



Covid-19 Pandemic Era : Towards Effective Library and Information Service (LIS) to the Local Community, Students and Health Care Professionals

P R Goswami
Former Director (Libraries)
Ministry of Culture
E-Mail: prgoswasmi@hotmail.com

Abstract

Covid -19 is a global pandemic which has impacted our lives in a big way. It has changed the way we work. Educational institutions, government offices and other establishments like libraries remain closed for more than three months. The purpose of this paper is to suggest the ways and means by which LIS professionals as a preventive measure can communicate suitable pandemic related information to the communities. The impact of online education on academic libraries as well as the preparedness required on the part of the librarians to deal with the situation have been discussed. The required variety of information services to the health care sector has also been discussed briefly.

Keywords: Global Pandemic, Covid-19 Prevention, Communication, Information Service, Online Education, Library Services and the Pandemic

0 Background

Covid-19 is a global pandemic and a catastrophe which has impacted almost all nations of the world. This pandemic is said to be a manifestation of a larger phenomenon of animal viruses transmitted to humans. The fundamental reason is rapid urbanisation and industrialisation and resultant erosion of natural habitats and destruction of forests.

The virus originated in China's Wuhan province possibly jumping from bats and pangolins into humans. It has been described as a 'zoonotic disease' that is directly caused by an exploitative and consumerist mindset of the human society. The prevailing health emergency is a symptom of a societal failure to adopt or move towards 'Green Growth' and 'Green New Deals'. (Chaulia, 2021)

The current pandemic was preceded by a more devastating Spanish flu of 1918 which lasted for almost two years. One of the hallmarks of the 1918 pandemic, unlike the current one was that a disproportionate percentage of its victims were young adults. (Michael Lennon 2020) More than 50 million people died and one third of world population became infected. Two other large scale epidemics were Black Death or Plague (AD1347-51) and Cholera of the nineteenth century. Plague was transmitted from rats to the human; and cholera through contaminated drinking water. Both are bacterial infections which could be controlled and held at bay by specific



measures. On the other hand the Spanish Flu and the Covid-19 are stated to be virus induced epidemics not readily amenable to preventive measures (Hardy 2020).

The impact of Covid-19 has been felt by the governments as well citizens all over the world. In India more than 150 thousand people have died. The estimated unemployment rate in the country after the lockdown was 23.5% (April 2020). Approximately 10 million migrant workers returned home with great difficulties. And the total estimated GDP loss to the country is very high. Three billion global population was put under quarantine. (Data Reported in *Sunday Times of India* 2020). Life was at a standstill for more than three months due to restrictions imposed by the government. For many lockdown has involved long period of loneliness, solitude and isolation causing mental illness.

All educational establishments and public institutions like libraries were closed. Most of the universities, schools and colleges are still not functioning in a normal way. Many of them have tried to adjust with the conditions and started providing remote online services to the students and clients. In view of the prevailing conditions Library and Information Services (LIS) professionals have also tried to reorient their services to suit the requirement of their clientele.

1. Objectives

The purpose of this brief paper is to address and discuss the following issues.

- i) What type of information services are to be provided to the local communities by libraries (mainly public libraries) to increase the awareness level about the pandemic.
- ii) What changes can be brought in social and cultural practices of the community members to prevent the spread of the pandemic.
- iii) How the libraries and the LIS professionals could work effectively to meet the demands of the students, the teaching community and the medical fraternity to remain useful and relevant in the newly emerging online service delivery system.

As a passing reference, the measures being taken by the government and policy makers to reorient the pedagogical system are to be analysed briefly

2. How to Disseminate Pandemic Related Information?

A recent paper published in a multidisciplinary research journal *World Development* has raised an important question "Can Information Improve Rural Governance and Service Delivery"? The paper has systematically reviewed 48 empirical studies on the impacts of information on the rural communities in different parts of the world. The genesis of the findings of these studies are enumerated below. (Kosec & Wantchekon 2020).

2.1 Information alone is insufficient to improve governance and service delivery.



2.2 Information must be deemed relevant to its recipient in the sense that it is both salient and meaningful.

2.3 Individuals must have both the power and incentive to act on the information.

2.4 In general there is insignificant impact of information service on communities due to one of these three factors listed above;— either relevance, power or incentives missing.

On the basis of these findings one can point out that even bits of useful information are to be repackaged and delivered to the communities so that the members can understand and act on them. The most important facts to be brought to the notice of the community related to the pandemic are a) social distancing b) Use of face masks and to c) Avoidance of handshake or any congregation of people.

One important measure on the part of the community would be to convince people in their locality to avoid organising religious functions which are attended by large number of people. And to keep a close watch on the people returning home after the lockdown. The local governance institutions should also endeavour to make special arrangement for this special class i.e migrant workers.

Storytelling: One method to create awareness about the virus infection is to tell live stories related to the pandemic to the community members. For example in the United Kingdom, the Jewish community was affected more than the others. Jews were accounting for 2.3% of Covid-19 deaths in a nation where they constitute only 0.4% of the total population. Similarly imbalanced figures have been reported in other Jewish communities residing in countries and places like Argentina and New York.

A number of reasons can be ascribed to this;— high mobility of the Jewish people, their concentration in urban areas, the effect of their social praying; as singing in groups in a brilliantly effective way of spreading viral-laden droplets. Some of the mass transmission events also took place as choir singing or football matches and weddings. Age may be another factor as 21% of the British Jews are in the age group of 65 and above compared to 16.4% of the general population (Hardy 2020).

Covid-19 is the first warning that the human society is moving into a more dangerous era in history. Rapid change in social behaviour is responsible for the present state. On the one hand human population has expanded at a fast pace; also lack of environmental awareness is frightening. Travel has become a part of our lifestyle. Air travel can spread airborne virus and contact virus infections invisibly and dangerously fast.

Communication Strategy: How to communicate the Covid-19 related message to the members of a community? This is a question need to be addressed. When a LIS professional communicates a message it contains two elements: contents and feeling. Both elements are



important because both give the message its true meaning. However as communicators LIS professionals may not understand other people's messages or are misunderstood by others because they forget 'meanings are in people not in messages.

The probability of effective communication is increased if the LIS professional feel and look positive or respectful towards the community members. Positive attitude normally carries a built in commitment and/or desire to share useful information and to promote public health awareness. Another factor equally important is effective listening;- it is a process in which the listeners interacts with the speaker or the communicator. It requires mental and verbal paraphrasing and attention to non verbal cues like tones, gestures and facial expressions (Wisner 1978, p 119-20).

Filtering Misinformation: During the trying period of Covid-19 one can come across many rumours regarding the efficacies of the disease control measures or reasons for the spread of the pandemic. One common rumour is the vaccines have been approved by the medical fraternity in a haste and they have side effects. Another rumour could be migrant labours coming back home need to be isolated and should not be allowed to enter the community premises or the village. The communication style of the information providers or LIS professionals would be a decisive factor in such a situation. An effective communicator can foresee the possibility of getting such rumours uprooted from the local community.

Sometimes ICT tools and techniques as well as social media like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram etc. play the trick in spreading misinformation and in building adverse public opinion. It is often termed as fake news or deep fakes. One glaring example is the message spread by an innocuously named organisation based in Russia like Internet Research Agency (IRA). It is a twenty-four hour troll factory which created thousands of fake social media personas during the 2016 US presidential elections. It is alleged that on Facebook alone the IRA's paid ciphers generated more than 80,000 politically inflammatory posts which were seen by an estimated 120 million American citizens.(Silcox 2020)

On the whole it can be said that disseminating right (often repackaged) information communicated in a right manner to the right person(s) should be the motto of the LIS groups during these pandemic days. Public libraries as public spirited institutions can play an important role in this endeavour. Librarians have an important responsibility to share evidence based information about the pandemic in an appropriate manner.

A recent article by an architect says that building of public libraries in many Colombian cities have helped to reduce the countries drug problem. A question has been raised in this article; could libraries bring down crime in Bihar or UP? (Bhatia 2020)

To adopt a library oriented policy the states in India have to break out of sign of stagnation in decision making.



3. Library Service to Students During or After the Pandemic

Most of the libraries were totally closed during the initial lockdown period. After a few months the government establishments and institutions started functioning with a skeletal staff. Only recently libraries have been allowed to open their doors to the readers following the norms of facemask and social distancing.

In the meantime educational institutions like colleges and schools have started their teaching and other ancillary academic work in an online mode. Many of our librarian friends have organised a number of online seminars and conferences. No doubt this effort has provided us opportunities to exchange views with other professionals.

3.1 New Methods of Teaching and Learning

However the real challenge before the LIS professionals is to redesign their online resource based library services. Even before the pandemic, a number of educational technology (EdTech) companies across the globe have started designing and developing applications that can be used on mobile phones, tablets and laptops to impart education seamlessly, irrespective of a student's location.

In order to remain relevant in the education landscape, LIS professionals are required to observe and analyse some of the emerging EdTech trends and devices. The future relies on the concept of continuous improvisation for learners of all ages. Therefore simulation concepts, incentive based learning, user engagement etc. are crucial. Every learner has different sets of abilities with regard to comprehension, learning capacity and methods of absorbing information. In order to curate customised content one has to take the advantage of the tools like big-data or artificial intelligence. Virtual laboratories and wearable devices will provide a holistic experience and cater to every single need of a learner in an interactive manner. And for accessibility of information cloud technology will become a priority for all EdTech companies.

Following benefits of virtual learning have been identified by the educational administrators. (Ed-Tech Platforms 2020)

- a) Access to coursework anywhere anytime
- b) Advancement of digital skills of students
- c) Informal set up make students more comfortable
- d) Lower cost
- e) Promotion of self discipline and responsibility



Moreover in addition to the use of applications commercially developed by the EdTech companies, the students now have access to a host of e books online made available by a number of public and private agencies against license agreements. The benefits of these e books is they are eco friendly in nature and easily accessible. On the occasion of Good Governance Day (25 December 2020) The Chief Minister of Haryana has announced the programme Digital Public Library. Under this project more than 6 Crore books and other study material will be available on the platform of E Granthakosh (Advertorial 2020). A joint programme Innovate for an Accessible India (IAI) by the NASSCOM Foundation and Microsoft India in partnership with certain government agencies like Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE) and Department of Science and Technology (DST) are working together to develop new educational devices for specially abled persons. (Student innovators who helped the specially-abled. *Times of India, Education Times*. 14 December 3, 2020. P 4.)

3.2 New Policy Measures for School Education

The global pandemic came suddenly and none of us expected that the teaching and learning process will go completely digital. Class notes, books and homework activities are now available at a click. It is anticipated that more learning will take place through content which is created in a gamified manner.

Following suggestions have been made by the school administrators particularly in light of the recommendations made in the New Education Policy document (2020).

- a) Children should not be put under the pressure of copying from textbooks but should be given work that improves their aptitude, reasoning and intelligence.
- b) Learning among children has no correlation with the school bag. To enhance the creative skill of students schools need to give more emphasis on 'learning by doing'. They must work on building analytical skill and develop scientific acumen in the students.
- c) The policy will also require schools to introduce infrastructural changes as students will not be able to carry many books daily to their classes. School bag policy of the Ministry of Education says that it should not be more than 10% of the bodyweight of the student(s)(School Bag Policy 2020).

One can say that online education will remain and prosper further even after the pandemic days. Libraries have to plan their new strategies to sustain themselves in this new milieu. At present most of the digital content is in English. A survey conducted by the KPMG International Limited (Anglo Dutch professional service company) has said that 90% Internet users in India over the next five years are likely to be Indian language users. Moreover the National Digital Literacy Mission is now stressing the importance of digital literacy at primary school level for basic contents and in higher classes and colleges for advanced content. Natural Language Processing



and Machine learning methods are now paving the way for automatic translation of content into regional languages from English or Hindi (India, NITI Aayog 2018, p 89-91).

LIS professionals working in schools and colleges have to keep a close watch on these developments to remain as a close partner in the education system of the country.

4. Library Services for the Non Specialists and Health Care Administrators

Health care librarianship is a specialised branch. There are quite a few medical libraries in the country serving the reference and research needs of the qualified medical professionals. However the pandemic has made it obligatory on the part of the public library staff or academic libraries to serve their clientele which include health care workers with the basics of infectious disease control measures related popular non specialised literature. One major concern should be to the general public aware of the environmental degradation.

Table 1 Covid-19 Related Publications; 20 January, 2020 to 15 March 2020

Web of Science	383
Scopus	686
Embase	933
PubMed	1570
Google Scholar	7600

The above Table shows number of published items on Covid-19 derived from various search engines and databases (Ali & Gatiti 2020). One can suggest that keeping in view the current situation all LIS professionals should keep a close watch on Covid-19 related literature which is appearing at a fast pace.

As regards the infectious disease awareness, the appearance of a new journal signalled the establishment of a new medical speciality in 1995. It was a development not to be missed by the LIS fraternity. The first issue of *Emerging Infectious Diseases* was published under the aegis of US Centre for Disease Control. It was a quarterly journal. Later it became bi-monthly in 1999 and made a monthly publication in 2002. Among the many infections covered by this journal since the year 1995, Covid-19 offers the most vivid and dramatic example of a global pandemic (Hardy 2020).

In India, diseases like malaria, small pox, cholera have been almost eradicated during the middle decades of the twentieth century. But the Covid-19 has indicated that we are resuming our journey with new forms of killer diseases. New types of infections are now visible due to careless exploitation of our planet's resources. One has to fight this condition with a strategic intent.



Health care administrators are required to design local community hospitals as planned in USA during the 1950's. These hospitals were set up to provide user friendly and quick medical care. It has been found good for the patients to be able to see out of the enclosed spaces. Empirical studies have demonstrated that speedy recovery could be noticed in case of hospital patients when placed in beds next to windows;- recognition of a damage done to individuals through confinement (Knoblauch 2019).

The purpose of raising these factors in this paper is to acquaint the LIS professionals with diverse nature of literature to be pooled for information service to the health care administrators and workers.

5. End Word

A close reading of the main part of this paper would reveal that technology is destined to play a major role in education during the pandemic induced conditions as well as in the future. Information dissemination to the generalists as well as specialists during the pandemic will also be influenced by the Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

LIS professionals have to sharpen their knowledge and skills to understand the efficacies of learning analytics (LA). It is basically measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of data about learners and their contexts. The purpose is to optimize learning and the environments in which it occurs (Jones 2019). In a similar way one can say that Covid-19 related data pertaining to reasons for a higher level of infection in a particular region or community could be analysed to inform the health care workers regarding possible remedial measures.

In order to remain as an integral part of the education system, LIS professionals have to act smart and imbibe new technology in the most appropriate manner.

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