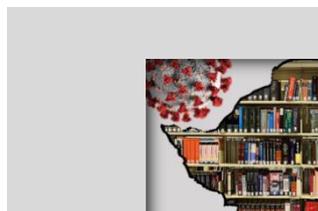


ZIMBABWEAN LIBRARIES IN THE COVID 19 ERA:

Libraries adapting to global change and supporting livelihoods during an epidemic

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The COVID-19 (Coronavirus) outbreak has had a negative impact on the world, and its effects on the local communities are beyond words. Libraries have been closed all over the world. Staff members working in libraries of all types, geographic locations, and sizes are learning the facts about this public health crisis, informing the public through social media, and adapting services to meet the changing community needs. The social lives we have grown accustomed to have been shaken to the core, with social distancing rules and conditions, such as the lock down regulation have been enforced.

Communication

Although communication is part of the everyday mandate for library personnel, in this COVID 19 era innovative ways of communicating with clientele remains a must. Like all else, Librarians had no warning to prepare for such an eventuality. Hence the sudden stand still in service provision caused immediate confusion and uncertainty to all. Safety coming first – closure of libraries for an initial twenty-one day lockdown had to led many towards thinking outside the box. Given the current uncertainty, and often the complexity of the process of lifting restrictions, libraries planning for this era have also tended to focus on electronic communications.

Affected services

Different Libraries have faced different challenges in service provision. Public Libraries for example in Bulawayo, Masvingo and Harare had programs, such as Story reading sessions,

and Library Day activities – dedicated to promotion of the Reading Culture suspended. Lack of such services has adversely affected the young readers. Scholars and students doing research depended immensely on Library services. The peace offered by libraries away from the hustle and bustle of a busy day at home or work has been changed. Not to mention that Libraries generally provide an ideal environment for reading and research. Academic libraries have had to enact swift policies that enable staff members to have access to their daily staple on an extended loan. The readers have also found themselves rushing for eBooks to supplement their needs.

Use of ICTS & Challenges

There is now a dependent use of WhatsApp for daily communication with certain Library clients. Through WhatsApp groups Librarians are able to share information. However, this comes with challenges on cost for data bundles from network providers. Not many Librarians are able to afford Wi-Fi services in their homes for use of the Internet and other services. Email services for most Librarians are not easy outside their place of work. Many have argued that the mobile penetration may be well above 80%, but does not translate to the number of people who can access data bundles and smart phones to communicate effectively.

Although the Zimbabwe Library Association (**ZIMLA**) has made initial strides to use the Webinar programme, many Librarians in the country may face the connectivity challenges financially. These financial implications not only affect Librarians, but more so the patrons especially students. Librarians are now retooling and learning digital skills for webinars and eLearning platforms.

Available resources

There has been an influx of on-line services with several books available through E-resources.

Once again, downloading those resources is not a cheap exercise for most of Zimbabwe's frontline Librarians. All in all the availability of these resources is a helpful move. The rise of the eLibrary and eBook store has become common place for those under lock down. Debate on the inclusion or creation of librarian platforms has led many to accept the need for a digital revolution that is both inclusive and well designed. Librarians will also need to debate on the need to lobby for eLibraries that are both accessible and affordable. The tools needed to realise digital access and electronic membership should be debated about.

"Where libraries have closed and demand for certain services has dropped, library personnel have been active in taking up other roles."

Implications

The sudden lockdown on the 27th of March, 2020 may have some serious implications on some Libraries. The most common is that not all books or resources that had been checked out to members may ever return. There is a possibility of book losses at the end of the day.

If the opening of the Libraries gets phased in the near future, the implications are reduced along with opening hours, as well as, a reduced number of patrons per opening period. There is likely to be a challenge to the Librarians with decision making on who is to be admitted to the Library in which period of time.

Libraries are generally underfunded in Zimbabwe. Hence some Libraries depend on subscriptions and or membership fees. The lockdown period means a financial loss to those types of libraries.

Taking a leaf from other LIBRARIANS across the world. Reference:

<https://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/covid-19>

Reassigning library resources

Where libraries have closed and demand for certain services has dropped, library personnel have been active in taking up other roles. In Ireland, for example, library staff have been seconded to help with contact tracing for people in isolation; while librarians in San Francisco have volunteered to do this, and in Trinec in Czechia Librarians took on other duties

temporarily, while staff at Tulane University Library have been engaged in efforts to provide the World Health Organization itself with the most recent scientific advice.

Across the United Kingdom, there are lots of examples of librarians moving to work at contact centres for people in isolation, helping to ensure those often at most risk keep contact with the outside world, with the same happening in Auckland, New Zealand and Newmarket, Canada. Elsewhere, librarians have volunteered with community initiatives, or, as in Mexico, are working to improve the quality of Wikipedia articles about people from under-represented groups. A further

list of types of redeployment at work in England is available in their Public Libraries News (<https://www.publiclibrariesnews.com>).

Library closure

The closure of the physical library has left many librarians with mixed feelings. Selected Polytechnics and Teachers Colleges were also used as quarantine centres for returnees. The plan to reopen schools has seen a lot of planning to remove selected learning as quarantine centres. The joy of serving patrons and finding that one special book for a patron will be missed, hopefully not for long. Libraries have again to been challenged to factor in the impact of a pandemic in service provision and to develop solutions for the future. The Association has noted how many librarians have raised concern on work safety. There have been some calling for a demand to have personal protective equipment, training on disinfecting libraries and a new way to process books.

In short, the pandemic has shed light on the need for Librarians to;

1. Create, update or review disaster management strategies
2. Promote awareness of COVID 19
3. Help counter fake news and disinformation
4. Promote collaboration and networking to develop electronic services.