

Living in libraryland lockdown!

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It wasn't referred to as a 'lockdown' at first. Perhaps this was an attempt to play down the severity of the coronavirus and the potential impact that it would have (and is now having) on the life and health of not just the nation, but the world . . . in every way possible. As I write this, I find it difficult to believe that it is actually only five weeks ago that the UK government had just begun to loosely advise its citizens to 'only travel if necessary', but warned that individuals at risk should not do so at all. There was encouragement and advice of needing to apply social distancing (in itself a new concept for most of us) in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, or COVID-19 as we have come to know it, and to play our part in avoiding a pandemic outbreak.

Whilst at my own place of work we had done some detailed business continuity planning for moving library services online, I did not think as I travelled into work on the morning of Monday 16 March that my library service would be exclusively online and provided entirely through digital means (whilst supporting an exclusive digital teaching, learning and research environment) by the end of the week. But that is what happened, and fast forward a further three weeks, our digital and online library services have now become the new norm, and from what I can see and hear, this is the case for most, if not all university library services throughout the United Kingdom, Europe and the USA.

Whilst this situation has swiftly become the new norm for us, it has not been without its planning, many frustrations and challenges, and lots of collaboration, co-operation and sharing of experiences alongside sage advice and guidance from academic library workers across the sector. Now that the whirlwind of the last few weeks has tailed off and we've managed to get through to Easter (and therefore, for many of us, have arrived at what would normally have been our summer term), I thought I would spend a few moments to reflect on my own experiences of the extraordinarily strange phenomenon that we have all just been a part of. Indeed, the new norm that we are experiencing is highly likely to affect how we deliver higher education and academic library services for the long term. We have adapted quickly, but will have to continue to do so for some



time to come. With this in mind, I thought I would capture the key stages of the last few weeks as I have experienced it:

1. The frenzy

During March 2020, as the outbreak became real, I have never been so thankful to be part of the [SCONUL](#) directors' network. Through our mailing lists, we were all able to share our experiences, our decisions and mainly our pain, as we all hurriedly had to put our business continuity plans in place and plan to reduce physical services and to enable increased working from home scenarios. The week of the 16 March 2020 will go down in UK academic library history, as the week when our worlds changed. The problem was very much that there was no one common message or approach from universities in translating the advice, guidance and directives received. Whilst advising against 'non-essential journeys' the UK government seemed to be happy that universities were doing their very best to adapt and deliver higher education online, so they were not instructed to close (as schools and colleges were). Therefore, senior managers in many universities also lacked any clarity as to what was supposed to happen next. Planning was afoot at many institutions to adapt all teaching so that it could be delivered online, therefore avoiding students needing to come onto campus.

My sense is that this was in fact very hurried in many institutions and the primary focus was on how academic departments needed to completely change their approaches. Again, judging from discussions on the [SCONUL](#) mailing list, most libraries did not start planning to close their physical buildings until that Monday, with many being forced, or encouraged by their universities and student unions to remain open in order to provide 'essential services' to students. This, quite rightly, caused a furore across the academic library community around how library staff are valued by senior managers at universities and their understanding of the differences between a library building and a library service. Helen Rimmer, Head of Library and Archives at the University of Westminster blogged about her experience and provided encouragement to other library directors. There are several aspects to this element of libraryland lockdown and you can [read about it here](#). It felt like a very frenzied week, and in effect, all such 'closing' discussions, whilst necessary during w/b 16 March, had become obsolete seven days later, when the government did indeed call for a lockdown, and all universities were advised to physically close their buildings.

However, the debates of this initial libraryland lockdown week proved to be helpful, because as well as being able to support and encourage each other as we set about closing our physical library buildings, many more useful discussions began about online resources and delivering new digital service models.

2. Adapting: what happens now?

Personally, I breathed a huge sigh of relief once I was able to physically close the library building until further notice. I'd found the frenzy of the week before to be quite exhausting and felt that we had definitely done the right thing to push to close buildings as soon as possible, in order to protect library staff and students and to demonstrate social responsibility. But there was no time to pause to draw further breath. The show had to go on!

Part of the frenzy phase had been lining up library services to be delivered entirely remotely and enabling this through equipping staff to work from home. The 'adapting stage' meant putting this into action, and again, the advice and guidance from colleagues across the international academic library community was a real lifeline. The strong partnerships and collaborations that university libraries have between them really came to the fore during this stage, with lots of exchanges about

what was being done in respect of operational challenges, such as waiving fines, loaning books over the long-term, book returns, reservations, inter-library loans, etc. In addition, one of the key elements of the 'adapting stage' was ensuring effective communications were in place, so that our staff and students were aware of our new service models. This is where our fabulous librarian marketing and publicity skills came into play, and it was great to see so many positive marketing and communications messages and campaigns come out of this.

It has also been heartening to see the 'can do' attitude in academic library teams around the world, in swiftly rising to the challenge of shifting our entire operation and service model. I know that we were already well set up for this, having always been key driving forces in the evolution of the digital information society, but it has been great to see how this preparedness has been an advantage to us over recent weeks.

3. We're getting good at this

Until three weeks ago, most working library environments for staff involved coming into the physical library building and operating from our wonderful safe and comfortable library spaces. As a 'people-centred' service environment, working from home has not been the norm for most of us apart from occasional arrangements where individuals may have had substantial desk-based work to carry out. As an academic library manager, I have certainly thought that libraries need staff and managers to be present in the [physical] environment in order to effectively operate. Personally, working from home has never really appealed to me, as I had always found myself to be a lot less productive. However, as of three weeks ago, any considerations about 'occasional' working from home became irrelevant. We all had to adapt to a new library office environment which now operates exclusively from individual library workers' homes (as indeed have many other industries and professions). My feeling is that academic libraries have excelled at this and although not without many big challenges (like home-schooling your children, or taking up caring responsibilities, whilst trying to run a library service), once again the whole community has come to the rescue of each other. There are again many examples of academic libraries now sharing experiences and ideas as to how to [effectively operate 'from home' and deliver services remotely](#).

Not only does the sector seem to have adapted quickly, but we have also moved quickly to being able to innovate in our new environments. I am seeing so many examples of library and learning support staff embracing the need to support students and academics online and we are now experimenting and discovering new ways to do this. Whilst we have all become more and more used to using technology to hold remote meetings, we are now immersed in it and it is refreshing to see librarians leading the way in their institutions in providing quality teaching and learning experiences through virtual means, whether this be through Microsoft Teams, Skype, FaceTime, WhatsApp, or other emerging web based meeting and collaboration platforms such as [Zoom](#), [Houseparty](#), [Whereby](#), to name but a few . . .

Also, in respect of rising to these new challenges, it is wonderful to see the wider community and professional associations, as well as vendors and aggregators, being part of the collaboration to enable these changes. Many publishers and vendors have quickly enabled increased, enhanced and free access to scholarly information resources for the duration of the crisis and this has certainly been welcomed by those of us working in academic libraries. In the UK, [JISC](#) have been involved in providing infrastructural and operational support, advice and guidance, and together with [SCONUL](#), [RLUK](#) and [ICOLIC \(International Coalition of Library Consortia\)](#) are co-ordinating the enhanced content available to libraries and higher education institutions.

Similarly, our colleagues at [UK Copyright Literacy](#) have been actively lobbying the CLA for assistance with copyright on resources during this time and have produced some really helpful webinars to assist librarians as the demand to make more and more e-resources accessible increases by the day.

These collaborations in adapting to the current situation are testament to the values that we all share within the scholarly communications industry. It is refreshing and encouraging to see us all working together in this way to try to make the transition and the challenge of changing our services models, whilst continuing to deliver excellent services, as smooth as possible.

4. Continuing frustrations, anxieties and uncertainty

I realise that my musings on libraryland lockdown thus far may have appeared ‘rose-tinted’ and have focused on how, as a sector, we have risen gloriously to the challenges presented to us and how we have excelled in adapting, creating opportunities and generally making the best of this extreme situation. But it is just that: an extreme situation where an awful deadly virus is spreading around the world, causing death and destruction in its wake. I am proud to say that I am part of a profession and a sector that has so swiftly heeded governmental advice and been able to do all it can to keep its constituents as safe as possible during the outbreak. And this must continue to be our priority.

We are all being massively disrupted and there are many frustrations, anxieties and worries that have surfaced as a result of the wholesale changes forced upon us. Staff are worried and anxious about workloads and productivity, and this will effect library managers and corporate managers as much as anyone. We need to be understanding and flexible where this is the case. I also see a whole debate about the huge increase in demand for access to electronic resources and e-books, in particular now that many of the world’s academics are discovering e-learning and electronic reading lists for the very first time. Many seem to be asking librarians if they can ‘just digitise these set texts’ for them. This is causing a lot of increased anxiety around workload amongst librarians working in this area, which is exacerbated through the high cost of e-books being requested. This leads to librarians feeling ill-equipped to fully support their students in their digital learning environments. This debate is perhaps for another time, but one that has very much become a more visible reality during the last few weeks.

And of course the ‘elephant in the room’ is the massive uncertainty surrounding student numbers and higher education in general once the pandemic is over. Will we ever go back to ‘normal’? What is normal? Will we have enough students? Will our institutions and our libraries survive? Answers to these questions certainly will need to wait until another time, but I really hope that we’ll get some reassurances, if not answers, over the coming weeks.

Final thoughts

This is my last editorial as co-editor of UKSG e-News, a position I have been very pleased and privileged to hold over the last five years. Thank you to those of you who have indulged me over the years and have provided excellent editorials for publication in UKSG e-News. It is very much appreciated, and as I hand over the reins I would like to conclude my libraryland lockdown reflections on these extraordinary and exceptional times with the following observations:

- The crisis and lockdown have amplified the solid partnerships and collaborations which we always work hard to establish and maintain across the academic library sector, and indeed the whole scholarly communications and publishing industry.

- The intangible asset of our ‘can-do’ attitude has proven invaluable as across the country, and indeed the world, we have risen to the challenges presented to us and adapted our service models whilst maintaining our integrity and the delivery of excellent and professional services.
- Many skills that we have always worked hard to develop, but have perhaps not been appreciated by our institutions’ senior leaders, have been applied very visibly and effectively as a result of the changes we have encountered: teamwork; problem solving; electronic resource management; e-learning development; marketing and publicity; change management; influence and negotiation; advocacy; business continuity planning; crisis management, etc, etc.
- We have stayed safe and looked after each other!

These views are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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