For the Field

Public Library Responses to COVID-19: An Investigation and Reflection of Canadian Experiences

As a sector, Canadian public libraries responded quickly and often creatively to the COVID-19 pandemic. Taking stock of innovations developed in a time of crisis, such as this one, is strategically important because these innovations not only help reveal immediate priorities but are likely to inform future ones. In this article, I attempt to contribute to the dialogue around both the responses to the pandemic in 2020 and the significance of these responses for the future of public libraries. In the first part of my analysis, I review a sample of initiatives public libraries across Canada developed in response to the pandemic. In the second, I examine the implications of these developments for the future work of public libraries. Primary among these, is the need for public libraries to leverage the success of virtual programming and services without sacrificing the ability to deliver their in-person equivalents or access to their spaces. In conducting this review, I adopt an explicit equity stance that regards the COVID-19 pandemic as, among other things, an opportunity for libraries to "retool our thinking, practices and policies" (Aldrich, 2020a, p. 14) in order to improve services for socially excluded populations, as well as for traditional users.

I begin, however, with two notes on methodology. First, in researching this article I relied on professional publications, library sector forums, and library websites, as well as blogs, and social and legacy media from 2020 as my primary sources. Second, given the vast amount of information and sources available, this analysis should be

understood as a representative sampling, rather than an exhaustive review of public library developments during 2020.

The library responses I found through my investigation fit into four broad themes: social isolation, economic needs, information needs, and repurposing physical space.

I. Library Responses

1) Social Isolation

Between March 11, the date when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, and March 24, when community transmission overtook travel-related spread in Canada (Canadian Press, 2020), most Canadian public libraries closed their doors (Klingbeil, 2020). Unable to provide access to library spaces or safely offer in-person programs, most public libraries pivoted to online programming. This was the case for 60% of public libraries in an Ontario Library Association report (OLA, 2020, p. 5). While no Canada-wide figures exist at this time, the 61% of Public Library Association members in the United States that switched to virtual programming provide a useful point of comparison (PLA, 2020, p. 3). In Canada, most of the virtual programming offered by public libraries consisted of family storytimes (CULCa, 2020). Ontario again provides a useful illustration. Storytimes accounted for over half of online programs libraries delivered in that province, but virtual programs there were also extended to adults, where 27% of libraries offered online book clubs, 14% offered craft programs, and 14% offered technology literacy among other program offerings (OLA 2020, p. 6).

Much of the rich variety of virtual programs that libraries organized during the pandemic—including everything from knitting and dance clubs to COVID social history projects (CULC, 2020a)—were intended to help reduce social isolation broadly.

However, there were numerous examples of efforts to connect underserved users with services and with their communities. Coquitlam Public Library, for instance, offered coping with COVID programs for Farsi and Mandarin speaking newcomers (Coquitlam PL, 2020). Several systems also reported reaching out to seniors. Hamilton Public Library, for example, conducted weekly telephone check-ins with users 75 years and over (Paul Takala in CUI, 2020).

2) Economic Needs

Libraries introduced many other virtual programs specifically geared to strengthen community resiliency in the face of the current financial crisis. Several in Ontario reported implementing online supports to help users navigate government sites or file taxes (OLA, 2020, p. 7). The Kitchener Public Library, for example, conducted COVID-19 financial literacy workshops to help people transition to new benefits post-CERB, as well as to apply for tax credits (KPL, 2020). Kitchener PL is also an example of a library system that enhanced its referral system and online resources to help connect users with community and job-seeking supports (KPL, 2020). This example is in line with well established patterns of public library support for the economic needs of their communities. For instance, approximately half of the nearly 17,000 public libraries in the US already provided free services designed for entrepreneurs (ALA, 2020), and 97% were helping users complete online government forms before the pandemic (IPAC, 2014).

Food security represents another important area where public libraries worked to meet material community needs. Halifax Public Library replaced its free daily afterschool snack program with "snack packs" that were distributed to families through

community partners (Nourish, 2020). Toronto Public Library repurposed one of its book sorting centres to function as a depot where staff packed food hampers (TPL, 2020b). Toronto PL's response was among the most comprehensive in that hampers were in turn distributed through 12 of its locations along with children's books. This initiative continued at two library branches for several months (TVO, 2020).

3) Information Needs

During the early period of the pandemic, public libraries expanded the means they used to provide their communities with access to the internet and information. Many library systems—including those in Calgary (CPL, 2020), Kitchener (CUI, 2020), and Halifax (McKenna, 2020)—circulated Chromebooks and HotSpots to the public through community partners. Saskatoon Public Library made technology available for volunteers assisting people applying for government programs (CULC 2020b). American libraries—where 81% of libraries reported increasing their Wi-Fi service and 13% reported loaning their technology even while their doors were closed—again provide a helpful point of reference (PLA, 2020).

A number of library systems also reported translating traditional information literacy programs into recorded online classes (LAA, 2020). Yet others, like the Ottawa Public Library (OPL, 2020), developed centralized COVID-19 portals to provide easy to use, updated, and credible information in the midst of a rapidly changing, often overwhelming information landscape. Media literacy efforts have been more uneven, however. Numerous public libraries, such as those in Vancouver (VPL, 2020) and Halifax (HPL, 2020), continued to maintain online resources and provided general guides, tools and links for spotting disinformation and fake news. Yet, at the time of

researching this article, no examples of Canadian public libraries were found that had developed programming or resources specifically addressing COVID-19 disinformation. Past research suggests this might be the result of the historically weak information and media literacy practices in public libraries (LaPierre & Kitzie, 2019; Sullivan, 2019; Young et al., 2020).

4) Physical Space

Public library openings and closures, as well as capacity limits and other protocols for their built spaces, have varied according to directives from respective provincial governments and regional health authorities. For example, most libraries reopened with limited physical services in Ontario by mid-June (OLA, 2020, p. 1), and by mid-July in Alberta (LAA, 2020). With the second wave of COVID-19 accelerating by the end of 2020, many libraries began to scale back services and shift to once again providing only online services. Halifax Public Library, for instance, closed its spaces and returned to curbside pickup in November (Halifax Today Staff, 2020), while Winnipeg's library public system shifted back to providing only online collections and virtual services by the end of the year (WPL, 2020).

Even when built library spaces were opened to users, access has been limited to highly specific purposes, like picking up holds, using computers and printers, or limited browsing. In Canada as in many other countries, this resulted in the loss of vital work and study spaces, and of safe community meeting places (IFLA, 2020).

A silver lining accompanying the reduction and closure of library spaces, has been the development of public library innovations within two areas. The first, is the temporary repurposing of spaces. A number of library systems opened their premises to

help meet the urgent needs of persons who are homeless and otherwise vulnerable. The Montreal Public Libraries Network, for instance, turned the hall of its Grande Bibliotheque into a warming station during the first wave of the pandemic (Giguère, 2020), while in Vancouver (Gold, 2020) and Halifax (McKenna, 2020) public libraries opened washroom facilities during full shutdowns in their regions when no other access was possible.

A second innovation has been to offer physical library services outdoors. This includes programming initiatives, from scavenger hunts and outdoor story-walks, to providing Wi-Fi, yoga classes, and children's programming in parks (LAA, 2020). While most of the above program activities were offered during the summer, some libraries are experimenting with winter programming too. Blue Mountains Public Library (Georgian Bay region), for example, offers wintertime outdoor storytime and festival of lights tours (BMPL, 2020). The library systems in North Grenville and Ottawa have increased loans of such outdoor activity items as walking poles, geocaching kits, and packs with stories, nature guides, and telescopes, as well as passes for skiing, snowshoeing, snow-biking trails and provincial parks (NGPL, 2020; Payne, 2020). The Halifax Public Library's Dartmouth North branch presents one of the most intriguing models in this regard. It is Canada's first outdoor library, and its mobile indoor/outdoor bookshelves, furniture, digital devices, and playground create the possibility for hybrid indoor/outdoor space uses (Berman, 2018; HPL, 2018). How this facility is being used during the pandemic period, and whether the model will become more popular moving forward remain to be seen.

II. Implications for Future Work

Having reviewed some of the major innovations in Canadian public libraries created in response to COVID-19, in part two I turn to reflect on some of the ongoing implications of these initiatives for the future of public libraries. Specifically, I focus on the considerations in balancing online and in-person services, the creation of more flexible library spaces, and the gap in media literacy.

1) Balancing Online and In-Person Services

The preceding investigation suggests the wide extent to which online services became a central component of public library strategies to respond to COVID-19. Figures from the first months of the pandemic likewise indicate that this migration to online service delivery was well received. In Toronto, for example, 40,000 users joined its library system's virtual programs (TVO, 2020). The Vancouver and Halifax library systems, for their part, experienced a surge in demand for new online library cards: approximately 3,000, and 6,000 respectively (Gold, 2020). Indeed, it has been noted that "an unexpected result of moving programs online has been an increased audience, and a broadening of the community served" (Freudenberger, 2020, p. 16). Altogether, this evidence points to the likelihood that at least some of these experimental services may become public library staples in the future.

Yet a critical problem with expanding digital offerings is that they are not universally accessible. This "digital divide" refers to the gap in access different populations have to the internet, as well as the range of activities they are able to perform online (Haight et al., 2014, p. 507). Although lack of connectivity is often considered primarily as a rural problem in Canada (Government of Canada, 2019), it is in actuality a complex problem that also affects urban populations. For example, even in

Kitchener—long considered one of Canada's tech-centres—23% of the population reportedly has no access to broadband service (Mary Chevreau, Kitchener PL in CUI, 2020). Technological access issues are one of the components that frame a digital divide. Relying on virtual public library programming then, risks leaving behind people on the wrong side of the digital divide. This problem is even more acute for communities experiencing higher degrees of social exclusion (Riggs, 2020, p. 14), such as those with a large number like people living in poverty, or racialized communities—the very ones disproportionately affected by COVID-19 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020).

The tension between the demand to expand online services on the one hand, and the need to maintain or even enrich their in-person equivalents on the other, is likely to increase once the pandemic subsides. However, the value of equitable access demands public libraries serve *all* community members. Arguably, it requires that public libraries dedicate equal, if not greater resources to ensuring their services reach persons experiencing more barriers and higher degrees of exclusion. So, as they have done many times in the past, libraries will need to creatively reorganize and retool ways of working to meet, at times, competing priorities. This may mean reallocating current resources, and diversifying funding sources to enable the necessary investments. It will also likely involve establishing new and different types of relationships with community, and with educational, corporate and other partners.

2) Creating More Flexible Library Spaces

The pandemic has largely eliminated the safe, community gathering function many public libraries have come to play in their communities. However, the temporary repurposing of their built spaces, and other forms of physical experimentation may point

to possible future directions for library services. Initiatives like outdoor library services, for example, centre attention on library services and on social activities themselves, rather than the built-spaces where they traditionally take place. In so doing, they make it possible to conceive of some of those activities as less bound to single localities. In practice, these efforts suggest libraries should explore how to extend programs and collections through mobile and pop-up services, for example, as well as by leveraging the spaces of partners. This line of thinking aligns with calls for libraries to become more open and present in the communities where they are located (WTP 2008, p. 26).

3) Addressing the Gap in Media Literacy

Another facet of retooling public libraries for the future suggested by my investigation, involves strengthening their information literacy function. As trusted information hubs, public libraries have long been identified as key actors in curbing the spread of misinformation (ALA, 2005; ALA, 2017). A gap exists, however, between this potential and actual practice in general, and with regards to COVID-19 misinformation in particular. Conducting more research, professional development, partnering with academic and news media organizations, and embedding information and media literacy in more popular forms of programming are some of the recommendations that have been made for improving public library action in this domain (LaPierre & Kitzie, 2019, p. 447).

Concluding Thoughts

While delivery of COVID-19 vaccines in Canada is already well underway, the lack of predictability of supply chains (Tasker, 2020), lack of clarity around how long vaccines will confer immunity (Semeniuk, 2020), and the emergence of new strains of the virus

make it hard to predict when social life will actually return to normal. For the short to medium term then, public libraries must plan to continue offering modified services. It will be critical for these institutions to continue to document and critically evaluate how their changed service models help them meet their core missions as they move to a post-COVID era.

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