

Smart Libraries Newsletter

News and Analysis in Library Technology Developments



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Smarter Libraries through Technology

Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis

By Marshall Breeding

Impact on Libraries

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on libraries. Most governmental authorities issued orders to close non-essential services, to restrict gatherings, and to maintain social distancing. Leaving economic forecasts to the experts, it seems reasonable to conclude that the library community will face budget challenges and will need to reshape at least part of their service programs for the next few years. We can also expect long-term or even permanent challenges for libraries after the initial wave of this pandemic abates.

This interruption of economic activity means substantial losses in local tax revenues for municipalities and counties—the primary source for most public library funding. Some libraries may face the need to cut personnel, reduce hours, or close branches as a result. During the crisis there have been many reports of staff furloughs in libraries, though most have allowed staff members to remain in a paid status, working from home when possible.

The crisis has also reinforced the need for libraries to develop a high capacity for delivery of digital services. Almost all public libraries have some level of ebook lending services. During the period where physical facilities are closed, libraries have

taken measures to expand these offerings.

Academic libraries face similar challenges. Colleges and universities are unlikely to quickly return to the level of prosperity in place prior to this crisis. Any refunds required for housing and food services, tuition, and fees will mean a painful impact for short-term budget prospects. The timeframe in which these institutions are able to return to normal residential teaching will be an important factor in the overall financial strength of academic institutions.

The COVID-19 crisis has forced libraries to take drastic measures in their operations and in the way they provide services. A total reliance on electronic resources is a drastic change for some, but only the next step in the continuum toward digital services for others. Programs, research consultations, exhibits, and other services usually provided in person or in physical facilities have shifted to online formats. In recent decades libraries have operated in a hybrid reality of physical and digital content and services. The crisis may permanently shift that balance.

Increased pressures for libraries to shift more toward digital services will mean investments in technologies able to extend the reach of a library's digital services. Budget shortfalls will likely limit new spending on physical materials and drive efforts to provide even more efficient fulfillment of these resources.

Some libraries have offered limited services during the pandemic, such as curbside service for pick-up of requested items. Offering this service has raised concern because it requires library personnel to work on-site rather than from home and in ways that may not provide adequate protection. These services may require special configuration of the request and hold features of the library's ILS, though they may also be handled

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through informal measures. Whether it is safe for staff members to handle library materials returned by patrons is another concern. Opinions vary regarding the timeframes in which returned materials can be handled safely. Book sterilization equipment is common in public libraries in Asia. The HKC book sterilizer is an example.¹ I am not aware of libraries in North America that have implemented these devices.

This current pandemic may prompt the library community to assess what procedures, policies, and equipment that they need for their future crisis management preparations.

Managing Library Closures

In response to these concerns, almost all libraries in the United States closed, though there have been some exceptions. Responses related to the library personnel have varied. Most have been able to work from home, especially in academic libraries. Others have been given paid time off; some have been asked to continue to work on-site.

The abrupt actions necessitated by the crisis have implications for the technology systems that support libraries. Major changes must be implemented in loan policy configurations, display of open hours on websites, cancellation or rescheduling of programs, and a host of other tasks to accomplish with little advance planning.

Closing a library, especially for an unplanned and indefinite period, requires multiple areas of intervention for the systems that manage lending of physical materials. Although there has been some variation, most libraries have implemented actions to:

- Broadly suspend circulation of physical materials
- Extend due dates until after the library re-opens
- Communicate that re-open dates are indefinite, and closure may be extended
- Restrain the return of materials because workers will not be available to process
- Suspend fines during the closure
- Suspend hold request and fulfillment of holds

Implementation of these actions requires temporary changes in the loan policies of the library's integrated library system as well as batch changes to pending circulation transactions. Some libraries with well-trained ILS administrators may be able to carry out these changes using the policy editors, API tools, or batch change scripts associated with the system. Others may require intervention from the ILS vendor. All the major ILS vendors have offered customers assistance with these kinds of issues as part of their efforts to provide

emergency support during the crisis. This issue of *Smart Libraries Newsletter* includes some examples of the proactive initiatives library vendors have taken to support their clients in implementing these changes.

Impact on Vendors

The long-term impact on the library technology industry will naturally be tied to the outcome of libraries once the crisis has subsided. Should libraries see persistent budget losses, their ability to continue licensing technology and content services will diminish proportionately. Public and academic libraries are especially concerned that they may face budget challenges for months or years to come.

The fees for software licenses and content resources are scaled according to multiple factors, often including the number of personnel employed by the library and the count of branches or facilities. Should these metrics decline, there would be a downstream negative impact on the revenues paid to technology and content providers. It should also be noted that in time of crisis, many libraries opt to make new investments in technology in order to maintain service levels with fewer human resources.

We can anticipate several trends in response to a general downturn in the economy, some similar to previous events.

Libraries will defer or even cancel some planned technology projects. Procurements for major technology products will slow as libraries balance budget priorities for personnel, collections, and infrastructure. Hopefully most technology projects will go forward as budget conditions eventually normalize.

Technology projects best positioned go forward will be those that lower costs for individual libraries and that increase the impact of collection resources. The large-scale shared infrastructure projects and consortial implementations of integrated library systems and library services platforms are consistent with this concern. But even when new shared system arrangements may result in lower overall costs for individual institutions, during times of budget shortages the upfront capital needed for procurement and migration may not be available.

Libraries will need to invest in technologies to support accelerated efforts to improve digital services and to manage and provide easier access to electronic content resources. Examples might include streamlined and scalable authentication, single sign-on, or collaborative tools for patrons to more easily access to resources and services and for staff to work remotely.

California community colleges' Council of Chief Librarians issued a statement highlighting the importance of their recently implemented statewide library services platform as an essential component supporting their ability to cope with the

crisis.² This implementation of Ex Libris Alma enabled the 110 participating institutions to shift to remote work and to continue to deliver access to electronic resources in compliance with California's shelter-in-place order.

Technologies and services for expedited resource sharing, document delivery, interlibrary loan will be in higher demand. When libraries must cut collections budgets, they usually respond by creating alternative methods to provide materials to their patrons. The current crisis may further accelerate the longstanding trend among libraries to enter into collaborative partnerships to share print and electronic collection resources with highly expedited fulfillment mechanisms.

The current crisis underscores some of the benefits of the ongoing trend toward technologies deployed via software-as-a-service. It can be challenging for libraries to perform

local system administration tasks when physical access to computer equipment may not be possible and when many other issues may be competing for the attention of technical personnel.

Amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic it is difficult to predict all the ways in which the circumstances of libraries will be altered as the new reality unfolds. Within the scope of technology, we can anticipate some specific needs for strengthening the management and delivery of digital content and services. But the broader question that comes to mind is whether the urgency of this crisis will spark innovation in the technologies that support libraries or whether budget austerity will lead to further stagnation. How these issues play out over time will be one of the important trends covered in future issues.

Vendor Responses to COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis has had a major impact on vendors in the library technology industry. The operations of these organizations have seen major disruption consistent with those in other business and governmental sectors throughout the world.

Library vendors, like the libraries they serve and companies in other business sectors, have shifted their operations to a mostly work-from-home model. Almost all support services and software development continue in this manner. Most were well prepared to make this change since it is quite common in this vendor community to have significant portions of personnel working remotely.

There have not been major service interruptions, gaps in support, or other widespread disruptions of the critical systems during this period. It will be important to assess any major failures that may have occurred, but overall, it seems that most vendors were able to respond adequately to this crisis and had contingency and continuity-of-business planning in place.

Beyond continuity of existing services and support, most of the library technology vendors have taken proactive measures to assist their library customers in dealing with the crisis. Some have created coronavirus-related resources or other services of special interest to the general public, health care workers, or researchers. Some have provided additional access to general content resources to library patrons to compensate for shuttered print collections.

Many of the organizations in the library industry have announced their responses to the current crisis. These should be taken as example of vendor responses and not a comprehensive representation. Some companies may have communicated their responses only within their customers without making public announcements.

EBSCO Information Services

EBSCO is especially well positioned to provide resources related to COVID-19 and the coronavirus through its EBSCO Health division. The company has assembled a new COVID-19 Updates and Information Portal, aggregating a wide variety of resources and data. The portal is designed for the general public, healthcare professionals, and for research and health information professionals. The portal includes resources from relevant agencies such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization, and other governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as related EBSCO Health resources. The COVID-19 portal was created in collaboration with its Stacks division, which provides its technical infrastructure. EBSCO has also opened access for non-subscribers to its COVID-19 clinical topic within its DynaMed clinical decision support tool. (See <https://covid-19.ebscomedical.com>)

ProQuest

ProQuest has created a cross-disciplinary Coronavirus Research Database that aggregates relevant content from multiple STM publishers, including Springer Nature, BioMed Central, PLOS, BMJ, and Taylor & Francis. This database will be made available to all libraries currently using the ProQuest Platform without additional cost. The database includes journal articles, conference proceedings, dissertations, and pre-prints on relevant topics.

In collaboration with more than 50 publishers, ProQuest is offering unlimited access for library patrons to Ebook Central holdings without additional cost. Items within a library's collection from these publishers restricted to one or three simultaneous users will automatically be extended to unlimited use during this period. Easing these restrictions will help libraries meet demand for ebooks while their print collections are not available. ProQuest anticipates that the number of publishers authorizing these license changes will expand beyond the initial list.

Ex Libris

Ex Libris, through its research services division, is providing open access to coverage related to coronavirus from Research Professional and Pivot. Research Professional publishes news articles and opinion related to academic research and funding opportunities, mostly from a European perspective. Pivot is a set of databases and tools for research funding and collaboration opportunities. (See: <https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/covid-19-funding-opportunities>)

Innovative Interfaces, Inc.

Innovative Interfaces, now owned by ProQuest, has taken multiple measures to assist its customer libraries to deal with issues related to the pandemic. Resources provided included procedures for suspending operations from physical facilities for each of its ILS products, Sierra, Millennium, Polaris, and Virtua.

Innovative is offering free webinars on related topics, including, "Sierra & Millennium Resources to Close Physical Locations." The company's support team has also released scripts for related tasks, such as for batch update for requested items on hold shelves prior to closing and for extending the "not needed after" dates for requested items.

Innovative affirms its commitment to the health and safety of its employees and customers. The company will fulfill its commitments for support and professional services with most employees working from home. It has tested its ability

to perform the needed tasks without compromising security. (See: <https://www.iii.com/blog/innovative-business-update-on-coronavirus-covid-19>)

SirsiDynix

SirsiDynix has focused primarily on providing free access to relevant training opportunities, which may be especially helpful as libraries make abrupt changes to their systems in response to COVID-19 related closures. The company has made its entire Mentor catalog of self-paced online training available to all its customers. The company is offering free access to selected instructor led training classes through its SirsiDynix Support Center. SirsiDynix has conducted multiple webinars in support of libraries using its products.

(See: <https://www.sirsidynix.com/covid-19-resources>)

OCLC

OCLC has assembled a website providing an extensive array of resources to help libraries respond to the COVID-19 crisis (<https://www.oclc.org/en/covid-19.html>). These resources include guides related to its WorldCat Interlibrary Loan service for optimizing access to electronic resources while most libraries remain closed. OCLC has created new COVID-19 profile groups identifying libraries able to fulfill requests for articles and those able to full requests for entire e-books. OCLC has assembled a list of free online resources related to coronavirus research from content providers. For users of WorldShare Management Services, OCLC has deployed a service for bulk renewal of items on loan. OCLC has created "service configuration cheat sheets" for all of its products that provide guidance in making configuration changes or other actions anticipated for library response to changes in their services due to the crisis.

OCLC also offers training opportunities and discussion forums where libraries can communicate and collaborate in their responses to the crisis. These are made available through the OCLC Community Center portal for its customers as well as the WebJunction portal for public libraries.

Follett

Follett Corporation has extended a variety of offers in support of educators and libraries during the COVID-19 crisis. Follett School Solutions created a resource portal highlighting its eLearning solutions, which will be of interest to schools moving to online learning. This division is also making its Classroom Ready Collections of standards-aligned open

educational resources (OER) available to Destiny customers without additional cost.

The Follett Higher Education Group, which manages college bookstores and provides courseware and content, is offering free ebook access to students enrolled in campuses where it manages physical or virtual bookstores. Each student can access up to seven ebooks through this program. Follett is also waiving shipping charges for orders of course materials and merchandise placed through its [efollett.com](https://www.follett.com) ecommerce portal. Lumen Learning, one of Follett's business partners, is offering free access to its OER courseware platform to assist educators as they transition to remote teaching while schools are closed.

Koha

The Koha development and support community expedited development of new features to enable libraries to perform global updates of due dates for items borrowed or requested.

ByWater Solutions is developing new API integrations for digital resources from Hoopla, which will complement existing connections already available for Overdrive, Recorded Books, and cloudLibrary.

Galacia Offers a Virtual Services Platform for Libraries

The Galacia Group has assembled a suite of services to assist libraries with providing virtual services. These tools help library staff working from home communicate efficiently among themselves and provide selected services to patrons. The suite of recommended utilities includes Zoom for teleconferencing among staff and with patrons, ZenDesk for tracking support requests, Slack for team communications, and Rescue for remotely assisting patrons with their own devices. Galacia helps libraries implementing virtual services using these tools as part of its consulting services. (See <https://galacia.com/virtual>).

FTC Reviews ProQuest Acquisition of Innovative Interfaces

The acquisition of Innovative Interfaces by ProQuest, announced in December 2019, is one of the major events in the history of the library technology industry. The deal in which ProQuest purchased Innovative from its previous investors, HCCG and JMI Equity, closed on January 16, 2020. Innovative has become a wholly owned subsidiary of ProQuest, with Yariv Kursh in place as general manager.

This transaction has attracted the attention of the Federal Trade Commission, which has initiated a review of the impact of the acquisition on the competitive environment. No specific timeframe has been given on the review, nor can any outcomes be predicted until it is concluded.

The FTC notified ProQuest of the review in February 2020. While the investigation is currently non-public, it is not considered confidential. ProQuest issued a blog post and a statement of Frequently Asked Questions acknowledging the review and its response.³ In those statements, ProQuest

reports its full cooperation with the inquiry and reiterates that all the Ex Libris and Innovative products will continue to be developed and supported according to previously stated roadmaps.

The main implication of the FTC review is that Innovative will be operated as an independent subsidiary with no intermingling of its staff or resources with that of ProQuest or Ex Libris. Innovative will work with Ex Libris as it would any other business partner. In its development of new discovery solutions, for example, Innovative can partner with Ex Libris for integration of Summon in a similar way that it has previously work with EBSCO Information Services.

The January 2020 issue of *Smart Libraries Newsletter* featured the acquisition of Innovative by ProQuest based on information and analysis current at that time. Expect coverage in future issues on additional developments, including any that arise out of the FTC review.

Patron Point Launches Online Patron Registration

Patron Point, a firm offering a set of services to help libraries improve their marketing and communications with patrons, introduced a new product for patron self-registration.

Many public libraries face challenges in registering patrons solely through online processes. Public libraries generally have legal requirements to provide core services primarily to persons that reside within their legal service area. Local governments want to be sure that libraries resources are channeled primarily to their own residents and taxpayers. Vendors of electronic resources set pricing based on the population of the library's service area. These multiple factors make it important for libraries to verify residency as part of the process of issuing membership cards. While many libraries offer web forms for the initial application of a card, most require an in-person visit to the library with paperwork such as a utility bill, driver's license, or other documents that verify the individual's residency.

Patron Point has recently introduced an online registration service for public libraries. The Online Registration service is now available without additional costs to libraries subscribing to Patron Point's marketing automation services. The Online Registration service consists of a set of library-branded forms to enable new patrons to apply for a library membership card. This service supports multiple types patron accounts with corresponding processes and business logic for processing and activating the registration. The registration can be confirmed by email or SMS messaging to validate contact details. Libraries usually will authorize a temporary or limited membership via a self-registration process such as this, but not necessarily convey full borrowing privileges.

In addition to the basic Online Registration, the company offers Patron Point Verify as a premium service. Verify consists of multiple components to verify that the address provided by the patron lies within the library's service area, that the specific address exists, and that the applicant resides at that address. These processes are like those used by banks and other commercial firms to verify customer details. This verification process enables libraries to issue a membership card with full privileges through an online process without the need for an in-person transaction.

Online patron registration has become an especially important service for libraries during the COVID-19 crisis. Because almost all public libraries have closed their physical facilities, such a service is needed to expand the reach of digital services and access to ebooks and other electronic resources.

Once the registration is completed, a patron record is created for the library's ILS. The standard features of the Patron Point service can then be activated to generate customized welcome messages or any other follow-up desired by the library.

Patron Point was launched as a customized library marketing solution in June 2016. The product makes use of data exported from the library's ILS to drive messaging campaigns based on a variety of events or activities, including new registrations, membership renewals, birthdates involving a change of membership category, as well as those based on interest in authors or topics. Patron Point can also replace standard ILS circulation notices with customized messages with more sophisticated formatting and branding.

Initially established as a small consulting firm in 2016, Patron Point has seen substantial growth in its customer base and in its workforce. Ian Downie, one of the founders of collectionHQ, joined Patron Point in December 2018. In January 2020, Brendan Pearce and Nigel Wheeldon were also appointed as business development directors for Patron Point. Both previously held sales positions at collectionHQ. More recently, Jan Linert joined Patron Point in March 2020 as a digital marketing consultant.

Since its formation in 2016, Patron Point has seen substantial growth in its customer base and in its workforce. Ian Downie, one of the founders of collectionHQ, joined Patron Point as VP, Growth in December 2018. In January 2020, Brendan Pearce and Nigel Wheeldon were also appointed as Business Development Directors for Patron Point. Both previously held sales positions at collectionHQ. More recently, Jan Linert joined Patron Point in March 2020 as a digital marketing consultant, working alongside the company's existing product development and support teams. Patron Point has more than doubled in size each year since it has been founded, in terms of customers, personnel, and revenue.

Notes

1. HKC, www.hkc.com.hk/library-management.
2. Council of Chief Librarians, "LSP Keeps Libraries Operational During Crisis," April 6, 2020, <https://cclibrarians.org/news/lsp-keeps-libraries-operational-during-crisis>.
3. ProQuest, "Frequently Asked Questions About the FTC Review," www.proquest.com/company/Frequently-Asked-Questions-about-the-FTC-Review.html.

Smart Libraries Q&A

Each issue Marshall Breeding responds to questions submitted by readers. Email questions to Patrick Hogan, Managing Editor, at phogan@ala.org.

Our library has closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We want to provide Wi-Fi connectivity for use by our patrons from our parking lot and grounds. Are there any security issues or other concerns that we should address?

Leaving a library's Wi-Fi network operating while it is closed should not incur significant security risks. Given that some patrons may lack internet access in their homes, allowing Wi-Fi access from the vicinity of a library building would be appreciated. Coffee shops and other commercial establishments in the area may likewise be closed, further limiting opportunities for gaining access to the internet for critical tasks such as applying for benefits.

Libraries providing unattended exterior Wi-Fi service will want to consider a few issues.

Leaving the library's Wi-Fi service active when the library is closed poses no additional concerns compared to its open hours. Regardless of whether the Wi-Fi service is offered within a building or is accessed from outside the building, the network should be configured in a way that segregates its communication away from more sensitive services and systems that reside on the library's staff network. Such segregation can be accomplished by implementing physically separate network equipment or through configuring separate zones in the firewalls, routers, or Ethernet switches for public and staff computing. Separation of network traffic into zones is a well-established practice needed for libraries to provide controlled internet access for public computers and patron devices. If these basic safeguards have been implemented for a library's public Wi-Fi access and public computers, use from outside the building poses no additional risk.

Network printers, scanners, or other devices usually available to those in the library should be switched off to avoid accidental use and consumption of print and toner while the library is closed.

Apart from security concerns, it may be difficult to provide usable Wi-Fi service to parking lots or other exterior locations unless they are quite close to the building. The exterior range of Wi-Fi devices deployed for interior coverage will

be limited. Some libraries may have previously implemented Wi-Fi access points for outdoor coverage. Those that have not, may be able to install one or more outdoor wireless access points that can be safely used by patrons.

Libraries that require users to use their library card number or a password may want to provide an alternative mechanism. Log-in details can be provided on a Wi-Fi splash page, for example.

The library can direct network administrators to capture and report statistics on the use of Wi-Fi network during periods of closure. Useful measures would include the number of network sessions by hour of day and the volume of bandwidth delivered. These statistics will help document the use of Wi-Fi as one of the emergency services that the library can offer.

Access to a library's exterior Wi-Fi should be implemented in ways consistent with mandates or recommendations for persons to maintain safe distances from each other. This concern does not necessarily need to be addressed in-person, though signage could be provided to remind those visiting the library premises to use the Wi-Fi to follow appropriate distancing practices.

The library may opt to take other proactive measures to facilitate internet access during times of crisis. Some libraries may have existing programs for lending Wi-Fi hot spots. These devices include cellular data plans supported by the library and enable internet access for households lacking other alternatives. Wi-Fi hotspot loaning programs have become popular services. However, the limited number of devices libraries are able to provide can only make a small dent in the digital divide that seems especially problematic during times of crisis.

Other libraries are using their bookmobiles to provide Wi-Fi access to their communities. While it may not be possible to lend materials due to health concerns, bookmobiles can be placed in areas with anticipated need, providing access to ebooks in addition to general internet connectivity.

Providing access to the internet through public Wi-Fi services has become an essential library service. Although building closures may preclude normal methods of access, libraries can provide access to locations where it can be safely used. If the library has followed standard practices in deploying its public Wi-Fi networks, such access does not pose additional security risks.



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