Summer 7-13-2023

Covid-19 Pandemic and Library and Information Professionals in Cameroon: Challenges and Opportunities

Roseline Bawack
rbawack.bcuyi@gmail.com

Introduction

Covid-19 took many professionals by surprise. In Cameroon, Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals were not prepared to get into another crisis amidst challenges brought by Information and communication technologies (ICTs), coupled with the constant changes in information packaging and dissemination which they had been grappling with. The role of university librarians in the covid-19 period includes raising awareness through education of the university community, providing online services to both academic and non-academic staff, and at the same time providing traditional information services to regular library patrons.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged and has changed virtually every aspect of regular information organization, dissemination and service delivery. There have been a lot of socio-economic and financial challenges, and though the covid-19 cases were 'less' in Cameroon than in most developed countries, no one knows if the COVID-19 crisis has completely ended given the fact that from time to time television stations keep reminding us of its presence. Therefore, educational institutions continue online engagements such as online and distance teaching and assignments for students. According to Ashrafi-Rizi, (2020), the challenge for LIS professionals is to devise effective communication and dissemination strategies that provide both the general public and the university community in particular who are most at risk with credible and actionable information such as, how to identify symptoms and guidance for treatment in order to ensure the safety of the population, and how to provide online services.

At the beginning of Covid-19, the Ministry of Higher Education (MINESUP) of Cameroon instructed universities and institutions of higher learning to immediately kick-start online teaching and learning to avoid the risk of losing an academic year. Some universities, both private and public yielded to this call and set up digital platforms for online teaching and learning, which is still going on in some faculties.

This paradigm shift in teaching and learning methods directly affected university library services. Shafack, (2021) posits that university libraries in Cameroon face a number of social, financial, and technological challenges, they are lacking in wide-scale state-of-the-art technological infrastructure, they are unable to provide access to subscribed electronic resources both on and off-campus, they are unable to build institutional repositories, and they fall short of innovative projects that could provide them with special services to fulfill their goal during the pandemic. Bawack, (2019) reports that low internet penetration, and in some cases a complete absence of Internet access on campuses have greatly affected university

libraries in Cameroon, thus librarians are not able to provide online services, and users are unable to access the library's digital information resources. Though there is a myriad of challenges that academic librarians face in meeting the needs of their users, these challenges could, however, be transformed into opportunities. There is growing concern how information professionals have been operating amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Are they resilient? This concern is relevant because it paves the way for future preparations, responses and resilience in case of another pandemic.

This study seeks to conduct an exploratory investigation of challenges library and information professionals face during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the opportunities that came along with the pandemic including strategies put in place to continue providing services in spite of the lock down and social distancing. The study explored library practices and service patterns amidst challenges and opportunities during the pandemic when face-to-face teaching and learning were suspended in universities and online classes were recommended. This reactive surge of online classes offered librarians a number of social, financial, and technical challenges, however, some of these challenges were transformed into opportunities.

The results of this study will provide an insight into the value of information services provided by library and information professionals working in the universities of Cameroon; librarians from various universities will, from the findings discover and make use of the opportunities that emerge from covid-19 pandemic; the study will help the Library and Information Professionals to improve their skill-set vis a vis changing paradigms; will provide some lessons learned and best practices that could be replicated by other libraries; the government and university administrators will be aware of the challenges that university libraries face amidst covid-19 era and post era, hence will be able to make evidence-based decisions that favour libraries.

Research Objective

The objectives of this study were:
- To examine the challenges library and information professionals faced during the period of covid-19 pandemic.
- To identify the opportunities that library and information professionals have during the covid-19 pandemic.
- To document new strategies put in place by Library and Information professionals during the covid-19 pandemic.

Research Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature as the purpose was to investigate the phenomenon and highlight challenges and opportunities faced by librarians. The sample was qualitative data through in-depth interviews and document analysis from various sources including university and library websites. We assumed that quantitative data (analyzing counts) would not present the holistic picture of the COVID-19 dilemma. Also, with qualitative method, we are more involved into looking at things, experiences, perceptions and practices with the lens of 'HOW' and 'WHY' questions (Creswell, 2016). Qualitative data analysis can be a simple or a complex procedure depending on the amount of data. Several researchers have stipulated that thematic analysis aims to merge significant patterns or themes from the raw data with its flexible approach (Nowell, et al, 2017). It is a multi-step process which involves organizing, identifying, describing and reporting themes from a set of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

This research design provides interviewees the opportunity to be open, bring out their experiences, and expand their responses. We conducted nineteen interviews of academic librarians with their consent. Semi-structured interview guide consisted of 14 broad questions based on literature and the author's experience was prepared and sent to target senior and chief librarians prior to interviews. After seeking respondents' consent, an in-depth online interview time was decided through phone at the convenience of each librarian. Interviews were conducted through telephone and WhatsApp voice mail. The interview duration spanned over 30–40 min. All interviews were recorded with the respondents' consent and later on, transcribed.

Literature Review

There is a plethora of literature on this topic with many empirical studies on the phenomenon except studies from Cameroon. Several blog posts focusing on the pandemic were published on the topic as the pandemic kept spreading worldwide. A number of library associations have responded by presenting best practices and lessons learned. The International Federation of Library Association and Institutions (IFLA) has provided information and resources on the situation of most libraries worldwide since the outspread of COVID-19. For example, IFLA (2020) regularly provides and updates information on its website. The American Library Association (2020) created a webpage to compile information about several challenges and possible opportunities of the COVID-19 pandemic and different ways for information

professionals to respond. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (2020) in the USA has made available resources for all types of libraries on its webpage. The Association of College and Research Libraries (2020) has developed a guide to support academic and research libraries in distance education, professional development, best practices, collection maintenance during the COVID-19 crisis and preparing librarians to become more resilient in times of crisis. The Association of Research Libraries (2020) also developed COVID-19 news and resource web pages. Australian Library and Information Association (2020) created a webpage for sharing news regarding their response to COVID-19. The International Coalition of Library Consortia (2020) issued a "Statement on the global COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact on Library and Information Services and Resources" on behalf of several library consortia worldwide.

Bhati P. (2020), in a qualitative study, depicts that library professionals have many challenges to face during covid-19, and to overcome these challenges, librarians should have very good knowledge in new service-orientations, presentation skills, cultural diversity, managerial and marketing skills, mastery of technology along with technical and communication skills. The current situation of the covid-19 pandemic demands information professionals to play a multi-dimensional role to meet these new and changing paradigms.

Vaidya & Ali (2021) examined the efforts of librarians, as well as the initiatives adopted during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The authors reported that the role of librarians during the pandemic is primordial. The authors emphasized on the concept of working remotely in preventing the spread of coronavirus. The authors further stated that librarians need to reassert their role by finding out the best possible ways in helping library users, and to mitigate every type of learning-based challenge proactively. Findings from this study revealed that library resources were made available to users through remote access.

Samanta (2020) explicates that in order to respond to the challenges brought by covid-19, academic libraries have remodelled their service operations by developing novel ideas regarding access to their resources via online mode. Free online access to digital contents and materials has made it possible for users to search and retrieve accessible information from e-journals, e-periodicals, e-books, theses, dissertations, and other materials for their educational and research needs.
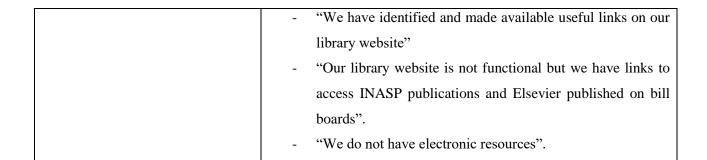
Ashiq, et al. (2022), reports that the challenges of academic libraries during the Covid-19 pandemic have predominant given birth to emerging roles that fall under four major categories:

infrastructure, accessibility and outreach; awareness and well-being; leadership and policy-making; and human capacity building respectively.

Findings and Discussions

For this study, recorded interviews were repeatedly listened to for the purpose of data familiarization, and summarized in the table below:

Themes	Codes
Library accessibility	- Library temporarily closed - Library staff working in shifts - Website update - Social distancing in sitting positions
Available resources and services	- Library database - Library website - Open Educational Resources
Barriers – A paradigm shift from Physical to Digital	- Copyright issues - Technology infrastructure - Insufficient professional staff - Staff incompetency - Training - Leadership
Budget	- Budget inadequacy - Inability to subscribe & purchase e-resources - Poor internet connection
Policy Change	- Decision to online teaching and online resources - Distance Learning platfom - Absence of policy on management, use and dissemination of digital content like copyright issues.
E-resources	- "Yes, we provided online resources before this pandemic, during and after. Especially, we created a database using PmB of research projects and theses which was quite useful for users during the pandemic. Access to OPAC was appreciated". - "Our library website does not provide online resources of theses and dissertations due to lack of skilled staff and technology".

	- "We have identified and made available useful links on our library website" - "Our library website is not functional but we have links to access INASP publications and Elsevier published on bill boards". - "We do not have electronic resources".

Challenges

Collection development was the first challenge for library professionals. Users requested for more online resources while most academic libraries provided books and journals in print. Balancing their collection vis-à-vis print and online to satisfy users was not possible. Emphasis on online and digital resources may bring out the need for an increase in library budget allocation.

Information literacy services like teaching information literacy courses to students was a major challenge. Librarians were not equipped with the required skills to provide this service.

Space planning was another challenge. Libraries had to provide service with reduced space because users had to maintain a safe distance among themselves. In some libraries, chairs and tables had to be removed and packed elsewhere to ensure enough distancing. Libraries were obliged to reduce the number of users at a given time. Reserved spaces for group and collaborative work were closed and reorganized to accommodate fewer reading spaces.

Library professionals experienced a new work pattern (in shifts). This offered some challenges for library staff as some respondents mentioned that it distorted their personal time schedule, especially with the reassignment of new roles and the introduction of new and flexible working hours. Such new schedules were a challenge as they required a review of staff engagements, a change of mindset, motivation, and a reassignment of staff roles and responsibilities. These changes, however, call for investment in staff development and the provision of infrastructure and technology.

The absence of the Internet, and in some libraries slow internet connectivity and low bandwidth was another challenge as libraries could not provide online facilities and services. Thus, users resorted to consulting other search engines like Google Search for research rather than visiting the library or accessing its resources remotely. However, some interviewees reported that they

were consulted by some users to teach them how to search and find the right information on the Internet.

One of the most pressing challenges reiterated by all interviewees was the digitization of resources and providing remote access to these resources. Indeed, the problem is the non-availability of digital infrastructure and trained staff in handling digital collections and services. Interviewees reported the absence of technology infrastructure, internet facilities, and unskilled staff as a major hindrance to digitization. Therefore, library management may need to urgently invest in procuring and augmenting the almost non-existing digital infrastructure of the library, kick-start digitization of the collections, and build institutional repositories to host theses and dissertations. Library staff are required to acquaint themselves with using new collaborative technologies like Zoom, Google Meet, and other related collaborative platforms to share tacit knowledge. Information professionals should, without delay acquaint themselves with free online courses and webinars. These do not need a budget, but rather a change of mindset and determination to embrace continuous learning.

Opportunities

The COVID-19 pandemic was an opportunity for university libraries to reassign resources, revamp their web presence, and adopt different strategies to meet the new demands of the users. Thus it is time for library professionals to learn about recent technological advancements and avail opportunities by learning with virtual platforms to improve their skills/ability for outreach in a virtual environment.

There is an opportunity to act as the connection between the virtual classroom and users, and to help move a step forward aligning with the strategic vision of the library to remain resilient.

It was an opportunity for libraries in Cameroon to urgently develop digital services and build institutional repositories to meet the needs of patrons from different disciplines.

The virtual services were solicited, and e-resources usage including electronic journals, e-books, and databases of thesis and dissertations were in high demand to support learning, research, and teaching activities. This was an opportunity for libraries to justify the need for quality services by lobbying, advocating, and soliciting management support to increase library budgets. Sufficient library budgets will cater for the urgent training of librarians to use technology and acquire state-of-the-art Information & Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure.

There was an increase in the demand for library online public access catalog (OPAC), and social media platforms. Great awareness of the necessity to transform libraries from the traditional physical to digital. It was an opportunity for libraries to valorize their services in cases where libraries were not visited.

It was reported that the pandemic raised the need for partnership and collaboration among libraries. Findings reveal that libraries used the opportunity to join networks, solicit partnerships, and proposed collaboration with other libraries to benefit from a wider plate-form to access more open-access resources.

More than ever before librarians solicited online training. A chief librarian reported that it was made compulsory for her library staff to get registered for free webinars and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

Strategies

Findings revealed that, due to the absence of the library's online resources, Information professionals sorted to identify and provide users with links to some free online resources.

Important Links were made available by some libraries for users to access Free/Open E-Resources as reported by some librarians.

The following is the list of open sources provided to library users with their access link:

E-Books for all Subjects:

- ✓ Doabooks - https://www.doabooks.org/;
- ✓ Free ebooks - https://www.free-ebooks.net/:
- ✓ Gutenberg - https://www.gutenberg.org/:
- ✓ Pdf drive - https://www.pdfdrive.com/;
- ✓ Arts & Science - Ebook Lobby - http://www.ebooklobby.com/;
- ✓ Audio Books - Librivox - https://librivox.org/.
- ✓ Directory of Open Access Journals – www.doaj.org
- ✓ www.who.org (*For news worldwide concerning the pandemic*)
- ✓ Other open educational sources proposed by information professionals were Mendeley, ScienceDirect, Scopus, and Google Scholar.

Other strategies by some libraries included providing services such as:

- Library hours were expanded: Libraries were opened earlier and closed late at night (10 pm) to accommodate more users and permit limited face-to-face contact.
- Faculty libraries that were closed because of a lack of furniture were refurbished to accommodate more students. Extra chairs and tables which were removed from the main library to respect social distancing were transferred to these faculty libraries.
- The library's digital content was made available 24/7 by some libraries.
- Libraries resorted to constant use of social media to quickly disseminate information and links to new online resources from various sources.
- To curb the spread of the virus in library premises, regular cleaning process was adopted, short breaks were provided exclusively for cleaning purposes, while attention was placed on intensifying cleaning around plastic and metallic surfaces where the virus was said to appear for longer period.
- LibGuide was created to provide a list of resources available in the library and disseminated via social media.
- Policy on open access to handle issues like copyright and plagiarism was developed.
- The library's strategic plan was redesigned to accommodate needs in time of crisis like the pandemic.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has exponentially affected academic libraries in Cameroon bringing along several challenges, especially in transforming resources from physical to digital. Some of these challenges were transformed into opportunities. Information professionals have documented lessons learned from the challenges and opportunities brought by the Covid-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of electronic resources and Internet access as key to information access and dissemination hence, making a good case for librarians to grasp the opportunity and lobby for support from the university administration to acquire more digital content related particularly to e-textbooks, e-journals, new subscriptions, and get training on how to manage these resources. It is high time for university administrators in Cameroon to understand how to effectively harness the power of the Internet and provide uninterrupted internet facilities to university libraries. Academic libraries now may re-plan and re-organize their priorities and services in a manner commensurate with changing paradigms. Academic libraries from anywhere in the world could use the findings of this study to look at their own experiences during Covid-19, thereby improving the library sector through

knowledge creation and dissemination towards a renewed and resilient sector during health crisis like the covid-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

The government through the Ministry of Higher Education of Cameroon should invest more in Information technology, improve Internet penetration particularly mobile internet (Wi-Fi) and step up training opportunities for information professionals

University libraries should quickly initiate digitization and provide online access to contents in digital formats in order to provide online access to contents in digital formats for quick and easy information retrieval. Institutional repositories may be a good start. Collaborative approach and partnerships may ensure the long-term sustainability of such initiatives.

Academic libraries should also increase their web presence. It is important that academic libraries in Cameroon design and manage their own websites and include videos, and web-based tutorials among others. Through their websites academic libraries should respond to false and unauthentic information which most often is disseminated ubiquitously on different websites. It should be noted that Websites represent the hub of academic library operations and the gateway to access the library's resources. Many academic libraries in Cameroon do not have a website.

It is important that library budgets be increased and prioritized to acquire basic infrastructure. An increase or re-prioritizing of library budgets to add electronic resources and services should be considered. This could permit libraries to invest in procuring new technologies, infrastructures, and human resource development to better serve their users in times of crisis.

References

American Library Association. (2020). Coronavirus pandemic (2019–2020). http://www.ala.org/tools/future/trends/coronavirus.

Ashiq, M., Jabeen, F., & Mahmood, K. (2022). Transformation of libraries during Covid-19 pandemic: A systematic review. *The Journal of academic librarianship*, *48*(4), 102534.

Ashrafi-Rizi, H., & Kazempour, Z. (2020). Information typology in coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis; A commentary. *Archives of Academic Emergency Medicine*, *8*(1).

Association of College and Research Libraries. (2020). Pandemic resources for academic libraries. https://acrl.libguides.com/pandemic/home.

Association of Research Libraries. (2020). COVID-19 news and resource pages. https ://www.arl.org/resources/covid-19-resource-updates-pages/.

Bawack, R. (2019). Academic Libraries in Cameroon in the digital age. *Libr Philos Pract*, *2019*, 1-13.

Bhati, P., & Kumar, I. (2020). Role of library professionals in a pandemic situation like COVID-19. *International Journal of Library and Information Studies*, *10*(2), 33-48.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3, 77–101.

International Coalition of Library Consortia. (2020). Statement on the GLOBAL COVID19 pandemic and its impact on library services and resources. https://icolc.net/state ment/statement-global-covid-19-pandemic-and-its-impact-library-services-and-res ources.

International Federation of Library Association and Federation. (2020). COVID-19 and the global library field. https://www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries.

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16(1), 1–13.

Perrine, A. (2020, April 30). Libraries go virtual through COVID-19 pandemics. The Two River Times. https://tworivertimes.com/libraries-go-virtual-through-covid-19-p andemic/

Shafack, R. M. (2021). Automation Challenges in Academic Libraries: An Exploration of Academic Libraries in Cameroon. *International Journal of Innovative Analyses and Emerging Technology*, *1*(1), 13-17.

Shafack, R. M. (2021). Securing Library and Information Resources: The Situation in Two State University Libraries in Cameroon. *European Journal of Education and Pedagogy*, *2*(1), 25-31.

Stracke, C. M., Burgos, D., Santos-Hermosa, G., Bozkurt, A., Sharma, R. C., Swiatek Cassafieres, C., ... & Truong, V. (2022). Responding to the initial challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic: analysis of international responses and impact in school and higher education. *Sustainability*, *14*(3), 1876.

Vaidya, P., & Ali, P. N. (2021). Measures and initiatives adopted by Indian University Libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic. In *Handbook of Research on Library Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic* (pp. 152-172). IGI Global.