Role of Libraries in Enhancing their Services during Pandemic

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Abstract

The present study tries to highlight the role and importance of libraries in enhancing their services during the pandemic. It identifies the problems faced by the user community along with the libraries during the pandemic. It emphasizes the challenges faced by the libraries, LIS professionals, and authorities of the institutions during the pandemic. It gives the steps and ways to overcome these challenges to be normal. The possible preventive measures for libraries and alternative services which can be offered in libraries are also discussed. It also focuses the light on some of the popular initiatives taken by the UGC and similar bodies.

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Keywords

Libraries, Services, Pandemic, Challenges, Measures,

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic provides unique challenges to all the stakeholders of the education system. The unexpected outbreak of the virus obligates the libraries to ascertain ways of working, shifting from conventional to digital platforms, and also to provide remote services to the users. This situation emphasizes the various roles of LIS professionals. It highlights the number of digital platforms available on the web and promotes the use of social media as well. Library professionals have supported the user community in their scholarly efforts. The role of the LIS professionals is to provide access to resources as per the user requirement, to act as an information disseminator, and to organize the existing knowledge. As a result of this, it makes others to define the LIS community as a new way of carrying out the responsibility and obtaining the information remotely.

It is the right time to show the importance of libraries and the role of LIS professionals to the society. The services such as curating information sources, providing comprehensive searching for evidence-based information, virtual information services, maintaining electronic inter-library loan services, and referral services are some of the outstanding efforts by LIS professionals in this pandemic. In addition to this, Libraries and publishers have to collaborate with leading publishers to spontaneously provide access to their resources to the user community to bridge the digital divide. Thousands of eBooks and eJournals are to be made accessible directly from the publisher's websites/ databases instead of the intranet of universities. Many people depend on the Internet, Google and other search engines, and also social media platforms to access and share information resources.Many libraries have to conduct information literacy programmes to educate people and cultivate reading and writing habits. The reader advisory services have also been availed from the librarians through online. The role of the libraries in this situation is crucial to serve the entire user community through online mode. In general, the libraries remain the best places where users can access and acquire knowledge without buying anything.

2. COVID-19 Pandemic Situation

Human beings have faced many tough pandemic situations if you look at the history where some of the situations were more dangerous for the entire world. This is another time where people of every country

are facing a tough situation. They have to fight with a Corona virus and also its other consequences. Coronavirus is a new virus that belongs to a family of viruses which can spread all over the world quickly. The infected people in most cases experience sickness and recover without requiring special treatment. The people of older age and underlying medical treatments like dialysis, respiratory diseases, cancer, diabetes, etc. are more likely to develop serious problems which lead them to die.

In January 2020, the first positive case of COVID-19 was reported in India from Kerala state. The Government of India declared closure of educational institutions in March 2020 as a precautionary measure to break the chain of spreading the virus and later India became one of the worst hit countries in the world.This pandemic has forced the Governments of various countries to lockdown fully or partially to avoid the spread of virus. This lockdown decision leads to many economic and social consequences even to the educational sector. This affected the students, teachers, researchers, administrators, policy makers, LIS professionals, etc. The school education and higher education sectors have shifted their activities from offline to online. The apex body of higher education and the University Grants Commission have cancelled the examinations. Some of these examinations are postponed.

The sudden change of the situations for more than six months forced many students to dislocate and left them without proper resources and course materials to prepare for the examinations. This situation leads to face the challenges by the libraries in the ways of their routine work. The temporary withdrawal of the services at the libraries has left the users and library professionals to go for adopting the ICT technologies which was the only way out to survive in the challenging time. During lockdown LIS professionals have demonstrated their ability, commitment, skills, empathy, and flexibility to respond to the situation. The online mode of communication with the users was an essential stand to connect, serve and survive.

3. Role of Libraries / LIS Professionals in Pandemic

In the lockdown period, it is difficult for the users of libraries to make visits to the libraries due to the government restrictions. Many libraries are shut down and some of them have provided restricted access. Some libraries have provided their digital collection for the entire user community. Before the pandemic the users of the library had easy access and many advantages in availing e-resources like e-books, e-journals, digital resources, and online programmes offered by various institutions like SWAYAM, NLIST, NDLI, etc. The National Emergency Library is an initiative by the USA which has a total collection of more than 1.4 million books including archives and blogs. Such initiatives and various online digital platforms are the need of the present situation. The social networking platforms can also be used to share links of these resources to the users. Many Libraries are providing the various links of the online resources available on the web. It is the essential role for the LIS Professionals to remain at the frontline along with the Covid warriors to serve the user community.

At present in the pandemic, the role of library professionals has been transformed from conservator of data to facilitator of knowledge by switching offline services to online services as required by the user community effectively. The some of the roles are:

- To familiarize the users of the library about open access resources.
- To provide the information regarding the subscribed digital resources.
- To assist the users who are not comfortable to use ICT tools.
- To arrange the training sessions for the databases and e-resources available on the web by inviting resource persons.
- To provide adequate information for the publishers to create a new app/ software or customize the existing one with access to the contents of different resources on a single platform.
- To play the role as an instructor, researcher, and collaborator to serve the various needs of the users.
- To also play the conventional role in acquiring, classifying, cataloguing, indexing, organising, and disseminating the information resources with library administration.

4. Challenges for Libraries / LIS Professionals in Pandemic

LIS professionals all over the world are facin different challenges in offering the services to the user community in situations like lockdown and Government restrictions like minimum access to maximum. Along with the libraries the user

community like teachers, researchers, students, scholars, public, etc. are also affected by these restrictions. The libraries of universities, colleges, schools, public, corporate sectors, and research centres are closed. Due to this, academic and competitive exams are postponed and are pending. This is the crucial time for the LIS professionals to serve these communities of users who are in dire need of information resources online. It is obvious for human beings to be sad, stressed, scared, confused, and irritated in these types of situations. An extra care to be taken by the LIS professionals to handle the people of such behaviours. This is the biggest challenge to manage these conditions and engage such users in a healthy environment by opening the libraries under the guidelines of the Government and other Bodies. It is not affordable by all to have the suitable ICT facilities such as laptops, desktops, smart phones, and internet connections to access online resources. Using these ICT tools needs proper IT knowledge and skills as well. These two things are also an additional challenge for the LIS professionals to overcome and make the online resources to be utilised by these types of users.

5. How to Overcome these Challenges

LIS professionals can place the efforts to break the chain of virus spread by just following the guidelines given by the Government and Statutory Bodies to resume and initiate different services to the users remotely. They can play important roles and following are the ways to overcome the challenges to assist the users in this pandemic situation.

- Governments are making many decisions and regulations to control the situations better. LIS professionals can extend their services to publish this information and circulate to the users through online.
- Start engaging the users through possible online platforms like websites, chats, emails, social media, etc. and to organize events like competitions, personality and skill development programs, etc. These can help the people to come to normal as previous and develop skills which reduces their stress in the pandemic time.
- Gather the necessary factual data and then convert it into valuable information which will help the users of various disciplines precisely.
- ICT facilities and tools shall be utilised at the maximum extent to spread the necessary information to the user community.
- Maximum utilisation of technology-based services such as Repositories, Cloud-based Library Services, Remote Access, Electronic Resource Management Systems, Blogs, Discovery Services, Digital Library Service Platforms, Guides, Open Access Resources, and other Social Networking Applications are to be emphasized.
- Open Course wares, Open Educational Resources, Open Learning Resources, Webinars, and Virtual Classrooms can be offered by the LIS professionals.
- The bibliographic databases, social research platforms, citation management tools, and content management systems are to be popularised.
- Diverse services of the library and its digital collections can be associated together to provide access to the digital spaces.

6. Preventive Measures for Libraries

The visit to the library by the users is frequent and the workspace of libraries like stack room, reading room, multimedia lab, circulation counter, etc. is relatively close. This eases the virus to spread among library staff and visitors. Hence, the Standard Operating Procedures are implemented in libraries to avoid the visitors and staff from getting infected. Libraries have come up with Special Information Literacy drives by connecting users with the aspects of health emergencies. A further step being taken by some libraries to limit the number of sections to open as the use of certain facilities may make the workplace contaminated and increase the risk of spread of the virus to staff and users. Another measure is to further adopt the use of online services like eLending, eLearning, remote teaching, and converting the automation services to RFID based services in order to allow access to books without human contact. Lastly by developing protocols for how to respond with the users who have symptoms?

7. Services to be Provided in Libraries

These days in the education sector online education has emerged without an alternative option to address the restrictions imposed by the Governments. Therefore, libraries have to start adding digital resources to its collection and providing remote access to them which is in the interest and support of academic and research activities. The significant services and facilities to be offered by the libraries are listed below.

- Providing remote access to e-resources.
- Offering free and expanded access to digital collection.
- Familiarising the open access resources.
- Displaying and sharing of information from the notifications of Government and Authorities related to pandemic.
- Exhibiting Standard Operating Procedures on the visible places.
- Displaying the information on accessible research support tools.
- Informing the users regarding restricted working hours and specific library services.

8. Ad hoc Services to be Provided in Libraries

8.1 Access to Conventional Materials and Document Scanning

Libraries have taken distinct efforts to make the print collection available to its users from the past decades. In addition to this, they have to compile a list of reading materials of the courses and introduce the service of online delivery of scanned copies of the documents on request.

8.2 Easing of Circulation and Penalty Rules

Libraries have to extend the due date for all types of information resources issued to all user communities and to renew the books issued prior to lockdown to avoid or minimise the penalty.

8.3 Assistance in Searching and Scholarly Writing

Libraries have to provide virtual reference services in a new and improved manner in person. The plagiarism checking, grammar checking services, and email alert services have to be taken as the priority services by the libraries. It also needs to extend research assistance in the areas of literature search to boost the research activities.

8.4 Organisation of Virtual Events

Libraries have very much in need to arrange webinars, workshops, conferences, and events on various topics like information literacy to research, how to access online resources, publishing process, etc. to make their users aware of the use of print and digital resources. The virtual book exhibitions and virtual orientation programs are the additions to these.

8.5 Library Competitions

The library competitions play an important role in creating awareness about library services and collection and also in bringing the users to the library in the both conventional and digital environment. During the lockdown period some types of competitions could be conducted online. After the effects of pandemic also same things shall be continued in organising the competitions.

8.6 Inter-Library Loan

The libraries are providing Inter-Library Loan services of print and electronic materials. It can be tried to facilitate Inter-Library Loan services on a virtual basis from requisition to supply.

8.7 Suggest a Purchase

The libraries are receiving the recommendations for the procurement of new and latest edition books from the users. The list of recommendations should be finalised on the regular basis and the procurement process of the books should be done immediately.

8.8 Ask a Librarian

Some libraries are offering Ask a Librarian service to the staff and students to provide them immediate information on various queries through real time email alert service and over the phone calls. This has to be carried out seriously.

9. Popular Initiatives

A list of initiatives of platforms having a huge number of information resources has been released by the UGC. These resources are very useful especially during the pandemic and by using these resources the academic community can utilize and excel in their learning and research outcome. There are UGC initiatives and plenty of other websites and platforms are providing easy access to their information resources as well. Many publishers are offered free access to some of its contents during pandemic. The following are some of the popular initiatives.

9.1 SWAYAM Online Courses / MOOCs

This provides access to the best teaching and learning resources. Anybody can get access to these texts, presentations, video lectures, notes, etc. on various topics in these platforms. Employees of various central government institutes are the major resource persons and coordinators for these programmes.

9.2 e-PG Pathshala, CEC and e-Content Courseware

The e-PG Pathshala, Consortium for Educational Communications, and e-Content Courseware contain more than 23 thousand modules in the form of e-text and video which are qualitative and authoritative in nature. These interactive e-contents are based on the curriculum which includes more than 70 postgraduate disciplines on social sciences, law, arts, fine arts, humanities, and natural & mathematical sciences. The e-content courseware is available in 87 undergraduate courses which have more than 24 thousand modules and available on the website.

9.3 Swayam Prabha

It is a group of 32 DTH channels telecasting the quality educational videos framed on the curriculum of many disciplines of arts, science, commerce, performing arts, social sciences, humanities, law, agriculture, etc. Anybody can watch and utilise these videos for their teaching, learning and research.

9.4 YouTube Channel

This channel has a huge number of educational and curriculum-based lectures. The speciality of the YouTube channel is that anybody can create a channel and upload videos regarding educational purposes. There are thousands of channels already available on learning skills invarious disciplines.

9.5 NDLI and NLIST

National Digital Library of India is a digital repository that contains resources in different forms, in several Indian languages, and in all disciplines for the users of all academic levels. National Library and Information Services Infrastructure for Scholarly Content also provides subscription-based access at a small subscription cost for the government, aided and private institutions as well. This contains huge numbers of e-resources like eBooks, eJournals, chapters, articles, notes, etc. from the international and national publishers around the globe.

9.6 Shodhganga and e-Shodh Sindhu

Shodhganga is a digital repository of Indian electronic theses and dissertations. It contains more than 2,60,000 resources and it will be helpful for the research scholars in the universities and various research centres. The e-Shodh Sindhu provides access to lakhs of peer-reviewed journals, bibliographic databases, and citation and factual databases in several disciplines from the commercial publishers.

10. Conclusion

The pandemic of the COVID-19 has necessitated sudden and radical changes in delivery of services in the libraries of academic, public, research centres, etc. It has happened in the view of lockdown measures and post covid times. The ICT enabled technologies have created a friendly environment to enable the libraries in enhancing and strengthening the process of teaching, learning, and research. The service of providing remote access to online resources by libraries is more than a decade old, but the way of doing it by libraries during the pandemic is remarkable. Libraries have done all possible things to serve the user community. Providing easy access to digital platforms and digital libraries, having social responsibility, and acting as stress busters to the potential users are some of the memorable activities of LIS professionals.

The Internet and web technologies have created an unparalleled environment in this era. The plan of action of library professionals will be required and continued even after post pandemic time. Many libraries which have less ICT facilities are still struggling to offer online services and adoption of technologies is the normal way to meet the requirements of the users. Libraries have acted elegantly during this period of time and evolved as continuous learning centres. Libraries are also capable of playing a crucial role in supporting the surroundings to settle into a normal situation.

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