

PROCEEDINGS OF 11TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF UNIVERSITY LIBRARIANS ASSOCIATION OF SRI LANKA - 2021

**“Scholarly Publishing & Open Access
for the Enhancement of Research Visibility”**

**Virtual Conference
22nd September 2021**

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIANS ASSOCIATION OF SRI LANKA

PROCEEDINGS



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University Librarians Association of
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(Virtual Conference)

University Librarians Association of Sri Lanka

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PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC: A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN MATARA DISTRICT

R. A. P. S. Senevirathna*

Senior Assistant Librarian, Main Library, University of Ruhuna, Matara, Sri Lanka
saku@lib.ruh.ac.lk

I. D. K. L. Fernando

Senior Assistant Librarian, Main Library, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, Belihuloya, Sri Lanka
kusala@lib.sab.ac.lk

Abstract

Information democracy is a major human right issue of a civilized society. Public libraries are one of the main pillars that need to be strengthened by the local authorities to bridge the information gaps within the country. The global pandemic lockdown situation has a challenge to the libraries around the globe by limiting its services and led the libraries to find new dimensions of information dissemination and remote learning. The present study investigates the remote services provided by the public libraries in Matara District before and during the pandemic situation. A survey was conducted to collect data from 38 public libraries. Results revealed that many libraries use free services such as social media, web 2.0 technologies, emails, and phone calls to continue their services to users remotely. Lack of higher authorities' attention, knowledge and technological infrastructure are major limiting factors that the libraries face when providing remote services. More attention towards public libraries needs to be ensured to establish better information democracy and equity among rights to information of the country.

Keywords: *Public library services, pandemic library management, remote library services, social media services, information democracy*

*Corresponding author

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Introduction

Right to information is one of the main indicators of democracy in a country that allow all the citizens have equal opportunity and the right to access the information they need (Jayasundara & Bodinayake, 2019). Public libraries serve as a focal point of providing information needs of all levels of the society respecting the social, financial, or any other barriers (Mugwisi et al., 2016). The value of the information services provided by the public library sector is in high contrast in situations like pandemics. This situation limits the access to information of different social layers much further. Thus, the capacity and services of modern public libraries should be transformed to meet the goals of social inclusion (Muddiman et al., 2000). Therefore, the libraries must initiate more innovative alternatives to promote the information democracy of the people (Gunarathna & Alahakoon, 2020). Libraries should be encouraged to provide remote services, especially during the pandemic situation of Covid (Gunarathna & Alahakoon, 2020; Neyra, 2021).

Global lockdowns due to the Covid 19 pandemic have been affecting most of the industries, and the quality of their social lives. Sri Lanka has undergone frequent lockdowns during 2020. Subsequently, library access was limited to prevent the spread of the Covid 19 virus, while patrons were also reluctant to visit public libraries due to personal health and safety. Hence, the public library sector should be updated to par with the prevailing situation of the country and provide the information requirements for its patrons. Public libraries are vital for providing information services to the public. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has provided a comprehensive level guideline for the management of libraries during the pandemic in a global perspective (IFLA, 2020). The American Library Association has drafted a comprehensive guide and best practices and protocols for librarians (ALA, 2020) which provide more insight into library management during the pandemic. The exit strategy from covid-19 for Sri Lankan Libraries published by the National Institute of Library and Information Sciences (NILIS, 2020) provides a national guideline for library operations. All these guidelines will be beneficial for providing better and protective services during the pandemic and similar situations.

The problem leading to conducting the present study is to investigate the modes used by the public libraries in the Matara district to provide in front of the public library users. Pandemic situations trained the public to utilize different remote services to continue the teaching, learning, and information exchange among each other.

Objectives

The present study aimed to investigate online services provided by the public libraries of Matara district during the Covid lockdown period from 2020-2021.

Methodology

Study area - The study area is limited to the randomly selected public libraries in Matara district. Of 41 public libraries ranked by the National Library of Sri Lanka (the revised list, the existing document mentions 38 public libraries), 38 libraries, two in Municipal Councils, two in Urban councils, and thirty-four in Pradeshiya Sabhas were selected. One Grade I, four Grade II, 25 Grade III, and 8 ungraded libraries were among them.

A structured paper and a pencil-based questionnaire were distributed among the public librarian or the person in charge among the 38 public libraries in Matara district. Subsequently, the same questionnaire was distributed as a google form to the same person after being contacted over the phone. Respondents were interviewed over the telephone to verify and investigate the limiting factors towards remote information services. Reminders were sent throughout a month until the number of respondents reached at least 60%. Results were analyzed using SPSS 26 platform. The questionnaire investigated the demographic information related to the librarians and the services they provided before and during the pandemic lockdown.

Results and Discussion

After a month, there were 23 respondents for the paper and pencil-based or online questionnaire. Of the respondents, 14 were public librarians, and 09 were library assistants. *Among respondent libraries*, 21 were under Pradeshiya sabhas. The rest two were under the urban council and the municipal council. Among Libraries, fourteen libraries were ranked under grade III, four were grade II, and one was grade I. Four libraries were not ranked yet. The work experience of the respondents over their designation represents in table 1. Of 23 respondents, 19 respondents had more than six years of working experience and, three had less than five years of service. There was one librarian whose working experience was more than 25.

Table 1: Work experience of the respondents

Designation	Working experience						Total
	<5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	25<	
Librarian	3	0	3	3	4	1	14
Library assistant	0	6	3	0	0	0	9
Total	3	6	6	3	4	1	23

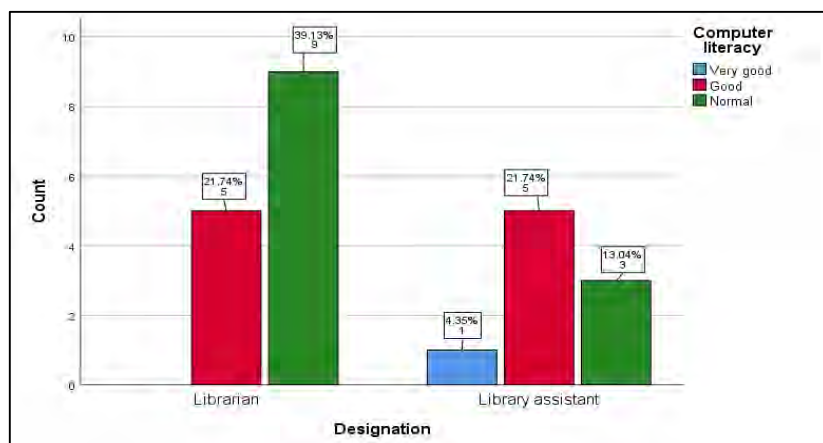
Source: Author complied, 2021

The majority of respondents hold a Diploma or above level of qualifications, while only two respondents had Advanced level as their highest educational qualification (Table 2).

Table 2: Educational qualifications of the respondents

Designation	Education level					Total
	Postgraduate	Graduate	Diploma	Certificate	Advanced level	
Librarian	1	1	11	0	1	14
Library assistant	0	0	6	2	1	9
Total	1	1	17	2	2	23

Source: Author complied, 2021

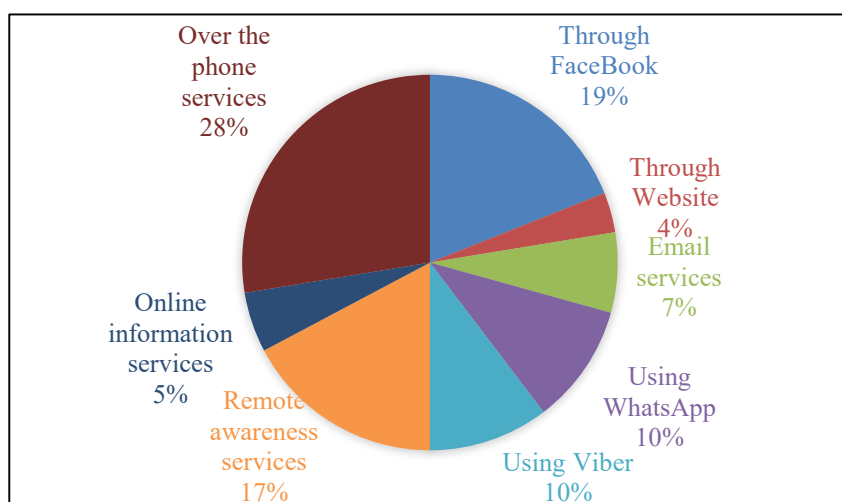


Most of the librarians among the respondents (39.13%) had a basic level of computer literacy, while 21.74% of the librarians having a good level of computer literacy (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Computer literacy of the respondents by the designation

(Source: Author compiled, 2021)

As depicted in Figure 1, all the respondents had adequate computer literacy to continue the duties of the library, and 4.35% of the library assistant group had a high level of computer literacy. Eight varieties of service media were used in 23 public libraries before the COVID pandemic situation (Figure 2). The most popular method was the services provided over the



phone. Only 4% of the libraries used to provide their services remotely via websites. Facebook, WhatsApp, and Viber were used predominantly, while 7% of the libraries used emails to provide the required services before the pandemic situation.

Figure 2: Mediums of public library services provided before the pandemic situation

(Source: Author compiled, 2021)

Three new services were introduced in several public libraries during the pandemic. Patron inquiry service, information services for school students, and education information service (Figure3) were newly introduced services. Other services used before the pandemic, mainly email, social media, and remote awareness services (Figure 3), were continued by the libraries with slight improvements.

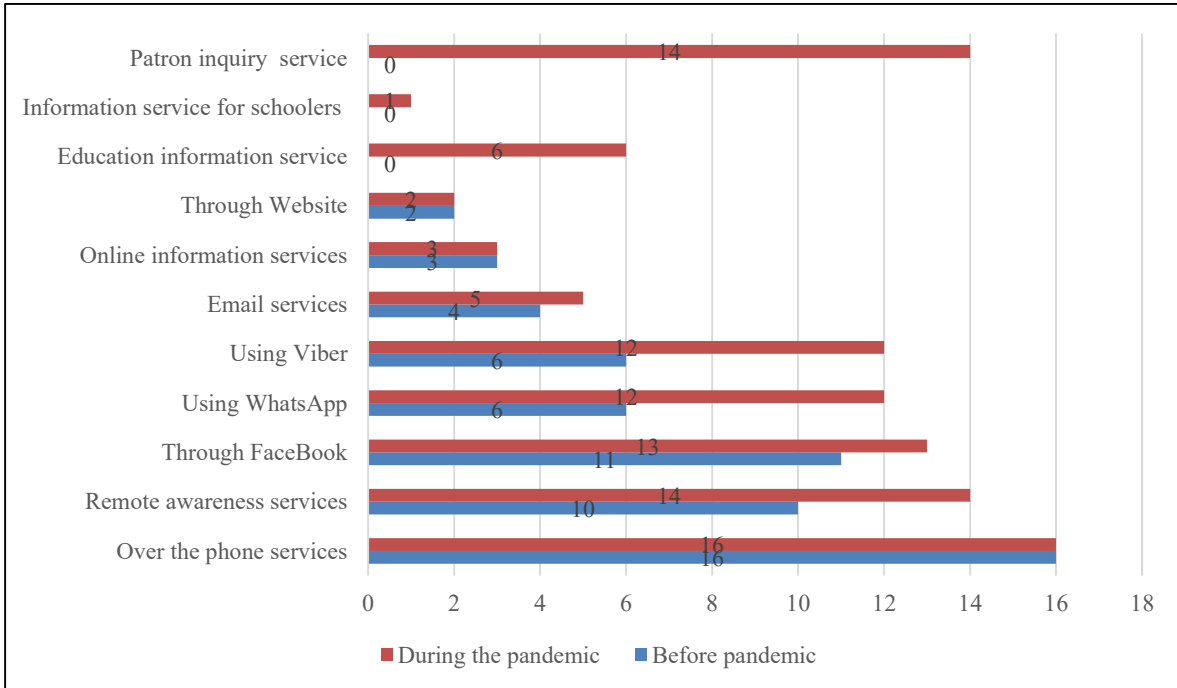
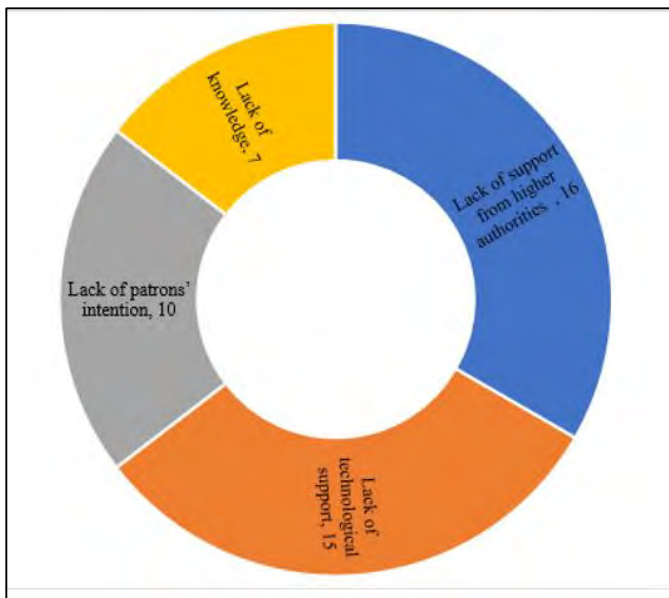


Figure 3: Mediums of public library services provided during the pandemic situation (Source: Author compiled, 2021)



Respondents also highlighted four main **constraints** they met while providing remote services during the pandemic (Figure 4). Lack of support and top management commitment was the most reported limiting factor, while lack of knowledge was reported only by seven public libraries. The intention of patrons to access the library during the pandemic was also identified by ten libraries, as the main factor that not promoted remote services during the pandemic.

Figure 4: Limiting factors to provide public library services during the pandemic (Source: Author compiled, 2021)

Discussion and Conclusion

Libraries have been considering adaptive methods to reach their patrons to continue uninterrupted services during the pandemic by creating new physical, virtual or remote, means of access to information (Neyra, 2021). Some of the libraries have already successfully practiced library collection services (Medawar & Tabet, 2020). As a whole, libraries are adapting to the pandemic through various approaches and continue their services. The public library sector in Sri Lanka is also similar and put immense effort to enhance their services by managing difficulties.

Public libraries of Matara district are supported by educated and experienced staff (Table 1 and 2). These persons have adequate knowledge in technology (Figure 1) to provide library services remotely. They already practiced some of the online library services even before the covid pandemic (Figure 2). Most of the services are provided through free or low-cost mediums, including social media, web 2.0 technologies, and telephones. These services are more cost-effective and easy to reach the patrons. Public librarians from the Matara district use web pages to promote their services (Figure 3). A library website is one of the best mediums that a librarian could disseminate information to a community (Pannananda, 2020). Authorities need to encourage developing web pages, at least district wise to reach public library services to the public.

Same services were continued and enhanced during the pandemic. New services, such as student information services were adopted by some of the public libraries (figure 3). Provide educational information and library needs of learners is a growing need and challenge for public libraries. Covid pandemic has boosted this need among learners toward e-learning (Perera & Suraweera, 2020). Further, while highlighting the information-seeking behaviors of school children in Jaffna, Jeebakaran and Shanmugadasan (2020) suggested that promoting self-learning among school children, to strengthen the school libraries and teacher librarians. However, school attendance was not taken regularly in the country since 2019, and students were away from the school librarians and library. Public libraries can fill this gap by providing educational information and specific services for school children as remote services. However, the public libraries in the Matara district have initiated this requirement to some extent (Figure 3). Frequent user surveys need to be conducted by public libraries to investigate the needs of their patrons and act accordingly. These services could also be more improved by referring to the services implemented by academic libraries of the country.

The academic libraries in the country implemented different library services, including OPACs, institutional repositories, online databases with off-campus access together with other conventional online services, article indexes, digital document delivery services, government publications, online/virtual library tours, LMS links, open access books, recommended reading downloads, subject liaison services, voice libraries, laptop lending services, virtual teaching, and plagiarism checking (Fernando & Senevirathna, 2020;

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Mashroofa, 2020). All these services may not be easily established in public libraries. However, a nationwide online services platform can be formulated amalgamating the strengths and resources of the National Library, all the public libraries, school libraries, and university libraries.

Public libraries in the country manage with several difficulties and limitations. The Covid pandemic situation is an unexpected barrier encountered, and it is a more challenging task for the public librarians to maintain their services. Public libraries in the Matara district also faced similar situations that avoid reaching the wider user community online. Lack of support from higher authorities, poor technological infrastructure, Lack of patron's intention, and Lack of knowledge were some of the limitations identified in this study (Figure 4). A similar situation has also been reported in other public libraries in the country (Dharmathilaka, 2020). This situation becomes crucial when public libraries require to deliver services for special groups in society, especially the visually impaired patrons (Kumar & Premadasa, 2020). The present study provides evidence for the lack of technical background to provide user needs accordingly. Patrons, at the same time, experienced bottlenecks to reach their libraries. A recent study done by Piyumali and Wijithadewa (2020) highlighted that 72.6% of undergraduates in Kelaniya university lacked suitable technological devices to access the library services, and 83.7% faced difficulties to reach eNenasala or a paid computer facility nearby. Pannananda (2020) highlighted the problems facing when providing information services through library websites. Librarians can lesson learn these points while providing service via websites. The best practice that could suggest is to formulate district-wide web pages for public libraries. Deka (2020), adding similar and more challenges from the Indian perspective towards remote information dissemination, including the psychological drawbacks of electronic teaching and learning. Atikuzzaman (2020) has reported that a negative impression of online teaching and learning in Bangladesh. Thus, public libraries need to understand the situation of the public and arrange remote services that involve a technological bridge to reach their remote users. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, YouTube, web 2.0 solutions, and other platforms such as Wikipedia pages, Google blogs, WordPress can also be used for free of charge. General users can easily access these services through a smartphone and meet their information requirements. At the same time, these services should design to reduce the psychological stress caused by online information services.

Public libraries in Matara district have taken initiative measures to reach their patrons remotely and provide continuous service during the pandemic situation. However, these services can be further developed and monitor to meets the patron's needs more effectively.

Recommendations

It is high time to performing necessary actions to mitigate the urgent needs and form required policies to prevent long-time issues. Higher authorities should pay more attention to public libraries in the country, and provide adequate infrastructure and technical knowledge. Public libraries can

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either mimic the measures taken by the national library or the academic libraries in the country or associate their patrons with these national-level remote services. Policymakers and planners should take the necessary steps to create a nationwide library network that shares the country's resources, provide a common platform, and form a national technological team to assist public libraries. It will ensure the information democracy of the country, by bridging the information gap irrespective of the social and economic boundaries

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