

Mobile Based Library Services: Transitioning Caribbean Libraries

As technology develops in the direction of being mobile first, there is an urgent need for Caribbean libraries to pivot to providing mobile-based offerings, not only to pave the way for the world of post-desktop libraries, but to also recognize the needs and realities of tomorrow's users. The emerging prevalence of small screens demands the existence of portable digital libraries and expanded library websites geared towards enhancing users' experiences. Ming et al. (2021) highlight the role of these technologies in ensuring that users are able to access a vast array of library resources without being susceptible to the traditional limitations of time and space once they have access to smartphones, tablets and other mobile devices and accessories. In addition to improved access, advancing towards mobile-based library services also promotes preservation through digitization, and a spirit of co-operation among libraries within the Caribbean region.

Mobile devices and mobile-based services can provide solutions to existing issues of access to information to the digital age. They cater not only to the needs of current library users by meeting them where they are, but also those of the next generation of users. Adewole-Odesi and Ezechukwu (2023) state the importance of mobile reference services that are delivered via email, SMS, WhatsApp and other platforms for attending to users. In acknowledgement of the ubiquity of mobile devices, there are increasing numbers of applications that provide access to a wealth of content, support advanced user interactivity, and have responsive interfaces, all of which improve user experiences. Similarly, physical and virtual libraries must also expand into mobile-based services to allow access to resources at any time of day and from any physical location. For Caribbean libraries, this shift will be executed through the adoption of technology trends and best practices established in international libraries outside the region.

Where mobile library apps add unique value is in adjusting to the interests, behaviours and needs of their users. Integrated correctly, they would have the potential to offer personalized recommendations based on users' previously accessed resources. These apps would also provide access to various sources via e-borrowing, including audiobooks and content from digital archives, thus expanding the range of materials presently available to users and incentivizing continued use. Moreover, development in this direction would also create opportunities for access by people from outside of the country, including

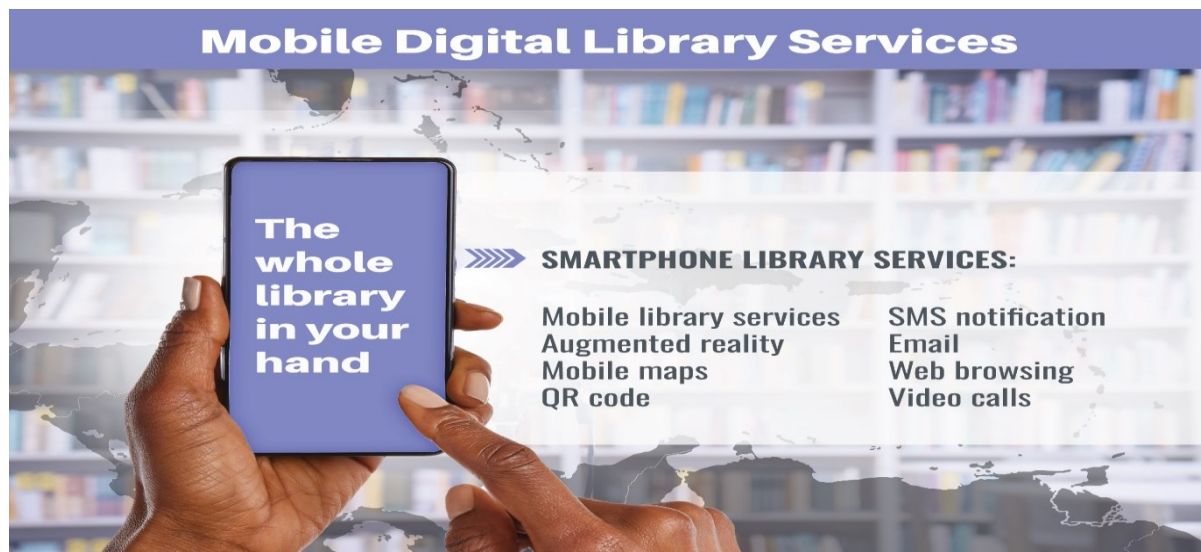
distance learners, and students of foreign languages, both in the region and beyond. In this way, these implementations further benefit current library users while also bridging the gaps for those with more constraints and ensuring them authentic learning opportunities that would have previously not been possible.

Additionally, mobile based services can be a powerful motivator for the preservation of historical materials. As libraries have begun to host special collections, they have also become responsible for the preservation of historically and culturally important materials. Digitization has become an important tool in ensuring that these collections are available for future generations. The Alma Jordan Library at The University of the West Indies St. Augustine Campus, for example, has made the West Indiana and Special Collections Division's Rare Photographs of Trinidad in the 1890s available via its UWISpace repository as one of its pushes towards digitizing and preserving rare and historical material. As progress on these movements is slow, further adoption and promotion of easily accessible and efficient digital library repositories may further motivate and even accelerate these efforts in consideration of changing user behaviours.

With these considerations in mind, Caribbean libraries can take additional steps to further their development and ensure that they are able to serve their future communities. Firstly, Caribbean countries should work together to make the shift to mobile digital libraries. Partnering would also allow the region to engage vendors and publishers to deliver mobile-first apps for accessing e-books, e-journals and online databases. Secondly, and perhaps more immediately, islands should forge ahead with making a wider range of services available through their websites, and their websites should be made mobile friendly. Thirdly, staff of these libraries must be trained to deliver quality service to support the mobile friendly apps.

Caribbean mobile digital libraries are poised to be transformative and serve as dynamic hubs of information and knowledge, regardless of whether they are public, academic, school, special or research libraries. They can support the preservation and dissemination of Caribbean culture and heritage through digitization initiatives and online exhibitions, and they can be crucial in democratizing knowledge and education by breaking down barriers to access, and reaching individuals in remote or underserved areas. Caribbean libraries must continue to evolve to offer more interactive and personalized experiences for users using artificial intelligence powered recommendations, virtual reality

simulations, and collaborative learning platforms. More importantly, trends indicate that mobile digital libraries will likely integrate seamlessly with other new technologies, such as block chain and augmented reality, to enhance security, accessibility and user engagement. Overall, trending technologies are shaping the future from physical and digital, and movements in this direction will help to ensure that libraries avoid becoming obsolete by re-establishing and relocating themselves to handheld devices such as smartphones and tablets.



References

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