Public Libraries in the Age of COVID-19

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Introduction

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, most local governments have decided to close their library buildings. But libraries should not be put on the bench just because their buildings are closed. Libraries are still offering critical resources in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and many librarians are working behind the scenes to entertain, educate, and inform families from a distance. Libraries are teaching us how 'nonessential' services can offer essential assets to the pandemic response.[1]

Libraries around the world may have closed physical doors to their communities of users, however they are exploring alternate methods of delivering goods and services and looking for unexpected opportunities.

The following is a brief summary of life and work for lockdown libraries and library staff. *When libraries closed their doors abruptly, they immediately opened their digital communications, collaborations, and creative activity to reach their public in ways as novel as the virus that forced them into it.[2]*

Service delivery

Collections
- o eResources only
- o Click and Collect – items ordered online and left for collection
- o Home / institution delivery

Programming and Services
- o Online – storytime, book clubs[3], digital escape rooms[4], etc.
- o Ask A Librarian - eReference service, online Readers' Advisory
- o Virtual displays and exhibitions
- o Preparation and distribution of take-home activity kits, craft resources, STEM kits etc

General
- o 'Instant' online registration (to allow access to eMaterials)
- o Fine 'forgiveness'
- o Extended loan periods (for the duration of closures)
- o Support for online learning by library members (WiFi outside library buildings, library vehicles used as mobile WiFi hotspots, database access, online resources etc.)

COVID-19 specific
- o Use of makerspace equipment to create PPE supplies[5]
- o Reallocation of library staff to other entities – emergency services etc.
- o Use of library vehicles/staff for distribution of supplies to the community and emergency services

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[1] *When non-essential is anything but* (2020)
https://thehill.com/opinion/healthcare/492022-when-non-essential-is-anything-but
[2] https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2020/03/public-libraries-novel-response-to-a-novel-virus/609058/
[3] https://programminglibrarian.org/articles/book-club-going-virtual-consider-these-3-things
[4] https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/moving-programming-online/
[5] Personal protective equipment (PPE) for health care workers, including face shields, surgical masks, and N95 respirator masks, is in critically short supply. To mitigate the ongoing crisis, some libraries are using their 3D printers to create the PPE components needed on the front lines of the pandemic.
https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/covid-19-using-3d-to-make-ppe/

- Collecting local material that documents COVID-19. Collections could include websites, social media posts, ephemera and posters, photos (for example, of supermarket shelves, products used to keep homes free of infection, library measures taken to keep staff safe, signs relating to COVID-19 in the community).

Professional development for staff – onsite and remote
- Formal online training
- Professional reading – eBooks and eJournals
- Online meetings
- Projects – review of procedures, policies etc; preparation of grant submissions; researching and writing journal articles/conference papers/library guides, updating the library/Council Wikipedia entry etc.

Housekeeping
- Stocktake
- Collection deselection
- Shelf checking
- Cleaning and maintenance
- Refresh / refurbish interior layout

Marketing and Communications
- Website – updating, checking links etc.
- Social media – expanded presence on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc. Used for library and Council news
- Online - Blogs, podcasts, videocasts, eNewsletters, website etc
- Print and broadcast media
- Fighting fake news[6] - the use of library social media channels to provide reliable, local, up-to-date information on the virus
- Use your front door as a message board – the front door or window can serve as a resource to people who may not be able to access the Internet. Use it to post information about Government and Health warnings and advisories; food banks, job support, homeless services, etc.

Work Health and Safety
- Staff - Personal hygiene if working onsite; Wellbeing / mental health
- Cleaning/sanitising of library building, furnishings and equipment; and returned items

Some Examples

NSW at Home
The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we live. The State Library of NSW is collecting images of life in NSW during this unprecedented moment in our history so that we may help tell this story to future generations.
https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/nswathome

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[6] https://programminglibrarian.org/articles/facts-fighting-fake-news-pandemic

State Library of Victoria

SLV staff are developing online advocacy training and other professional development courses for use by public library staff.

Make your own 19th century paper puppy

Need a desktop dog to keep you company while you're at home (or just want a pet to show off in your next zoom class/meeting)? Take a moment to paws over the weekend and make your own paper puppy in the style of 19th-century Australian artist ST Gill.
https://blogs.slv.vic.gov.au/our-stories/papercraft/

Richmond Tweed Regional Library (NSW)

Staff are working on stock rotation/cleaning/maintenance. Home delivery using the Region's courier vehicle to deliver Home Library patrons' reserves and care packages (blind-date-with-a-book/s). Most staff are working from home with very limited visits to the Library to pick up work to take home. Projects include clipping and indexing newspapers; learning new skills (online learning); digitising of in-library-use -only items; sorting donations; production of online baby bounce, story time, craft and science clips for delivery via the Library's YouTube channel; reviewing and updating procedures and manuals etc.

Northern Beaches Libraries

Libraries2U

Home delivery of requested items or let the library staff choose for you.
https://www.northernbeaches.nsw.gov.au/library/during-covid-19/library-2-you

State Library of Western Australia

Mystery Box

This free service provides books and DVDs to help keep people occupied in their homes whilst measures are in place to limit movement within the community. The 'Mystery Box' includes seven to ten books or DVDs. Requestors nominate fiction, non-fiction, children's or a box with a 'bit of everything'.
Pick up is via a 'non-contact' drive through service from the State Library van dock, between 8.30am – 2.30pm Monday to Friday.
https://www.slwa.wa.gov.au/our-services/state-library-mystery-box

Brimbank Libraries (Victoria)

Library members can set up a phone session by emailing their resume so a librarian can review and call back with tips and suggestions. This phone service was created in response to need in the area, with many local residents experiencing unemployment for the first time in a long time.
https://www.brimbanklibraries.vic.gov.au/index.php/what-s-on/481-resume-help

Ideas to Keep Busy at Home for All Ages

The Goleta Valley, Solvang and Buellton Libraries (California USA) are here for you during this unprecedented time. We know that both children and adults need to be entertained and to continue learning. Even though our patrons are not able to go inside the libraries right now, we are doing our best to bring the libraries to you.
https://www.cityofgoleta.org/city-hall/goleta-valley-library/information/covid-19-how-to-keep-busy

Tauranga City Libraries (New Zealand)

Bubble Life! Jnr

An online club featuring library staff presenting online programming and events (storytime, writing clubs, coding etc.); easy recipes, crafts and activities, and weekly kupu (short videos from staff and users.

https://sites.google.com/view/bubblelifejnr/home?authuser=0

Wellington City Library (New Zealand)

Wellington City Libraries online creative writing 'virtual classroom' for the international NaNoWriMo Young Writers' Programme.

http://www.wcl.govt.nz/blogs/teens/index.php/2020/04/01/got-a-month-get-writing-with-campnano/?utm_source=Personal+Members&utm_campaign=ab6ed2ecd0-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_04_01_11_12_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_7a777428b4-ab6ed2ecd0-325942987

Stay at Home Fest

A digital arts festival, StayAtHomeFest 2020 combines talks from some of our favourite authors with links to eBooks of their work via Overdrive.

http://www.wcl.govt.nz/blog/index.php/2020/03/24/stayathomefest-2020-day-one/

Quaranzine

Quaranzine is a weekly collection of creative works from the Arlington (Virginia USA) community that documents how it has responded to the pandemic. Post-Corona, the library hopes to print, distribute and store them in the library's Center for Local History,

https://wamu.org/story/20/04/06/arlington-public-library-is-publishing-a-quaranzine-with-work-from-local-artists/

https://library.arlingtonva.us/2020/04/03/quaranzine-issue-1/

Food banks at Toronto Libraries (Canada)

Several Toronto Public Library branches have become food bank distribution centres. *Our library branches are community hubs, and our staff are dedicated public servants committed to supporting those communities, so redirecting library resources to help address this critical need makes so much sense.*

https://www.blogto.com/eat_drink/2020/04/toronto-library-food-banks/

Professional Associations

Professional associations around the globe have been quick to respond to the crisis, in a variety of ways to support library staff and the communities they serve.

Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA)

- o Relief fund - to help Members who are experiencing a reduction in income as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- o Online professional development opportunities
- o ALIA Connects - ideas and suggested activities for remaining in contact with your colleagues and the wider GLAMR community during the pandemic.
- o Resources and information including book industry deal and copyright guidance

      ○   Virtual catchups for members

https://www.alia.org.au/australian-libraries-responding-covid-19

Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA)

LIANZA has created an online space to support all New Zealand libraries and other organisations. It includes information on:
  ○ Initiatives from library suppliers (free access, copyright exemptions etc.)
  ○ Innovative solutions form libraries
  ○ COVID-19 Resources
  ○ Online chat and meetups

https://lianza.org.nz/covid-19/#covid19-resources

International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA)

Information and resources on:
  ○ Understanding COVID-19 and its spread
  ○ Library closures around the world
  ○ Managing different approaches to restrictions
  ○ Staying safe at home and work
  ○ Providing services remotely
  ○ Managing remote working
  ○ Reassigning library resources
  ○ Actions by Associations, National Libraries and Library Partners
  ○ Communicating with users in different languages
  ○ Ongoing issues

https://www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries

American Library Association (ALA)

Tools and resources include:
  ○ News
  ○ Library responses to COVID-19
  ○ Topics to include in an individual library policy
  ○ Professional development/training resources
  ○ Resources from ALA

http://www.ala.org/tools/atoz/pandemic-preparedness

Public Libraries Association (USA)

The Association surveyed libraries across the United States in late March 2020 to gather data regarding their responses to the CVID-19 pandemic, with over 2,500 respondents.
http://www.ala.org/pla/sites/ala.org.pla/files/content/advocacy/covid-19/PLA-Libraries-Respond-Survey_Aggregate-Results_FINAL2.pdf

Post Pandemic

There has also been considerable discussion of what libraries will look like, post pandemic[7]. *Some observers have dubbed this crisis "The Great Pause." But I believe librarians cannot pause. Librarians cannot sit back and wait to unlock the library doors again. We must take this time to begin thinking about how public libraries will function in a society that will certainly be changed for the short term, and may be changed forever.*[8]

The general consensus seems to be that there will be a gradual re-opening of services, a continuation of online service delivery, and some changed protocols, for example:
- Opening for restricted hours (to allow for additional cleaning and disinfection to continue)
- Reduced staff numbers in the library (staff will continue to work from home for part of the week)
- Continuing, or commencing, click and collect services
- Social distancing – perhaps a no 'lingering' policy where patrons simply choose their items and leave
- Rearrangement of furniture and computers to allow for greater distances between library users
- Laptops for use in library rather than fixed computers
- Extended home delivery, particularly for the more vulnerable of library patrons
- Extra demand for job seeker services and homework/study help, as some children will continue to be home-schooled
- Continued expansion of eResources – range and availability
- Continued and expanded use of social media and online channels for programming and information services
- Monitoring of library users (temperature and wellness tests etc.)

Other issues to consider are:
- The long-term impacts of the economic measures undertaken by government - advocacy for libraries will be critical to ensure adequate ongoing funding
- Preparedness for future crises - risk management and disaster planning
- The relationships between publishers, authors and libraries – reduced budgets, eResources, streaming etc will all have an impact
- The mental health and wellbeing of staff and users – the community will need to feel comfortable visiting the library, and staff will need to adapt to a new way of working

All links were correct and active at the date of publication.
Please report any broken links to the PLA Executive Officer

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[7]IFLA (2020). Now and Next: What a Post-COVID World May Bring for Libraries https://blogs.ifla.org/lpa/2020/04/06/now-and-next-what-a-post-covid-world-may-bring-for-libraries/

[8] Feldman, S (2020) *Public libraries after the pandemic.* https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/83093-public-libraries-after-the-pandemic.html