

Digital libraries and COVID-19: responding to a global emergency

Digital libraries are services that have been developed and enhanced for years, but the recent COVID-19 pandemic has made many users aware of the service for the first time. Especially because of the closure of libraries, during the pandemic, additional efforts have been made to promote digital libraries and their services, as clearly visible and active libraries. Moreover, traditional libraries or those without many digital services were having the challenge of keeping their services active for their users virtually during this emergency, and librarians have been engaging in new work practices to achieve such objectives from their home offices.

The articles in this *Digital Library Perspectives (DLP)* Special issue First Part document the immediate reactions from the digital libraries sector to the pandemic. The articles in the next special issue second part will concentrate on the measures taken after reopening many productive activities, among them physical libraries, a time that was referred to as the “new normal”.

Organizational change

Like almost all economic sectors, libraries suffered a strong impact from COVID-19 and were urgently forced to change their organization and even their services. Many librarians started working from home and there was the need of an increased flexibility for delivering services, such as changing lending rules and extending instructions and tutorials to provide orientation.

Mehta and Wang in their paper “COVID-19 and digital library services – a case study of a university library” reflect and share the experience of a university library in response to the COVID-19 pandemic since early March 2020. This paper describes the challenges that the pandemic has posed to their digital services and details how the library has adapted some existing services into a digital format and explored new initiatives and practices to support their university’s full online teaching and learning processes.

Digital services

While buildings were closed, libraries have offered expanded digital services. All types of libraries have offered an increased use of digital content and tools. Some of the digital services do not need the library staff’s intervention, while some do.

Document delivering services (DDS) and library cooperation is the topic of the paper by Saavedra-Alamillas, Pacheco-Mendoza, García-Meléndez, Vilchis López, Martínez-Camacho, Ortiz-Díaz and Ortega-Martínez. They describe the importance of DDS as a relevant service to provide information on demand to six Mexican universities, in a cooperative manner. Their results determined that DDS is a reliable service although it is necessary to adjust legal schemes and interlibrary loan policies.

The same insights and similar challenges for digital library services are described by other libraries that are coping with the global health crisis. Henda’s paper “Kuwait University faculty’s use of electronic resources during the COVID-19 pandemic”, aims to examine the benefits that Kuwait University faculty received from the electronic resources offered by the Kuwait University Libraries Administration, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Their results showed a humble use of electronic resources during this critical time. Faculty mostly used the electronic resources for writing research papers, while databases and



e-journals were their preferred resources. They also found that the majority of non-users were more willing to learn about the electronic resources and how to use them.

Temiz and Salelkar present “Exploring Impact of COVID-19 to Digital Services of University Libraries in Sweden”, which aims to describe the new digital services and activities that librarians are conducting from their home offices to keep their libraries alive and support their users. The main themes they identified include: availability of information, accessibility of resources, collaboration with other actors, increased use of existing services and motivation and support to practice social distancing.

Pokorná, Indrák, Grman, Stepanovsky and Smetánková, through their paper, “Silver lining of the COVID-19 crisis for digital libraries in terms of remote access”, describe a digital library model experimentation set in the context of current copyright laws. A server instance protected by a Shibboleth authentication enabled students and academic staff to remotely access even copyright-protected works during the lockdown period. Through brief observation of user behaviour, their paper explores accessed titles, with a focus on their copyright status. Users overwhelmingly preferred titles that are copyright protected, monographs in particular. Their spectrum of interests was wide, and thus, mass digitization is essential. The paper presents a solution to provide free remote access to library users during closure on a national level, and it reveals the needs and interests of users via a brief analysis of accessed titles and gives grounds for further changes towards a more open remote access model, which would be possible within the current copyright restrictions.

Building digital communities

Libraries also changed the way they connect with their communities. Online community building has become an important activity for maintaining contact, with innovative experiences of active community participation.

Cleave and Geijsman, in their paper “LibraryCraft: how the COVID-19 pandemic led to the growth of the WA libraries public Minecraft server” describe the LibraryCraft initiative, created to bring communities together across Western Australia (WA) in a safe, structured and moderated way, so that players could stretch their creativity and imagination. LibraryCraft uses the features of Minecraft, which foster users’ innovation and creative thinking, develop their STEAM skills and build social and life skills such as collaboration, negotiation, economic management and civic engagement. While Minecraft servers operated by libraries are far from new, LibraryCraft is unique. No groups of libraries have run Minecraft servers collaboratively in Australia before, and none is available statewide. The programme is highly valued by families in WA, providing a safe social outlet for players stuck at home in isolation.

When faced with events such as the COVID-19 global pandemic, libraries have had a unique opportunity to develop and engage communities with their born-digital collections. These collections provide challenges for metadata creation, collection development policies, workflows and digital preservation.

Neatrou, Myntti and Wittmann present “Documenting contemporary regional history: the Utah COVID-19 digital collection”, which provides a case study of a born-digital collection initiative undertaken at the University of Utah in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper aims to provide an overview of the Utah COVID-19 digital collection, with a discussion of its impact and lessons learned. The project prompted engagement with the University of Utah communities and people across the state. Workflows, metadata management and partnerships are discussed, with the purpose of providing a model for institutions developing similar projects during a time of crisis.

Fritz, Milligan, Ruest and Lin signed “Building community at distance: a datathon during COVID-19”, which reports the experience of a physical event that had to turn to virtual and they discuss the broader implications of transitioning to online events. It gives both practical recommendations for event organizers and broad reflections on the role of digital libraries during the pandemic and beyond. They also suggest best practices, including factors for assessing whether an event can be run online; the mixture of synchronous versus asynchronous content; and important technical questions around delivery. Moving an event online during a novel pandemic is part of a broader shift within the digital libraries’ community. This paper will be relevant for other professionals exploring this shift, as well as those exploring new program delivery in the post-pandemic period.

The response to the first *DLP* call highlights that the reaction to the pandemic and the closure of libraries has been similar globally. Several lessons were learned throughout the pandemic urgency, which will be useful for digital libraries embarking upon an acceleration of digital services during the new normal.

Anna Maria Tammaro

Department of Information Engineering, University of Parma, Parma, Italy, and

Juan D. Machin-Mastromatteo

*Faculty of Philosophy and Lyrics, Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua,
Chihuahua, Mexico*