libraries become more competitive and responsive to patrons' information needs, especially in times of emergencies or pandemics that restrict physical movement.
5. Libraries hitherto operating the traditional model would have been strategically position themselves to deliver information services directly to a broader audience through the deliberate marketing of information products and services. This approach signals an end to the longstanding practice of relying on patrons' physical presence for service transactions.
6. One of the contemporary challenges for researchers lie in the difficulty of navigating the vast landscape of scientific development and discourse, given the overwhelming volume of literature and information. Consequently, various scholarly communication platforms such as conferences, workshops, and seminars are now complemented by pertinent social media tools like LinkedIn, ResearchGate, Academia.edu (Persson & Svenningsson, 2017), Almetric, Mendeley, Orcid, Google Scholar, among others. These platforms play a crucial role in helping researchers increase visibility and citations by reaching a broader audience with their research findings (Van Noorden, 2014; Bik & Goldstein, 2013). Recognizing that citation is a key metric for measuring research impact, libraries could proactively establish or subscribe to relevant academic social media platforms to further promote academic and scholarly publications originating from their institutions, ultimately benefiting authors and contributing to the institutions' rankings.

Conclusion

The paper emphasizes the critical importance of retooling and adapting library services to meet the evolving needs of users in the dynamic information landscape. The identified strategies include recognizing the transformative shift in information access, understanding the library's audience, diversifying information services on social media, adapting services to audience and device-specific needs, building and sustaining social media communities, implementing real-time management of social media platforms, and initiating reciprocal engagement. The acknowledgment of the diminishing monopoly over information provision highlights the necessity for libraries to adapt to patrons who increasingly access information independently in the digital era. The proposed strategies, if implemented consciously, offer various advantages, including removing the "traditional" label, countering predictions about changing patron behaviours, enhancing the professional image of libraries, and strategically positioning them for broader outreach. Overall, these strategies enable libraries not only to adapt but also to thrive as dynamic and responsive institutions in the digital age.

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