Mitigating the Infodemic Associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic: Roles of Nigerian Librarians

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Abstract

This study investigates how Nigerian librarians are mitigating the infodemic caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The entire population of Nigerian librarians in major social media platforms of the Nigerian Library Association and its sections were used for the study. An online survey administered through Google forms was used. A total of 186 librarians responded to the survey. The data was analysed with percentages and presented in charts. The findings show that: the majority (80%) agreed that there is infodemic in Nigeria. The major roles played by the librarians in mitigating the infodemic are: correction of misconceptions online (54.8%), posting of official information online(47.8%), and provision of authentic sources to COVID-19 guidelines (39.8%); the majority (91.1%) of the librarians played these roles as personal initiatives; majority (79%) of them believe their roles have been effective; and the major challenges facing their efforts are the issue of low bandwidth (59.1%), distrust for official information (31%) and regard for myths (29%). The implication of these findings is that most of the efforts made by Nigerian librarians to curb the spread of fake news associated with the corona virus were mainly personal initiatives. This further implies that a majority of Nigerian libraries do not have plans and policies in place to ensure service delivery in emergency situations. It was recommended, among others, that Nigerian librarians should go beyond online efforts to use traditional methods in order to reach a larger part of the populace without access to the internet.

Keywords: COVID-19, fake news, infodemic, librarians, Nigerian, social media

Introduction

The year 2020 heralded tremendous changes in global affairs, especially regarding the health sector and the movement of persons from place to place. This was caused by the advent of the novel Corona virus which was first identified in Wuhan, China. The Chinese National Health Commission reported a novel human Corona virus (SARS-CoV-2) in December 2019, but it was not until January 2020 that most parts of the world began to come to the reality of the virus (Abdo A. Elfiky, 2020). Even then, it took the World Health Organization (WHO) additional two months before declaring it as a pandemic (Bogoch et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

Several reactions trailed the declaration of the virus outbreak as a pandemic from different quarters. From scientists, doctors, government officials to normal citizens, reactions were and are still swelling tending from confusion to anxiety. With the outbreak of the virus came a season of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. Many individuals from developed and developing nations alike deliberately used the instrument of the internet to spin false news and disseminate fake information regarding the Corona virus (COVID-19). And with fear and anxiety, many people especially in developing nations received and utilized such information.

In the early days of the current COVID-19 pandemic, Hu, Yang, Li, Zhan, and Huang (2020) noted that "less aligned emphasis has been given to the COVID-19 infodemic coordinating with the COVID-19 outbreak". Jones (2020) equally noted that "Infodemic follows closely on the heels of every pathogen like never-departing shadow". Infodemic basically refers to the outbreak of misinformation, disinformation and enormous spread of fake news and false information. Infodemic could be a product of confusion, ignorance, or a deliberate attempt to derail the efforts of others by mischievous groups and individuals. According to Zarocoatas (2020) infodemic is a form of "global epidemic of misinformation, spreading rapidly through social media platforms and other outlets..."

Hernández-García and Giménez-Júlvez (2020) reported that the internet has played a key role in the dissemination of information on the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study highlighted the spate of fake news and misinformation on the internet on the pandemic. The negative impact of fake news is heightened when social media is the carrier due to the way majority of citizens accept almost everything on social media, and rarely consult other sources except when they have personal doubts (Tandoc, et al., 2018).

Findings from previous studies on global epidemics such as the cases of Ebola and the Zika viruses have shown that online tools are employed by many to misinform the majority of people across different countries irrespective of their social-economic ratings (Oyeyemi et al., 2016).

Infodemic has proven in many cases to be a more dangerous crisis than the main issues. As Rovetta and Bhagavathula (2020) rightly noted "fake news and misleading information have circulated worldwide, which can profoundly affect public health communication". This is in addition to the fact that misinformation complicates and frustrates actions taken to curb or resolve the real issues.

According to United Nations Development Programme (2020) "the COVID-19 pandemic is more than a health crisis. It has social and economic implications from nation to nation". Apart from the effect on the economies of nations, the pandemic has come with major alterations to how people live. Paramount among the changes is how people interact on social media. There

is a spike in how people interact online. In the Nigerian context as well as in other climes too, more and more people have come to rely on information from the internet. The truthfulness or otherwise of the information on the internet, and the capacity to differentiate them is the key issue that will determine how the pandemic is been handled in Nigeria. Since the first case of the corona virus was detected in Nigeria on February 27, 2020 (Nigerian Centre of Disease Control), the social media space in Nigeria went agog with conspiracy theories, religious permutations and fake news relating to the origin of the virus with some even offering herbal/natural cures. In fact, current reactions to the virus in Nigeria have shown that majority of the Nigerian people have been fed with fake news on several aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, from false cures to complete disbelief on the existence of the virus (BBC, 2020; TheWorld, 2020). To address this issue of infodemic, Zarocostas (2020) in listing the efforts of the World Health Organization, highlighted that to fight an infodemic people must have access to right information through the same channels where they often get fake news and wrong information. Librarians, as stakeholders in information dissemination, are therefore, saddled with the responsibility of ensuring that people have access to the right information about the pandemic. In view of this, this study is undertaken to investigate the actions Nigerian librarians are taking to mitigate the infodemic associated with the corona virus pandemic.

Research Questions for the Study

1. How would you rate the extent of the infodemic in Nigeria since the outbreak of the corona virus pandemic?
2. What role(s) have you played in mitigating the infodemic as a librarian in Nigeria?
3. In what capacity have you played the role (s) in question 2?
4. What channels have you employed to play the role(s) in question 2?
5. How would you rate the outcome of your roles so far?
6. What challenges did you encounter in playing your roles effectively?

Literature Review

Coronaviruses (CoV) are positive-sense, single-chain RNA viruses, possessing the largest viral RNA genome known to-date. According to Lu, Zhao, Li, et al. (2020) coronaviruses are known for their rapid spread, unpredictable emergence, and their threat to human health, magnified by the wide range of animal reservoirs and the lack of preventive or curative treatments. Huang C, Wang Y, Li X, et al. (2020) attest that CoV is an infection that affects patients with and without underlying diseases, although most of the fatalities are older patients or patients with significant comorbidities. The vast majority of reported cases have been in adults, decreasing our ability to draw inferences and make recommendations for pediatric patients (Chen et al., 2020).

Infodemic can be described as an overloaded information on a particular issue or problems thereby making solution to such problem more difficult. Infodemic can as well be referred to what is known as fake news/information explosion/information multiplicity. An infodemics according to open dictionary (2020) can also be considered as the spread of incorrect information such as online. This can be confirmed in the statement "we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic" (WHO Director-Ghebreyesus 2020).

Fake news can be said to be any information that is deliberately meant to be misleading, spread through online social media, but spontaneously existing in the mainstream of information (Jane, 2019). According to Wardle (2017), there are different ways news/information can be considered fake such as when headlines are not supported by the content of the document,

misleading information to frame an issue, when genuine content is shared with false contextual information, when genuine sources are "impersonated", when genuine information is manipulated to deceive, and news content is 100% false designed to deceive and do harm among others. False information is often sensational, dishonest, and outright fabrication, which is then reverberated through social media. It could also be false or misleading information published as authentic news, generally understood to be deliberate, however possibly accidental with no basis, but is presented as being factual (Jane, 2019).

Information explosion can be described as an overabundance of data or information. That is, information explosion is the amount of /increase in information available for the consumption of the citizenry in carrying out their daily activities. Information explosion could simply be defined as the rapid increase in the amount of published information (Kadiri & Adetoto, 2012). According to Wilson (2011) information explosion is also called information overload and can be classified as Personal Overload and Organizational Overload. To him, personal overload appeared to be cognitive which can be defined as a perception by the individual that the information associated with tasks is greater than can be managed effectively and that such overload can create a degree of stress for which effective coping strategies are necessary while organization overload is the extent individual perceived information overload is sufficiently widespread within an organization as to reduce the overall effectiveness of management operations. Etsua-Mensah in Kadiri & Adetoto (2012) explains that there is information overload because more and more information is published every year, and this has created myriads of problems for both users and managers of information.

Roles of Librarians

The roles of librarians in information provision are becoming more critical considering the intensity of the current pandemic facing countries all over the world. These roles range from information dissemination which includes systematic gathering, analysis, matching and delivery of a message to meet a desired outcome. According to Isibor (n.d.) the matching stages is usually facilitated through a systematic approach, an appropriate media and using the right language. He further confirmed that the role of the librarian in information dissemination is very important in health and the provision of balanced perspectives to medical issues. Adio, Akewukereke and Ibitoye (2017) observed that, librarians play essential non-partisan roles in providing information that allows users to make informed decisions as far as health issues is concern.

The 2019-nCoV sudden occurrence and reaction has been accompanied by an "infodemic". That is, an over-abundance of information with some of it been accurate while some are not, making it hard for people to find reliable guidance when they need it. Due to the high demand for timely and adequate information about 2019-nCoV, there is need for librarians to package and disseminate timely and up-to-date information while staying at home. This could involve working round the clock to identify and verify the most adequate information that can be of benefit to the public's health such as positive prevention measures or cures refuted with evidence-based information. This information can be made available through the use of resources such as billboard, handbills, pictures on social media channels (including Weibo, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest) and library websites. With the current exponential growth in knowledge and information associated with corona virus pandemic, librarians as custodians of information should be genuinely concerned. This is because it has always been the traditional responsibilities of libraries to collect, organize, preserve and retrieve information either manually or through the use of Information Communication

Technology (ICT). In view of this, Hinderson (2016) listed the advantages of ICT to librarians as the

- Provision of speedy and easy access to information;
- Provision of remote access to users;
- Access to unlimited information from different sources;
- Provision of flexibility to be used by any individual according to their requirements.

The duties of the librarian would involve the provision of access to the information contained in books, newspapers, magazines, journals, and audio-visual materials to users according to their needs. The librarian is expected to harness the resources at their disposal to stem the tide of misinformation and the deliberate disinformation going on in the era of the corona virus pandemic.

Research Method

The descriptive survey design was adopted for this study. The accidental sampling technique was adopted to sample Nigerian librarians on the major social media platforms of the Nigerian Library Association. The instrument for data collection was online survey designed and administered through Google forms. The form is available at https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1w8XSHnTQETNpJdf0rcI5asw2wqdm2_VZtRLtYW9Ylz0 /edit. The survey was open from 14th to 25th April, 2020, and a total of 186 librarians responded to the survey within that period. Their responses were analyzed with calculation of frequencies and percentages on bar and pie charts.
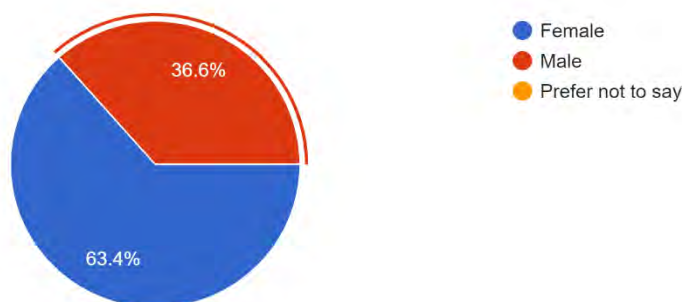
Results and Discussion of Findings

The results of the demographic data and responses to the research questions are analyzed as follows:
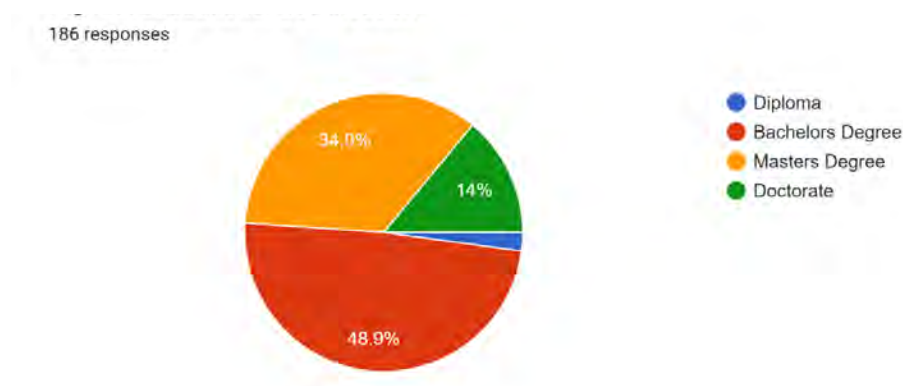
Figure 1
Gender of Respondents

186 responses

The data in figure 1 shows that majority (63.4%) of the librarians who responded to the survey were females. This finding is consistent previous studies (Aiyebelehin and Omekwu, 2019) that have shown that there are more females among Nigerian librarians compared to males.

Figure 2

Educational Qualification of the Respondents

From figure 2 it can seen that 48.9% of the librarians surveyed have Bachelors degree in Librarianship, 34.9% have master's degree in librarianship,while 14% of the respondents have PhD degree in librarianship. This clearly shows that the respondents were all professionals, since according to the Librarians Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN), a librarian is inducted as a professional upon the possession of the Bachelors, Master's or PhD degree in librarianship. The educational qualification of the respondents further shows that the librarians have the educational qualification to render quality service to users whether online or in the physical library.

Figure 3

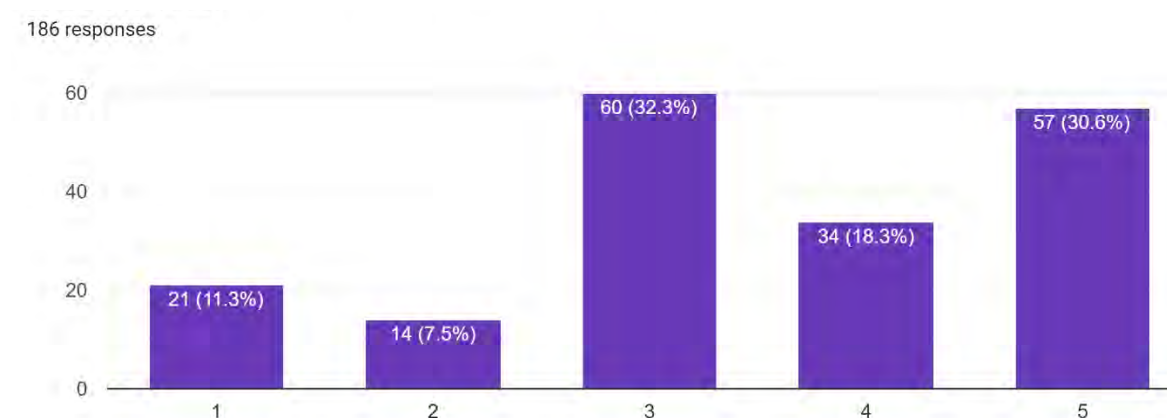*Extent of Infodemic in Nigeria Since the Outbreak of COVID19*

Figure 3 rates the respondents' opinions on the extent of the prevalence of infodemic in the Nigerian information space. The scale ranks from very low extent to very high extent. From figure 3 it can be deduced that on the overall, the extent of the prevalence of infodemic is seen to be very high by the librarians. For an example, 32.3% of the librarians agreed that the infodemic is to a moderate extent, 18.3% agreed that it is to a high extent, while 30.6% agreed that is it to a very high extent. A combined analysis of the data shows that over 80% of the librarians rank the extent of the infodemic from moderate to very high. While less than 20% of the librarians do not think the infodemic is a matter of concern. The opinion that the infodemic is a worrisome issue aligns well with the alarm raised by Paakkari, and Okan, (2020). In fact, Jones (2020) asserted that "infodemic follows closely on the heels of every pathogen like

never-departing shadow". The implication of this is that if not quickly mitigated, the infodemic in Nigeria could largely hamper the efforts of organizations fighting the corona virus pandemic.
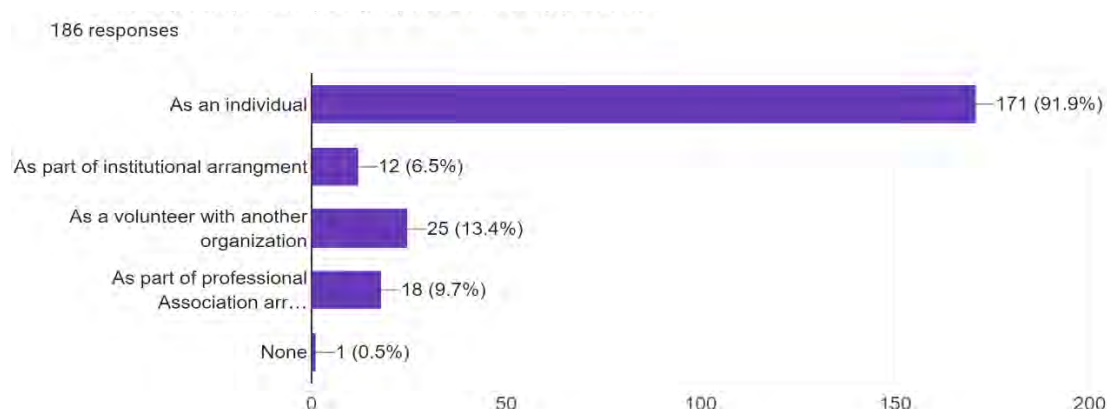
Figure 4
*Roles played by the librarians in mitigating infodemic in Nigeria*
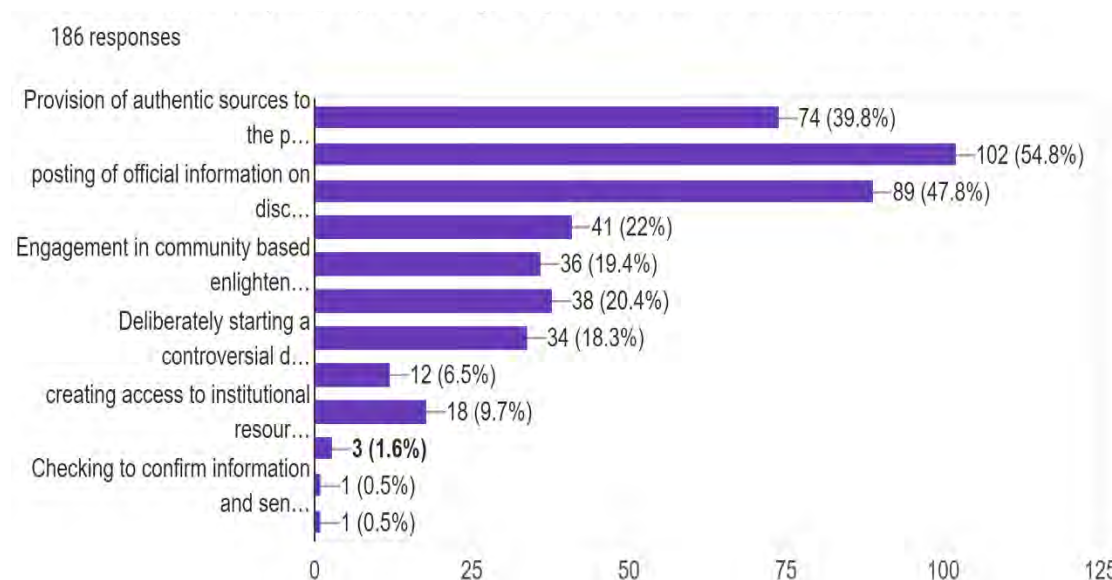
Responses in figure 4 show the various roles Nigerian librarians have played so far in mitigating the infodemic. From the responses it is clear that the major roles librarians have played are participation in online discusions to correct misconceptions (54.8%), post of official information on discusion forums (47.8%) and provision of authentic sources to the public (39.8%). Curiously, the roles least played by the librarians in mitigating the infodemic are the roles that are construed as traditional roles of the librarians. For example, only 6.5% of the respondents gave out handbills to people in their community, while 9.7% of the respondents provided access to institutional resources on information relating to COVID-19. The lack of provision of access to institution resources on COVID-19 or related disease undescores the issue of lack preparedness for emergencies. In fact, with the lockdowns, most libraries in Nigeria were totally inoperative and closed to users both physically and online. The efforts of Nigerian librarians to mitigate the infodemic as shown in the roles they have played are in line with the suggestion of Zarocostas (2020), who noted that to fight an infodemic, people must be given the authentic information through the mediums they have normally receive false and misleading information.

Figure 5
The Capacity from which the Librarians are Playing their Roles

Although the librarians are all practicing and teaching librarians, the results as seen shown in figure 5 present new facts. As seen in figure 5, 91.9% of the librarians are playing the role of mitigating the infodemic from individual effort. This implies that their action is not a product of their organization's plans or employers' ideas. The roles the Nigerian librarians are playing are borne out of a personal response. This fact reveals a much deeper issue that is the issue of lack of preparedness for emergencies. What this underscores is that Nigerian libraries barely have policies and plans for responding to emergencies such as the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, only 6.5% of the librarians attribute their roles as part of institutional arrangements. The findings from this study that there is lack of preparedness for emergencies clearly agrees with the findings of Ilo, Nwachukwu, & Izuagbe (2020), who found that many Nigerian libraries were not adequately prepared to handle emergencies.
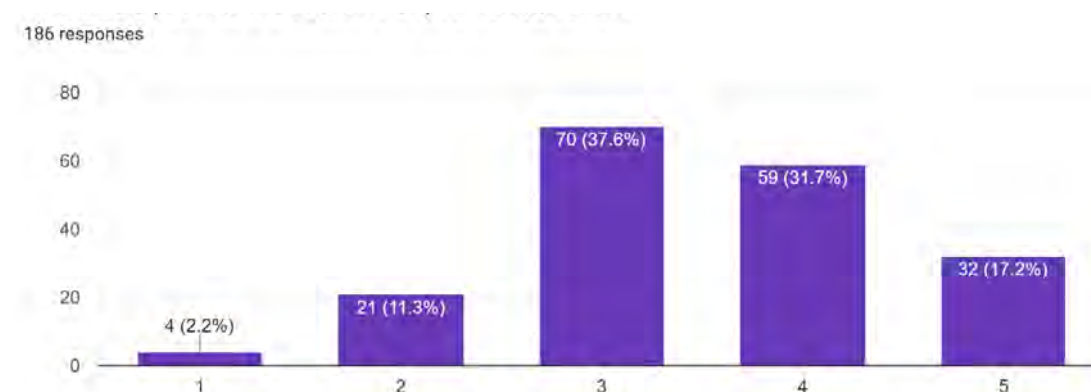
Figure 6
Channels utilized by the librarians
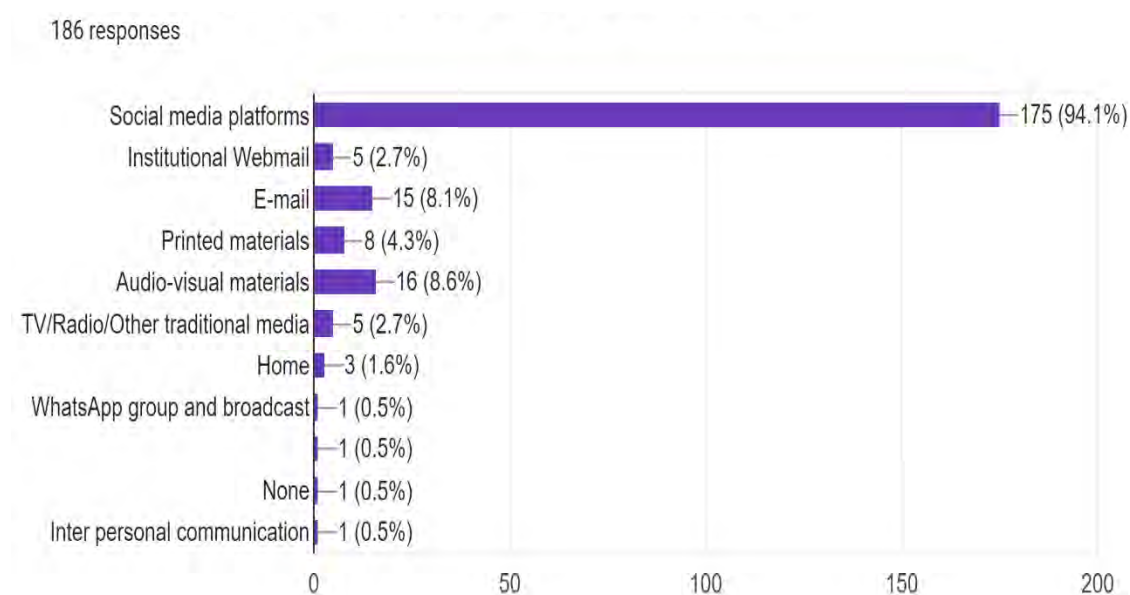
As seen in figure 6, almost all (94.1%) the librarians used social media platforms to engage the Nigerian populace. This is most probably due to the lockdowns, and the effectiveness of using

social media to reach people irrespective of location. Also, the use of social media could also be due to the fact most of the librarians played these roles in their individual capacity. In fact, that only a meager 2.7% of the librarians used webmail shows that most institutions had no plans to reach users and the general populace, especially in the heat of the COVID-19 outbreak. These findings agree with the findings from González-Padilla and Tortolero-Blanco (2020) who reported the influence of social media on the COVID-19 pandemic. Other reports from Nigeria have shown the impact of social media on information dissemination relating to COVID-19, and the how librarians are utilizing social media in this regard (Obi-Ani, Anikwenze and Isiani, 2020; Chukwuyere, Nwanneka, Chukwudebelu, and Chidiebere, 2020).

Figure 7
Success Rate of the Librarians' Roles

As shown in figure 7, a majority of the librarians agreed that the effectiveness of their roles is in the range of moderately effective, highly effective and very highly effective. A total of 37.6% of the librarians rate their efforts to be moderately effective, 31.7% believe their efforts are highly effective, while 17.2% agreed their efforts are highly effective. Only about 13% of the librarians rate their efforts to be either not effective or fairly effective. While it may be too early to assess the success rate of the roles played by the librarians in mitigating the infodemic associated with the COVID-19 pandemic since it is an ongoing issue, the findings from this question could, however, serve as critical information for decision making in the fight against infodemic.

Figure 8
Challenges Facing the librarians
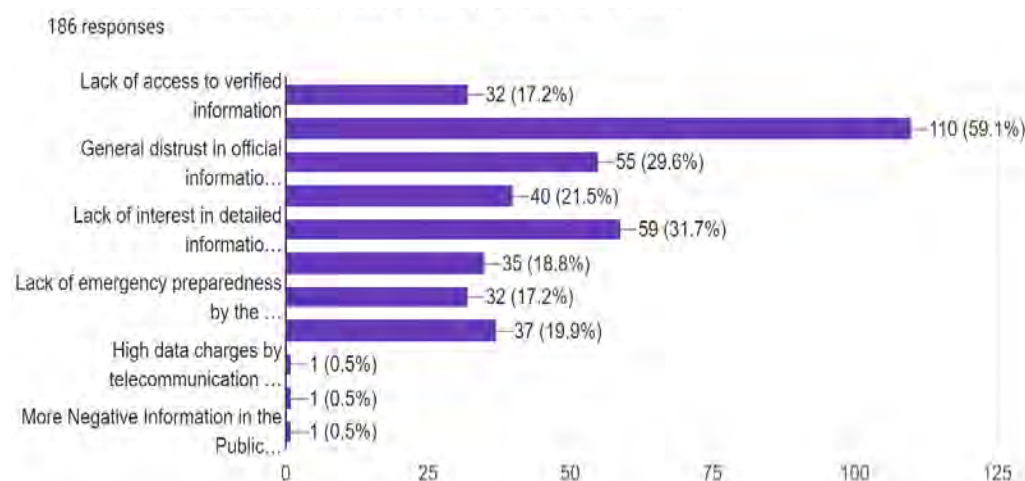
As shown in figure 8, the major challenges facing Nigerian librarians in playing their roles as regards mitigating infodemic associated with COVID-19 pandemic are poor internet connection or low bandwith (59.1%), the lack of interest in detailed information by the Nigerian public (31.7%), a general distrust in official information by the public (29.6%), and entrenched beliefs in myths (21.5%). The issue of low bandwidth has been identified by previous studies as a major hindrance to effective information service delivery (Benson, Okorafor, & Ekeruche, 2017; Ilesanmi & Mabawonku, 2020). The other issues have social implications because they mirror realities in the Nigerian society. In this regard, they present a difficult wall of resistance to effectiveness in fighting infodemic in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

This study has clearly established that librarians are critical stakeholders in the fight against the corona virus pandemic. There seems to be consensus from literatures that the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic requires different actors who will work in synergy to end the various aspects and ramifications of the virus. The fight against infodemic is critical because without that the war against long-term impact of the virus may be lost. Nigerian librarians, despite the challenges they face, are rising to the challenge of fighting the infodemic prevalent in Nigeria. They have used and are still using online tools and devices, mostly as personal initiatives to win the fight against misinformation. While it may sound premature to rate their efforts, findings from this study provide evidence of action on the part of Nigerian librarians. It is important, therefore, that the librarians' efforts are recognized and supported by appropriate authorities in order to sustain these crucial efforts.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations have been suggested:

1. That there is need for the librarians to extend their efforts beyond social media and online channels since there is a larger part of the Nigerian society who are cut out of the internet and online tools due to illiteracy, poor infrastructure and other factors. Hence, the librarians should employ traditional means such as public awareness campaigns, and printing of flyers.
2. That Nigerian libraries should come up with a framework for responding to emergencies and that funding should be set aside for providing emergency information services whenever the need arises.
3. That the issue of low bandwidth should be addressed by relevant stakeholders especially the ministry of communication since access to good internet connection is critical for survival especially in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic
4. that the Nigerian Library Association should work with other relevant associations to address the age-old problems of distrust in official information, and love for myths among the Nigerian people.

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