

## Now and Next

### I - [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/)<sup>1</sup>(6 abril)

Around the world, library and information workers are doing their best, both personally and professionally, to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Even as some libraries are – cautiously – beginning to loosen restrictions, others are seeing them come into place.

Naturally, the focus is on the short term – how to keep staff, patrons safe, how to keep offering services as best possible, how to manage uncertainty. For many, it will seem difficult to think even beyond the coming days.

At the same time, it is already clear that this is a historic moment, with unprecedented steps being taken by governments, businesses and individuals. These are having a huge impact on the present, but what about the future? To what extent will what we are experiencing today not just ‘be’ history, but rather ‘make’ it?

This blog aims to identify ten developments we’re seeing today, and explore what they may mean in terms of trends shaping the future of libraries. It is not – and cannot be – exhaustive, and certainly can be improved. We welcome your ideas.

#### **1) Restrictions on movement have dramatically changed our lives – will we get back to normal?**

Limits on where we can go, how and with whom are affecting a huge share of the global population. On a personal level, people have been kept from family and friends, including at difficult moments. Many are not able to work, and face a loss of livelihood that, depending on whether they can receive support from elsewhere, could prove critical.

While many will be able to pick themselves up once the pandemic is over and go back to work, many will not be so lucky. We do face the risk of increased unemployment, homelessness and poverty into the future. Many will need training, support, or simply a place to get away from it all as they look to rebuild their lives and careers.

Faced with this, the need for free and welcoming public services like libraries, able both to help people find new opportunities for work or business, and to offer a moment of respite, should be as high as ever. Initiatives such as business incubators, support in job-searching or broader training programmes are likely to be important.

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1 <https://blogs.ifla.org/lpa/2020/04/06/now-and-next-what-a-post-covid-world-may-bring-for-libraries/> acedido em 9 jun. 2020

## **2) Many of our activities have ‘pivoted’ to online – will they stay there?**

Just as many libraries have restricted or stopped circulating physical materials, they have in parallel seen much greater demand for digital content. They are working hard to identify ways to support online learning for students of all ages, often overcoming barriers (see below). In their own work, even those who were previously most resistant to new tools and technologies are having to get used to remote working and communication.

The restrictions will not last forever however, and many are looking forward to the possibility to work face-to-face with users and colleagues, as well as to handling new books and materials again. Nonetheless, the possibilities of digital – for learning, researching and accessing all forms of culture – will be clearer for all, and convenience may well replace necessity as a reason for using online tools. These of course bring with them ongoing concerns about how to protect privacy in the process.

The role of libraries as digital – as well as physical – providers of information and services seems likely to be confirmed. It remains to be seen whether the more favourable conditions set out by right-holders for access to electronic works will continue (or to what extent they will continue to print physical works at all), and whether library budgets themselves will swing back to physical spending.

## **3) Governments are investing billions into economies – how will they take it back?**

As highlighted above, the restrictions needed to limit the spread of the pandemic are having a major impact on the ability of many to earn a living. Individuals and businesses in the culture sector, for example, are hit hard by the lack of physical audiences or visitors. In many countries, governments have sought to act by offering loans or subsidies to cover costs and pay salaries.

While these steps are welcome in the short term, this leaves open the question of how these same governments will deal with the debt incurred in the long term. With tax revenues also likely to be low, it seems inevitable that many will look to cut public spending, posing a direct threat to libraries.

Libraries will need to be able to make the case that they – alongside other key services – have the potential to be part of the recovery, and so to receive the support necessary to do this. The experience of the years after the 2008 financial crisis has been very negative for many, although at least the well-documented harm caused may help ensure that politicians think twice.

#### **4) Education has been disrupted and delayed – can we limit the scarring effects?**

Thanks to the fast footwork of many educational institutions – including their libraries – a lot of teaching has moved online. Lessons and lectures are provided through videoconference, homework and assignments set and received by e-mail or dedicated platforms, and some are even proposing online exams.

Nonetheless, it is clear that for those coming to the end of school years in May or June, it is not a normal year, leading to worries about how to ensure children do not fall behind, or miss opportunities.

As time goes on, there is likely to be major need for support to students looking to catch up or take new decisions about their futures. Online and/or lifelong learning opportunities will play a key role in this – libraries have the reputation and materials to support in both, either as provider or platform for others. In this way, they can help ensure that temporary disruption does not turn into permanent damage.

#### **5) Testing, tracking and emergency powers are helping to fight the pandemic – but will governments be able to let go?**

Governments globally have highlighted the value of testing and contact tracing as means of slowing – and in some cases containing – the spread of the pandemic. Through collecting information about people's health and lives, they hope to be able better to isolate those at risk, and treat those infected. Limits on freedom of movement and action are aimed at stopping infection.

Such moves have often come as part of packages of emergency powers allowing governments to take all steps they think necessary in the context. Sometimes – regrettably – they have been accompanied with nationalist rhetoric.

Yet it does not always seem clear what guarantees there are that these special measures will be lifted at the earliest safe opportunity. This matters. The possibility to collect information about citizens and to by-pass ordinary procedures may be helpful in the fight against COVID-19, but it can also serve less positive ends.

Libraries can already help citizens and parliamentarians to keep track of what governments are doing – a vital first step towards accountability – and will need to continue to do this in the recovery. Governments themselves may look to hold onto extraordinary powers longer than they should. Libraries will need to be ready to remind them – and citizens – of the need to return to high levels of data protection, privacy, personal and academic freedom, and openness to the world as soon as possible.

## **6) It has become clear that laws and practices were not ready – will we learn the lessons?**

A major concern for many in the library field has been how to deal with the fact that copyright laws – and in particular the exceptions and limitations on which libraries rely – are often firmly stuck in the analogue age. With on-site (and on-campus) activities now impossible, libraries have too often found themselves unable to provide services they have already paid for, or which would be completely uncontroversial in person (such as storytimes).

There are welcome steps – through soft-law agreements and unilateral action by some rightholders – to improve matters here, but it is clearly far from ideal that the ability of libraries to provide services in times of crisis should rely on goodwill and good relationships.

The challenge in future will be to ensure that the lessons of the crisis are learnt, and that libraries and their users should not face more difficulty in working through digital tools as through analogue ones. Adapting copyright laws properly for the digital age will be a key part of this, although we can certainly expect efforts to resist this in order to leave decisions in the hands of rightholders.

## **7) Weaknesses and incompleteness in our digital infrastructure have become clear – will we fix them?**

Undoubtedly, more people are able to continue with more elements of their personal and professional lives now from their homes than ever before. However, this is clearly not the case for all. This is not just because their livelihoods depend on activities which have been forced to close., but also because they do not enough good quality access to the internet and the skills to use it.

At a time where connectivity can make the difference between being able to talk with family and friends, continue working, and keep supplied and healthy, the impact of the digital divide is as clear as ever. The people coming to library car parks to download homework – or films – are simply one illustration of the failings of our current infrastructure.

We can hope that this crisis will lead to greater investment in connecting communities – itself a powerful economic stimulus. With this, it will be necessary to call for support for skills development, with libraries an obvious potential provider. We will need to avoid those getting online for the first time failing to realise potential or falling victim to scams and other dangers.

## **8) The need for global information sharing is obvious – will we make it permanent?**

Many of us have been regular visitors to websites sharing latest information about the spread of the pandemic. Of course, in addition to maps and overall statistics, there is also a huge amount of data and research being shared between authorities globally in an effort both to understand what is going on, and to advance work towards effective treatments and even a vaccine.

This work has been supported by widespread efforts to lift paywalls and other restrictions on access to articles and other work related to COVID-19. With time, it has also been made easier to re-use works, for example in the course of text and data mining.

The question remains whether these restrictions will re-appear once the crisis is over, or will we see a lasting shift to a more open information-sharing environment? Partially this will rely on laws, for example making it clear that activities such as text and data mining should not require new payments or authorisation. Partly it will need changes in practices and business models. Libraries will need to keep up the pressure in favour of openness.

### **9) Pollution is down and air quality up – will we learn to live greener lives?**

One of the rare positives from the pandemic has been the fall in emissions from transport and industry, leading to improved quality of air and water in many places. Without the possibility to go to work, visit friends or family, or go on holiday, people are effectively consuming less carbon and producing fewer other polluting chemicals. Conferences and meetings have moved online, and people are discovering local attractions, at least where they can.

Clearly, once the restrictions are lifted, many will want to take the first opportunity to go and visit loved ones again, and return to normal life. But with people getting used to having to limit driving and flying by necessity, can we hope that the pattern of increasing emissions globally will be stopped or at least slowed?

As they re-open, libraries will have the opportunity to redouble their efforts to promote green lifestyles, as well as bring together evidence that supports ongoing efforts to understand and deal with climate change. Some may be able to continue the support they have started to offer to users in terms of tools and advice so that they can continue to work remotely, so reducing travel. We can hope, also, that people may come to appreciate more than before their local areas and what there is to do there, again limiting polluting travel.

### **10) The value of culture in well-being is clear – will we continue to invest in making it a reality?**

As highlighted above, libraries (and publishers) are seeing major increases in demand for their digital offers. At a time of stress – often linked with forced inactivity – people want to be distracted, informed, or inspired by creative works, both contemporary and historic. Virtual exhibitions are taking place, some even looking back at how societies have dealt with pandemics in the past.

Librarians and archivists are also already working hard to collect news and other materials which will help future researchers understand the events and experiences of today. These may even help us improve our responses the next time we face such a challenge.

But will this awareness of the importance of culture last into the future? This is certainly to be hoped, although the ability of creators and libraries to supply this will depend a lot on whether they continue to receive the necessary support. Laws and practices will need to change to facilitate this, but at least as the crisis has showed, there is no shortage of energy and inventiveness here.

As set out in the introduction, we are still very much in the middle of the crisis. With the focus almost exclusively on the coming weeks, it is certainly too early to say with confidence what will come next.

However, what happens now will shape the future. The ideas above set out some potential trends, which are likely to interact with each other as we go into the future.

Do libraries risk seeing growing demand while having to fight hard for existing resources? Will they be able to keep up with – and support – an ever more digitalised economy and society without changes in laws? What will be necessary to uphold – or restore – core library values once the crisis is over?

## II - [What Might a Library Advocacy Agenda for the Post-Pandemic World Look Like?](#)<sup>2</sup>(21 abril)

In our first ‘Now and Next’ blog, we explored a number of potential trends that are likely to shape the library field as it – and the communities it serves – emerge from the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Just as in the first blog, it is clear that we are still in the midst of the crisis. Even as some countries are able to relax controls on people’s lives and activities, others are prolonging them. In some cases, we have seen decisions to re-impose them, as the disease has returned. It will likely be a long time until we can talk about a post-pandemic world.

Nonetheless, as calls grow for clarity about how governments plan to go about returning to normal, it will make sense to engage with governments. Indeed, this is likely to be particularly necessary in the light of the serious economic impact COVID-19 is already having.

As institutions which do depend on the financial health of the governments, institutions or other organisations that support them, it will be as important as ever to ensure libraries – and their values – are understood as having an essential role in the recovery, or even in creating better societies and economies in future.

We can only do this by reaching out and making the case. This blog therefore looks to explore potential advocacy agendas in the immediate, medium and longer-term. In this, the short-term is defined as now – with libraries in many countries physically closed. The medium-term is the

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2 <https://blogs.ifla.org/lpa/2020/04/21/adovc8-now-and-next-part-2-what-might-a-library-advocacy-agenda-for-the-post-pandemic-world-look-like/> acedido em 9 jun. 2020

situation as libraries start to re-open and restrictions are lifted. The long-term refers to the time when the pandemic can be declared over, and only minimal if any rules are in place to address the spread of the disease.

### **The Short-Term: Provide Relief, Support Research**

- Copyright should not become a barrier: it should not be the case that just because a library has closed its doors, its users cannot draw on its resources. Governments should make it clear that at a time that physical access is often impossible – for everything from research to storytimes – digital alternatives can take its place.
- Licensing terms should not override the public interest: where the terms of licences under which libraries access content prevent their use, rightholders should be ready to introduce necessary flexibilities to allow libraries to carry out their missions. Where this does not happen, libraries should be able to bypass licensing terms in the course of their work where this does not cause unreasonable harm to rightholders.
- Libraries need to be enabled to support their communities: faced with increasing demand for digital content, some governments have already been ready to increase acquisitions budgets. More broadly, other restrictions – such as on offering public access to WiFi, or on lending library equipment or materials to vulnerable groups – should be relaxed if these create problems.
- COVID-19 must not become an excuse for bad government: many countries have adopted a state of emergency in order to allow steps to be taken against COVID-19. However, the application of these powers should not lead to decisions in other areas being taken without proper scrutiny, and all decision-making needs to be properly documented for future accountability.
- Restrictions on free expression and access to information must be kept to a minimum: some governments have moved to limit free expression as part of their response, while social media companies are also increasing their efforts to close sites disseminating deliberately false information. Such restrictions should be avoided if other means of achieving the same goals are available, and otherwise applied carefully and proportionately. It is better to promote positive interventions such as media and information literacy.
- The cultural sector needs support to avoid disaster: while some in the cultural field are benefitting strongly from increased demand for their work (especially digital content), others – especially those who rely on performances or physical visitors – are suffering. Faced with ongoing costs, these require support if they are to avoid having to give up and close their doors for good.
- Greater dependence on online tools cannot come at the expense of rights: there has been an explosive rise in use of digital tools to work and communicate. However, we need to be vigilant to ensure that this does not increase the risk of cybersecurity breaches or other losses of personal data.

- Open science should be the default: there have been welcome moves to adopt open science practices in research specifically around COVID-19, with the National Library of Medicine in the United States creating the COVID-19 Open Research Dataset (CORD). These should be expanded and supported by governments, and reach out to related disciplines in order to help ensure better informed responses to the pandemic.

### **The Medium-Term: Returning to Not-Quite-Normal, Safely**

- Official approaches to re-opening need to take safety into account: the news of libraries being able to reopen will be both a source of encouragement and worry for many. Often small, not necessarily set out to allow people to maintain social distance, and offering a lot of direct personal support, it should be clear that libraries are high social-interaction spaces. Where reopening does happen, it should be based on a sound understanding of how libraries really work.
- Exceptional measures on access to content should not be lifted until the need for them is over: many of the special measures put in place, for example, by publishers to offer remote access to books and articles, or online story-times, are time-limited. While some have noted that their application can be extended, it will be important to keep up the pressure to maintain them until all library users are able to make use of library services again as before.
- There needs to be meaningful investment in helping learners to catch up: the internet has allowed far more teaching and learning to take place during the pandemic than could have been imagined even a few years ago. However, many have underlined that it is still not the same as being in class, and it will be necessary to help learners catch up, especially those in more vulnerable situations. Governments need to have a plan for this.
- Insofar as they affect access to government information, states of emergency should be lifted as soon as possible: states of emergency should never be indefinite, given the threat they pose to fundamental rights. In particular, it is important for information about government responses to the virus to be made open, in order to inform researchers as well as journalists.
- Ensure that efforts continue to help those who will need to be subject to restrictions for longer: the loosening of restrictions is likely to move at a different pace for different groups, with already marginalised populations – older persons, those with disabilities, or prison populations to name just a few – likely to need to wait longer. As the rest of society moves back as close to normality as possible, we cannot forget those for whom this isn't the case.
- Ensure that libraries are supported to take on the upcoming rise in demand: it seems likely that not only will libraries welcome back people who have missed their resources, services and spaces, but also those needing to use them to get their lives back on track after losing jobs and even homes. Libraries have a proven track record here, but scaling this up will require continued support.

- Ensuring that lifting restrictions on movement doesn't mean new restrictions on privacy: the potential use of tracking apps to contribute to the safe lifting of limitations has received a lot of limitations. If these are introduced, it will be important to protect privacy, ensure that users consciously opt in, and to ensure that no more information is collected and retained than strictly necessary.
- Continue to promote open science, and invest in discoverability and interoperability: managing the lifting of restrictions is going to require extensive use of research, drawing on a variety of disciplines. We will need to strengthen the infrastructures and resources for open science, allowing researchers to work globally, and across different areas of study, with meaningful tools for discovery and analysis.

### **The Long-Term: Build Back Better**

- Ensure copyright and competition laws are truly fit for the digital age: the crisis has brought into very stark relief the difference between what copyright laws permit as concerns digital and non-digital uses, and the degree to which libraries have had to rely on rightholder goodwill – rather than the law – in order to continue to fulfil their missions. This should not continue. Moreover, the fact that access to and use of digital content tends to be shaped by the choices of rightholders, rather than the law, has also helped underline the need to look at these markets from a competition angle.
- Mobilise libraries in the wider effort to rebuild lives, societies and economies: over recent years, libraries globally have worked to realise their potential as a key part of the social infrastructure of their communities. In addition to all they do to promote wellbeing as cultural spaces and centres, they can also act as platforms and partners for efforts to support employment, entrepreneurship and education. As such, they need to be part of relevant government strategies at all levels.
- Ensure proper scrutiny of decision-making during the crisis: governments at the moment are taking crucial decisions about societies and economies, which may have significant and long-lasting effects. In order to be able to hold them to account, we will need to ensure that researchers, the press, and the public have the access they need to information to allow them to participate fully in a healthy democratic life.
- Learn from the experience to promote inclusion and well-being for all: the pandemic has helped underline the vulnerability of many groups, whose living conditions, livelihoods or other characteristics have made them more susceptible to the pandemic and/or harder hit by its consequences. These should lead us to design policies and programmes in general that are truly inclusive and pro-equity in future.
- Achieve universal meaningful connectivity: having access to the internet made it possible to continue with more aspects of life during the crisis that previously could not have been imagined. However, this has only been the case for the half of the world which enjoy connectivity. Even those who are online do not necessarily have the skills and confidence necessary to make the most of it. We need to invest in helping everyone become active and capable internet users.

- Invest in effective public (health) information systems: one key lesson from the crisis has been the importance of developing a meaningful infrastructure for providing access to information to people. This is not just a case of transmitting information, but rather being able to listen and adapt messages to ensure they have most impact, as well as to build literacy skills for all. Libraries can be part of this.
- Move to a new level in open science and collaborative research: the potential of open science to inform better policymaking has been clear in the current crisis. It should become the norm, with meaningful investment in platforms, reforms to assessment and recognition frameworks, and careful efforts to ensure that researchers and readers do not risk being locked into any individual providers' products. Cross-border research should be enabled by appropriate international action on copyright reform.
- Don't forget other challenges!: clearly COVID-19 is the focus of attention at the moment. Nonetheless, there are other challenges facing the world at the moment, not least climate change, and the rest of the United Nations 2030 Agenda. Clearly, the way we address these may change, but the underlying priorities remain if we are to ensure that we don't just return to normal, but to better.