Chapter 4
Digital Technology Information–Sharing Prospects:
A Case of Library Websites in Tanzania During the COVID–19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an experience shown by university and research library websites in Tanzania following the outbreak of COVID-19. Content analysis was the main method of data collection and analysis in which the contents of the selected websites were explored to establish various services. Thus, the analysis of the selected library website contents revealed that 12 of 24 library websites had the opening and closing hours, two university library websites had information related to the outbreak of the COVID-19, and 12 had no information related to the outbreak of COVID-19 or changes in the library services following the outbreak of COVID-19. This chapter concludes that library websites provide opportunities for the libraries to serve their users conveniently. However, the experience given by some of the university and research library websites in Tanzania shows a lack of information on how particular libraries serve their users when the working environment and style changed following the outbreak of COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technologies supports information sharing and dissemination in libraries. Digital technologies and particularly the use of websites have shown to support information sharing, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Varghese, 2020). This is related to the closure of most of the library buildings, and health restrictions that required most library users to be served remotely. Therefore, librarians were required to connect users with digital content, updating library websites, sharing information resources and respond to different queries from users (Rafiq, Batool, Ali & Ullah 2021). The websites were also used to share various updates related to the prevention of COVID-19 pandemic,

provide new arrangements for getting services from the library following library closure and updates from publishing industries (Ali & Gatiti, 2020; University of Cape Town; University of Nairobi Library, 2020). Thus, library websites present one of the essential digital technologies that provide a convenient way through which libraries can communicate and share information with their users.

For example, the use of the website facilitates information sharing and communication between business owners and their customers (Devi & Verma 2018; Okechukwu & Anunobi, 2020). In libraries, websites are used to connect users with information resources and services such as access to scholarly databases, online public access catalogue, research tools and useful links for research and academic purposes (Arshad and Ameen, 2015; Dominguez et al., 2015; Devi & Verma, 2016; Gohain, 2019; Valenti, 2019). Furthermore, library websites are used to give general information such as library history, facilities, working hours, staff and contact information (Herring, 2007; Sife & Tandika, 2014; Gohain, 2019). Similarly, library users can get the experience of a particular library or service through a virtual tour on library websites (Gohain, 2019).

However, the benefits obtained from a particular website largely depend on its application. This requires effective management plans to ensure that library websites are used to support information use and communication. Some scholars like Valenti (2019) support that effective management of library websites is essential to maximise its benefits as information sharing and communication tool. This chapter intends to present an experience shown at universities and research libraries in Tanzania concerning their websites following the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion given here is grounded from the findings obtained from Tanzania and experiences given by other library websites in Africa and elsewhere. Thus, the chapter sheds light on the best practices that libraries can employ to support their users through their websites during emergency times and beyond. It is important to note that, unlike other countries that applied lockdowns as a strategy to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, in Tanzania there was a temporary closure of schools and universities. Therefore, most of the students and other library users had limited access to the library buildings.

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced governments worldwide to impose some restrictions to control the spread of the coronavirus. In Tanzania, the government employed several measures to contain the spread of the virus, including the temporary closure of all schools and universities across the country from 17 March 2020 for 30 days. The temporary suspension of education activities impacted negatively to students, teachers and education systems at large, including changes in the date of examinations and other academic activities (Tarimo & Wu, 2020; The Citizen, 2020). While the students, instructors, researchers were restricted to physical access to the library services, some services and resources were remotely available. For example, links for e-resources were available through individual library websites. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted to new style in the working and service environment. These changes necessitate individuals and institutions to learn and assume new working arrangements to cope with the existing business and working environment. In the library settings, for instance, librarians require to learn new facts about the pandemic disease, inform the public and adopt new services to meet the changing community information needs and behavior (Ali & Gatiti, 2020; OCLC, 2020; University of Pretoria Library, 2020; University of Cape Town Library, 2020; University of Nairobi Library, 2020). Adapting new working styles is important because the COVID-19 pandemic caused some limitations on

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