

Digital libraries and COVID-19, Part 2: The “new normal”

COVID-19 took us by surprise a year ago and since it has been submitting humanity through many tests, in all productive areas. In libraries, education and technology, which conform the focus of Digital Library Perspectives, we might argue that although we had developed and implemented many technological and online solutions, we were not prepared to face the trial of such long worldwide lockdowns, as it involved suddenly switching all our activities into online mode.

At first this so-called “new normal” seemed to involve reopening productive areas, but now, starting 2021, many countries are facing the second wave of the virus, while others, such as Latin American countries, appear to keep struggling with a continuous first wave that has not receded in the least. COVID-19 found us ill prepared to face it and we had to respond as best as we could when lockdowns were enforced. It seems that we will have to continue our activities in online mode for a while.

During the pandemic, there have been interesting dynamics regarding libraries, learning and research. Thematic hubs on COVID-19 have been established by most of the largest publishers, with relatively easy access to research related to the virus, this is also evident in the largest open access and open data repositories; while other portals with support materials for e-learning have also been set. The importance of preprints and repositories has also increased, and there has been an explosion of scientific dissemination, tutorials and webinars freely available for students and professionals.

Researchers from all fields of knowledge have been contributing to alleviate the various and complex implications and consequences of the pandemic and the continued lockdown worldwide. Library and Information Science is no exception and there is already a wealth of publications about our contributions to e-learning, enhancing digital services, and providing alternative strategies and services to serve users remotely. It is worth noting that Emerald has been keen on publishing special issues dedicated to the pandemic, which obviously includes Digital Library Perspective’s (DLP) two-part special issue (of which the present issue is the second part), as well as the two-part issue published in Information and Learning Science, “Evidence-based and Pragmatic Online Teaching and Learning Approaches: A Response to Emergency Transitions to Remote Online Education in K-12, Higher Education, and Librarianship”; Library Hi Tech’s upcoming “COVID-19 Pandemic and Health Informatics”; and Information Discovery and Delivery’s upcoming “Using Data Science to Understand the Coronavirus Pandemic”. In the following paragraphs, we present the articles published in this second part of our COVID-19 special issue Digital libraries and COVID-19: the “new normal”, which we hope will be of interest to our readers.

Ortega-Martínez, Pacheco Mendoza, García Meléndez, Ortiz-Díaz and Saavedra-Alamillos present the article “Digital services adapted by libraries in Mexico to COVID-19 pandemic: a critical review”, analyze the strategies implemented by Mexican university libraries in the context of the pandemic, particularly open access, user support services, the usage of collaborative tools among librarians, and the explosion of conferences and webinars. Additionally, they analyzed libraries’ fan pages on Facebook, by using the Fanpage Karma software.

In the article “An academic digital library advancing an equitable and inclusive educational environment”, La Macchia reflects on the university library as a center for diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, particularly after the first few months of



lockdown. She offers us an interesting perspective of the librarian as a conflict mediator or coach who works with information literacy and support services for aiding the development of an inclusive campus.

Mbambo-Thata contributed the article “Responding to COVID-19 in an African university: the case of the National University of Lesotho library”, in which she discusses the library broadening of digital services as a response to the pandemic, through a reflective practice exercise conducted with the library team members and to analyze how those services are meeting the needs of the library community and how all stakeholders will experience the new normal.

In “Responsibilities of archivist now and in the future as the result of COVID-19: Case of ICA-SUV”, Netshakhuma examines the preservation of archival materials in the International Council on Archives Section on University and Research Institution Archives through a survey of its members. Findings show a lack of digitization strategies and a limited online access to digital records, issues that turn out to be even more important in the context of a pandemic such as the present one, because access to digital resources during the lockdown would be an urgent user need and the use of such resources could dramatically increase.

Tsekea and Chigwada present “COVID-19: strategies for positioning the university library in support of e-learning”, in which they study the strategies adopted by academic libraries in Zimbabwe through a survey distributed to 34 librarians. Their findings highlight the importance of libraries in supporting users’ needs by facilitating access to digital resources and the authors argue that libraries should always be prepared for situations like the present, in which library buildings have to remain closed.

Peruginelli, Conti and Fioravanti contributed “COVID-19 and digital library services: an overview on legal information”, which presents an overview on the availability of legal information on COVID-19 in digital libraries, they found a high heterogeneity in the kind of information provided, as well as its purposes and intended audience. However, this represents a useful review of the most relevant resources that have been available.

Winata, Fadelina and Basuki contributed “New normal and library services in Indonesia: a case study of university libraries”, in which they report the activities of Indonesian libraries during the pandemic and also how they worked when they reopened in early June 2020. Challenges for librarians included implementing COVID-19 health protocols and switching almost all services to digital, while they had to deal with insufficient internet infrastructure, training librarians to operate online activities, book delivery services, and managing budget.

We wish to thank all authors from both parts of this COVID-19 special issue for their interest and contributions, as we are confident that they will aid in strengthening and growing DLP as a relevant journal for Library and Information Science researchers, students and practitioners.

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