

Post COVID-19 Reference Services: NIIA Library, the Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, the novel Corona Virus (COVID-19) emerged from Wuhan China. Being a pandemic, it succeeded in locking down economies of the world. Borders, schools, and religious organisations were closed, businesses were shut down and people were forced to stay at home and work from home. This dealt a big financial blow to the economies of the world. The Libraries were not left out as they were also shut to the public and Librarians made to work from home. The death toll skyrocketed as scientists and big pharmaceuticals struggle to find a vaccine to cure the disease. The question now is how to live with the Corona Virus, because staying indoors and shutting down the economy is not sustainable and would lead to the economic ruin of nations. As countries are slowly lifting the lockdown, regular washing of hands, social distancing, wearing of face masks and shields, virtual/remote working are fast becoming the “new normal” and the “new face of work, this article proposes what the “new normal” will be for the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs Library Post COVID-19, and the need for the Library to become more electronically compliant and friendly, if it wants to stay relevant and effectively deliver services to its clientele in the Post COVID era.

KEY WORDS: Corona Virus, COVID-19, Libraries, Reference Services, ICT, Social distancing, New Normal, New face of work.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 promised to be a year of “clear vision” so to speak, considering that vision 2020 was not only used to connote perfect vision, but was also the year when Nigeria’s vision 2020 agenda was supposed to be achieved. This agenda was supposed to place Nigeria amongst the world’s 20th best economies in the world. Unfortunately, this goal was not achieved by Nigeria. “Like play, like play”, as a local adage in Nigeria puts it, an unseen enemy which broke out in December 2019 in Wuhan China, turned the world upside down.

According to the World Health Organization:

“Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. The best way to prevent and slow down transmission is be well informed about the COVID-19 virus, the disease it causes and how it spreads. Protect yourself and others from infection by washing your hands or using an alcohol based rub frequently and not touching your face. The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes, so it’s important that you also practice respiratory etiquette (for example, by coughing into a flexed elbow). At this time, there are no specific vaccines or treatments for COVID-19. However, there are many ongoing clinical trials evaluating potential treatments”⁽¹⁾.

So far, we have had different types of human coronaviruses that have caused symptoms that have been hazardous to human health. They are namely,

1. **MERS-CoV** (The Beta Coronavirus that causes **Middle East Respiratory Syndrome**, or **MERS**),
2. **SARS-CoV** (The Beta Coronavirus that causes **Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome**, or **SARS**, and the new
3. **2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV)**

Furthermore, droplets can land on the surfaces from which it can spread to people when they touch door handles, railings, table surfaces etc. These are the same hands they end up putting in their mouths, eyes and nose. Therefore, regular washing of hands, wiping surfaces with alcohol-based sanitizers, wearing of face masks and shields and social distancing are some of the precautionary/preventive measures proposed by medical and healthcare practitioners to curb the spread of the virus.

Social distancing is a very important factor, in the prevention of the spread of the corona virus. According to the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) “Social distancing, also called “physical distancing,” means keeping a safe space between yourself and other people who are not from your household. To practice social or physical distancing, stay at least 6 feet (about 2 arms' length) from other people who are not from your household in both indoor and outdoor spaces”⁽²⁾.

The Pandemic succeeded in locking down the economies of the world. Countries closed their borders, schools and religious organisations were closed, businesses were shut down, and people were forced to stay at home and work from home. The Libraries were not left out, they too were shut to the public and Librarians worked from home. The death toll skyrocketed as scientists and big pharmaceuticals struggle to find a vaccine to cure the disease. As most nations are slowly lifting the lockdown, regular washing of hands, social distancing, wearing of face masks and shields, virtual/remote working are fast becoming the “new normal” and the “new face of work”.

The European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations (EBLIDA) identifies five “new normals” for an European Library Agenda in the post-Covid-19 age⁽³⁾:

1. Exponential social distancing: A well-connected two-meter library.
2. Technologies are mutating and shaping libraries in new ways.
3. Uncharted economic territory: A need to review the library budget composition.
4. Library governance at central and local levels.
5. The climate change opportunity and threat

This article is going to propose what the “new normal” and the “new face of work” will be for the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs Library Post COVID-19, as the Library gradually starts opening its doors once again to the public. The Reference Librarian will become more “faceless” and the use of digital tools will take over in delivering Reference services. University of Lagos Library has already acquired Robots for Library functions, although right now they are still trying to set up the system. NIIA Library has every intention in joining the race to applying more digital tools in its Library operations.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Igun ⁽⁴⁾, “Digital libraries are libraries with collections of documents in electronic, organised form”. She goes on to say that “virtual library”, “electronic library”, “Library without walls” and “digital library” are being used interchangeably to mean the same thing. According to Rosenberg ⁽⁵⁾, the term digital library is used to refer to a library where some or all of the holdings are available in electronic form, and the services of the library are also made available electronically. A digital library can be developed by forming an electronic catalogue of all library materials. Networking this catalogue so that users not only in the library but also from elsewhere can access it gives the Library more visibility. The full electronic versions of journals and books and CD-ROMS all make up a digital collection. The digitalization of locally produced information and the establishment of institutional repositories to provide access to the scholarly material produced by members of the institution. ⁽⁶⁾

An example of a well-established digital Library in Africa is the African Digital (ADL). It is “a collection of electronic books (eBooks) that can be accessed and used free-of-charge by any person living on the African continent. Individuals can access the library from any PC that is connected to the Internet in Africa” ⁽⁷⁾. The ADL was established in November 1999 in collaboration with NetLibrary. NetLibrary was acquired by EBSCO from OCLC in March 2010. EBSCO was fortunate to also obtain a fully formed eBook platform that already had a large collection of about 200,000 eBooks from 500 publishers available on 17,000 sites worldwide. The primary aim of the ADL is to provide access to its collections consisting of: The African Digital Library collection (9808 titles), Audio books (4 titles), and a publicly accessible collection (3487 titles) ⁽⁸⁾.

The African Online Digital Library (AODL) is being pioneered by MATRIX (Centre for Humane Arts, Letters and Social Sciences Online) in cooperation with the African Studies Centre at MSU, and in partnership with premiere research institutions in Africa; L'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN) and West African Research Centre/Centre De Recherche Ouest Africain (WARC/CROA). The goal of AODL is for “fully accessible online digital repository to adopt the emerging best practices of the American Digital Library community and apply them in an African context” ⁽⁹⁾.

In Nigeria, the British Council Digital library “offers world-class resources at the tip of your fingers, from online study resources to popular eBooks and audiobooks, and award-winning movies and documentaries” ⁽¹⁰⁾.

The first step towards establishing a digital Library is the acquisition and implementation of a Library Management System. Digital Library Management Software is a computer-based system where all the functions of the library are controlled digitally and in a systematic way. It helps in keeping a record of books, journals, catalogues, newspapers, CDs, etc in the Library ⁽¹¹⁾. Two examples of Library management systems are Liberty

Library Software by Softlink. This software can be adapted to an organization's special needs. There is also Koha Library Management System which is an open source integrated Library system that is free and used all over the world by Libraries and public schools. Many Libraries in Africa make use of this Library Management Software for their collection. There are many Library Management Systems and organizations need to consider the uniqueness of its collection before choosing a management system.

The NIIA Library started off with TinLib then migrated to Alice and is now making use of the Liberty Library Management Software to manage its collection. Pay the annual maintenance fee and hosting of NIIA's database on Liberty Software in time is the main challenge being faced.

Structure of the NIIA Library

The Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) is Nigeria's foremost foreign policy Think tank established in 1961. The NIIA exists to direct the foreign policy of the country. The Library is the workroom used by the Research and Studies department to carry out the mandate of the institute. It has a robust collection of social science materials covering the following subject areas: African Politics and Integration, Security and Strategic Studies, International Organisations, International Politics, Foreign Policy, International law and Diplomacy etc. The Library is divided into four divisions, headed by Deputy Directors, namely: Technical Services, Readers and Bibliographic Services, Press Library and Documentation Services. The Library Directorate is headed by the Director of Library and Documentation Services, who administers and manages the Library. It is open to the Research staff, NIIA members and the public (who will only be allowed entry upon the presentation of a letter of introduction from their various institutions).

Reference Services prior to COVID-19

The Readers and Bibliographic Services division is the show case of the Library, and where the library interfaces with the public. A Library is as good as the quality of services rendered in the Readers Services to its clientele. The collection consists of 69,436 volumes of books, 20,883 pamphlets, 367,692 press clippings, 1,995 journals, 5,096 UN deposits, 2,035 non-book materials and photographs⁽¹²⁾. The e-resources consists of EBSCO database that is made up of over 10,000 peer review journals, JSTOR free database, Africa Portal database and a NIIA Treaties database. The Oral documentation tapes are being transcribed so as preserve the information. Digitalization of the transcribed materials is a new development currently being considered especially in light of the novel virus. The Liberty Library software by Softlink is used to manage the Library's online catalogue. So far, digitalization has started in the Press collection and is still on-going.

Prior to the pandemic, the Library was opened on Monday to Friday, from 8.00am to 4.00pm. Our Library users could come in to use the collection as they wished, make searches, have interviews with the Reference Librarians, make photocopies, and borrow materials. The users that came into the Library were not only able to get what they wanted, they were also able take a look around the Library to see others things that they also liked and could be of possible interest to them. The Library is just not only a place where serious academic work is done, Library users were also able to sit down in a nice conducive atmosphere, relax and read magazines and newspapers, both foreign and local. They were also able to make friends with staff and fellow Library users.

In addition to paying direct visits to the Library, there were also online visits, where an email was sent to the Reference Librarian requesting for information and materials. Using the e-resources available, the Reference Librarian would send materials to the Library user. Sometimes relevant pages of books and journals would be scanned to the user.

To show case the Library's collection to the public, exhibitions are organized to commemorate international days of the UN, or to support a programme being organized by the Research department. This also allowed us to see the areas where the Library was lacking in materials and thus help us in building and developing our Library collection.

Reference Services Post COVID 19: The New Face of Work

Gradually, the country is opening up and staff from grade-level 14 upwards as well as those on essential duties were instructed to resume work by the government. Right now, the working hours are from 8.00am-2.00pm. As partial work has resumed, it is obvious that social distancing has come to stay. Everyone wears a mask and is careful not to come close to any other person. This has the effect of eroding the camaraderie between workers and Library users. The emphasis now is on minimizing physical contact.

Below are some suggestions I believe will enable us to thrive at work post COVID:
First and foremost, the Library must be sanitized once a week, preferably over the weekend before work starts on Monday.

1. An automated handwashing system and an automated liquid soap dispenser should be installed by the side of the Library to enable regular washing of hands.

2. An automated sanitizer dispenser should be mounted in specific contact points across the Library to enable people to easily and frequently sanitize their hands.
3. An installation of an automated temperature gauge in which Library staff and users will be mandated to use to gauge their temperature before entering the Library. Anyone whose temperature level exceeds 37 degrees will not be allowed entrance into the Library.
4. Installation of sensor doors that automatically open as soon as anyone approaches it. This would go a long way in curbing the spread of germs that come from frequent contact with door handles.
5. All Library staff and users must wear a mask (even though they have a shield on) throughout their stay in the Library. To reduce personal contact between members of staff, hours spent in the office can be cut down and staff can be rotated. Some will work on the premises, for a week, while the rest from home. The normal working hours of 8.00am-4.00pm will apply solely to those working virtually. While those working from the office will work for a reduced number of hours which is 8.00am- 2.00pm. An employee time tracking software known as "Time Doctor" would be deployed to help monitor employee productivity.
6. The Library clerks would be made to wear disposable protective gloves when retrieving materials from the shelves and shelving books.
7. All books will be wiped with alcohol-based sanitizers before being given out to users. Books returned to the Library would be left out in the sun for about an hour before being brought into the Library, since the novel coronavirus cannot survive under heat. Also, the daily Newspapers and magazines would also be subjected to the same treatment before they are brought into the Library.
8. The Library cleaners would be tasked with constantly wiping tables, chairs, shelves and racks with sanitizing materials. Library equipment e.g. computers, keyboards, fans, scanners, photocopying machines etc. would also not be left out.
9. Restriction of the number of people that will be allowed into the Library at a given time. Using a Google form, prospective Library users would sign up from the NIIA web page. A given number of people would be granted daily access to the Library on a first-come, first-serve basis. Not more than 10 users from outside the Institute would be allowed into the Library every day.

The post COVID-19 era is an era where Digitalization would be at the forefront. Reference Services has to be taken to the Clientele's doorstep more often. NIIA has a lot of background work and catching up to do in order to render relevant Library services virtually. Right now, only the Press Library is being digitalized. We need to start by digitalizing our NIIA publications. We can make the content accessible to the public for free, at least the older publications up till 2005, but as from 2006 till date, they will be accessed at a fee. This allows our users to access the collection while we make some revenue from the collection too. The tricky ones are books that do not belong to us, because of copyright issues we cannot collect a fee, unless specific arrangements are made with the authors.

The need for us to start thinking critically about developing and expanding our digital collection has become so glaring. Thus, moving forward there should be more acquisition of digital books so as to build up the Library's digital collection. It is gradually becoming obvious that a lot more on-line Reference services would be taking place. For this however to be effective, a steady power supply is of the essence, preferably 24/7. This would necessitate the provision of strong inverters to support the epileptic power supply.

This has therefore informed the following suggestions:

10. In order to avoid overcrowding in the Library, the Research staff can have their required materials sent to their offices. All they have to do is call on the intercom and request for materials, which will then be delivered to their rooms or sent virtually.
11. The users who are not able to come in can have a virtual Reference Zoom meeting with the Reference Librarian, or send an email, or contact the Library via the Library via its chat services on the Library's Facebook page or on the NIIA's website.
12. Librarians will be provided with more training opportunities on the use of various technologies to deliver effective Reference Services to users.
13. Digitalization of our rich photograph collection to better preserve the rare photo collection we have and enable us show case them during online photo exhibitions.
14. Virtual Exhibitions encouraged: The NIIA Library is known for its exhibitions used in marking international UN days, as well as enriching various conferences, workshops and seminars held at the Institute. In light of the "new normal", exhibitions will now be conducted online rather than physically.
15. The Library is a depository of certified true copies of Treaties and agreements entered into by Nigeria and other countries. These treaties ought to be fully digitized and provided online for use, when the time frame put on them before they can be published has elapsed.

16. The Library's Oral Documentation project, in which Nigerian statesmen and women who have played a significant role in Nigeria's foreign policy formulation and execution are interviewed and the interview tapes transcribed. These transcribed works must be available online.

17. There is a need for the NIIA library to forge partnerships so as to form online sharing networks that agree to share local as well as international information using Information Communication Technology (ICT).

18. With so much digital information, the Library must make sure that its collection is well backed up and all the necessary anti-virus packages are promptly renewed when they expire so that the data is not wiped out.

Above all educating and re-educating the staff on COVID-19 and the need to take preventative measures must constantly be done. Medical personnel can be called in to give such talks, from time to time. In addition to that, a committee that will monitor staff compliance to set down rules should be established. They should also be on guard and be able to quickly spot any staff that is sick and ensure that he or she observes self-isolation and gets adequate medical attention.

III. CONCLUSION

It is obvious that the Corona Virus will be around for some time before a cure can be found. Even when the vaccine is found, accessibility and affordability are areas of concern, especially for us on this side of the world. We have to think of how best to carry on with our lives. Digitalization is certainly a way out when it comes to curbing the spread of this virus. We thus have to make sure that as information managers; we retool ourselves and acquire the requisite ICT skills. Setting up and hosting zoom virtual reference interviews, creating Google forms for people to sign up for physical access to the Library etc. should no longer be "unusual" to us. Efforts should also be made when it comes to forging partnerships with other Libraries, so as to share their digital resources, especially as e-materials are very expensive. We should also strive to buy e-books and journals as opposed to subscribing to them so that we have long-term ownership. Emphasis needs to be placed on fixing and acquiring adequate infrastructure most especially when it comes to power supply. Social distancing, good hygiene and face masks and shields will be around with us for some time, so will working from home. This is now the new normal and the new face of work that has gradually emerged during this COVID-19 pandemic era. Adequate steps need to be taken in ensuring that no aspect of life is halted, but rather sustainable alternatives are explored to help manage the virus as least for now.

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