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Sharing Library and Information Resources During a Global Pandemic Introduction from the Guest Editor

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JILLDDER Special Issue:

Sharing Library and Information Resources During a Global Pandemic

Introduction from the Guest Editor

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt life, in large and small ways, around the world, library resource sharing specialists have been sharing information resources with library users, as always. Although no single interlibrary loan, document delivery, or electronic reserve transaction can save the world, people do need access to reliable information to live and learn, even, and perhaps especially, during an emergency. And, sharing information is what libraries are all about. However, no library service should come at the cost of the health of library workers or library users. Therefore, during this time, our instinct has been to support each other by sharing solutions that enable us to share information with library users, safely.

Written in the summer and fall of 2020, and revised and published in 2021, the articles in this special issue of *Journal of Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery and Electronic Reserve* offer examples of how the library community has been meeting local and global needs for information during this pandemic. They highlight the challenges and issues that have regrettably, but understandably, limited information sharing, as well as some best practices that have emerged. They also report on local activities and details for which there is not yet a consensus. This journal issue is not the first word on the subject; we have been communicating and connecting with each other from the beginning, with daily listserv messages, webinars, online conferences that have enabled more attendance than ever, and (possibly too many) online meetings. And, this is also not meant to be the last word, or to offer the most comprehensive of investigations. A complete and

considered critical analysis of our work, while we are still in the depths of a crisis, is simply not possible. Rather, these articles, offering the perspectives of dozens of contributors, have been collected and published in the same spirit of support that always informs our community of practice.

This is a conversation that we can all participate in, because this is an experience we are all going through. However, as we work every day, transaction by transaction, to meet the immediate, specific, varied and numerous information needs of library users, time is always limited. In addition to processing requests for information, interlibrary loan, document delivery, and electronic reserve specialists also regularly review the practical details of policies, workflows and systems, participate in training and professional development, and align the nature and scope of our work with the larger missions of our organizations and profession. This is the case under both ordinary and extraordinary circumstances. Our work is labor intensive, despite advances in technology, because it is user-centric and we care about customer service. Stay at home orders and recommendations, and a year of fewer in-person events, may have offered a pause for some, but constant worries and tragic losses made this time restful for no one. Instead, as this coronavirus continues to spread, time has been especially scarce and library work has only gotten more complex. Library staff layoffs have devastated those who lost their jobs, and challenged all who remained, as the efforts of library workers to maintain online library events and services, including interlibrary loan, document delivery, and electronic reserves, did not stop.

We are now navigating a world in which everyday acts such as purchasing groceries or visiting family and friends pose potential health risks. Going to a library to

study or to borrow a book - as well as working in a library or directing others to do so - also poses ethical dilemmas. Making libraries safe spaces, for both library users and library workers, clearly remains an imperative. But, we must pursue several imperatives at once – to keep our communities, and ourselves, healthy, to cost effectively share information resources locally and globally, and to advocate for the jobs and other resources we need to do our work. As practical professionals who provide specialized services, those of us who work in interlibrary loan, document delivery, and electronic reserves face a complex world of information; our work, like all of life, even at the best of times, comes with hard choices and incomplete information. And, as library spaces became potential vectors of virus transmission, ambiguity and uncertainty have been heightened, along with risk.

None of this is simple. The realities of a global pandemic have required us to create and manage, and to adjust and readjust, procedures and policies. We have been implementing measures that mitigate the risks of COVID-19, and safeguard the health of both library users and frontline departmental staff members, often the lowest paid among us, who interact with library users and colleagues in shared spaces. Masks, knowledge of HVAC systems, physical distancing, and quarantining protocols for books and physical resources have become part of our workdays. As always, online services and access to library licensed, purchased, and curated e-resources remain accessible. But, this only helps those library users and staff members who have the technology needed to work online, and for those resources with license terms that support sharing; existing inequities have only been exacerbated by this pandemic. While some library spaces and print collections remain closed to library staff and/or users, most have opened up to various

and changing extents, and, so, we are all remaining flexible. Some of us are processing requests and sharing information from electronic resources while working remotely. Some are scanning from print at their libraries and offering curbside pickup, or regular circulation and reserves, or mailing books to other libraries and/or to users at their homes. For those working remotely, some are coping with crowded households and the needs of children, partners, and pets, while others are working at home alone, isolated from family, friends, and co-workers. And, we are still renewing interlibrary loans as we keep track of requests that are now over a year overdue, and as we remain responsible for the ultimate return, or cost, of library material.

All of this challenges us. But it also positions us to appreciate the value of community more than ever. In interlibrary loan services, our partners have always been physically distant from us; and, now, as always, these connections have been sustaining us. Whether we are sharing information locally or globally, we see that that the power and possibilities of community and connection are not merely clichés. We are all emotionally exhausted by budget struggles, and with maintaining jobs, and services, and concerns for the health of everyone we know, and everyone in the world, while balancing our work and personal lives. But, now, as always, one of our most effective coping mechanisms is to respond to our shared challenges by sharing solutions and support with each other.

People have always maintained hope amidst an imperfect world. Our connectedness helps us to be empathetic and kind to each other, and our practicality helps us to maintain rational optimism. After over a year, it remains challenging to find the time and space - both the physical workspace and emotional space - to reflect. But, as we

process interlibrary loan and document delivery transactions, and fill electronic reserve needs, we are also, consciously and unconsciously, processing ideas and emotions. We see that individual resilience cannot address systemic issues in organizations or society. We understand that any challenge can be better surmounted through solidarity than in silos. And, as we read and respond to the articles shared here, we appreciate how much we can learn from each other.

ARTICLES

This pandemic has affected every library, as well as everyone working in, and using, libraries, around the world. However, specific circumstances among libraries during this time have differed. And, experiences have varied, even for staff members within one department of one library. Personal, local, and governmental resources, local infection and hospitalization rates, population density, decisions about services and working conditions, and pre-existing racial and economic privileges and inequities are impacting us all, as individuals, and as library workers. These articles reflect all this, but they also offer windows into the parameters of the uncertainties and challenges that we are all facing.

Here, you will read about new international sharing schemes and local experiments in several academic libraries, of varying sizes, in the United States, as well as medical libraries, and the work of library consortia. Four of these articles focus on what was, and is being, done to connect people and information when access to print collections was, and in many cases, still remains, limited. Three others focus on community and consortial resources created to support library resource sharing during this pandemic. And, an eighth article focuses on an existing consortial solution and how it

it operated during this and other public health events. It is also notable that most of these articles are co-written, which reflects the cooperative nature of our work. And, again, because these articles are neither a representative sample nor a general survey, they cannot offer answers to every question. But, reading about the details of what was done in some libraries can help us deliberate about how we can utilize our own local and shared assets in support of the information needs – and health - of our own library colleagues and users.

In Rider University: Keeping Resources Available through the Pandemic & Construction, by Whitfield, Bengmark, Dawson, Doganiero and Hilgar, we are reminded that the issue of limited, or no, access to print collections happens during library moves and construction projects, as well as during emergency closures of libraries because of a pandemic. And, so, the solutions can be the same, as well, including interlibrary loan, open access and open education resources, acquisitions on demand, and controlled digital lending.

In Course Reserves During the COVID-19 Pandemic, by Tudesco and Bower Relevo, we see how a large university research library handled access to print course reserve materials for students who became remote learners in the middle of a semester.

In Creative Staffing During a Pandemic: Training and Utilizing an On-Campus Student Worker While Working Remotely, Singer describes how a student assistant was trained remotely to do work in the library, highlighting issues of onsite and remote work.

In New-Fashioned Resource Sharing Pie: A Georgia Recipe by Logue, Humphrey and Chew, library resource sharing specialists from three libraries share how in-person work was managed, using the metaphor of pie baking as a nod to the shared experience of

many people who turned to baking while working from home (and both the challenges and comfort that baking can provide.)

Next, Hogan, Paulus, Hannan and Wobick present a compendium of resources created in response to library resource sharing during COVID-19 in *Resource Sharing Resources During a Pandemic: A Review*. This list demonstrates the collaborative nature of our community. And, it remains of practical use as librarians continue to amend procedures and policies in light of evolving circumstances.

Community as a Shared Resource: How One Consortium Congregated, Collaborated, and Innovated Its Way Through the COVID-19 Crisis, by Massey, Cohen, Walker and Massie share how one library consortium, SHARES, successfully came together – and continues to meet weekly – in online town hall meeting designed to help each other, practically and emotionally.

In Hochstein, Han, Takamaru, Unger, and Juneau's *Analysis of National Library of Medicine (NLM) DOCLINE® Interlibrary Loan System Request Patterns during Selected Public Health Events* a team of librarians investigates how the DOCLINE system supported information seeking behaviors during this and other public health events, demonstrating the value of this resource.

And, in *Researching Interlibrary Loan/Document Delivery Usage by Health Sciences Libraries during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Creazzo and Bakker, Koos, Jo, and Alpi share a report on an ongoing research project in which information about how health science library workers provided needed information during this pandemic is being gathered. This is an example of the valuable research being undertaken now; and, much more will undoubtedly be conducted and published in the future.

CONCLUSION

Library resource sharing specialists recognize that every request for every information resource matters to its requester. Similarly, every account of how we are providing library services during a global pandemic, in each of our libraries, is valuable. The full story is yet to unfold, much less be written. It would be impossible to have done things perfectly. And, we have undoubtedly gotten some things wrong. Nonetheless, we do know more than we did in early 2020 about how we can do our jobs in an environment where everything has become more difficult, or at best, more fraught.

There is no requirement that tragedy come with a silver lining. But, there are lessons in any experience. Sticking with what we know and are comfortable with may be an understandable reaction to crisis, but staying open, and continually learning, as contexts shift, is the only way for improvements to evolve. A global pandemic is a health and safety threat that requires potentially life and death decisions. It necessitates a focus on survival. But, it can also compel us to focus on what matters most, on what can really help, and on what is not only practical and sustainable, but is also aspirational and desirable, in our libraries and in the world.

As we live through this historical moment, it is clear that this is not an isolated event, and that all societal issues impact our work, just as our work impacts our communities. As we face this pandemic, we have also been reckoning with essential issues of racial justice and equity in our communities and in our libraries. Environmental pressures, the expanding wealth gap, and so many other urgent challenges, abound. Rather than ignoring or minimizing these unacceptable realities, our collective attention, work, and support are required to make meaningful changes. A crisis can slow us down,

temporarily. But, it can also mobilize us and provide the impetus to survive and thrive in our libraries, our personal lives, and our shared world. And, sharing information, even when our struggles seem insurmountable, does help people individually, as it helps us all to address societal issues that cannot be ignored.

Budget shortages and health and safety concerns may limit information sharing, or change how we work, but our philosophy and values should not. This experience has reinforced the value of information, itself, and why we share it. As we face budgetary pressures that have only been exacerbated by this pandemic, it is essential that library resource sharing specialists continue to advocate for the resources we need to provide excellent library services. This includes staff positions, with fair salaries and working conditions, consortia memberships, and technology that is responsive to our need for affordable, flexible, interoperable, community-driven, and user-friendly systems. These resources also include the health measures - including mental health - needed to protect onsite library users and workers, and the technology needed for remote work. Librarians must still maintain libraries, collect physical resources, and share them under fair use copyright laws. We also still need to license or purchase e-resources and share them by negotiating licenses that support this, without user-unfriendly digital rights management (DRM) controls. And, shared print initiatives, collective collections, controlled digital lending, open access publishing, and open educational resources also deserve and require support in order to be further developed and implemented.

This global health crisis has highlighted the question of who is an essential worker, whether librarians can do our jobs apart from our library spaces, and what our library spaces are needed for; and, the costs of our services have also come under

scrutiny. But, this experience has also demonstrated that people do still need and want print and other physical library materials, as well as library spaces that inspire and enable quiet study and group work. And, the goodwill of our library colleagues and the strength of our existing networks have been proven as we shared information with, and among, each other. Although what we do in library resource sharing is invisible labor to many, the thankfulness of library users makes it clear that many people do appreciate our work. So, we should not just share user complaints with administrators, but should also share the gratitude and acknowledgements we receive from those who appreciate our help and who understand that it has not been easy.

Even when we could not provide interlibrary loan, document delivery and electronic reserve services and resources, as quickly, and in as high a volume, as usual, because of a global pandemic, we can all be proud of all that we are doing and all that we have accomplished, under these circumstances. But, librarians and library workers are not magicians who can make do with continual budget austerity, inadequate staffing levels, and questionable working conditions. Shared ideals and good intentions are not enough. Information access alone, without privacy rights and critical evaluation will not empower library users. But, the work we do to share information in and among libraries is valuable.

As we acknowledge our work, we also extend our thanks to all our colleagues, for their work leading libraries, collecting, licensing, cataloging, preserving and shelving, and for their camaraderie, that also sustains us. As vaccines vie with variants to bring this health crisis to an end, we remain very much in the now, processing requests for information. And, we are also moving forward, learning from the past as we plan for the future. There is still a lot we do not know about COVID-19 but we do know more than a

few things now about providing library services during a pandemic. By being practical and creative, while also being cooperative and caring, we will continue to contribute to meeting the information needs, while protecting the health of our library users and our local and global communities. And, adapting, adopting, or even refuting what we read about here is a good place to start.